

Disney's Tia Dalma: A Critical Interrogation of an "Imagineered" Priestess

Kameelah Martin Samuel, *Georgia State University*

Abstract

The conjure woman has long lived as a popular American cultural icon, so much so that it seemed destined that multimedia conglomerate the Walt Disney Company would eventually adopt and embrace her. The conjure woman's likeness is reflected in the Disney feature films *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* (2006) and *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End* (2007). This essay investigates just what happens to black women and spirit work when placed in the hands of Disney, a corporation with a sordid history of pirating in another context. The work is particularly invested in complicating black female body politics by addressing the additional stigma against female spiritual autonomy. How is an association with African spiritual cosmologies inscribed on the physicality of black women in popular culture? I focus my attention on Tia Dalma, the minor black female character engaged in Vodou in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise, applying a close reading of the spiritual iconography and other cinematic coding surrounding her performance of African-based spirituality. I assess Disney's appropriation of black cultural forms in the construction of fantasy and fairytale.

Images of conjurers, voodoo queens, and obeah women have pervaded the American popular imagination at least since Tituba was described by judicial officials as "a slave from the West Indies probably practicing hoodoo" during her trial at Salem Village (Tucker 2000, 624).¹ Marie Laveau's name and likeness are invoked all over New Orleans where voodoo devotees and the curious alike sojourn to her tomb annually. Both the publishing and film industries have fueled the world's obsession with black women and spirit work. Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Tell My Horse* (1938) and Karen McCarthy Brown's *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (1990) provide an insider's perspective on the place of women

in African-based spiritual systems. Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Voodoo Dreams* (1993) and subsequent voodoo trilogy is targeted at an audience hungry to consume black magic women.² Even the mainstream *Amazing Spider-Man* series pits a villainous voodoo priestess against the arachnid-inspired superhero.³ Early Hollywood films like *Chloe, Love is Calling You* (1934) and *The Love Wanga* (1936) evince a long-standing American preoccupation with Africana women of spiritual prowess. The phenomenon of *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) and *Eve's Bayou* (1997), two independent films by black women, speak to yet another audience, black women, who find affirmation of their way of life in such films. More recently, HBO's original series *True Blood* introduced Ms. Jeanette, the conjure woman from Bontemps, Louisiana, in season one, and the season three finale alludes to an ancestral connection to women and voodoo for the character Lafayette.⁴ The twentieth century, in particular, is reeling with references to African-derived religious figures that are female in the material culture of America. The depictions range from representations of the fantastic as in the graphic novel *Voodoo: Dancing in the Dark* (1990) to filmmaker Julie Dash's culturally sensitive rendering in *Daughters of the Dust*.

The conjure woman has such a long standing as a cultural icon, particularly in American consumer markets, that it was destined that multimedia giant the Walt Disney Company would eventually take a sip of her brew. The conjure woman's likeness is reflected in the Disney feature films *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* (2006) and *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End* (2007) (hereafter referred to as *Pirates*). Disney's appropriation of women and spirit work signals a halting moment for the conjure woman. This essay asks what happens to her image when placed in the hands of Disney? The company has a sordid history of piracy in another context.⁵ It is common knowledge that the conglomerate did not necessarily manufacture many of the beloved fairy tales, folk heroes, and Disney "classics" owned, distributed, and marketed by the company.⁶ The Walt Disney Company has incurred much criticism to this effect, though such criticism has not had sizable repercussions in profit or public opinion.⁷ All things considered, it is a wonder that Disney would delve into multiple film projects that mirror the folk and spiritual expressions of people of African descent.

Black female characters, lead or supporting, have a limited history on the Disney silver screen. Yet and still, new concepts such as "postracial America" suggest that the development and marketing for an African American audience seem politically correct action for Disney to pursue.⁸ Visible African American characters with developed storylines seemingly solve the conundrum of minimizing social offense while also satiating a target demographic.

Disney's earlier attempt in *Song of the South* (1946) caused some controversy over the questionable depiction of African Americans and the supposed bastardization of the Brer Rabbit tales.⁹ The film is currently serving a twenty-five year (and counting) banishment in the Disney vault. It has not been released theatrically or for home-entertainment purchase in the United States since 1986.¹⁰ Perhaps in the twenty-first century, Disney has reconsidered its approach to culturally sensitive representations, perhaps not. The following interrogation of Tia Dalma, the Africana female character who appears to be linked to black circum-Atlantic spiritual traditions in the aforementioned *Pirates* films, intends to address that precise question. After all, with the Disney name behind her, the conjuring woman has the potential to sail to new popular culture heights—without the express disavowal of the very group of people whom she represents—a distinction Disney has yet to earn.¹¹

Disney's Tia Dalma and the *Pirates* Trilogy

In 2006, Walt Disney Pictures introduced the character Tia Dalma (actress Naomi Harris) in the second installation of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* trilogy. Tia Dalma appears late in the film, surfacing only when the lead character, Jack Sparrow (actor Johnny Depp), seeks out the obeah woman to save him from the wrath of Davy Jones.¹² Tia Dalma's habitat is nestled deep upriver on an unnamed Caribbean island.¹³ Her home is not on physical land; rather, she resides in a wooden shack situated in the branches of a cypress forest. Her living space is illuminated with soft, golden candlelight and decorated with various hanging pseudo-obeah accoutrements, like a jar full of human eyeballs and skeletal remains. The most obvious sight is the albino python draped across the tree limb that rises through the floor. Captain Sparrow visibly shifts from being cavalier to an apprehensive posture when entering Tia Dalma's shack. His first mate assures him, "I'll watch your back," to which Sparrow responds with thinly veiled sexual innuendo, "It's me front I'm worried about" (*Dead Man's Chest* 2006). Before Tia Dalma steps into the frame, the audience is already queued as to how to read her character—scary, otherworldly, and sexually aggressive. That Sparrow seeks her knowledge to protect him from Jones implies that, like Jones, Tia Dalma trucks in the supernatural, grotesque, immoral world of piracy, or something much worse.

Tia Dalma's home is hidden in the swamps among a settlement of other African-descended persons. The setting immediately invoked, for this author, the history of fugitive slaves living in swamps and hills undetected by the

planter class. Disney does not address the origins of Tia Dalma and her community on film, but based on Caribbean history, it seems logical to assume this to be a maroon settlement. Otherwise, it is difficult to explain the large Afro-Caribbean population living free in the deepest, hidden part of the island when, according to the film, it is the height of the East India Company's triangular import/export business. Tia Dalma is the stated leader of her community; as such, her character is in keeping with that of disobedient slave. From my view, she can be interpreted as a rebellious woman who, in defiance of British rule, commits *marronage*. The unusual items in her dwelling also allude to some socially unacceptable activity that borders on the un-Christian and otherworldly.

Her visual representation works to corroborate such coding. Tia Dalma first appears at a table where she is performing a divination with crab claws. The camera zooms into a close-up shot of her face, drawing attention to her black lipstick, unkempt dreadlocks, bloodshot eyes, and what appears to be some type of tribal markings on her face; she is exceptionally *othered*. Her teeth, like those of the other pirates, are rotted. She wears a colonial, off-the-shoulder ball gown complete with a hoopskirt and corset, which is visibly tattered and worn. When considering her costume and make-up one might argue that Disney is more interested in portraying Tia Dalma as pirate scum, consistent with the other characters in the film, than in perpetuating women and spirit work as unsightly and unclean. While one may agree with that statement to some extent, I am discouraged from such reasoning by the more pristine imaging of Elizabeth Swann (actress Keira Knightly), the other female pirate character in the film. Elizabeth Swann is the white, privileged daughter of Wetherby Swann, the British governor of Port Royal, Jamaica. She is clearly delineated as the desirable, romantic interest of both Jack Sparrow and Will Turner (actor Orlando Bloom).¹⁴ She remains comparatively clean and feminine, maintaining her "to-be-looked-at-ness" throughout the trilogy (Mulvey 1999, 837). She manages to maintain and even exceed her feminine looks despite the harsh life of piracy. Tia Dalma literally becomes monstrous by the end of the three-part series, whereas Elizabeth remains the Princess Swann.¹⁵ Such juxtaposition of black and white females in cinema enables erroneous perceptions about the difference between these women. "Same-sex female polarization perpetuates exaggerated and false distinctions between black and white women which," Norma Manatu argues, "threaten to color all social exchanges between them. Moreover, because the depictions are presented as comedic and in many cases 'endearing,' audiences generally

may completely miss how such images work to foster the ‘otherness’ of black women culturally” (2003, 46).

The polarization between these two characters moves beyond dinginess and shabby appearances. Janell Hobson argues that “the black female body poses such a threat to the white patriarchal system, it has been rendered invisible for fear that the visibility of a sexually desirable woman would disrupt the accepted constructions of white as beautiful, as the norm” (2002, 52). She goes on to explain that this invisibility is often enacted through the “hypervisibility of the black female body,” as in the case of the so-called Hot-tentot Venus (2002, 52).¹⁶ The way in which Elizabeth Swann and Tia Dalma perform their sexuality is, then, of particular significance for this analysis. Tia Dalma smiles intimately when she recognizes Jack Sparrow, and their verbal and physical interaction implies that there may have been a romantic or sexual liaison between them in the past. No sooner than she realizes that Jack Sparrow is not traveling alone do her interests sway toward Will Turner. She reads him as he comes into view and proclaims, “You have a touch of destiny about you . . . William Turner,” spoken in a slow, sultry Afro-British patois (*Dead Man’s Chest* 2006). She knows his name without his revealing it, and if the audience is still unclear about her role in the film or rather who or what she is, this scene solidifies her position as obeah woman.¹⁷ Tia Dalma suggestively offers herself to Will Turner asking, “You want to *know* me?” as she moves familiarly close to him. Jack Sparrow intervenes, but Tia Dalma is close enough to Will Turner to stroke his face and inquire, “What service can I do you?” Will Turner appears surprised at her forwardness, yet flattered and even slightly aroused as she fondles him. The initial minutes of her screen introduction communicates that Tia Dalma is concerned first with the seduction of men. She is coded as a worldly woman with little discretion concerning the number or identity of her lovers. As Jack Sparrow, Will Turner, and the other pirates offer an undead monkey to Tia Dalma as in-kind payment for her services, the camera follows the monkey as it skips into an adjacent room perching on the foot of a bed partially hidden from the view of the pirate crew. Though his identity is hidden, a pair of booted feet confirms that Tia Dalma literally has another male visitor in her bed. Though she backs down from seducing Will Turner for the moment, the third film delves much further into the erotic nature of Tia Dalma.

Tia Dalma greets Jack Sparrow in a similarly sexually charged exchange in *At World’s End* (2007) when she and the crew of the *Black Pearl* rescue him from Davy Jones’s locker. Jack Sparrow initially insults her and accuses

Tia Dalma of trying to kill him, to which she responds in a playful, seductive tone, “Now, don’t tell me you didn’t enjoy it at the time.” She moves closer to him, their faces almost touching as she fingers his braided goatee. Jack Sparrow, unable to maintain his frustration with her, smiles boyishly and concedes the point. The audience also learns of her romantic association with Davy Jones in this film. That she seduced Davy Jones, manipulated him into accepting the responsibility of “[ferrying] those who die at sea to the other side,” and is thus confined to a life at sea is only exacerbated by the fact that “she who love him truly” did not keep her promise to gratify his emotional and sexual desires upon his return to dry land ten years later. Tia Dalma, in this scenario, amounts to nothing more than a temptress and a tease—the same accusations aimed at black women “jezebels” who found themselves in the dubious position of conceiving the master’s children.

Like the Jezebel archetype, Tia Dalma is not spared from the social backlash of her actions. Her punishment for toying with the desires of a white man was to be bound in human form by the Brethren Court of Pirates, whereas she previously roamed the earth as the goddess Calypso, most often embodied as the ocean. The name connotes an association with the nymph Calypso, of Greek mythology, who is best known for her entrapment of Homer’s hero in the *Odyssey*.¹⁸ Tia Dalma does offer and grant Davy Jones immortality, but this is where the similarities between she and the Greek Nereid end. The Homeric Calypso neither betrayed Odysseus nor rejected him in order to pursue other lovers. Tia Dalma, however, actualizes a correlation between ocean divinities and an insatiable sexual appetite, a correlation that is entirely too problematic when dealing with women of color and film. Disney commits to this particular employment of the black female character in its pirate franchise, unfortunately, even connecting Tia Dalma/Calypso’s liberation to an innate and feverish sexuality. In order to free the goddess, Captain Barbossa (Geoffrey Rush) explains, the personal effects of nine different pirate lords must be burned together and the phrase “Calypso! I release you from your human bonds” is to be “spoken as if by a lover” (*At World’s End* 2007). She responds ecstatically; her panting, closed eyes, and sensual facial expressions suggest pleasurable erotic stimulation rather than jubilee for freedom.

Elizabeth Swann, on the other hand, reflects her sexuality in a much more subtle way. She is coded for her “to-be-looked-at-ness” during the course of the two films in question (Mulvey 1999, 837). Yet it is drastically more conservative and conscious of her position of white privilege. In *Dead Man’s Chest*, the audience is reminded of Elizabeth Swann’s affluence and pending membership in the era’s Cult of True Womanhood. The camera pans over

the ruins of her English wedding—silver place settings, embroidered table cloths, and ornate flower arrangements, seating for a small orchestra; and Elizabeth Swann herself is dolled up in an exquisite wedding gown.¹⁹ The wedding is spoiled by torrid rainfall and the descent of the British Army on Port Royal. Elizabeth Swann is the princess awaiting her happily-ever-after. Her future takes another direction when she and Will Turner are arrested on charges of conspiracy. She is then transformed into the classic damsel-in-distress archetype. Specifically, she is helpless and in need of rescuing, presumably by white men. Swann strays from this role for a good part of the series, but this particular rendering of her character is consistent in that every action she takes thereafter is fueled by the subtext of her pending marriage and identity as wife. Her status as cherished, white female trumps every other characteristic she assumes on screen. Further, it is the one to which she ultimately returns after playing with pirates. She laments her postponed nuptials in an emotional outburst while on the *Black Pearl*: “I just thought I’d be married by now. I’m so ready to be married” (*Dead Man’s Chest* 2006). Her only concern and mission in the film are to solidify her place as domestic and obedient wife.

Positioned as a maiden of wealth, Elizabeth Swann signifies the chaste, untouched, and pure. The film’s leading men desire her, but, unlike their desire for Tia Dalma, their desire for Elizabeth Swann is made honorable by the promise of marriage. She is engaged to Will Turner, was formerly affianced to Commodore James Norrington (actor Jack Davenport), and even Captain Jack Sparrow offers something of a proposal in Will Turner’s absence: “You know, Lizzie, I am Captain of a ship. And being Captain of a ship I can, in fact, perform a marriage right here, right on this deck . . . right *now*” (*Dead Man’s Chest* 2006). Elizabeth Swann has been involved romantically with all three men—she kisses each of them on different occasions between the second and third films. However, this does not taint or compromise her reputation because each has asked for her hand in marriage, which somehow substantiates their lust.²⁰ Swann’s flirtation among and between men is not a signal of her wanton ways or implication of loose sexual morals. Rather, it becomes sport, with Will Turner having the last laugh when he wins the prize. It is to Will Turner that Elizabeth Swann makes her only sexually forward comment—whereas Tia Dalma’s character exchanges several with as many characters. Turner promises a jailed Swann to return to Port Royal to marry her properly when the British military officer Lord Beckett (actor Tom Hollander) foils their wedding night. She replies, “If it weren’t for these bars, I’d have you already.”

The implied true womanhood of Elizabeth Swann is upheld with understated signals in the films. When Jack Sparrow's indecisive heart can no longer direct the compass he bartered from Tia Dalma toward his heart's true desires, he relies on Elizabeth Swann's innate goodness and honesty to guide his ship toward an elusive treasure.²¹ Sparrow knows how much affection she has for Will Turner and uses this to manipulate her into taking possession of the compass. Her goodness guides the ship to bounty Jack Sparrow seeks and simultaneously to Will Turner, the true desire of her heart, who is held captive by Davy Jones. Elizabeth Swann's fidelity to Turner goes unquestioned partly because her role as love interest is understood as being harmonious with the hero who fights on the side of everything good and just.

Another example of subtly coding Elizabeth Swann as true woman is deciphered in the supposed erasure of her biological sex. In an attempt to mask her femininity while aboard the *Black Pearl*, Swann disguises herself in male clothing, but her androgyny fails as her male shipmates refuse to acknowledge her as anything except a lady to be admired and protected. Swann's incognito is further nullified when she appears on the deck in men's attire, yet her hair is loose and flowing; it dances seductively in the sea breeze as she banters with Captain Jack Sparrow. There is no confusion over or debate concerning her gender coding here. Her body is clothed modestly in men's pants and a tailored shirt to cover her feminine form for the better part of the film, yet the camera angles focus on her natural beauty and fine facial features rather than capitalizing on her physique—reifying the purity and innocence of white womanhood by drawing attention away from her body. Jack Sparrow addresses her pseudo-masculinity directly, however, saying in no uncertain terms that men's clothes “do not flatter [her] at all. It should be a dress or nothing” (*Dead Man's Chest* 2006). His statement is understood as tongue-in-cheek. It signifies his desire to see her naked, rejects the notion of her androgyny, and reasserts her position on the pedestal of whiteness.

At World's End (2007) continues this engagement of Elizabeth Swann's character as the epitome of white womanhood. Her opening scenes, set in Singapore, toy again with the false androgyny. Here, she is quickly returned to her place as prized possession of men when she is made to disarm before taking an audience with the Pirate Lord, Sao Feng (actor Chow Yun-Fat). She strips herself of the ridiculous number of weapons she carries on her body, most of which have unquestionable phallic resemblance. Swann is further “castrated” when forced to disrobe and left to appear in nothing but a revealing Asian-inspired tunic. She is reduced to her biological sex and made vulnerable by literally removing her pants and being exposed as sexual

object. Her body language also drastically changes. Initially, she was a rogue pirate who violently confronted another pirate who challenged her gender. She then shifted to damsel in distress (*At World's End* 2007). Ironically, she *does* need protecting. She looks to her pirate comrades, Will Turner especially, to keep her chastity intact and disrupt the scopophilic gaze to which she is subjected.

True to the metanarrative of white womanhood, Elizabeth Swann is rescued, albeit with her full participation in the battle. Sao Feng (the racialized other in this scene) gets a second chance to act out his desire on the white female who is off limits to him. When Captain Barbosa announces that the goddess Calypso is part of his crew, Sao Feng immediately assumes Elizabeth Swann to be her human incarnation, excluding Tia Dalma from the possibility altogether. The audience, with Sao Feng, is led by filmmakers to connect Elizabeth Swann with beauty, cleanliness, and divinity by juxtaposing her to the only other female in the film—dirty and unsightly Tia Dalma. Sao Feng assumes the white woman is Calypso because she is desirable; she fits the Eurocentric model of beauty and femininity. In actuality, it is Tia Dalma—marked as unbeautiful, marginal, other—who doubles as the sea goddess. She possesses supernatural power and *konnaissance*, yet no one suspects the black woman as divinity.²² Tia Dalma smirks at such foolish logic.

Sao Feng captures Elizabeth Swann, whom he believes to be Calypso, and Elizabeth Swann plays along with his fantasy seemingly oblivious to his intention to rape her. He sexually assaults her, but in the most ceremonious of ways. He offers his “desire”—clearly a euphemism for his penis—in exchange for her dominion of the ocean. His language is poetic, reverent, and unthreatening, though his actions are not. When his attempted rape is sidelined by a fatal wound at the hands of the *Flying Dutchman*, Sao Feng begs forgiveness for his impropriety with the goddess and with his last breath names Elizabeth Swann captain and pirate lord in his stead. I contend that the gentleness with which Sao Feng treats Elizabeth Swann is due, in part, to her whiteness, perceived beauty, and position of privilege. The scene in which the actual Calypso is visited by her lover corroborates my contention. Davy Jones, played by Bill Nighy, appears before Tia Dalma/Calypso while she is imprisoned on the *Black Pearl*. He, unlike Sao Feng, is not there to honor the goddess, rescue her, or submit to his carnal desires. Rather, the exchange is ripe with physical and verbal violence as Davy Jones confronts the “fish wife” for betraying him with her fickle nature (*At World's End* 2007).

Captain Barbosa, likewise, manhandles Tia Dalma/Calypso when she asserts her power and emasculates him in front of his crew. He addresses her

in a condescending tone and strokes her hair as a patronizing gesture. She grabs his hand, which instantly shrivels to skeletal matter under her supernatural grip. She warns, "Caution, Barbossa. Do not forget it was by my power you return from the dead or what it mean if you fail me" (*At World's End* 2007). With absolutely no regard for her gender or status as obeah woman, Captain Barbossa grabs Tia Dalma's arm and ferociously pulls her toward him before ordering her "to the brig" where she is bound in rope like an animal. This is a startling contrast to the way Barbossa tolerates Elizabeth Swann when she "forget[s her] place" with Sao Feng in the opening scenes of *At World's End*. He rolls his eyes but dares not challenge an English lady whose rank and race are closer to his own than Tia Dalma's.

The film continues to differentiate white womanhood from black womanhood by the limited interaction between Elizabeth Swann and Tia Dalma. Their first on-screen meeting is in the final scene of *Dead Man's Chest* when the crew of the *Black Pearl* returns to Tia Dalma's hideaway following the supposed death of Jack Sparrow. Tia Dalma, divinely aware of Elizabeth Swann's heartache over leaving Jack Sparrow for dead and her unresolved attraction to him, nurtures the white woman by offering her a warm remedy to protect "against the cold and the sorrow" (*Dead Man's Chest* 2006). There are two other scenes in which the two converse. When traveling to World's End, Elizabeth Swann asks Tia Dalma's insightful opinion about Sao Feng's honor, and on their return, it is Tia Dalma who offers Swann the final consolation when she realizes that her father is among the lost souls at sea: "Him at Peace" (*At World's End* 2007).

Their relationship to one another is tinged with distance and situates Tia Dalma as a subservient, mother figure to the young mistress of the ship. Elizabeth Swann is catered to and consoled at various points in the story, whereas no one comes to Tia Dalma's aid—not even Jack Sparrow—when Captain Barbossa banishes her and treats her like an animal for challenging his sovereignty. Their difference is solidified in the denouement as Elizabeth Swann successfully completes her mission toward matrimony and ascends to her reserved space in the Cult of True Womanhood. In the final scene of *At World's End*, which follows the closing credits, Elizabeth Swann appears properly attired in colonial British dress and is accompanied by the legitimate child of her coupling with Will Turner. She achieves her happily-ever-after, while the fate of Tia Dalma and her beloved Davy Jones remains problematic and unresolved.

The polarization of Tia Dalma and Elizabeth Swann continues to be problematic in the way it positions the obeah woman as the unequal coun-

terpart to white womanhood and ranks Tia Dalma's social status as that below scoundrel, vagabond pirate. It is precisely her association with African-derived ways of knowing that relegates her to the realm of the grotesque and inhumane. Accordingly, Tia Dalma is only valuable as a means of pitting various pirate crews against each other as they scour the ocean for tangible symbols of empire and wealth. The Brethren Court are battling against the hegemonic colonial forces of the East India Company for their turf and lifestyle. Tia Dalma, on the other hand, is in a war for her freedom from the dominantly male Brethren Court. She is a means to an end for the pirate lords, but of no tangible value herself. As a vehicle for capitalist and political gain that is absent any lasting social bonds in the trilogy, it stands to reason that the filmmakers were neither interested in creating Tia Dalma with any depth of character nor with any reflection of the Black Atlantic cultural milieu from which obeah women emerged. It becomes increasingly evident, as one investigates Tia Dalma for imprints of an Afro-Caribbean spiritual epistemology, that Disney opted to appropriate a number of folk histories and world mythologies in its development of her with ill regard for cultural sensitivity or authenticity.

Disney's history of questionable creative license

Disney executives are certainly free to take creative privilege when configuring their characters—even when revising already existing figures—and they have a questionable reputation for doing just that. Peggy Russo (1992) cites one of the earliest critiques of Disney's appropriation of traditional children's literature (fairytales):

In a 1965 letter to the *Los Angeles Times*, Frances Clark Sayer criticized Disney "for his debasement of the traditional literature of childhood." Sayers accused him of: (1) lack of respect for the "integrity of original creations;" (2) "manipulation and vulgarization" of texts for his own ends; (3) lack of regard for the "anthropological, spiritual, or psychological truths" of folklore; (4) "fixing his mutilated film versions in books which are cut to a fraction of their original forms"; and (5) "illustration of those books with garish pictures, in which every prince looks like a badly drawn portrait of Cary Grant; every princess a sex symbol." . . . But the remark that rings most tellingly lamented Disney's "tendency to take over a . . . work and make it his own without any regard for the original author or to the original book." (21)

Disney's revision of the colonial American myth about John Smith and Pocahontas was similarly criticized.²³ Films and animated shorts such as *Pinocchio* (1940), the *Winnie the Pooh* series, *The Little Mermaid* (1989), and *Mulan* (1998) also stray from their original forms when in the hands of the Disney machine. Disney is well aware of the criticism but has not chosen to correct the images. David Forgacs notes a June 1965 document from Walt Disney Productions, which states, "It is perfectly all right to speak of 'Walt Disney's Donald Duck' or 'Walt Disney's Disneyland'. It is quite another thing to say 'Walt Disney's *Treasure Island*' or 'Walt Disney's *Mary Poppins*' or 'Walt Disney's *Winnie the Pooh*'. . . . It is not true that Walt created *Treasure Island* or *Mary Poppins* or *Winnie the Pooh*, and we should not present them in book form to the public in ways that suggest, imply, or claim that he did" (1992, 369). The question of cinematic integrity and responsibility truthfully to represent the folkloric and cultural origins of much of Disney's material is debatable, but as it concerns conjuring women, there is much at stake.

Imagineerng the Black Conjure Woman

The conjure woman has long felt the chains of oppression and marginalization at the hands of a European-centered New World majority. Disney, perhaps one of the world's most recognized multimedia and commercial enterprises, has the social currency to shift public perception or, at the very least, portray Black Atlantic religion as something other than stereotype and caricature.²⁴ Such is the power of the Disney name that, as Dorothy Hurley argues,

children [and adults] tend to believe that Disney's version . . . is the real story rather than the "classic" version to which they may or may not have been exposed through school or home. Not only does the Disney version provide visual images for the fairy tale it is depicting, these images and the relative value of group membership associated with the images are then translated into beliefs children [and adults] hold about status in particular group membership. (2005, 222)

Thus, by creating films that depict practitioners of African-centered religion, Disney is accountable for the images, histories, and representations that it disseminates. More than this, "Disney texts . . . attempt to become definitive, thereby solidifying a single variant" of the conjure woman mythos that has been sustained for centuries by various oral renditions, print revisions, visual arts, and other moving images (Koven 2003, 177). More times than not, the

single variant Disney distributes is taken at face value; the viewing audience of “Disney babies” consume the cinema as reliable history and literature that inevitably becomes part of pop culture lexicon (Forgacs 1992, 361).

This would, perhaps, not be as problematic if Tia Dalma were not a mere simulacrum, a shadowy resemblance of the obeah women and Vodou priestesses of African Diasporic memory. Tia Dalma is referenced as “obeah woman” in *At World’s End* and as “Voodoo priestess” in the Disney licensed *Complete Visual Guide* to the *Pirates* trilogy, yet she is limited in her embodiment of Afro-Caribbean spirituality (Platt and Dakin 2007, 58). Disney displaces a history of defiance, spiritual symbolism, and cultural signs of an African past with Eurocentric “engineered” iconography.²⁵ Tia Dalma becomes a “bogus visual version” of her conjuring ancestors (Russo 1992, 19). For the black spectator who may be expecting a more dynamic representation of one of the most adept agents of mobility and self-determination within black womanhood, the end product is unfulfilling. It appears that the *Pirates*’ creative team, Ted Elliot and Terry Rossio, attempts to pay homage to Caribbean historical memory by developing Tia Dalma as a powerful and revered obeah woman, but she morphs into something beyond that.

Tia Dalma is a healer and priestess living outside colonial reaches in the most secluded part of the island. The description sounds eerily close to the history/legend of Jamaica’s Nanny of the Windward Maroons.²⁶ This is not a far reach of the imagination. Any historical research the screenwriters may have conducted in the present day on British colonial history in the Caribbean would surely refer to the Jamaican national hero. It is not a complicated leap to piece together how Tia Dalma is erected from the bones of Nanny’s narrative. Jenny Sharpe explains, “Nanny’s exploits *are* well documented in maroon oral histories, but these stories did not endow her with a historical reality prior to Jamaican independence. As a woman leader whose memory was preserved in oral form alone, she was relegated to the fictitious world of folklore” (2003, 1). Without conflict, Disney borrows from Nanny’s “fictive” personage to morph and re-imagine the “rebels’ old obeah woman” as a young, sultry enchantress with the “uncanny power to foretell the future, to summon up demons, and to look deep into men’s souls” (Sharpe 2003, 1; Platt and Dakin 2007, 58).

As a black spectator, I observe immense disjuncture in the way Disney pilfers Afro-Caribbean oral histories, particularly in that “one of the utopian dimensions of the film is that it represents a Caribbean in which a black majority does not exist” (Frank 2007, 59). More to the point, Nanny’s “symbolic value lies in her ability to represent both the buried tradition of

an African culture and the long history of anticolonial struggles so central to the identity of emergent nations of the Caribbean” (Sharpe 2003, 4). Disney only *implies* a connection to slave resistance via Tia Dalma. Viewers familiar with the Caribbean’s colonial past as it relates to slavery and *marronage* may suspect that Tia Dalma’s obscure, hard-to-locate community of colored folk is a maroon colony and she, its spiritual leader. Tia Dalma is devoid of any such value, symbolic or otherwise. Her character is a reflection of the historical moment that created Nanny and many unnamed mambos and obeah women who rejected bondage through their spiritual acumen.

A temporal visage in the form of Tia Dalma mocks the seriousness and cultural relevance of women like Nanny when it is *purposefully* employed in reifying a history of the dominant class. While one can argue that the Brethren Court and Tia Dalma share a common enemy in the East India Company, the social stratification in the film positions Tia Dalma as less valuable, somehow more degenerate and loathsome than the pirates—who are decidedly male—which does, in fact, reify the dominion of Western patriarchy no matter which way you spin it. In this way, Disney commits a type of epistemic violence, to use Gayatri Spivak’s language, by reconfiguring Tia Dalma’s purpose to that of assisting pirates to retrieve their captain from Davy Jones’s locker.²⁷ Disney erases (for the generic viewer) the culturally specific coding of resistance “by making their polymorphous [obeah woman] conform to the binary logic of a Western system of meaning” (Sharpe 2003, 7–8).

This violence against conjuring women continues to be visited on Tia Dalma’s portrayal of New World religion. *At World’s End* situates her as an ocean deity trapped in human flesh form. The characterization of Tia Dalma as priestess with specifically African derivations—her divination board in her first on-screen appearance is decorated with a *vévé* for Legba—implies that the aforementioned divinity should also imbibe Africanity.²⁸ On the contrary, this goddess answers to the name Calypso—most notably of Greco-Roman mythology. The name stems from a civilization that is the hallmark of Western cultural supremacy. Tia Dalma’s divine incarnation does not bear a name by which her black circum-Atlantic communities might recognize her as their own: Yemonja, Olokún, Lasiren, or Mami Wata. By invoking a Greek nymph when the deity is named, Disney severs Tia Dalma from her African antecedents “disneyfying” Vodou into a more palatable and safe form with which its audience is familiar. The film poorly simulates African-derived spirituality, rather than indulge or celebrate a religion that, by Eurocentric standards, is utterly *other*. One could argue that Disney chose “Calypso” in

reference to the Trinidadian folk music that is popular across the Caribbean and not in direct association with Greek epic narrative. This is fathomable and even likely. The word does suppose a connection to an African heritage in that context. Errol Hill, who has done extensive research on the etymology of the musical form, argues that “calypso” is a creolized African word that survived the middle passage.²⁹ There is at least one other reference of a Black Atlantic divinity by that name in Elizabeth Nunez’s *Beyond the Limbo Silence* (1998). Nunez’s novel mythologizes the female water spirit, calling her by several names that emphasize the cross-cultural milieu of Trinidad: Siren, Orehu, Mermaid, Sea Cow, Calypso.

Calypso, in Nunez’s narrative of coming of age and identity formation, is the essence of Trinidadian folk culture that connects its African-descended people to their African-ness. It is infectious and “self-propagating” like Ishmael Reed’s *Jes Grew*; “it’s not 1 of those germs that break bleed suck gnaw or devour. It’s nothing we can bring into focus or categorize” (Reed 1972, 5).³⁰ Sara, the protagonist who is reconciling her mixed-race heritage, speaks of middle-class black mothers “who put wax in their daughters’ ears” to resist “the slip backward” into blackness; to resist “the pull of the Pinkety Ping Pang of Calypso’s steel band pan” (Nunez 1998, 127). The Calypso of Nunez’s imagination is more than the alluring soundtrack to the carnival season; she is embodied as a divine entity that Sara and her ancestor spirit encounter in between worlds on a vast world ocean: “We would have been trapped by icebergs if Calypso had not saved us. We heard ping, pang, pinkety, pang of her steel band pans and swam towards her” (1998, 306–7). *Beyond the Limbo Silence* purposefully links Caribbean folk music with female spirit and an association with the sea. As a Trinidadian author, it is logical that Nunez mythologizes the multicultural origins and conflicts of Caribbean spiritual identity.

Disney, on the other hand, developed the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise as a means to capitalize on the theme park ride of the same name in which “history and fantasy intertwine to create commodities rooted in society’s psyche” (Petersen 2007, 64). Without access to the production notes and the screenwriters, I cannot state this emphatically. However, it seems unlikely that Disney’s use of the name Calypso is a premeditated invocation of Caribbean cultural production meant to signify to the viewing audience, a deeply musical and spiritual reconnection to the African antecedents of the Caribbean people of color, especially since this thread is virtually absent in the films.

I contend that the creation of Tia Dalma is haphazard and concerned, pri-

marily, with the magic of Disney fantasy and fairytale than with appropriately portraying African-based spiritual traditions. Tia Dalma is only superficially recognizable as mambo or Vodou priestess. To more clearly demonstrate how Tia Dalma/Calypso mimics a specialist of African cosmologies or spirit, I compare her depiction as an ocean deity and obeah woman to other New World African spirits using Georgene Bess Montgomery's *Ifa Paradigm* in an effort to discern to which, if any, African Diasporic ocean spirit she corresponds.³¹ The *Ifa Paradigm* is "a method [of interrogation] informed by the ideas and worldview of Ifá, an ancient African spiritual system, [and used] to unlock deeper levels of meaning in the writing of African peoples" (Montgomery 2008, 3). Montgomery's critical lens is also particularly useful for critiquing narratives about people of African descent. Her framework is invaluable in assisting readers to explicate how "the [Orisha] the ancestors, colors, numbers, conjurers, conjuring, divination, initiation, ritual, [and] magic are manifested in Caribbean and African American literary texts and demonstrates how to identify and decode signs and symbols central to [African-based spirituality] located in the texts" (2008, 4). Many of the orisha, for instance, "are seen in natural forms like stones, water-sources, the sea, or felt as wind," so that one can argue that the storm in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* is a manifestation of Oya, who represents the winds of change and transition (Gleason 2000, 268). The *Ifa Paradigm* is one tool used by critics and theorists to successfully identify African religious or spiritual allusions in literature and film. My application of it to interpret Tia Dalma/Calypso's expressions of African-centered spirituality proved less useful. A close reading of her performance of African spirituality reveals the inconsistencies in her portrayal.³²

Tia Dalma's initial appearance in *Dead Man's Chest*—with amber candlelight filling the frame, her shack situated on the river, coquettish demeanor and attire—strongly invokes an association with the orisha Oshún, known in the Black Atlantic as the river deity; or Erzulie, the Haitian loa of beauty and feminine power. According to Gary Edwards and John Mason, Oshún's ritual color is yellow, a reflection of brass, gold, and other yellow metals that are sacred to her.³³ Just as Tia Dalma exudes sexuality and desire, Oshún represents "the trapped feelings of lust and the anticipation of pleasure" (Edwards and Mason 1985, 98). There is an implication that Tia Dalma has had a past tryst with Jack Sparrow, and viewers witness her yearning for young Will Turner, all of which can be explained by recognizing Oshún as the spiritual energy that rules her head. Oshún is referred to by the Lucumí as the "divine courtesan" because she "is licentious," she "sleeps around,"

or so says “the legend of her restless motion from husband to husband” (Thompson 2001, 260). Her favorite offering is honey and “honey is the knife,” Thompson bemuses (2001, 261). It is with sweetness that the orisha becomes most persuasive, he explains, “When honey ‘cuts’ it can soften the mood of the toughest warrior, as in the case of Ogun, ultimate soldier and ultimate blacksmith. The latter lived in anger and solitude until he ‘tasted honey’—i.e., tasted the body of Oshún” (2001, 261). Davy Jones is likewise intoxicated by Tia Dalma/Calypso’s saccharine voice. The only moment where Davy Jones is not depicted as a callous sea monstrosity—both physically and figuratively—occurs when he comes face to face with his lady love. Tia Dalma shares other similarities with the African goddess. For instance, Ifa divination verse tells of the time the Supreme Being sent the orisha to earth to create the world—Oshún was among them the only female spirit. The other orisha failed to consult and include Oshún in their divine plans; as a result, every task they attempted failed until they humbled themselves to the power and necessity of a woman.³⁴ Tia Dalma is also dispatched on a mission where she is surrounded by men who do not recognize her power. The success of the mission depends, too, on her connection to the invisible world, a woman’s temperament, and the pirates’ proper supplication to her will.

In Haitian Vodou, the feminine energy is manifested in the loa Erzulie. She is often envisioned as an extremely attractive mulatto woman. Zora Neale Hurston describes her thus:

In Greece and Rome the goddesses of love had husbands and bore children, Erzulie has no children and her husband is all the men of Haiti. That is, any-one of them that she chooses for herself . . . As the perfect female she must be loved and obeyed. She whose love is so strong and binding that it cannot tolerate a rival . . . But high and low they serve her, dream her, have visions of her as the Holy Grail. Every Thursday and Saturday millions of candles are lighted in her honor. Thousands of beds, pure in their snowy whiteness and perfumed are spread for her . . . She is the ideal of the love bed . . . Erzulie is worshipped for her perfection in giving herself to mortal man. (1990, 121)

This particular aspect of Tia Dalma’s personality is showcased as she flirts shamelessly with men. Other histories of Erzulie tell of the three wedding bands she wears upon her left hand—signaling her three husbands Damballah, Agwé, and Ogun.³⁵ Tia Dalma’s romantic interests, regardless how short lived, are three in number as well; “yet [she would never suggest] that she

betrays any of them” (Deren 1983, 142). She flashes Davy Jones a coquettish smile and offers this in defense of her wayward heart: “It’s my nature. Would you love me if I was anything but what I am?” (*At World’s End* 2007). The most telling iconography that links Tia Dalma/Calypso to Erzulie, however, is the heart-shaped crab locket she shares with her lover, Davy Jones. The *vévé* for Erzulie is easily recognized by its dominant heart emblem, most often pierced by a dagger or sword. Author and Oshún priestess Alysia “L. Divine” Logan suggests that it is rather telling that, in the film, the only means of taming the menace of Davy Jones is to literally stab his beating heart, a heart that he has removed from his body; thus, it more closely resembles the emblem for the African deity when he is defeated.³⁶

Neither Oshún nor Erzulie are unequivocally associated or embodied as the ocean in a New World context, which complicates an interpretation of Tia Dalma/Calypso using the Ifa Paradigm.³⁷ Yemonja and Lasiren are more readily discussed as ocean-dwelling deities in their respective traditions. Montgomery notes, “In the traditional African religion(s) in the Americas, Yemonja is represented by the ocean and has as one of her symbols the fish. Women who wish to conceive pray to Yemonja to aid in conception. Once pregnant, they will often dream of fish, a sign from Yemonja that their prayers have been answered” (2008, 15). Her number is seven, which “corresponds to . . . the seven seas” (Edwards and Mason 1985, 87). Like the ocean, Yemonja “is temperamental, unpredictable, and moody” (1985, 88). Tia Dalma/Calypso claims this same nature, which manifests itself during the maelstrom scene in *At World’s End*. There is considerable imagery of the crab, which according to Logan, is sacred to Yemonja and taboo for her initiates to consume.³⁸ Tia Dalma divines with crab claws, she wears a crab/heart locket, and, when released as Calypso, transforms into millions of crabs that instinctively return to the ocean. She otherwise seems to stray away from the more conventional coding for the Great Mother orisha: she has no children; she does not wear blue and white, the traditional colors of Yemonja; and she is not represented by any fish-tailed creatures such as mermaids or porpoises. In the case of Lasiren, the ocean manifestation of Erzulie—whose symbols include mermaids, mirrors, combs, whales, and snakes—one is also hard pressed to find connections between Tia Dalma/Calypso and this particular loa.³⁹ There is a randomly placed albino python in Tia Dalma’s shack in *Dead Man’s Chest*, but no other apparent allusions to Mambo Lasiren.

This leads to the possibility of Disney’s ocean goddess being a spin-off of the orisha Olokún, the androgynous owner of the deep ocean, if one commits to drawing parallels between what Tia Dalma is said to be and what

is visualized on the screen. Associated with the numbers nine and seven, Olokún represents the part of the ocean that is unknown to humanity and thus is referred to as the “keeper of secrets” (Edwards and Mason 1985, 80). Edwards and Mason argue, “Olokún holds the keys to the mysteries about the history of the trans-Atlantic passage, in which lies the ancestral links between African people in the diaspora and on the continent of Africa” (1985, 80). They take this idea a step further to suggest that Olokún is the guardian of lost African spirits: “water is the primary residence of spirits, both human and otherwise. Olokún plays host to the spirits and, in a sense, Olokún’s domain can be thought of as a spiritual waiting room where the spirits of the dead wait to be reborn” (1985, 81). Tia Dalma/Calypso is comparable to the orisha of the deep ocean in the way that she is concerned with the safe transition of the dead. She is visibly upset when she realizes that Davy Jones has failed “to ferry those who die at sea to the other side” (*At World’s End* 2007). She also has the power to revive Captain Barbosa from death and retrieve Jack Sparrow from the invisible world of Davy Jones’s locker. Additionally, the number nine is heavily referred to in the film. There are nine pirate lords, the ritual to release Calypso requires “nine pieces of eight,” and the crab claws with which Tia Dalma divines are nine in number.

Yet there is another African deity who corresponds to the number of change, nine, and is also in communication with the dead. “Oya continues,” on either side of the Atlantic, “as queen of the dead, and her daring, transformative character is counted on to preside at funerals” (Gleason 2000, 265). Teresa N. Washington elaborates on Oya’s relationship to death, revealing “from the moment of death, Oya is present. Her purpose at funeral ceremonies is to invoke [death orisha] who initiates the transformation that occurs at death. Oya also opens the gates to the realm of the ancestors. She stands at the center of humanity’s two most profound transformations, life and death” (2005, 50). Judith Gleason informs us that Oya is slow to mount an initiate and that “sometimes she has to be cajoled in the Cuban tradition with sexy jokes,” which is easily consistent with Calypso’s release being contingent on speaking an incantation in a lover’s tone (2000, 274). More directly, Oya is manifested in the torrid winds and lightning of the hurricane and tornado. Tia Dalma/Calypso’s climatic exit seemingly signifies on this point. Yet, with several other viable arguments for her embodiment as other spirit forms, one cannot rest on a single interpretation with conviction. More to the point, Black Atlantic religious doctrine insists on the sanctity of each individual orisha or loa. Tia Dalma cannot be Oya, Oshún, and Yemónja simultaneously if we engage her character through an African-centered lens. The host

body cannot be inhabited or possessed by more than one spirit at a time. This point suggests that Tia Dalma's similarity to the aforementioned spirits is either coincidental or the sloppy appropriation of African deities by the folks at Disney.

Tia Dalma: a Disney Gimmick

Tia Dalma/Calypso represents a conflation of several divine personas from differing geographical and spiritual traditions and fails to commit to a single entity for the duration of her time on film. This statement, however, is only applicable if one assumes that the writers and producers were cognizant of such references and selected them with autonomy. One can certainly project an association with Yoruba spirits and African-centered epistemologies using the Ifa Paradigm onto Tia Dalma. However, the film reveals its fallacy as the deconstruction of Tia Dalma/Calypso ushers in no deeper meaning or particular significance of her purpose in the film. Tia Dalma/Calypso continues to function as a device to reify a more vulgar mode of colonialism via piracy, even if she is read as Yemonja or Oshún. That Calypso is an "imagineered" sea goddess with superficial ties (at best) to traditional African religions reflects the degree to which conjure, obeah, Vodou, and the like are employed as a gimmick by Disney. They are tools used to recognize half-heartedly marginalized and *othered* religions constructed from the New World's slave past. The gimmick offered by the film series fails to fulfill the expectations of a developed, culturally relevant priestess of Afro-Caribbean religion who is not constructed "primarily for the pleasure of white spectators (male or female)" (Diawara 1988, 71). The Disneyfication of histories, cultural narratives, and myths is one of the most lasting types of epistemic violence perpetuated against marginalized groups. Its power to "close" a text or narrative is unmatched by any other multimedia outlet, as Petersen (2007) explains about the *Pirates* trilogy:

Altering the medium of presentation . . . alters the message, not only through technological advances, but by "closing" the text. . . . Whereas an "open" text, such as an oral narrative, is characterized by a dynamicism that allows cultural variation and nuance appropriate to time and location, the closed text remains constant. . . . In addition to neutralizing potentially offensive elements and refiguring the plot line to mesh with Disney specifications (Manichaeon struggle between good and evil; narrative closure with heteronormative coupling), the fact that the cartoons are fleshed out—given a voice, demeanor, and body—further limits potential interpretations of the

text. Moral nuance, ambiguity, and personal interpretation are eliminated in favor of a clear, solid, universally palatable product. (66)

The danger lies in Disney's reputation for commodifying the laughable, nostalgic signifiers of childhood—available as dolls and video games at neighborhood stores.⁴⁰ Tia Dalma, specifically, is an endearing character who has won the favor of Disney fans. Her popularity is evidenced in the replica of dolls, crab lockets, costumes and other paraphernalia. Indeed, the closing of the conjure woman text via Disney has commenced.

Endnotes

1. I use two variations of the term *voodoo* to connote the difference between the national religion of Haiti, which I refer to as *Vodou*, and the Americanized practice that developed in the cross-cultural milieu of New Orleans, Louisiana: *voodoo*.

2. Jewell Parker Rhodes's novels *Voodoo Season* (2005) and *Yellow Moon* (2008), together with *Voodoo Dreams* (1993), compose a trilogy in which the family line of Marie Laveau and its connection to voodoo is explored into the twenty-first century.

3. The character "Calypso Ezili" first appears in the "Amazing Spider-Man" storyline of Marvel Comics in October 1980 as an assistant to Kraven the Hunter, a nemesis of Spider-Man. She is Haitian and uses her knowledge of Vodou as a weapon against Spiderman (O'Neil et al, 1980).

4. Ms. Jeanette is introduced in season one, episode 10: "I Don't Wanna Know," which aired in 2008. She performs an exorcism on Tara's mother to cure her alcoholism; later, Tara returns to her to have "negative energy" removed. Lafayette is informed by Jesus, who is a *brujo* or witch, that his great grandmothers were voodoo priestesses and that he, too, has inherited a sensitivity to magic. This scene is from season three, episode 36: "Evil Is Going On" (2010). See www.hbo.com/true-blood for complete synopsis of the show and individual episodes. Accessed November 10, 2011.

5. See Forgacs (1992), Russo (1992), Edgerton and Jackson (1996), and Petersen (2007) for arguments that Disney has borrowed and plundered the cultural material of others to make a profit, specifically in their animation history.

6. Fairytales and stories such as *Snow White*, *Pinocchio*, *The Little Mermaid*, and *Winnie the Pooh* were not original creations of Disney but borrowed and revised versions of much older tales. See Russo (1992) and Forgacs (1992) for more specific details.

7. Bell, Haas, and Sells (1995) edited a collection of essays that looks specifically at Disney's influence on American culture. Many of the chapters in the book offer critical commentary on Disney's practice of culture, though admittedly these criticisms have not had a detrimental effect on the popularity of the multimedia giant.

8. Disney, until the 2009 release of the *Princess and the Frog*, had very few black female characters in its film, television, and animation history. Of the few, many of the depictions were questionable and viewed as racist or insensitive to African Americans. The most notable black female characters include Sunflower the Centaur from *Fantasia* (1940),

Aunt Tempy from *Song of the South* (1946), Pollyanna and Aunt Polly from *Polly* (1989), the Muses from *Hercules* (1997), and Tiana, Mama Odie, and other minor characters from *The Princess and the Frog* (2009).

9. There is some criticism against Disney's "borrowing" of Joel Chandler Harris's *Uncle Remus Tales* for inspiration for the film *Song of the South* (1946). Some argue the Disney production corrupted Harris's legacy, while others argue the contrary. The NAACP protested against the film because of its poor portraiture of African Americans. Peggy Russo (1992) discusses the problem of authenticity and ownership of the Brer Rabbit.

10. While the film has been unofficially banned from the American public, it should be noted that the film was a huge commercial success and earned two Academy Awards. See Russo (1992) for further details.

11. The scholarship surrounding Disney's "ethnic" characterizations on film points to an unsettled disappointment by the various cultural groups represented. This is particularly true with the films *Pocahontas* (1995), *Aladdin* (1992), and *Mulan* (1998).

12. In the Disney film, Davy Jones is one of the most feared pirates on the open seas and captain of the pirate ship *The Flying Dutchman*. Jones made a deal with the goddess Calypso; in order to obtain immortality, he would assume the responsibility of ushering dead souls to the invisible world. He is after Jack Sparrow because Sparrow escaped from *The Flying Dutchman* and abandoned the debt of servitude he owed to Jones. Jones is using supernatural means to recapture Sparrow, which is why Sparrow has turned to Tia Dalma for help.

13. The island is unnamed, but one can safely assume that it is an island under British colonization, as Tia Dalma speaks with a clear Afro-British patois and most of the other characters also have an affiliation with Britain.

14. Will Turner is Elizabeth Swann's love interest and fiancé in the trilogy. He is the orphaned son of Bootstrap Bill Turner, a pirate who has sold his life to be among the crew of the *Flying Dutchman*.

15. I am referring to Tia Dalma's final scenes in *At World's End* where she is freed from her physical form and grows as tall as the ship's mast and then transforms into a million small crabs that leap into the ocean.

16. Saartjie Baartman, a South African woman, traveled to London and Paris to work as prostitute and sideshow exhibit from 1810 to 1815. She was well known and exploited for her large buttocks and genitalia, which doctors and scientists thought so aberrant that it was worthy of preservation and public spectacle—even after her death. In 2002, France returned her body parts to South Africa where she received a proper burial. See Saunders (2002).

17. Here I move from using "conjure woman" to "obeah woman" to reflect the language and terminology used in the British Caribbean.

18. Calypso kept Odysseus imprisoned on the island of Ogygia. She desired to make a husband of him. She promised him immortality if he would stay with her, but he refused. He lived with her seven years before Athena convinced Zeus to intervene.

19. The Cult of True Womanhood, according to Barbara Welter, is a term used to describe nineteenth-century ideals of womanhood. Welter identifies four tenants of the True Woman: (1) a woman should be pious, (2) a woman should exemplify purity of heart, mind, and especially body; (3) a true woman submits to the will and ways of her husband;

and (4) a true woman reigns over domesticity. See Welter (1966) for a full discussion of the term and its cultural reverberations.

20. Swann kisses Jack Sparrow in *Dead Man's Chest* as the crew of the Black Pearl abandon ship to escape the kracken. Knowing that the kracken is after Sparrow, Swann kisses him passionately to distract him while she chains him to the ship, sealing his demise. The kiss between her and Norrington takes place in *At World's End* when he helps her escape from *The Flying Dutchman*, and it is clear that he will not escape with his life. She kisses him just before making her escape. He dies moments afterward. There are several scenes in which she and current fiancé, Will Turner, embrace in passion.

21. Sparrow has bartered a compass from Tia Dalma, which will magically guide its owner to his or her "true heart's desire" when placed in his or her hands.

22. This is a Haitian Creole (or Kreyol) term, which roughly translates to "spiritual knowledge."

23. Buscher and Ono (1996), Edgerton and Jackson (1996), Kilpatrick (1995), and Maslin (1995) all offer criticism of the Disney film *Pocahontas* (1995).

24. Disney is one of the largest multimedia conglomerates, with full ownership or majority stake in over six movie studios, three production companies, three recording companies, ten broadcast stations, the ABC networks and affiliates, ESPN and its fifty-plus business entities, publishing houses, theme parks, and the recently acquired Marvel Comics. This information is gathered from the Disney Corporate Web site: <http://corporate.disney.go.com/corporate/overview.html>. Accessed November 17, 2011.

25. The term *imagineer* is a phrase adopted by Disney to describe the company's employees and, more specifically, the collaborative processes of using "creativity and innovative technological advances" to design and construct the Disney Theme Parks and Resorts. Walt Disney Imagineering is a separate branch of the company that focuses exclusively on the creative development and engineering of theme parks, resorts, cruise ships, and other Disney attractions. I am using the term also to refer to the creative process of developing new storylines, films, and characters under the Walt Disney Company umbrella. For further detail, see http://corporate.disney.go.com/careers/who_imagineering.html.

26. Nanny of the Windward Maroons was a leader of the Windward Jamaican Maroons during the height of their rebellion against British rule and slavery from 1725 to 1740. She has lengthy, rich, oral histories and folklore attached to her leadership and role in the Jamaican Maroon struggle for freedom. Some of the oral histories describe Nanny as a powerful obeah woman and warrior who used her African spirituality and folk medicine as a weapon against the British. In 1976, she was made a national hero of Jamaica. See Gottlieb (2000) and Sharpe (2003), chapter 1.

27. Spivak (2001) articulates the idea of epistemic violence.

28. A *vévé* is a ritual drawing used in Haitian Vodou to represent and add in summoning the loa during ceremonies. They are traditionally drawn with flour or cornmeal. Each loa has his or her personal *vévé*. The *vévé* in the film was identified as that of Legba, guardian of the crossroads, during an interview and film screening with author and Oshun priestess, Alysia "L. Divine" Logan. Nov. 18, 2009.

29. See "On the Origin of the term Calypso" where Hill (1967) recounts his research into the earliest use of the term and his hypothesis on its origin.

30. *Jes Grew* is an epidemic that spreads across the nation in Ishmael Reed's 1972 novel

Mumbo Jumbo. While there are many interpretations of what the epidemic symbolizes, I understand the “disease” to be a metaphor for the intangible cultural influence of the African Diaspora. It might be likened to the “soul” in soul music or an irresistible desire to dance when percussion instruments are played, especially the drum.

31. Montgomery (2008) theorizes the Ifa Paradigm, a theoretical approach used to “investigate how some literary use of colors, signs, symbols, numbers, images, myths, legends, and landscapes references African culture” (10). She contends that “the paradigm suggests that knowledge of continental African cultures can provide a richer critique of work by Africans in the Diaspora” (10).

32. While Montgomery centers her paradigm in Ifa, I employ it as a strategy to help articulate connections to other African-based religions such as Santería/Lucumí, Obeah, Hoodoo, and Vodou.

33. See Edwards and Mason (1985, 99).

34. See Abiodun (2001, 16).

35. Deren (1983, 142).

36. Logan, personal interview.

37. The ocean loa, Lasiren, is considered to be an incarnation of Erzulie’s spiritual energy. She is discussed as being a separate loa, however.

38. This information was shared during our personal interview and film screening.

39. Houlberg (1996, 31 and 33).

40. Here I am referencing Zipes’s essay, “Breaking the Disney Spell,” in which he discusses the influence Disney has on American culture. This essay is found in the Bell, Haas, and Sells (1995) collection.

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