

## Mirror, Mirror for Us All

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### Disney Theme Parks and the Collective Memory of the American National Narrative

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**ABSTRACT:** Love them or hate them, Disney theme parks have become some of the most culturally significant locations of collective memory of the American experience. Rather than focus, as most discussion has, on whether this should be viewed as “good” or “bad,” this essay seeks to lay a groundwork for understanding *how* Disney parks gained their cultural authority. In doing so it will suggest that public historians could benefit from framing the interaction between history and the public at Disney parks as a location-specific process by which the public and a corporation are engaged in a cultural ritual of transforming historical fact into the national narrative.

**KEY WORDS:** Disney, national narrative, collective memory, public history, theme parks

Mickey Mouse sailed into American consciousness on November 18, 1928 in the cartoon short “Steamboat Willie.” The *Washington Post* later observed that with this film, “Overnight Mickey became not only an authorized representative of the American people and the American scene, but an incentive to the laughter of nations.”<sup>1</sup> Whereas Mickey’s ability to induce laughter was (and still is) instantaneous, his status, and that of the brand he represents, as an “authorized representative of the American people” was not, in fact, an overnight occurrence. It took years for Disney to build the kind of cultural capital that allows the brand to act as a representative of the American people, years more for them to become as much of a player in the identity of America as they are today. In the building of that capital the company built not only a well-recognized American symbol of their brand, but physical locations for the collective memories of the American people and the “scene” they represent.

One of the most important ways culture and tradition pass from generation to generation is through the telling of stories. This is true not only on a familial

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Gary Apgar, *Mickey Mouse: Emblem of the American Spirit* (San Francisco: The Walt Disney Family Foundation Press, 2015), 101.

and local level, but also on a national scale. Stories about American history that emphasize and illustrate the characteristics that make Americans unique create a national narrative that serves to reassure citizens, generate and affirm shared values, and unite a diverse group of people under a distinctly American identity. This American narrative is kept alive through its retelling in literature, art, and music, through its teaching in classrooms, and through the experiencing of it at sites of public memory such as National Parks, the Smithsonian Institution . . . and the Disney theme parks.

Indeed, Disney theme parks are some of the foremost places where the nation consumes its collective memory of the American experience and the American national narrative. After all, Disney is in the business of selling memories. Not just memories of family vacations, but memories of stories from American history. Margaret King refers to the Disney theme parks as a “national trust’ of mainstream cultural values” as imparted through these folk histories.<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that those “mainstream” cultural values and the historical stories presenting them were, at least in the early decades, skewed heavily white, male, and middle- to upper-class. This has changed over time, however, as the American “mainstream” has changed. The embracing of this change is an important factor in the continued success and cultural relevancy of Disney’s theme parks, and the change itself can and should be understood as indicative of the evolution of the national narrative.

The Disney theme park vision of America emphasizes the nation as a place of rugged individualism, free enterprise, and the conquering of new frontiers. It is a version of America that, in the words of Steven Fjellman, “taps into people’s nostalgic need for a false history—for the reasonably benign makings of a community of memory. Disney has not only told stories to help fill out those memories but has become a central part of shared U.S. experience.”<sup>3</sup> In what has become a rite of passage for the American middle class, millions trek yearly to Walt Disney World in Florida and Disneyland in California where they physically experience carefully curated moments of American history. By being offered the same impression of the American experience, visitors who come from different places at different times nonetheless share a collective memory. As Disney provides similar individual memories to more and more people who visit their happily nostalgic kingdom of American myth, their effect on American collective memory grows. Although the entire Disney canon has great influence on Americans’ understanding of their history and shared cultural vernacular, it is at Disneyland and Walt Disney World that the American collective memory finds a physical place to reside. The art, films, and songs which capture American imagination and are both born from and

<sup>2</sup> Margaret King, “The Disney Effect: Fifty Years After Theme Park Design,” in *Disneyland and Culture: Essays on the Parks and Their Influence*, ed. Kathy Merlock Jackson and Mark I. West (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers, 2011), 225.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Fjellman, *Vinyl Leaves: Walt Disney World and America* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), 60.

become part of American folk history funnel into the physical locations where their imagery is replicated, amplifying the cultural meaning of those spaces. Richard Francaviglia describes Disney's theme parks as maps that guests may physically follow, but also by which they "collectively get their bearings on the landscape of [American] imagination."<sup>4</sup> If Disney's art has taken on symbolic meaning, it is by overlaying these symbols on the map of the Disney theme parks that we make use of that meaning on a national scale.

Although scholars do not generally agree on whether this should be understood as "good" or "bad," the historiography of Disney suggests they do agree that understanding Disney (not just the theme parks emphasized here, but all aspects of the brand) is important to understanding the American people. Mike Wallace, for example, although vocal in his concern that Disney trivializes history and obfuscates hard truths, is nonetheless also staunchly in favor of understanding the Disney theme parks as sites of public history. Henry Giroux, critical of a corporation having cultural power in a democratic society, still emphasizes that Disney does shape the national identity.<sup>5</sup>

Those who fall on the "good" (or more often "neutral") side of the argument generally believe either that any exposure to history is good for the public, whatever form it takes, or, as this essay does, attempt to understand Disney's cultural appeal in its historical context and relationship to its audience.<sup>6</sup> Those who believe the Walt Disney Company's presentation of historical stories is "bad" most frequently cite concern over the type of history presented versus what is left out, and over the implications of a corporation with consumerist interests wielding cultural power for its own benefit.<sup>7</sup> These criticisms generally appear together, as these arguments often assume that a company whose livelihood is based on public consumption must present only certain aspects of history to remain popular, and in turn that its popularity gives it even more power to shape the views of history it propagates in ways that benefit itself. Although these criticisms are not necessarily

4 Richard Francaviglia, "Walt Disney's Frontierland as an Allegorical Map of the American West," *Western Historical Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (Summer, 1999): 166.

5 See Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996) and Henry Giroux, *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.).

6 See Gary Apgar, *Mickey Mouse: Emblem of the American Spirit* (San Francisco: The Walt Disney Family Foundation Press, 2015); Neal Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006); Kathy Merlock Jackson and Mark I. West, eds., *Disneyland and Culture: Essays on the Parks and Their Influence* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc. 2011); Margaret King, "The Theme Park: A Curious Amalgam," in *Continuities in Popular Culture: The Present in the Past and the Past in the Present and Future*, ed. Ray Broadus Browne and Ronald J. Ambrosetti (Madison, WI: Popular Press, 1993), 49–60; Karal Ann Marling, ed., *Designing Disney: The Architecture of Reassurance* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998); and Stephen Watts, *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life* (Houghton Mifflin Company, New York), 1997.

7 See in particular Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart, *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic* (Amsterdam: International General, 1991); Richard Schickel, *The Disney Version* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Inc., 1997); Giroux, *The Mouse that Roared*; and Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History*.

incorrect and the connection between corporations and culture are certainly worthy of study, the dismissals are less than helpful for public historians. They tend to immediately cast the Disney brand in the negative and provide little room to find ways to work with a company that is meaningful to the American public. The terms “Mickey Mouse history” and “Disneyfication” for instance, have been used to denote superficiality and commercialism in Disney’s (and subsequently other for-profit corporations’) use of history, but they could also refer to a folk version of American history that has evolved over time to reflect who the American people want to be. Both of those framings acknowledge that the “history” presented may not be factually accurate, but one version dismisses the role of the public in the exchange, negating their agency and casting them merely as consumers. It is not enough, however, to view any use of history on Disney’s part as “good”; rather, public historians must actively endeavor to engage with the company and the materials it presents to discover how we might mutually benefit one another. We must meet the people where they are, and they are at Disney World.

Much previous Disney scholarship has focused on singular aspects of the brand: critiques of cartoons and films, art histories, business assessments, Walt Disney biographies, and more recently, sociological studies of the theme parks. Given that my nonacademic involvement with the brand has largely been with the theme parks, studies focusing on them were particularly resonant to my own personal experiences.<sup>8</sup> Although many pages have been written asserting the ideological importance of Disney theme parks in American culture, few seem to deeply question *how* that importance was achieved. How did the Disney theme parks become one of the chief purveyors of American history? What is lacking from the current literature is an understanding of what built these spaces into what Robert B. Pettit called “shrines of the American civil religion.”<sup>9</sup> To answer that question, we need to connect the various pockets of Disney scholarship into one narrative.

The presence of so many distinct pockets of Disney scholarship can be in part explained by the fact that the term “Disney” can encompass many things. The Walt Disney Company at present includes several production studios, media networks, five theme park resort areas, a publications arm, and more. This can make any discussion of “Disney” complex. In this essay, when using the term “Disney” without qualifiers, I am referring to the brand at large and all that it encompasses: the Walt Disney Company and its various holdings, as well as the historical work of the company. Although the essay examines every facet of the company, its focus is grounded in the theme parks, specifically those within the United States, that is, Disneyland and Disney’s California Adventure in California and all components

<sup>8</sup> My mother visited Walt Disney World as a teenager and loved it. Growing up, she and my father took our family every few years, hence my familiarity with and interest in the subject. I continue to visit the park today, both for pleasure and for research.

<sup>9</sup> Robert B. Pettit, “One Nation Under Walt: Disney Theme Parks as Shrines of American Civil Religion” (presentation, Annual Meeting of the Popular Culture Association, Atlanta, Georgia, 1986, revised 1992).

of the Walt Disney World Resort in Florida, with particular emphasis on Epcot and the Magic Kingdom. Today these spaces are the physical location of much of the negotiation and dissemination of the American national narrative, and they became such due in large part to the company's other endeavors in cartoon, film, music and television.

Five specific factors have worked in concert over time to transform Disney's theme parks from simple amusement parks to places where the collective memory of the American narrative is shaped: Disney's use of American folk tale and myth, the role of Disney characters as American symbols, the translation of folk history into physical experience, the legitimization of Disney's version of history through association with national figures and holidays, and Disney's continued use of and negotiation with history in their parks. Understanding these factors provides an initial framework from which to build towards a greater understanding of the ways Disney gained the cultural capital to become a recognized site of national collective memory. Such a framework will offer an avenue for public historians to frame their understanding of the Disney theme parks in a way that is useful for public historians, as spaces where the American people negotiate the national narrative.

#### Branding: Disney and American Folklore

Today Disney is a recognized global empire with a diverse roster of products,<sup>10</sup> but at its founding in 1923, it consisted only of the Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio and their animated cartoons.<sup>11</sup> These cartoons often drew on common American folk tales that had themselves evolved from historic myths and American ideals, telling stories that emphasized Americans' ideal versions of themselves. This wasn't particularly new; many films and cartoons drew and continue to draw on similar archetypes: the underdog turned hero, the pursuit of freedom, and humanity's relationship with nature, for instance. What made Disney distinctive was the combination of stunning artwork, innovative production techniques, and perhaps most importantly, a stable of recurring and likable characters who starred in these cartoons, led by the one and only Mickey Mouse. As these characters began to repeatedly appear in similar roles, audiences quickly discerned and began to identify with their representative personality traits.

As his cartoon repertoire was built up, Mickey Mouse in particular emerged as a uniquely "American" character, cast in in the roles of an average "Everyman," of working class Americans and of the folk heroes those Americans looked up to. This

<sup>10</sup> These include, but are not limited to, films, television shows, toys, games, music, books, magazines, theatrical shows, and resorts. The scope of their product offering contributes to Disney's influence as it offers many avenues for individuals to come into contact with the company. Not all of Disney's products relate to American history and/or identity, but this essay will focus on the wealth of those that do.

<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that Walt Disney was involved in several other production companies before the Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio was opened, however, this is the date the used by the present Disney company as that of its founding.

association with Americana can be readily discerned in examples from the early Mickey Mouse cartoons.<sup>12</sup> The first Mickey cartoon to be released, *Steamboat Willie*, drew heavily on a vision of an idyllic rural American heartland, and was scored with popular folk music such as “Steamboat Bill” and “Turkey in the Straw.” In the 1929 short *Plane Crazy*, Mickey attempted (with mixed success) to fly a plane in order to emulate America’s national hero Charles Lindbergh, reflecting the dreams of many land-bound viewers following Lindbergh’s famous solo flight across the Atlantic. *Mickey’s Good Deed*, from 1932, saw Mickey as a Depression victim who nevertheless showed an unselfish spirit at Christmas. Mickey took on the role of an urban laborer working under an aggressively overbearing foreman in 1933’s *Building a Building*. Although the Mickey of the very early shorts is a bit more mischievous and even aggressive than the personality of the mouse we know today (in *Plane Crazy*, for example, Mickey forcibly steals a kiss from Minnie, aggravated by her initial refusal), by 1933 those potentially rough edges had been worn down enough to see him hailed by journalist Arthur Millier as:

an epic of your soul, my soul, the plumber’s soul, and, of course, the soul of Walt Disney . . . Mickey is ‘Everyman’ . . . He is honest, decent, a good sportsman . . . Mickey has his little human weaknesses, but there is no question whose side he is on. He is little David who slays Goliath. He is that most popular, because most universally conceivable of hero—the little man who shuts his eyes and pastes the big bully in the jaw.<sup>13</sup>

In short, Mickey came represent the characteristics many Americans chose to see in their own histories and wanted to see in themselves, an archetypal American in all the best ways. They were characteristics that people saw, too, in Mickey’s “father,” Walt Disney. His “fairy tale” rise from small town boy to media mogul was positioned as “the old American success story of the self-made man overcoming obstacles on his way to fame and fortune.”<sup>14</sup> The notion that these cartoons not only spoke to traditional American values but were themselves the products of one of America’s own success stories gave them further credence as animated American representatives.

Although the American public is always partial to an underdog story (or in this case, an under-mouse story), these themes were particularly popular at the time of their release because the United States was in the middle of the Great Depression. The nation needed not only a distraction from its troubles but affirmation that

<sup>12</sup> These themes are of course not limited to Disney’s Mickey Mouse cartoons. Art historians such as Gary Apgar and Steven Watts have documented the trend throughout the Disney brand’s creative life as they expanded beyond their initial characters. See Apgar, *Mickey Mouse* and Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*.

<sup>13</sup> Arthur Millier, “Disney’s Artistry Explains Silly Symphony Popularity,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 5, 1933.

<sup>14</sup> Steven Watts, *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 42.

Americans had within them the qualities needed to weather the economic storm. Seeking comfort and reassurance, audiences packed theaters to see Disney's animated tales that offered what the *New York Times* columnist L. H. Robbins called "a nine-minute moratorium on the debt we owe to the iron facts of life" and the assurance of what Steven Watts termed "sentimental populism" to a country that sorely needed it.<sup>15</sup>

Mickey cartoons continued to be popular both for their slapstick comedy and uplifting messages, but the release of the *Silly Symphony* short *Three Little Pigs* in 1933 especially resonated with audiences. The moral of the story, a retelling of the fable of similar name, is that hard work and preparation will allow one to triumph over adversity (as did Henry Ford, Andrew Carnegie, and Walt Disney, individuals often held up as epitomes of the American dream). Whereas the pigs faced a hungry wolf, Americans were facing an economic collapse. This eight-minute, colorful reminder of persistence winning the day served, in the words of journalist Mayme Peak, "to restore America's old time cocky confidence." Peak referred to the short's song "Who's Afraid of the Big, Bad Wolf?" as "the new national anthem."<sup>16</sup> It encompassed the spirit of the United States not only during the Depression but in the face of all national crises, declaring, said John Black of the *New York Times*, that Americans could always "sing defiance loud enough and the wolf [would] depart."<sup>17</sup>

As the studio added live action film into their repertoire of creative work in the late 1940s, they continued to produce stories drawn from American folklore, with films and TV series often explicitly re-creating or fictionalizing historic events. This was done perhaps most obviously with the combination live action-animation film *Melody Time*, a compilation of shorts released in 1948 that included stories of American folk heroes such as "The Legend of Johnny Appleseed" and "Pecos Bill." This spurred Hollywood critic Hedda Hopper to write that Disney's pictures were more and more "telling the stories of the all-American heroes of myth and legend, including Johnny Appleseed, Paul Bunyan, Ichabod Crane, Pecos Bill, Davy Crockett and others."<sup>18</sup> Other fully live-action examples focused on the American Revolution, such as *Johnny Tremain*, which told the story of a young silversmith in Boston, and the television series "The Swamp Fox," which featured the exploits of war hero Francis Marion.

Perhaps the most famous of Disney's historic live action films is 1955's *Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier*. The lens through which Disney interpreted the mythic story of Crockett is representative of what became a hallmark of Disney's portrayal of the national narrative. Crockett was larger-than-life and somewhat idealized, but not so changed as to be unrecognizable to those who would know

15 L. H. Robbins, "Mickey Mouse Emerges as Economist," *New York Times*, March 10, 1935.

16 Mayme Ober Peake, "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf!," *Daily Boston Globe*, October 29, 1933.

17 John Black, "Story of the Depression is Told in Song," *New York Times*, February 25, 1934.

18 Hedda Hopper, "Disney Brings Native American Folklore Characters to Public as Film Heroes," *Los Angeles Times*, May 9, 1948.

of him from studies of history. During the airing of the *Davy Crockett* TV series (the movie first appeared in five parts on television, and then was edited into two feature films), one family wrote the studio that if they didn't "get Davy out of the Alamo unharmed" they would no longer watch Disney's programming.<sup>19</sup> Disney stuck with the historically accurate, if less emotionally satisfying, ending, indicating that while they might be willing to play fast and loose with certain facts in the service of a good story, some historic moments were too important for even Disney to change.

This didn't mean, however, that the history they presented was entirely factual (nor did the company represent it as such). For example, Disney's Crockett was "brave, intelligent, stalwart, and kind," a portrayal met by some skepticism.<sup>20</sup> Critics of this portrayal, however, were answered by a passionate public that maintained that it didn't matter whether it was the exact truth or not—they preferred Disney's iteration and the model it offered to the children watching. It is this combination of just enough historical truth with a hefty dose of idealization that gives the "Disney versions" such impact. Today, Disney's Davy Crockett, like many other historic characters the company has interpreted, is implanted in our collective memory. This is due mostly to the film's enduring popularity, the medium of television allowing it to enter the home and pervade daily life, and the appeal of its reassuring narrative of American character during the post-WWII and Cold War era. The public was willing to accept some adaptations of fact in service of representing a character in ways that reflected traits they wanted their children to emulate. The more Disney's products played to the narrative of who and what Americans wanted to be, the more popular they became.

Walt Disney<sup>21</sup> himself noted his use of American myth in film and the role it played in the minds of viewers, as reported by Hedda Hopper in 1948:

the heroes we made in our own likeness in this country are as good a reflection of our national traits and personality as anything history can offer . . . In addition to the sheer entertainment values in the characters of our native legendry . . . I think this is a good time to get acquainted with or renew acquaintance with the American breed of robust, cheerful, energetic and representative folk heroes. One thing they had in common—they were all workingmen. The mighty man of American myth earned his keep, riding herd, planting trees, felling timber, building railroads, pounding a steel drill, poling keelboats, taming nature in mighty joust and herculean feat. There were no drones in this great cast of national characters. They were just exaggerated portraits of the normal, busy, indomitable, toiling man of

19 "A Wonderful World," *Newsweek Magazine*, April 18, 1955.

20 Margaret King, "The Recycled Hero," in *Davy Crockett: The Man, the Legend, The Legacy 1786–1986*, ed. Michael A. Lofaro (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 151–152.

21 When referring to Walt Disney, the man, I refer to him by his first or first and last name, as is done within the official literature of the company. Of course, separating the man from the company can be difficult in itself as Walt's reputation and own life story are as much a part of the Disney brand as Mickey Mouse.

their day. And they are worth looking at—soberly and in fun—to re-educate our minds, and our children’s minds, to the lusty, gutty new world called America.<sup>22</sup>

Disney’s films were constantly reminding viewers, implicitly and explicitly, of the American character as Walt and others at this time understood it. This was both part of what made them popular and what gave the films meaning to Americans beyond simple entertainment value. They served as ways for Americans to pass on their values and understand their society.

Disney’s entire body work ultimately led President Eisenhower to call Walt Disney the nation’s own “creator of folklore” in 1957.<sup>23</sup> Notably, Eisenhower repeated this point when he labeled Walt Disney an “Ambassador of Freedom for the United States” while awarding him the Freedoms Foundation’s 1963 George Washington Honor Medal.<sup>24</sup> It was this body of work—early cartoons as well as work on behalf of the government and American home front during World War II—that initially created an association of the Disney brand and traditional visions of American morals and myths.

#### Symbolizing: Disney Diplomacy and Morale

As Disney characters and cartoons were reaching new heights of popularity at the end of the 1930s, World War II interrupted the studio’s traditional operations (as it did those of the world at large). As they had during the Depression, Disney’s cartoons continued to offer lighthearted entertainment to a public that was often hard pressed to find anything to laugh about. A Disney cartoon, *Mickey’s Gala Premiere*, was the final transmission from the BBC television station in Britain before it went off the air on September 1, 1939, as a safety precaution (it was feared that enemy planes would be able to lock onto the BBC’s signal and use it as a target).<sup>25</sup> As screens went dark, it was a fitting message of defiance that the happy, ever hopeful Mickey Mouse was the one to say goodbye. Although Disney’s cartoons and comic strips had been popular overseas since the time of their release, the work that Disney did for the federal government in service of the war effort would cement the company as a quasi-official American symbol, both at home and abroad.

From the very beginning of World War II, Disney was at work on the home front. The day after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, US Army troops charged with protecting the nearby Lockheed Martin plant requisitioned half of Disney’s Burbank, California, studio for their use. Soon, the rest of the studio was devoted to the cause as well, churning out military training films, government propaganda (provided at cost), and military insignia (which was provided free of charge). Disney’s

<sup>22</sup> Hopper, “Disney Brings.”

<sup>23</sup> Thomas M. Pryor, “Disney is Saluted by the President,” *New York Times*, February 19, 1957.

<sup>24</sup> “Disney Wins George Washington Award,” *Atlanta Daily World*, February 24, 1963.

<sup>25</sup> Finolo Rohrer, “Back After Break,” *BBC News Magazine*, June 7, 2006, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/magazine/5054802.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/5054802.stm).

entire stable of characters was employed in the name of patriotism. Perhaps their most prolific role during the war was as a morale booster for the troops. Company artists created images of Disney characters (as well as new characters or mascots done in the Disney style) for use by different military divisions, eventually providing insignia to almost 1,300 units in the US armed forces. Requests were so numerous that the studio had to set up an entire five-person team devoted to insignia under the lead of artist Hank Porter to even come close to keeping up with the demand. When those units went into service, both at home and abroad, they took a little piece of Disney with them, alongside the American flag.

Beyond individual military units, Disney partnered with several government agencies to educate citizens and encourage them to do their part for the war effort. Disney characters appeared on posters, in books, and even on war bonds to boost their appeal to children. Disney's animation techniques were used for educational shorts, training films, and war-time themed entertainment. *The New Spirit* was meant to explain income tax laws enacted in 1942 to help fund the war. *Donald Gets Drafted* provided entertainment aligned with current events and promoted patriotic service as exemplified by Donald Duck. By 1943 newspapers were reporting that up to 92 percent of the Disney Company's work was being done for government agencies. Its involvement on the home front established Disney as a truly American brand, one that supported the American values already associated with its character.

Although people around the world knew Disney characters to be American creations, during the war they were explicitly associated with the US government. This was particularly clear in 1941 when President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Nelson Rockefeller, in his war-time role as Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, sent Walt on a tour of South America as part of the Good Neighbor program.<sup>26</sup> They hoped that Mickey and company (along with various other film stars) could inspire the countries of that continent to choose loyalty to the United States over joining forces with the Axis. Even if they didn't find the American government all that likable, surely no one would want to stand against that lovable Mickey Mouse.

The most famous results of that trip were the films *Saludos Amigos* and *The Three Caballeros*, starring Donald Duck, crowned by Theodore Strauss of the *New York Times* as an "ambassador-at-large, a salesman of the American Way" for his representation of the United States south of its borders.<sup>27</sup> At this point, however, the title "Salesman of the American Way" could really be said to belong to Walt Disney himself, as the use of his characters in war-related work had solidified his brand as a symbol of the United States and its values. After this work, Disney and America would be irrevocably linked. In 1944 Hedda Hopper alluded to this future after she had discussed with Walt Disney his contemporary projects and future plans:

<sup>26</sup> See J. B. Kaufman, *South of the Border with Disney: Walt Disney and the Good Neighbor Program, 1941-1948* (Glendale, CA: Disney Editions, 2009) and Theodore Thomas, *Walt and El Grupo* (Film, Theodore Thomas Productions, 2008).

<sup>27</sup> Theodore Strauss, "Donald Duck's Disney," *New York Times*, February 7, 1943.

The war's end may be a long way off but it's good to see that leaders are looking ahead and will be ready for the return of our boys who sacrificed their all to establish the rights of free men to live and raise families with the security we here in America have always known.

Walt Disney, who built a mouse into a household pet, is showing us the way.<sup>28</sup>

Disney's war work went a long way towards giving the brand legitimacy as a representative of American identity, but it was not only that which made it truly unique in the formation of collective memory.<sup>29</sup> What truly set Disney apart from other film studios was its creation of a physical place where the history and ideals they had become identified with came to life, so to speak, through lived experience.

### Materializing: Disney Parks

In 1955, Disney opened Disneyland in California, a theme park Walt Disney described in his speech at its opening as dedicated to "the ideals, the dreams, and the hard facts that have created America." In 1971, five years after the death of its founder, the Disney Company opened Walt Disney World in Florida, which expanded on the original template while maintaining the same basic cultural story. By building locations where people can experience simulations of historical moments alongside characters they've come to see as representations of themselves, Disney distilled the collective memories it had tapped into with its films and cartoons into a physical place. The theme parks gave a tangible form to American myths and stories of cultural identity, many of which, being largely mythological, had no other memory site of their own. This distillation has made the Disney Parks what anthropologist Conrad Kottak has deemed an American pilgrimage location, where we travel to see "a national mythology at a sacred site."<sup>30</sup>

Similar to living history sites such as Greenfield Village and Colonial Williamsburg, Disney theme parks offer an immersive experience of a carefully curated version of history. The visitor is able to add to or replace their recollection of an historical moment with a lived experience. Through our experiences of them the stories presented in these spaces become the versions of history we most readily remember, hence, they become our collective memory.<sup>31</sup> Amy Levin describes

28 Hedda Hopper, "Disney Outlines Postwar Plans," *Los Angeles Times*, February 20, 1944.

29 Other studios such as Warner Brothers were also involved in war themed entertainment work and employed by the federal government to sell bonds and moral lessons. See Martin Kaplan and Johanna Blakley, eds., *Warners' War: Politics, Pop Culture & Propaganda in Wartime Hollywood* (Los Angeles: The Norman Lear Center Press, 2004).

30 Conrad Kottak quoted in Peter Carlson, "More Real than Reality," *The Washington Post*, May 15, 1994.

31 Richard Handler and Eric Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

attractions such as Colonial Williamsburg and Greenfield Village as places “where public history may be transformed into collective memory as visitors come to remember the experience of visiting the site rather than ‘pure’ history,” a description that can also be aptly applied to the Disney Parks.<sup>32</sup> Walt Disney visited both Greenfield Village and Colonial Williamsburg before building his own theme park, and he recognized the power of the physical to impact learning. He himself credited his own real-life experiences with most of his knowledge, explaining his view that “You can’t force people to be scholars . . . There’s other ways people get educated.”<sup>33</sup> In describing Disneyland’s concept Walt stated that its explicit purpose was to reach beyond the entertainment typically associated with theme parks, to straddle the world between fun and learning. “I don’t want to just entertain kids with pony rides and slides and swings” he said, “I want them to learn something about their heritage.”<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Walt often used the term “exhibits” when talking about his plans for Disneyland. Although we often associate the term exhibits with museums, Walt would have understood “exhibits” as also encompassing other educational and entertainment displays such as those at World’s Fairs. By using the term “exhibits,” Disney voiced his intention to include education as an integral part of his theme park. Taking versions of history that had already been, in Stephen Fjellman’s term, “re-mythologized” in movies and television, Disney created a land where fact and fiction blended together into experiences which turned into memories.

Fjellman writes that although Disney theme parks were, of course, built “by a corporation for corporate purposes” they have “transcended that corporation by assimilating and even inventing key symbols of the version of the United States” they present.<sup>35</sup> Each Disney “land” within its Magic Kingdom parks as well as the American Adventure pavilion at Epcot contains symbols and theming evocative of the time period it displays and, by extension, the piece of the American identity it represents. In Walt Disney World’s Magic Kingdom and Disneyland Park in California, those memories of the United States include a version of the rugged individualism personified by the Wild West in Frontierland, where theming echoes a movie-set vision of the American “Old West,” and where Davy Crockett and Pecos Bill would be at home among saloons, desert pines, and mine trains, all neatly symbolized by the coonskin caps still sold in the gift shops there. They include a vision of America on the verge of revolution in Liberty Square (in Florida), where visitors may come face to face with audio-animatronic versions of each president or stand in front of a replica Liberty Bell, a national symbol of freedom. They include an homage to free enterprise on Main Street, U.S.A., where bustling

32 Amy K. Levin, ed., *Defining Memory: Local Museums and the Construction of History in America’s Changing Communities* (AltaMira Press: Lanham, MD, 2007), 45.

33 As told to Peter Martin and Diane Disney Miller in 1956, quoted in Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 13.

34 Karal Ann Marling, “Disneyland, 1955: Just Take the Santa Ana Freeway to the American Dream,” *American Art* 5, no. 1/2 (Winter-Spring 1991): 173.

35 Fjellman, *Vinyl Leaves*, 21.

shops and a railroad depot promise growth to the small, turn-of-the-century town they are meant to represent. They include an emphasis on the forward march of progress and the conquering of new frontiers in Tomorrowland, where themes of space travel and future technological innovations are explored.

In each land, of course, there are opportunities for the visitor not to simply view the past or future but to participate in it. They can ride a mine train in Frontierland or a spaceship in Tomorrowland, both of which evoke feelings of excitement and adventure. They can listen to Abraham Lincoln give a speech in Liberty Square at Disney World or Great Moments with Mr. Lincoln in Disneyland, stirring feelings of patriotism. On Main Street they can converse with the costumed “Citizens of Main Street,” who will make them feel as if they are a member of the small turn-of-the-century town community themselves. The ability to both evoke a feeling and create a memory associated with a symbol such as the vista of a Main Street railroad depot or a Frontierland coonskin cap is an important part of why Disney parks capture the national narrative so well.

At Epcot, part of Florida’s Walt Disney World, there are additional emphases on the themes of liberty, patriotism, and progress. Future World, one half of the park, is completely devoted to technological innovation and the expansion of horizons both physical (such as in the park’s attraction Mission Space, where visitors can crew a mission to Mars) and intellectual (the park’s most physically imposing attraction, Spaceship Earth, details better living through science and discovery over human history). In the host pavilion in Epcot’s World Showcase, known as the American Adventure, visitors are immersed in detailed colonial theming and can enjoy a theater show hosted by Audio-Animatronic figures of Benjamin Franklin and Mark Twain. American symbols in their own right, Franklin and Twain present a sweeping overview of American history focusing on stories commonly accepted as making up American identity. These include defining moments of struggle such as the Civil War and Great Depression that Americans now look back to with an eye for what moral lessons they have to impart.

Through visits to the parks, the feelings of excitement, adventure, patriotism, and progress that these attractions elicit become bound to the place and symbols with which they were experienced, and also become associated with the history they evoke. This can entwine them in our memories. If being an American means to be full of excitement, liberty, adventure, and patriotism, then the places that can evoke all of those feelings in one day while using American cultural stories may, it would follow in our memory, be integral to understanding what being an American means. It must in fact be a part of American identity.

The symbols and historic references of the settings in each Disney “land” have been well-established by many other scholars.<sup>36</sup> This essay instead emphasizes

36 Margaret J. King, Stephen Fjellman, and Karal Ann Marling, to name a few, have done overviews of the symbolism and values in the parks as a whole. See in particular Richard Francaviglia, “Main Street U.S.A.: A Comparison/Contrast of Streetscapes in Disneyland and Walt Disney World,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 15, no. 1 (Summer 1981): 141–56, as well as Francaviglia, “Walt

that it is these images, these snapshots of time specifically engineered to be pleasant and conflict free, which were based on Walt Disney's cartoon work and his personal, intensely patriotic vision of American history, that loom large in the collective memories of millions of American citizens, not to mention many international visitors. The settings of these "lands" also provide a physical space for the understanding and, as we will see later, the negotiation of American identity and experience.

As Karal Ann Marling observed, with its theme parks Disney "added the missing quotient of reality" to the vision of America already being depicted in their cartoons and films. "The once-passive viewer now became . . . a real-life participant" in a version of history that seemed more real to those participants than ever before, a version that, to quote David Johnson, became a "special mode of first-hand experience in the repertoire of the great national shared experience."<sup>37</sup> However, it wasn't simply the fact that these memories of America *seemed* real that gave them a place in the national narrative. Although the Disney brand identified with its version of American history and values and created a physical space for the formation of collective memories, that was not enough to establish it as a place of *national* memory. What moves the Disney theme parks beyond being just places that create memories of American history into places that create memories of the American national narrative is the legitimization that Disney's parks receive through their partnerships with national figures and celebrations.

#### Legitimizing: Mickey Mouse/White House

One of the most common means of nationmaking is the forging of a national narrative to unite the citizenry.<sup>38</sup> Although the federal government has preserved and operates "official" sites of American history to tell a national narrative, such as National Parks and the Smithsonian Institution, it is clear that more people are exposed on a regular basis to the Disney version of the national narrative than the federal government's official version. According to the Themed Entertainment Association, in 2016 the Disney theme parks located in the United States received

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Disney's Frontierland as an Allegorical Map of the American West," *Western Historical Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (Summer, 1999): 155–82; and David Johnson, "Disney World as Structure and Symbol: Re-Creation of the American Experience," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 15, no. 1 (Summer 1981): 157–65. A useful discussion of each land at Disneyland can be found in Priscilla Hobbs, *Walt's Utopia: Disneyland and American Mythmaking* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2015). Epcot has been the subject of fewer studies than the lands of the Magic Kingdoms, but Mike Wallace in *Mickey Mouse History* and Stephen Fjellman in *Vinyl Leaves* have both done useful distillations of the American Adventure, specifically. See also Karen Klugman et. al., *Inside the Mouse: Work and Play at Walt Disney World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995) for a breakdown of ideas and ideals at Epcot.

<sup>37</sup> Marling, "Disneyland, 1955," 173 and Johnson, quoted in Fjellman, *Vinyl Leaves*, 96.

<sup>38</sup> See John Gillis, ed. *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994) for a discussion of the politics of national identity and collective memory.

80.7 million visitors. The National Mall—arguably one of the most important “official” sites for American collective memory, housing numerous National Park Service sites as well as most of the Smithsonian Institution’s museums—received 56.5 million visitors in the same year, almost 25 million less than Disney’s North American theme parks.<sup>39</sup> If influence can be measured by sheer numbers of visitors, Disney almost always comes out on top. Given the Disney brand’s popularity it isn’t surprising that federal and state governments seek both official and unofficial partnerships with them. In doing so, they appear to accept the Disney version of the American story. Nor is it surprising that Disney would not only welcome but also actively seek the promotion potential and implicit seal of approval provided by involving the government and elected officials in events at their parks. This mutually beneficial relationship has served a purpose perhaps not envisioned by either party: to set Disney’s theme parks and the American experience viewed there as one of the most important visions of and locations for Americans’ collective memory of their national narrative.

One of the ways the federal government appears to lend its seal of approval to Disney is by sending symbolic representatives of the nation to the Disney theme parks. Since Dwight Eisenhower, every president with the exception of Lyndon Johnson (who presented Walt Disney with the Medal of Freedom but did not visit his park) has visited a Disney property at some point in their lifetime, many for official ceremonies and celebrations. In 1959, while a senator, John F. Kennedy met with Ahmed Sékou Touré, President of Guinea, at Disneyland. That same year Richard Nixon, then the sitting vice president, attended the opening of the Disneyland monorail system with his family. When former president Harry Truman was in Los Angeles for a 1957 Democratic fundraising dinner, he and his entourage took time for an appearance at Disneyland. Four presidents made their visits while in office: in 1978 Jimmy Carter attended the opening of the 26th World Congress of the International Chamber of Commerce meeting at the Magic Kingdom in Walt Disney World, Florida. Ronald Reagan visited twice, both times to EPCOT, first in 1983 to greet international students attending a fellowship program and then in 1985 to hold a second-term inaugural celebration. George H. W. Bush attended a celebration of his “Points of Light” program at EPCOT in 1991, and Barack Obama gave remarks promoting international tourism to the United States while standing in front of Cinderella’s Castle in Florida’s Magic Kingdom in 2012. During his speech, President Obama explicitly connected Disney and the American Dream. As he stated:

we’re going to rebuild an economy where hard work pays off, where responsibility is rewarded, and where anybody can make it if they try. That’s

39 “Theme Index Museum Index 2016 Global Attractions Attendance Report,” Themed Entertainment Association, [http://www.teaconnect.org/images/files/TEA\\_235\\_103719\\_170601.pdf](http://www.teaconnect.org/images/files/TEA_235_103719_170601.pdf); “2016 Visitor Statistics Washington, DC,” *Destination DC*, [https://washington-org.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2016\\_visitor\\_statistics\\_september\\_2017.pdf](https://washington-org.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2016_visitor_statistics_september_2017.pdf).



Vice President Richard Nixon and his family (pictured with Walt Disney) were present at the opening ceremony for the Disneyland monorail, June 14, 1959. (Image courtesy Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum)

part of the reason why people want to come here, because they know our history. They know what the American Dream has been all about . . . a place like Disneyland represents that quintessentially American spirit. This image is something that's recognized all around the world.<sup>40</sup>

Not only do presidential visits offer the occasion for great photo-ops and good PR for both the administration and the Disney Company, but they confer the ultimate legitimization of Disney as the seat of collective memory of, as President Obama put it, “that quintessentially American spirit.”

Another way the Disney theme parks have earned a sense of legitimization from the state is the staging of national moments of celebration. These include yearly Fourth of July celebrations, nightly flag retreat ceremonies, even, as noted above,

<sup>40</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks at Walt Disney World in Lake Buena Vista, Florida,” The White House website, January 19, 2012. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/01/19/remarks-president-unveiling-strategy-help-boost-travel-and-tourism>.

holding an inaugural parade for Ronald Reagan when his Washington, DC parade had to be canceled due to extreme weather. Of these celebrations, perhaps the largest was the fifteen-month bicoastal extravaganza of Americana, “America on Parade,” which Disney staged from 1975 to 1976 to celebrate the bicentennial of the United States.

Designated as official bicentennial events by the US government and taking place at both Disneyland and Walt Disney World, these parades were estimated to have been seen by over 25 million people.<sup>41</sup> In 1976, Independence National Historic Park, the seat of the actual signing of the Declaration of Independence that the year’s celebrations marked, received by contrast 3.7 million visitors.<sup>42</sup> The sheer numbers witnessing Disney’s parade, which featured floats re-creating scenes from American history, bands, and fireworks, made it one of the largest shared celebrations across the nation. This sense of national celebration taking place specifically at Disney sites did much to solidify the theme park’s place in the minds of Americans as spaces not only for family-friendly vacations, but as ones where they could come together to share cultural and historical heritage. After visiting both the Magic Kingdom park in Florida and Colonial Williamsburg during the bicentennial celebrations, journalist Dick Schaap’s six-year-old son intimated to his father, “George Washington may be the father of this country, dad, but Walt Disney is its guardian.” Schaap himself astutely (and wryly) observed how the celebration placed the Disney theme parks alongside another living history park as a repository of national heritage and place of celebration:

The cradle of democracy blends with the height of imagination, and every day through September, 1976, “America on Parade,” a spectacular Bicentennial salute, marches straight down . . . not Duke of Gloucester Street in Williamsburg . . . but Main Street, U.S.A., in the heart of Disney World. And there, at the heart of the parade, bearing drum and fife and Betsy Ross’s original pennant, dressed in tricorn hat and patched with bandages, stand the three symbols of the American Revolution: Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and Goofy.<sup>43</sup>

Partnerships with the federal government during World War II had already given the Disney brand some sense of authority in representing the United States. With the opening of Disneyland, Disney continued to invite and/or accept politicians at their parks, drawing, perhaps unconsciously, on the legitimacy of the state in the process of nationmaking and creating a national story to burnish their own authority in those activities.

41 James T. Wooten, “Disney Will Join In Bicentennial,” *New York Times*, February 19, 1975.

42 “Independence NHP,” National Park Service, [https://irma.nps.gov/Stats/SSRSReports/Park%20Specific%20Reports/Annual%20Park%20Recreation%20Visitation%20\(1904%20-%20Last%20Calendar%20Year\)?Park=INDE](https://irma.nps.gov/Stats/SSRSReports/Park%20Specific%20Reports/Annual%20Park%20Recreation%20Visitation%20(1904%20-%20Last%20Calendar%20Year)?Park=INDE).

43 Dick Schaap, “Culture Shock,” *New York Times*, September 28, 1975.

Disney theme parks have been able to remain relevant as places of collective memory of the national narrative by allowing the narrative they present to adjust along with prevailing attitudes. At the same time, the company has kept the narrative static enough and slow enough in responding to those attitude changes that it remains appealing to multiple generations. In this way the narrative changes while not seeming jarring to visitors.

For example, as the public's attitudes towards the portrayal of women and minorities have changed over time from those which dominated during the time the Disney theme parks were built, Disney has updated early attractions to reflect new social mores. As the national narrative changed, so did its portrayal at the parks. One of the ways the company has done this is by enlisting prominent historians to consult on their projects. For instance, they worked with Eric Foner to update the scripts at Walt Disney World's Hall of Presidents and Disneyland's "Great Moments with Mr. Lincoln." Former head of Walt Disney Imagineering Marty Sklar noted that the Carousel of Progress, a ride at Walt Disney World that originated at the 1964 World's Fair and that represents versions of an American family through the years enjoying successive iterations of new technologies, has been updated from the original show in an attempt to represent the "changing roles of women, youth, and grandparents with its final act."<sup>44</sup> Lynn Weiner's examination of the different scripts of the show, however, reveal not just a reflection of the changing roles but a reflection of the way those roles are perceived socially, noting that "a feminist perspective, acknowledged during the 1970s and 1980s when feminism was part of the national discourse, has been scripted out of the *Carousel's* world in the more conservative 1990s."<sup>45</sup> In this sense, the show might be even more reflective of the national attitude than even Disney realized as it updated it.

Other updates include changes at the American Adventure at EPCOT, where Disney devotes a small gallery called "American Heritage Gallery" to exhibits on American heritage that have included African, African American and, most recently, American Indian art. In the same building that houses these exhibits runs the aforementioned Mark Twain and Benjamin Franklin hosted theater show designed to take the viewer "through our nation's short, but storied history."<sup>46</sup> The show premiered in 1982 (with updates in 1993 and 2007) and the content represented what Mike Wallace called "an extraordinary step forward" as in this presentation "American history is no longer about great white men; indeed it seems to be largely about African Americans, women, Indians, and ecologists."<sup>47</sup> A Disney

<sup>44</sup> Marty Sklar, *Dream It! Do It! My Half-Century Creating Disney's Magic Kingdoms* (Glendale, CA: Disney Editions, 2013), 59.

<sup>45</sup> Lynn Y. Weiner, "There's a Great Big Beautiful Tomorrow': Historic Memory and Gender in Walt Disney's Carousel of Progress," *Journal of American Culture* 20 (June 2004): 115.

<sup>46</sup> "The American Adventure," Walt Disney World website, <https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/attractions/epcot/american-adventure/>.

<sup>47</sup> Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History*, 151.



The symbolic heart of the unofficial national narrative, Epcot’s American Adventure pavilion, now has an exhibit of American Indian art. (Image courtesy of the author)

briefing pamphlet for employees at the pavilion confirmed that Disney “couldn’t ignore certain major issues that questioned our nation’s stand on human liberty and justice” when they designed the show.<sup>48</sup>

In July 2018, Disney opened an exhibit of American Indian art in the “American Heritage Gallery” in the American Pavilion at Epcot. “Creating Tradition: Innovation and Change in American Indian Art,” a joint effort between Disney, the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) and Museum of Indian Arts and Culture (MIAC), is located directly outside the theater where Ben Franklin and Mark Twain narrate the greatest hits of American history—beginning with the arrival of the pilgrims. The addition of “Creating Tradition” helps to complicate the narrative that already exists in the theatrical show. Through the juxtaposition of Native art from different time periods and geographic locations, “Creating” makes a simple but bold statement, given the location: American Indian peoples have always been here, they are still here, and they are not monolithic. At the exhibit’s opening, NMAI Director Kevin Gover (Pawnee) captured both the intent of the

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History*, 151.

exhibit and the importance of its location, stating that visitors would see that “the American Experience begins with the American Indians who have always been here . . . This gallery helps to convey not only that there were a great many Indians and they were very different one from another, but also that they’re still here.”<sup>49</sup> By physically locating Native history within the American Adventure pavilion, Disney, NMAI, and MIAC are furthering the growth of a more inclusive American narrative. Native cultures and American folk heroes not only occupy the same physical space but relate to one another not as adversaries (as in so many American folk histories of the “Old West”) but as part of one greater, unified story. In doing so Disney (in partnership with NMAI and MIAC) is actively participating in the shifting of the national narrative.

Another recent update has been a change in the way women, or rather, one woman in particular, was portrayed on the classic Disney ride *Pirates of the Caribbean*, bringing it more in line with current thought. Disney replaced a scene along the boat ride that involved the auction of a woman (advertised by a sign as a “Wench for a Bride”) with a scene where the same woman once on sale now gains agency by participating in auctioning stolen goods as a pirate herself. This followed other changes made over the years to other female characters in the ride, including the reversal of a scene in which pirates chased women around, obviously ready to grab them as spoils. Today, those same women are chasing the pirates out of their homes with broomsticks. These modifications are the result of how views of the public (and changing populations) have changed over time, influenced by a number of factors outside the Disney Company itself. Although *Pirates of the Caribbean* does not focus on US history, because of its location at the Disney parks the lens with which it views women can appear to represent the perspective of the entire country. Therefore, when it became apparent the *Pirates of the Caribbean* was out of step with the views of the majority of the American people, the company stepped in to adjust it. This is an example of the American narrative influencing not only attractions dealing with American history specifically, but also the entirety of the Disney parks. It shows that the relationship between the parks and the national narrative flows both ways, from Disney to the people, from the people to Disney.

The Disney theme parks also play host (sometimes willingly, sometimes not) to public attempts to interact with or even shift the national narrative directly. Perhaps the best-known updating of the national narrative at Disney is that at the Hall of Presidents at Walt Disney World, where every president from Washington to the current commander-in-chief is represented in audio-animatronic form during a stirring, patriotic theatrical homage to the office and the country itself. Historically, guests have tended to interact with the figure of the sitting president in a negative fashion if unpopular (Clinton was booed, and items were thrown at George W. Bush, for example, while they were in office. Nixon is still occasionally booed when his figure is introduced). Visitors have often reported clapping or

49 Kevin Gover, *Creating Tradition* Opening speech, Orlando, Florida, July 27, 2018.



Earnest Gay Thoughts

@JayMalsky

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I protested @realDonaldTrump at the #hallofpresidents cuz I'll never get this close in real life probs. #lockhimup



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On December 27, 2017 Jay Malsky engaged in a small protest at Walt Disney World's Hall of Presidents. (Screen capture by the author, June 29, 2018)

booing at different presidents (sometimes the same president).<sup>50</sup> Though guests know, intellectually, that they are viewing robotic versions of the commander-in-chief, they sometimes can't help themselves from making commentary they don't have the opportunity to make in person.

The audio-animatronic of the current president, Donald J. Trump, made its debut in December 2017. The first public report of interaction came shortly thereafter: a video from December 27 showed a member of the crowd shouting "Lock him up!" during the Trump robot's speech, while another guest shouts back "He's

<sup>50</sup> See, for instance, "Do People Boo at Hall of Presidents," *Reddit*, [https://www.reddit.com/r/WaltDisneyWorld/comments/2tkire/do\\_people\\_boo\\_at\\_hall\\_of\\_presidents/](https://www.reddit.com/r/WaltDisneyWorld/comments/2tkire/do_people_boo_at_hall_of_presidents/) or Mike Spata, "Man Sits Through Disney World's Hall of Presidents Over and Over Just Trying to Understand America," *Tampa Bay Times*, February 18, 2018.

not real!”<sup>51</sup> Although likely not Disney’s intention, the mechanical Trump appears to be standing in as a Trump proxy for members of the audience. It is the closest to any of the presidents that almost all guests are ever going to be, which is one reason some feel it is a legitimate place to air their grievances. In fact, Jay Malsky, the Trump protestor referenced above, said exactly that in his Twitter report of the incident: “I protested @realDonaldTrump at the #hallofpresidents cuz I’ll never get this close in real life probs.”<sup>52</sup> Walt Disney intended for this part of the park to educate children in some of their nation’s history, but over the years it has also come to function as a space for the public to express their opinion on the current administration and sometimes render a verdict on historical ones. This space for interaction between people and a speaking simulation of every president is the only one of its kind in the United States, and thus an important location for the formation of collective memories of the presidents.

Currently adjacent to the Hall of Presidents is an interactive show called “The Muppets Present Great Moments in American History,” a light-hearted exercise in “collective” participation in public memory. During each show the Muppets re-tell, with much comedic flair, an important story from early American history, currently either the midnight ride of Paul Revere or the signing of the Declaration of Independence. During the show recounting the Declaration’s signing, an actor on the ground occasionally engages members of the audience who are encouraged to pretend to be part of the historical scene being presented, providing guests with a common cultural experience. Having the scenes portrayed by Muppets of various species, colors, variations of fur, and genders complicates somewhat the traditional stories presented, most of which fall within the category of stories of great white men of American history. In its own way, this also gives a more inclusive twist to the traditional narrative.

In another example of the public engaging with the national narrative from the location of a Disney park, in January 2018 a group of activists chose Disneyland’s gates as a place to stake their claim to a piece of the American experience. About fifteen protestors staged a peaceful rally that temporarily blocked vehicle entrance to Disneyland to publicly demand Congressional support for recipients of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA), commonly known as Dreamers. One of the protesters, Barbara Hernandez, was told by her mother when she was six years old that they were going to Disneyland. It turned out that was code for moving to America.<sup>53</sup> Now, Hernandez

51 Ian R, “Fight Over Donald Trump at Disneyworld Hall of Presidents,” [filmed December 2017], YouTube video, 00:46, Posted [Dec. 27, 2017], [www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=11&v=gwjOe5TKoBM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=11&v=gwjOe5TKoBM).

52 Jay Malsky, Twitter post, December 27, 2017, 6:34 p.m., <https://twitter.com/jaymalsky/status/946147176488546304>?

53 Carlos Granada, “DACA Protest Temporarily Blocks Disneyland Entrance,” *ABC 7* (Los Angeles, CA), January 22, 2018, [abc7.com/politics/daca-protest-temporarily-blocks-disneyland-entrance/2978429/](http://abc7.com/politics/daca-protest-temporarily-blocks-disneyland-entrance/2978429/). According to Smithsonian researcher Patricia Arteaga, it isn’t uncommon for a “visit to Disneyland” to be used by Latinx immigrant families as code for moving to the US.



A protest in support of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA) held at the gates of Disneyland on January 22, 2018. (Image courtesy of Cindy Carcamo, *Los Angeles Times*)

and her allies chose Disneyland as the stage for their protest because of its symbolic value, both as a representative space for the US and because “it’s where dreams come true... But we’re not on vacation anymore. We’re still waiting for our dreams to come true.”<sup>54</sup> Acknowledging the power of the Disney theme park as a location for public discourse and an American symbol, the activists chose it to engage in public debate about who should be included in the national narrative.

This directly contradicts concerns on the part of some critics such as Henry Giroux, who worries that Disney’s “corporate reach into everyday life... will sanitize and trivialize any serious engagement with public memory, citizenship, and democracy.”<sup>55</sup> In fact, Disney has increasingly become a place where the public engages directly with questions of citizenship and democracy. The year 2018 saw the aforementioned DACA protest, a planned “die-in” at a Walt Disney World park to protest Disney’s donations to a politician who supported the National Rifle Association (which was later canceled for fear of traumatizing children), and a man who unfurled a “Re-elect Trump” banner at Walt Disney World’s Magic Kingdom

54 Hailey Branson-Potts and Cindy Carcamo, “DACA Recipients Temporarily Block Disneyland Entrance as an Act of Civil Disobedience,” *LA Times*, 22 Jan. 22, 2018, <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-disneyland-daca-protest-20180122-htmlstory.html>.

55 Giroux, *The Mouse That Roared*, 79.

Main Street Railroad and held up a “Trump 2020” placard for cameras while riding Splash Mountain at the same park.<sup>56</sup>

All these examples illustrate ways that Disney theme parks provide a space for collective participation and collaboration in shaping the national discourse. In some cases Disney explicitly invites that participation, and in some cases, the public takes it upon itself to initiate an interaction with the American narrative they see presented at the parks. This keeps that narrative relevant to new generations, who can see themselves reflected in it and who can see ways to change it. It also suggests that the Disney-going public are not passive recipients of the narrative the park has built. They help to shape it, not merely through their consumer dollars, but through active participation. This interaction is the true evidence that Disney has taken its place as a location for not just the dissemination, but the negotiation of the American national narrative.

### Conclusion: Disney for Public Historians

The ways in which the national narrative is represented at Disney theme parks are not, of course, immune to criticism. Many historians and public activists continue to reproach the company for being slow to reflect larger cultural changes (the most frequently cited are the representations of women and minorities) and for hewing as closely as possible to the Cold War-era American narrative they began with. Updates in galleries and attractions reflect the changes pushed for by the public at large, not by specialist groups such as academics. Disney has received criticism for their presentation of history, but they have not ignored it. Rather, the changes made at their parks reflect those desired by their ultimate stakeholders, the ticket-purchasing public, which are not always one and the same with those suggested by academics or social activists.

This is not to discount potentially problematic aspects of Disney’s presentation of history. Rather, it is to suggest that to make best use of the sometimes-fraught relationship that Disney has with public history and the national story, researchers should seek ways in which to examine Disney constructively, beyond denunciation or deification. Steven Watts noted that the polarizing strife between “Disney Disciples” and “Disney Denouncers” had “created an emotional and ideological minefield for those who wish to approach Disney seeking neither revelation nor

<sup>56</sup> Gray Rohrer, “Disney ‘Die-In’ Protest Canceled to Avoid ‘Trauma’ to Kids,” *Orlando Sentinel*, June 25, 2018, <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/politics/political-pulse/os-disney-die-in-canceled-20180625-story.html>; Aris Folley, “Man Sneaks ‘Re-Elect Trump’ Banner into Disney World’s Magic Kingdom,” *The Hill*, September 24, 2018, <https://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/408127-man-installs-re-elect-trump-banner-at-walt-disney-worlds-magic>; and Kalham Rosenblatt, “Disney World Bans Man Who Held Trump Sign on Splash Mountain,” *NBC News*, November 14, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/disney-world-bans-man-who-held-trump-sign-splash-mountain-n936151>.

damnation, but understanding.”<sup>57</sup> The Disney theme parks offer a good opportunity for researchers to utilize them as a barometer of the national narrative itself, at least in the way that many American consumers see it. What resonates with the theme park-going public about Disney’s representations of history? What do they push back on? Disney’s presentations of the past have often been decried by those in the academy as a distortion of history, but this ignores the importance of what is actually occurring.<sup>58</sup> Rather than a straightforward history lesson, Disney provides a space for the negotiation of how Americans have understood and want to understand history. Most study of the Disney theme parks has focused on how Disney has packaged history for the public, but has little acknowledged the way the public has influenced Disney in their presentations. To gain a full understanding of how Disney grew to become an institution of public history, we must endeavor to acknowledge the *public’s* role in doing so. If we reframe our thinking, we might instead understand the ways history has both been presented and evolved over time at those parks as a location-specific process by which the public and a corporation are engaged in a cultural ritual of transforming historical fact into the “national narrative.” We might begin to better see the ways in which the public use the Disney parks as places to influence the national narrative, such as their calls for shifting the way women are represented in certain attractions, a park-specific influence, to calls from Disney property to change DACA laws, a nationwide influence. Doing so would allow researchers to build a more constructive analysis of the theme parks and the way the public uses them. As Disney park visitors are a self-selecting group, it cannot be said that they represent an impartial cross-section of the American public, but their views as they influence the Disney theme parks may still offer a useful tool in a kit of many used to assess how Americans relate to history, as well as influence ways and places public historians seek to impact and facilitate the presentation of history. If we understand how the public uses history at Disney, we will be better positioned to work with both Disney and the public to facilitate that use in responsible ways.

Walt Disney was not the first to use history to inspire his storytelling nor the first to turn history into a physical experience. He was, however, the first use a brand that had already become symbolic of a nation’s history itself to create that physical experience. Over time, through a combination of branding, symbolizing,

57 Steven Watts, “Walt Disney: Art and Politics in the American Century,” *The Journal of American History* 82, no. 1 (June 1995): 84. Jason Sperb has offered an excellent short analysis of the problems of teaching Disney when most students come to his classroom firmly rooted in one camp or another. Sperb suggests that the goal for those teaching the subject of Disney should be to “inform, but not necessarily change, minds and to get students to be reflective, not critical.” Jason Sperb, “How (Not) to Teach Disney,” *Journal of Film and Video* 70, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 47–60. This is a perfect description of how public historians should approach the subject as well, simply replacing “students” with “the public.”

58 As Richard Francaviglia put it, “those who think of Disney’s version of history as unreal need to redefine reality in order to understand what is occurring.” Francaviglia, “The Significance of Imagineered Places.”

materializing, legitimizing, and adapting, Disney theme parks have been elevated to nationally important places of collective memory of the American experience. The factors in this rise help us to understand why, if Disney wasn't the first to do many of these things, they nevertheless became perhaps the most important to have done so. These factors have helped build Cinderella's Castle into what John Schultz has called "the hub of American myths" and the Magic Kingdom into "a mirror to tell us not only who is the fairest of them all, but who we are and who we are becoming."<sup>59</sup> In other words, the castle, the Magic Kingdom, EPCOT, Frontierland, all reflect to us our national narrative, and we in turn participate in shaping their narrative into our own image. Understanding how Disney theme parks came to play such an important function is a key to understanding how the national narrative is shaped in other locations of collective memory as well. The factors of influence outlined here can provide an initial framework for future researchers to explore how other non-federal locations of memory gain cultural influence, how the public works with or against private corporations to shape the story of the nation they reflect, and offer us a way to constructively use Disney parks to further our understanding of the state of the national narrative. They might even help to untangle the complicated question of exactly how "Disney" came to mean so much to so many.

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<sup>59</sup> John Schultz, "The Fabulous Presumption of Walt Disney World: Magic Kingdom in the Wilderness," *The Georgia Review* 42, no. 2 (Summer 1988): 283, 286.