



“Dreams do come true in New Orleans”: American fairy tales, Post-Katrina New Orleans, and Disney’s *The Princess and the Frog* (2009)

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*In the South Land there's a city
Way down on the river
Where the women are very pretty
And all the men deliver
[...]
Get everything you want, lose what you had
Down here in New Orleans
[...]
Rich people, old people, all got dreams
Dreams do come true in New Orleans.*

(Newman 2009)

The latest in Walt Disney’s animated canon, *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), has been hailed as many things. It marks the return of Disney to traditional 2-D hand-drawn animation, the first of its kind since Disney’s movement towards computer-generated animation in the early 21st century. The film is the successor to Disney’s Renaissance of the 1990s, starting with *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and arguably ending with *Tarzan* (1999), marked particularly by the musical style of storytelling. This notion of a return to past glory can be considered as a striking signifier of nostalgia as a prominent preoccupation of the film. Alongside *Pocahontas* (1995), it is Disney’s only specifically American animated fairy tale. It is arguably more successful as an American fairy tale than is *Pocahontas*, despite the fact that *Pocahontas* is a specifically American legend, whereas the Grimm tale of “The Frog Prince”, upon which the story of *The Princess and the Frog* is based, is not. Although *Pocahontas* is geographically and temporally precise in its American setting of Virginia in 1607, a number of factors are problematic. The year is in the distant American past, and Virginia is still a non-specific landscape that does not consciously convey the sense that this is *America*. The film pivots on the story of the diasporic minority of America’s indigenous peoples, and the only characters who are not Native American are British. There is little here for an American audience to identify with particularly, neither in the characters nor the setting.

The Princess and the Frog, on the other hand, is familiar in its proximity, set in Louisiana in 1926: Jazz-Age New Orleans. The plot is loosely derived from E. D. Baker’s young adult novel, *The Frog*

Princess (2002), itself a reimagining of the Grimms' "The Frog Prince". Visiting New Orleans for Mardi Gras, Prince Naveen is transformed into a frog by the film's villain, Dr. Facilier. Naveen happens upon Tiana, a waitress costumed as a princess during a carnival ball, and solicits a kiss from her to break his enchantment. Because she is not really a princess, however, the spell transforms her into a frog as well. The unlikely pair must venture into the Louisiana bayou to locate Mama Odie, who functions as the fairy godmother of the tale, and can undo the enchantment. The film is littered with American identifiers, particularly Louisianan identifiers, such as the vibrant animation of 1920s New Orleans, including its street life and traditions, its historically and culturally iconic locations of the French Quarter and the Garden District. The characters range from a Southern belle and her effusive "Big Daddy", toothsome Cajun fireflies, and a trio of inbred, deformed bayou rednecks. Both villain and fairy godmother are practitioners of voodoo—the magic elements in the tale come only from voodoo. The film's setting draws specific notice to America's black heritage through New Orleans's position in the development of a black counterculture to the normative and dominant white American culture, signified most strongly in the film by the repeated emphasis on jazz.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the heroine, Tiana, is Disney's first African American princess. This last feature has been the most celebrated of the film, and, together with the timely release of the film in the first year of Barack Obama's presidency, renders it an appropriate marker of America's so-called "new age" of racial harmony: a black president resides in the White House, and a black princess in the Disney castle. But just as the celebration of Obama's "change" may have been based on an overly optimistic perception of America's racial politics, Disney's attempt at racial plurality is also problematic. This paper argues instead that the gesture borders on tokenistic, just as Disney's other cultural "Others", such as *Pocahontas*, *Aladdin*, or *Mulan*, veer into the territory of stereotype, Orientalism, and, for the harshest of critics, intrinsic racism (Towbin et al. 2004, pp. 31-33). The New Orleans of *The Princess and the Frog* is, I argue, an attempt to overwrite the problematic racial space the city occupies in the American psyche with a romantic fairy tale.

Creating "Blackness"ⁱ, Disney style

Of Disney's animated films, the only other to prominently feature America's black culture is *Song of the South* (1946), a combination of live-action and animation based on Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus story cycle, featuring Br'er Rabbit and company. Like Harris's original stories, there is a problem with cultural "authority" in the film, as a story told by a white man (originally Harris, then Walt Disney), behind the face of a black man ("Uncle Remus"), to a white child audience. Remus delivers his stories using a stereotypical black patois, further complicated as a comical performance of "blackness" rather than a genuine representation by the casting of vaudeville actor James Baskett as Remus. For the purposes of my argument, *The Song of the South* is notable for its representation of black people with round faces and wide, toothsome smiles à la the Little Black Sambo, and the deeply problematic invocation of the "Tar Baby", which is used to entrap Br'er Rabbit. *The Princess and the Frog*, I argue, is a belated attempt to represent America's

multiculturalism, but like the infamous Tar Baby, the film's 1946 predecessor is a difficult entity to disengage from.

Certain steps were taken early in the production of *The Princess and the Frog* to address racially sensitive elements of the story. Originally named "Maddy", the heroine was renamed "Tiana" after complaints that her name veered too close to the derogatory term "Mammy" (Hall 2009). Similarly, her original occupation changed from a chambermaid for a white family—deemed stereotypical (Hall 2009)—to a waitress and aspiring chef, industriously saving to purchase her own Creole restaurant. Oprah Winfrey was hired as a "technical consultant", presumably with regard to issues of racial sensitivity, and subsequently lent her voice to Tiana's mother, Eudora. The invocation of Winfrey as an "authority" works on the assumption that, as a prominent figure in popular black culture, Winfrey is somehow positioned to judge an "authentic" version of black culture. This position, however, is complicated by the socially authoritative position Winfrey also assumes in white culture—in fact, across *American* culture, generally. Furthermore, as Clare Bradford (2006) argues "texts that incorporate characters from minority groups are not necessarily multicultural merely because they reflect cultural plurality; they may well treat minorities through superficial, stereotyped, or paternalistic representations" (p. 113). Such is the case, despite Disney's gestures towards cultural sensitivity, in *The Princess and the Frog*. These gestures do not disguise the fact that the film's portrayal of its black characters is deeply problematic. Some secondary characters, such as Buford, the obese, thick-lipped and gap-toothed cook at Duke's Café where Tiana works, are animated with uncomfortable shades of the Little Black Sambo. Dr. Facilier seems to be derived from minstrelsy archetypes in his tone and gestures. Furthermore, in terms of the plot itself, the film generally skirts around issues of racial inequality. Although Tiana is black, the film chooses not to portray racial tensions, with the exception of an extremely brief exchange with two bankers early in the story. We might see this as a protectionist stance towards Disney's implied young audience—possibly an implied audience of predominantly African-American children, what with the publicity surrounding Disney's first black princess—but this may be a facile equivocation which fails to engage with the film's complicity in a revisionist whitewashing of American racial politics and history. There is no intimation, for instance, of the abject poverty and social injustice, tied inextricably to issues of race, and rife in Louisiana.

Rather, the film implicitly elides socio-cultural inequalities tied to the urban geographies it constructs. The main focus of the plot is the love story between hero and heroine, as is typical of Disney's animated fairy tales, and the subtext prioritises American values over European ones. Naveen is European, but not *white*. Rather, he is Franco-Italian. This choice is revealing. First, it allows for cross-cultural marriage to conclude the film without addressing deep-seeded cultural miscegenation anxiety, prevalent not only in the South but throughout America. Secondly, it has interesting implications for Tiana as a black woman, as black women who were sufficiently pale in complexion to "pass" could claim they were Mediterranean (Greek, Spanish, Italian). It is almost as though, despite the proud position Tiana assumes as Disney's first black princess, there is a desire to downplay her "blackness". This is compounded by the fact that she speaks to and interacts with other black characters for a notably minimal portion of the film—she interacts mainly with Cajuns

and whites. She certainly profits more from her non-black friendships than her black ones. Early in the film, she is encouraged by her black friends to take a night off work and go out dancing with them. Her black friends distract her from her dream—for which she works two jobs and sacrifices any semblance of a social life—and when she refuses to be distracted, they criticise her work ethic as a killjoy attitude. On the other hand, Tiana’s white friend, the Southern belle Charlotte LaBouff, hires Tiana to cater for her carnival ball, paying her enough to achieve her dream. Her black friends judge and criticise her; Charlotte comes to her aid when her clothes are ruined by spilled food, freely lending Tiana a ballgown and jewellery to replace her clothes. The film implies that “blackness” is not conducive to the American Dream, but “whiteness” is. There is clearly more for Tiana to gain by stepping into the white world, or even to “try on” whiteness, just as she tries on Charlotte’s ballgown. This is a convenient way for the film to draw focus away from the African-American legacy of Louisiana.

There thus appears to be a desire to downplay Louisiana’s—and, implicitly, America’s—racial heritage. For instance, Tiana stores her life savings in a collection of coffee tins, drawing unconscious attention to Louisiana’s plantation history, but we glimpse them only twice in the film. The opening titles to the film are scored by the song, “Down in New Orleans”, and Disney has not expurgated Randy Newman’s lyrics. When the stanza referring to the “Stately homes and mansions/Of the Sugar Barons and the Cotton Kings” (Newman 2009) is sung, there is obviously a dilemma, because the stanza references not only the sumptuous houses of the Garden District, but also, subtextually, the echoing cries of slavery upon which these mansions were built. But how can the spectres of America’s slave heritage be adapted to a Disney film without addressing them specifically? How might that heritage be downplayed without actually being ignored? The stanza is part of a longer song that “sets the scene”, as it were, for the film. As it is sung, the film focuses on the picturesque home of Big Daddy LaBouff, Charlotte’s father, whom we associate with generosity and effusiveness through his dealings with Eudora and Tiana in the film’s prologue. In essence, the lyrics are a textual symptom of the history that is ostensibly overwritten by the connotations of benevolence and largesse associated with Big Daddy, the LaBouff house, and its surroundings.

American Dreams and New Orleans

The film’s portrayal of New Orleans indicates the place the city assumes in America’s racial heritage, but also, more broadly, the place of a fictional, even mythical, New Orleans in the United States in general. It conflates two seemingly disparate settings: the Disney castle, where wishing upon a star can make dreams come true, and the “real” city of New Orleans, where, as the song tells us, “Dreams do come true” (Newman 2009). We see this quite vividly in the prologue, which begins with an ode to the evening star as it shines down on the city, and ends, just before the opening credits, with the young Tiana wishing upon the evening star for her dreams to come true. The Disney castle relocates to New Orleans, where “anything can happen” (Newman 2009). The film therefore takes part in the American mythologising of New Orleans as an exotic Otherland, a dreamscape rather than a “real” city. It is also a paradise of specifically ethnic Otherness located within the American interior, where “visitors have for decades been invited to immerse themselves in the supposedly ‘exotic’ space of ethnic tourism” (Hartnell 2009, p. 723). This mythological New

Orleans is a place to safely experience the Otherness of Louisiana's Creole cultural melting pot before returning to the familiar outside world. The tourist experience of the city is narrowly focussed on the iconic French Quarter and Garden District, away from the possibly distressing detritus of actual life New Orleans, in what Helen Regis (1999) terms "spatial apartheid" (p. 472). Black culture, fostered and representative of life in the poor districts of the city, is packaged and transported away from these tourist-unfriendly areas, and relocated to "'safe' tourist spaces" (Hartnell 2009, p. 732). Likewise, *The Princess and the Frog* transplants black culture and music into the recognisable tourist districts it lavishly animates.

Billy Sothern (2007) observes:

French Quarter tourists [are] rarely exposed to the reality beneath the Disneyland Gomorrah that is projected as "N'Awlins" [...] The seemingly average, white, middle-class Americans [whoop] it up on Bourbon Street without any thought of the third-world lives of so many of the city's citizens that [exist] under their noses. The husband and wife, clad in khaki shorts, feather boa, and Mardi Gras beads ... [behold] a child tap-dancing on the street for money and [clap] along to his beat without considering the obvious fact that this [is] an early school-day afternoon and that the child should be learning to read, not dancing for money.

(pp. 37-8)

There are uncomfortable nuances of what Sothern describes in *The Princess and the Frog*. As Lee Artz (2005) remarks, "Disney fantasies and their narratives ... are based on widely accepted cultural myths and mores" (p. 78). We see irresponsible tourist consumption of the mythological New Orleans in Naveen, a hedonistic wastrel from the imagined European kingdom of Maldonia, who visits the city in order to consume of its most iconic product: jazz. Disney's curious decision to name a European prince an Indian name emphasises the cultural confusion of the so-called "real-space" of the film. Naveen assumes the role of Sothern's (2007, p. 37) "seemingly average, white, middle-class Americans", disposing of his royal garb and making his careless way through the French Quarter, strumming his ukulele in accompaniment to a black child street dancer. We sneer at Naveen as Tiana denounces his devil-may-care attitude and selfishness. Phonetically, the name of Naveen's kingdom conjures images of "mouldy", Old-World Europe. His speech is stereotypically accented with a French/Italian patois, adding to the general effect of indolent effeminacy.

We can read this as a product of the specific Americanness of this fairy tale. Tiana is not a princess; she is a hard-working waitress. In her disdain for Naveen, we can see that the film is geared to prize American industry and ingenuity over the decadent European entitlement of monarchy. When at last our protagonists fall in love, Naveen is unable to purchase Tiana's dream for her. She does this on her own, although not without Naveen standing symbolically beside her for moral support. Charlotte is held up as a comical alternative, desperate to realise her own fairy tale and marry into European royalty. Charlotte's love of the core story of the film, "The Frog Prince," seemingly demonstrates her inability to participate in American industry, preferring instead to "wish upon her star" and magically transfer into her ideal life. Tiana, on the other hand, may wish upon her star, but

continues to steadfastly work towards her dream as well. In “When We’re Human”, Tiana sings her American values to the spoilt Naveen:

*I've worked hard for everything I've got
And that's the way it's supposed to be
When I'm a human being
At least I'll act like one
If you do your best each and every day
Good things are sure to come your way
What you give is what you get
My daddy said that
And I'll never forget
And I commend it to you.*

(Newman 2009)

The Princess and the Frog is very much a product of its time. Released after the beginning of the Global Financial Crisis, we can read anxiety about economic downturn in the film. Tiana works hard for her dream of property ownership, but she is already the possessor of two more recent dreams in the American psyche: she holds not one, but two jobs, and a great pile of savings. And although the primary villain of the film is Dr. Facilier, two minor villains appear in the shape of two greedy and effete bankers/realtors, Henry and Harvey Fenner. Tiana scrimps and saves, but when she finally has amassed the right amount, the Fenners inform her that she is still short of the total, which they have increased. I have noted the curious lack of racial tension throughout the film; the Fenners are the only characters who hint at racial prejudice when they suggest that “a little woman of your...background” would be unable to manage a business. At the carnival ball at the LaBouff house, the Fenners are disguised as two halves of a horse, making at least one of them a horse’s arse. And at the end of the film, the Fenners are put in their place when an alligator threatens them as Tiana hands them her money. In an America where Bernie Madoff is considered “the most hated man in New York” (Jagger 2008), if not in the entire United States, bankers and realtors might be cast as the villains of the film, and Tiana’s victory over them, her attainment of the American dream, is perhaps another layer of fairy tale.

It is debateable how effective the film’s critique of the “Old World” of Europe and privileging of American values really is, given that Tiana ultimately weds the prince and becomes a princess. Furthermore, Naveen and Tiana cannot return to human form until Tiana becomes a princess, linking their salvation to Tiana’s royal status. There is, however, little intimation of a royal future for the protagonists, as, incongruously, they singlehandedly renovate the dilapidated restaurant. This is a curious sub-urbanisation of royalty as small businessmen/women. Nevertheless, we cannot escape their royalty. Tiana’s restaurant, which she originally intended to name “Tiana’s Place”, is ultimately named “Tiana’s *Palace*”. Clad in a glamorous gown, upswept hair and, revealingly, a tiara, Tiana moves with ease amongst her freely mingling, multiracial clientele, demonstrating the polar shift in her social status from the film’s beginning, clad in a worn coat and felt cloche hat over a frazzled ponytail. Naveen does not wear a crown, which suggests that his royalty is an internalised

part of him, whereas Tiana must consciously draw external attention to and rely upon her assumed royalty. The prince becomes a jazz performer on the restaurant stage alongside a trumpet-playing alligator. Despite the “real-world” setting, the surreal conclusion emphasises the dream of New Orleans upon which the film is situated.

Disney’s Tourist Brochure

It is not only the tourists who commodify New Orleans. The film itself is complicit in this commodification as well, pivoting around the two tourist locales of the French Quarter and the Garden District and then moving into the surrounding bayou. Tiana’s home, from the brief glimpse we see at the beginning of the film, appears to be in the city’s lower wards, but this poor, black district is not sufficiently picturesque to merit more than a few seconds’ representation. The film does, however, appropriate vast swathes of black culture, “largely shorn from an explicit acknowledgement of its history of oppression, the evidence of which lies beyond the Quarter’s gates” (Hartnell 2009, p. 732). The main action of the story centres on Mardi Gras celebrations; the film opens with characters anticipating the upcoming festival, and the dénouement occurs against the backdrop of Mardi Gras revelry. This, and the reference to Dr. Facilier as “the Shadow Man” invoke traditional associations of New Orleans with excess and carnival. Tiana’s proficiency in Creole cookery is the driving force behind her American dream and her fairytale romance. Dr. Facilier is a voodoo practitioner as is fairy godmother figure, Mama Odie. The lovers unite on a Mississippi riverboat accompanied by the strains of an onboard jazz band. The final showdown between Facilier and the protagonists occurs among the tombs of the iconic Lafayette Cemetery Number One. The film is underscored throughout by a ragtime jazz soundtrack, and the songs are an almost parodically honky-tonk, blues-y musical interpretation of the New Orleans setting. Brass and piano accoutrements pay superficial homage to the musical heritage of America’s southern states, a tasting plate of the music on offer, tipping its hat to Louisiana’s cultural diversity without elucidating the significance or influences of each musical style.

In short, the entire film seems to function as a tourist brochure for New Orleans and Louisiana, looking nostalgically back to a glossy picture of New Orleans in the Jazz Age. This is complicated by the presence in Anaheim Disneyland of New Orleans Square. This ‘real world’ presence as theme park simulacrum offers a context for reading the geofantasy simulacra in the film. The square (in actual fact, not a square but a convoluted series of French Quarter streets) epitomises the commodification of New Orleans, as a stylised, romanticised recreation of the French Quarter, almost equivalent to the French Quarter we see so vibrantly animated in the film. Although it opened in 1966, parts of it were adapted to coincide with *The Princess and the Frog*. But as Sothern (2007) argues, this glamorous image of New Orleans, so readily consumed by visitors to the city, is a fictional construct:

For those of us who live here, even the wealthy and the privileged, it is impossible to ignore race and poverty [...] these factors are central in our civic discourse and define daily life in the city. It is hard to ignore the consequences of poverty when you can’t send your children to public schools because the schools are almost universally failing; when you can’t walk the streets at night out of fear for your safety because of a murder rate more than six times the

per capita murder rate of New York City; when, even in the richest neighborhoods, craters seemingly large enough to swallow cars go untended in the city's streets because our public coffers are empty [...] I have never been to a city in the United States whose life and character was so defined by the struggles of its poorest citizens.

(pp. 38-39).

And if New Orleans Square is such a simulacrum, but can be regarded as a visual inspiration for *The Princess and the Frog*, this renders Disney's film a copy of a copy, with the layers of fictionality and simulation distorting the real space of New Orleans. Disney's nostalgia for a fictional city functions instead as a form of cultural amnesia; the golden light of retrospection dazzles the harsher light of introspection, refiguring a complex and at times unhappy history into a romantic fairy tale.

This raises the question: *why*? If "Disney can render history and nature in very antihistorical and unnatural ways [...] [and] because Disney excels at wrapping the fantastic in the natural, its animated narratives assume much of the verisimilitude of "real" movies" (Artz 2005, pp. 79-80), why go to such lengths to establish a fantasy universe in the American interior under the guise of "real space"? As Henry Giroux (2004, p. 168) points out, "Disney inscribes itself in a commanding way on the lives of children and powerfully shapes the way America's cultural landscape is imagined", while Kathy Jackson (1993, p. 109) has argued that the Disney vision "permeates our culture". Effectively, then, *The Princess and the Frog* embeds a new generation of viewers in a fictional "reality", anxiously reiterating that "dreams come true in New Orleans", but averting its gaze from the problematic space New Orleans assumes in America's racial heritage. After all, if Obama's presidency represents a post-racial America, then perhaps this implies that issues of race need not be raised. There is an attempt here to overwrite the real New Orleans with the fictional one, and in order to understand a possible 'why', we need to step back into the city's recent history.

A Hurricane named Katrina

Although I have noted the convenient release of the film in Obama's first year of presidency, *The Princess and the Frog* went into production in 2006. Because of this, there has been a long shadow over the film from its earliest conception. This is Hurricane Katrina, which made landfall in America's Gulf region in August 2005. Although damage was sustained throughout New Orleans, Katrina stands out particularly in America's *racial* memory because the worst of the damage was sustained by poor, black residents: state health department statistics show that 53% of the dead were black ("Sign of Katrina Fatigue? Memorial Delayed" 2008). Sustained governmental neglect compounded the losses of lives and property. The problematic media coverage of the hurricane and its aftermath, was coloured by a specifically racial lens:

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Black New Orleans was represented as a symbol of disorder as the major news broadcast focused attention on one of the poorest cities in the poorest region in the country, a city where Blacks counted for 67 percent of the city's population before the storm. Mass mediated cultural outlets manufactured images, narratives,

and imaginaries of the Black poor as either hapless victims or as the source of the social problems they endured.

(Camp 2009, pp. 693-694)

White survivors scavenging deserted shops for supplies, for instance, were referred to by the media as survivors who had “found” supplies, while blacks were labelled “looters” (Campbell 2005). Early commentators therefore criticised Disney’s use of a city which has “a terrifying resonance” for African Americans, particularly in which to set its ostensibly racially progressive film (Heldenfels 2010, p. E2). Ron Clements and John Musker protested that the city had been chosen in order to pay tribute to its history, and also because it was executive producer John Lasseter’s “favourite city in the world” (King 2009).

Curiously, the critics did not voice concerns over the film after it was released—there is a Katrina-shaped hole in reactions to the film which perhaps speaks louder than words. *The Princess and the Frog* has a role to play in the memorialising of post-Katrina New Orleans, particularly its threatening presence in the national consciousness as a governmental failure, rather than solely a natural disaster. Furthermore, Katrina heralded the public revelation of life in New Orleans, via the television of the city in the wake of the hurricane and what Anna Hartnell (2009, p. 724) describes as “disaster tourism” as Americans came to view—and consume—the destruction, now built into the “safe” tourist experience of the city. Anxiety runs throughout the film, as though this most recent imprint of New Orleans on the national consciousness—battered and derelict, with human bodies strewn about amongst the building detritus—will undermine the golden dreamspace of New Orleans that Disney constructs.

The Shadows of the Dead

We can read some of this anxiety by contrasting the fairy godmother and villain of the film, particularly as, both being voodoo practitioners, there ought to be great similarity between them. There is a distinction made, however, between the powers of Dr. Facilier and Mama Odie; to wit, the former derives his power from the malevolent forces of the dead, whereas the latter derives hers from altogether more benign influences, seeing the future in her gumbo pot and attended by a host of bayou animals. This is a notable idiosyncrasy in the film, because voodoo spirituality relies solely on the veneration and the invocation of the spirits of the dead, therefore one cannot have voodoo *without* the dead. The film clearly constructs a “good voodoo” and a “bad voodoo”, signified by the two characters: Facilier is skeletal and dark, lives in a narrow shop in a dark alley, and his musical number is a blues song, sung in low tones with a deep backbeat. Odie, on the other hand, is plump and maternal, lives in a battered boat perched in a tree deep in the bayou, signifying her closeness to nature, and her musical number is a gospel-style song, attended by a gospel choir of bayou birds, preaching that:

*You got to dig a little deeper
Find out who you are
[...]
When you find out who you are
You'll find out what you need
Blue skies and sunshine guaranteed
[...]
Open up the windows
Let in the light children.*

(Newman 2009)

In contrast to the religiously uplifting subtext of Mama Odie's song, Facilier refers to himself in his song as a "poor sinner". The fact that the dead are so deliberately aligned with this evil-doing "poor sinner", and distinguished from "good voodoo" is, I want to argue, a product of post-Katrina New Orleans. There is a great preoccupation with the spirits of the dead throughout the film. Facilier is empowered by his "friends on the other side", hulking shades of the dead who are the subject of an eponymous musical number which ends with Facilier donning a skull half-mask which lingers as a white imprint onscreen as the rest of the scene fades away. He wins their support with the promise that they can consume the souls of the living, and there also a bestial quality to them as they howl and cry throughout the film. Some even assume the shapes of beasts. Towards the film's climax, Facilier unleashes the shadows, which then grotesquely caper through the French Quarter and Garden District in search of Tiana.

The film's climax occurs in Lafayette Cemetery Number One, where the serried ranks of the entombed dead press in on our frog protagonists, and when Facilier is finally defeated, the tombs open like great, shadowy maws and his "friends on the other side" drag him screaming into the realm of the dead. The tomb encloses him and we are left with a macabre carving of his contorted face upon the tombstone. The spirits of the dead stalk through the film and are woven into its resolution. We can also see an anxiety about death and the unquiet dead in the character of Ray, an effervescent Cajun firefly who takes one of the sidekick roles in the film. He is crushed under Facilier's shoe and killed, but in lieu of burial, he is magically transported into the heavens as another evening star. Even the dead bodies of "good" characters, it seems, are threatening and must be repositioned away from the living. The dead are a threatening presence throughout, and we are only allowed a resolution to the film when they are safely entombed or removed entirely.

Perhaps this anxiety is present because the film overwrites the spirits of the dead. The spectre of Katrina goes unacknowledged, either in the film or in its publicity. Again, the argument may be made that this is a children's film, and some material is inappropriate. But there is, I have argued, a conscious invocation of these spirits and a recasting of them as threatening forces. The lurking proximity of the dead mimics the lurking proximity of Katrina, so recently passed into America's national memory before the film began production. Furthermore, the year the film is set in is 1926. Just one year later, in 1927, is the Great Mississippi Flood, which was curiously prescient of

Katrina's destruction. In 1927, the Caernarvon Levee was destroyed with dynamite, flooding the poor, black districts of New Orleans in order to save the stately homes further along the river. The happy black community we glimpse at the beginning of the film, gathered around Tiana's back porch, would have been washed away in this flood, and the residents drowned. When the levees broke after Katrina and the rising water hit Lafayette Cemetery, the tombs burst open, flooding the city with the bodies of the dead. But these were not the only bodies littering the streets. Those districts flooded in 1927 suffered the heaviest losses.

The dead of these communities haunt the American psyche, most particularly because so many of the dead are not attributable to Katrina but rather, to the monumental failure of the government and relief agencies who left New Orleans adrift for weeks without aid. It is small wonder, then, that the dead are a threatening force: they threaten the comfortable assumption of Katrina as a natural disaster, rather than a governmental one. Furthermore, the spectre of the 1927 flood has strong resonance in the contemporary black community of New Orleans. In Spike Lee's post-Katrina documentary *When the Levees Broke* (2006), many residents swear that they heard dynamite as the levees broke in 2005. Sothorn also refers to such testimonials from black residents. He reasons that in 2005 the levees broke due to engineering faults, but also that the conviction with which some black residents claim otherwise marks a traumatic generational memory of the previous incident, in which certain areas were deemed more expendable due to race. There is an ongoing fear, Sothorn (2007, pp. 117-18) argues, that similar racially-motivated decisions continue to be made by governing bodies, which in turn suggests that perhaps America is not the post-racial nation it dreams of.

When we consider that many of the deaths were due to the abject poverty of the tourist-free, black districts of the city, the dead also threaten the comfortable mirage of the American dream. Sothorn observes, for instance, that many who visited New Orleans after Katrina remarked upon its uncanny similarities to developing countries and assume that this was a product of the hurricane. Sothorn (2007, p. xix), however, argues that the poverty was endemic in the city long before any hurricane, and is a marker of the great disparity between races that continues to exist in America today. So the dead also threaten the comfortable consumption of the mythological New Orleans, without the acknowledgement of the third-world existence on the peripheries of the celebrated tourist destinations. In the film's silence, we can perhaps see a shoring up of the racial divisions prevalent in the city.

Political Memorials

In its anxious entombment of the dead, *The Princess and the Frog* also plays a role in the *political* memorialisation of Katrina. When the Hurricane Katrina Memorial was opened in August 2008, Mayor C. Ray Nagin of New Orleans described the event as the enclosure of "the final bodies from Katrina, the last unknown victims of Katrina. This represents the pain and suffering" (Maggi 2008). It also, potentially, represents the entombment of the hurricane itself, with all its problematic revelations of life in New Orleans and its reverberating after-effects for the American administration. There is an implication that "the pain and suffering" is also permanently entombed,

that adequate mourning for the dead has been conducted, and that the city, and America, can now move on. This is remembering in order to forget, simultaneously memorialising and erasing the troubling presence of the dead (Tuggle 2010). Perhaps this need to forget is unsurprising, given the series of catastrophic governmental failures that compounded—and sometimes caused—the “pain and suffering”. Although numerous casualties were caused by the hurricane itself, more were the results of exposure during Katrina’s immediate aftermath, and over the following weeks and months from the “apparent physical stress” of the evacuation (“Sign of Katrina Fatigue? Memorial Delayed” 2008). Survivors faced dehydration and food poisoning, the threat of diseases spread by contaminated food and water, such as cholera and typhoid fever, as well as long-term health risks from prolonged exposure to the polluted floodwater and diseases carried by mosquitoes in the humid climate (Vince 2005). Some deaths, moreover, were caused by mass panic and chaos in Katrina’s aftermath, such as the Danziger Bridge shootings, in which officers of the New Orleans Police Department opened fire on a group of civilians fleeing the city, fatally wounding two African-Americans (Warner 2008). Prisoners held at Orleans Parish Prison were left abandoned as the floodwaters rose, without food or water. Again, this is coloured by racial politics, given that in Louisiana black Americans are incarcerated at almost six times the rate of whites and make up 72% of the state’s prisoners (Camp 2009, p. 702).

Two myths adopted by governmental agencies were that many New Orleans residents *chose* to remain in their homes after the hurricane warning was given, and that many of the post-Katrina diaspora equally *chose* not to return to their homes in the aftermath (Fussell, Sastry & VanLandingham 2009, p. 4; Tuggle 2010). For the first, the myth conceals the truth that many residents, particularly the poor, of whom a large percentage were black, as well as the elderly and disabled, had no alternative than to remain in the city, without the transport, finances or ability to evacuate. As for the second myth, the assumption that many chose not to return refuses to acknowledge the possibility that similarly, many lack the wherewithal to rebuild a life completely destroyed, particularly in a vacuum of public funding, or, more worryingly, that some of these missing residents might be some of the unknown dead collected in Katrina’s wake. There are also political and logistical influences on the designation of a Katrina fatality, which has varied legal and financial ramifications, such as potential effects on life-insurance policies and public aid (Tuggle 2010).

It is perhaps not difficult to see, then, why Nagin might have voiced an anxiety at seeing the formally-acknowledged bodies of Katrina’s dead safely entombed. Ruth Salvaggio (2008) remarks that “the city has become a poster site for erasing the past and therefore everything is possible, a legacy inscribed in its tourist emblem—*New Orleans, the City that Care Forgot*” (p. 305). As I have discussed, *The Princess and the Frog* also conveys this anxiety, and its “happily ever after”, although a stipulation of its fairy tale mode and Disney heritage, is also an implied “happily ever after” for the city of New Orleans. The film imprints viewers with the assurance that all is well in the Big Easy, and as it ends, it pulls back to portray the banks of the Mississippi and the multicoloured, glittering lights of the French Quarter at night. But the film does not end there. The shot pans upwards to focus on the evening star, perhaps signalling that this cheery vista is also a

dream. One of the last impressions we get of the city is the wide river, the self-same river that flooded the following year, in 1927, and again in 2005.

Katrina is the repressed memory underscoring *The Princess and the Frog*. The film overtly memorialises nostalgically in order to forget, but there are textual symptoms—a return of the repressed—scattered throughout. Mama Odie’s home, for example, a boat lodged high in a bayou tree pays unconscious homage to the devastation left in the wake of the hurricane. I will also observe that the New Orleans Superdome is located directly between the two carefully animated urban settings of the film, so the characters and story literally skirt around it. Following the mass evacuation of New Orleans residents to the CBD assembly point, roughly 20-30 000 people were housed in the Superdome, which had adequate supplies to cater to about 15 000 evacuees at most. The building, which had also sustained roof damage, was ill-equipped to handle the large body of homeless, with no water purification facilities, few medical supplies or designated medical staff, and little bedding. In the days that followed, stories began to proliferate of sexual violence and rioting amongst the evacuees, perpetuated by the media coverage of the disaster. On September 6, 2005, New Orleans police chief, Eddie Compass, went on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and wept, exclaiming, “We had babies in there. Little babies being raped!” (*The Oprah Winfrey Show* 2005). Ray Nagin corroborated Compass’s account:

About three days we basically rationing, fighting, people were—that’s why the people, in my opinion, they got to this almost animalistic state because they didn’t have the resources ... we have people standing out there, that have been in that frickin’ Superdome for five days watching dead bodies, watching hooligans, killing people, raping people.

(The Oprah Winfrey Show 2005)

These accounts were perhaps more easily believed and perpetuated because of the proportion of evacuees who were black, and from the poorest, crime-raddled districts of the city. Under investigation, however, the stories are more revealing of the nation watching the disaster than those who were caught up in it. After five days of such reports, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) representatives brought a refrigerated truck and three doctors to process the 200 bodies reported, yet found only six (Thevenot 2005, p. A1). As Sothorn (2007) observes:

[M]uch of what Americans saw was not a matter of subjective interpretation in the cool light of day. They were simply wrong about what they thought they saw. There was not a single reported rape or murder in the Superdome or Convention Center. No one looted the Children’s Hospital. Not one shot was fired at helicopters or Charity Hospital.

(p. 57)

The reports of degradation and inhumanity, readily communicated by the media and readily consumed by a mesmerised public, appear to be the products of hysterical mythologising at the opposite pole of the happy, *sentimental* Disneyland that *The Princess and the Frog* so lovingly constructs in lieu of the real New Orleans. Where the latter reiterates the beauty and elegance of the Disney city, the former fetishises the bestial, ruined city in Katrina’s wake. Both are equally fictional constructs. Katrina is very much the elephant in the room, and as Disney’s story flows

from the French Quarter to the Garden District, the Superdome is the boulder in the story stream, immovable and implacable, demanding our notice. Like the hulking shadows of the dead which somehow pass unnoticed by characters in the film, Katrina lurks on the edge of perception, yet is interwoven throughout the entire story.

Conclusions and an ode to BP

This paper was, for the most part, conceptualised in January 2010. In the months since, yet another threatening spectre has reared reality's head over the sentimental and romanticised depiction of New Orleans and its surrounds in *The Princess and the Frog*. This is, of course, the explosion at the Deepwater Horizon oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico on April 20, 2010, and the resultant oil spill. As of August 2010, the spill has, according to the U.S. Government's website, www.restorethegulf.gov, dumped approximately 4.9 million barrels of oil into the Gulf. Approximately 368 miles of Louisiana's shoreline is currently oiled, with the spill spreading into the state's wetlands. *The Princess and the Frog* flees the city of New Orleans for a time, dodging the shadows of the dead and the memory of Katrina, and takes refuge in the bayou, demonstrating what David Whitley (2008, p. 12) has identified as American pastoralism. For the most part, the bayou scenes are animated with a golden filter, lovingly detailed, sparkling in the sunlight, romantically lit by hordes of fireflies in the night. If the city is a dreamscape, then the bayou is even more so, magical and magnificent. But the Deepwater oil spill is a tarred brush painting over Disney's pastoral dream, perhaps once again invoking the sticky Tar Baby.

So, are we to believe that dreams do come true in New Orleans? In this paper I have argued that the New Orleans constructed by *The Princess and the Frog* is itself a dreamscape, an attempt to overwrite the traumatic space of race and death with a romantic fairy tale setting. As Sergei Eisenstein (1986) has observed:

Disney is a marvellous lullaby for the suffering and unfortunate, the oppressed and deprived ... Disney's films are a revolt against partitioning and legislating, against spiritual stagnation and greyness. But the revolt is lyrical. The revolt is a daydream.

(pp. 3-4)

Ultimately, *The Princess and the Frog* is a hopeful, perhaps naive, dream of the American Southland. It dreams of racial harmony and equality in a post-racial America. In this dreamscape, poverty does not exist, "the women are very pretty, and all the men deliver" (Newman 2009), levees do not break, and tragedy can be swept away by wishing upon a star.

Endnotes

ⁱSee, for example, Green, Sonn & Matsebula (2007) for background on "whiteness theory".

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