

Disney's *Zootopia*: Racial Biases in Post-Racial America

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1. Introduction

Walt Disney Pictures released its fifty-fifth animated feature film, *Zootopia* (titled *Zootropolis* in the United Kingdom), in 2016. In this fictional world, animals have evolved above the duality of predator and prey and now live together in harmony on a continent inhabited by anthropomorphic mammals. Furthermore, their general belief is that anyone can be anything in the titular capital city, solidifying that *Zootopia* is a metaphor for the utopia of post-racial America. Historian David A. Hollinger, while stating that he prefers the term “postethnic”, explains that such a society is not anti-ethnic or colourblind but a community in which all individuals can decide how much energy they devote to their community of descent, but ethnicity is not anyone’s most significant characteristic (1033–1034). The society in *Zootopia* is rhetorically colourblind and, as a result, cannot erase racial discrimination. A (rhetorically) non-existing issue cannot be solved.

Zootopia’s illustration of a rhetorically colourblind society where prejudice is still deeply embedded in every aspect of life concurs with many scholars’ opinions on America being a post-racial country. Political scientist Michael C. Dawson and sociologist Lawrence D. Bobo declare that overcoming racism would require time and effort beyond legislative and performative action and that the election of President Barack Obama has not abruptly ended discrimination, as many claim (249). Historian Ibram X. Kendi further states that people viewing Barack Obama’s victory as the moment when America left behind its racist past has led to the “most sophisticated racist idea ever produced”, the comforting illusion of post-racialism that eliminates the opportunity to resolve racial inequity (Kendi). Relying on sociologist Jason Smith’s declaration that “Hollywood films reflect the racial order in which they are made.” (779), this thesis explores the film through examples as a social record of the attitude towards racism during the first half of the second decade in the third millennium in the United States.

Zootopia was created when the traditional, legal forms of racial discrimination that included job discrimination, de jure segregation and the “separate but equal” doctrine, prohibition of voting, had already been overturned. As a result, the film’s themes and motifs parallel newer forms of racial prejudice in real life such as racial profiling, de facto segregation and interpersonal racism. Certain phenomena, such as, e.g. police brutality and racial disproportionality in sentencing, are not showcased as the primary target audience was children. It is essential to state that the most current events are not reflected in this 2016 film; it is not a

reaction to the social unrest of the past few years, nor the Black Lives Matter and the Defund the Police movements.

Zootopia was rated PG (“PG Parental Guidance”), meaning it should not unsettle children aged eight or older in general and could be watched by even younger ones after parental consideration. It is a modern fable featuring talking animals, humour and cuteness, a catchy hit song, “Try Everything” by Shakira (Ripoll et al.), and an easy-to-understand message: fur does not make the animal. Adult viewers can also enjoy the film with its refined look and animation style, jokes and pop-culture references intended for grown-ups. The savvier audience will also recognise the disturbing reflections of human society with racism, gender biases and messy politics very well present. The title’s allusion to Utopia can also be reconsidered, even though certain aspects of life indeed work better in Zootopia than in reality, such as the city being accessible for all animals of different sizes and needs.

Zootopia has won forty-seven awards, including the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature Film of 2017 (“Zootopia - Awards”). Critics and casual viewers praised its deep themes supported by extraordinary visuals. However, it has also received criticism for still enforcing stereotypes in a few cases and essentially rendering another White Saviour narrative. The story follows the protagonist, Judy Hopps, a rabbit, as she fulfils her childhood dream and becomes the first bunny police officer in the history of the titular megalopolis. She soon realises that prejudice is still present in this seemingly utopian society, even in the idealised capital city. Bunny Officer Judy, who graduated as the valedictorian of her class from the police academy, is assigned parking duty.

Meanwhile, the police’s highest priority is to find fourteen missing mammals, all predators. Officer Judy Hopps only gets to work on the case by chance. She blackmails the film’s deuteragonist, a red fox, Nick Wilde, into working with her. Nick, the red fox, is a criminal who makes a living by scheming. Nick, the red fox, is a criminal, making a living from scheming. During the investigation, they learn that all missing predators went “savage”¹ before disappearing. Officer Judy and Nick find the victims. When the residents of Zootopia learn that these predators have become feral, panic consumes the city. Ultimately, Officer Judy and Nick uncover the conspiracy in which Assistant Mayor Bellwether, a sheep considered gentle and harmless, and her associates poisoned the predators to make them “savage” to turn the general public against them. As predators are the minority in Zootopia, composing circa ten per cent of the population, social panic could effectively marginalise them.

¹ Throughout the text, the word “savage” is used between quotation marks regarding the missing predators to display that their transformation is not a result of any internal biological change or devolution.

Zootopia follows a long tradition of featuring anthropomorphised animals in fiction. Classical and mediaeval literature have already used animals that behaved like humans to varying degrees. (Magee, 156) Aesop's Fables are one of the earliest written records of fiction teaching about morality through animals, such as *The Fox and the Crow*, in which the fox outsmarts the crow and takes the cheese from it through wit and flattery. (Winter) Indigenous oral tradition also kept stories alive, such as the ones featuring Wenebojo's interactions with talking animals from the Ojibwe Oral Tradition (Ritzenthaler and Ritzenthaler) or *The Rabbit and the Fox*, part of the Aymara Oral Tradition (Flores Moscoso et al.). The latter features the fox as the antagonist and the rabbit as the protagonist, who outwits the cruel fox. The sly fox and the friendly bunny are recurring tropes in children's stories. (More, 20) *Zootopia* cleverly builds on and expands these long recurring themes to quickly set and then defy the expectations of the audience by making the fox a scam artist who becomes one of the heroes by the end and the witty bunny, a police officer, who has to deal with her cognitive bias originating from her upbringing.

Many consider animation enjoyable only for children, equating this medium with stories intended for the youth for entertainment. However, they can also be regarded as multi-layered cultural products that can make youngsters and adults alike think about complex societal problems. *Zootopia* is an excellent example of the latter, particularly its thought-provoking and nuanced portrayal of racial bias. This thesis primarily focuses on the film's plot, not visual gags, bringing various scenes as examples. In the film, prejudice is targeted at various animal species. However, as all humans living today belong to one species, all instances parallel racial, ethnic and gender biases. While the movie avoids applying the most evident stereotypes, the characters are coded to correspond to certain demographic cohorts. These subliminal codes expose the most entrenched clichés and more subtle modes of racial relations. Therefore, this paper explores racial stereotypes in *Zootopia* that are parts of the plot and, as a result, handled with care and those the creators overlooked.

This thesis is structured following American physician, epidemiologist, and anti-racism activist Camara Phyllis Jones's theoretical framework for understanding racism on three levels. After this introduction, the second chapter considers examples of institutionalised racism in the film, the third chapter covers instances of personally mediated racism, and the fourth chapter approaches internalised racism. In its fifth chapter, this thesis also reviews racial stereotypes enforced in the film.

Jones defines institutionalised racism as “differential access to the goods, services, and opportunities of society by race” (1212). Personally mediated racism is also called interpersonal

racism. Originating from prejudice, it happens between individuals, leading to assumptions “about the abilities, motives, and intentions of others according to their race” (Jones 1212–1213), resulting in discrimination. Internalised racism in Jones’s characterisation is “acceptance by members of the stigmatized races of negative messages about their own abilities and intrinsic worth” (1213). Applying this classification to perceived and complex racial biases, each concept will be further explained and exemplified in the respective chapters. Relying on Criminal Justice Scholar Patrik McGrain's assertion that “post-racial America is an aspiration, not a reality”, for America cannot be viewed as a post-racial society as long as people feel inequality (McGrain), this paper will suggest that neither Zootopia is truly post-racial, but a post-racial vision that is very much grounded in twenty-first century America's social and societal realities.

2. Institutionalised Racism in *Zootopia*

In the case of institutionalised or systemic racism, institutional power supports and enforces discrimination, affecting racial minorities' educational, housing and job opportunities and access to healthcare. It is also the cause of racial disparities in sentencing (DiAngelo 109–110, 113–115). In explaining her theoretical framework, Jones states that institutionalised racism creates the interrelation between socioeconomic status and race (Jones 1212). As it also leads to the differential treatment of minorities during contact with the police (John).

Zootopia codes certain characters as Black or Hispanic. Black- or Hispanic-coded means subtextually applying racial stereotypes, particularly to cartoon characters. While the terminology is relatively new and not yet academic jargon, the discussion² about anthropomorphic cartoon characters assuming certain racial or ethnic markers is not new³. This chapter showcases examples related to the law enforcement agency of the titular city.

2.1 *Racial Discrimination Leading to Police Neglected: The Missing Emmitt Otterton*

From the police's attitude towards one of the missing mammals, Emmitt Otterton, we learn that they deem certain citizens' well-being less critical than others'. Emmitt Otterton is an otter, a small-bodied predator, and in *Zootopia*, body size is a measure of value for many animals. Even before we learn about the officers' negligence, a comment from the Police Chief hints at the missing otter's insignificance. During the briefing (*Zootopia* 00:15:24-00:15:39), Police Chief Bogo, a Cape buffalo, introduces the case of fourteen missing mammals. He emphasises the severity of the situation by explaining that there is a giant polar bear and a “teensy little otter” amongst the victims. Even his intonation changes when he describes the missing otter. Just for “teensy little”, his otherwise authoritative voice becomes higher in a condescending manner.

As we later learn, Police Chief Bogo's commentary on the victims' body sizes denotes their differential importance to him. As an individual, although he is free to have a biased opinion. However, in this scenario, he is the agency's leading officer, not an ordinary individual. He has the power to decide about the course of the investigation. (This is why systemic racism generally affects people's lives the most severely.) With his judgement clouded

² Although not academic sources, these articles provide examples of the general population's opinion on the phenomena: “Natasja Rose's Character Coding in Fiction” and “Sarah Hagi's All Your Favourite Cartoon Characters Are Black”.

³ BBC.com reported that The Walt Disney Company on their streaming service, Disney+, even added a warning before certain films, such as *Dumbo* or *The Aristocrats*, showcasing insensitive or harmful stereotypes with racially coded characters.

by personal emotions, Police Chief Bogo assigns groups of three for each affected district, which should naturally include the case of the missing otter. However, Officer Judy discovers that no officer made any effort to find any leads regarding Otterton.

In a later scene (*Zootopia* 00:31:25-00:33:58), we learn that the missing otter's wife has tried to reach Police Chief Bogo for days. The wife barges into the Chief's office while he is in there with Officer Judy. The receptionist and dispatcher, Officer Clawhauser, a cheetah, enters after her, panting exhaustedly, apologising to Police Chief Bogo. Officer Clawhauser says he tried to stop the missing otter's wife, but she is super slippery. This is a strange word choice, as mammals are not commonly described as slippery. However, the adjective "slippery" has the secondary meaning of untrustworthy. As a result, it is frequently used as an attribute to the noun "criminal". The idiom "slippery as an eel" is also used to describe someone who is devious or cunning and, therefore, hard to catch. We cannot be sure without knowing the creators' intention, but this can be understood as a real-life reference, presenting another instance of the police officers' biases against otters, strengthening the statement that the negligence of the missing otter's case is based on discrimination.

Later in the same scene, the Police Chief, although not explicitly, admits to the missing otter's wife that his officers have not made much progress, although the otter disappeared ten days ago. Police Chief Bogo ensures the wife that they (meaning the police) are doing everything they can, but their detectives are very busy. (At this point, the viewer can already suspect the detectives are busy with the other, bigger-bodied missing mammals' cases.) Officer Hopps, who works as a meter maid at this time, interrupts to say she will find the missing otter.

Although instances of biases paralleling human gender stereotypes are beyond the scope of this thesis, here it is essential to state that, like many other animals, Police Chief Bogo is prejudiced against Judy for being a bunny. In the film, bunnies and, in some cases, other small-bodied prey animals are female-coded and are used to refer to real-life prejudice against women. As we already know, Officer Hopps was assigned to parking duty despite being a valedictorian. This becomes even more peculiar when we learn about the declared shortage of detectives.

The above side note was included to strengthen the claim that Police Chief Bogo cares less about the missing otter than respect for his authority and holding onto his stereotypes about bunnies. In the last segment of the same scene, Police Chief Bogo wants to fire Officer Judy for telling the missing otter's wife that she will take the case. Due to Assistant Mayor Bellwether, a sheep, getting involved, the Police Chief is forced to give Officer Judy the case. However, there is a condition. Judy is given forty-eight hours to find the missing otter; otherwise, she is to resign. "But, you strike out, you resign", as Police Chief Bogo phrases it.

His authoritative voice and angry facial expression change when he says, “you strike out”. We see him smiling smugly. After a moment of hesitation, Officer Judy accepts. With a content smile, the Police Chief says that receptionist Officer Clawhauser will give the bunny officer the complete case file.

When the cheetah gives Officer Judy the file (*Zootopia* 00:33:58-00:34:43), we learn that no progress has been made in the otter’s disappearance. Officer Clawhauser says this is the smallest case file he has ever seen. It is a single paper with no recorded leads, witnesses, or evidence. Furthermore, Officer Hopps is not in the computer system yet, so she has no resources.

Another occasion proves that Police Chief Bogo does not care about the missing otter (*Zootopia* 00:56:02-00:57:33). Officer Judy and Nick, a civilian, have found a black jaguar who fits the victim profile; however, he disappears before the reinforcements arrive. Officer Judy has no proof of any progress, so the Police Chief demands her badge as per their agreement. Nick interrupts, clarifying that the bunny officer still has ten hours until the deadline, and then the two of them leave to continue the investigation.

As the plot progresses, Officer Judy and Nick find the missing otter and, with him, all the missing mammals. However, the case is only solved because one member of the police force, the bunny Judy Hopps, has a strong internal motivation: a sense of personal responsibility, a wish to do good, and a wish to prove herself as a police officer. Moreover, she receives help from a civilian rather than her fellow officers. This example of police negligence showcases the severe consequences racial discrimination on an institutional level may have.

2.2 Racial Profiling: The Police Chief’s Treatment of Nick Wilde

Nick Wilde, the red fox, is one example of Black-coded characters in the film. Chapters 3. and 4. contain a detailed explanation, but a brief commentary is necessary here. Most animals in *Zootopia*, including the protagonist, Officer Judy, are prejudiced against foxes, paralleling human racial biases. The general belief is that foxes are sly, prone to criminal activities, and untrustworthy the least. However, a police official should disregard such bigoted beliefs. Police Chief Bogo is unable to do so. He lets his biases cloud his judgement again, failing to maintain professionalism when Officer Hopps asks Nick to verify her claims regarding the “savage” black jaguar (*Zootopia* 00:56:18-00:57:33). (Naturally, further verification would not be necessary if Police Chief Bogo believed his subordinate, Judy, but because of his prejudice against bunnies, he did not.)

The Police Chief appears shocked that Officer Judy thinks he would consider a fox a reliable witness. Judy insists that Nick is a key witness, but Police Chief Bogo ignores her argument, demanding her badge. Nick interrupts him (as mentioned above in Subchapter 2.1). Police Chief Bogo turns to him in disbelief, asking, “What did you say, fox?” stressing the word “fox” threateningly. The Police Chief’s behaviour is unacceptable. He is on duty, wearing his uniform, and talking to a civilian while surrounded by his subordinates. Despite Nick being a key witness, the most important thing to Police Chief Bogo about him is his species. The Police Chief dismisses a witness and mistreats a civilian. Consequently, he endangers the whole investigation and the lives of all missing mammals.

2.3 Racial Discrimination at the Zootopia Police Department as a Workplace

After the missing mammals are found, the conspiracy that caused them to go “savage” remains uncovered. Residents of Zootopia know that certain predators have transformed, but the reason behind it is unknown. Educational researchers Beaudine et al., in their media essay review of the film, explain that predators stand in for the Black American population, comparing the racial distribution of America to the number of predators in Zootopia, as the predators compose circa 10 per cent of the population (228). The demographic numbers of Black Americans within the United States are similar, 13.6 per cent, according to the 2022 population estimates, not including those who reported more than one race (U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts).

Beaudine et al. also support their statement with the emerging irrational panic caused simply by the potential of a predator turning savage (228). They refer to real-life events where the white perpetrator of the Charleston Church Massacre was taken into custody alive (Ellis et al.). However, a Black man was shot four times and killed after he was pulled over for a broken taillight with his fiancée and their four-year-old daughter in the car (McLaughlin). Beaudine et al. conclude that “the prey in Zootopia [...] have a similar fear of their predator brethren, leading to irrational overreactions when addressing the rash of predators turning savage” (228).

This overreaction is showcased when Officer Clawhauser is being transferred from his receptionist and dispatcher position to the Department of Records downstairs by the boiler. As he tells Officer Judy (*Zootopia* 01:15:05-01:15:27) sorrowfully, “they” (meaning the board) thought it would be better if a predator were not the first face seen upon entering the ZPD⁴. The

⁴ Zootopia Police Department

reason behind such decisions is usually not disclosed in real life, but it is most likely revealed in the film to ensure that all viewers understand the situation.

This transfer demonstrates that the police as an institution has started reacting to the social panic, moving an employee whose work performance they were contented with before to a less-visible position. This decision might seemingly soothe communal tension, but it strengthens prejudice towards the predators, suggesting that members of this minority are unsuitable for certain roles. Sharif et al., in their perspective article in the *Frontiers in Public Health* journal, assess that nonviolent forms of racism and racist violence are closely connected (2). Structural racism and structural violence sustain racial inequities together, and it is not only the latter that harms and threatens the lives of racial minorities (Sharif et al. 2).

Sociologists Blee et al. interviewed a “broad set of former racist activists to explore how violence is caused by—and also can cause—the vicious racist ideologies of modern white supremacy” (Résumé). They concluded that “in the highly aggressive world of white supremacy, ideologies of race can be decidedly secondary as a motivation for violence” (Blee et al. Section 47), meaning that racism does not necessarily lead to physical violence. However, racist violence can be an outlet for pre-existing or group-induced aggression. Moreover, in some instances, racist narratives and narrative violence can lead to (physical) violence. Educational psychologist David Light Shields's research article concludes that seemingly harmless, subdued forms of everyday prejudice “form the foundation upon which more extreme acts of prejudice build” (20). He categorises job discrimination as “an overt pattern of discrimination” and “an extreme expression of prejudice” (Shields 23).

With the growing social tension, Officer Clawhauser quickly falls victim to workplace discrimination. Likewise, after the conspiracy gets uncovered and panic dissolves, he is again quickly restored as receptionist and dispatcher. It is common and reasonable for a story with children as its primary target audience to resolve the conflict swiftly and fully. The adult viewers, however, might not find the solution entirely comforting. Rushed decisions are signs of instability, but government institutions should provide a solid foundation for society.

3. Personally Mediated Racism in *Zootopia*

Camara Phyllis Jones explains that personally mediated racism (also called interpersonal racism) is “what most people think of when they hear the word ‘racism’” (1212). On the one hand, it is biases, prejudice and differential assumptions about other people’s abilities, motives and intentions based on race (Jones 1213). On the other hand, it is discrimination: differential treatment of others according to their race (Jones 1213). It includes intentional and unintentional behaviours, acts of commission or omission (Jones 1213). It can manifest in “lack of respect (poor or no service, failure to communicate options), suspicion (shopkeepers’ vigilance; everyday avoidance, including street crossing, purse clutching, and standing when there are empty seats on public transportation)” (Jones 1213). Certain species in *Zootopia* share the experience of marginalised racial minorities. This chapter examines instances paralleling personally mediated racism in the film.

3.1 Segregation in Zootopia: Nick Wilde and Finnick at Jumbeaux’s Cafe

When Officer Judy and the viewer spots Nick, the red fox, outside an ice cream parlour in the capital city, his behaviour is suspicious (*Zootopia* 00:17:54-00:19:34). He stands there, rocking himself back and forth (a sign of uneasiness), looking around as if waiting for something or someone. When an elephant arrives to enter the shop, Jumbeaux’s Cafe, Nick is right at his heel, jogging after him to get in while the door is still open. Officer Judy follows him to the shop and witnesses the elephant vendor being overly hostile towards the red fox.

The elephant declares that he does not know what Nick is “doing skulking around during daylight hours”, but he does not want any trouble in his shop and threateningly tells the red fox to hit the road. While speaking, the elephant vendor even leans over the shop worktop, towering above Nick as much as he can with the furniture between them. Huddled up respectfully and apologetically, Nick explains that he is not looking for any trouble either; he simply wants to buy a Jumbo Pop for his son, a fennec fox wearing a onesie suckling a dummy.

The elephant vendor does not care. In a patronising manner, he calls the red fox “buddy” and asks if there are no ice cream joints in Nick’s part of town. The red fox remorsefully admits that there are, but his son loves all things elephant, waiting to be one when he grows up. With growing anger, the elephant vendor slams a sign onto the worktop and slowly, belittling, reads it out loud: it says they reserve the right to refuse service to anyone. Then, aggressively, he tells the red fox to “beat it”. Now, even the next customer in line, a female elephant, angrily steps forward so close that it is physically threatening, indicating that she will stomp on Nick next time. While stomping forward, the female elephant says the red fox is holding up the line,

essentially taking the vendor's side. Officer Judy cannot stand there and watch this adorable family of foxes getting thrown out and the child being denied ice cream, all because of their species. Using her authority as a police officer, Judy essentially forces the elephant vendor to sell the foxes a Jumbo Pop.

Subchapter 3.2 and Chapter 4 cover details of the upcoming plot twist, while the rest of Subchapter 3.1 contains the identification of the motifs paralleling real life in the above scene.

3.1.1 The existence of racial-ethnic neighbourhoods in the metropolis of Zootopia

Ronald L. Jackson II, a communication, culture, and media professor, declared that Nick, the red fox, is coded as a Black man in the scene (qtd. in Cramer 269). His mere appearance leads to suspicion (Jackson qtd. in Cramer 269). He is seen as someone prone to committing crimes, better to be feared and avoided, threatened, if necessary, as self-defence (Jackson qtd. in Cramer 269). He is seen as someone who should stay in his own (racial-ethnic) neighbourhood (Jackson qtd. in Cramer 269). Jackson compares this to the “common, harmful inscriptions placed upon the Black male body in media texts and society” (qtd. in Cramer 269).

With Jackson's analogy between Nick, the red fox, and Black men, the almost subtle mention of “Nick's own part of town” becomes an apparent reference to racial-ethnic neighbourhoods and ghettos. As *Zootopia* does not detail this phenomenon⁵, the following paragraph mentions aspects of real-life residential segregation to contextualise the brief implication of its existence of residential segregation in the titular city.

A comprehensive overview of segregated housing is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, historian Richard Rothstein, with education, race, and ethnicity as his areas of expertise, highlights important facts about residential segregation in the United States. Although de jure segregation was abolished by the end of the 1960s, residential segregation continues to exist in every metropolitan area of the United States (Rothstein qtd. in “NASEM” 23–24). Rothstein also exposes the myth of de facto segregation resulting in housing segregation, stating that not private sector activity but federal housing policies established and have perpetuated it (qtd. in “NASEM” 23–24). Without speculating about the intentions of the creators of *Zootopia*, the existence of systemic racism in the fictional continent makes it possible that similar governmental housing policies lead to the formation of racial-ethnic neighbourhoods in the capital metropolis.

⁵ I interpret *Zootopia*'s vastly different districts as inclusive spaces, supported by papers from educational scientist Ana Virginia López-Fuentes, Advocacy Content Specialist and former academic Kristina Kopic, and architect Aditya Yuwana.

3.1.2 *De facto segregation by denial of service*

There is no de jure segregation in Zootopia; however, in the scene at the ice cream parlour, we see that personally mediated racism causes distrust, resulting in the elephant vendor's vigilance and aggression towards Nick. Although Officer Judy Hopps prevents the refusal of service on this occasion, it most likely happened before to other foxes, probably by referring to the same sign that was read out loud to Nick. In the United States, the right to refuse service means that businesses may "exclude a customer who is rude and disruptive" ("BOLI"), not that they can refuse to serve anyone based on personal biases, as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 "prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin" ("OASAM").

American state laws differ, but e.g. the Oregon Bureau of Labor & Industries declares that a sign stating, "We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone." "does not give a place of public accommodation the right to exclude customers because of their race or color" ("BOLI"). In Colorado, Commission Rule 20.4 prohibits businesses from posting "any sign that states or implies" the reservation of such right ("CCRD"). The film's creators have not published the laws of Zootopia. However, considering the Mammal Inclusion Initiative existing, we can assume that the elephant vendor, similar to some American business owners⁶, has no legal basis for refusing the service from Nick for being a fox.

The Mammal Inclusion Initiative is only mentioned twice in the film, both times regarding Officer Judy. First, at her graduation from the police academy (*Zootopia* 00:07:14-00:08:14). Zootopia's Mayor, a lion, proudly announces that his Mammal Inclusion Initiative has produced its first police academy graduate, the Zootopia Police Department's very first rabbit officer, Judy Hopps. The second mention is when the Assistant Mayor learns that Judy is taking the case of the missing otter (*Zootopia* 00:33:03-00:33:33). The Assistant Mayor, while texting the Mayor about it, says that "the Mammal Inclusion Initiative is really starting to pay off". As all inhabitants of the continent are anthropomorphised mammals, the aim of the governmental inclusion initiative is most likely to bring diversity into the government workforce by aiding animals of certain species that are systematically under-represented.⁷

⁶ Although not an academic source, Faith Karimi's article, "Here's why some businesses can deny you service - but others can't", provides examples of such cases.

⁷ President Joseph Biden's "Executive Order on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in the Federal Workforce" details the Government-Wide Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility Initiative and Strategic Plan of the United States.

3.2 A Racially Biased Protagonist: Judy Hopps

In his research article, educational psychologist David Light Shields differentiates between biases, prejudice, discrimination, and racism (20–24). Although these are interconnected concepts, there are also significant differences. Whereas prejudice is pre-judgment based on stereotypes, manifesting in beliefs and attitudes, discrimination manifests in actions, policies or social arrangements of differential treatment that disadvantages marginalised groups (Shields 21). Racism fundamentally combines prejudices with power, exercised however subtly or indirectly (Shields 21). The difference between a prejudiced and a racist statement is that the latter reinforces the prevailing unequal power hierarchies (Shields 21–22). Based on their psychological research, Haselton et al. conclude that from an evolutionary perspective, bias, in the noncommittal sense, is simply a cognitive feature (968–969). American public policy scholar Theodore R. Johnson's findings are that racial biases develop subconsciously and can remain implicit, making it a conscious effort to recognise and suppress them (T. R. Johnson). This section analyses Officer Judy's attitude towards foxes through examples while factoring in the prior distinctions.

The research of Haselton et al. can explain why an intelligent, educated, and benevolent bunny develops racial biases when socialised in an environment where racial prejudice is present. A comprehensive psychological evaluation of Judy is beyond the scope of this thesis; therefore, this section does not strictly distinguish between reflections of racial biases and racial prejudice in Officer Judy's behaviour. Considering the above classifications, these concepts probably are correlative in her case, acquired through socialisation. The scene where Judy says goodbye to her parents before leaving for her police assignment in the capital city strengthens this claim (*Zootopia* 00:08:09-00:09:19).

Judy's parents, Bonnie and Stu, are proud of her but worried. "It's kind of a proud-scared combo", as her father says. The main reason is that they are terrified of predators. The majority of Bunnyburrow, their hometown's population, are rabbits and hares, but Zootopia is "full of" predators, says the Hopps parents, whereas predators are the minority in the capital city. Bonnie and Stu list all kinds of predators they fear, concluding that they are all cheaters and that foxes are the worst. When Judy rolls her eyes and sighs annoyedly, Bonnie says that being a cheater is in foxes' "biology".

They also remind her of an incident when the nine-year-old Judy confronted the red fox bully, Gideon Grey, also a child at the time (*Zootopia* 00:04:13-00:05:47). That affair ended with Judy kicking the red fox in the face for ridiculing her, to which Gideon responded by slapping her cheek and drawing blood with his claws. Judy disagrees with her parents, stating

that it had nothing to do with Gideon being a fox but with him being a “jerk” who happened to be a fox and that she knows plenty of bunnies who are jerks.

Stu does not try to convince her; instead, he enthusiastically raises a bag off the ground. It is a “little care package” Judy should bring with her “just in case”. Besides snacks, there are a fox deterrent and a fox repellent, both in bright pink packaging branded “Fox Away”. Stu is especially proud of purchasing the fox taser of the same brand. He even switches it on and shows Judy and Bonnie the strong and vibrant electric sparks. Even his wife finds the fox taser excessive and says that their daughter does not need a fox taser, to which Stu replies by asking the rhetorical question of when there is not a need for a fox taser, stressing “not”. Judy resignedly takes the fox repellent just to cut the discussion short.

This scene showcases the racial prejudices the Hopps parents have and, with the intention of protecting them, inflict upon their children. Seemingly, her parents’ negative preconceptions about predators and particularly about foxes have not affected Judy as she has no conscious biases. When the topic is discussed, she explicitly states that there is no connection between personality, behaviour, and one’s species. Even when encountering predators, Judy shows no signs of prejudice, e.g., irrational fear, suspicion or discomfort. There are several examples to prove this, such as Judy using a wolf’s head as a launching platform to vault over an obstacle during training (*Zootopia* 00:06:57-00:07:00); being comfortable with physical closeness with the Mayor of Zootopia, a lion, during a photo op (*Zootopia* 00:08:03-00:08:05); her carefree first interaction with the ZPD’s receptionist and dispatcher, a cheetah, Officer Clawhauser (*Zootopia* 00:13:38-00:14:27).

However, Judy’s unconscious emotional responses show that she has implicit biases against foxes. When Judy is about to leave for her first day at the ZPD, she notices the fox repellent beside her key (*Zootopia* 00:13:09-00:13:31), which also shows that the bunny has taken it out of her luggage and placed it conveniently. After a moment of hesitation, she leaves without the item. After three seconds, Judy returns to take it with her “just in case”, as his father said before gifting it to her. Judy’s emotional distress triggers an unconscious reaction, overwriting her personal value system.

A second example is when Officer Judy first spots Nick, just before the incident, in the elephant ice cream parlour (*Zootopia* 00:17:47-00:19:03). It is still her first day on duty. The bunny officer hears screeching tyres and a car horn honking during metering vehicles. A sheep truck driver almost hits a red fox dressed in a short-sleeved shirt and a necktie. It is Nick. The sheep driver shouts at him to watch where he is going, ending with an overpronounced “fox”. Officer Judy gasps, alarmed, and her nose starts twitching in distress. Suspiciously, Judy watches

the red fox waiting for the right moment to slink into Jumbeaux's Cafe. Assured of the red fox's ill intentions, Judy follows Nick.

As Officer Judy cannot see the suspect through the window, she enters the parlour. While the elephant vendor rudely addresses his fox customer, Judy unsnaps the holster of the fox repellent. Even though it is the elephant who behaves aggressively, the bunny officer is concerned about Nick. Eyebrows furrowed, she starts walking towards the counter. As she gets closer, Nick's child, a fennec fox, is no longer obscured by customers. When seeing the tenderness of the red fox towards his child, the realisation hits Judy. She snaps back the repellent holster and anxiously adjusts her vest as she looks around to see if anyone has seen her unjust and exaggerated reaction. She murmurs, "I'm such a..." to herself in disgust as she turns to leave. Most likely, what she omits is either "hypocrite", thinking about her parents, or "racist". In a sense, both would be true; her conscious reaction, however, reveals that she wishes to suppress her implicit bias.

Psychological research conducted by José-Miguel Rodríguez-García and Ulrich Wagner concludes that "parental and offspring prejudice scores are substantially related with each other" (520). In the case of Judy Hopps, the above-described instances also demonstrate a clear connection between her and her parents' negative preconceptions about foxes. As forming bias is "a necessary by-product of processing limitations" to shorten information processing time and an evolutionary useful cognitive feature, everyone's responsibility is to control their initial reactions consciously (Haselton et al. 968–970), as Officer Judy does so.

4. Internalised Racism in *Zootopia*

This chapter explores reflections on internalised racism in the film. Camara Phyllis Jones defines the phenomenon as when members of stigmatised races internalise “negative messages about their own abilities and intrinsic worth”, leading to self-doubt as well as a lack of confidence in other members of their own race (1213). It also entails accepting the limitations imposed on them by society, constraining themselves in self-expression and defining their life goals (Jones 1213). Even their belief in self-determination suffers. It manifests ... self-devaluation, ... resignation, helplessness, and hopelessness (Jones 1213).

4.1 *Nick Wilde’s Internalised Stereotypes about Foxes*

As mentioned in previous chapters, foxes are victims of prejudice and discrimination in the world of *Zootopia*. This Subchapter focuses on the impact of mistreatment on Nick, the red fox. In one of his articles, Black American public policy scholar Theodore R. Johnson tells how he realised his hidden biases after taking Harvard’s Implicit Association Test. The test revealed he has a “strong automatic preference for European Americans compared to African Americans” (T.R Johnson). The data gathered from the test results reveals that although Black people express a solid preference for their own racial group over whites if directly asked, their performance on the test “suggests they subconsciously hold a slight preference for whites over blacks” (T. R. Johnson). T. R. Johnson declares the same as Jones (1213): that this a direct result of racism as the negative stereotypes get internalised by members of this racial minority.

After Officer Judy realises Nick lied to her and essentially tricked her into providing the funds for a scheme, she confronts the fox (*Zootopia* 00:23:41-00:25:58). Nick is not at all ashamed but rather delighted and proud of himself for deceiving the bunny. Officer Judy tries to arrest him, but the fox has an explanation or paperwork ready for all the bunny’s otherwise true accusations. He even says with confidence and pride that Judy cannot touch him because he has been doing this since he was born.

Factually, this cannot be true. New-born red foxes begin opening their eyes by the age of day nine (Saunders). The cubs make their first trips to the den entrance from days twenty-eight to thirty-five and start accompanying their parents on foraging trips by the age of twelve weeks (Saunders). The cubs are born during spring and become independent only by late summer or early autumn. (Saunders)

Nick, of course, says this figuratively, and he is a fictionally evolved animal living in a different social setting than wild foxes. However, we still need to state that red foxes stay under extended parental care after they are born, which points to the fact that they acquire certain

skills through observing and mimicking. Although genetics do play a role in foxes' personality (Dugatkin and Trut), scheming is not a personality trait but a learned behaviour. Nevertheless, Nick seems to be under the impression that he was born to be devious, destined to become a criminal. In the same conversation, Nick tells Judy that he is not the only one born to be as he is today, but everyone is. Patronisingly, he explains to the bunny that it is not true despite every newcomer in Zootopia believing so. One cannot, as everyone can only be what they are. He, a sly fox, and Judy, a dumb bunny. This statement and that he calls Officer Judy “Carrots”, a racial slur for rabbits, further emphasises that Nick believes in predestination (not in the biblical, but in a biological sense).

In a later scene, Judy gets the fox to confess his unreported income so she can blackmail him into helping with the investigation if Nick does not cooperate willingly (*Zootopia* 00:34:49-00:36:29). Nick, not knowing that Judy records his words, proudly says that he makes two hundred “bucks” a day (also calling Officer Hopps “fluff”, another derogatory racial slur for bunnies), 365 days a year since he was twelve. Even though the fox is content with his life, the viewer can make a disturbing realisation: Nick has been working since childhood. (The fox’s words suggest that for narrative reasons, animals in *Zootopia* have the same life expectancy and life cycle as humans.) Chapter 2. covers instances of institutionalised racism, but Jones’s statement that it affects Black people’s “access to quality education, sound housing, gainful employment” (1212) needs to be highlighted here. Although we do not learn details about Nick’s studies, possible housing issues and his labour market experiences, he fits the profile of a member of a marginalised minority who has been and still is a victim of discrimination. These details are probably excluded because they would have made the film much more disturbing for young viewers. However, savvier viewers can still understand the referenced phenomenon from the presented elements.

As the investigation progresses and Nick and Judy grow closer to each other, Nick shares a story from his childhood (*Zootopia* 00:58:00-01:00:01). It happens after they leave Police Chief Bogo and the other officers to finish the investigation. Nick tries to comfort the disappointed, sad bunny by giving her advice. He says Judy should never let anyone see that they get to her. Judy, surprised, asks if things do get to Nick. The red fox admits that although not anymore, he was “small and emotionally unbalanced” once, like Judy. When the bunny does not believe him, Nick tells her what happened when he wanted to join the Zootopia Junior Ranger Scouts around the age of eight or nine.

Nick starts the story by saying that her mother “scraped together enough money” to buy him a brand-new uniform so he can fit in. From this, we can assume that although it is

impossible to determine the poverty line in Zootopia, based on this detail, Nick most likely grew up in relative poverty. It is sometimes described as “‘relative deprivation’ because the people falling under this category are not living in total poverty (Brown). They are not, however, enjoying the same standard of life as everyone else in the country” (Brown). Furthermore, it also tells us about Nick’s wish to fit in, suggesting that he was treated differently, even as a kid, even by other kids.

Then, the scene continues with a flashback of the Junior Ranger Scouts meeting the red fox had attended as a child. We discover that Nick was to be the only predator in the troop. The prey kids trick Nick into believing he can undergo his initiation. They even make him say the oath with his right hand raised, with which Nick promises to be brave, loyal, helpful, and trustworthy, as a junior ranger scout should be. One of the kids immediately asks, smiling smugly: “Even though you’re a fox?”. To Nick’s shock, the prey animals his age attack him, assault him, and muzzle him. Clearly, they had never planned to let Nick join. The same mean kid says with a sense of superiority that if Nick thought they would ever trust a fox without a muzzle, he is even dumber than he looks. The flashback ends with the child Nick sobbing desperately, heartbroken.

As the film returns to the present, the fox tells Judy he learned two things that day. One, that he was never going to let anyone see that they got to him. Second, if the world is only going to see a fox as shifty and untrustworthy, there is no point in trying to be anything else. Knowing more about Nick’s background, the viewer can understand why it is so important to him that he earns good money through his schemes and takes pride in being a cunning criminal. Although Nick has internalised the negative stereotypes about foxes and, as a result, limited his own potential, he is successful at what he does. He is a criminal but also a high achiever.

4.2 The Internalised Racism of Judy’s Prejudiced Parents, Stu and Bonnie Hopps

Rabbits are another minority group marginalised based on species in *Zootopia*. Officer Judy’s parents showcase typical signs of personally mediated racism towards all predators in general, deeming foxes the worst. They have an irrational fear of foxes and, wanting to protect their children, teach them the same (as analysed in Subchapter 3.2). However, the Hopps parents also present signs of internalised racism through self-devaluation and self-limitation, and in effect, applying the same biases against their own children.

When, in a school play, the child Judy declares that she is going to be a police officer, we see her parents becoming terrified. As most in the audience clap (even Judy’s younger siblings; a subtle hint that they have not yet internalised their parents’ racial biases), the Hopps

parents share a look of shock and worry. At the end of the performance, Stu and Bonnie clap half-heartedly, still horrified. Their conversation with Judy later that day, at the Carrot Days Festival, demonstrates both self-devaluation and self-limitation imposed on themselves as well as on their children (*Zootopia* 00:03:09-00:04:10).

At first, Stu and Bonnie evade to directly dissuade Judy from becoming a police officer. Instead, they start talking about the reason behind their own happiness, asking Judy if she ever wonders how they “got to be so darn happy”. As a typical child, Judy answers honestly with a “nope”. She is still wearing the police officer uniform she performed in the play, jumping forward happily between her parents, holding hands with them. Her father happily explains that they gave up on their dreams and settled. Judy’s mother, Bonnie, cheerfully adds that they settled hard, emphasising “hard”. Stu continues by saying that this is the beauty of complacency, slowly approaching the main point by stating that if one does not try anything new, one will never fail. As a child, Judy does not understand the subtle hints and gleefully states that she likes trying.

Her mother finally becomes more straightforward, explaining that what Judy’s father means is that it is going to be difficult, impossible even for Judy to become a police officer. Stu adds that there has never been a bunny cop. Bonnie says that bunnies do not do that. Then both add a “never”, hoping to conclude the discussion. Judy seems startled for a moment before she becomes even more enthusiastic, saying that she will need to be the first one then because she is going to make the world a better place. In her delight, she jumps up high, wall-running on a vendor’s stand, then somersaulting. If anything, she is even more determined to become a police officer.

Realising that Judy would not want to set, his father has another idea. Together with Bonnie, they explain that the best way to make the world a better place is to become a carrot farmer, changing the world one carrot at a time. Stu calls carrot farming a noble profession. Then the two get so absorbed in discussing the simple beauties of carrot farming that they do not even realise that Judy is already gone, making the world a better place, saving her friends from a pair of bullies, a red fox and a black-footed ferret. The Hopps parents only notice her absence when they try to give her their final advice: that it is great to have dreams as long as one does not believe in them too much. These words of resignation are in stark contrast with how the two adult bunnies tell them: with jolly facial expressions in gentle, inspiring voices. What would be hopelessness for Judy is happiness for them.

This is further emphasised by their video call with the adult Judy on the evening of the bunny officer’s first day on duty in the capital city (*Zootopia* 00:26:42-00:27:35). Judy arrives

at her rented room utterly disappointed. She has been assigned parking duty instead of being involved in the missing mammal cases. She was also tricked by the con artist, Nick. She feels completely hopeless. The film uses pathetic fallacy⁸, a narrative technique in which the environment reflects the emotions and mood of the character(s) to amplify Judy's state of mind. Arriving home, she turns on the radio, and all channels play melancholic music with more and more explicitly dispiriting lyrics every time she changes channels before she settles for a slow and sorrowful classical piece. Her microwave dinner looks nothing like the image on the packaging; it is only a tiny, parched carrot.

Judy answers with exaggerated happiness when her parents call, although not very convincingly. Her voice is high-pitched, and she speaks with rising intonation while telling her parents that everything is great. Just as she becomes more convincing, her parents notice her vest above her uniform. The vest is a tell-tale sign of her being a parking enforcement officer or meter maid, as all characters refer to it. Stu and Bonnie become overwhelmed with joy. Judy tries to say this is temporary, but Bonnie interrupts her as she gleefully exclaims that it is the safest job on the force. Stu bursts out with relief: "Ah, she's not a real cop!", then shouts that their prayers have been answered. He even starts chanting "meter maid". None of them notices Judy's distress. Judy cuts the call short by saying it has been a really long day. His father says that "Those meters aren't gonna maid themselves." and winks at her unironically. He feels a mutual understanding among the three of them, a shared happiness. Stu could not be more mistaken.

The Hopps parents' delight in their daughter having been assigned parking duty is not surprising after their revulsion for the child Judy's dream of becoming a police officer. Stu stating that Judy is not a real cop is hurtful and insensitive. Even on parking duty, Judy is a police officer. This comment is demeaning both to her and her current occupation. However, the most troublesome detail we learn is that the Hopps parents have been praying for their daughter to fail. Although they disagree with Judy's choice, they should respect it and the years of hard work she devoted to achieving her goal. Sharing with her that they have been praying for this further aggravates their insolence.

Stu and Bonnie Hopps have utterly internalised that bunnies are what the stereotypes say about them: simple carrot farmers with large families living in a podunk. They are content with their lives, honestly not wishing for anything more or different. With the best possible intentions, they also try to limit Judy's self-determination, upholding the racial bias that being

⁸ Annie Kapur's article "A Filmmaker's Guide to: Pathetic Fallacy", although not an academic source, offers a more detailed explanation of this narrative technique with examples from literature and cinema.

a police officer is not something a bunny does. As a result of identifying themselves and bunnies in general with weakness being compliant, the Hopps parents seem to be afraid of strength, physical or mental, both in predators and in Judy.

5. Racial Stereotypes Enforced in *Zootopia*

The film makes clear enough statements for children to understand that prejudices are harmful. It also adds subtle hints of reflections on American society for the adult audience and showcases sensitively and thoroughly designed plot devices and half-hidden references for well-informed viewers. However, some topics were handled with less care, enforcing racial stereotypes, most likely due to implicit bias and the use of long-existing film narratives.

5.1 *The Absence of Nick's Father*

As this thesis has established earlier, Nick Wilde, as a red fox, is a Black-coded character. This statement is supported by the other animals' attitudes towards him, the fact that he internalised these negative stereotypes, and the effect self-devaluation had on his personal value system and, as a shared result, his overall life experiences. Another proof of Nick being coded as Black is his father's absence, which is a generalised pejorative concept about African American family structures analysed in detail in “The Myth of the Missing Black Father”, a book edited by sociologists Roberta L. Coles and Charles Green.

This research overview notes that a possible explanation for the assumed absence of Black fathers is the rate of nonmarital births, which was 68 per cent of all births to African American women (Coles and Green Introduction). As Coles and Green point out, this “statistic could easily lead observers to assume that the fathers are absent” (Introduction). The editors also add that absence connotes “invisibility and noninvolvement, which further investigation has proven to be exaggerated” (Coles and Green Introduction). However, neither the parents' marital status nor whether they are cohabiting provide information on the father's inclusion (Coles and Green Introduction).

In *Zootopia*, the absence of Nick's father is suggested by the father's complete omission from the film. When Nick tells Officer Judy about his traumatic experience with the Junior Ranger Scouts (analysed in Subchapter 4.1), he mentions only her mother's excessive effort to be able to purchase him a brand-new uniform. At the beginning of the red fox's flashback to the incident, we see the child Nick proudly smiling at his reflection in the mirror (*Zootopia* 00:58:26-00:58:34). His mother stands behind him, adjusting his son's necktie. The mirror's frame obscures the mother's face, depersonalising her and turning her into a symbolic mother figure rather than a unique individual. Teaching a son how to tie a necktie is a widely used metaphor in popular culture for teaching a child about manhood. It is also traditionally the responsibility of the father.

The development and changes in parental roles are beyond the scope of this thesis, so it is just briefly noted that with the expansion of women's rights and changing social norms, the strict categorisation of paternal and maternal roles has started transforming into shared responsibilities. However, without including further details in the film, the general assumption probably will be the absence of the father if it is (only) the mother who shares this symbolic moment with the son. *Zootopia* (most likely unintentionally, considering the film's attention to detail and overall sensitivity) enforces a harmful stereotype about Black parenthood by omitting Nick's father.

5.2 Enforcing The Myth of Black Violence

Nick Wilde is a complex character, and his being Black-coded adds another, deeper layer of reflection on American society intended for viewers informed about the United States's social relations. In contrast, Finnick, the fennec fox, Nick's criminal partner, is a stereotypical schematic illustration of Black men, a much less nuanced and more exaggerated character than Nick.

Although both the red and fennec foxes are deceptive, the film also shows Nick's genuine, empathetic side and his prior traumas. It even provides an (although simplified) explanation for his criminal lifestyle. By the film's end, Nick's life has been completely transformed. The red fox becomes a police officer with Officer Judy as his partner, living a life that is in accord with his Junior Range Scouts oath of being brave, loyal, helpful, and trustworthy, as he has already proved to be during the investigation of the missing mammal cases.

However, Finnick, the fennec fox, remains a two-dimensional character throughout the film. His one side is of an adult deceiving others of being a child, playing the role of Nick's son in the pair's schemes. He plays the role most convincingly as he suckles on his dummy with an innocent facial expression, moving with a child's discoordination, staying deeply immersed in character even while moving forward with their scheme and when he receives his share of the money from Nick (*Zootopia* 00:21:57-00:23:26). His other side is the stereotypical portrayal of "the aggressive Black man", enforcing the myth of Black violence.

In his journal article, Sociologist Evan Stark states that "the police, media, and courts share the stereotype of blacks as 'violence prone'" (488). Supporting evidence includes that adult Black males' arrest rate is roughly a hundred per cent higher than their crime rates (Stark 487). Additionally, the media's tendency to portray Black youths as outlaws while white perpetrators of violent crimes are often portrayed as having "gone wrong"; essentially: making

a mistake rather than being violent by nature (Stark 488). The disproportionally high rate of Black prison inmates (Stark 486) also strengthens the statement.

Finnick is portrayed as a con artist impersonating a child in most of his scenes throughout the film. There are three instances of him behaving like an adult, all of which show him as either aggressive or rude. The first is when we learn that Finnick is not a kid (*Zootopia* 00:23:24-00:23:41). Even though we already know that Finnick helps Nick with their schemes, it is surprising to see Nick starting to count down part of the scheme's profit into the fennec fox's paw. Nick then starts teasing Finnick, saying, "Way to work that diaper, big guy."

As the camera cuts behind Nick, we see Finnick, ignoring the red fox, still suckling on his dummy as he takes off the elephant onesie before climbing up to the minivan's driver's seat, confirming the viewer's suspicion that he is, in fact, not a child. Nick continues to tease the fennec fox to provoke a reaction, asking, "Hey, no kiss bye-bye for daddy?". Finnick spits out the dummy, which hits the steering wheel hard. The small Finnick has a surprisingly deep, resonant voice as he angrily answers that if the red fox kisses him tomorrow, he will bite his face off. He then turns on a blaring French rap song⁹. Putting on sunglasses, Finnick says goodbye with a "Ciao"¹⁰. As he drives off, we see that on the side of the minivan, there is a true-to-scale-sized painting in the style of Boris Vallejo of a fox warrior with a sword on his back, wearing an armour decorated with a horned skull. The warrior holds an unconscious vixen in his arms.

The second example of Finnick not presenting as a child is when Judy enlists Nick for her investigation by blackmailing the red fox with her proof of Nick's unreported income (*Zootopia* 00:34:43-00:37:05). When the bunny officer reveals that she has tricked the red fox, Finnick starts taunting Nick. The fennec fox is sitting in a stroller, which Nick is pushing before Judy stops them. The stroller's cover is pulled down so only the fennec fox's paws are visible. They wiggle happily. Finnick laughs loudly at Nick before saying that Nick is a cop now (foreshadowing that Nick will be a police officer by the film's end) and wishes him to have fun working with the "fuzz" as he leaves. Although teasing each other is part of the two foxes' relationship dynamics, Finnick is never shown to be genuinely kind to anyone throughout the film, except when he helps Judy find Nick.

The third instance occurs right before Finnick helps Judy offscreen (*Zootopia* 01:19:51-01:20:00). After Judy and Nick had found the missing mammals, the reason predators went

⁹ "Parlez-Vous Rap", an original song segment created for *Zootopia*.

¹⁰ The use of a French rap song and "ciao", the French loanword borrowed from Italian, could be a hint to the Black community and the working-class banlieues in France.

“savage” was not yet uncovered. The bunny and the red fox had a heated argument during which Nick realised Judy is still biased against predators. The dispute abruptly ended their friendship. When Judy finds a new lead, she goes to Finnick’s minivan to ask him where to find Nick, hoping to resolve the conflict and continue the investigation with the red fox. Judy knocks on the minivan’s back door. The fennec fox pushes the door out forcefully and shouts, “Who is it?” holding a baseball bat in one hand, his face angry, his body tense, his claws emerged. He is ready to fight anyone who is behind that door. At the sight of Judy, his eyes widen, and his eyebrows raise; he looks like a child again. His muscles relax, his claws retract, and his grip around the baseball bat’s handle loosens. He is shocked to see Judy, but the change in facial expression and his posture suggests that he heard about Nick and Judy falling out, and he wishes for them to resolve it.

The scene, however, abruptly ends right after Judy asks for the fennec fox’s help thus the viewer cannot see Finnick’s attitude while he tells Judy about Nick’s whereabouts. The fact that he did is only supported when Judy finds Nick in the next scene. Although with this gesture, the film does hint at Finnick’s ability for empathy, the moment that suggests that Finnick cares for his friend, Nick, only lasts for a second. On the contrary, his being prone to violence is shown excessively as the fennec fox’s main characteristic.

From this scene, the viewer can also assume that Finnick lives in his minivan. His car parks in a back alley in the Sahara Square district, and Finnick is in the cargo area, not the driver’s seat, when Judy comes knocking. This suggests he was not parking at that spot shortly but has been staying there longer, probably resting. The popularity of the nomad lifestyle of living inside a minivan and travelling through the United States while working remotely online has been on the rise. However, we know that is not what Finnick does. Physician Jonathan L. Kaplan and political scientist Andrew Walls say that the consequences of the long and ongoing history of housing discrimination against Black people are a prominent part of the still-existing racial inequalities (255, 270). Homeownership rates in Black communities are lower than in white communities (Kaplan and Walls 258). With these in mind, Finnick’s living in his minivan seems to be another subtler hint of his being Black-coded.

Film historian Ed Guerrero wrote about “the nation’s vexed and paradoxical fascination with the image of the black male” (395). On the narrow spectrum of the portrayal of Black men in Hollywood, the overly masculine Black brute is an often-used trope (Guerrero 395). Finnick, the fennec fox, is another example on this narrow spectrum with his overly aggressive behaviour, his blasting a rap song through the quiet streets, the macho painting on his minivan,

as well as the lack of inclusion of other aspects of his life other than criminality and his housing issue.

5.3 Judy Hopps as the White Saviour

As sociologist Matthew W. Hughey explains, the trope of the White Saviour is a heavily used motif in Hollywood films with the change of narratives on racial relations through the history of cinema (475–476). White characters are either victimised, valorised, or both in these stories (Hughey 478). With the shared motif of white superiority where a white character helps a dysfunctional and dangerous Black character or community, racism in films has shifted from explicit forms to subtle manifestations (Hughey 481, 478). *Zootopia* does not build its whole narrative on this motif but rather on the personal development of both the white-coded Officer Judy and the initially villainous red fox, Nick, while the two mutually help each other's betterment. However, if we examine the effect of this friendship on their lives, it is evident that Nick's impact on Judy is much less prominent than Judy's on Nick.

While Judy's resolving her racial biases improves her quality of life, ridding her of irrational fears, it is also beneficial for the community, as Judy's prejudices as a police officer could potentially harm the already marginalised group of foxes. Nevertheless, there is no change in the trajectory of Judy's life; she continues serving as a police officer. On the contrary, by the film's end, Nick completely abandons his previous life as he also becomes a police officer, moreover, the first-ever fox police officer. It is Judy who encourages Nick to apply to the police academy and expresses her wish for the red fox to become her partner after graduation (*Zootopia* 01:09:46-01:10:10).

Nick is shocked. Mainly not because Judy suggests his becoming a police officer, but because after years of suffering unjust discrimination, someone sees behind the red fur and finds him "brave, loyal, helpful and trustworthy". The very traits he was told to be unable to possess. Judy even gives her the pen with which she recorded his confession of having unreported income to fill out the application form, showing that whatever his decision, she has no intention to blackmail him anymore. Nick is in awe, unable to speak. While the encouragement for applying to the police academy is technically an instance of white saviourism, it is truly a touching moment in the story's context. However, the bit with the pen, especially Nick's reaction, should not be showcased as a feel-good story.

Blackmailing Nick was an abuse of power. The elimination of this threat should not be portrayed as a grand gesture and graciousness. Even if we see the blackmail as Nick was a necessary evil to save lives, with the case solved, giving Nick back his sense of safety should

be unquestionable and necessary to be even mentioned only so Nick knows about it. Nick's gratitude makes it evident that he still sees him as inferior to the bunny, who saves the fox from the threat she, herself, poses. The insensitivity of this scene suggests that this is, again, an unintentional act of enforcing harmful racial stereotypes from the creators who were so attentive to detail in other cases.

6. Conclusion

This thesis examined instances in the film that parallel race relations in contemporary American society. The title *Zootopia* suggests that the film was intended to present a utopian society which has achieved post-racialism, a term that became widely discussed after President Barack Obama's election in 2008. Political scientist Michael C. Dawson and sociologist Lawrence D. Bobo noted that many people had claimed that Barack Obama's "election signified America has truly become a 'post-racial' society", consistent with the majority of white Americans' prior belief that racial equality had been or would soon be achieved "despite substantial evidence to the contrary" (247).

With the reality of America becoming a post-racial society being out of reach during the years of the film's development but existing as a desired goal to achieve, *Zootopia* can be seen as both criticism of the past and a hopeful, optimistic prediction of the future. However, the criticism of the dream of post-racialism raises the question of how a society could address race-related issues and inequalities if no one "sees colour". The effect of aiming for colourblindness instead of colourconsciousness can be witnessed in *Zootopia*, within a society that is unable to end inequality in any aspect of life but rhetoric.

While providing background context for each concept and a critical review of the examined scenes, this paper analysed instances of institutionalised racism by inspecting police officials' attitudes and behaviours towards marginalised groups of predators. The thesis proved the existence of de facto segregation and racial-ethnic neighbourhoods in the titular city, as well as looked at the protagonist Judy Hopp's own racial bias. By inspecting the internalised racism of Nick Wilde and the Hopps parents, the thesis also considered the most obscured aspect of racism. In addition, examples of racial stereotypes enforced in the film were also included. This thesis concludes that all three levels of racism are present in the city of Zootopia; with these and the unintentionally implemented racial stereotypes, the film serves as a social record of the attitudes towards race relations in the first one-and-a-half decade of the twenty-first century.

This incomprehensive overview aimed to prove that, as all utopian stories are, this 2016 animation film is a social record of its contemporary society. Instead of the portrayal of an actual post-racial society where racial inequalities are non-existent, *Zootopia* is a lively and evolving Zootropolis with multifaceted attitudes towards racism. The film itself supports this interpretation, as it ends with a contemplative self-reflection on the partial success of reaching impartiality in Zootopia instead of magically solving all racial inequities before the credit list. With this, the creators indicate that post-racialism is not the reality of America but only an

aspiration. In one of the film's final scenes, Officer Judy gives an introspective commencement address to the graduates of the police academy, including Nick: (Zootopia 01:33:22-01:34:36):

When I was a kid, I thought Zootopia was this perfect place where everyone got along and anyone could be anything... Turns out, real life's a little bit more complicated than a slogan on a bumper sticker. Real life is messy.

We all have limitations. We all make mistakes. Which means-- hey, glass half full!-- we all have a lot in common. And the more we try to understand one another, the more exceptional each of us will be. But we have to try.

So, no matter what type of animal you are, from the biggest elephant to our first fox... implore you... try. Try to make the world a better place. Look inside yourself, and recognize that change starts with you. It starts with me. It starts with all of us. (Bush and Johnston 107)

Although Judy, in her speech, presents the task of reaching equality to be simpler than it is and might be seen as overly optimistic, the hopeful, uplifting manner and the encouragement to make the world a better place are typical characteristics of commencement addresses. She also emphasises the importance of individual effort, which reminds me how public policy scholar Theodore R. Johnson concludes that “with willingness and conscious effort to recognise hidden biases and be mindful about how they could affect our actions, members of any race can train themselves to leave behind race-based preferences” (T. R. Johnson).

Zootopia has been generating discourse both among academics and the general public, receiving praise and criticism. Political scientist Jason Johnson says that while the film is not perfect due to the underdevelopment of some of its racial messages, it is “the most searing, complicated and subversive film about race, drugs and policy since the movie ‘*Traffic*’” (J. Johnson). Without contemplating whether the phenomenon of an “instant classic” exists, many prominent magazines reviewed *Zootopia* as such (qtd. in Surrey). Only time can tell if *Zootopia* will become a classic, but its self-aware social criticism distinguishes it from prior Disney animations. Besides children, a wide variety of adult social groups can comprehend its message on different levels of understanding. It can appeal to those with superficial knowledge of race relations as well as people with a deeper understanding of American society. Many scholars have also analysed the film. All these make *Zootopia* a topic of interest for students of American culture.

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