“Ew, Ew, the Body!”: Submerged Racialization in American 21st-Century Children’s Animation

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I analyze the Minions from Universal Pictures’ Despicable Me franchise (2010-2020), Olaf from Disney’s Frozen franchise (2013-2019), and Ducky and Bunny from Pixar’s Toy Story 4 (2019). Although these characters are not intended to represent human beings but are fictional nonhuman species, examining them through the lens of racialization defamiliarizes them and reveals how children’s media not only perpetuates specific caricatures of people of color but subtly naturalizes what race is as an assemblage of visual, verbal, performative, and affective components. While scholars studying racial representations in children’s animated films often focus on how animated characters speak in non-white dialects, engage in stereotypes, and reproduce visual aspects of race, this interpretive framework does not address the ways in which race goes beyond the surface, nor does it address complex interactions between race, gender, and sexuality. Rather than asserting that nonhuman animated characters are certain races, my term “submerged racialization” suggests that animated characters are not direct representations of “real” non-white bodies but are aggregates of what it is to be racialized in historically specific ways that are co-constitutive with gender and sexuality. These features dwell beneath the surface like a skeleton, overdetermining how the characters perform without necessarily influencing their outward appearance in easily recognizable ways. In the first chapter, I analyze how the Minions enact a multi-layered submerged racialization as Black, Asian American, and indigenous beings. The second chapter discusses how Olaf’s racialization shifts across different objects in the Frozen franchise, addressing his relationship to Blackness and Hawaiinanness in the first film, the featurette, “pull apart” plush toys, and Hula Olaf figures.
Finally, in my third chapter, I show how Ducky and Bunny fulfil roles as Black comedic sidekicks and demonstrate how Black men have been constructed as aggressive, hypersexual threats. By uncovering the submerged racialization underlying today’s most popular children’s franchises, I stress that race is reproduced and reinvented in the seemingly innocent intimate spaces around us.
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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

What race are the Minions? While this may seem a strange question, scholars of children’s animated films have often described the race of nonhuman animated characters based on whether they speak in non-white dialects, engage in stereotypes, and reproduce certain visual characteristics, such as black skin. However, I argue that the Minions from Universal Pictures’ Despicable Me franchise (2010-2020), Olaf from Disney’s Frozen franchise (2013-2019), and Ducky and Bunny from Pixar’s Toy Story 4 (2019) are “submerged racialized figures” and not direct representations of “real” non-white bodies. These characters demonstrate what it means to be racialized in historically specific ways that intersect with their gender and sexuality. Their racial features dwell beneath the surface like a skeleton, affecting their representation without necessarily influencing their outward appearance in easily recognizable ways. In the first chapter, I analyze how the Minions demonstrate a multi-layered submerged racialization throughout the franchise as Black, Asian American, and indigenous beings. The second chapter discusses how Olaf’s racialization shifts across different objects in the Frozen franchise, changing his relationship to Blackness and Hawaiianess in the first film, the featurette, “pull apart” plush toys, and Hula Olaf figures. Finally, in my third chapter, I show how Ducky and Bunny fulfil roles as Black comedic sidekicks and demonstrate how Black men have been constructed as aggressive, hypersexual threats. By uncovering the submerged racialization within today’s most popular children’s franchises, I demonstrate how race is reproduced and reinvented in the seemingly innocent intimate spaces around us.
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Table of Contents:

Introduction – Coming Soon to Own .................................................................1

Chapter 1. Going Bananas: Despicable Me’s Minions .......................................17

Chapter 2. Things Come Apart: Frozen’s Olaf ..................................................40

Chapter 3. Neon Black: Toy Story 4’s Ducky and Bunny ...................................71

Conclusion – Now on Home Video .................................................................95

Works Cited .....................................................................................................104
Introduction – Coming Soon to Own

Disney’s animated all-audience film *Frozen* (2013) introduces Olaf the magically sentient snowman through a comical paradox of harmless violence. Olaf appears seemingly out of nowhere in the snowy woods as the human protagonists, Princess Anna and mountain man Kristoff, journey toward Queen Elsa’s ice castle. When they notice him, Anna screams and kicks Olaf’s head from his body and straight into Kristoff’s arms. The two toss the head back and forth frantically, each character anxious to be rid of the “creepy” talking head (*Frozen*). When Olaf’s still-moving body walks blindly toward Anna to retrieve his head, she cries out in disgust, “Ew, ew, the body!” and throws Olaf’s decapitated head upside-down back onto his torso (*Frozen*). Olaf, naively confused at the orientation of the earth, feels no pain during the encounter despite being physically divided and wrong-way-round. He does not realize what has happened until Anna places his head right-side-up on his body. Olaf thanks her and cheerfully declares, “Now I’m perfect!” (*Frozen*).

Humorous, disorienting moments such as this one in *Frozen* can be considered manifestations of what Sergei Eisenstein infamously described as “plasmaticity” within early animation (21). According to Eisenstein’s analysis of Disney cartoons in the 1940s, animated characters are liberated from solid forms through the genre’s innovative tendency to radically stretch corporeal limits beyond realistic breaking points without fear of pain or death. However, as at least one scholar has noted, Olaf’s plasmaticity has specifically racialized repercussions. In a 2019 article, Michelle Ann Abate argues that Olaf is a blackface minstrel performer, in part because of how Olaf’s “head, torso, arms, and legs are disassembled, reassembled, and then disassembled again in amusing ways” (1068). Abate claims scenes such as this one demonstrate
Olaf’s “engagement in physical comedy,” echoing the “slapstick humor” depicted on minstrel stages across the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (1068).

While this interpretation is compelling, it limits interpretation of Olaf to a highly specific genealogy of white performers “blacking up” on stage and screen. This structure obscures Olaf’s alternative racializations, the interactions between race, gender, and sexuality, and the racial theories and epistemologies informing minstrelsy, instead creating equivalences between various components of blackface performances and twenty-first-century animated characters in a way insensitive to the potential for “different specific manifestations that these [racial] forms take in contemporary culture and throughout history” (Jeon xxii). Not only does Olaf’s body come apart for laughs in a manner reminiscent of physical comedy on the minstrel stage, but blackface physical comedy was itself a beneficiary of and contributor to the prevailing cultural narrative that Blacks could not feel pain in the same way as whites. From this perspective, animated characters’ comically repetitive deathless dismemberments are not merely exaggerated minstrel slapstick but are only made culturally coherent by the history of racialized bodies being contorted, manipulated, and denied acknowledgement of pain even while pain is disproportionately concentrated.

Rather than directly comparing characters to the blackface minstrel tradition, I argue in this thesis that it is more effective to analyze twenty-first century children’s animated nonhuman characters like Olaf through a wider framework of racialization, “the process through which a person becomes racially differentiated,” that remains attentive to the interconnections between gender, sex, and sexuality (Jeon xvi). I discuss the Minions from Universal Pictures’ Despicable Me franchise (2010-2020), Olaf from Disney’s Frozen franchise (2013-2019), and Ducky and Bunny from Pixar’s Toy Story 4 (2019) to argue that, although these characters are not intended
to represent Homo sapiens persons but are fictional entities belonging to imaginary nonhuman species, examining them through the lens of racialization defamiliarizes how children’s media not only perpetuates specific caricatures of people of color but subtly naturalizes what race is as an assemblage of visual, verbal, performative, and affective components. This analysis builds on the idea that racism within children’s films “involves more than the mobilization of stereotypes, that in fact it extends far beyond matters of visual representation” (Ngai 106).

I argue that the Minions, Olaf, and Ducky and Bunny demonstrate how what I have termed “submerged racialization” defines the most popular children’s nonhuman animated characters in the contemporary United States. I refer to the racialized aspects undergirding each character as “submerged” because these features dwell beneath the surface like a skeleton, overdetermining how the character performs without producing an outward appearance marked by the familiar racial codes of black skin or slanted eyes. While my critique mentions characters’ physical features and their various racialized referents when applicable, I offer more sustained analysis of how characters’ personalities, desires, performances of sex, gender, and sexuality, and their position within the power dynamics of their fictional universe draw from specific historical racial constructions. My framework therefore prioritizes different aspects of characterization than those highlighted by some scholars of race in animation, such as Nicholas Sammond and Abate, in that I claim that foregrounding a character’s appearance can be a distraction from the work the character does in the film and in the world. Although their external bodies carry traces of racial histories, submerged racialized figures do not have to “look the part”; the strongest evidence for their racialization does not lie in their physical appearance. By prioritizing substance over style, I discuss how race is constructed while neither naturalizing the
concept of race as a biological or physical category nor emphasizing only one aspect of characters who operate on visual, vocal, performative, and affective levels simultaneously.

I also distinguish my analysis from the “bad/good” binary method exemplifying the trend in film criticism beginning in the mid-seventies in which scholars such as Donald Bogle and Daniel J. Leab identified negative Black representation and promoted positive replacements. While this was a worthy endeavor, I instead align my approach with that of James Snead and bell hooks, who aspire to “expand the discussion of race and representation beyond debates of good and bad imagery” (hooks, Black Looks 4). Informed by Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan’s analysis of Disney films in 1999, I “wish to discuss the terms upon which such [racialized] images operate and the kinds of identities and positions they enable” rather than add “to the ever-growing list of Disney films in which race is ‘mis-represented’” (97-98).

I strategically selected the Despicable Me, Frozen, and Toy Story franchises in order to highlight the most prominent, popular, and profitable animated characters and films in 2020 as well as to address the three major U.S. animation studios currently dominating the industry: Universal Pictures’ Illumination, Disney, and Pixar. Choosing such mainstream franchises and studios allows me to highlight how submerged racialized figures populate the media that American children are most likely to consume and to encounter beyond the screen through material culture via product licensing. My selections also show coverage, demonstrating that this pattern is not restricted to one American animation studio. Within these franchises, my objects of inquiry include not only feature films but animated shorts and material goods, such as plush toys and figurines. Since I have selected a collection of objects from ongoing franchises within a narrow genre that has inspired limited published scholarship outside of the context of Disney films, my archive is necessarily unconventional and includes additional texts beyond academic
journal articles and monographs. My research thus takes into account a range of sources, including popular media coverage, film reviews, unofficial fan sites and Wikis, blog posts, official press kits, screenplays, and studio-sponsored advertisements and trailers. It is my hope that this archive—and its gaps—illustrates the uptake of these characters in popular culture and shows the need for further applications of critical race theory to animated nonhuman characters in contemporary American kinderculture.

The seven films from which the Minions, Olaf, and Ducky and Bunny originate are saturated with the visual, verbal, performative, and affective discourses of white supremacy. Nevertheless, the films’ existence in the twenty-first century during the supposedly progressive “post-race” Obama era, their position in the market as harmless children’s media, and their immense popularity among people of diverse ages and races have allowed their racial representations to go virtually unchallenged. Children’s animated films, even the most popular, escape attention by their very mundanity and unquestioned inclusion in the American cultural fabric; they fly under the radar. As Henry A. Giroux notes, “Under the rubric of fun, entertainment, and escape, massive public spheres are being produced which appear too ‘innocent’ to be worthy of political analysis” (28). However, these animated movies, like any other material creation, are not immune to the political despite their “family friendly” label and their very recent appearance on the world scene. They must be taken up as serious objects of study with regard to issues of “cultural power and how it influences public understandings of the past, national coherence, and popular memory” (Giroux 29). To employ Hortense Spillers’ description in another context, the seven films I have chosen “borro[w] [their] narrative energies from the grid of associations, from the semantic and iconic folds buried deep in the collective past, that come to surround and signify,” in this case, the animated racialized body (69). The
films rely on cheap shortcuts in storytelling and characterization, ultimately deriving much of their humor from racial tropes and conventions that have been making audiences laugh since the nineteenth century.

In the first chapter, I analyze the Minions from Illumination’s *Despicable Me* franchise, which is comprised of four feature films and numerous animated short films. Two of these movies, *Minions* (2015) and *Despicable Me 3* (2017), surpassed the billion dollar mark, the former earning $1.16 billion and the latter $1.03 billion at the global box office, making them the fourth- and eighth-highest-grossing animated films of all time respectively (“All Time Worldwide”). The Minions (voiced by Pierre Coffin) star in their own amusement park ride at Universal Studios and are slated to appear in a second *Minions* movie planned for 2020. The yellow creatures are heavily licensed and emblazoned on nearly every piece of merchandise imaginable; a Google search for “Minions merchandise” yields 6,690,000 results compared to Olaf’s 1,920,000 and Ducky and Bunny’s 1,170,000.\(^1\) The *Despicable Me* franchise has wielded tangible economic and social power for a decade and continues to expand its hold over the children’s entertainment market. In my analysis of the Minions’ personalities across all four films and the way they are described in popular articles, I argue that the Minions provide an entry point into the connections between racialization and servitude, primitivism, and Asian American masculinity and queer sexuality.

In the second chapter, I focus on Olaf (voiced by Josh Gad), the talking snowman from Walt Disney Animation Studios’ *Frozen* franchise. *Frozen* (2013) is the second-highest-grossing animated film of all time, reaching $1.27 billion at the box office. The sequel, *Frozen II*, was recently released in November 2019; the film earned $1.43 billion at the global box office and

\(^1\) These numbers appeared in Google searches conducted on April 13th, 2020.
took the title of the highest-grossing animated movie of all time (“All Time Worldwide”). Olaf has been abundantly commodified, with his likeness appearing in the form of toys of all kinds, jewelry, technology, and food; he also appears in Disney theme parks around the globe. Overall, Disney’s Frozen franchise is one of the most profitable and powerful multimedia influences for children in the twenty-first century, incorporating live experiences such as character meet-and-greets, a Broadway show, and an ice-skating show that intimately usher audiences into the Frozen universe. In the words of TheStreet’s Leon Lazaroff, “Frozen is no longer a movie, it’s a global brand, a larger than life franchise built around products, theme parks and sequels that could last into the next century.” Olaf’s existence in the Disney princess-film canon automatically places him in conversation with Disney’s prior racialized nonhuman side-kick characters such as Sebastian in The Little Mermaid (1989), all belonging to a mythologized megacorporation which has received more scholarly study than any other animation studio in this genre. In this chapter, I demonstrate how Olaf’s how childlike vocal inflections and dialogue function to racialize his character, a choice that differs from Disney’s tradition of assigning an explicitly non-white dialect to their nonhuman sidekicks. I examine Olaf’s multiplicity of meaning over the course of the franchise and his interactions with queer sexuality by analyzing Olaf’s relationship to difference in “Olaf’s Frozen Adventure.” I then analyze Olaf “pull apart” plush toys as an example of racialized violence marketed as harmless amusement. Finally, I examine the three versions of the Hula Olaf figure used to advertise the first Frozen film through the lens of commodified Native Hawaiian feminized indigeneity to show how Hula Olaf performs “white possession” of Polynesia (Arvin).

In the third chapter, I examine Ducky and Bunny, two supporting characters who recently joined Pixar Animation Studios’ well-established Toy Story franchise that began in 1995. Toy
*Story 4*, the only film in which Ducky and Bunny appear, was released in the summer of 2019 and became the fifth-highest-grossing animated film of all time with $1.07 billion at the box office (“All Time Worldwide”). Their presence in a beloved decades-spanning franchise elevates them in the popular imagination, and *Toy Story 4*’s 2020 Oscar win for “Best Animated Feature” underscores the film’s respect in the industry (Chianne). Moreover, Ducky and Bunny are rare for the *Toy Story* franchise and the animated children’s movie genre in that they are voiced by Black actors Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele, respectively. Before their casting, the first and only Black voice actor in the franchise was Whoopi Goldberg, who portrayed minor character Stretch in *Toy Story 3* (2010). Analyzing figures voiced by Key and Peele enables me to discuss the interplay between racialized actors and their corresponding nonhuman characters, including how these characters’ and actors’ racial features are picked up by advertisements and film critics. In addition to the overlaps between actor and character, I explore the way these characters are gendered and racialized as Black men in *Toy Story 4* through their limited roles as dialect-speaking comedic sidekicks, their lack of character development and backstory, and their performances of aggression against humans.

Each of these characters, the Minions, Olaf, and Ducky and Bunny, provide opportunities for sustained analysis, allowing me to emphasize and isolate various aspects of submerged racialization and its role in today’s kinderculture. Race, as numerous scholars have shown, is not bound to skin color or physical appearance but operates within a complex matrix of signifiers.

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2 I acknowledge the ongoing debate between using lowercase or uppercase first letters in the terms “Black” and “white.” I capitalize “Black” and lowercase “white” throughout to signify that while both are political categories oriented around race, capitalizing Black respectfully references a group of people united through a shared experience of race-based oppression after being purposefully stripped of individual ethnic and national identity during centuries of enslavement in the Americas. White people in the U.S., however, are able to trace their genealogy and identify along the lines of ethnicity/nationality (English, German, Italian, etc.) and have not collectively faced oppressive experiences because of their whiteness.
that gain their meaning in relation to other elements and must be understood in context. As Dorothy Roberts asserts, “Race is not a biological category that is politically charged. It is a political category that has been disguised as a biological one” (4). To avoid this slippery, empty-yet-loaded term, sociologists Rohit Barot and John Bird recommend that “‘race’ [which] is a scientifically invalid term . . . be replaced with racialization which is a sociologically useful one” (613). “Racialization” emphasizes processes rather than implying fixed, essential identities or biological truths. Understanding “race” as merely a set of phenotypic markers “conceals” and “masks” the historical process of racialization, which involves “the political, economic, social, and cultural disciplining . . . of the Homo sapiens species into assemblages of the human, not-quite-human, and nonhuman” (Weheliye 43). Barot and Bird, interpreting Charles Mills, posit that “there is no one, fixed ideology of race but a range of ways in which structures and ideas are racialized” (614). Applying these “structuring structures” to fictional creatures beyond the realm of “Homo sapiens” thus expands our understanding of racialization, the process by which race is conceived “as a conglomerate of sociopolitical relations” that “discipline humanity” (Bourdieu 72; Weheliye 3). I claim that not only do these multiple factors “discipline humanity,” governing and creating different types of humans and partitioning them into categories on a “‘great chain of being,’” but the qualities, processes, and relations used to dehumanize humans are also ascribed to fictional nonhuman creatures (Weheliye 3, emphasis mine; Chen 34).

My analytical framework differs from that of C. Richard King, Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo, and Mary K. Bloodsworth-Lugo, who discuss “racialized anthropomorphism” in their book Animating Difference (37). The authors assert that in children’s animated films, nonhuman animals and creatures are humanized for the audience through the process of anthropomorphism, but they “are not simply transformed into some generic ‘human’ (for there are no generic
humans); rather, they are inscribed, for example, as white ‘humans,’ black ‘humans,’ Asian ‘humans,’ or Latino ‘humans’” (King et al. 37). “Racialized anthropomorphism” therefore describes a nonhuman animal or creature, such as a dragon or a sentient car, that has been ascribed physical, linguistic, and/or cultural signifiers of a particular “race” and ethnicity that is recognizable as a stereotype operating in the “real world” (King et al.). Whereas King, Lugo-Lugo, and Bloodsworth-Lugo assert that these characters are certain races merely transferred onto a nonhuman body in caricatured form, my term “submerged racialization” suggests that animated characters are not direct representations of “real” bodies but are aggregates of what it is to be racialized in historically specific ways that are co-constitutive with gender and sexuality. In such a framework, I am not claiming that a Minion is Asian American, or that Olaf is Black. Rather, in some moments, the Minions perform “Asian American masculinity” as it was constructed in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries through effeminacy and homosexual deviance; Olaf performs “Blackness” as it was constructed through blackface minstrelsy and the rhetoric of perpetual childishness. When I discuss Ducky and Bunny, who are in many ways meant to represent the Black actors who voice them, I address them as placeholders for larger patterns rather than claiming they are literally supposed to be Black men in the film.

Throughout my analysis of submerged racialized figures in children’s animation, I do not presume intent, as I do not wish to imply that racialization can be traced back to a “bad apple” in the director’s chair or that relying on racial tropes for humor is necessarily a conscious choice by screenwriters and animators. By emphasizing historical processes and institutions, I seek to avoid reducing racism “from a structural issue to merely one of individual prejudice” (Barot and Bird 615). Attempting to label individuals as either “racist” or “not racist” when studying creations
worked on by hundreds of people would not offer meaningful investigative opportunities; it is a distracting trap that leads to conversations about “good” or “bad” people, as if racism were mainly a matter of one’s personal moral feelings. Being that we are “always-already interpellated” as raced subjects through a “matrix of domination” composed of “interlocking systems of oppression,” the question becomes to what extent this preexisting framework appears in the text (Althusser; Collins). Therefore, in the tradition of Robyn Wiegman, I explore “how” rather than “why” nonhuman characters are racialized in children’s animation (1). As Robin Berstein explains, asking why these characters’ teams of creators gave them particular racialized qualities would be “unanswerable . . . because the ‘whys’ of race are often unstable and inconsistent, unspoken or unspeakable” (“Dances” 68). “Why” questions are a fruitless search to prove intent and assign blame to individuals, while “how” questions widen the scope by leading us to explore the ways in which these animated nonhuman characters overlap and transform a panoply of historically-situated racializations.

All of the characters I analyze share a common racialized foundation: they embody both human and animal qualities and occupy liminal spaces. None of them fit comfortably in the discrete category of the animal or the human. The Minions are a species of somewhat humanoid pill-shaped creatures, Olaf is a snowman alive through magic, and Ducky and Bunny are brightly-colored plush stuffed animals in a universe in which all toys are alive. These characters do not belong to a fixed ontological category, which facilitates certain types of (mis)treatment. Their unstable positions between human and animal echo constructions of race which create non-white bodies that are “neither man nor animal” through systematic institutional processes (Sartre 14). Animality displaces certain bodies from full human status; it is attributed to racialized bodies to disconnect them from humanity and deny them equitable treatment. As Mel Y. Chen
notes. “Many nuances of racism, while in some ways articulated around ‘race,’ are themselves built upon complex animacy hierarchies” that rank beings from inanimate to animate and include animality “each of which can potentially implicate directly the charge of racial abjection without reference to race itself” (35). Since the concept of race in Western thought is in large part built on establishing that certain groups are closer to animals than to ‘true’ humans, a person does not have to explicitly make a comment on another’s race to be making a racial statement. Comparing a body to an animal or ascribing animal-like characteristics and behaviors to certain non-white groups is a common theme in “contemporary American architectures of racism” which connote inferiority by dispossessing the body of claims to human worth and ability (Chen 34). Statements which ascribe animality to human beings gain their dehumanizing power from “a reference cline (a graded linear scale) resembling a ‘great chain of being,’ an ordered hierarchy from inanimate object to plant to nonhuman animal to human, by which the subject properties are differentially distributed (with humans possessing maximal and optimal subjectivity at the top)” (Chen 40). This hegemonic ranking system means that “when humans are blended with objects along this cline, they are effectively ‘dehumanized,’ and simultaneously de-subjectified and objectified” (Chen 40).

Non-white racialization therefore entails adjacency to animals, a slippage of terms and traits in which the person is perceived as an animal in some way. Frantz Fanon, writing of the Black African colonized subject in The Wretched of the Earth, states that “the terms the settler uses when he mentions the native are zoological terms. . . . When the settler seeks to describe the native fully in exact terms he constantly refers to the bestiary” (34). Commenting on the dehumanization inherent to the colonization of racialized bodies, Jean-Paul Sartre explains that “since none may enslave, rob, or kill his fellow man without committing a crime, [the settlers]
lay down the principle that the native is not one of our fellow men” (13). Colonizers must “reduce the inhabitants of the annexed country to the level of superior monkeys in order to justify the settler’s treatment of them as beasts of burden” (Sartre 13). Animality is thus a necessary component of racialization for the oppressor because exploitation hinges upon the Other’s abjection as nonhuman or not-quite-human.

In my thesis, I specify how this foundational notion of non-whiteness as a state of liminal humanity applies to each animated character to show their precarity in their fictional universe and the ways in which their lack of fixed ontological position justifies ill use. However, even as I employ the term “human,” I frame my analysis in Sylvia Wynter’s theory of the human as a historical narrative construction based on race in the service of those in power who defined it. The human is not fixed and should not be taken as a given that is already present in the world waiting to be discovered and described, even as the limits of language constrain us to discuss the human as though it exists outside of discourse. Walter D. Mignolo asserts that “projects [to define what is human] are filled with an imperial bend, a will to objectivity and truth—a truth that . . . bolsters the belief system that supports such an epistemology” (110). These truths about the nature of humanity are often considered atemporal, but these ideas and even the need for these formations are responses to specific historical moments. At the emergence of “race,” the

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3 Walter D. Mignolo describes how Wynter “refuses to embrace the entity of the Human independently of the epistemic categories and concepts that created it by suggesting instead that our conceptualizations of the Human are produced within an autopoietic system. . . . The Human is therefore the product of a particular epistemology, yet it appears to be (and is accepted as) a naturally independent entity existing in the world” (108).

4 Wynter locates multiple stages in the construction of Man, claiming that the newly formed idea of race became the dominant matrix “to replace the earlier mortal/immortal, natural/supernatural, human/the ancestors, the gods/God distinction as the one on whose basis all human groups had millennially ‘grounded’ their descriptive statement/prescriptive statements of what it is to be human, and to reground its secularizing own on a newly projected human/subhuman distinction instead” (264).
lines were redrawn between whose life was valuable and whose was not; the presupposition of race as a biological fact became “the answer that the secularizing West would now give to the Heideggerian question as to the who, and the what we are” (Wynter 264). Wynter notes that through the West’s imperial and colonial projects,

it was to be the peoples of Black African descent who would be constructed as the ultimate referent of the “racially inferior” Human Other, with the range of other colonized dark-skinned peoples, all classified as “natives,” now being assimilated to its category—all of these as the ostensible embodiment of the non-evolved backward Others—if to varying degrees and, as such, the negation of the generic “normal humanness,” ostensibly expressed by and embodied in the peoples of the West. (266)

The hegemonic EuroAmerican white body became unmarked, universal, objective Man through the process of labeling the Other as deviant, as if it did not itself have a race, an erasure causing Deleuze and Guattari to posit that “there is no race but inferior, minoritarian; there is no dominant race” (379). As Weheliye asserts, “The different groups excluded from the category of proper humanity . . . reinscribe the superiority of western Man, reflecting their own value as ontological lack and western man’s value as properly human” (43). Therefore, in a circular process, racialized bodies stood in contrast to the normative human being, and only through these dehumanized bodies could the figure of the human ground itself.

As the Minions, Olaf, and Ducky and Bunny straddle the human and the nonhuman, one subtle and seemingly innocuous way in which they reinforce the racialized hierarchy of being is through their cuteness, which signifies their lack of power and their impressionability. Each character is drawn with the visual traits commonly described as “cute,” such as exaggerated physical proportions. These nonhuman creatures sport large eye(s), chubby cheeks, wide smiling
mouths, small plump bodies, small hands and feet, and stubby limbs. Although cuteness is often considered a purely positive characteristic, their cuteness is entwined with their powerlessness: “cute” is a feeling fostered by their manufactured animated helplessness. As Sianne Ngai notes, “Cute is an aesthetic response to the diminutive, the weak, and the subordinate” (Our Aesthetic Categories 53). Ngai warns in Our Aesthetic Categories that cuteness renders such bodies even more vulnerable to outside harm because “cuteness is not just an aestheticization but an eroticization of powerlessness, evoking tenderness for ‘small things’ but also, sometimes, a desire to belittle or diminish them further” (3). Cuteness thus arises from a visual form of vulnerability that inspires abuse, whether it be the impulsive pinching of squishy round cheeks or something more sinister.

Because cute things incite poking, hugging, and squishing gestures that shape and mark the body, they connote extreme malleability and responsiveness to external forces, which overlaps the notion of racialized bodies as highly impressionable. The Minions, Olaf, and Ducky and Bunny are given “simple round contours and little or no ornamentation or detail,” so that they “bea[r] the look of an object unusually responsive to and thus easily shaped or deformed by the subject’s feeling or attitude toward” them (Ngai, Our Aesthetic Categories 65). As Ngai explains in Ugly Feelings, this quality of being easily moved by an external force or stronger subject, which she terms “animatedness,” is inherently racialized (91). Ngai speaks of racialized “animatedness” in its twin meanings of both a “puppet-like state” and “high-spiritedness” (Ugly Feelings 21). Although “it is the cultural representation of the African-American that most visibly harnesses the affective qualities of liveliness, effusiveness, spontaneity, and zeal,” this “animatedness” is not bound to one specific type of racialized body (Ngai, Ugly Feelings 95). Ngai suggests instead that “to be ‘animated’ in American culture is to be racialized in some way, even if animation’s affective connotations of
vivacity or zealousness do not cover every racial or ethnic stereotype,” such as the dominant trope of “the Asian as silent, inexpressive, and . . . emotionally inscrutable” (Ugly 95, 93).

Ultimately, despite the differences between individual racial and ethnic stereotypes, “animation remains central to the production of the racially marked subject, even when his or her difference is signaled by the pathos of emotional suppression rather than by emotional excess” (Ngai, Ugly 95). The process of racialization is similar for all non-white groups, although the results take different forms and hold different material consequences. In the case of these nonhuman animated characters, cuteness and racialization go hand in hand, leaving them vulnerable in their fictional worlds.

Understanding the Minions, Olaf, and Ducky and Bunny helps us to see the pervasive nature of racialization, which naturalizes tropes so that they go unnoticed in all but the most obvious and explicit of forms. Such a study also reveals how such forms shift in response to the changing world. Depictions of race and dominant ideas of what race is adapt to cultural trends and technological and scientific innovation. These animated characters participate in a matrix of discourses that preceded them by over a hundred years by recycling and repurposing elements already infused with race from numerous sites in a new twenty-first century context. In this way, the Minions, Olaf, and Ducky and Bunny show that “racial constructs [are] a series of everchanging, contemporary phenomena that are in conversation with, but not entirely determined by, their historical legacy” (Jeon xxxi). By uncovering the submerged aspects of racialization within today’s most popular children’s franchises, I stress that race is reproduced and reinvented in the intimate spaces around us.
Chapter 1. Going Bananas: Despicable Me’s Minions

Illumination’s highly profitable film franchise, consisting of Despicable Me (2010), Despicable Me 2 (2013), Despicable Me 3 (2017), and Minions (2015), was not born out of “insane amounts of creativity” or sheer “‘genius,’” as reporters and industry moguls have remarked (Trumbore; Palmeri and Sakoui). Rather, the movies should be considered “products of their time,” warranting the same disclaimer colloquially assigned to other beloved cartoons that rely on racial tropes. The bulk of problematic characterization falls upon the Minions, characters originally included to fill nonessential roles as background comedic relief in the first film. However, their immense popularity and marketability led to their increasing involvement in the action of the subsequent films, culminating in their own spin-off line of movies beginning in 2015 with Minions followed by a sequel, Minions: The Rise of Gru, anticipated in 2020.

As I mentioned in my introduction, although the Minions populating the Despicable Me franchise are not meant to represent human beings, the Minions’ very exclusion from humanity and the specific ways these fictional characters are differentiated from humans overlap with racial caricatures in a manner that is more than coincidental. In this chapter, I analyze how the Minions demonstrate a multi-layered submerged racialization as Black, Asian, and indigenous beings through their liminal position in the hierarchy of human and animal; their biological

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5 For purposes of flow and clarity, the first, second, and third films will be hereafter referred to by the abbreviations DM, DM 2, and DM 3, while the four-film franchise will be referred to by the full title, Despicable Me.

6 While outside the scope of this thesis, several human characters in the Despicable Me franchise are also significantly racialized; however, there is a dearth of scholarship on this franchise. See Sara Veronica Hinojos’ “Very ¡MACHO!: Sonic Legacies of Mexican Animated Villains” for a discussion of the villain in DM 2, Eduardo Perez/El Macho, as a stereotypical representation of Mexican masculinity.

7 At the time of this writing in April 2020, Minions: The Rise of Gru was originally slated for release in late June to early July 2020 but was delayed indefinitely due to the global coronavirus pandemic (Desowitz).
predisposition to servitude; their filial relationship with Gru; their inability to be harmed; their
physical appearance; their performances of sex, gender, and queer sexuality; their obsession with
bananas; and their placement in the discourse of primitivism.

Minions, by the literal definition of their name, are denied access to the realm of the
human and are unable to be equal with human beings, an ontological characteristic which
overlaps significantly with racialization. As I discussed in my introduction, racialized bodies are
constructed as liminally defined humans, a description which applies to the figure of the Minion,
a fictional body in which animal and human mix. Not only are Minions defined as inferior to
humans on the level of sociopolitical status because of their excessive willingness to serve, but
they also are understood to inhabit a lower plane of existence in the hierarchy of being.

Synonyms for **minion** include **servant, underling, lackey, bootlicker, puppet, leech, creature,**
**poodle,** and **dogsbody,** words that denote inferior status in a given hierarchy. This rhetoric
actively dehumanizes, equating such weak, servile beings with animals, placing them in line with
insects such as **leeches,** types of dogs such as **poodle** and **dogsbody,** and even unnamable
**creatures,** mysteries in abject flesh. The signifying chain demonstrates that Minions are
associated with deficiency and animality. Whatever they are, Minions are inherently lacking.

Minions occupy an uneasy liminal space between the human and the animal, which
places them at a disadvantage in dealings with beings firmly entrenched in the human category.
While *Despicable Me*’s brand of Minions is considered cute and they are seemingly welcomed
into their human boss Gru’s family, a Minion is not a **pet,** a beloved tame animal kept in or
around the home not for its practicality or use-value in the Marxist sense but because it is a
companion that brings its owner pleasure. Nor is a toddler-esque, bumbling Minion a **peer** for a
human child, to be treated the same as Gru’s young adopted children, Margo, Edith, and Agnes.
Minions are workers, kept for their labor, but they do not work in the same way that horses or oxen are used for manual labor or transportation, and they are not practical for their bodies in the way that cows are used for milk and meat. Instead, they are all-purpose servants available at Gru’s beck and call 24/7, operating assembly lines, manufacturing complex weapons, and stepping into roles as housekeepers, personal shoppers, and babysitters at Gru’s request. They occupy a nebulous position by the unknowable nature of their being.

Moreover, their species name *minion*, synonymous with *puppet*, implies that there must always be a more powerful, more important being pulling the strings, animating the Minions through external force. To apply Sianne Ngai’s concept of “animatedness” in which “the overemotional racialized subject . . . [is] unusually receptive to external control,” the Minions are passive beings in need of a master to inspire and invigorate them (91). As the *Minions* voice-over narration explains, the Minions’ agency is limited by their biology: “Making their master happy [is] the tribe’s very reason for existence” (Lynch 2). Since their purpose revolves around “[m]aking their master happy,” the Minions are invested in creating pleasurable affects; they are dedicated to moving others (Lynch 2). It is an essential characteristic of Minions that they cannot live for themselves or work to pursue their own aims but must serve others, specifically supervillains or evil bosses; they desire “to serve the most despicable master they could find” (Lynch 2). However, “despicable” is loosely defined, as the movie seems to find the “evil boss” label rather slippery and synonymous only with “boss” at times (Lynch 5). The film opens with a montage in which the Minions are shown serving a tyrannosaurus rex, a caveman, an Egyptian pharaoh, the vampire Dracula, and French military leader Napoléon Bonaparte before they are chased into a cave by the French army due to their own incompetence on the battlefield (*Minions*). When the Minions find themselves without a master to serve, the voice-over narrator
observes, they “felt empty inside. Without a master, they had no purpose. They became aimless and depressed. If this continued any longer, the Minions would perish” (Lynch 7). The film depicts two Minions engaged in a mock therapy session, one lying on a couch as the other scribbles notes, a long line of Minions waiting in the queue below. A Minion chorus attempts to sing, but they cry instead, blubbering through the tune (Minions). The depression and apathy embodied onscreen illustrate that their lives literally depend upon perpetual servitude. They want to and must serve, and because they want to do so anyway, it is acceptable and ethical to use their labor.

The Minions’ built-in limitations paradoxically disguise their service as a choice made out of free will and guided by their own personal desires. This legitimates their labor, naturalizing the relationship they have with Gru, their human boss for the majority of the franchise. It is implied that the Minions have worked with Gru for several decades, since they met him at the end of Minions, set in the 1960s, and the events of DM appear to be contemporary. In all four films, there is only one line of dialogue directly referencing monetary compensation for the Minions’ services: in DM, Gru tells a Minion, “No, no raises! You’re not going to get any raises” (Paul and Daurio 8). The lack of information about the terms of their service and Gru’s denial of raises leaves open the possibility that the Minions are “unfree” labor (Lowe 201).

The Minions’ most likely uncompensated, biologically-driven labor mirrors the construction of the enslaved Black body, which was also theorized to be happy in a situation of servitude due to biology. Chen describes “a long philosophical tradition harking back at least to Aristotle” which asserts that “a condition of human animality (or barbarity) represents the simultaneous legitimation of enslavement, a relative lack of philosophical awareness other than a
recognition of one’s need to be ruled, and a dispossession of right to self-determination (hence, justified enslavement)” (47). Since the racialized body was ostensibly at its core a not-quite-human being, it was considered malleable, rightfully possessed by another more able to lead. David Pilgrim notes that “proponents of slavery created and promoted images of blacks that justified slavery and soothed white consciences” (“The Picaninny”). If servitude was Black peoples’ inherent purpose for existing, it could not harm them, and slavery could be seen as an enabling structure rather than a cruel institution. Plantation life could be championed for allowing Black people to be happy and productive for the good of all society; the “proof” of their contentment was that the enslaved sang while they worked.

The Minions film depicts a similar affective response in which finding a master means finding a song. In contrast to the sadness demonstrated at the loss of a master, the Minions’ exuberance at finding another master parallels “the disturbingly enduring representation of the African-American as at once an excessively ‘lively’ subject and a pliant body unusually susceptible to external control” (Ngai 12). When the Minions gain a new boss, the leader of a group of furry white abominable snowmen, they perform an elaborate choreographed song and dance routine in its honor, invigorated with life at the onset of slavery. Their musical talent and hyperactivity return once they have someone in charge in need of entertaining. The Minions thus demonstrate racialized “animatedness” in its twin meanings of both a “puppet-like state” and “high-spiritedness” (Ngai 21).

Racialized bodies, particularly Black bodies, are often perceived as living in a state of perpetual childhood which necessitates a protective paternal influence and justifies the institution of slavery. Pilgrim comments that “if slaves were [considered to be] childlike . . . then a paternalistic institution where masters acted as quasi-parents to their slaves was humane, even
morally right” (“The Picaninny”). In the *Despicable Me* franchise, only Gru is shown to understand Minionese and know all of the Minions’ names as part of his special relationship with them, which is frequently depicted in explicitly heteronormative, paternal terms. The *Despicable Me* fandom Wiki, which was created by a community of fans of the franchise, describes Gru as a benevolent master: “Unlike most other criminal masterminds and their usual doctrine of abusing their henchmen, Gru gets along famously with the minions. He genuinely seems to like them and shows appreciation for their hard work and support. He even seems to know each of them by name” (“Minion Wiki”). In *DM 3*, the Minion leader named Mel is given a nostalgic cut-away montage as he remembers Gru tending his scraped leg, replacing his broken toy, and passing him Gru’s own fishing pole while the two are fishing off the end of a pier together. At the end of the film, Gru catches the falling Mel in his arms and cuddles him. In *DM 3*, these instances function to establish Gru as the Minions’ father figure, providing an emotional redemption arc for the rebellious Minions to return to his side after they had quit working for him when he left a life of crime to care for his three adopted human children.

Serving a similar function as the fiction of the paternal, benevolent slave master, Gru’s paternal relationship was explicitly engineered by Illumination to improve audiences’ reaction to Gru. *Despicable Me*’s director Pierre Coffin, commenting on the creative process, asserted that in the first version of the film, the Minions

“were depicted as this big army of muscular thugs doing the dirty work of the arch villain Gru and we quickly realised that they were very unappealing and made Gru a totally unsympathetic anti-hero. To make him charming, we had this idea that he’d know all of his little helpers by their forenames, even though there were hundreds, and suddenly Gru was sympathetic.” (McGrath)
In another interview, Coffin claimed, “‘We needed to make Gru sympathetic and the easy way was to actually have him surrounded by incompetence’” (Han). The Minions are portrayed as weak, annoying, and inept to justify the viewer’s sympathy for Gru: they are symbols of his patience and goodness, as if he cannot be such a “bad guy” if he is polite to his workforce.

Although Gru is paternal toward the Minions, they are not treated with the care that his human children are given because the Minions do not feel pain, a distinction which engages in the racialized discourses of childhood. Despite their supposed helplessness and arrested development, the Minions, like other racialized bodies, are excluded from the category of the child and denied innocence because their bodies are indestructible. This exclusion justifies their exploitation and abuse by neutralizing violence against them. As Robin Bernstein has shown, in the second half of the nineteenth century “white children became constructed as tender angels while black children were libeled as unfeeling, noninnocent nonchildren” (Racial Innocence 33). The Minions’ inability to die or receive serious injuries despite being frequent targets of violence severs them from childhood, since “pain is what divided white childhood from black childhood in U.S. popular culture” (Bernstein, Racial Innocence 35). The Minions do not hold the same place in Gru’s affection as his children Margo, Edith, and Agnes, nor can they be true competition for them as non-children and non-innocients.

The Minions film further demonstrates how the Minions’ lack of pain echoes Black racializations in a scene in which a human named Herb attempts to torture three Minions in a dungeon. While the Minions cringe with fear when they are placed on the rack, their bodies stretch effortlessly, accommodating the motion of the device. Herb then attempts to hang them on the gallows, but the noose slides off their pill-shaped bodies without harm. The Minions laugh and turn the torture implements into toys, transforming the dungeon into a playground as they
take turns jumping through the noose like acrobats as frantic circus music plays in the background. This disorienting scene overlaps pseudo-scientific myths about the Black body created to perpetuate enslavement, as “slavery had been legitimized in part by widespread claims that African Americans were impervious to pain” (Bernstein, *Racial Innocence* 50). This myth was embodied in nineteenth-century pickaninny characters, the most famous being Topsy from minstrelized stage productions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In Bernstein’s work on the insensate nature of the pickaninny, she claims that “when threatened, pickaninny characters might ignore danger or quake in exaggerated fear; when attacked, they might laugh or yelp, but in either case, they never experienced or express pain or sustain wounds in any remotely realistic way” (*Racial Innocence* 34). Topsy cheerfully narrated previous beatings on stage, “respond[ing] to violence not by becoming physically and emotionally damaged, but by laughing and singing about her invulnerability” (Bernstein, *Racial Innocence* 49). Like the Minions, the Black body supposedly could experience harm without actually feeling pain, turning torture into a game. Black slaves’ invulnerability meant that nothing was wrong with their situation, as “the pickaninny’s essentialized insensateness resolved ethical problems of violence: viciousness against African-American juveniles was not immoral if it did not hurt” (Bernstein, *Racial Innocence* 54).

Similarly, the Minions exist outside of pity and do not need to be protected since they cannot be hurt, which makes their harsh treatment merely a matter of course.

Despite Gru’s seeming bond with the Minions, to Gru and the other adult human characters in the franchise, Minions have just enough qualities of both the animal and the human to justify treatment as neither. The nature of their being cannot easily be sorted into one ontological space, as they straddle the two fundamental organizational categories governing centuries of Western epistemology. This inability to be categorized leaves them vulnerable to
exploitation. Since their existence does not align neatly with humanity or animality, they stand outside of traditional ethical considerations for how to treat humans or how to treat animals. Some characters pivot quickly from treating them like human children to treating them like inhuman creatures, such as in the Minions film when Scarlet Overkill reads them a bedtime story that ends with a death threat if they do not successfully steal the queen’s crown for her. Even the supposedly benevolent Gru does not react to the Minions’ fear of pain and their potential suffering as he does with his human children, showing that the boundaries of empathy extend to human family only. Minions are test subjects for his various weaponry and Dr. Nafario’s serums, and Gru does not flinch when they fall from great heights or experience mishaps that would cause any parent to sweat. Gru’s willingness to put the Minions in danger contrasts sharply with his overprotective attitude toward his daughters, showing an overlap with the role of a plantation master who, under the guise of ‘father,’ can dictate the terms of his slaves’ existence while remaining a sympathetic figure to the public.

Despite Gru’s knowledge of their names, for audiences the Minions are rendered anonymous and fungible. Only a handful of Minions are named within the films and feature as recurring characters, such as Mel, Dave, Kevin, Bob, and Stuart. There is a limited number of body combinations, and most Minions fit one of four distinct physical types (BaltoSeppala/JerseyCaptain). As Angie Han describes the Minions in a review for /Film, “They look practically indistinguishable from one another and often blur together into one massive horde.” The lack of diversity in their looks and their namelessness contributes to the sense that they are merely part of a collective, insensate mass rather than autonomous beings. The franchise often treats them as if they are mutually interchangeable, easily replaced by yet another member of the hoard: a Minion is shown floating alone in space in DM after Dr. Nafario tests an anti-
gravity serum on him; a Minion’s head is trapped in a glass jar for the entirety of DM 2; a Minion is left behind frantically signaling for help on a prison rooftop in DM 3 while the other Minions escape in a makeshift aircraft. As these scenes of mundane violence and abandonment show, the lives of most of the Minions are essentially inconsequential. It is difficult for audience members and most of the characters in the films to perceive them as individuals or become invested in single Minions.

In part, the Minions are fungible because they are perceived as irrational and unintelligent and therefore of a lesser worth. The Minions’ disparaged intellectual capacity places their humanity up for debate in a way which falls in line with white supremacist understandings of race as mental deficit and disability. Mel Y. Chen describes EuroAmerican “brutal hierarchies of sentience in which only some privileged humans are granted the status of a thinking subject,” asserting that a “form of what is understood as dehumanization involves the removal of qualities especially cherished as human,” the most fundamental of which is reason (43, emphasis in original). Reason, or the ability to think rationally and employ logic, is the ostensible hallmark of Man. Because the Minions are easily distracted, clumsy, prone to slapping each other, and often bungle their assigned tasks, they tend to be described as “stupid” in the fictional world of the films and in the real world by film reviewers and by the people who brought them into existence. In the universe of the films, a butler named Fritz mutters under his breath, “Idiots,” after a large group of Minions stubbornly refuses to give him directions to Gru’s house (DM 3). Katie Walsh reports of their “chattering gibberish language somewhere between Italian and alien” in the Chicago Tribune. Nick McGrath goes so far as to call the Minions “incompetents babbling like an unruly congregation of helium-sucking Esperanto-speakers,” labeling their speech “high-octane . . . drivel.” Universal Pictures’ official press kit for DM 2 advertises the Minions’ speech
as nonsense, calling it “gibberish” (7). The Despicable Me creative behemoths Chris Renaud and Pierre Coffin, who are franchise co-directors, executive producers, Minions co-creators, and Minions voice actors, frequently deride the Minions’ supposed lack of intellect. Renaud remarked to the Los Angeles Times that the Minions “‘lose their focus, they’re not very smart,’” while Coffin referred to them as “‘ridiculous dumb creatures’” in an interview with The New York Times (Keegan; Murphy). The consensus seems to be that the Minions are unintelligent, and their speech is an especially obvious marker of deficiency

Like other racialized figures, the Minions are found lacking according to the dominant criteria (i.e., ableist white Western standards) for what counts as knowledge, ability, or reasoning skills. This failure to be recognized as intelligent exposes the flaws within the standard and emphasizes how the Minions have no firm ontological category, fitting into neither the animal nor the human realm. In fact, the Minions are more intelligent and capable than given credit for. The Minions speak their own language, Minionese, governed by its own grammar\(^8\) and comprised of repeating sounds and snippets of actual human languages, such as English, Spanish, and French. They frequently scheme and enact complicated plans, demonstrating creative problem-solving skills in their attempts to achieve their goals. They can also understand, read, type, and write in English; interpret and follow blueprints; operate motor vehicles; and deftly manipulate technology and every sort of manual and power tool. With their diverse abilities and aptitudes, Minions transcend barriers that supposedly define animals. They show incredible talents that defy expectations placed on animals, but they are not considered smart enough to satisfy humans both real and in the fictional world they live in. The Minions are judged by restrictive standards intended to apply to certain types of beings who are already

\(^8\) Minionese is bound by linguistic rules, as evidenced in DM 3, in which Gru uses a dictionary to communicate in their language after his initial efforts fail due to mispronunciation.
recognized as belonging to the human category. Trapped outside of the Western epistemological framework, their knowledge is not honored or validated as being knowledge.

Their supposed lack of intelligence positions the Minions as primitive beings; they are circumscribed within the discourse of the primitive, a discourse that naturalizes their inferior status and dependence on a master. The Minions opening sequence depicts three single-celled bright yellow amoebas suddenly growing a new bodily appendage each time they gain a new, stronger master. The master-figure is always larger in physical size and demonstrates more biological complexity than the early Minion-organisms, sporting more appendages, eyes, a mouth, and/or teeth. The Minions follow behind each master-figure as it travels through the primordial ocean until it is eaten by another, even larger creature. The Minions then transfer their affections to the new consuming creature; during one transition, the Minions smile in the direction of their new boss and instantly grow large googly-eyes, signifying adoration. Intensifying the positive mood, the song that plays during this segment, The Turtles’ 1976 “Happy Together,” proclaims, “I can’t see me lovin’ nobody but you / For all my life / . . . The only one for me is you, and you for me / So happy together” (The Turtles). The combination of this upbeat love song and the Minions’ glee and bodily generation works to foreclose any negative interpretations of the Minions’ servitude. These beings are shown literally coming to life through the act of worship, becoming more and more animated by the presence of a superior master. The progress narrative which forms the Minions’ origin story hinges on one condition: there must be someone superior to serve. The Minions can only experience evolutionary progress under the infectious influence of someone better than they are in both brawn and brain.

The Minions suffer from arrested development once reaching land. After illustrating the Minions growing from single-celled organisms until their fully-formed bodies arise out of the
primordial ocean, the voice-over narrator declares that “Minions have been on this planet far longer than we have” (Lynch 1). But the Minions apparently do not evolve like humans. They are frozen in time; they have not changed evolutionarily in the centuries they have been on earth. Described frequently by the Minions narrator as a “tribe,” the Minions fit Sigmund Freud’s postulates on the “primitive” in Totem and Taboo (1913). Freud slips easily between calling the indigenous groups he analyzes “a peculiar race,” “tribes,” “savages,” and “poor naked cannibals” (1). He asserts that

there are people whom we still consider more closely related to primitive man than to ourselves, in whom we therefore recognize the direct descendants and representatives of earlier man. We can thus judge the so-called savage and semi-savage races; their psychic life assumes a peculiar interest for us, for we can recognize in their psychic life a well-preserved, early stage of our own development. (Freud 1)

Freud claims that “the primitive lacks mental complexity” because these “tribes” are merely versions of Man who ceased developing, as if they live outside of time (Eng 9). The Minions, too, have retained the qualities they started with in “prehistoric age,” but the humans they serve transform into very different beings after “the Stone Age,” a metamorphosis illustrated through the caveman character in the beginning of the Minions film (Lynch 3). The caveman is given similar proportions to the Minions, shown with a thick body with almost no neck, flat features, an underbite, and almost nonexistent legs with small feet. The caveman and the Minions also share similar clothing, fur pelts draped diagonally around the body, and a similar hairstyle, a tuft of black hair wrapped around a small bone. However, as time passes in a montage of bosses, the human bodies change, while the Minions stay the same, only changing their clothes and not their corporeal form or mental abilities.
While I have discussed how the Minions overlap significantly with several constructions of racialization in general and Blackness specifically, the Minions also provide an entry point into conversations about Asian racializations through their performances of gender and sexuality. The Minions’ physical bodies set them apart as a group with a distinct yellow skin color, an exaggerated, literal version of the “yellowness” associated with Asian racializations. As Rohit Barot and John Bird assert, “Issues of corporeality were central to developing racial discourses and were seen as signs of something else, that is, signs of superiority and inferiority” (607).

Physical appearance is the largest factor used to set certain bodies apart from humanity. The Minions are given physical traits that are supposed to stand in as a shorthand representation of their personalities and define them as the inferior Other to humans. Their skin is of a uniform, bright yellow hue and is often compared to the color and texture of a banana. Minions’ monochromatic, highly-saturated flesh is separated from race in the popular imagination because it appears on the body of a fictional nonhuman, but skin color is a foundational marker of racial difference. Hortense Spillers notes that the “most easily remarkable and irremediable difference is perceived in skin color,” and that “the magic of skin color [was] already installed as a decisive factor in human dealings” by the mid-fifteenth century (70). Indeed, skin tone is one of the most common descriptors used in media descriptions of the Minions. Film reviewer McGrath encapsulates the Minions’ popularity by referencing the color of their skin in an epidermal epidemic phrase that refers to the white sexual fetishism of Asian women, an issue rooted in colonization: “The unstoppable rise of yellow fever shows little sign of waning.” Significantly, the Minions co-creator and voice actor Coffin has an Indonesian mother, novelist Nh Dini who writes about living under Dutch colonization and who also appears several times in McGrath’s profile piece about Coffin. The “yellow fever” designation shows slippage between the male
Minions’ yellow flesh, the racialization of their real male creator, and the historical feminization and queerness associated with Asian male bodies (McGrath; Jeon).

The Minions’ performances of sex and gender construct their bodies in terms that are similar to the figure of the emasculated Asian man in American racial and sexual discourse. As David Eng argues, “sexuality and race, often seen as disparate or independently articulated domains, are mutually constitutive and constituted” (5). The Minions’ racialized traits are also gendered and sexed, while portrayals of their gender and sex are in turn informed by their racialization. Each Minion is canonically male, and they sport masculine-gendered names such as Kevin, Bob, and Stuart. Although they have prominent buttocks that are often depicted for laughs, they lack visible nipples and genitals; they can be hit between their legs without feeling pain, which mirrors the ways in which Asian males have been constructed in American discourse as physically lacking a penis: “The Asian man is defined by a striking absence down there” (Fung). Jokes in the Despicable Me franchise often revolve around suddenly-naked Minions covering non-existent private parts in embarrassment. These scenes are constructed as humorous precisely because there is “a striking absence down there”; the Minions’ nudity is perceived as nonthreatening and alleviates audience anxiety over the body of the Other because the phallic signifier has been removed (Fung).

These bodily jokes also often feature Minions wearing female-coded clothing and occasionally align with portrayals of commodified versions of “exotic” Asianness. In DM 3, two Minions wear coconut bras, hibiscus lei po‘o (headpieces), and grass skirts to imitate Hawaiian women during a luau-themed party complete with painted tiki masks and colorful lights spelling.

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9 In an interview with The Wrap, Coffin attributed the Minions’ sex to their lack of intelligence: “Seeing how dumb and stupid [the Minions] often are, I just couldn’t imagine Minions being girls” (Verhoeven).
“Aloha.” As seen in figure 1, when one Minion’s coconut-shell bra slips, revealing the same unmarked, flat, yellow flesh covering the rest of the Minion’s body, the other Minion uses his hand to cover the nonexistent nipple, but the first Minion slaps his hand away, leaving the flesh uncovered and bare (DM 3).

Figure 1. The Minions perform in Gru’s backyard (DM3).

This instance depicts two Minions embodying a mass-market, Asianized version of indigenous Pacific Islanders through clothing that is both raced and gendered, as well as through racialized and sexualized behaviors and inferior status. The two Minions are clearly in service roles, providing entertainment by playing the ukulele, drums, and their own coconut bras as instruments while singing a Minionese imitation of Native Hawaiian hula music with the song “Tiki Tiki Babeloo” (DM 3). Since oldest child Margo explains that the girls constructed this experience because Gru and Lucy “never got to go on a honeymoon,” the Minions have been commodified as exoticized, voyeuristic enjoyment for Gru and Lucy’s romantic dinner, as much an objectified part of the girls’ mise en scene as the tiki masks (DM 3). Providing a simulacrum of Hawaii “substituting the signs of the real for the real,” the girls have invoked “a geography of difference in which exoticism, escape, and opportunity are projected” onto the backyard for the
white family (Baudrillard 2; King 3). In addition, the physical placement of the Minions in this scene speaks to their status: the nuclear family of Gru, Lucy, and the three girls are inside the treehouse, while the Minions are on the ground below, looking upward at the human characters (DM 3).

The Minions’ inability to assimilate into the heterosexual nuclear family further links them to historical constructions of Asian men in the United States. All Minions, of which there are at least several hundred, live in a functionally sexless bachelor community. The films never portray how or if the Minions reproduce, instead showing in the Minions film that the same group of hundreds of Minions has been alive for millennia. These attributes parallel dominant constructions of Asian men as under- and un-sexed. Park notes that “Asian American males are viewed as effeminate, asexual and passive,” a feminization created in large part by immigration policies and anti-miscegenation laws in the nineteenth century that excluded Asian women from the U.S. and prohibited Asian men from marrying (5). These “laws and practices would not only exclude Asians from the American polity, but would simultaneously help create a racialization and female gendering of the Asian American male” by “restricting their access to heterosexual norms and ideals, including nuclear family relations” (Park 7, 5). The perpetually out-of-reach heterosexual nuclear family is parodied in DM when three Minions, Tim, Mark, and Phil, dress as mother, father, and baby for a trip to the supermarket. This role-playing is sustained beyond the boundaries of the single shopping trip, as the three are shown still wearing their outfits while in Gru’s lab many hours after completing their task (DM). The Minions can only pretend to be a “real family,” permanently barred from entering marriage and forming the normative family, while Gru is shown over the course of the films successfully achieving this hegemonic family structure by adopting three children and marrying a white woman.
As implied in the Minions’ cross-dressing shopping trip, frequent performances of queer sexuality add to the submerged racialization of the Minions as Asian-American men. Their species name carries lingering queer undertones: the word *minion* was used not only “as a derogatory term (esp. as a form of address): slave, underling,” but also used throughout the 1500s “sometimes with contemptuous suggestion of homosexual relations” to describe “a fastidious or effeminate man” (“Minion, n.1 and adj.”). Similarly, Richard Fung notes that “Asian and anus are conflated” in Western sexual politics and imagination. This slippage maps onto the scene in *DM 3* which shows the two Minions wearing pseudo-Hawaiian garb as they joyfully rip off their clothing piece by piece until they are wearing nothing but tight white underwear. They rub their butts against each other in a circular motion and hoot, their eyes rolling up in ecstasy. This scene links Asianness to homosexual pleasure and focuses attention on the buttocks in what could be understood as a PG-movie version of “the eroticism of the anus” (Fung). Played as a joke, this scene’s strategic camera placement and its portrayal of racialized homosexuality generate an affective response in the audience that leads them to identify with Gru (*DM 3*). The shot cuts to his reaction, removing the Minions from the screen: Gru groans, rolls his eyes, walks away with his back to the off-camera Minions, and exclaims “Geesh!” with his hands thrown in the air in exasperation (*DM 3*).

In the *Despicable Me* franchise, bananas function as a complex signifier of both Asian American and Black racializations, collapsing seemingly disparate racial and sexual codes into a single multifaceted symbol. The banana itself is a racialized fruit given its association with jungles, monkeys, and other simian comparisons often negatively ascribed to Black people. “Banana” is also a racial pejorative hinging on the idea of being “yellow on the outside and white on the inside,” an accusation aimed toward Asians accused of losing their cultural or ethnic
identity and becoming white or Westernized. The fruit also invokes “banana republics,” a “term [which] came to describe any Central American nation whose economy depended on bananas” and that was considered to be so corrupt that banana companies were running the government (Graham). Since bananas are the Minions’ favorite food and appear for comedic effect several times in all four films, these problematic discourses are heavily embedded within the franchise.

First, the effect of a banana on a Minion is a close analogue to the stereotypical effect of a watermelon on the Black body. The Minions show exuberant affective and bodily responses throughout the Despicable Me films whenever a banana appears in the scene, and they are frequently depicted selfishly indulging in bananas. Their obsession with a particular fruit is similar to the notion that Black people crave watermelon, a fruit that William R. Black states became “a symbol of black people’s unfitness for freedom” through white American popular culture (73). Indeed, images of Black characters stealing watermelons and devouring oversized slices with primal gratification have been reiterated in every imaginable variation in American visual and material culture since the late 1800s. The Black relationship to watermelon was one of comedic distraction justifying inequality: “The African American’s supposed inability to think beyond watermelons became a punchline . . . [These] jokes suggested African Americans were too preoccupied with instant gratification to be proper citizens” (Black 75). In a strong parallel, the banana also causes the racialized Minion body to immediately take notice and begin scheming to obtain the fruit. The 2010 short film “Banana” opens with a Minion taking a break from work to remove a banana from his lunchbox, which causes an immediate fist fight, a feud which escalates to exploding bombs and a horde of a hundred Minions chasing after fruit. In this way, the Minions also exemplify the ever-present threat of theft associated with the Black body’s supposedly excessive appetite, a connection reinforced in the marketing for the Minions Paradise
mobile game. The first line of the official commercial is a cheerful voice telling the audience, “Hide your bananas!” (“Minions Paradise”).

Second, the Minions’ love of bananas comprises part of their essential primitivism; bananas are an ancient desire that they have held onto throughout and despite the passage of time. Immediately after the Minions emerge on land for the first time in Minions, the narrator comments that although serving a master is the Minions’ primary, essential goal, “That’s not to say that they didn’t have OTHER passions” (Lynch 3, emphasis in original). The scene shows a prehistoric Minion noticing a banana plant laden with fruit. He exclaims happily and pulls a banana from the plant, holding it over his head like a trophy. This scene’s jungle setting and the Minion’s recent arrival from the primordial ocean explicitly tie the banana to narratives of “the beginning of time”; the banana is a lasting prop from a bygone era that the Minions continue to crave centuries later. Even the word “banana” appears frequently in the Minions’ vocabulary as a signifier of an object of desire, as illustrated in the Minionese version of The Beach Boys’ “Barbara Ann,” in which the female object of affection’s name has been replaced with “Banana” (“Minions Banana Song”). Their desires have not gained complexity, a stasis which marks the Minion as a relic, frozen in time.

The banana also has phallic connotations due to its shape, size, and manner of consumption, imbuing the fruit with racialized, queer, masculine meanings in the context of the Minions. In Minions, one Minion named Stuart is so hungry that he hallucinates that the two Minions sitting across from him, Bob and Kevin, have literally transformed into bananas. The scene is then illustrated from Stuart’s perspective; the audience now sees Bob and Kevin’s bodies in the shape of bananas. In a quick succession of shots, the camera takes Bob and Kevin’s perspective and cuts to Stuart, who yells, “Banana!” and rushes toward the camera with
outstretched arms and an open mouth. The camera next takes Stuart’s perspective as it cuts back to Bob and Kevin, still drawn as bananas, who cling to each other and scream. The sustained final shot in this sequence, a third-person perspective in which all three Minions are seen on screen at once, depicts Stuart frantically licking Kevin up and down. No longer illustrated as a banana, Kevin pushes Stuart away and slaps him back and forth in the face, but Stuart lunges forward toward Kevin’s lips. It appears as though Stuart is straining to kiss Kevin by the position of their faces, with Kevin frantically resisting Stuart’s advances. Bob, who has been standing behind Kevin, suddenly grabs the back of Kevin’s head and wraps his mouth around his forehead, pulling him toward the ground, as seen in figure 2.

Figure 2. From left: Stuart, Kevin, and Bob the Minion (Minions).

The Minions screenplay describes this scene as a fight that combines physical violence with oral activity: “Stuart LEAPS ON KEVIN, starts to lick him. They SLAP-FIGHT. Bob joins in, sucking on Kevin’s head” (Lynch 12, emphasis in original). Throughout the scene, the Minions make various semi-sexual vocalizations, such as small screams, straining noises, sounds of anticipation, and slurping, sucking, and licking sounds, against an upbeat musical backdrop that reframes these physical actions and desires as humorous. The scene’s sexual reading reinscribes the queerness and the lack associated with Asian male bodies. None of the Minions truly are or
possess the object of desire, the banana/penis, despite their maleness, nor does Kevin desire the physical attention forced upon him from his fellow Minions, which echoes the *Aiieeeeee!* editors’ comment that “Chinese men, at their best, are effeminate closet queens like Charlie Chan and, at their worst, are homosexual menaces like Fu Manchu” (Jeffery Paul Chan, et al. xiii). Stuart and Bob desire the doubly “wrong” object, in the sense that Kevin is not a banana/penis nor the “proper” object of affection, a cis-gendered woman.

Moreover, as I previously noted, the banana is a primitive link for the Minions, which means that with its queer overtones, the Minions’ connection to bananas overlaps Freud’s theories of racialized homosexuality. Eng claims that in analyzing Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* in conversation with Freud’s later work “On Narcissism,” “We witness a convergence of homosexuality with racial difference, a coming together of the homosexual and the primitive as pathologized, banished figures within the psychic landscape of the social proper. In this merging, the figure of the homosexual is racialized as the figure of the primitive is (homo)sexualized” (13). The Minions are ascribed multiple characteristics and desires which position them in the discourse of the primitive, racialized homosexual male.

In this chapter, I have utilized the figure of the Minion to explore racialization in the intersecting terms of queer Asian masculinity, servitude, and primitivism to argue that analyzing the Minions demonstrates the centuries-long lifespan of racialized embodiments as they have been filtered through children’s animation. As Bernstein insightfully claims about the adaptive nature of racism,

when a racial argument is effectively countered or even delegitimized in adult culture, the argument often flows stealthily into children’s culture or performances involving children’s bodies. So located, the argument appears racially innocent. This appearance of
innocence provides a cover under which otherwise discredited racial ideology survives and continues, covertly, to influence culture. (*Racial Innocence* 51)

Children’s media is considered especially innocuous and carries unserious, playful connotations. Contemporary audiences are trained to read films intended for children as if the work exists within an ahistorical, apolitical bubble. Thus, racialized elements are more easily camouflaged because the family-friendly subgenre overdetermines audiences’ interpretive practices, rendering the content and form politically neutral. As Philip Nel posits in his 2017 book *Was the Cat in the Hat Black?*, race within media targeted at children tends to be “displaced, coded, [and] hidden . . . frequently in the ways we fail to notice on a conscious level” (4). The covert nature of race in children’s media allows the Minions to sustain and amplify racialized aspects of identity for a new generation of children. In the words of Scott Mendelson after the release of the first trailer for 2020’s *Minions: The Rise of Gru*, “We underestimate this franchise at our peril.”
Chapter 2. Things Come Apart: Frozen’s Olaf

In “Frozen Fever,” magically-sentient snowman Olaf, his lips outlined with blue icing, declares with a wide grin, “I can’t read. Or spell” (as seen in figure 1). This Disney animated short infuses Olaf with familiar humor by recycling the pattern of one of Olaf’s most beloved lines in Frozen (2013), “I don’t have a skull. Or bones.” Yet as I demonstrate in this chapter, the Frozen franchise often uses Olaf for a more harmful method of recycling, imbuing his malleable body with problematic messages about race, sexuality, gender, and indigeneity for comedic purposes. In the case of “Frozen Fever,” Olaf’s large mouth smeared with icing recalls the caricatured faces of Black people given heavily exaggerated mouths and lips, while his illiteracy makes him the butt of the joke when he attempts to fix the banner reading “Happy Birthday Anna” but instead arranges it to read “Dry Banana Hippy Hat.” This animated short gestures toward the need for an analysis of how Olaf is coded that moves beyond the first Frozen film. Olaf’s character fluctuates throughout the franchise in surprising ways that require conversations across the current single-axis interpretive framework for Frozen productions. These conversations will ultimately lead to a fuller understanding of the multiplicity of submerged racialization in the Frozen franchise.
Figure 1. Olaf happily informs Kristoff he cannot read or spell, his lips covered with icing from the cake (“Frozen Fever”).

Walt Disney, as mortal, masterpiece, mega-conglomerate, and myth, receives far more critical attention in the field of children’s animation than any other person, animation studio, or film franchise. As scholars observed in 2010, “the research that has been published on the animated world focuses almost entirely on Disney (the empire and/or the man),” and this trend has not reversed in the ten years since (King et al. 7). This critical importance can be ascribed to Disney’s ubiquity since the 1930s, its economic hold over the marketplace, its consistent, coordinated branding over hundreds of multimedia platforms, and its massive cultural significance. The first and most dominant producer of animated content specifically marketed as wholesome entertainment for edifying the generic “American child,” Disney is known for its enduring commodification of white middle-class childhood, nostalgia, the American Dream, and other “conventional values that are synonymous with the Disney ideology” such as “togetherness, unity, optimism, brightness, cleanliness, security, safety, protection, [and] wholesomeness” (Sammond, Babes; Halsall 155). Disney reaches beyond the confines of a typical brand to become an immersive lifestyle, forwarding a “pedagogy of pleasure” that “helps teach us into particular ways of understanding the world, our selves, and others” (Sandlin and Maudlin 2). For millions across the globe, Disney is synonymous with happily-ever-after, saccharine-sweet princess films that inspire and delight audiences of all ages. Disney pioneered not just the genre of animation but specifically animated renditions of fairy tales adapted to reflect conservative values, beginning with Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937) and continuing with classic favorites such as Cinderella (1950), The Little Mermaid (1989) and Beauty and the Beast (1991). Frozen (2013) perpetuates Disney’s famous princess pattern as an
adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen’s 1844 “The Snow Queen” that was generously modified to feature two royal sisters, Anna and Elsa, and include a heterosexual romance plot, a sharp contrast to the original unrelated, nonroyal, platonic boy and girl pair Gerda and Kai.\textsuperscript{10}

The \textit{Frozen} franchise’s extension of the Disney princess universe signaled a shift from the norm, however, which was quickly expressed as a binary in popular and scholarly conversations: is this Disney film “feminist,” or not? Popular articles heralded \textit{Frozen} as a “refreshingly feminist” take on the typical princess tale, praising it for recalling Disney’s golden era with its “old-fashioned story” of a “lonely princess in a castle” and a “kingdom under a spell” while updating the portrayal of women for twenty-first-century sensibilities: its “female characters speak more like modern teenagers” and “the true-love’s-kiss that Anna needs in order to be saved turns out to come from her own sister, Elsa” (Mendelson; Ebiri). Scott Mendelson, writing for \textit{Forbes}, asserted that “\textit{Frozen} is both a declaration of Disney’s renewed cultural relevance and a reaffirmation of Disney coming to terms with its own legacy and its own identity,” as if the film reinvented the Disney fairy-tale princess genre for a modern age of empowered women and girls. This common interpretation of the \textit{Frozen} franchise as a “a rebuke to the usual Disney true love narrative” prevails with \textit{Frozen II} (Ebiri). A Buzzfeed article compiled fan tweets heralding the lead male character Kristoff as the “best Disney prince” because he “stands beside Anna during battle, instead of trying to protect her,” while \textit{Saturday Night Live} satirized Kristoff for being “big and woke,” referring to his characterization as a

\textsuperscript{10} For clarity, I consistently refer to the original 2013 film by its title, \textit{Frozen}. I use \textit{Frozen II} when referencing the 2019 feature film sequel and use “\textit{Frozen} franchise” to reference the entire official canon of this universe, including both full-length movies, a short film, featurettes, numerous multimedia adaptations, extensive product lines and associated merchandise, and live-action versions and experience-based adaptations.
conventionally masculine man who also sings an 80’s-style power ballad about his love for Anna (Dominick; “Frozen 2 - SNL”).

Scholars have responded to the dominant popular interpretation that Frozen is feminist by pushing against the notion that the film significantly deviates from the standard Disney schtick in terms of female representation. Critics tend to employ a psychoanalytic framework that emphasizes issues of gender and sexuality, specifically highlighting the film’s dependence on the conventional heterosexual romance plot for one of its heroines, Anna, and its depiction of Elsa as a sexualized femme fatal whose transgressive ice-creating powers and homosexual coding are ultimately neutralized, brought into the normative domestic fold by the end of the movie (Streiff and Dundes; Dundes et al.; Rudloff; Geal). Critic Alison Halsall analyzes the popular response to the first film in terms that apply to the entire franchise, asserting that

Frozen’s so-called “feminist” update to the fairy tale genre and the almost fanatical obsession with this story in North American popular culture is emblematic of the “American way” in general: a cultural stance that pretends to be forward-thinking, liberal, and empowering to women, but that at its heart craves the hegemony of the “happily ever after” script packaged as a consumer romance. (146)

Halsall notes that Disney offers lip-service to gender equity, confusing women’s equality with watered-down notions of “girl power,” which makes the film enjoyable to those who pat themselves on the back for their progressive ideals while remaining comfortable with commodified heteronormativity and sexism. For Halsall, the megacorporation simply disseminates problematic portrayals of women and relationships for a new generation of children in a more palatable disguise.
Scholars’ attempt to counter the wider public’s views on the portrayals of human characters’ gender and sexuality provides little sustained analysis of the nonhuman characters and tends to ignore issues of race. Michelle Ann Abate’s “‘Do You Want to Build on a Racist Tradition?’: Olaf from Disney’s *Frozen* and Blackface Minstrelsy” is one exception, as her article traces Olaf’s roots in blackface minstrelsy and discusses the white-washing of Arendelle, *Frozen*’s fictional kingdom. However, binary discussions weighing whether a character is feminist or is a minstrel foreclose richer alternative interpretations that merge discussions of race, gender, and sexuality. In addition, most published work on the *Frozen* franchise tends to prioritize the first *Frozen* film at the expense of other media within the franchise, neglecting not only the two shorter animated pieces and the sequel but the host of *Frozen*-brand items marketed to children. While the lack of critical attention to the sequel, *Frozen II*, can be easily attributed to its recent 2019 Thanksgiving weekend release in the U.S., the short animated film “Frozen Fever” (2015) and the featurette “Olaf’s Frozen Adventure” (2017) tend to be ignored despite their age. If they are mentioned at all in a critical context, they are merely listed as other examples of the great multimedia reach of Disney’s *Frozen* franchise. Children’s *Frozen* toys are similarly used in scholarly work to prove a point about *Frozen*’s popularity and children’s extensive exposure to the brand, rather than given individualized attention for what the particular toy reflects about the character’s uptake in material culture as a physical commodity. The omission of these canonical texts and a lack of sustained multiple-axes analysis means that there remains much to be said about gender, race, and sexuality in the *Frozen* universe.

To show Olaf’s multiplicity through the franchise and to think across the dominant frameworks for analyzing *Frozen*, this chapter focuses on Olaf as a submerged racialized figure and on how these racializations interact with gender and sexuality both on- and off-screen. I
demonstrate the critical potential for understandings of Olaf that move across objects within the franchise and beyond the boundaries of the pre-existing conversations that isolate race, gender, and sexuality. First, I show how Olaf expands Disney’s established canon of racialized sidekicks by substituting other racialized vocal effects for obvious non-white dialects. Next, building on Abate’s analysis of Olaf as a blackface minstrel figure in the first *Frozen* film, I use the featurette “Olaf’s Frozen Adventure” to destabilize the franchise’s ambivalent relationship to difference and to show Olaf’s receptivity to sexual discourses in a queer space on the outskirts of Arendelle. Transitioning from screen to material object, I analyze Olaf “pull apart” plush toys as “‘scriptive things’” that encourage children, through both narrative and material dimensions, to derive pleasure from reenacting casual violence against Olaf’s insensate racialized body (Bernstein, “Dances” 69). Finally, I conclude with a study of commodified racialized indigeneity through Hula Olaf figures, 7-foot-tall Olafs holding ukuleles, wearing grass skirts, and mechanized to dance when plugged in, which were displayed in movie theatres in 2013 to advertise *Frozen* and are still sold today in miniature form despite Olaf never wearing such attire in the film. These unconventional filmic and material texts illustrate how Olaf’s racialization must be understood as operating below the surface and over the course of the franchise.

Olaf belongs to an established history of problematic racialization in Disney’s animated princess films that equates race with animality for both human and nonhuman characters. Scholars and film critics often critique the racial representation in Disney princess films, which consistently portray white and non-white princesses strikingly differently from each other. As C. Richard King, Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo, and Mary K. Bloodsworth-Lugo note, “for ‘characters of color’ the process [of racialization] needs to be understood in relation to the racialization of ‘white characters’” (95). White princesses are shown to embody civilization, citizenship,
individualism, femininity, and refinement, while the non-white characters considered princesses in the Disney canon (the majority of these women technically are not princesses) are closer to nature, savagery, foreignness, and masculinity (Condis; King et al.). As Megan Condis insightfully points out, Disney’s forays into non-white princess lore always feature a slippage between human and animal that does not exist for the white princesses; Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty have a clearly delineated boundary placing them above the animals with whom they are associated, while Pocahontas, Jasmine, Mulan, and Tiana are portrayed as equal to their animal companions. In this way, “the princesses of color might be lovely and good at heart, but they are shown to be closer to expressing their animal natures than white women are” (Condis 3). For example, Tiana, the first and only Black Disney princess and titular star of The Princess and the Frog (2009), infamously spends the majority of the movie in amphibian form rather than as a human (Condis 1). In Aladdin (1992), an Orientalist adaptation of One Thousand and One Nights (1704), Princess Jasmine and her tiger, Rajah, are portrayed as best friends; Rajah is her confidant as well as her protector rather than being positioned within a hierarchical master-servant dynamic. The marked “contrast between how white princesses and princesses of color interact with their animal friends creates two separate models of how one relates to the world (or perhaps, how the world relates to you)” (Condis 25). The Disney princess canon has a pattern of engaging in an established discourse of racialization that pairs animality and race to differentiate its human characters of color.

This slippage between animality and race within the Disney franchise is even more blatant in the case of the nonhuman animal companions themselves. Just as being a racialized Disney princess entails closeness to animals, being a Disney animal entails closeness to a non-white race. While the racialized humans are separated from whiteness partially through their
relationship to animals, the nonhuman animal companions are set apart from humanity through racialization as people of color, a move which most commonly occurs through dialect. King, Lugo-Lugo, and Bloodsworth-Lugo comment on this trend within animated films, asserting that [racializing] processes also occur in films with non-human characters, for non-human characters are not only “turned into” male and female humans (that is, anthropomorphized) but turned into white and non-white humans (that is, they are racialized) as well. Even non-human characters (for example, animals, aliens, and toys) display a “humanity” to which the audience can relate, and they articulate and perform gender and race in ways that are familiar to us. (95-96)

The authors list some of the racialized nonhuman beings in Disney animated children’s films that seem obviously insensitive to most viewers today, such as “the crows in Dumbo, King Louie in the Jungle Book, or the Siamese cats in Lady and the Tramp” (King et al. 2). These characters are racialized through their personality traits, appearance, and physicality, but more noticeably through their voices: the princess pantheon’s Mulan (1998) features the dragon “Mushu (voiced by Eddie Murphy) [who] speaks with a cadence and vocabulary that U.S. mainstream society associates with twenty-first-century African Americans” (King et al. 100). These characters, as well as the “churlish hyenas” who speak in dialect in The Lion King (1994), constitute a “long-standing practice of presenting comedic sidekicks in Disney fairy-tale films in racialized ways” (Iati; Abate 1073). The classic Disney sidekicks are frequently criticized for their non-standard, racialized dialects in scholarly work and popular articles (Abate; Gidney and Dobrow; Fattal).

Compared to this pattern, Olaf is a notable departure from the standard racialized Disney sidekick due to his lack of dialect, which lets him avoid scrutiny by placing him outside the limits of the established critical conversation. However, he serves the same function as these
dialect-speaking nonhuman sidekicks: Olaf is tasked with inciting audience laughter at his verbal and physical buffoonery, qualities which manifest in various forms throughout the *Frozen* franchise. Perhaps implying more about Olaf’s racial genealogy than he intended, *Entertainment Weekly*’s Keith Staskiewicz proclaimed, “Olaf is the latest claimant to the title of Adorable Disney Sidekick, whose colorful and lunch-box-ready antecedents include *The Little Mermaid*’s Sebastian,” a bright red crab whose Jamaican accent immediately demarcates him as Black. Olaf should be read against the backdrop of Disney’s well-known reliance on racialized sidekicks in its princess films, but Olaf extends this legacy in the *Frozen* franchise as a nonhuman character whose racialization is more slippery and lies in different places than merely his accent.

Although Olaf does not speak in stereotypical non-white dialect, what comes out of his mouth should not be discounted as an aspect of his racialization. Olaf’s vocal qualities underscore the content of his dialogue; the combination of content and inflection sets him apart from the rest of the characters in *Frozen* and links him to problematic portrayals of Black people as perpetual children lacking common sense. Voiced by white Broadway actor Josh Gad, Olaf’s voice is defined by cheerfulness, a simple vocabulary, a conversational style, a slightly high pitch, and an almost sing-songy lilt. In a word, Olaf is the epitome of “cutesy” in both the sound of his voice and in what he says. Often described as a “chatterbox,” his voice takes an innocent, child-like tone as he wonders aloud incredulously about common human behaviors and the events occurring around him (Nayman). He has a comedic way of stating the obvious without comprehension, and he often literalizes, counting to exactly 60 seconds before bursting in after Anna tells him to “just give us a minute” (Lee 65).

Most significantly, Olaf demonstrates his youthful unworldliness and need for a caretaker as he dreams about experiencing summer heat without realizing snow melts. Abate observes that
Olaf’s characteristic naiveté invokes “a common source of humor for many minstrel performers [in which they] present[ed] blacks as naïve, uneducated, and even moronic” (1070). For Abate, Olaf’s oblivious love of summer “echo[es] racist stereotypes that African Americans were less intelligent than whites,” exemplified by “minstrel performers present[ing] blacks as being absurdly unaware of or grossly ill-informed about a variety of common subjects and widely known facts” (1070). Yet the baby voice in which Olaf delivers his lines complicates this analysis. These negative stereotypes about Black people involved their immaturity and inability to navigate the world as fully-functioning adults, which gave this form of racist comedy a clear political aim. As I discussed in my previous chapter, Black people’s ostensible ignorance was intended to demonstrate that they lived in a permanent state of childhood, necessitating a paternal figure from the superior white race to look after them (Pilgrim, “The Picaninny”). Olaf’s toddler-esque vocal qualities similarly position him as a gullible child who needs to be watched and guided by the white human bodies around him. Moreover, Olaf’s ardent desire for summer and lack of awareness of its risks to himself, a limitation not shared by the normative bodies around him, parallels how white supremacists posited that freedom from slavery and full participation in American democracy, privileges enjoyed by white men, were responsibilities that Blacks did not know they could not handle.

Beyond the vocal intonations and dialogue demonstrating his racialized childishness, Olaf’s solo musical number in Frozen includes several elements that associate him with Blackness, cementing submerged racialization as the backbone of his character. “In Summer” dramatizes Olaf’s fervent wish to experience “summer and sun and all things hot” (Frozen). As Olaf “close[s his] eyes and imagine[s] what it’d be like when summer does come,” the winter scene dissolves to “Olaf’s fantasy world” (Frozen; Lee 56). Olaf is shown frolicking through a
meadow of fluffy dandelions, a setting which Abate compares to a romanticized Southern field of cotton plants, and he performs a soft-shoe dance with a straw hat and cane, a style of dance and dress with origins in blackface minstrelsy (Abate 1069). Abate notes that Olaf, whose exaggerated facial features, goofy expressions, and sticks for hair already reference minstrel makeup and stereotypical pickaninny braids, furthers the racialized resemblance in this song by striking an iconic pose associated with prominent blackface minstrel Al Jolson: arms out and gaze uplifted, a wide smile on his face (Abate 1066). These visual, musical, and performative parallels within his defining “I Want” song mark a possible reading of Olaf as a descendant of and a participant within the blackface minstrel tradition and convincingly racialize Olaf as a character stitched together from Black parody.

However, Olaf’s characterization in Frozen is not the last word on his racialization, because Olaf shows surprising instability when he is analyzed across the franchise. His identity is frequently in flux in “Olaf’s Frozen Adventure,” which debuted in theatres as a 24-minute animated featurette playing before Disney-Pixar’s Coco (2017). In the featurette, Olaf is extremely malleable, shifting in response to those around him in a way that seems to transcend difference even as it anxiously depicts it. Released four years after Frozen, “Olaf’s Frozen Adventure” builds on Olaf’s characterization as established in the feature film but complicates it by adding explicit sexual discourses, layering these meanings onto Olaf’s literally and symbolically slippery body. Phallic signifiers, nudity, sexual jokes, and visual gags emphasize Olaf’s racialized sexuality in a sauna setting already portrayed as a queer space in Frozen.

“Olaf’s Frozen Adventure” follows Olaf as he journeys across the kingdom of Arendelle compiling townspeople’s family traditions in hopes of delivering the perfect tradition to royal sisters Elsa and Anna, who sadly do not believe they share any family traditions “at that time of
During a song montage, Olaf participates in various winter traditions for just a few seconds each, which shows him to be easily adaptable to external circumstances. He moves from left to right in each shot, and the scene cuts abruptly around him while he continues to move, resulting in continuous action between shots. In the home of a Jewish family celebrating Hanukkah, Olaf sings “shalom” and spins upside-down on his carrot nose next to a similarly spinning dreidel. While Olaf sings “happy solstice,” the shot cuts to Olaf skipping in a circle outdoors with a garland of greenery around his neck in front of three people dancing with matching garlands. The third shot shows a family wearing St. Lucy’s Day candle crowns; a child places one on Olaf’s head as he dizzily comes to a stop and sings “fancy chandelier” (“Olaf’s Frozen Adventure”). Later, the song returns to the Jewish family, and Olaf lights the menorah, obliviously lighting one of his twig fingers on fire, too.

In this montage, Olaf shows an ambivalent relationship to difference. He is physically altered by the traditional practices of those around him, bearing the marks of their practices on his body through his dizziness and burned finger. However, this bodily inscription is temporary; Olaf transcends difference as a flexible vehicle for various religious or cultural practices, implying that these identities are ritual performances that can be embodied by anyone rather than fixed states of being belonging to only certain groups. The sequence thus attempts to make a multicultural gesture asserting that all traditions are equally valid while simultaneously suggesting that they are not: Olaf’s stated purpose is to find the best tradition to give to Elsa and Anna, and he reminds the villagers that he’ll “decide if [the tradition is] special enough” (“Olaf’s Frozen Adventure”). This contradictory impulse toward difference frames the ambiguity of the featurette, which modulates between praising and censuring, denying and reasserting difference through the central figure of Olaf.
Moreover, although Olaf ostensibly visits every house in the Norwegian kingdom on his quest for traditions, there are no people of color, invalidating many religious and cultural traditions through exclusion. All of the villagers have the same pale skin tone and appear racially homogenous, and the families depicted are nuclear heterosexual groupings of mother, father, and children. None of the townspeople look “different” with regard to race or sexuality, which relegates their difference to a matter of external adornment and accessories: the Jews have a menorah and dreidel, the pagans have garlands, and the St. Lucy’s celebrants have candle crowns. Rather than a “hieroglyphics of the flesh” parceling up the population, the townspeople are interchangeable with one another (Spillers 67). They could merely trade these external traditional objects to become the Other because they are already the Same, just as Olaf is gathering these trappings up in his sleigh to bring back to the castle.

Without featuring bodies of color in the act of winter celebration, the sequence aligns Olaf with racial difference through external covering, suggesting that racial difference is a manner of excess. He embodies a potentially violatory Blackness by accidentally blackening his face with coal dust after he looks up a chimney, as seen in figure 2. While his face is partially blackened, Olaf exclaims and ostensibly writes, “Breaking and entering: okay on Christmas!,” a move which conflates crime, specifically thievery and the violation of physical boundaries, with Blackness (“Olaf’s Frozen Adventure”). This visual gag employs a familiar tactic in early animation in which characters’ faces were unwittingly blacked through coal dust or an explosion in a way reminiscent of minstrelsy (Sammond, Birth 261). In this moment, Olaf participates in an ephemeral Blackness just as he momentarily participated in Jewishness.11 The Frozen film had already established that Olaf’s strong connection to Blackness, and this featurette anxiously

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11 Josh Gad, the voice of Olaf, is a white Jewish actor, although the potential implications of his identity for Olaf’s character throughout the franchise are outside the scope of this thesis.
reiterates this difference as a visual statement, drawing a line between Olaf and the white townspeople even as it suggests that this racial line might be as porous as the religious and cultural differences Olaf elsewhere embodied.

Figure 2. Olaf, marked with black coal dust, records a family’s holiday tradition on his list in “Olaf’s Frozen Adventure.”

After anxiously recalling Olaf’s racial separation from Arendelle’s white families, “Olaf’s Frozen Adventure” moves from the city center to the margins both sexually and geographically, fixating on Olaf’s carrot as a phallic symbol in a scene that takes place in a queer space outside the bounds of Arendelle proper. Olaf leaves the heart of Arendelle to visit the “last house,” Wandering Oaken’s Trading Post and Sauna, to learn the proprietor, Oaken’s, holiday traditions (“Olaf’s Frozen Adventure”). Oaken has already been established in Frozen as having a white same-sex partner through a brief cut-away shot of his family in the sauna, and Oaken’s potential homosexuality has been both praised as progressive and denounced as sinful.
propaganda in popular media (Geal 102). The sauna is therefore delineated as a queer space on the outskirts of the kingdom that does not adhere to the heteronormativity structuring the majority of Arendelle.

“Olaf’s Frozen Adventure” temporarily creates a shared sexual identity between Olaf and Oaken in the space of the sauna in a way that is similar to the prior song montage’s enactment of shared religious practices between Olaf and the townspeople. Olaf and Oaken occupy the visual center in the shot of the steamy sauna room, with a dozen of Oaken’s family members flanking the rectangular room on the visual periphery. Although the anonymous family members and a pile of hot coals are technically closer to the audience, the eye is drawn to Olaf and Oaken as the camera zooms in slowly throughout the entire scene. Olaf is shown relaxing in the steam next to Oaken, who is only wearing a towel around his waist and a cap on his head. Olaf can be understood as naked, as he plucks his three rock buttons one by one from his body and sighs, “Nothin’ like taking your coals off once in a while, you know what I mean?” (“Olaf’s Frozen Adventure”). This line, vocal signs of pleasure, and his corresponding action allude to sexual gratification in a sanitized variation on the colloquial phrase “getting your rocks off,” which commonly refers to a male having an orgasm—“rocks” being “a vulgar slang term for testicles” (“Getting”).12 Through the phrase “you know what I mean?” and in the two characters’ close physical proximity, this experience offers a moment of identification between Olaf and Oaken. Olaf quickly melts in the sauna’s heat, with his features and body, now a viscous white liquid, flowing downward to the floor. His carrot nose slides across his torso, angling slightly right of center, a phallic carrot over his crotch (as seen in figure 3). Oaken delicately scoots a bucket across the floor with his foot to catch Olaf’s spillage.

12 I acknowledge that testicles do not a male make.
Figure 3. Olaf’s carrot slides down his body in “Olaf’s Frozen Adventure.”

The scene quickly cuts away in a blur of white, imitating steam, and reveals Oaken standing on the porch of his establishment holding the bucket. All that shows over the rim of the bucket is Olaf’s carrot, which sticks straight up and bobs slightly in the unseen water.

In this featurette, Olaf’s racialized phallic associations are made explicit and rely on visual imagery, innuendos, and physical performances. While Abate mentions that the name “Olaf” also functions as “a slang term for a large penis” and links this connotation to the way that Black men were hypersexualized on the minstrel stage, Olaf’s sexuality is on display in “Olaf’s Frozen Adventure” rather than lingering in his intangible name (1071). This unexpected sequence in the sauna on the outskirts of Arendelle further demonstrates Olaf’s

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13 Abate supports her claim by citing a definition by “PrincessClara” on Urban Dictionary made in 2010 that has 142 “upvotes” and 73 “downvotes” (“Olaf”). I would like to note that this is a site on which any anonymous user can post, and no one cites their sources. In addition, it is a widespread practice for users to fictionalize words and definitions, especially as they relate to sex, which casts doubt on the accuracy of this claim.
dynamic possibilities for meaning-making that cannot be reduced to one axis of either race or
gender or sexuality. Instead, his characterization as a nonhuman animated sidekick and his
personality as a naïve, curious being who is ready to go along with anything renders him
particularly receptive to whatever he encounters. He destabilizes existing frameworks and
exposes the ambivalences of categorization even while he reproduces hierarchies and the
boundary between bodies in town and those on the margins.

Much of Olaf’s receptivity to meaning-making and ability to adapt to situations around
him comes from the physical flexibility of his body. He welcomes impressions by external forces
both symbolic and literal, as exemplified by his melting in the sauna. Olaf’s boundary-defying
physicality and lack of solid definition are ironically his most defining characteristics. Olaf is
“whimsically animated as a physics-defying set of independently mobile snowballs,” an artistic
choice which renders his snowman-body “amusingly malleable” (Kois; Nayman). Olaf’s
irreverence toward physics and physical limitations and his ability to be harmlessly dismembered
is presented as an innocent source of delight.

However, as I mentioned in my introduction, Olaf’s engagement in this form of comedy
speaks to the American history of violence against Black bodies as a source of harmless fun. The
Frozen franchise delights in demonstrating in each film, short, and featurette how Olaf can melt
and dissolve, be dismembered and impaled, and all the while keep a goofy, naïve smile on his
face. In these cases, the audience is meant to feel not sexual pleasure but a thrill at watching
Olaf’s happy invincibility and the cleverness of his animators. Frozen co-director Chris Buck
explained Olaf’s appeal for the Disney animators, noting to Entertainment Weekly, “‘They all
wanted to do something fun with him . . . We had to say, “Look, guys, we’ve got an emotional
scene here, let’s keep his head on”’” (Staskiewicz). Buck’s words illustrate the pleasure Olaf’s
body gives to his creators, a gratification with distinct, uncomfortable parallels to the sadistic: one of the story artists, Jeff Ranjo, enjoyed animating Olaf because “you can rip his arms off, you can cut his head off, you can make a hole in him. He doesn’t care. I love to torture Olaf, because he’s a snowman. He doesn’t feel pain. I can abuse him and get paid for it” (Solomon 109). Decapitating and mutilating Olaf is an innocent, fun act because he “doesn’t care” since he “doesn’t feel pain”; he is not a person with bodily integrity and ethical considerations but a mere “snowman” (Solomon 109). Olaf’s inability to feel pain or be physically harmed renders such bodily actions neutral and literally harmless, defined as the complete absence of harm. It is a joy to tear him apart in new ways and a sign of the animators’ creativity.

Yet Ranjo’s language betrays the ruse: impaling Olaf’s chest with an icicle is still technically “torture” of one entity by another — in this case the animator placing the animated icicle — but because Olaf calmly notes, “Oh, look at that. I’ve been impaled,” and “laughs it off,” it becomes a type of torture Ranjo can “love,” a form of “abuse” Ranjo can “get paid for” (Solomon 109; Lee 61). Nicholas Sammond notes that this sadistic relationship between animator and animated appeared often in the first cartoons, which featured characters often explicitly described as minstrels and imbued with blackface performance qualities: “Early animation is replete with examples of the animator demonstrating the plasticity of his characters by assaulting or deforming them, directly or indirectly,” to show off the animator’s skill and, implicitly, their power over a racialized body (Birth, 289). In his 2015 book Birth of an Industry, Sammond interprets early animated characters as active participants in the blackface minstrel tradition, claiming, “Mickey Mouse isn’t like a minstrel; he is a minstrel” (5, emphasis in original). He asserts that early animation’s characterizations, tropes, and running gags are not merely derived from blackface minstrels but actually extended the life of this form in the face
of technological change. Olaf’s relationship with his animators thus demonstrates the enduring thrill of antagonizing one’s racialized creations to achieve commercial success; since these characters are not real people and cannot feel pain, they can be easily made vehicles for human pleasure.

As I mentioned in my discussion of the Minions, the insistence that non-white persons were less susceptible to pain was a key element of racialization and dehumanization in nineteenth-century popular media and performance styles. The inability to feel pain excludes the racialized body from the hegemonic construction of childhood, since childhood is predicated on innocence, and innocence is understood as the presence of vulnerability and the need to be protected from external harm (Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*). However, whereas the Minions’ racialized invulnerability combines with their massive numbers and anonymity to further naturalize their servitude and form a barrier of difference between audience and Minion, Olaf’s racialized invulnerability is depicted as a source of pleasure and laughter for both the audience and the snowman. The Minions, who cringe in fear, are always depicted as distressed at the prospect of injury, but Olaf happily moves toward what would otherwise be a physical threat. For example, in *Frozen II*, Olaf, laughing all the way, runs multiple times into a magical barrier that throws him in the air and backward several feet. Taking Topsy, the infamous insensate pickaninny figure, to the extreme in the animated world, Olaf comes apart and back together again over and over throughout every film, short, and featurette, a comedic repetition demonstrating his complete physical invulnerability, noninnocence, and non-whiteness.  

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14 While Olaf temporarily ‘dies’ in *Frozen II* by disassembling into an inanimate pile of snow, this is not due to his own bodily failure in response to external physical threats; instead, the cause is Elsa’s momentary death in Ahtohallan, which cuts off the magical powers that keep him alive.
Michelle Ann Abate notes in her discussion of *Frozen* that “while blackface performers, of course, did not dismember their bodies like Olaf, much of their comedy was physical: they tripped, they fell down, and they were struck by various objects for comedic effect’” (1068). But Olaf does not merely recreate the slapstick of minstrels; he instead demonstrates through repeated physical dismemberment what it means in the white imagination for a Black body to be available for public consumption. Blackness is bought and sold by white audiences as the natural embodiment of what is funny precisely through those bodies’ supposed lack of pain; whites pay and “get paid” to consume and perform supposedly humorous acts of violence against insensate Black bodies (Solomon 109). As Franklin Hughes notes, historically “many caricatures of African Americans were designed to be laughed at, reducing black people to buffoons.” These buffoonish caricatures were frequently targets of violence, which was both depicted in popular culture and acted out physically upon fictitious or living bodies of Black people. Black children, through the pickaninny caricature, were endlessly portrayed in material objects and visual representations such as postcards in “the state of being threatened or attacked by animals (especially alligators, geese, dogs, pigs, or tigers)” (Bernstein, *Racial Innocence* 34). Commodified violence against the Black body appeared in and contributed to pleasurable “family-friendly” venues for whites, such as state fairs, circuses, and carnivals. According to Hughes, “the idea of throwing objects at African Americans for entertainment lasted for many years and took many forms,” such as a game with the “possibility of actually hitting an African American with a baseball” called the “African Dodger” and a turn of the twentieth-century dunk tank called the “African Dip game which had the slogan of ‘Hit the trigger, dump the nigger’” (Hughes). The atmosphere of fun, pleasure, and relaxation saturating an event such as a circus
neutralized and naturalized white violence against Black bodies; it was all in good fun, for a laugh.

Olaf’s racialized ability to be harmlessly torn apart is marketed to children as an innocent source of joy and delight and as a quintessential part of his “Olafness.” As Daniel Hade explains in his analysis of branding tactics for children’s book characters, for a megacorporation like Disney, an Olaf “key ring is no different from a[n Olaf] book. Each is a ‘container’ for the idea of ‘[Olaf]’. Each ‘container’ is simply a means for a child to experience ‘[Olafness].’ In this world [of Disney marketing] there is no difference between a book and a video or a CD or a T-shirt or a backpack” (512). Rather than attempting to sell a book as a book, emphasizing the qualities that make it an effective piece of reading material, Disney advertises the concept of Olafness, packages it in various ways, and sells it to the consumer. Disney is often noted as being especially good at these “transmedia synergies,” with Halsall attributing the Frozen franchise’s massive commercial success to “corporate control of consistent messaging across all levels of media” (153, 142). Disney’s strategic marketing creates character recognition that sustains consumer interest and positive associations across many different items, whether those are “bowling balls; bubble making wand and solution sets; chess sets; [or] children’s play cosmetics,” all part of Disney’s trademark application for “Olaf’s Frozen Adventure” branded products (“Walt Disney Company”). The Olaf licensed products, containers for ideology, are essentially interchangeable in the capitalist perspective of the company because a consistent Olafness remains at their core.¹⁵

While to Disney these various branded products sell the same Olafness, at the material level, different types of products allow for different kinds of interactions between the child and

¹⁵I am indebted to Bernstein’s analysis of “Raggedyness” in her book Racial Innocence for this idea.
the commodity that can more explicitly and tangibly embody Olafness. Olaf, as an idea and cluster of qualities, is heavily associated with the concept of harmless physical dismemberment. Sold originally between 2013 and 2015 as “Frozen Pull Apart and Talkin’ Olaf” and re-released recently with a few updated features as “Disney Frozen 2 Olaf Pull Apart,” two plush toy versions of Olaf explicitly “script” casually violent play through the ways the toys are constructed as well as through their inescapable ties to the animated canonical Olaf (Bernstein, “Dances” 68). Both plush toys’ product descriptions state what the child should do with the toy and what affective and embodied responses Olaf will incite for the child. In the case of the “Frozen Pull Apart and Talkin’ Olaf,” “Olaf will make you laugh”; “Pull him apart and help put him back together” (“Frozen Pull Apart,” emphasis mine). Likewise, the “Disney Frozen 2 Olaf Pull Apart” is a holder for happiness that the child will unleash during rough play: “The Disney Frozen Pull Apart Olaf plush toy is full of silly fun – pull Olaf’s torso and he will stretch apart then snap back together!” (“Disney Frozen 2 Olaf,” emphasis mine).

These two plush toys are “scriptive things,” to use Robin Bernstein’s term (“Dances” 69). In her analysis of material culture, Bernstein notes that a “‘scriptive thing,’ like a play script, broadly structures a performance while simultaneously allowing for resistance and unleashing original, live variations that may not be individually predictable” (“Dances” 69). While children have agency and do not necessarily have to play roughly with Olaf, Olaf’s bodily configuration in plush toy form encourages this manner of play. As seen in figure 4, Olaf’s body parts are connected by Velcro and a single elastic string that runs through his body; pull on his nose, head, chest, or bottom and it will come off, unhooking from the Velcro and held in tension by a string a few inches from his core. When the child lets go, the body part will snap back in place with the rest of the body due to the tension from the elastic. Not only does the toy itself encourage this
play, but children are also highly likely to reproduce what they have seen on television in their play with character toys related to the show, imitating what they have witnessed on-screen rather than supplying the play patterns from their own imagination (Greenfield et al.). Children do not have to play rough with Olaf, but the narrative and material factors suggest that they will be inclined to take him apart to mimic what they have seen Olaf do gladly throughout the franchise.

Figure 4. Both sold on Amazon, the two images on the left show “Frozen Pull Apart and Talkin’ Olaf,” while the image on the right shows “Disney Frozen 2 Olaf Pull Apart - Exclusive.”

While these two plush toys explicitly direct behavior through their material construction, all Olaf toys are in fact “scriptive things” (Bernstein, “Dances” 69). The buyers’ and children’s expectations and the children’s play behavior are structured by the larger Frozen universe that Olaf belongs to, which created the characteristics forming his essential Olafness, and by how the Olaf toys are made and marketed. To take one example of how the filmic creation of Olafness occasionally clashes with the materiality of a physical Olaf toy, one anonymous Amazon reviewer of the “Frozen Pull Apart and Talkin’ Olaf” wrote, “Olaf pull apart is great for kids
who have watched ‘olaf’s frozen adventure’ [sic] as in this short film Olaf takes his nose off a lot so my little boy was confused why he wouldn’t pull Olaf’s nose off with the normal Olaf teddy. I now have two Olaf’s for this reason.” In this case, the child expected to be able to take the nose from the “normal Olaf teddy” because of what the child saw in the featurette. When the toy Olaf’s nose was not removable, the child was “confused,” necessitating the reviewer’s purchase of yet another Olaf toy whose nose does in fact come off. Disney was able to sell two products because of the disconnect between the static Olaf toy and the Olaf that routinely disassembles as portrayed in the films. Therefore, while to Disney the Olafness or the idea of Olaf stays the same in any form, to consumers the toy’s materiality matters: some toys are closer than others to the idea of Olaf. Olaf should come apart; coming apart is Olafness. Such intimate violence in the private space of the child’s home is framed as not-violence because it is administered against a body that does not fight back and keeps smiling through the ordeal: the “Frozen Pull Apart and Talkin’ Olaf” will “tell jokes” such as “I can’t feel my legs,” “Heads up!,” and “Oh thank you, now I'm perfect,” while “Disney Frozen 2 Olaf Pull Apart” says, “You’re a lot stronger than I think you realize” when his limbs are pulled.

The comedic excess underlining racialized physicality is imbued with positive affect for white audiences, as Ngai notes in her analysis of racialized “animatedness.” Amazon reviewer Meemster writes of the “Disney Frozen 2 Olaf Pull Apart,” “It is bringing lots of giggles. Too cute. Very animated.” Such a description reveals the overlaps between Olafness and Blackness, constructed in similar terms of bodily excessiveness and exaggerated expression. These invulnerable Olaf “pull apart” toys “configure blackness as an elastic form of subjectivity that can withstand blows without breaking” (Bernstein, “Dances” 74). Olaf, constructed using actual pieces of elastic, immediately bounces back when stretched over and over again. As Sammond
asks rhetorically about early animated characters, “What crimes did Bimbo or Daffy commit to suffer our vengeance? And how did that violence against them become a compulsively repetitive act?” (293). Children’s repetitive violence against the excessive, “animated” body of Olaf follows a similar script as the sadistic animators’: How much fun can I have dismembering this unfeeling racialized body?

While the “pull apart” Olaf toys encourage actions of tugging and prying, the small- and large-scale Hula Olafs configure other forms of pleasure and intimacy between the racialized commodity and consumers that rely on messages about the sexual availability of indigenous women. The original figure of the Hula Olaf, a highly visible prop displayed in movie theaters, used an exoticized, sexualized “Hawaiianness” to advertise Frozen as a pleasurable escape in 2013. At 7 feet tall, the Hula Olaf is physically imposing yet nonthreatening with its wide smile and the way it cradles the ukulele in its arms like a hug. When plugged in, Hula Olaf’s curvy hips gently sway from side to side, causing the plastic grass skirt to ripple slightly. The base of the statue reads “Disney Frozen” on the front and back, with the left side proclaiming “Thanksgiving,” the film’s release date, and the right side entreatling the viewer, “Enter for your chance to win a mini Olaf,” with the corresponding URL underneath: “http://di.sn/FrozenHula” (“Life Size”). Today, these Hula Olafs can be viewed and purchased online in their giant form on sites such as Worthpoint.com and LifeSizePropShop.com, as well as in miniature plush and plastic forms. ToyWiz offers a soft stuffed “Disney Frozen Olaf Exclusive 13-Inch Plush

16 Having “Thanksgiving” written on the base causes this figure of settler colonialism in Polynesia, specifically Hawaii, to also be associated with histories of settler colonialism and rituals of historical revisionism in the contiguous United States.
17 Ironically, the seller on LifeSizePropShop.com writes that they “are offering FREE SHIPPING to anywhere in the continental United States, Alaska and Hawaii not included” (“Life Size”). This offers yet another instance of commodified Hawaiianness targeted toward a non-Hawaiian audience and incentivizing such consumption at the expense of actual people in Hawaii.
“Aloha” that also features an orange flower next to his twig hair, and both ToyWiz and Amazon sell a 6-inch tall plastic spring-loaded “Disney Olaf Hula Figure - Frozen” that “works by manual manipulation and momentum - just give Olaf a push to see him do the hula.” Yet Olaf never wears such attire nor plays a ukulele in Frozen, nor does he appear this way in any of the canonical Frozen films, shorts, or the featurette. Why market the 2013 film this way?

As a promotional figure for the first film, Hula Olaf is a commodity that markets summer fun and entertainment, catering to white voyeuristic audiences while never participating in the on-screen action himself. Instead, as the likely first “touch point” consumers encountered for the ideas of Olafness and Frozen, Hula Olaf pointed to a particular ideology of amusement, steering potential customers toward certain purchasing behaviors via the familiar “hula girl” motif as a symbol of welcome and leisure into an exotic tourist-oriented landscape (Jenkins 63; Arvin). According to Maile Renee Arvin, “So-called tiki culture is popular again in the United States, that postwar invention expressing nostalgia for U.S. military service and r&r in the Pacific, now revived in everything from hipster tiki bars to a bewildering proliferation of tiki-themed lawn ornaments to supplement the familiar tiki torch” (1). Underscoring the commonality of the ‘tiki’ motif, the product description for the mini plastic Hula Olaf notes that the item should be considered a traditional collectible alongside similarly themed goods: “This classic hula wobbler makes a cool refreshment for your home tiki room decor!” (“Disney Frozen Hula Olaf”). Such mass-produced simulacra of Polynesia replace actual living peoples and their cultures in the white imagination, causing Native Hawaiians to become “invisible as a people, despite their literal and imagined presence in many of the centers of American culture, [such as in] Disney cartoons” like Lilo and Stitch (2002) and Moana (2016) (Arvin 2). Olaf’s pseudo grass skirt, ukulele, gracefully mobile hips, and friendly smile fit within a larger historical
discourse of popular “pinup-style illustrations of Hawaiian girls and their exotic racial mixes” that are distributed throughout the U.S. (Arvin 99).\footnote{Olaf’s prominent buck tooth takes on special significance in the figure of the Hula Olaf, as “buck teeth have a long and complex symbolic history in American entertainment. This facial feature has been used to connote simpleness and classlessness, lower-class status, rural residency, and—of course—race and ethnicity. Together with being associated with blackface minstrelsy, buck teeth have also been a common element in disparaging depictions of Asian characters” (Abate 1077). Olaf’s buck tooth overlaps Asian caricatures with Native Hawaiian caricatures and alludes to the ways in which Hawaii has been imagined as a ‘melting pot,’ a multiracial haven, due to intermarriage between Asians, white Europeans, and Native Hawaiians, as seen in former Honolulu minister Albert Palmer’s assertion in 1924 that Hawaii is literally “a human bridge of international good will and understanding between East and West” (qtd. in Arvin 103).}

Olaf’s allusion to sexualized and racialized Native Hawaiians contributes to normalizing “the daily exotification of light-skinned Hawaiian ‘hula girls’ as naturally available sexual conquests for visiting white tourists,” while extending a pattern of “colonial images of Hawai‘i as an idyllic vacation destination for white Americans—that is, of Hawai‘i as a white possession” (Arvin 3, 15). Hawaii is constructed in popular media as the emblematic white paradise in which the friendly feminized locals are accommodating in every way and perform the hula for tourists’ scopic pleasure, just as animatronic Hula Olaf sways around the clock to sell tickets to Frozen and entreat viewers to try their luck in a sweepstakes, and the miniature version bobbles frantically for you if you “just give Olaf a push” (“Disney Olaf Hula”).

Like the trope of the Hawaiian hula girl, all iterations of Hula Olaf script interactions based on commodified intimacy and an ethos of friendly availability, but these intimate interactions only flow one way, functioning to solidify the divide between white subject and racialized object and to perform the “white possession” of Polynesia (Arvin). The 7-foot Hula Olaf, built much bigger than he is depicted on-screen, illustrates pleasure in excess through his larger-than-life size and his invitation to consumers to enter a sweepstakes in which the
participant can win one of 100 mini Hula Olafs. The statue also invites viewers to pose alongside
the figure and take photos or videos, perhaps while mimicking Olaf’s hula performance, creating
a spectacle easily shared on private social media accounts to promote the film without need of
Disney’s official sponsorship, spreading the message of readily available entertainment further
(Bernstein, “Dances”).

Hula Olaf’s small plush versions and plastic clones promote different forms of intimacy
with the racialized, exoticized, feminized indigenous body, but they work toward the same end,
enacting on a microscale the white possession of Polynesia through settler colonialism. In stuffed
form, the plush softness of the toy, its round, pudgy exterior, and the additional orange fabric
hibiscus flower in the hair foregrounds cuteness and increases the toy’s performance of exotic
femininity while scripting consumers to cuddle it and hold it close to their bodies (as seen in
figure 5). The product description for “Disney Frozen Olaf Exclusive 13-Inch Plush [Aloha]”
reads, “Sun-loving Olaf shows his aloha spirit in grass skirt with ukulele, all ready to receive a
warm summer shower of hugs from you,” which emphasizes the toy’s compliance to physical
touch based on his pseudo-indigenous accessories. “Aloha spirit” highlights Hula Olaf’s
openness and that he welcomes outside influence as a Native Hawaiian body, and the word
“ready” signals that this is his purpose; he is prepared for such intimate play (“Disney Frozen
Olaf Exclusive”).
The plastic mini Hula Olaf, on the other hand, encourages more physically distant interactions and embodies power differentials. As seen in figure 6, the mini Hula Olaf figure, rather than looking slightly downward at the consumer like the 7-foot-tall Hula Olaf, looks imploringly, adoringly skyward in a gesture of passivity and deference.
The consumer is expected to flick the mini Hula Olaf’s hips to force the figurine to perform on demand within the consumer’s eyesight but separated from the consumer’s body, emphasizing the difference between the scrutinizing subject and the racialized, gendered object of the gaze.

With both the cuddling gesture of the soft toy and the push to the hips with the plastic version, the consumer enters into one of “the places where settler colonialism appears to be ‘tender’ and feminized” and ultimately performs white possession of Polynesia, defined by Arvin as “the claiming of other peoples’ bodies, identities, and other resources as one’s own, without regard to those peoples’ own histories and desires for the future” (Arvin 18, 24). These Hula Olafs script
consumers to reenact the violence of colonization through seemingly intimate, warmhearted gestures.

As I have demonstrated in this chapter, the *Frozen* franchise consistently positions Olaf in racialized, gendered, and sexualized ways that include but also move beyond equivalences with performers on the blackface minstrel stage. The tendrils of racialization and their intersections with other components of identity are submerged below Olaf’s character design and spread across the franchise in various forms, such as “Olaf’s Frozen Adventure,” Olaf “pull apart” plush toys, and the three iterations of Hula Olaf. Analysis of multiple sites incorporating more than a single axis of identity is vital to understanding the implications of consumers’ physical interactions with Olaf as well as Disney’s continuing problematic representations of race, gender, sexuality, and indigeneity in their sidekick characters. Just as Olaf imitates Mickey Mouse in *Frozen II* during a game of charades by striking the iconic pose and rearranging his rock ‘buttons’ to mimic ears and a nose (as seen in figure 7), he also illustrates that Disney has not discarded the model formed by its previous racialized characters when creating new twenty-first-century animated characters.

![Figure 7](image.png)

Figure 7. Olaf performs “mouse” during a game of charades in Arendelle castle (*Frozen II*).
Chapter 3. Neon Black: *Toy Story* 4’s Ducky and Bunny

Pixar Animation Studios’ *Toy Story* franchise has achieved “firsts” with each of its four all-audience animated feature films about the behind-the-scenes lives of toys, who are sentient, talking, moving beings who just want to be loved by a child. The Pixar website proudly announces that the first *Toy Story* movie in 1995 was also “the world’s first computer animated feature film” which “open[ed] at #1 that weekend and [went] on to become the highest grossing film of the year” (“Our Story”). In 1999, *Toy Story 2*, jointly produced by Disney and Pixar, was “the first film in history to be entirely created, mastered and exhibited digitally” (“Our Story”). Pixar was purchased by The Walt Disney Company in 2006, and *Toy Story 3* was released in 2010, ostensibly as the final film in the series (“Our Story”). *Toy Story 3* had a different kind of first that Pixar kept quiet about: the first Black voice actor. In *Toy Story 3*, comedian Whoopi Goldberg plays minor character Stretch, a purple rubbery octopus toy who does the villain’s bidding, wins at gambling, and only has four scripted lines in the entire movie. *Toy Story 4*, the unexpected fourth film in the franchise, released in 2019 and supposedly the true end to the sequence, furthers this trend by featuring more people of color in the cast of voice actors, including the first Black men in the franchise: Carl Weathers as the three Combat Carl figurines, Keegan-Michael Key as Ducky, and Jordan Peele as Bunny. While the humanoid Combat Carl action figures appear racially ambiguous, are present only briefly in the film, and speak nine lines in Standard American English (SAE), stuffed animals Ducky and Bunny speak a version of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and provide the majority of the comic relief throughout the last hour of the film as racialized nonhuman sidekick characters.  

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19 I subsequently refer to these four films in abbreviated form as *TS*, *TS2*, *TS3*, and *TS4*, while retaining *Toy Story* in reference to the larger universe and franchise.
In this chapter, I analyze how Ducky and Bunny are racialized and gendered as Black men through their strong association with their voice actors, their dialect features, their limited position in the film as comedic sidekicks, their lack of in-depth backstory, and their propensity for violence. These elements set Ducky and Bunny apart to serve as foils for the other toys in ways that enable existing racial norms and hierarchies. Ducky and Bunny are thus differentiated in convenient ways that are palatable for majority white audiences, their transgressive impulses managed by the structure of the film and politically neutralized. These characters demonstrate that in recent children’s animated films, “race and gender have shifted, taking on superficially positive qualities, which seemingly affirm and empower difference” while simultaneously “retain[ing] significant force as a means of projecting fantasies, policing deviation, arranging hierarchies, grounding identities, and reinforcing exclusions” (King et al. 5). Ducky and Bunny strike a safe balance when entertaining a white liberal America that is split between the notion of “colorblindness,” in which “the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture,” and the America that praises “diversity” but veers into tokenism and conditional acceptance based on whether the non-white face supports the dominant ideology (Morrison 9-10). As bell hooks asserts, “Visibility does not mean that certain images are inherently radical or progressive” (Reel 38). The incorporation of the Other in the final Toy Story film through the insertion of Ducky and Bunny demonstrates that simply including Black voice actors or characters is not enough when white supremacist representational systems remain intact in the film (hooks, Black Looks 10).

Sewn together at one paw/wing in a gesture of inseparable friendship, neon yellow Ducky and neon blue and green Bunny encourage audiences to see them as animated versions of their Black voice actors, who performed as duo “Key & Peele” in a sketch comedy series of the same
name from 2012 to 2015. Film reviewers frequently linked the humans to the characters, as did The Hollywood Reporter’s Lily Rosenberg: “Like in Key & Peele’s eponymous sketch comedy series, the duo’s Toy Story 4 characters, Bunny and Ducky, . . . are a package deal.” The voice actors themselves claim that they are Ducky and Bunny. Peele explained that “they [Pixar] wanted our real dynamic . . . it was a relief to realize that we are the characters as opposed to us doing the characters” (TS4 Press Kit 15-16). Key joked with Jimmy Fallon on The Tonight Show that it was “the first time in [Peele’s] life he’s ever been taller than me” because Pixar flipped the actors’ heights: Peele, the shorter member of the duo, plays the taller Bunny, while taller actor Key voices the short, small Ducky (“Keegan”). The Toy Story franchise also leaned into the association between Key and Peele and Ducky and Bunny for comedic effect during the marketing campaign. In the “TS4 | Teaser Trailer Reaction” animated promotional video, Ducky and Bunny advertise TS4 by imitating a sanitized version of Key and Peele’s former sketch comedy characters, two valets who excitedly gush about famous actors and movies (“Every Single Sketch”). Numerous articles about the upcoming film emphasized this connection. Brian Welk noticed how “the two actually riff on their famous parking valet attendants characters,” while Dan Neilan speculated, “We can only assume this means a large chunk of the new film will just be Key and Peele recreating family-friendly versions of their best sketches.”

For some, Pixar’s choice to create Black-coded nonhuman characters and place them in comedic sidekick roles in the all-white Toy Story universe caused hesitation based on the way these roles have been historically botched through reliance on stereotypes. But the casting of Key and Peele was reassuring. According to Black Nerd Comedy’s film reviewer Andre, “I knew that I was going to be okay with those two [actors], but I still got a little nervous because, you know, it’s two side characters being comedic, and Toy Story is not necessarily known for its…urban
flavor? But with those two actors doing the roles, they were good characters.” The trusted presence of Key and Peele, actors known for tackling heavy topics like systemic racism in their comedy show and in Peele’s horror film *Get Out*, assuaged audience trepidation.

Yet *TS4*’s depiction of Ducky and Bunny is in many ways an updated version of Black comedian Eddie Murphy’s Mushu, an AAVE-speaking nonhuman sidekick in Disney’s *Mulan* (1998), a film criticized for employing racial tropes about Black and Chinese people (Cappiccie et al.). Ducky and Bunny are racialized comedic sidekicks modified for 2019 sensibilities by casting Key and Peele and toning down the more obvious racial features used in *Mulan*—such as Mushu’s imitation of a “Southern Baptist minister” and the line “I caught me a turkey!”—while retaining problematic core qualities (Hsiao 31; 88). Rosina Lippi-Green observes that “Disney continues to portray side-kicks as scrappy inner city tough guys with hearts of gold” and non-Standard American English dialects, and Ducky and Bunny are no exceptions to the pattern in this Pixar film distributed and owned by Disney (113). Like Mushu, Mulan’s “small, very scrappy guardian dragon,” Ducky and Bunny are small plush stuffed animals who, for comic relief, fight, imagine fighting, or talk about fighting other toys and even humans (Lippi-Green 113). Mushu was described as “jivey” and “sassy” in a *Chicago Tribune* review in 1998; in *TS4*, Ducky and Bunny have the only song and dance sequence, a short improvised number that involves spontaneous harmonizing and beatboxing (Wilmington). As Brandon Zachary observed in a review for *CBR*, Ducky and Bunny “quickly establish themselves as the boisterous comic relief, a good contrast to the more serious other members. . . . The pair drop snarky comments frequently but are always quickly undercut by the world around them.” They are purposely one-

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20 While Pixar is a subsidiary of Disney and technically a separate animation studio, there are significant overlaps in leadership between the studios: John Lasseter, who headed both Walt Disney Animation Studios and Pixar from 2006-2018, is also credited for story work on *Toy Story 4* (“Our Story”).
dimensional and serve as foils for the lead characters. Ducky and Bunny, like Mushu before them, fulfil the stereotypical role of “the African American entertainer, the jokester or trickster” through their approximated AAVE and subordinate position as sidekick comic relief (Lippi-Green 123). For all three characters voiced by famous Black male comedians who have made the crossover into mainstream white animated films, their Blackness is capitalized as inherent humor in contrast to the normative bodies around them. But in TS4, the effect is tamed slightly to appeal to the masses in 2019.

By employing a version of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), TS4 adds a sonic element to Ducky and Bunny’s racialization that perpetuates historical representations of Blacks as linguistically deficient but inherently ‘cool’ and comical. As I mentioned in my discussion of Frozen’s Olaf, children’s animated films frequently rely on linguistic features to racialize nonhuman sidekick characters in stereotypical ways. Putting Black voice actors in the roles of talking nonhuman characters does not in and of itself imply that the characters are coded as Black or that the characters should be interpreted as problematic racial caricatures. However, having Black voice actors perform a version of AAVE, the dialect strongly associated with working-class Blackness and hip-hop and rap culture in America, does lead the audience into unconscious or conscious slippage between the race of the actors and that of the characters. This slippage is partially due to “linguistic profiling,” which is “the ability to identify an individual’s race or ethnicity on the basis of voice alone” (Lippi-Green 122). By the year 2000, there were “more than a dozen studies . . . conducted over the past three decades showing that listeners are able to identify accurately the ethnicity of black and white speakers on the basis of tape-recorded samples of their speech, some less than 2.5 seconds long” (Rickford and Rickford 101). Even if the audience does not know the actor’s race, audience members will most likely recognize and
associate the specific dialect with Black people and, by extension, understand the nonhuman character through the lens of Blackness. This assumption can occur even when the actor is not Black but is using Black sonic forms like scatting, such as in the case of Louis Prima, a white Italian man who voiced King Louie in the 1967 Disney film *The Jungle Book* (Lippi-Green 123). In *TS4*, even if an American audience member does not recognize the voices of Key and Peele, it is almost impossible for them to not recognize the characters’ voices as Black and interpret Ducky and Bunny accordingly.

Ducky and Bunny speak an approximated, commodified version of AAVE rather than an “authentic” Black dialect; many of the most distinctive and common AAVE features in natural speech are missing from Ducky and Bunny’s dialogue (Fine and Anderson 398). Generally, as Lippi-Green observed with regard to Disney’s *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), “the voice actors restrict themselves to intonation patterns” rather than using AAVE syntax, lexical, or phonological features (124). *TS4* prioritizes linguistic Otherness rather than accuracy. Like the dialect spoken in the Black family sitcoms analyzed by Marlene G. Fine and Carolyn Anderson, Ducky and Bunny’s dialect “is a limited dialect, one that does not correspond to BEV [Black English Vernacular] in naturalistic settings, but gives the impression of difference” (402). Ducky and Bunny indeed speak differently than the SAE-speaking Woody and Buzz and the other non-SAE-speaking minor characters, whose vocal tics are limited to regional accents, such as Canadian Duke Caboom (Keanu Reeves), Southern Slinky Dog (Blake Clark), and Brooklyn-Jewish Mr. and Mrs. Potato Head (Don Rickles and Estelle Harris).

A large part of Ducky and Bunny’s verbal difference comes from their extensive use of pop culture allusions and nicknames, which serves to reinforce their urban “coolness.” This is best illustrated in the following exchange from one of *TS4*’s several end-credits scenes:
DUCKY (O.S.)

Up here, Rainbow Connection.

[. . .]

BUNNY

You Mr. Toads wanna take a wild ride with a kid?

DUCKY

We can make that happen...

CARNIVAL PRIZE FROG #1 & 2

You CAN?!...Really?!

DUCKY

Oh, yeah! Leave it to us, Jeremiah. (Stanton and Folsom 119)

Almost every line includes a reference to pop culture outside of the Toy Story universe. In quick succession, Ducky and Bunny allude to the Muppets’ 1979 song “Rainbow Connection”; a former Disney’s Magic Kingdom attraction open from 1971 to 1998, Mr. Toad’s Wild Ride; and a Three Dog Night song from 1970, “Joy to the World.” While most of these references would likely be too obscure for the children watching the film in 2019, their parents and other adults in the audience would probably catch the meaning. No other TS4 characters notably employ allusions to pop culture. Ducky and Bunny are thus uniquely positioned as possessors of cultural capital and are more hip than straight-laced white characters Woody and Buzz.

Linguistic markers in American popular culture are used to connote particular racializations and clusters of characteristics in the service of dominant ideologies and hierarchies. Comedic minor characters like Ducky and Bunny are frequently given non-Standard
American English (non-SAE) dialects as shorthand for their personalities, as writers often use “accent to draw character quickly, building on well-established, preconceived notions associated with specific regional loyalties, ethnic, racial alliances or economic status” (Lippi-Green 104). *TS4* uses Ducky and Bunny’s racialized language to immediately characterize them as inherently funny, expressive, and “hip” but not very intelligent. In this way, Ducky and Bunny overlap with historical representations of Blacks, which tend to adhere to certain codes, a code being “roughly, a set of conventions defining perception in limited and predictable ways in any given culture” (Snead 2). Black people have been traditionally coded in film, literature, and blackface minstrelsy through an imagined “Negro dialect” as a marker of their difference and inferiority to whites (Snead 6). In minstrelsy, white actors in blackface played the buffoon with a constructed “slave dialect,” using a crude imitation of Black language patterns under the banner of realism and authenticity (Hix). Off the stage, as film scholar James Snead points out, “early title cards in silent films even felt constrained to write dialect when blacks were seen to speak,” and Black speech in literature “at its worst was unreadable, at its mildest, merely exaggerated and ungrammatical” (Snead 6; Rollins 219). Yannick Marshall describes the political function of Black speech as it is often rendered purposefully unintelligible or ridiculous, explaining that “if Man is seen as a speaking animal then the further Black people are placed outside of good speech, the further they are dehumanized, and the more their injury can be legitimated.”

Although Ducky and Bunny’s dialect is not as heavy as Mushu’s or Jim Crow’s in *Dumbo* (1941), embedded in Ducky and Bunny’s language practices is the historical assertion that Blacks are not meant to be taken seriously. They are set apart by speaking a version of a stigmatized dialect not spoken by any other character, human or toy, in the entire *Toy Story* franchise.
Ducky and Bunny’s language use, however, is but a facet of a larger problem in the representation of Black-coded characters as mere props for the lead white characters, used to highlight contrasts. Toni Morrison describes a need for scholars to analyze “the strategic use of black characters to define the goals and enhance the qualities of white characters” (53). While Ducky and Bunny ostensibly have their own desire to “get with a kid,” they in actuality play second fiddle to support the goals of the major characters, Woody (Tom Hanks), Buzz (Tim Allen), and Bo Peep (Annie Potts) (Stanton and Folsom 54). Ducky and Bunny help Woody in his plot to free Forky (Tony Hale), supposedly in exchange for adoption by a child, but the film never shows the fulfilment of this promise. Although Ducky and Bunny declare at one point that they will not rely on Woody to help them find a child, saying, “We’ll find our OWN kid,” the film does not follow through on this declaration (Stanton and Folsom 90). They follow Bo after that, and when Bo shows a change of heart, the whole group returns to the antique store to help Woody despite Ducky and Bunny never explicitly consenting to this arrangement: after being spun around the underbelly of the carousel, they “can barely stand up, dizzy,” according to the screenplay, and “Bo practically sweeps them up” in the Skunkmobile on the way back to Woody (Stanton and Folsom 98, 99).

With Bo’s swift move, Ducky and Bunny are denied a character arc. They do not have a moment in which they renounce their great wish for a child to adopt them. The film only implicitly addresses why they have shifted into a helping role by the end-credits scene rather than maintaining and fulfilling their initial wish, insinuating that the pleasure they received from helping to connect the doll Harmony with a lost child was the ultimate satisfaction. At the end of the movie, Ducky and Bunny are shown happily helping Woody, Bo, Giggle McDimples (Ally Maki), and Duke Caboom free other toys from carnival booths, rigging the games so children
can win the toys. However, even in this scene, Ducky and Bunny follow Woody and Bo’s
directions and forward the plot of others rather than prioritizing their own story or goals. Ducky
and Bunny are offered no dream fulfillment. The film continues to prioritize the white
characters’ goals over Ducky and Bunny’s, which is not surprising when considering TS4
screenwriter and executive producer Andrew Stanton’s statement that Woody, a valuable
collectible white cowboy sheriff from a fictional 1950’s television show, is “‘a really universal,
interesting character . . . the everyman,’” but Ducky and Bunny are inferior toys, as “‘a carnival
has the cheapest, saddest, most disposable toys known to man’” (TS4 Press Kit 6; 15). As Snead
asserts, “the dominant ‘I’ needs the coded ‘other’ to function”; just as Woody needs cheap,
unserious, subordinate Ducky and Bunny to highlight his value, rationality, and status as a
leader, “white male stars need black butlers or sidekicks to make them seem more authoritatively
manly” (4, 4-5).

If Ducky and Bunny do not have a future, neither do they have a past beyond
incarceration. Ducky and Bunny are denied history, which overlaps with the trope of Black
permanency. Snead observes that “one of the prime codes surrounding blacks on screen, then—
one much at variance with the narrative codes that mandate potential mobility for other screen
characters—is an almost metaphysical stasis” (3). While white characters can change their minds
and grow as three-dimensional people, Black characters are “seen as eternal, unchanging,
unchangeable” (Snead 3). There is no cut-scene of Ducky and Bunny’s backstory and
motivations as is given to white Canadian supporting character Duke Caboom, also new to the
franchise in TS4. There is no special animated short film explaining their history in the vein of
“Lamp Life,” which explains Bo Peep’s adventures before the events of TS4. Ducky and Bunny
are not given enough background information to be understood by the audience beyond their
suspension from the carnival booth ceiling for three years without release, which aligns with long-standing tropes of restricted movement and incarceration associated with Black Americans. All the audience knows for certain about Ducky and Bunny’s past can be gathered from a single line that they were dangling in their carnival booth for “three years . . . That’s how long we’ve been hanging up there waiting for a kid” (Stanton and Folsom 61). The TS4 Press Kit emphasizes that this previous captivity sets them apart from the rest of the characters: Ducky and Bunny “find themselves on an unexpected adventure with a group of toys who have no idea what it feels like to be tacked to a prize wall” (15). Moreover, adhering somewhat to the trope of the happy slave I mentioned in chapter 1, Ducky and Bunny do not want to be free. Bunny immediately demands that Buzz “put us back up there!” when the three fall to the ground, and Ducky sobs, “You ruined our lives!” (Stanton and Folsom 56, 62). In this way, the film subtly aligns with the tropes that Black characters do not change and have negligible history that can be defined by gesturing towards a previous state of bondage—a state they even enjoyed.

The divide between the neon pair and the other characters applies to their negotiation of the rules of the world around them. Ducky and Bunny have volatile personalities that often lead to aggression against other toys and even humans. Ducky and Bunny’s propensity to violence against humans separates them from the rest of the toys in the entire Toy Story franchise, a disposition that parallels the trope of Black men as naturally aggressive and prone to violence in contrast to the civil, rational white male body. Through their fantasies of fighting humans, the pair are shown on-screen breaking the one major rule that is supposed to define the role of toys: do not let the humans know you are alive. Ducky and Bunny are the only characters in TS4 or in the franchise who are shown on-screen physically attacking humans, actions which break the
separation between the toy world and the human world so carefully maintained by lead characters Woody and Buzz. As Brandon Zachary points out,

Ducky and Bunny, unlike most of the toys that have been introduced in the Toy Story franchise, seem to straddle a strange line. Most of the toys that are introduced either know fully well that they’re toys and what rules they have to follow, or they come into the world unaware of their status. . . . [Most toys] seem to know what role they’re meant to play in the world, i.e. not openly interacting with humans. Ducky and Bunny, however, are the first ones to reject that reality outright.

With the exception of Ducky and Bunny, all the other toys do not want humans to know they are thinking, walking, talking beings who are essentially alive; they collapse in the same positions that the human left them in last and become seemingly inanimate when a human is near. There is only one notable departure from this rule: in the first Toy Story movie, Sid’s toys reveal themselves as sentient, moving, speaking beings in order to scare the cruel boy out of torturing and dismembering them. Despite Sid’s sadistic ways, the toys do not physically assault him, but instead only intimidate him with the threat that his toys are watching. Woody tells the boy, “From now on, you must take good care of your toys. Because if you don't, we’ll find out, Sid. We toys can see everything. So play nice,” as he switches from inanimacy and a voice-box effect to actually moving and speaking for the last sentence (TS).

In TS4, however, Ducky and Bunny are twice depicted physically launching themselves from a shelf at an elderly shopkeeper’s face in order to steal her key. The older woman, Margaret, is shown breaking vases, falling against furniture, and thrashing wildly as she attempts to repel the attack in a fast-paced, tense cut-scene, while Ducky and Bunny yell, “The keys!... Hand’em over lady! The keys!... Give’em up!... Where are they?!... Give us the KEYS!”
(Stanton and Folsom 70). Her face, in the brief moment her expression can be distinguished underneath the stuffed animals, is marked by panic and distress, as seen in figure 1 (TS4). Ducky and Bunny’s boundary-breaking is not framed as a defensive mechanism as is the retaliation against Sid. Although Ducky and Bunny are scheming to steal the key in service of another toy, Forky, who is trapped in the locked cabinet, the store owner is unaware of Forky’s existence in the cabinet and has not purposefully harmed any toy.

Figure 1. Ducky and Bunny’s first plot to steal Margaret’s key (TS4).

With each variation of the plot to steal the key, Ducky and Bunny intensify the psychological and physical violence. The second plan, which Ducky calls “Winner, Winner, Chicken Dinner,” includes a slight variation in which Ducky and Bunny, now no longer visible on the shelf, drop a baseball, which rolls behind Margaret (TS4). When she investigates where it came from, squinting into the depths of the shelf, Ducky and Bunny again launch themselves at her face. The third plan, “Plush Rush,” escalates the situation further, strongly implying that the woman is attacked in her own home in the middle of the night. In this final plot to steal the keys, the two characters secretly stalk the woman, watching her as she drives home, eats dinner, and
takes a bath. The screenplay, worth quoting at length, describes this third scheme in similar terms to a horror movie in which the villains move unseen to maximize audience tension and surprise:

- Margaret again walks down the aisle, turns toward the shelf, and… nothing. Takes the money from the cash register.
- BACKSEAT POV of Margaret driving home that night. She checks her rearview mirror. Nothing.

[...]
- INSIDE OF MARGARET’S REFRIGERATOR as she opens the door, pulls out a dish, and… nothing. Closes the door.
- Margaret relaxes in a BUBBLE BATH. Nurses a glass of wine, and… nothing happens.
- IN BED. Margaret snores. Slowly, Ducky & Bunny RISE OVER HER… CUT WIDE ON HER HOUSE: Her SCREAM echoes in the night. (Stanton and Folsom 71-72)

The purposeful ties to the horror genre are also present in the jazz song, “Midnight, the Stars and You” (1934), that plays in the background during each of the three imagined plots, separating reality from violent fantasy with music also used in Stanley Kubrick’s famous horror film The Shining (1980) (TS4). These elements may also be a nod to Peele’s involvement in the horror genre with his films Get Out (2017) and Us (2019), which further ties the characters to the actors.

While there are significant racial implications for these particular characters terrorizing an elderly white woman to steal from her in the first and second fantasy scenarios, this third fantasy scene is only coherent because it relies on established horror conventions, including the myth of the Black predator, performing the threat of Black male sexual violence against a white
woman. Snead asserts that “in all Hollywood film portrayals of blacks, . . . the political is never far from the sexual, for it is both as a political and as a sexual threat that the black skin appears on screen” (8). Black men were libeled in postbellum America as inherently violent creatures who targeted white women for rape. Southerner George T. Winston warned the public in the 1890s, “‘When a knock is heard at the door [a white woman] shudders with nameless horror. The black brute is lurking in the dark, a monstrous beast crazed with lust’” (qtd. in Pilgrim, *Understanding* 146). As a small business owner who deals in nostalgia through her Second Chance antiques shop, the feminine, small-framed Margaret is the embodiment of innocence and helplessness. When Ducky and Bunny loom menacingly over the side of Margaret’s bed as she sleeps, their heights are exaggerated so as to appear human size, as seen in figure 2. The juxtaposition between “the beast and the girl” shown here is a familiar “combination based upon pre-existing sexual and visual conventions in Western iconography” (Snead 21). Ducky and Bunny’s oversized bodies are magnified even further by the camera angle, which takes the perspective as if the camera is in bed on the pillow next to the older woman. Utilizing Laura Mulvey’s theory of “man as the bearer of the look” who shares the look with the camera, this perspective connects the audience with the gaze of the no-longer-present husband figure, who presumably filled the space in the bed next to Margaret (62). Margaret can be understood through the heterosexual matrix because the heteronormative *Toy Story* universe emphasizes conservative nuclear family structures and has never explicitly featured a same-sex relationship. She was most likely in a heterosexual relationship at one point because she has an adult child (voiced by Patricia Arquette). Since Margaret’s child is a white woman, it can be assumed Ducky and Bunny are presented as a threat to the white female body through the point of view of a white heterosexual male. The camera then immediately cuts to a wide shot of the outside of the
house, seen in figure 3, as if the white male gaze cannot handle what will happen next to the white woman and must look away from the unspeakable, unimaginable defilement. Only Margaret’s scream is heard, piercing the still night (TS4).

Figure 2. Ducky and Bunny rise above the sleeping Margaret (TS4).

Figure 3. Wide shot of Margaret’s house. A scream is heard (TS4).

This sequence, like everything Ducky and Bunny do and say, is intended to be humorous. This third fantasy scene allows the audience to release tension by laughing at the taboo, reasserting their power over the specter of Black male violence against white women. Laughter
disavows and disarms the threat; this scene is absurd when performed with neon stuffed animals. Ducky and Bunny’s soft plush fur and true miniscule size tames the beast, a domesticated parody of the horror rather than the horror itself. Ducky and Bunny are rendered unthreatening in the same way that Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan describe Disney’s Black-coded Mushu and Sebastian: “whatever the myths about black masculinity, these boys are definitely tiny” (105).

Moreover, the “endangered beauty” in this scene is an elderly grandmother, which distances the threat even further from the site of virginal vulnerability (Snead 22). Rather than being scary, the scene reinforces the audience’s invincibility, especially since what is shown on screen is doubly “not real”: the scene does not actually take place in the universe of the film but is merely a fantasy, in addition to being animated and “unreal” just as the entire movie is not real. Ducky and Bunny therefore offer a safe outlet to explore and denounce “the power of the black penis in white American psychic life” (Lott 9).

The extended fantasy sequence uses audience laughter to alienate Ducky and Bunny from the rest of the characters and from the audience, and the film works to associate Ducky and Bunny with deviance through the dialogue, the reactions of Buzz Lightyear and Giggle McDimples, and the camera work. Ducky and Bunny are united as calculating criminals with these three plots, since they seem to have these plans at the ready: they prompt each other to remember the details with the shared names “Winner, Winner, Chicken Dinner” and “Plush Rush” (TS4). The cut-away scenes imply that Ducky and Bunny have a seamless single imagination. Because of the disorienting way the first shot is edited, the audience is not sure if this action has in fact occurred in the plot or if it is merely imaginary. It is only after the first vignette is finished, when the camera cuts to a shot of Buzz and Giggle staring incredulously at Ducky and Bunny, that the audience realizes that this attack only happened in Ducky and
Bunny’s shared fantasy. As seen in figure 4, the shot is placed from a perspective slightly behind Ducky and Bunny, as if floating almost above Ducky’s head. The audience is therefore focused on Buzz and Giggle’s shocked and disapproving looks and does not see Ducky and Bunny’s faces, an angle which forces the audience to prioritize Buzz and Giggle and identify with their feelings in this moment (*TS4*). The two also give negative verbal feedback which reinforces the notion that Ducky and Bunny have crossed a sacred line. Buzz tells Ducky and Bunny after each plot, “Well, we’re NOT doing that,” “Uh... you’re kidding,” and “Not gonna happen. N. O.!” (Stanton and Folsom 70, 71, 72). As one of the beloved core leads in the franchise, an intergalactic space ranger and American patriot—in *TS2*, he gives a rousing speech in front of an American flag while “The Star-Spangled Banner” plays—Buzz’s disavowal goes beyond that of an individual and stands for the national interest; he is defending the entire rule-bound toy universe. The miniature police officer figurine Giggle McDimples, whose blue uniform and occupation lend her institutional authority, denounces Ducky and Bunny with the phrase, “What is wrong with you!,” more judgmental of the characters themselves rather than simply their imagined actions (Stanton and Folsom 72). In this way, Ducky and Bunny’s aggressive impulses are disavowed by Buzz and Giggles, and by extension, the audience and the state. This sequence thus works on multiple levels to condemn Ducky and Bunny’s desires as unwarranted, excessive, and even carrying pathological implications.
Figure 4. Buzz and Giggle do not approve of Ducky and Bunny’s first plan (TS4).

At the same time, through these violent, transgressive fantasies, Ducky and Bunny occupy pseudo-radical roles in the film that seem to offer liberatory possibilities in the filmic universe, but the new ways of imagining the power relations between humans and toys are undercut and foreclosed in the end by the prevailing hierarchical logic. Toni Morrison, commenting on the tropes surrounding imagined Black characters, notes that

In minstrelsy, a layer of blackness applied to a white face released it from law. Just as entertainers, through or by association with blackface, could render permissible topics that otherwise would have been taboo, so American writers were able to employ an imagined Africanist persona to articulate and imaginatively act out the forbidden in American culture. (66)

Black-coded characters are given license to act out whites’ repressed fantasies and break taboos as bodies supposedly already beyond the boundaries of rational civilization. In TS4, there is a “transference to blackness of the power of illicit sexuality, chaos, madness, impropriety, anarchy, [and] strangeness” (Morrison 81). Ducky and Bunny dare to imagine alternative ways of being through physical conflict. In one of the end-credits scenes, Ducky and Bunny “Plush Rush” the
white male human “carnie” who runs the booth they used to be trapped in (Stanton and Folsom 120). They begin their attack by attaching to his face as they did to Margaret earlier, but this time, Ducky and Bunny also imagine themselves tormenting the carnie with monstrous powers. Bunny shoots pink lasers from his eyes at the screaming carnie’s feet, while Ducky taunts, “Dance! Get those knees up! Let’s see those feet move!” (TS4). The two plush figures grow to giant size, “laughing maniacally” in deep voices (Stanton and Folsom 121). Ducky’s eyes become reptilian slits; he displays a pointed tongue as he breathes fire, while Bunny incessantly fires lasers as they pursue the fleeing carnie, destroying the carnival (as seen in figure 5). The camera cuts to Ducky and Bunny’s point of view, quickly zooming in on the running carnie as if the two characters can almost reach him. But just as the camera closes in on the carnie’s terrified face as Ducky and Bunny are in the act of overtaking him, the shot abruptly cuts to reality from Woody’s perspective, disrupting the plush pair’s anarchy and stripping them of their powers (as seen in figure 6). Returned to normal size, Ducky and Bunny merely stand in the bottom of the carnival booth staring into the middle distance, making noises with their mouths. The shot cuts to Giggle, Bo, Woody, and Duke’s faces, whose gaping mouths and raised eyebrows show signs of shock, worry, or disappointment (as seen in figure 7). Bo declares, “Or, we could get more toys to kids,” and Woody agrees; they walk off-screen together (TS4).
Figure 5. Ducky and Bunny chase the carnie (TS4).

Figure 6. Ducky and Bunny from Woody’s perspective (TS4).
In this end-credits scene, Ducky and Bunny “establish themselves as potential leaders in the looming toy rebellion” by fantasizing about “tak[ing] down humans who treat [toys] like property despite the fact that they are living, breathing beings” (Harper, “TS4 Suggests”). Blake Harper describes the unequal power dynamic between toys and humans, claiming that

Humans haven’t knowingly forced toys into slavery, but, in this universe, every toy you have ever thrown across the room, taken apart for fun, or destroyed was, in the scheme of *Toy Story*, basically a plastic human. Sure, we didn’t know, but does intent really matter if you have been participating in genocide for the last hundred years? Not really. This is, after all, a toy story. And in this toy story, we are the oppressors. (“The Dark Reality”) The systemic oppression of toys by humans has some key parallels with the Western institution of race-based chattel slavery. Ducky and Bunny can be thus read in the tradition of Toussaint L’Ouverture or Nat Turner as emancipatory Black leaders who do not shrink from physical confrontation with their oppressors. However, Ducky and Bunny are quickly reigned in, their subversive impulses checked by camera editing, other characters, and audience laughter,
containing the threat to the dominant world order posed by “the destabilizing potential of America’s racial fantasies and fears” (Byrne and McQuillan 105). Ducky and Bunny’s inability to subvert the power structures underlying the Toy Story franchise demonstrates that when analyzing the depictions of Black characters “it is therefore not transgression that should be our watchword, but transformation” (Wilson 370). Ducky and Bunny’s characterization may include some transgressive elements, but these literally inflammatory dreams of rebellion are framed as absurd and dismissed; the camera cuts away and refuses to fulfil the fantasy, disarming their transformative political potential.

As the first, only, and last Black male-coded characters in the Toy Story franchise, Ducky and Bunny occupy safe roles in TS4 as comedic figures who entertain audiences with watered-down AAVE and provide an outlet to denounce and defuse through laughter the tension around the threat of Black sexual violence against white women and the notion of rebellion against prevailing power structures. Using Key and Peele’s famous Blackness, Ducky and Bunny bring cultural capital and diversity points to a majority white and male franchise while not intruding on the plot lines of the lead characters or taking up too much space. Annie Potts, voice actor for Bo Peep, inadvertently summarizes the Toy Story approach to difference in her foreword for The Art of Toy Story 4, emphatically declaring, “We’re all the same INSIDE. We are ONE. We are ALL ONE” (5). This white liberal stance that refuses to see color plays out in TS4 as a reiteration of familiar stories of Black sidekicks, Black clowns, and Black predators at the expense of a distinctly non-white political perspective. In the words of bell hooks,

It is this current trend in producing colorful ethnicity for the white consumer appetite that makes it possible for blackness to be commodified in unprecedented ways, and for whites to appropriate black culture without interrogating whiteness o[r] showing concern for the
displeasure of blacks... [W]hite cultural imperialism... allows white audiences to applaud representations of black culture, if they are satisfied with the images and habits of being represented. (Reel 223)

Ducky and Bunny walk the tightrope between conforming to the preexisting codes limiting Black characters and actors in the film industry and allowing white liberals to pat themselves on the back for their racial tolerance and inclusivity. As Pete Docter, Pixar’s chief creative officer, asserts, “‘The Toy Story films are about toys, but they’re really about us,’” reflecting the imagined world of white creators and consumers in which Black characters entertain but do not challenge (TS4 Press Kit 2).
Conclusion – Now on Home Video

In popular understanding and in hegemonic Western epistemologies, race is frequently equated with biology and tends to be defined by physical appearance. But as my analysis of submerged racialization in children’s contemporary films shows, this supposedly “common sense” racial logic is reductive, as racialization operates beyond the limits of appearance for nonhuman characters. The ways in which nonhuman characters in the most popular twenty-first-century film franchises echo, circulate, and influence ideas about race are not always apparent in their visual components. The bodies of the Minions, Olaf, and Ducky and Bunny do not sport features that immediately align with the dominant visual signs of race, such as black skin, and neither are they given the white gloves of early animated minstrels like Mickey Mouse (Sammond, Birth). Instead of relying on stereotypical visual or physical features, which audiences would consider more obviously problematic in the 2010s and onward, these nonhuman animated characters perform in ways that parallel specific histories of racialization for various marginalized groups, behaving, speaking, dancing, and singing “race.” These racializations are often mobilized around gender and sex and cannot be separated from other intersecting categories of identity as they have been constructed at certain points in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The Minions, Olaf, and Ducky and Bunny each carry the mark of the Other in some way which differentiates them from the normative bodies populating their worlds. They all occupy a liminal existence between human and animal, enacting the foundational division made by race as a category that limits access to humanity. Their cuteness is a function of their powerlessness and malleability; their exaggerated expressions in response to external forces and overall “animatedness” connote their status as subordinate bodies (Ngai 95). As I noted in chapter 1, the
Minions’ performance of gender and sexual behavior should not be isolated from a racial analysis; these characters are assigned a cluster of attributes and desires and hold a position in the larger *Despicable Me* universe that mimics the caricature of Asian American men initially created during the late nineteenth century with the influx of Chinese immigrant laborers. The Minions are positioned as primitive permanent second-class citizens who happily steal and serve to survive, and whose homosexuality and gender-bending behavior make them the literal butts of the joke. In chapter 2, I demonstrated how the feminized incarnation of Hula Olaf in *Frozen* toys and advertising mirrors the fetishized Hawaiian “hula girl,” the exotic, accessible beauty who was created to facilitate the colonization of Polynesia by presenting the islands as a white pleasure playground. Hula Olaf is a colonized body whose docile swaying enacts white possession of Polynesia via the feminized, racialized Hawaiian body (Arvin). Through the “pull apart” toys, Olaf is also configured as an indestructible insensate racialized body whose pain is pleasurable both on screen and in intimate encounters with the character as a physical object. My analysis of Ducky and Bunny in chapter 3 highlighted how Black men have been constructed in the white imagination as hypersexual threats against white women and how that construction persists even in ostensibly harmless children’s entertainment. As embodiments of chaos and anarchy, Ducky and Bunny fantasize about violence and boundary-crossing that would break the strongest taboos of their universe and ours, but they are quickly laughed back into their place as comedic Black sidekicks.

There is no end in sight to the practice of racializing nonhuman characters in mainstream media, and the fact remains that these characters currently function as learning tools for children and adults alike. As bell hooks asserts, “Whether we like it or not, cinema assumes a pedagogical role in the lives of many people. It may not be the intent of a filmmaker to teach audiences
anything, but that does not mean that lessons are not learned” (Reel 2). Movies are inherently persuasive art forms that temporarily demand viewers’ attention and prescribe passivity; hooks states that “whether we call it ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ or just plain submission, in the darkness of the theater most audiences choose to give themselves over, if only for a time, to the images depicted and the images that have created those images” (Reel 3). Rosina Lippi-Green warns about the pedagogical relationship between the genre of animated film and its primarily young audience, noting that “animated films entertain, but they are also a vehicle by which children learn to associate specific characteristics and life styles with specific social groups, and to accept a narrow and exclusionary world view” (111). Animated movies demonstrate how “dominant culture reaffirms its control over subordinate cultures and nations by re-establishing, on a day-to-day basis, their preferred view of the world as right and proper and primary” (Lippi-Green 111). Unsurprisingly, these films that perpetuate dominant white world views are able to cause negative psychological effects in non-white or non-majority-culture children, since “self-image in children is shaped in some degree by exposure to images found in written texts, illustrations, and films” (Hurley 221).

Beyond the animated films themselves, the material objects made to accompany the films find homes in millions of children’s bedrooms, reinforcing on-screen lessons and advancing new configurations in alternative intimate spaces. While I addressed Olaf merchandise via “pull apart” toys and the Hula Olaf wobbler and plush toy in chapter 2, the Minions and Ducky and Bunny also have their animated likenesses solidified in plush and plastic forms. Ducky and Bunny “Interactive True Talkers” are a plastic duo programmed to speak in “white appropriations of racialized speech” (Jeon xxiii). The product description on Amazon.com proclaims, “Hear Bunny say hilarious lines like, ‘Why you got to look at me like that?’ and ‘Oh
snap!’ Push Ducky’s nose and he’ll reply, ‘Like what?’ and ‘You stop lookin’ at me!’ Recreate their hysterical scenes with these new, special Toy Story 4 talking toys!” (“TS Disney/Pixar”). The toys, again voiced by Key and Peele, speak approximated AAVE in lines that are not present in the movie, despite the product page’s insistence that the toys allow the child to “recreate the movie magic” (“TS Disney/Pixar”). The vendor implies the lessons to be learned from these toys are “imagination, courage, teamwork and humor” (“TS Disney/Pixar”). However, such speaking toys and the way they are marketed via “hilarious lines” and “hysterical scenes” merely reinforce stereotypes that Black people “talk funny,” casting an ironic light on the seller’s statement that “Toy Story 4 explores colorful new worlds” (“TS Disney/Pixar”).

Figure 1. Ducky and Bunny as “Interactive True Talkers” sold on Amazon.com (“TS Disney/Pixar”).

The Minions are arguably worse teachers, however, with the Despicable Me 3 jail series of Minion toys. There are multiple Minion toys in which the Minion wears black and white
striped prison overalls with a number emblazoned on the chest. As seen in figure 2, the Amazon description for one such toy, a plush Minion with a distraught expression on his face, reads, “Is Carl the Minion prepared for life in jail? . . . An ideal gift for three and up,” while another stuffed adaptation, “Minions Jail Version Tim,” sports a blue headband under his prison cap that mimics a durag ("DM3 Jail").

Figure 2. On the right, Carl in jail attire as shown on Amazon.com; on the left, Tim as he appears on FirstCry.com ("DM3 Jail"; “Minions Jail Version Tim”).

A parent can also buy their child the “Despicable Me 3 Jail Time Tattoo Phil” or “Tattoo Tim,” small plastic Minion action figures that “le[t] kids decorate the Minion with 16 different tattoo stickers from dice and a banana with a ball and chain to a heart with the word ‘Gru’ in the middle of it” (“Editor’s Review”). Phil comes with a dumbbell to “help him beef up those muscles,” while Tim’s accessory is a shovel for kids to “dig an escape tunnel” (“Editor’s Review”; “DM3 Deluxe”). In a review of “Tattoo Phil,” the editors of TTPM note that a child can “shake him from side to side to watch his eyes wiggle” (“Editor’s Review”). The product description for the
Phil toy on Walmart.com glibly proclaims, “You’re sentenced to years of hard laughter with the *Despicable Me 3* Jail Time Tattoo Phil!”

![Image of Minions](image1.png)

Figure 3. “*DM3* Jail Time Tattoo Phil Deluxe Action Figure” on the left and “*DM3* Deluxe Action Figure Jail Time Tattoo Tim” on the right, both as sold on Walmart.com.

These toys are supposed to “engag[e] kids in fun play” as they “get creative” applying the tattoo stickers, and the plush Tim’s product page claims that he “enhances child’s social and emotional growth” (“*DM3* Deluxe”; “Editor’s Review”; “Minions Jail”). Nonetheless, rather than creativity and imaginative freedom, children learn harmful, anti-social stereotypes about Black bodies and criminality. Layering on top of the racializations of the Minions themselves, the durag, tattoos with designs of dice and their master’s name, and rolling wide eyes make tangible the equation of caricatured Blackness with incarceration in a time when “African Americans are incarcerated at more than 5 times the rate of whites” and when, “in 2017, blacks represented 12% of the U.S. adult population but 33% of the sentenced prison population” (NAACP; Gramlich).

The question remains: do the Minions, Olaf, and Ducky and Bunny contribute to negative social and material consequences for actual people of color in the United States today? Michelle
Ann Abate argues that the answer is yes, using Ralph Ellison’s essay “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke” to claim that there is a “firm link between comedic denigration and sociopolitical oppression” (1076). I am not entirely certain in the case of these three franchises. It can be difficult to believe that seeing the two Minions rub their butts together as they do in DM 3 directly incites homophobic and/or anti-Asian sentiments, or that playing with an Olaf “pull apart” plush will lower a white child’s inhibition to do the same to a Black body. Such direct correlations sound suspiciously reductive. Yet I see the potential for children accustomed to laughing about yellow creatures crazed over bananas to not see the harm in also laughing about jokes and memes depicting Black people going wild for watermelon. I can imagine that indigenous Polynesian children begin to internalize negative images of themselves as the docile “hula girl” when Olaf sways in the movie theater hallway or that Black children lower their expectations and sense of value when they see in Toy Story 4 another iteration of the “funny Black best friend” and never see themselves as the protagonist. Animation instills habits of mind and has the potential to convince viewers that what is depicted is how the world is or how it should be. It makes sense that racist things seem safe, natural, and normal to members of the dominant group when caricatures look tame in beautifully rendered animation, when stereotypes are depicted as comical. Laughter neutralizes while placing the object of laughter at arm’s length, beyond the reach of empathy or critical thinking.

The logical leap from colorful animated characters to real bodies of color is also made easier through repeated exposure to consistent content flowing over different media “‘touch points’” (Jenkins 63). Twenty-first-century children have access to the Minions, Olaf, and Ducky and Bunny in unprecedented ways. Today, children often watch these films over and over in digital form by instantly streaming movies and shorts on Disney+, Netflix, and YouTube, a
manner unimaginable with the original animated films, which a child would watch perhaps only once in a movie theater. By pressing an app on their personal smart device — “42 percent of young children now have their very own tablet” — children can access the universe of *Despicable Me, Frozen,* and *Toy Story* through their associated mobile games (Kamenetz). Kids can eat branded food, wear branded clothes, and sleep under branded bedding sets in a bedroom filled with branded toys, furniture, and decorations; almost every object that one can imagine has been licensed by Disney and Universal Pictures and seamlessly incorporated into the child’s ongoing experience of the franchise. Modern film studios like Disney and Universal Pictures “integrat[e] entertainment and marketing to create physical, emotional, and kinesthetic attachments between consumer and story to ensure further sales. These attachments are to a transferrable homogeneous narrative that is tightly controlled” as it moves across platforms (Halsall 154). Turning off the television no longer stops the barrage of racialized characters. The ubiquitous way they are marketed and disseminated ensures that they not only permeate kinderculture, they *are* kinderculture.

What should be done about these racialized nonhuman characters that teach the next generation racial caricatures submerged under a palatable animated figure? The issue of culpability and responsibility for animated characters brings to mind Jessica Rabbit’s infamous declaration in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988): “I’m not bad. I’m just drawn that way.” The buxom animated Rabbit speaks to the problem of representation and interpretation in animated films and shifts the blame from character to animator. As Lippi-Green states, most creatives who engage in stereotyping are not malicious; they act from a “lack of imagination, laziness, bias, or some combination of the three,” using what seemed to work in the past without questioning the potential for harm (105). I would also point the finger further, toward the myriad discourses and
narrative codes and conventions that influence all storytelling activity. Ultimately, the Minions, Olaf, and Ducky and Bunny are not the point; targeting these characters as embodiments of the contemporary “problem of the color line” within animation can only offer simplistic pseudo-solutions (Du Bois 1). The Minions, Olaf, and Ducky and Bunny are but part of a greater pattern of racial caricaturing in animation that began with the genre’s blackface minstrel origins in the early twentieth century (Sammond, Birth). Boycotting the Despicable Me, Frozen, and Toy Story franchises would not accomplish anti-racist political and aesthetic goals, nor would such a protest be feasible in a capitalist landscape in which mega-conglomerates Disney and Comcast are the two of the largest media corporations in the country and own several hundred companies between them. Rather, the Minions, Olaf, and Ducky and Bunny are most useful for providing an entry point into demonstrating that a twenty-first-century “‘post-racial’ consciousness is a false consciousness”; race saturates contemporary discourse and continues to organize worlds, especially in the venues considered most innocent (Holloway xiii). These submerged racialized figures illustrate that the formation of an equitable, just society entails dismantling the very narrative fabric and foundational logic of the United States.


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