

SECTION I—BEYOND THE FAIREST: ESSAYS ON RACE AND ETHNICITY

Cannibals and Coons: Blackness in the Early Days of Walt Disney

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Wish Upon a Star

There is little doubt that for the young and young at heart, Disney is synonymous with magic and fantasy, a wish factory if you will. It is an alternate universe that operates at the pleasure of young children, centering their world view, creating a place where animals speak, one never grows old and the possibility of becoming a prince or princess seems far more attainable than becoming a scientist or teacher. Mickey is the unofficial *wishmaster*. He and his animated entourage are interwoven into the fabric of this nation and the lives of many families who pass their love for Disney and its magic from one generation to the next. Yet for all of its allure, Disney's world is not magic for everyone. Although many may cite *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) as evidence to the contrary, the arrival of a Disney-born black princess—more than 70 years after the appearance of their first effort to create an animated fairytale with *Snow White*—offers little consolation to people like me who spent their childhood on a quest for a reflection of myself in the world of Disney.

Growing up I searched for characters who mirrored the people in my community and reflected the values and aesthetics of the Other, in this case, African, Latino, Asian and First Nations Diasporas. Instead, Disney gave me caricatured representations of the diversity of my world. Disney's diversity was often channeled not with cartoon characters but through animals whose speech and mannerisms reflected animated minstrelsy. Self-proclaimed *injuns*, complete with red skin, exaggerated features and eagle feathers share a *peace pipe* with Peter Pan, Wendy and the crew as *the natives* tell their story through

stereotypical dance while singing, *What Made the Red Man Red* (1953). *Song of the South* (1946), Disney's first live-action musical drama, offers us Bre'r Rabbit, Fox and Bear. These core characters of African American folktales are transformed into shady imposters of their authentic selves, into classic coons physically and verbally, complete with the standard speech of "dees," "dems" and "dose."¹ These characters were the rule instead of the exception. The portrayals were presented during the ascent of America's favorite mouse with images that dashed my girlhood wishes for Disney magic that looked, and felt, familiar and beautiful.

The Legacy of Caricatured Blackness

Shortly after the birth of Mickey Mouse in the animated short *Steamboat Willie* (1928), caricatured illustrations of Africans and African Americans began to appear in Disney animated films.² Disney's images were the latest in a history of drawings informed by racism that had been in existence for almost 500 years. Since the first explorers began traveling to Africa in the mid-15th century renderings of Africans have been included as a part of their travel diaries and official records of their journeys.³

Many of the drawings were ethnographic recordings of various cultural groups and nations and used for anthropological studies. In addition to the images being used as visual references for scientific investigations, illustrations of men, women and children appeared in a variety of other ways ranging from decorative elements along of the border of maps that detailed the continent and countries of Africa, to portraits featuring them in the service of Europeans. Irrespective of the manner of portrayal the intent was the same: to illustrate the differences between the races, thereby validating the notion of African people as direct descendants of "the missing link," more closely related to primates in ancestry, appearance and behavior than humans (Europeans).⁴ Scientists, scholars and the leaders of nations utilized the discourse of difference as a means to justify the morality of the Transatlantic Slave Trade.⁵

It must be noted, however, that not all of the drawings were anthropological in nature. One of the earliest non-scientific illustrations can be found in Milan featuring a male servant as one of the assassins of a Milanese Duke, Galeazzo Maria Sforza, in a 1476 frontispiece of Giovanni Andrea da Lampugnano's *Lament of the Duke Galeazzo Maria*.⁶ Paintings and sculptures of African descended kings, traders and religious figures housed in the world's museums demonstrate that there were a number of artists working during the same 500 year period who were more interested in portraying realistic representations of the aesthetics and cultures of the sitters as opposed to stylized stereotypical interpretations.

Nevertheless a large majority of the images continued to highlight the

differences between Africans and Europeans and create a dichotomous relationship that presented Europeans as good, pretty, intellectual, refined and driven, commonly articulated as *whiteness*, juxtaposed against bad, ugly, emotional, savage and lazy Africans, representing *blackness*.⁷ It was the racialization of humanity that served as the foundation for many theories related to the validity of inherent *inhumanness* of black people, thereby grounding the argument for enslavement, segregation, oppression and genocide. Almost 200 years after da Lampugnano's work was published, the United States joined Europe in the slave trade, as well as their propagandistic pursuit to justify their endeavor.

Even Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826), third president of the United States, formally comments on the differences between the races in his book *Notes on the State of Virginia*, first published in 1781. In this text Jefferson uses physical differences between blacks and whites to justify the continued enslavement of Africans:

The first difference which strikes us is that of colour. Whether the black of the negro resides in the reticular membrane between the skin and scarf-skin, or in the scarf-skin itself; whether it proceeds from the colour of the blood, the colour of the bile, or from that of some other secretion, the difference is fixed in nature, and is as real as if its seat and cause were better known to us. And is this difference of no importance? Is it not the foundation of a greater or less share of beauty in the two races? Are not the fine mixtures of red and white, the expressions of every passion by greater or less suffusions of colour in the one, preferable to that eternal monotony, which reigns in the countenances, that immoveable veil of black which covers all the emotions of the other race.⁸

Jefferson also believed that there was a connection between color and countenance. Unifying complexion and character was a part of the discourse employed by pro-slavery advocates and served as a rallying point for their cause. Although less than 100 years after Jefferson's observations, enslavement would come to a formal end, the battle over Blackness and the humanity of African Diasporan people would continue. The rhetoric of difference, however, was now infused into the fabric of this nation, impacting all aspects of society from policy to public engagement, from education to entertainment.

In the 19th century, illustrator Edward Williams Clay (1799–1857) drew caricatured black figures in a series entitled *Life in Philadelphia* (1828–1830). According to the University of Michigan's Clements Library exhibition, *Reframing the Color Line: Race and the Visual Culture in the Atlantic World*,

Clay deployed caricature to pose questions about who African Americans, many of them former slaves, could be in a nation that relied upon race and slavery to signal inequality and difference. Clay invented black figures that uttered malapropisms, wore clothing of exaggerated proportions, struck ungraceful poses,

and thereby failed to measure up to the demands of freedom and citizenship. His ideas were cruel, yet enduring.⁹

Caricaturists Arthur Burdett Frost (1851–1928) and Edward Windsor Kemble (1861–1933), known for their illustrations in the Joel Chandler Harris series featuring *Uncle Remus*,¹⁰ continued Clay's legacy of black caricatures reifying the stereotypical interpretations of people of African descent.

The works of Clay, Frost and Kemble are not unique in their imagery or intent. Artists working in a variety of media incorporated stereotypical representations of black people into their work. Yet the illustrations and cartoons found in books, magazines and newspapers made the largest impact by normalizing these caricatured perspectives largely due to the accessibility of the media. In addition most of these images were accompanied by text in the form of captions or descriptive commentaries. The text was often written in what was considered an accurate encapsulation of the manner in which black people spoke, or *black dialect*, further perpetuating and cementing society's perceptions about the ignorance and limited educability of blacks.

Although the impact of cartoons and illustrations was far-reaching, the advent of animated cartoons ushered in by Winsor McCay (1871–1934), who transformed his comic strip *Little Nemo in Slumberland* into an animated short in 1911, brought messages and images to broad audience regardless of literacy, education and exposure (Crawford, 2007). With animation, accessibility of these images dramatically increased well beyond the reach attained through books, magazines and newspapers. As a result, caricatured imagery became embodied through animation so when McCay's character *Little Nemo* was introduced to the nation through his short, so were his black maid and the enslaved Africans who were in the service of King Morpheus, ruler of all Slumberland (Heer, 2006).

Prior to McCay and other early animators working in studios like Bray Productions (1914) and the Pat Sullivan Studio (1916), the images presented by Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio (1923) signaled the emergence of the next generation in animation as well as racist characterizations of black people, offering a visual justification for their continued segregation and oppression.

Here Comes the Rabbit ... I Mean the Mouse

Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio was renamed Walt Disney Studios shortly after its founding. Named after Walt at the urging of his brother Roy, their studio would quickly emerge as an innovator in the burgeoning field of cartoon animation. Disney improved upon existing techniques created by other animators, including Max Fleischer who first used live action and animated characters in the same scene, as well as the synchronization of the sound and character originally attempted by Warner Brothers' production of the first

“talky” in the live action film, *The Jazz Singer* (1927). However it was Disney’s creative and progressive approach to their animation technique and storytelling that laid the foundation upon which the Disney empire now rests, confirming their current standing as a cultural icon.

Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, Mickey’s animated forefather, was the first Disney character to enamor himself to America. Co-created by Walt Disney and his friend and fellow animator Ub Iwerks, Oswald starred in 26 cartoon shorts from 1927 to 1928, guided by Disney’s and Iwerk’s vision. Oswald became the first character to generate a fan base as well as marketing merchandise.¹¹ Although Disney and Iwerks created Oswald as well as the *Alice Comedies*, the work was being produced for and marketed by Universal Pictures.

With the success of Oswald, Walt Disney sought to renegotiate his contract only to be denied and subsequently informed that almost everyone with exception to Iwerks and animator Les Clark had signed contracts with Universal in anticipation of their continued success. Walt Disney, Iwerks and Clark decided to leave it all behind, including Oswald who was owned by Universal. In 2006 Oswald returned home (via a trade between Disney and NBC/Universal) to the Disney family after a 78-year separation.¹²

Although Walt Disney’s utilization of stereotypical imagery was not as overt in his early work as it would later become once Mickey arrived, the Oswald series was not exempt. In *Africa Before Dark* (1928) Oswald journeys to Africa as a big game hunter. One can only speculate what the trip is about because it is among the Disney-inspired Oswald shorts that are considered lost. However there are other Oswald cartoons that offer caricatured representations of Blackness.

In *Bright Lights* (1928), Oswald attempts to sneak into a theater. The opening scene featuring a lighted marquee with the word *Vodvil*, with four high-kicking women in the center above the name of the headliner, *Mlle. Zulu Shimmy Queen*, alludes to Paris and its headliner Josephine Baker, who became an overnight sensation with her banana dance when she performed it at the Folies Bergère two years earlier in 1926. Baker’s dance would have been known to Walt Disney and his peers and his decision to racialize the headliner by using Zulu as her surname leaves little question as to implied cultural heritage of the featured act. In *Bright Lights*, Oswald’s Josephine is portrayed by his feline girlfriend, who in the Oswald series is not offered the courtesy of a fixed identity, and as a result goes by a number of names or sometimes no name at all.

The short continues with Oswald attempting to sneak into the theater literally in the shadow of a high roller outfitted in a full-length fur, bowler cap and fat cigar. His ruse is discovered when the bellhop, while taking the coat and the shadow, reveals a very skinny man underneath the coat and Oswald beneath the shadow. In this scene, the bellhop is portrayed as an orangutan,

the only one among the rabbits, cats, bears and other *animalesque* characters that make up Oswald's world. In the early part of the 20th century, African American men often worked as bellhops and in other service staff positions, often by circumstance rather than choice. Although the bellhop's appearance is brief, it is significant because Oswald's world was an anthropomorphic interpretation of reality, one in which Blackness was viewed through the lens of exoticism and societal bias.

When Walt Disney lost the rights to Oswald because of his refusal to sign the Universal contract that dramatically cut his salary and impacted his autonomy, the end result was a parting of ways, making room for the emergence of a new Disney character, free from what could be described as *animation sharecropping* under Universal. Although there are competing theories surrounding the genesis of Mickey, with some of the stories coming directly from Walt's own revisionist recollections himself, the one thing that is indisputable is once the mouse was in the house, animation, American culture and the world would never be the same.

In the article "Mickey Mouse at Seventy-Five," written on the occasion of Mickey's birthday, author Garry Apgar details the diversity of Mickey's fan base and how he was woven into popular culture (2003). Apgar notes how Mickey was adored by mainstream society as well as the rich, famous and influential. His greatest supporters included *The New York Times*, Charlie Chaplin and American writer and cultural critic Gilbert Seldes. Mickey was also referenced in a Cole Porter lyric for the song *You're the Top* (1934) and in a scene from *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), starring Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant. American regionalist painter Thomas Hart Benton also featured him in a set of murals in 1932 for the Whitney Museum Library.¹³ Scholar Robert W. Brockway in his article, "The Masks of Mickey Mouse: Symbol of a Generation," provides additional commentary about the global appeal of Mickey.

By 1933 the Mickey Mouse craze was global. George V decreed that there must be a Mickey Mouse cartoon at all film performances attended by the royal family and their guests. The Emperor of Japan wore a Mickey Mouse watch....

Mickey was adored by the whole world. He was listed in *Who's Who* and *Encyclopedia Britannica* devoted an entire article to him.¹⁴

Less than 10 years after his New York City debut, Mickey went global. It is his swift rise to international iconic status that makes Disney's visual commentary on Blackness so complicated and problematic. Mickey's worldwide appeal spread perspectives about Black people that went unchallenged because a counter-narrative did not exist. African Americans were little more than one generation removed from enslavement, which had been in existence in the United States since 1619 and the world since the 15th century. It is nearly impossible to compete with hundreds of years of propagandistic portrayals of African Diasporan people as a justification for oppression and enslavement. It

is that understanding coupled with the subtlety of these images that results in them remaining largely unnoticed or ignored, in mainstream society, from the very beginning until today.

Cannibals and Coons

As previously mentioned, stereotypical portrayals of Blackness in Disney animation were present from the very beginning. However in the Oswald shorts that are available, Blackness was not used as comical fodder as a means to move the plotline along until Mickey took center stage. One of the earliest examples of this technique is in *The Grocery Boy* (1932).

In this short Mickey finds himself trying to prevent Pluto from completely destroying Minnie's house in an effort to eat the elaborate meal she has prepared. During the course of Pluto's many attempts to escape with a cooked turkey clenched in his teeth, Pluto knocks over a pedestal, sending a statue of Napoleon in the air to land on Mickey's head, completely encasing his body and leaving only his legs showing. Shortly thereafter, Pluto runs toward Mickey and scoops him up onto his back, transforming Mickey into Napoleon riding his trusty steed (Pluto). They eventually crash into a potbellied stove and transform the statue of Napoleon wearing his classic bicorn hat and uniform into a man in blackface wearing a bowler hat and overcoat. In other words, Mickey goes from conqueror to coon.

Disney's technique of using blackface continues in *Trader Mickey* (1932), except in this short, the role of Blackness moves beyond the blackface found in *The Grocery Boy* into creating an entire film inspired by racism for the amusement of viewers. In this short, Disney offers the audience visual illustrations for a virtually endless menu of stereotypes, caricatures and cultural perceptions about African people and Blackness. Set to the sounds of Shelton Brooks' *The Darktown Strutter's Ball* (1917), Mickey and Pluto find themselves sailing down the coast of Africa, established by the presence of hippos (indigenous to this continent), with cargo containing various items including musical instruments.

The trouble begins for Mickey and Pluto shortly after disembarking when they are captured by what could be characterized as *wild-eyed Africans*, quite literally, evidenced by their swirling eyeballs, as they gaze upon the intruders. Portrayed by animals most closely resembling primates, their facial features are reminiscent of chimpanzees and silverback gorillas. Historically, in film and literature, primates and Black people have been interchangeable. Not only have Africans been viewed, and portrayed, as the most apparent ancestor of monkeys, Disney's deliberate decision to animalize Blacks is evidenced in his films. Crows—presented as black men in *Dumbo*—are widely regarded as urban irritants, producers of raucous noises and more disturbing than their rural, less maligned cousins, the raven. When Blacks appear as donkeys in *Fantasia*, they define rough beasts of burden: ugly and obstinate—certainly no child's pined-

for pony. And here, with *Trader Mickey*, Disney's chimp-like *natives* replete with grass skirts, nose rings, spears and shields communicate through grunts and babbling ... that is when they are not laughing.

Disney's *natives* replete with grass skirts, nose rings, spears and shields communicate through grunts and babbling ... that is when they are not laughing. The *Africans* are immediately established as cannibals by the presence of an overabundance of skulls used as decorative elements and trophies. This sentiment is soon confirmed when Mickey and Pluto are brought to the chief and he and the cook decide that they will be the main course for dinner. While Mickey and Pluto are slowly simmering in cauldrons, the natives raid Mickey's boat and its contents. The items in the crates, including instruments, fascinate them although it is clear that they don't know what anything is used for as demonstrated by the chief who places a corset on his head or the suspenders that a mother with over-exaggerated lips, courtesy of a lip plate, uses to strap in all four of her children she is carrying on her back like a possum.

Capitalizing on the ignorance of the natives and a bit angry that the cook is using a saxophone to stir the pot he is in and also taste the broth, Mickey snatches the saxophone and begins to play it. The moment the music begins the natives respond with wide eyes and even wider smiles, eventually joining in using other instruments. Although they play them from the wrong end it presents little problem due to their big lips that are amazingly able to stretch over the end of all the instruments, even those that aren't played by mouth. In addition to the instruments, they also utilize their bodies to make all kinds of music.

One particularly disturbing example presents three women dancing in unison, in a sort of hula style dance more closely associated with South Pacific Island cultures. While the women are dancing they clap their lips together rhythmically. Shortly thereafter, the women turn revealing a baby strapped to each of their backs. These babies, wearing classic pickaninny, electrified hairstyles, turn away from their mothers' backs toward their rear ends and begin to play them with their hands keeping time with the syncopated rhythms made by their mothers' mouths.

In little more than seven minutes, Disney equates Blackness with ignorance and buffoonery and declares that African society and intellect are rudimentary at best. This is illustrated by Mickey's ability to adapt to the music and dance styles of his former kidnappers, transforming himself from captive to colonialist the moment he grabs the horn and begins to play. Disney also highlights and exaggerates the physical attributes of these so-called Africans, in a manner that suggests large lips and ample hips are grotesque and abhorrent.

The overtly racist *Trader Mickey* is a direct representation of Disney's views on African people and Blackness. These portrayals continued to be incorporated throughout Disney's films although they were not always integral to

the plot. *Fantasia* (1940) was one of Disney's most successful animated films featuring these types of characters. It is the only film where Disney responded to the criticisms about their racist characters, by modifying or eliminating elements from the *Pastoral Symphony* scene in subsequent releases.¹⁵ Set to the sounds of the world's best classical musicians including Igor Stravinsky, Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky and Johann Sebastian Bach, *Fantasia* is a visual and aural feast and by today's standards would also be considered a concert film. Featuring Ludwig Van Beethoven's *Symphony No. 6 in F, Op. 68 "Pastorale,"* Disney's *Pastoral Symphony* creates a mythological world featuring gods, satyrs, cupids, centaurs, and pegasi preparing for a visit from some young centaur men on their coming to take part in the celebration of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine.¹⁶ Keeping with tradition, Disney continues to equate Blackness with servitude and Otherness.

In beginning of this scene we find the beautiful and colorful centaur women getting ready, with the help of very creative cupids, for the arrival of the dashing and equally colorful male centaurs. The only centaur not being prepared by these cupids, but rather assisting in the process, is their Black servant aptly named Sunflower. Named after a member of *asteraceae* or *compositae* family, sunflowers are known by a number of common names including "Black-eyed Susan," "Yellow Daisy" and "Golden Jerusalem," but this flower is also known as a Niggerhead.¹⁷ Given the visual conversation that Disney engages regarding Blackness, it unlikely that their choice of name was coincidental. Sunflower reflects quintessential coon features: dark skin, big lips, wide eyes and a pickaninny hairstyle. She is a pseudo-centaur because she is part donkey, not horse. The choice of a donkey is yet another not-so-subtle commentary on race as the scientific name for donkey is *equus africanus asinus* (2008). Referencing its undomesticated ancestor, Disney's animated Darwinism makes it clear that Sunflower could only be a servant because she is aesthetically, physically and genetically inferior to the women she serves. Sunflower's main job is to assist in the beautification rituals of the women she serves by polishing hooves, decorating tails and holding a flower bridle while the more beautiful and refined centaur women jockey for position to see the approaching men.

We meet the two other Black centaurs in the latter half of *Pastoral* with the arrival of Dionysus. The god of wine arrives to great fanfare and in his own parade, which in modern terms looks more like an entourage. Dionysus enters this centaur community with a Black servant on each side. Their main role is to ensure that he stays cool through continuous fanning and that his wine never runs out. Unlike Sunflower, these nameless women who are part-zebra, which are indigenous to Africa, are brown-skinned, their hair is coiffed to perfection and aesthetically they more closely resemble their White centaur counterparts. Given that they do not possess all of the qualities of Sunflower nor the women she serves, these servants present the embodiment of the exotic

Other. Although they are there to serve the god of wine, by making them beautiful, Disney seems to be suggesting that these women literally work for the pleasure of Dionysus who by nature is passionate and overindulgent.

Earlier in this chapter I addressed Disney's overtly racist characterization of Blackness. When Disney addressed the same issue, it was no less demeaning nor damaging as evidenced by the film *Dumbo* (1941). On its face *Dumbo* tells the endearing story about the trials and tribulations of baby circus elephant Jumbo Jr., renamed Dumbo by Mrs. Jumbo's persnickety girlfriends, who is born with enormous ears. But it is also a tale about embracing difference, and how a seemingly simple gesture can change the attitude of the people around you. However that concept does not appear to apply to African Americans. In *Dumbo*, Disney offers viewers their standard caricatured portrayals of Blackness in addition to mocking legislation aimed at moving African Americans closer to first-class citizenship in the United States.

Early in the film we see African American laborers in song while erecting the circus tents during a storm. Disney's portrayal of this scene reads more like inmates on the chain gang than hardworking men earning a living. In tune to the rhythm of clanking metal, broad-backed men pound stakes into the mud. Although working in the dark and the rain with the help of elephants may seem tough, they chant with irrational joy. They invoke a common African American colloquialism known as "can't see to can't see," which refers to the notion of working from before the sun rises till after the sun sets. The phrase was most often used by the African American community since enslavement. Even the workers toil ceaselessly, even though they are illiterates who don't just work but "slave" and even though they admittedly waste their money on payday, they are—pause for a full-toothed grin here—oh, so happy!

Traditionally, laborers travel with carnivals and circuses to build and break down the tents. However, when you take into consideration the historically limited positive portrayals of Black men in cinema, for them to proclaim their lack of education and celebrate their seemingly never-ending work day with childlike joy paints a picture of Blackness commonly found on the silver screen. As scholar Donald Bogle details in his text, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*: "Fun was poked at the American Negro by presenting him as either a nitwit or a childlike lackey."¹⁸

Disney continues their critique of Blackness through caricatures, but in the following scene they also make a mockery of African Americans' efforts towards attaining equality. Toward the end of the film we are introduced to a motley crew of characters in the form of black crows in the scene where Dumbo is sleeping it off after inadvertently drinking water from a bucket into which a group of circus performers engaging in a post-performance celebration knocked a full champagne bottle earlier that evening. Led by the main crow *Jim*, referencing racial segregation laws enacted in the late 19th and early 20th

centuries, he and the other crows, which remain nameless, offer a performance reminiscent of turn-of-the-century minstrel shows.

The crows are culturally identified through Disney's efforts to reproduce authentic African American speech through word choice, phonology and mannerisms. One of the crows, dressed in a hat and vest from a zoot suit, starts it off by declaring, "*My my, why dis is mose eeregulah,*" as they sit on a tree limb above speculating about a sleeping Dumbo and his mouse friend Timothy. In response, a bespectacled crow asks: "*Dey ain't dead is dey?*" His rotund partner responds, "*Nooo! Dead people don't snore ... or do dey?*" At this point they stop looking below and turn to each other and chatter among themselves about the possible scenarios that landed an elephant and a mouse on a branch below theirs.

The conspiracy theories only end when Jim lands on the branch, wearing a tiny bowler hat, shirt, vest and spats with no shoes while asking, "*Uh, wut's all the rookus? C'mon step aside brotha,*" as he clears the limb so he can parade back and forth peppering his *crownies* with questions as he smokes a big stogie. Calling each other *brotha* points more to Walt Disney's affection for Joel Chandler Harris' *Uncle Remus* (1904) series featuring Bre'r Fox, and Bre'r Rabbit, as opposed to kinship. Jim even calls Timothy "brotha," although the mouse vehemently rejects that label. Ultimately they fall to the ground and when Timothy suggests that Dumbo can fly as a rationale for waking up in such a unique location, Jim and his homeboys laugh and make fun of the very idea. As the music builds for Jim to begin his song, "When I See an Elephant Fly," he lists all the unusual things he has seen but declares, "*But I be dun seen 'bout everything, when I see an elephant fly.*" His declaration is quickly questioned by one of the other crows off camera, "*Wut chu say, boy?*" Calling Jim Crow "*boy*" offers a commentary on Disney's views about *de facto* segregation legislation. Given the history of terrorism and violence experienced by men, women and children in pursuit of their rights as citizens of this country, reducing a significant part of African American—dare I say, American—history to a bunch of coons masquerading as crows led by a leader who responds to being called "boy" is problematic at best.

Still Wishing Upon a Star

Ultimately Disney's use of caricatured representations of Blackness serves to confirm the status quo perceptions about Black people, post-Reconstruction, and set the stage for a pattern of racist portrayals that continue through the 21st century. The impact of this imagery not only affects the perceptions of the people portrayed in this manner, but it also impacts how these same people view their own culture. Disney's *Song of the South* (1946) is an excellent illustration of how a film plays such a role of self-critique. This film's concept and execution are based upon racist discourse about African Americans.

Specifically it is the bastardization of characters taken from traditional African folktales that survived the Middle Passage and were transformed by enslaved Africans in this country. Disney's re-interpretation of these treasured folkloric characters is so offensive that it forever changed how African Americans view them. As a result, characters including Br'er Rabbit and Br'er Fox, originally celebrated by African Diasporan people for their endlessly cunning ways of outwitting abusive whites, were later depicted by white writers as simply lazy and foolish. These centuries-old characters, born in ancient Africa as animal metaphors for crafty, sage survivalists, have been silenced and are no longer an active part of African American folklore and culture.

Disney continues their utilization of caricatured representations, although today's images also include diverse communities who often share the designation of Other. Over time their portrayals have become even subtler and more sophisticated such as King Louis, the jive talking orangutan whose self-hatred and desire to become a white man is on display when he proclaims "I want to be like you" in *The Jungle Book* (1967). Also exemplified are Disney's Sebastian, the ambiguous Caribbean crustacean and servant to King Triton in *The Little Mermaid* (1989), and Frozone, the one-dimensional brutal Black buck superhero sidekick to Mr. Incredible in *The Incredibles* (2004). Disney's 2009 *The Princess and the Frog* earned its share of criticism about the garbled English of Cajun fireflies and a princess who spends most of the movie as an amphibian. I still search for images of myself, and now, my daughter, in Disney; I still long to see diverse representations of diverse people. I imagine a blockbuster film featuring everyday people—Latinas without sass, Asians without choppy English and Africans without rhythm or rage. This is my *Fantasia*, perfectly suitable for animation, with villains and heroines characterized by their character and not misrepresented by caricatures, color or culture. Perhaps, one day, Disney will make new magic, complete with enough sparkle for everyone, and finally fulfill my wish for images that look, and feel, familiar and beautiful.

Notes

1. Disney's African American characters as well as those coded as Black are often marked by speech patterns that are meant to convey what is believed to be African American English (also described as African American Black Vernacular), but are often distorted and employed in a manner to illustrate deficiencies; e.g., lack of education. For further reading on this topic please see: Green, Lisa. *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction*. MA: Cambridge University Press; Billings, Andrew. "Beyond the Ebonics Debate: Attitudes about Black and Standard American English." *Journal of Black Studies* 36.1 (2005) 68–81.

2. *Plane Crazy* and *Gallopin' Gaucho*, both released in 1928, were the first and second films that featured Mickey Mouse. However both films were silent. It was Disney's debut of *Steamboat Willie*, the first animated feature with sound, that same year at the Colony Theater in Manhattan that is credited with the arrival of Mickey.

3. Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002.

4. For purposes of this essay, Black, African American and African Diasporan/African

Descended are used interchangeably although each term suggests a different emphasis on terms that are utilized. Black indicates political and cultural emphasis from a nationalist perspective, African American is used as a continental identity where politically and culturally their views may not emanate from a nationalist paradigm. African Disaporan/African Descended is both continental and political due to its direct identification with Africa but also denotes kinship with all peoples whose identity emerges from their African heritage, by birth, kinship or the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade.

5. August F. Saint-Aubin, "A Grammar of Black Masculinity: A Body of Science." *The Journal of Men's Studies* 10.3 (2002), 247–270.

6. http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Frontespizio_Lamento_del_duca_Galeazzo_Maria_Sforza_1444-1473-,_1476.jpg. The web address suggests that this is a frontispiece, but, according to the file information, the image is on the title page.

7. Here, the words "bad, ugly, emotional, savage and lazy" become synonymous with "Blackness" when explained from a racially-biased view. "Blackness" here—unlike the "Blackness" often juxtaposed with "African-American" or used as an identity of pride—also becomes code for an impure, dirty, underworld racial identifier.

8. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Philadelphia: Pritchard and Hall, 1788, 264–265.

9. "Reframing the Color Line: Race and the Visual Culture in the Atlantic World." Exhibition, William L. Clements Library and Center for Afroamerican and African Studies, University of Michigan, Oct. 19, 2009–Feb. 19, 2010.

10. Joel Chandler Harris' "Uncle Remus" books became classics for their supposed authentic offerings of African American vernacular, storytelling and cultural detail. The heroic trickster tales of "Bre'r Rabbit, Bre'r Bear and Bre'r Coon," for example, emerged from his writings.

11. The official licensed items were a stencil set, candy bar and button.

12. <http://disney.go.com/vault/archives/characters/oswald/oswald.html>

13. When the Whitney Museum relocated uptown in 1953, five of the murals were sold to the New Britain Museum of American Art in Connecticut.

14. Robert W. Brockway, "The Mask of Mickey Mouse: Symbol of a Generation," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 22.4 (1989), 25.

15. *Fantasia* was re-released in 1946, 1956, 1963, 1969, 1977, 1982, 1985 and 1990, then released on video in 1991. In 2000 Disney released *Fantasia 2000*, a new version of *Fantasia*, on DVD.

16. Also known by his Roman name, Bacchus.

17. <http://www.nature-and-flower-pictures.com/black-eyed-susan.html>

18. Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 4th ed. New York: Continuum, 2001, 4.

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Saludos Amigos and The Three Caballeros: *The Representation of Latin America in Disney's "Good Neighbor" Films*

KAREN S. GOLDMAN

This essay examines representations of Latin America and situational Latin American identities in the feature-length Disney films *Saludos Amigos* (1942) and *The Three Caballeros* (1945). These films have come to be known as “Good Neighbor” films because, in contrast to earlier Disney animations that focused on children’s stories and family entertainment, they were produced with a clear political and public relations mandate: to foster goodwill between U.S. and Latin American audiences. In a notable scene from the 16mm documentary short *South of the Border with Disney*, cartoonist Norm Ferguson is shown in Santiago, furiously sketching page after page of Pluto drawings to give away to a seemingly endless line of Chilean children. The footage, shot by Walt himself in 1942, represents a concise visual summary of the underlying set of relationships between the Disney Studio and its Latin American subjects. While the artist provides cartoon images from a widely recognized compendium of characters, the filmmaker captures new, “authentic” images of inhabitants of an exotic locale. These are in turn framed for consumption, and repackaged as a Hollywood product for U.S. consumers as well as those same exotic Others that the films putatively seek to represent.

From a structural point of view, the films are divided into discrete segments, which in *Saludos Amigos* are linked by the travel footage of Disney and his entourage, or “El grupo.” In *The Three Caballeros*, the narrative is more organically connected by the travels of Disney’s cartoon surrogate, Donald Duck, and his avian friends. In both, we can identify several central strategies

that allow the narrative to contain the largely unfamiliar and potentially threatening degree of difference that the Latin American world signified to U.S. audiences. First, the “Good Neighbor” films are intertextual: that is, they rely on the audience’s familiarity with a variety of external sources. The literary term “intertextuality” was introduced by Julia Kristeva, who describes two axes for each cultural text: a horizontal axis that connects the author and reader, and a vertical axis, which locates the text in an infinite dialogue with other texts.¹ Robert Stam, referring to the intertextuality of cinematic texts remarks that it is “as if both filmmaker and spectator were members of a vast audiovisual library.”² Both films contain references to a diversity of texts and genres from this “library,” calling on the spectator’s previously garnered knowledge of film genres and characters. *Saludos Amigos* provides, for example, a satirical wink at then-popular film travelogues, and also presents itself as a quasi-ethnographic documentary, in the style of Robert Flaherty, Merian C. Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack, to bolster its claim to realism. Both films also draw on Disney’s collection of widely recognized characters as well as the Disney brand itself. The spectator’s previously-established expectations of Disney animation endow these films with an aura of legitimacy and perceived quality to which no other filmmaker of the time could lay claim.

In addition, and in an effort to both personalize the films (making them appear to come directly from Walt Disney’s authorial hand) and to de-personalize them (ultimately reflecting the Disney model of keeping the actual artists anonymous), *Saludos Amigos* and *The Three Caballeros* exhibit a surprisingly high degree of reflexivity, underscoring their own means of production, and intentionally uncovering the nature of cartoon illusion itself. Reflexivity blurs the divisions along the vertical axis of a text, and make visible what by generic custom had largely been invisible: the presence of the author in the text itself. Self-reflexivity in animation was certainly not new to audiences in the 1940s. References to the “real” cartoonist and/or the cartoon genre itself can be found from the early days of animation. Characters from Max Fleishman’s 1930s “Out of the Inkwell” series and Otto Mesmer’s “Krazy Kat” often interacted with the animated “cartoonist.” Similarly, in Tex Avery’s cartoons, spectators are occasionally addressed directly, and asides are often spoken specifically to the complicit spectator, without the knowledge of the other characters.

Early Disney cartoons were also sometimes self-reflexive, including interventions by the animator’s voice or hand in cartoon shorts. But the technique of self-reflexivity was first introduced in an animated feature in 1941 with Disney’s *The Reluctant Dragon*. Contrary to the traditional and unstated “rules” of animated film, *The Reluctant Dragon* is deliberately and self-consciously reflexive. It begins by depicting in live-action the animator, Robert Benchley. Benchley, who, in the scripted process of searching for Walt Disney himself to pitch his cartoon idea, learns about the workings of animation and the

process of converting written narrative into cartoons. The film then launches into the actual cartoon featuring the dragon. Perhaps what is most remarkable about the inclusion of the cartoonist in *The Reluctant Dragon* is that the film's production coincides with the animator's strike that was taking place at the Disney studios. The strike was principally about dissatisfaction over unpaid work, overtime and job security, but another very central issue for the strikers was the lack of attribution and credit for individual artists. All work produced at the Disney studios was signed by only one creator, and that was Walt Disney, in the unmistakable signature that has become the international logo of the company.

And while *Saludos Amigos* and *The Three Caballeros* were commissioned, in part, to dispel negative stereotyping of Latin Americans in Hollywood cinema, close analysis reveals that the films actually promote other, no less inaccurate stereotypes, and, in particular, underscore the longstanding unequal relationship between the U.S. and Latin America. They continue to depict the flow of cultural texts from north to south as natural and unequivocal. Furthermore, *Saludos Amigos* and *The Three Caballeros* code the nations and people of Latin America as exotic, idealized and sexualized. This last category, especially, has been the focus of numerous commentators and critics. Film and cultural critics José Piedra, Jean Franco and Julianne Burton have, from different perspectives, all analyzed the many segmented sequences of *The Three Caballeros* as the staging ground for a gendered narrative of U.S. masculine-identified hegemony vis à vis a highly feminized representation of Latin America. Piedra focuses on the sexualization of Latin America as an extension of U.S. financial interests in the region, the real motor behind this libidinal economy:

Ultimately the U.S., self-styled as a good neighbor, stands as an incestuous *padre de familias* who, while ostensibly teaching his Pan-American children to forge their own nations, libidinally encourages their dependency. The system even teaches us Latin Americans how to become the "child brides" of the United States. Thus we Latins in and around the U.S. backyard become not only the poor live-in neighbor but the tantalizing girl-next-door—not to mention the fruit-next-door—so dear to the United Fruit Company's heart.³

Burton, on the other hand, likens Disney animation to an unmediated reality beyond objective experience that "can also be the site of unbridled expressions of the individual and collective unconscious ... cartoons in this sense can be understood as a kind of dreamer's dreaming, the unconscious of the unconscious."⁴

In their landmark 1971 study *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*, Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart pointed out that Disney represents another kind of dream, more a reflection of the way Disney products work to construct meanings, and ultimately reproduce, in the words of Henry A. Giroux, "ideologically loaded fantasies."⁵ According to

Dorfman and Mattelart, this invitation to fantasize about the Other represents a grave threat to the cultural autonomy of Latin American nations. The threat is not so much that Disney products embody the “American way of life” as the “American Dream of Life”:

It is the manner in which the U.S. dreams and redeems itself, and then imposes that dream upon others for its own salvation, which poses the danger for the dependent countries. It forces us Latin Americans to see ourselves *as they see us*.⁶

While Dorfman and Mattelart’s analysis is primarily focused on the Donald Duck comic strip, and their interpretation of Donald may seem limited today, the point of their latter statement is central to understanding the “Good Neighbor” films. Even at their most authentic, the films offer up an externally-constructed, highly condensed and almost parodical representation of Latin American national identities *for* Latin American audiences. Both films situate Latin Americans as exotic Others in contrast to a normative (U.S.) hegemonic culture, which is always eager to incorporate them—literally, through the figures that are “animated,” literally brought to life through the magic of animation, and figuratively, through the many ways that they are framed as “real” by the film narrative.

The question of realism in Disney cartoons has always been a complicated one, since from the moment the studio embarked on the production of its first animated feature, *Snow White*, the Disney studio strove to produce cartoons that rival live action footage in their ability to depict realistic characters and backgrounds, all while maintaining the “magic” of animation. The emphasis on producing animation that closely approximated the look and movement of live humans and animals came to be known in the Disney context as “the illusion of life.” It is described in detail in both a 1981 book and “Wonderful World of Disney” television special.⁷ In the 1940s, cartoons were generally flat and characters lacked personality and depth. Disney’s aim was to create an animated scene that presented an almost photographic fidelity to “real” life and therefore could “forge that emotional bond with the audience—an animated universe he called ‘the plausible impossible’ that stretched natural laws without actually breaking them.”⁸ To achieve this aim, Disney artists studied photographs, live models and live action film to accurately reproduce the look of landscapes and backgrounds and especially the seamless, natural way that bodies (human and animal) moved. The studio had already been making use of the Disney-developed technology of the multi-plane camera, which created the illusion of depth by layering animation cels⁹ one over another and photographing them from above. The desire to animate as realistically as possible even led to the use of the “rotoscope,” a device that allows live action footage to be traced and used for animation drawings.

Disney’s “illusion of life” animation as a form of cinema art has been widely commented and frequently criticized. In the opinion of film theorist

Sigfried Kracauer, animation is a form of cinema that does not depend on a photographic reproduction of the real; i.e., nothing in the cartoon exists in real life, except in the very literal sense that the camera photographically records a collection of drawings. Thus, animators do not actually reproduce life or reality and therefore do not make use of what Kracauer terms the cinema's "inherent affinities." Kracauer continues:

Unlike photographs or live action, animation is called upon to picture what is not real—that which never happens. (...) Walt Disney's increasing attempts to express fantasy in realistic terms are aesthetically questionable precisely because they comply with the cinematic approach. There is a growing tendency toward camera-reality in his later full length films. Peopled with the counterparts of real landscapes and real human beings, they are not so much "drawings brought to life" as life reproduced in drawings.¹⁰

In Kracauer's view, animation is an inherently fantastic form of cinema and therefore Disney's attempt to depict cinematic realism, either by the "illusion of life" techniques or by creating hybrid forms, such as those featured in the "Good Neighbor" films, was necessarily a poor format to exploit the aesthetic qualities of the medium. And while Kracauer's estimation of Disney's "realism" is wholly negative, his description of the realism that characterizes these films is quite accurate. Disney's intent was indeed to "reproduce life in drawings" as well as in live-action and hybrid forms.

But the assumption that this reflects a deliberate aesthetic decision with regard to the "Good Neighbor" Disney films is questionable. The live action footage, by virtue of its photographic realism clearly endowed the films with an aura of authenticity. But the inclusion of live action footage was, in the end, a financial decision. The highly realistic animation such as that featured in the early, "illusion of life" films—*Snow White*, *Pinocchio*, *Fantasia*, *Dumbo* and *Bambi*—was extremely labor-intensive and very expensive. It required thousands of individual cels to be hand drawn and inked. In contrast, live action sequences shot on location allowed the films to be extended significantly in length without the additional cost of animation or filming on a studio set. Thus, the preference for hybrid forms and the use of live-action footage in *Saludos Amigos* and *The Three Caballeros* point to a central priority of the Disney Studios at the time: keeping production costs low while maintaining quality and assuring a profit. The studio had been experiencing continued financial troubles due in part to Walt's mismanagement, and in part to the high cost of producing its recent cartoon features, which left the Disney with a deficit of more than a half of a million dollars in 1942.¹¹ In addition, as mentioned above, in 1941 the Disney studio was in the throes of a bitter strike led by the animators union. The company was facing, for the first time since its establishment in 1923, the prospect of pay cuts and layoffs. Disgruntled animators picketed the studio daily and refused to work, creating an even more dire finan-

cial outlook for Disney. In short, the company was in need of a way to continue making films quickly and with a reduced labor pool. The combination of live action and animation was one response to this problem. Another was to rely on external funding to cover the production costs. The U.S. government's "Good Neighbor" policy was just the thing to afford Disney the opportunity to turn a profit with little capital investment.

Although the "Good Neighbor Policy" dates back to the presidency of Herbert Hoover, it was President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1933, who, determined to improve relations with the nations of Central and South America, adopted the "Good Neighbor" as the official U.S. foreign policy vis-à-vis Latin America. Its stated mission was to emphasize cooperation and trade rather than military force to maintain stability in the hemisphere. In his inaugural address on March 4, 1933, Roosevelt stated: "In the field of world policy I would dedicate this nation to the policy of the good neighbor—the neighbor who resolutely respects himself and, because he does so, respects the rights of others." Roosevelt's Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, participated in the Montevideo Conference of December 1933, where he backed a declaration favored by most nations of the Western Hemisphere: "No state has the right to intervene in the internal or external affairs of another." In December Roosevelt stated, "The definite policy of the United States from now on is one opposed to armed intervention."¹² Obviously, this emphasis on good neighborliness versus interventionism is open to question, given the continued U.S. military operations in Latin America. But the policy did address a number of economic issues that had been troublesome for U.S.-Latin American relations. Hull's policies of low tariffs improved the economies of the Latin American countries that had been hurt by the protectionist Hawley-Smoot Tariff of 1930, especially in Cuba, where low prices on sugar had previously made it difficult to sell to the United States.

Near the end of the 1930s, the U.S. government encountered reason to fear that the Nazi communications machine was making inroads in Latin America. Already disconcerting was the fact that in the early 1940s German interests held ownership or majority control over the telephone systems in Argentina, Ecuador, Uruguay, Paraguay, southern Chile and Mexico.¹³ Anatole Litvak's 1939 anti-Nazi film *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* had been banned in eighteen Latin American countries. In 1940, most Latin American governments also banned Charles Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*, understood universally as an exhortation to oppose Hitler's tyranny, and many were allowing Nazi propaganda films (such as the fictional film described in Argentine writer Manuel Puig's novel *The Kiss of the Spider Woman*) to be shown freely in commercial cinemas. To counter that troubling trend, President Roosevelt in 1940 named Nelson Rockefeller, who had extensive experience in Latin America because of the many business holdings he possessed there, to head the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs. One of Rockefeller's first actions

was to create a Motion Picture Division that would concentrate its efforts on seeing that Hollywood films, which had presented almost exclusively negative stereotypical images of Latin Americans, would now present positive ones. The goal of the Motion Picture Division would be to present assumedly more authentic images of Latin America and Latin Americans. To head this division, Rockefeller chose John Hay Whitney, a vice-president of the Museum of Modern Art, a financial backer of many films, and, like Walt Disney himself, an enthusiastic polo player.

The Coordinator's office sent various Hollywood celebrities to visit Latin American countries to take advantage of their celebrity and charisma to win over this public. Hollywood producers were even asked to include Latin American themes in their movies to attract Spanish-speaking viewers and to bolster good will between the continents. Twentieth Century-Fox released a string of films highlighting Latin American topics, including *Down Argentine Way* (1940), *That Night in Rio* and *Weekend in Havana* (both 1941). Following Fox's success, other studios followed suit. Latin music soared in popularity, and U.S. audiences across the nation became familiar with entertainers like Xavier Cugat and Desi Arnaz. Nonetheless, it was clear that the strategy of advancing the "Good Neighbor" policy by including Latin American themes in Hollywood films was, by any measure, a dismal failure. Instead of promoting a sense of pride and good will in Latin American audiences, the inaccurate and stereotypical images enraged them. J.B. Kaufman, one of Disney's official historians, commented on Universal Pictures' *Argentine Nights*: "When the film was shown in Buenos Aires, with its wildly inaccurate portrayal of Argentina and its jumble of Spanish dialects, audiences were so infuriated that riot police were called to quell the disturbance, and the feature was pulled after two days."¹⁴

In an effort to stave off this kind of blatant and insensitive inaccuracies, the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs agreed to finance not only the Disney Studio's "Good Neighbor" film production itself, but also travel for Disney and a group of 15 artists through Latin America to research, draw and generally familiarize themselves with the cultures and the geography of the continent. Disney artists, musicians and other employees received instruction in the history, customs, music, art and literature of the various regions as though they were completing a research seminar on the topic. Perhaps most important, the Office arranged visits with Latin American comics, artists and musicians. J.B. Kaufman, one of the Walt Disney Family Foundation's official historians, commented glowingly on Disney's efforts at depicting an authentic Latin American reality:

Walt was already on the right track with in-depth research on individual countries. (...) Let other Hollywood studios commit their careless cultural mistakes: the Disney studio would consistently strike a responsive chord with Latin American audiences by picturing their cultures in authentic detail.¹⁵

Did Disney in fact, provide a more authentic representation by providing attention to detail, or manage to avoid committing “careless cultural mistakes” as Kaufman asserts the other studios did? In response, I note that the representations of the diverse Other in the Disney animations are far from careless, and do not project the non-intentionality of the term “mistake.” The Latin Americans in the “Good Neighbor” films are without exception depicted as happy, friendly and frequently child-like. Disney’s gaze at the indigenous Other is clearly an idealized and exoticizing one, which aims less to provide a faithful representation of an historical reality than to make it attractive and as such to render it less threatening: that which is diverse becomes positive. And the inclusion of diverse elements in the films are highly selective: some indigenous elements are presented (such as the Andean populations around Lake Titicaca in *Saludos Amigos*) and others elided (such as any intimation of African heritage in any of the Brazilian segments). With the sole exception of the documentary scenes in *Saludos Amigos*, which offer a picture-postcard representation of “modern” cities such as Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires, neither history, nor political or social reality infects the idealized and exoticized universe of Disney’s Latin America. As Jean Franco notes: “This was a Latin America that people could live with....”¹⁶

This idealized celebration of the idealized Other, and its positioning in a timeless, faceless, classless context, however, is in fact simply the other face of its polar opposite: ethnocentrism. Débora Kriskhke Leitão’s remarks regarding Brazilian exoticism in French fashion are applicable here:

Ranging from suspicion to hostility, [ethnocentrism] rejects all cultural forms that are different from one’s own. In this regard, ethnocentrism and exoticism are drawn closer together. Even if different in content—one valuing, the other repealing—both attitudes are less a statement about the *other* than about one-self.¹⁷

Ethnocentrism can be described as the understanding of one’s own culture as hegemonic, the dominant standard against which, from the perspective of the creator/viewer, all others are measured. Consumption of the exotic is not only the process of consuming products from *elsewhere*; it is also a process of differentiating between *us* and *them*.

And indeed the opening shot of *Saludos Amigos* could not be more direct in its positioning of Latin America as Other in relation to the dominant position of Disney—the enunciative “I” in the “Saludos” of the title. The opening screen is dominated by a written message, superimposed on an outline map of Latin America, and signed by Walt himself: “With sincere appreciation for the courtesy and cooperation shown us by the artists, musicians, and our many friends in Latin America.” An animated airplane flies over the map, standing in stark contrast to the subsequent live-action scene of a gleaming silver Pam Am airplane that Walt and his artists are boarding (a scene that, in keeping

with the simulacrum that characterized many subsequent Disney products, was actually shot in the parking lot of the Disney Studio in Burbank). The animated airplane flies over the map, showing all of Latin America as a colorful region of tidy cities, quaint villages, mountains and rivers, all fitting nicely into a camera frame. When the plane arrives at Lake Titicaca, the format suddenly switches to live-action. Like the popular Fox Movietone newsreels and travelogues, the subsequent scenes are accompanied by an authoritative male voice-over. This is the intertextual cue for the viewer to switch into the documentary mode: the live action sequences resemble nothing so much as Disney's 1950s nature documentaries such as *The Living Desert* and *The Vanishing Prairie*, which feature footage of real animals and flora. In addition, by showing the animators who are the same creative force behind the film we are watching, the film reflects back on itself, and invites the audience to observe the creative presence behind the animation they are watching.

While this self-reflexive technique is often employed as a distancing technique by modernist authors and filmmakers to "elicit an active thinking spectator rather than a passive consumer,"¹⁸ the effect here is rather the opposite. By couching the exotic Other in a generic format that is familiar for audiences, and exposing the American artists as the "authors" of the segment, the diverse elements are contained in the narrative and rendered less threatening.

To complement the neutralization of the exotic difference of the Other, the U.S. "visitor" not only encounters, but also appropriates the exotic cultural artifacts. The first Latin American people we see in the film are the Bolivian inhabitants of the *altiplano* assembled for market day. A Bolivian woman, dressed in a traditional colorful *pollera* and an undersized bowler hat, carries a large bowl on her head and a baby, wrapped in a long shawl, on her back. The live action is magically and self-reflexively transformed into a pastel drawing, showing the freckled hand of the artist filling in the color of the now mimetically-rendered woman. As strains of an Andean flute are introduced in the soundtrack and the image returns to a live action frame, the voice-over remarks: "Their music is strange and exotic." This statement summarizes the representation of the Latin American Other throughout the film, which is appropriated by Disney's various surrogates, and adjusted to suit the perceptions of the hegemonic "us" of the narration. The point is unambiguously exemplified in the following scene, in which Donald Duck permits us to see "The land of the Incas through the eyes of a celebrated North American tourist." (Contemporary viewers will recognize the depictions of the Andean landscape, the llamas, and even the people from 2000s Disney feature *The Emperor's New Groove*.) Wearing an explorer's helmet in the style of H.M. Stanley, Donald, golf clubs in tow, engages in a series of visual gags on the shores of Lake Titicaca. Donald produces a still camera and begins photographing examples of "local color," injecting yet another moment of reflexivity, and pointing again to the unseen presence of both the filmmakers and the animators introduced

at the beginning of the film. In one of many moments of cultural appropriation, Donald exchanges the young “Incan” boy’s wool cap, poncho and *flauta* for his own helmet and camera. “The visitor is never satisfied until he tries on the native costume,” quips the voice-over. Donald initially plays the “strange exotic music” of the *altiplano*, but then switches to a jazzy tune that sounds unmistakably like a lively Hollywood sound track. This small example again illustrates the dynamic underlying the “Good Neighbor” films: The image of the exotic Other (the boy) is captured by a familiar character (Donald’s camera), rendered unthreatening through cultural appropriation (Donald’s Americanization of the strange, exotic music) and then repackaged for international consumption as a Hollywood product by a studio that represents the best of American capitalism (the feature itself).

There are numerous additional examples of this pattern of intertextuality, reflexivity and cultural appropriation in the remainder of the film, but suffice it here to point out a most compelling one: the Argentine segment, and especially the representation of Goofy as gaucho. The segment begins with live action “postcard” shots of Buenos Aires, but quickly moves to the “lush, wind-swept plains of the Pampas.” This is followed by a segment introducing Argentine artist, F. Molina Campos, best known for his folkloric paintings of gauchos. Disney’s pre-production collaboration with Campos was supposed to assure an authentic representation of the gaucho. But, in the end, the camera only briefly focuses on Campos’ paintings during a visit to his studio. In contrast, it is the Disney animator who is shown sketching the dancing gauchos. John Rose, Disney’s liaison to the Office of the Coordinator for Inter-American Affairs, in a private memo to the New York office remarked: “The frank truth of the matter is that we don’t need the guy at all- and that blunt fact applies to all the other South American talent we had lined up.”¹⁹

The next segment, again underscoring the *us/them* structure of the film, “compares the life of the Argentine gaucho to that of our own cowboy.” Goofy begins the segment as a stereotypical cowboy figure in Texas, flies over the map of Latin America to the Pampas, and, like Donald in the previous segment, dons a traditional gaucho costume. Again, what follows is a series of visual gags punctuated by descriptions of gaucho dances. In the end, Goofy flies safely back to “his prairie homeland” and the “natural” order of things is restored. Again, the exotic Other is neutralized through its elision with a familiar intertextual figure. The self-reflexive format emphasizes the fact that the normative position of the film is “us,” and not “them.” The last segment of *Saludos Amigos* points forward toward *The Three Caballeros*, with the introduction of both the figure of the seductive (and anonymous) Latin Beauty, and Donald’s second caballero, the Brazilian parrot Zé Carioca.

The Three Caballeros begins with Donald Duck tearing open a series of wrapped boxes. Donald (Disney’s best-known character after Mickey Mouse), like Goofy in *Saludos Amigos* appeals to the audience’s intertextual familiarity,

providing an unequivocally U.S. perspective from which to venture into the unknown. The boxes are labeled in Spanish: “Best wishes to Donald Duck on his birthday, Friday the 13th, from his friends in Latin America.” Self-reflexivity makes its first appearance here, as the first box contains a movie projector, a screen and a film reel. As he subsequently screens these films, Donald repositions himself: no longer just a cartoon subject but a spectator; focusing his “all-American” gaze at a collection of tropical cartoon birds, followed by the unlikely stories of a penguin who loves warm weather and a young gaucho’s flying donkey.

At this point, the film-inside-a-film concludes and Donald opens the next gift. This time, the intertextual “container” is a large encyclopedia-like book entitled *Brazil*, out of which, when opened, pop a collection of Brazilian sequences. The most significant of these, from the point of view of diversity in Disney, is the scene that features the first “Latin Baby,” of the film: a live-action Aurora Miranda, singing “Os quindins de Yayá.” This is the first instance in this film of a hybrid format, and the first one in Disney since the 1923 production of a very primitive *Alice in Wonderland* featuring a superimposed live action Alice. Miranda appears over a cartoon background of the quaint colonial streets of Bahia. Again, we encounter the key strategy of intertextuality: with her exaggerated headdress and long, flowing skirt, it would be nearly impossible for audiences not to associate Aurora with Carmen, her more famous sister. Carmen Miranda had already become an iconic signifier, both for her flamboyant, tropical style and her positioning as the “Brazilian Bombshell” in many Hollywood films. Myra Mendible demonstrated how Miranda’s body came to serve as a “synecdoche for Latin America.” Identified as she eventually became with the Chiquita Banana trademark, Miranda ultimately functioned “as an ethnic commodity—and unwitting marketing rep for U.S. corporate exploitation of Latin American labor and natural resources.”²⁰ The fact that Aurora Miranda is portrayed as a Bahian sweets-seller only underscores her insertion in the economy of sexual and material consumption that underlies the representations in *The Three Caballeros*. The commodification of the Latina body is paralleled in an unequivocal manner here with Miranda’s depiction as purveyor of authentic Brazilian “goods” (especially the sexually suggestive “cookies”) and her positioning as the object of both the Anglo (Donald’s) and the Brazilian (Zé’s) eroticizing gaze. The fact that she is dancing in the scene gives added weight to the stereotype of the hypersexual Latina, given that even this simple act is “loaded with gendered, racialized baggage.”²¹

It is in this scene, accordingly, that Donald reveals himself for the first time as a *rara avis*: “a wolf in Duck’s clothing.” He lusts after women to the point of having to be restrained by his parrot friend, who exclaims: “Donald, you are a wolf! Take it easy!” This characterization is affirmed in a subsequent scene, as well as in the text that appears in one of the first posters advertising the film. Located in a cartoon balloon above Donald’s sombrero’d head it says

Imagine me and all my pals singing, dancing, romancing in the same scenes, with real, live, three-dimensional (and what dimensions!) luscious latin beauties like Aurora Miranda, Dora Luz, Carmen Molina! We're twice as torrid as a hot foot on the equator—and even more fun! Just change the name girls, from Donald Duck to Donald El Wolf, sí, sí, and wooooooooo-woooooo!”

With the depiction of Donald exhibiting this traditional (Latin-associated) macho behavior, another stereotype is reinforced; this time in the all-American character, who, recalling his role as tourist at Lake Titicaca in *Saludos Amigos*, now engages in a frenzy of real and symbolic cross-dressing, code-switching and “slumming with the natives.”

Out of the next gift box, the largest of all, emerges Panchito, a Mexican cock dressed as a traditional *charro*. He is easily identified as the gun-toting, pistol-shooting *bandito*—another negative Latin stereotype familiar to Hollywood audiences. He yells loudly, dances, sings and leads the trio in panting over the silhouette of a shapely woman. The three take off on a magic flying serape to tour Mexico. After a series of cultural sidetrips that feature Mexican customs and folklore, they end up flying over the beach in Veracruz—again, this scene was actually simulated in the Burbank studio parking lot.²² In this scene the telescope that Donald looks through self-reflexively becomes the subjective circular iris of the camera's “eye.” The all-female sunbathers wave at the visitors, but then scatter and run, as Donald tries in various ways to catch them, even playing an improvised game of blind-man's bluff (called, significantly, in Spanish, “the blind hen”). In the end, the women escape, leaving Donald, still blindfolded, kissing an imagined woman, but actually in the arms of Zé Carioca. “No, Donald, don't do that!” exclaims the parrot. While transgendered characters, gender ambiguity and hints of homoeroticism occur throughout the film (*Piedra*), like the threatening degree of difference represented in the native Others, this is quickly neutralized as the trio continues on its serape ride. As if to compensate for this lapse in normative heterosexuality, the remainder of the film features Donald rapturously entranced by a number of Mexican women, and variously framed by flowers, animated lips, disembodied legs, stars, sombreros and an army of phallic cacti. These in turn transform into a series of miniature Donalds. The reference here to sexual reproduction could not be more unambiguous. Even the original meaning of the term “animation” becomes relevant here, as the cartoon quite literally becomes a life-giving agent of creation. And not surprisingly, the creative mechanism here is purely a masculine undertaking—the phallic cacti beget the baby ducks. The female component is relegated to the background, or played out mimetically by the male birds. *The Three Caballeros* concludes with a frenzied bullfight scene, in which Donald plays the bull, and an orgasmic fireworks finale, in which all restraint is abandoned and the three cartoon birds sing, dance, and morph from one figure into another. The concluding scenes show the three “amigos” with Donald in the middle, synecdochically channel-

ing his apparent ultimate contrition for his bawdy behavior, again, through costume: he wears the serape over his head like a Madonna, and looks angelically heavenwards, while his sailor's cap floats gently above his head in the guise of a halo. But the final ending, over which the words "The End" appear, is a cataclysmic explosion. In the end, neither the framing of the camera nor the sturdy boxes can contain the difference that Latin America, with its irrepressible birds, maps, colorful dancers and especially Latin women represents.

Saludos Amigos and *The Three Caballeros* both signal a turning point in the history of Disney's cinema. They mark the beginning of the Disney foray into the documentary mode that characterized much of its later production, especially in the educational animated and live-action shorts that rounded out Walt's commitment to the "Good Neighbor" program. They introduced the highly stereotypical representations of Latin America and Latin Americans that remained stubbornly consistent throughout subsequent productions, including the colorful, exotic Latins that appear in the feature-length 1988 film *Oliver and Company*, the 1990 animated film and television show *Duck Tales*, the 2000 release *The Emperor's New Groove* and even the cartoon map of Latin America that makes a brief appearance in the 2009 feature *Up*. These early films also set the stage for the introduction of a longstanding Disney animation staple: the offensive and condescending treatment of the exotic and diverse Other that can be observed in the subsequent representations of African Americans in *Song of the South* and other ethnic characters in later films. As Jean Franco points out, the Disney cartoon "vies with the real and forecasts the power of the simulacrum that today draws millions of Latin Americans to Disneyland and Disneyworld."²³ Among those many consumers, viewers and visitors, there are many who either learned to see their Latin neighbors, or indeed to see *themselves*, through Disney's "Good Neighbor" treatment of difference.

Notes

1. Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. Leon S. Roudiez, ed. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez, trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 66.
2. Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature from Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Goddard*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 21.
3. José Piedra, "The Three Caballeros": Pato Donald's Gender Ducking. *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* no. 39 (June 1994) 23, 112.
4. Julianne Burton, "Don (Juanito) Duck and the Imperial-Patriarchal Unconscious: Disney Studios, the Good Neighbor Policy, and the Packaging of Latin America" in: *Nationalisms & Sexualities*, Andrew Parker ... [et al.], eds. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 31.
5. Henry A. Giroux, "Are Disney Movies Good for Your Kids?" in *Kinder Culture: The Corporate Construction of Childhood*. Steinberg, Shirley and Joe L. Kincheloe, eds. (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), 57.
6. Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart. *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*. David Kunzle, ed. (New York: International General, 1991), 95. Emphasis mine.
7. Ollie Johnston, Frank Thomas. *The Illusion of Life: Disney Animation*. (New York: Disney Editions, 1981).

8. Neal Gabler. *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*. (New York: Knopf, 2006), 173.
9. A “cel” in animation, short for “celluloid” is a transparent sheet on which objects are drawn or painted. See Tim Dirk’s FilmSite: <http://www.filmsite.org/animatedfilms.html>.
10. Siegfried Kracauer. *Theory of Film*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1960), 89–90.
11. Gaizka S. de Usabel. *The High Noon of American Films in Latin America*. (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1982), 164.
12. Fredrick B. Pike. *FDR’s Good Neighbor Policy: Sixty Years of Generally Gentle Chaos*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).
13. Rodolfo Vidal González. *La actividad propagandística de Walt Disney durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial*. (Salamanca: Publicaciones Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca, 2006) 114.
14. J.B. Kaufman. *South of the Border with Disney: Walt Disney and the Good Neighbor Program, 1941–1948*. (New York: Disney Editions, 2009), 19.
15. *Ibid.*, 24.
16. Jean Franco. *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City: Latin America in the Cold War* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001), 26.
17. Débora Krischke Leitão. “We, the Others: Construction of the Exotic and Consumption of Brazilian Fashion in France” *Horizontes Antropológicos*, Vol.4 no. se Porto Alegre, 2008, 7.
18. Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature from Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Goddard* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 16.
19. Kaufman, *South of the Border with Disney*, 73.
20. Myra Mendible, ed. *From Bananas to Buttocks: The Latina Body in Popular Film and Culture*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 10, 12.
21. *Ibid.*, 20.
22. Kaufman, *South of the Border with Disney*, 221.
23. Franco, *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City*, 28.

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