

Alejandra Garcia Ceja

Dr. Frouzesh

Humanities Core 1C

12 June 2020

Disney's 2016 Film, *Zootopia* as a Postracial Utopia Created by the White Imaginary

“Back then, the world was divided in two-- vicious predator or meek prey. But over time, we evolved. And moved beyond our primitive and savage ways. Now, predator and prey live in harmony” (00:01:41-00:02:02). *Zootopia*, the city where “anyone can be anything” (00:03:04), has a population that consists of both mammal prey and predators; both big and small. *Zootopia* is painted as a utopian space hinted by the wordplay in the name and in the opening scenes of the film. In other words, it is presented as a progressive space free from forms discrimination and oppression. To her disappointment, bunny police officer Judy Hopps, finds that the world is still “divided in two”, as there are predators who are being treated unjustly as they are deemed untrustworthy and intimidating to the prey population. Not only are members of the predator division oppressed, but they are also victims in a missing mammal case-- with all fifteen being predators.

As this overview suggests, Disney's 2016 film *Zootopia* casts different species as racial groups, assigning stereotypical accents and cultural attributes which make it hard to avoid and hard for the audience not to recognize. The division between prey and predator is related to the division between Whiteness and “Otherness”. The film's depiction of animals in racial terms is a post-racial imaginary which preserves and promotes the trope of the colonial white savior, therefore perpetuating and centralizing Whiteness as superior. In effect, the film exposes the

casual racism that continues to prevail in both social and political forms in American society today. Disney's 2016 film *Zootopia* presents the protagonist, Judy Hopps, as the white savior of the racial predators in what appears to be a supposed post-racial, progressive space created by the White imaginary. Released in the midst of social activist movements and the 2016 presidential election of the US, the film represents, reinforces and seamlessly mimics the hypocrisy of American society through a "family friendly" cartoon.

The release of *Zootopia* in the last stretch of the Obama presidency was no coincidence; the racial content of the film touched on issues of public awareness of Black Lives Matter and its Blue Lives Matter appropriation. Founded in 2013 by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, the Black Lives Matter Movement is "an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise" (Garza 23). Despite being founded in 2013, the movement reached a peak in 2016 after a series of deaths of African Americans unjustly occurred at the hands of the police force. The movement received attention on a national scale, with people across the nation holding protests and celebrities speaking in solidarity with the movement. However, the movement was not well received by some Americans and in retaliation created a counter-movement: Blue Lives Matter. Both Black Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter create what Johanna Soloman and Adam Martin, scholars specializing in political science, call a "competitive victimhood" in which both parties attempt to prove that one has suffered more than the other (Martin et al. 1). Blue Lives Matter came into light when the police force was met with a hostile public in light of the Black Lives Matter movement, therefore shifting the blame onto the Black community for the backlash they were receiving (Martin et al. 18). *Zootopia's* release in the midst of social activist movements in the

racial climate of the United States therefore becomes relevant, given the openly racial content and the police benevolence the movie presents.

Provided the context of *Zootopia's* release, the film becomes critical since it promotes copaganda through Judy Hopps by painting the police force in a favorable manner. The term copaganda is a blend of the words cop and propaganda. Propaganda is defined as “the systematic dissemination of information, esp. in a biased or misleading way, in order to promote a political cause or point of view” (OED). Therefore, the blending of the terms refers to any form of pro-police content that subliminally benefits the image of the police body for political and social reasons. The film explicitly follows this concept through the protagonist Judy Hopps who is a bunny rabbit that has the dream of becoming a police officer for the city of Zootopia. The film follows her experience of working hard to fulfill her dreams and her encounters with the reality of becoming a cop in order to “make the world a better place” (00:14:47). Judy is given favorable traits such as being hard-working, intelligent, and overall very genuine, thus making her a beloved character to all. Since the film is told from the perspective of Judy, the viewer quickly empathizes with her character and becomes biased towards her side of the narrative. Judy is portrayed as a cop hero after she ends up cracking a complex case involving the disappearances of 15 mammal predators, with the help of the fox Nick Wilde. By creating the protagonist as a loveable character with a police occupation, the film presents a biased narrative that favors cops as inherently good-- which becomes problematic since the Blue Lives Matter movement was made to belittle the Black Lives Matter movement. Solomon and Martin, scholars of political science, emphasize that one of the goals of Blue Lives Matter is to “reverse recent harm to the public perception of police, including stopping the negative media and enshrining

police as protected victims” (Martin et al. 23). Disney’s *Zootopia* erases this negative image of the police body held by many in this critical time by delivering a “family friendly” cartoon that backs the narrative of a good cop, therefore reinforcing copaganda. In turn, the release of *Zootopia* during this critical time becomes problematic to many.

Disney’s *Zootopia* exclusively links colonial language of primitivism and savagery to the racialized “Other” to contrast Whiteness, thus reinforcing the division between prey and predator the film presents. The prey in the film are symbolic of those associated with Whiteness and the predators are symbolic of the racialized “Other”-- more specifically, they are linked to Blackness. This notion is hinted at in the opening scene of the film: “Back then, the world was divided in two-- vicious predator or meek prey. But over time, we evolved. And moved beyond our primitive and savage ways. Now, predator and prey live in harmony” (00:01:41-00:02:02). Historically, terms such as “primitive” and “savage” were used to dehumanize the racial “Other” by white Europeans. James W. Cook, professor of U.S. History and American studies, in his article regarding P.T Barnum’s 1860 Freak Shows states that “blackness [was equated] with the savage” and that Africans were “a specimen of the connecting link between man and monkey.” (Cook 156). Africans historically were treated as specimens on display to White European audiences, and were often described to be lower than human beings. The link of Blackness to savagery as Cook describes indicates the long history of Black people being associated with brutishness and a wild disposition. Apart from using language associated with the dehumanization of the “Other”, the opening scene of the film hints at segregation that prevailed in American society in the 19th and mid 20th centuries, reflecting a clear post-segregation postracial White imaginary. Beaudine, Osibodu, and Beavers, social activist PHD students at

Michigan State University state, “predators make up 9 or 10 percent of the population of Zootopia, with prey constituting the other 90 or 91 percent. These numbers are similar to the demographic numbers for Black men and women within the United States” (Beaudine et al. 227). Given that the demographic numbers match up, the city of Zootopia is meant to model an American city which allows there to be a post-segregation interpretation when viewing the film. The animals in *Zootopia* moving past their “primitive and savage ways” (00:01:41-00:02:02) implies that it was only the racialized “Other” that had to change their ways and conform to Whiteness in order to have harmony-- therefore suggesting that employing Whiteness is necessary criterion for having an ideal world. Linsay M. Crammer, scholar of intercultural communication and Whiteness studies in media, states that within the film “prey as occupants of white positionality [are] inherently good, pure and innocent and racial “Others” as inherently dangerous” (Crammer 7). This refers to the belief that racial “Others” were often viewed as uncivilized by Europeans in their colonial encounters. In effect, the “Other”, or the predators in this case, had to conform to White society and ideologies in order to be considered civilized.

Disney’s *Zootopia* portrays the city of Zootopia as a post racial imaginary space filled with microaggressions and casual racism, and it is further proven through the acts of casual racism displayed by the protagonist Judy Hopps. The film is a host to colorblind racism, which is the belief that racism is no longer a problem in today’s society and it undermines the issues surrounding race. Sarah Nilsen, an associate professor in the history of film surrounding issues of race, states that “The social ideology of colorblindness has been used to justify the persistence of racial injustice in the US criminal justice system” (Nilsen para. 5). As Nilsen describes, racial injustice in the film *Zootopia* becomes normalized through the ideology of colorblindness and it

is expressed in casual forms of racism. Racism often stems from fear and such fear becomes the breeding ground for ignorance within a society, resulting in discrimination of the predators in the city of Zootopia. One scene that displays an instance of casual racism is when Judy profiles Nick Wilde, a predator. On Judy's first day on the job as a police officer, to her disappointment, she is assigned the job of a meter maid. As she is patrolling the streets, she notices Nick Wilde, a fox who she believes is engaging in suspicious behavior as seen in Figure 1. By following him, Judy is racially profiling Nick simply because he is a predator, and everything a predator does is deemed as suspicious or threatening in the eyes of the prey. By doing so, the film hints at more parallels between predators and racialized "Others", as those of racial disposition are deemed guilty before committing a crime.



Figure 1: Judy Hopps (left image) spying on Nick Wilde (right image) due to his suspicious demeanor.

In the next scene, Judy follows Nick as she reaches for her fox repellent spray into the ice cream shop and finds that he was only trying to buy his son a jumbo pop, therefore revealing that Judy had wrongfully profiled him. The fact that Judy carries fox repellent hints at the fact that there is still a deep instilled fear of predators, despite them moving past their primitive ways thus reinforcing the inherent distrust of predators. In the next scene, the elephant shop owner denies

him service by stating “There aren’t any fox ice cream joints in your part of town?” (00:19:08), which causes Judy to jump in and help Nick, thus painting her as the anti-racist hero. After threatening the shop with a health code violation if they deny Nick service, the shop owner complies and sells him the jumbo pop. In the next scene Judy tells Nick that it “burns [her] up to see folks with such backward attitudes toward foxes” (00:20:55), which in turn exposes her hypocrisy as she was quick to profile Nick and how she was reaching for her fox repellent. She then follows up this statement by saying that Nick is “a real articulate fella” (00:21:05). This statement serves as a backhanded compliment, as it implies that foxes aren’t articulate and that Nick is only an exemption from this generalization of his species, or in symbolic terms, race. Overall, from this scene it is evident that Judy is guilty of engaging in acts of casual racism, though she is depicted as the supposed anti-racist hero of the film.

Zootopia associates violence and anger with the biological components of the predators, which in turn is related to forms of biological racism that existed in the past. Judy and Nick first find out about the predators who have been reverting back to their primitive roots in a lab-like facility that contains all of the missing predator mammals in cages.

Figure 2: Judy and Nick find the missing predators in a lab facility, and find they have gone “savage”.

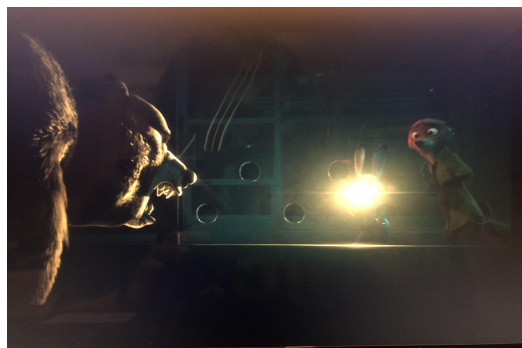


Figure 2 shows a bear growling at both characters with scratch marks on the glass cage, indicating the bear's savagery and primitivism. Judy and Nick discover that the Mayor of Zootopia, a lion, has been aware that predators have been reverting back to their savage ways and has been keeping it from the rest of the city. Judy manages to record the conversation and takes the evidence to the ZPD, which results in the mayor being arrested for keeping such critical evidence from the public. Soon after, Judy is interviewed regarding the investigation and when asked why it was all happening she states, "It may have something to do with biology-- a biological component. You know, something in their DNA ... thousand of years ago, predators survived through their aggressive hunting instincts. They seem to be reverting back to their primitive, savage ways" (01:10:47- 01:11:39). In this statement, Judy utilizes the terms "primitive" and "savage" which are linked to the colonial history of dehumanization of the racialized "Other" as discussed earlier. Essentially, the use of the terms implies that Judy is referring to predators in a manner that sets them up for even more discrimination later on in the film. Judy points out that the aggressive behavior that the targeted predators are exhibiting is due to their biological makeup, which is related to historical instances of biological racism. Jennifer Sandlin, associate professor of justice and social inquiry at ASU and Nathan Snaza, member of the English department at the University of Richmond, quote Darwin's *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals*: "Becoming less white would involve moving backwards in time, such that one would come to resemble a more primitive form of social life, or a 'lower and animal like condition'" (Sandlin and Snaza 16). Thus, becoming "less white" is equivalent to regressing on the evolutionary timeline to a simplified state that is below human. The belief that those of White positionality are higher on the evolutionary scale effectively dehumanizes the

racialized “Other”, and the set up of a scientific basis enabled racism and discrimination to be normalized. Sandlin and Snaza further state that “[*Zootopia*] suggests that Black people are more primitive than White people, and this ‘savagery’ causes them to experience more rage” (Sandlin and Snaza 16). Due to predators being paralleled with the racialized “Other”, the film implies that forms of aggression and violent behaviors can be linked biologically to the “Other”. In effect, the film unintentionally creates a link between Blackness and aggression.

Zootopia’s Judy Hopps, a member of the prey division that occupies a white positionality, reinforces the progressive white savior as she is the white cop hero who saves the racialized “Other”. Judy’s interview caused the divide between prey and predator to grow rapidly, and predators began to face direct discrimination due to fear growing amongst the prey. The now visible divide between both groups brings about massive change in the city, such as predators being let go from public service jobs and protests being held in response to the discrimination as seen in Figure 3. Figure 3 parallels many of the Black Lives Matter protests held at the time of the release of the film, with many police officers gathered trying to silence the protestors.



Figure 3: Peaceful protest in the city held by predators in response to systematic discrimination.

At the end of the film, Judy discovers the truth as to why the predators have been reverting to their primitive ways. Judy finds that it was actually the work of the evil mastermind Assistant Mayor Bellwether who was making the predators go savage by shooting them with “NightHowler” flowers that are able to turn any animal savage. Assistant Mayor Bellwether, a member of the prey division, longed for a future in which the “little guys” (prey) no longer had to cower from the threatening predators. Judy was able to discover her plans and managed to get evidence to arrest her. The film ends by painting Judy as the progressive white cop hero of the predators who were being even more discriminated against as a result of Bellwether’s plans. Scholar Lindsay Crammer states that Bellwether is “a rare, dated, racist, bigot who just needs to go away (i.e., to prison) in order for racial harmony and the postracial to be maintained” (Crammer 13). In other words, Bellwether’s character serves as a foil character in order to highlight Judy’s progressiveness as a white cop hero for the racialized “Others”. In effect, the film associates Whiteness with integrity and honor through Judy’s actions and beliefs. On another note, the film suggests that fear is an effective strategy to uphold the oppression and discrimination of the racialized “Other”.

“We all have limitations. We all make mistakes... Look inside yourself and recognize that change starts with you” (01:24:34). The closing words of the film by Judy end on an optimistic note by giving the audience advice on how to be an effective ally to people of color. It is evident that Disney did not have bad intentions in the making of this film; the film touches upon important themes such as stereotyping, race, racism that could spark conversations among young children across the nation in a critical time. However, Disney’s *Zootopia* talks about such issues through the lens of a White imaginary-- one that centralizes Whiteness as the only possible

option for a utopian future. The film creates a post-racial imaginary filled with microaggressions toward the racialized “Other” in ways that are hard to avoid and not recognize. From the start of the film up until the end, *Zootopia* manages to mask progressiveness with Whiteness by repeatedly mentioning that it was the predators that had to move past their “primitive” and “savage” ways in order to have a utopian space. In effect, the film reinforces and perpetuates the notion that Whiteness is superior. A possible way for an influential company like Disney to effectively bring up conversations surrounding race in an appropriate way would be to bring up crucial themes surrounding white privilege as well as the lasting effects of slavery, such as systematic racism. In brief, educating oneself about those crucial themes may bring about awareness and ideas on how to combat both subtle and overt forms of racism.

Works Cited

- Cook, "Of Men, Missing Links and Nondescripts: The Strange Career of P.T. Barnum's 'What Is It?' Exhibition."
- Darwin, Charles. *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. London: J. Murray, 1872.
- Garza, Alicia Magdalena Nevárez. "A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement." (2014).
- Gregory Beaudine, Oyemolade Osibodu, and Aliya Beavers, "Disney's Metaphorical Exploration of Racism and Stereotypes: A Review of *Zootopia*," *Comparative Education Review* 61, no. 1 (February 2017): 227-234.
- Linsay M. Cramer (2019) Whiteness and the Postracial Imaginary in Disney's *Zootopia*, *Howard Journal of Communications*, DOI: [10.1080/10646175.2019.1666070](https://doi.org/10.1080/10646175.2019.1666070)
- Nilsen S. (2019) Living in *Zootopia*: Tracking the Neoliberal Subject in a Colorblind World. In: Turner S., Nilsen S. (eds) *The Myth of Colorblindness*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham
- "propaganda, n.3" OED Online, Oxford University Press, September 2019, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/152605>. Accessed 20 May 2020.
- Sandlin, J. and Snaza, N. (2018), "It's Called a Hustle, Sweetheart": Black Lives Matter, the Police State, and the Politics of Colonizing Anger in *Zootopia* . *J Pop Cult*, 51: 1190-1213. doi:10.1111/jpcu.12714
- Solomon, J, Martin, A. "Competitive victimhood as a lens to reconciliation: An analysis of the Black Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter movements". *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*. 2019; 37: 7– 31. <https://doi.org/10.1002/crq.21262>
- Zootopia*. Directed by Byron Howard and Rich Moore. Walt Disney Animation Studios. 2016.