

Unmasking the Mouse: Cultural Appropriation in Disney Films

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Abstract	4
Introduction	5
Cultural Appropriation	7
The Walt Disney Company	
History	12
Disney Culture & American Culture	16
Protecting Disney Culture	21
Film Case Studies	27
Part One: North Native American Cultural Representations	
<i>Peter Pan</i> (1953)	
History-J.M Barrie's Play	28
Disney Film- “What Makes the Red Man Red”	30
Art References- Pop Culture	33
<i>Pocahontas</i> (1995)	
History- A European Perspective	43
Disney Film- “Savages”	46
Art References- Contact & History Content	53
Modern Native American Representations	61
Part Two: Mexican Cultural Representations	
<i>The Three Caballeros</i> (1945)	
History-The Good Neighbor Policy & Goodwill Tour	70
Disney Film- Stereotypes	72
Art References- Costume Books and World Showcases	75
Pixar Animation Studios	85
<i>Coco</i> (2017)	
History- Day of the Dead Celebrations	88
Disney Film- Establishing Distance	90
Art References-Mexican Artists	97
Modern Mexican Representations	105
Conclusion-Solutions	111
Bibliography	115

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Abstract

The artworld has largely revolved around traditional institutions like museums for centuries, however with the age of technology quickly evolving new artforms have risen to challenge these traditional spaces. Large corporations like The Walt Disney Company, have revolutionized the world of art and have become a prominent voice in representing cultures to a large population of the public. The two forces may be comparably different on the surface; however, both are going through a progressive change as they enter the discussion of inclusive representation and accusations of cultural appropriation. The act of cultural appropriation concerns the negatively generated adaptations of a culture that can be seen as stereotypical or depicting the people of the traditions as being “other.” In recent years, the Disney company has established systems and initiatives to prevent misappropriation from occurring, as it had in the company's past. While the Disney and Pixar studios have released several culturally influenced films, this research will be limited to the analysis of the films that visualize North Native American culture: *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Peter Pan* (1953), and Mexican culture: *The Three Caballeros* (1945), and *Coco* (2017). The history of the company will be briefly covered to establish the processes and representation within the Walt Disney Company and the films will be analyzed by their influence stories, film’s content, and reactions to the movies. The addition of modern representations of the cultures will be included to show the evolving nature of representations within the Native American and Mexican communities.

Introduction

The Metropolitan Museum of Art serves as an escape from the bustling, noisy streets of New York City and the confines of everyday life. The mausoleum for art of the past welcomes thousands of viewers every year from art scholars, cultural enthusiasts, the average tourist, and elementary students on field trips. It is easy to imagine wandering the halls of the large institution on a weekday afternoon and becoming absorbed in artworks that allow viewers to travel around the world. Visitors can create their own itinerary on cultures they wish to encounter, and while it's certain the artworks you may encounter, the experience may vary. Many times, it's the conversations overheard by fellow viewers that can create the largest impact.

The museum is home to hundreds of galleries each with varying degrees of attendance, and many times rooms of the highlighted works in the collection will be the center of attention for young visitors during guided field trips. If one encounters such a group, it can be hard not to eavesdrop and listen to the viewpoints of the young viewers who are so new to the world around them. The perspectives can make one reconsider even the simplest works of art. The tour guides usually run through their scripted presentations and move-on but relating to the kids the importance of art may require improvisation. Looking through the exhibitions, dazed looks can accompany the magnificence of classical Greek art, the breathtaking strokes of Vincent van Gogh's self-portrait, or the large tomb of a great Egyptian ruler. The context of art may not interest the young minds of the visitors, however when accompanying the facts with a name familiar with most children, the world of art becomes accessible to them. The name is simple: Disney.

The name surrounded by magic has crept into nearly all corners of The Metropolitan Museum of Art without being noticed. Tours for young elementary children could become

extensions of the movies they love by relating artifacts from the Oceania exhibit to the tales of Moana's journeys, pre-contact Mexican sculptures to the land of the dead in *Coco*, or classical marble monuments to the vibrant tale of Hercules. However, to make these connections one must overlook the long-ingrained message that cartoons do not belong in scholarly discussions, especially those created by The Walt Disney Company. The films Disney produces are filled with cultural references that introduce children to themes that are expressed in more traditional art forms found in museums. In a more confronting sense, Disney films serve as a historical gateway drug into the complexities that define artworks hung around museums worldwide. Disney content deserves to live within museums because the Disney name shares more similarities with traditional art than differences. Although Disney and art history serve as ways to visualize culture to children, several issues can arise; the most crucial is the act of cultural appropriation.

Museums and Disney share common ground in the heated debates concerning cultural appropriation in art. These large institutions face major accusations of appropriation when creating and displaying artwork that falsely represents a culture that has been marginalized in the past.¹ Museums have been accused of such acts for centuries, largely due to the type of art deemed worthy to be displayed in such institutions. The works of art seen in most museums belong to the art canon, or the pieces deemed worthy and valuable enough to be studied by the public. The art canon has long stood for the quintessential works to study for art historians, students, and art enthusiasts. However, many artworks worth studying have not been inducted

¹ Many institutions have faced the accusations of cultural appropriation, like in 2017 the Palazzo Grassi and Punta Della Dogana in Venice faced backlash for displaying Damien Hirst's, *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable*. The works were accused of appropriating Yoruba sculptures because the artist and museum did not provide historical context to the pieces. In 2012 the Walters Art Center saw protestors from the Dakota community for displaying Sam Durant's *Scaffold*, because it minimized the gravity of the execution of 38 Dakota natives who were killed close to the center. The museum and Durant both vowed to never reconstruct the installation.

into the largely Western white male dominated canon. The works that lie beyond the confines of the canon provide insight into the judgements, ideals, and creative minds of the past that have long lived in the shadows.

Another voice that the canon has ignored is popular entertainment which could be typified by the work of the Walt Disney Company. Disney's animated movies have often been relegated to just children's entertainment, but they are valuable as art objects and cultural touchstones. However, like the canon and traditional art museums, Disney has faced accusations of whitewashing history. Including cultural appropriation due to the launch of their new streaming service, Disney+, which allowed old content to resurface and become more readily available to the public. Several lawsuits and boycotts of films have been introduced in the last ten years against Walt Disney films similar to many art works deemed historical that are displayed in museums. The discussion surrounding the films is comparable to the discussion of inclusion within museums. The two could benefit from being discussed in tandem with one another. Both are on the cusp of a great reform to provide inclusivity for all cultures. Although cultural appropriation is a large and complex issue that has been ingrained within society for centuries, the discussion of reform and accountability posed to a large company like Disney encourages hope for a solution that needs to influence museums around the world.

Cultural Appropriation

Issues surrounding essentializing representations of cultures within any context is referred to as cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation is the act of adopting elements from another culture of which the appropriator does not belong. The cultures commonly appropriated are those that are considered "minorities" or that have been marginalized in the past. Edward Said, the anthropological theorist who wrote the influential text *Orientalism*, provides the classic

framework for understanding the processes of appropriation. He begins his analysis by claiming that to appropriate a culture an individual must first understand its values and traditions, noting that; “to have such knowledge of such a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it.”² Said’s language and use of powerful words like “dominate” and “authority” foreshadow this research. The use of strong language to define the act of cultural appropriation allows the appropriator to gain a sense of privilege over others. Said explains how the visualization of cultures allowed artist to gain a self-inherited privilege over cultures and the power of representation when stated, “Later in the nineteenth century, in the works of Delacroix and literally dozens of other French and British painters, the Oriental genre tableau carried representation into visual expression and a life of its own...”³ The visualization of Othering permitted the act to become a part of art which acts as a universal language because it is free from the confines of language barriers. The key element to appropriation is the knowledge of a culture and the willingness to first recognize a culture for its value. Susan Scafidi’s, *Who Owns Culture? Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law*, also highlights the initial role in recognizing a culture by noting: “Before outsiders can appropriate a cultural product, they must first recognize its existence, source community, and value.”⁴ Scafidi clarifies Said’s research by asserting that an “outsider” must be the one to perform cultural appropriation. An incident where an insider performs cultural appropriation is less likely to occur, but not unprecedented. The act of appropriation from an “outsider” is the focus of this research. The work of Erich Hatala Matthes, “Cultural Appropriation Without Cultural Essentialism?” examines the act in a broader perspective when stated, “Appropriation also occurs when someone else becomes the expert on your experience

² Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Penguin Books, 2019), 32.

³ Ibid, 118.

⁴ Susan Scafidi, “Outsider Appropriation.” in *Who Owns Culture? Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 91.

and is deemed more knowledgeable about who you are than yourself.”⁵ The scale of appropriation can vary from an isolated case involving an individual to falsely representing an entire demographic; despite the reach of misinformation the impact is an epidemic issue.⁶

The act of appropriation is conducted through various means, however the most common way a culture can be appropriated involves the act of “Othering,” in which the dominant culture treats and views a person or group of individuals as alien or different from a population of people, and therefore excluding them from society. The exclusion from society therefore silences the voice of the “other” and permits the appropriator to speak falsely about the individual, group, or culture. Said expands on the degrading of the individual or culture when he asserts, “....this ‘object’ [referencing the Orient or the Other] of study will be, as is customary, passive, non-participating, endowed with a historical subjectivity, above all, non-active, non-autonomous, non-sovereign with regard to itself....”⁷ The act of silencing the “other” allows the appropriator to make the culture or individual manageable and appealing to a larger audience, even though the appearance may be based upon lies. This has been visualized throughout art history, a classic example is Rembrandt van Rijn’s *Man in Oriental Costume*, of 1632 which depicts a Dutch man wearing a turban and robe (**Figure 1**). Very often, artists traveled to foreign countries and visually interpreted the culture they encountered. Often, they knew little about the traditions and complexities of the people they encountered. The position of the Other is examined when Matthes states, “The ‘right’ to use the voice of the Other has, however, been bought at great

⁵ Erich Hatala Matthes, “Cultural Appropriation Without Cultural Essentialism?” *Social Theory and Practice* 42, no. 2 (Florida State University Department of Philosophy, 2016), 349.

⁶ The act of othering is like the act of mimicking. In “Of Mimicry of Men,” Homi Bhabha states, “Mimicry is, thus, the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power.” The act of mimicking a culture allows the appropriator to understand and thus make the distinction of what is alien or exotics to an outside audience. However, Bhabha asserts that “Mimicry repeats rather than re-represents....” Therefore, if mimicking a culture were to occur while “othering” it should be noted as an interpretation not as fact.

⁷ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Penguin Books, 2019), 97.

price—the silencing of the Other; it is, in fact, neatly positioned on that silencing.”⁸ The “right” being discussed is the assumed privilege some cultures hold over others. Through the course of history, if a culture or practice did not conform to the general traditions it was alienated by appearing foreign or wrong. The globalization and colonization of areas popularized the act of Othering because it allowed the invaders to gain a sense of power and support from their countries. Said explains the position of Westerners to the act when stated, “A certain freedom of intercourse was always the Westerner’s privilege; because his was the stronger culture, he could penetrate, he could wrestle with, he could give shape and meaning to the great Asiatic mystery....”⁹ Said is referencing the “exotic” appearance of Asian countries, such as in Jean Leon Gerome’s, *The Snake Charmer* from 1870 his logic can be applied to encounters with other territories, like the Americas (**Figure 2**).¹⁰ In Theodore de Bry’s works, such as *Indians worship the column in honor of the French king* from 1591, the artist depicted the natives from North America as “other” beings who followed a different religion and lifestyle that did not conform to European ideals (**Figure 3**).¹¹ Due to the “differences” in the cultures, the Westerners found the “new” culture threatening to their own, and therefore tried to distance and belittle those in the culture. The act of othering has not disappeared from society but remains a prominent tactic when performing appropriation and trying to assert superiority over a culture.

The Walt Disney Company has performed the act of Othering in their content, for example in the Disney classic *Peter Pan*. The natives of Neverland were modeled from Native American references and are created as “Other” beings through their use of broken English and

⁸ Erich Hatala Matthes, “Cultural Appropriation Without Cultural Essentialism?” 349.

⁹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Penguin Books, 2019), 44.

¹⁰ Jean Leon Gerome’s, *The Snake Charmer* from 1870 was used as the cover for Edward Said’s novel *Orientalism* and depicts fantasized versions of Asian and Eastern countries.

¹¹ The works of Theodore de Bry will be revisited in the Native American research.

stereotypical attributes assigned to Native Americans, such as feathers, the teepee, and the peace pipe. Unfortunately, the act of cultural appropriation in modern content, such as the films produced by the Walt Disney company, was predicted by Edward Said. In the words of Said, “Each age and society re-create its ‘Others’.”¹² The act of appropriation is a persistent issue that focuses on making cultures static and fixed in time to conform to the Western viewer and creator.¹³ Art's ability to capture the static image of a culture in time allows visual media to be an effective tool in the act of Othering. The visualization of the “other” like in Disney content and traditional artforms guarantees that the stereotype will be carried over to the next generation of viewers because art is universally understood. The formation of the art canon by Western white men allowed the “other” to be ingrained within art and therefore into society.

The initial stage of appropriation and the othering of a culture is an influential power that extends into local, national, and global markets. The entertainment industry controls a market that capitalizes on exploiting the traditions of marginalized cultures.¹⁴ The corporations commonly exploit “trendy” or aesthetic elements of a culture that appeal to a large audience. For example, large retail stores like Target selling Día de los Muertos merchandise or the advertisement of Native American Halloween costumes that focus on stereotypical items like feather headdresses and Native American attire.¹⁵ The sports industry also capitalizes on these stereotypical Native American representations when selling their merchandise and presenting

¹² Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Penguin Books, 2019), 332.

¹³ Ibid, 108.

¹⁴ The entertainment industry is defined as, “a group of sub-industries devoted to entertainment. Entertainment industry is used to describe the mass media companies that control the distribution and manufacture of mass media entertainment. Generally, the entertainment industry includes the fields of theater, film, fine art, dance, opera, music, literary publishing, television, and radio. The common element found in all these fields is the fact that they engage in selling or otherwise profiting from creative works or services provided by script writers, songwriters, musicians, and other artists.” (“Entertainment Industry Law and Legal Definition,” US Legal, accessed February 13, 2021, <https://definitions.uslegal.com/e/entertainment-industry/>.)

¹⁵ An article released by NPR highlights an incident of Native American costumes present in an elementary school classroom. To find more information please consider the following article: Leila Fadel, “Cultural Appropriation, A Perennial Issue on Halloween,” NPR (NPR, October 29, 2019), <https://www.npr.org/2019/10/29/773615928/cultural-appropriation-a-perennial-issue-on-halloween>.)

mascots for national and local teams. The employment of cultural traditions into the marketplace is explained further in Jennifer C. Lena's work, *Entitled: Discriminating Tastes and the Expansion of the Arts*: "Markets give us access to other cultures and encourage us to think we have a right to that access, while also minimizing any discomfort we might experience."¹⁶ Lena's point echoes Said's assertion that, by having knowledge of these cultures, the colonizing individual assumes unwarranted authority over the traditions. The market of cultural images is generally surrounded by negative connotations; however, positives can emerge from the sharing of cultural knowledge. The representation of cultures through larger entertainment platforms, like Disney films, allows the culture to be acknowledged and make a larger demographic of people aware of said culture. However, to produce a positive representation individuals involved in a cultural exchange should be aware of their positions and have cultural competence. Cultural competence involves being aware of one's own world view, developing positive attitudes towards cultural difference, and gaining knowledge of different cultural practices and world views.¹⁷ The ability to understand a culture is not guaranteed to produce positive results and in the interest of this research, the outcome of cultural engagement tends to produce more negative than positive outcome. Similar to Said's use of "authority", Lena's use of "discomfort" is a part of the process to gain power because the culture has been stripped down of its discomforts to become something that the appropriator wants and feels a right to have authority over. The culture has become something that is manageable both for the individual and a marketplace. The influential powers involved in performing cultural appropriation and the disbursement of the

¹⁶ Jennifer C. Lena, "Cultural Appropriation," in *Entitled: Discriminating Tastes and the Expansion of the Arts* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019), 116.

¹⁷ Tori DeAngelis, "In Search of Cultural Competence," *Monitor on Psychology* (American Psychological Association, March 2015).

products to large audiences are major corporations. One of the most powerful companies that has assets in a global market is the Walt Disney Company.



Figure 1: Rembrandt van Rijn, *Man in Oriental Costume*, 1632, 98.5 x 74.5 cm (38 ¾ x 29 5/16 in.), oil on canvas, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, National Art Gallery, Washington DC.



Figure 2: Jean-Léon Gérôme, *The Snake Charmer*, 1879, 82.2 x 121 cm (32.4 x 48 in), oil on canvas, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, MA.



Figure 3: Theodore de Bry, *Indians worship the column in honor of the French king*, 1591, 178 x 214 mm, engraving on paper, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC.

The Walt Disney Company

History

The Walt Disney Company began as a small studio founded by Walt Disney and Roy Disney in the early 1920's in Los Angeles, California. The studio was aided by M.J. Winkler, a distributor in New York, who helped contract the distribution of the "Alice Comedies" on October 16, 1923. For the next four years the Disney brothers' studio would create the "Alice Comedies" and the Oswald cartoons. However, tragedy struck when M.J Winkler decided to cut Walt Disney from the creation process and would pursue the Oswald cartoons without Disney's

help. The defeat did not hinder the company, as Walt Disney would go on to create the famous Mickey Mouse cartoons in 1926. The studios would include Mickey Mouse in one of the first sound cartoons titled *Steamboat Willie* on November 18, 1928. The company's success would continue to grow with the creation of the *Silly Symphonies* series which were produced over a span of time from 1929-1939 and would compile several Academy awards for Best Animated short over the years of production. The popularity and success of the company created the confidence to produce their first feature length animated film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937. The film would be the beginning of Disney's venture into the film industry. The company would go on to create films during World War II, such as *Pinocchio* and *Fantasia* in 1940, *Dumbo* (1941), and *Bambi* (1942). The company would also focus on the war effort, sometimes in concert with the American government and sometimes on their own accord, as stated in documents provided by the Walt Disney Archives, "During the war, Walt Disney made two films in South America, *Saludos Amigos* and *The Three Caballeros*, at the request of the State Department. His studio concentrated on making propaganda and training films for the military."¹⁸ The success from his wartime films helped propel Disney into other fields of the entertainment industry.

While the company was achieving great success (on track to becoming the major influencer it is today), Walt Disney was not content with his work in the film industry. He wanted to move into other divisions of the entertainment industry, the most alluring being amusement parks. Through the influence of observing his own daughters, Walt Disney saw the potential of the amusement park and wanted to create a place where parents and children could have fun together. The result was the creation of Disneyland, which opened its doors to the

¹⁸ "Disney History," D23 (Walt Disney Archives, 2019), 1. The material referenced is available via the Walt Disney Archives website through D23 and through requests directed to the Walt Disney Archives.

public on July 17th, 1955. The park's success resulted in Walt Disney planning an east coast park, his so-called Florida Project, prior to his death in 1966. Roy Disney continued the Florida Project and would officially open Walt Disney World on October 1, 1971, in honor of his brother. The park exceeded Disneyland with the opening of three additional parks; Epcot Center that contains the World Showcase which opened on October 1st, 1982, Hollywood Studios opened on May 1st, 1989, and Animal Kingdom welcomed guests on April 12th, 1998.¹⁹

During the 1980s the film industry was changing in America and the company was not meeting its standards among the teen and adult market. To correct this, the company established Touchstone Pictures and released the film *Splash* in 1984. Under the direction of Eisner and Wells²⁰, the company released *Golden Girls* in 1986, and returned to Sunday night television with Disney Sunday Movies. The company also began releasing Disney classics on VHS, allowing the titles to become all-time best sellers, and introducing them to a new home market and new generations of consumers. During this era the company started Hollywood Pictures, Hyperion Books, acquired Wrather Corp (the owner of the Disneyland Hotel), the television station KHJ (Los Angeles/ KCAL), and purchased Childcraft allowing the company to open Disney Stores. In 1991, the company bought Discover magazine and expanded into sports in 1993 with franchise marketing for the National Hockey League, Mighty Ducks of Anaheim. The studios also broke a record with the acquisition of Capital Cities/ABC, which became the second-largest transaction in US history with a 1.9-billion dollar price tag.²¹ This would bring the country's top television network to Disney, "...in addition to 10 TV stations, 21 radio stations,

¹⁹ Ibid, 3.

²⁰ Michael Eisner was chairman and CEO of the company from 1984-2005. Frank Wells was president and Chief Operating Officer for the company from 1984-1994.

²¹ "Disney History," D23 (Walt Disney Archives, 2019), 5.

seven daily newspapers and ownership positions in four cable networks.”²² The company would continue to expand in 1998 with the ESPN zone and the Disney Magic luxury cruise ships setting sail to Disney’s private island, Castaway Cay. Then began the purchasing of several large companies in 2006 with Pixar Animation Studios, then three years later the purchase of Marvel Entertainment, and the most recent addition being Lucasfilm Ltd. in 2012. The company has grown exponentially since its beginning in 1923 and continues to grow in both value and influential power.

Disney Culture & American Culture

The growth of the company has allowed it to become one of the most successful entertainment names that occupies millions of households around the globe. In the process of expansion, the company has become its own culture with its own set of values. The Disney culture surrounding the corporation is a way of thinking and acting that conforms to the values and ideals created by the Walt Disney Company. The values generally involve fantasized versions of reality and history that are based upon a “happily ever after” mindset that promotes innocence and centers on toxic positivity. The culture has expanded beyond its American origins and now stretches across the globe with Disney theme parks in Europe and Asia, along with countless films that have been translated into a plethora of languages. The culture is a global phenomenon and one that is best represented in Disney’s own attraction, “It’s a Small World.” In John Wills', *Disney Culture*, the author asserts, “It’s a Small World underlines the common values of humankind and a shared destiny on this planet. It also situates Disney at the core of those values, the force that binds the world together and makes it small. Disney Culture is a

²² “Disney History,” D23 (Walt Disney Archives, 2019), 5.

powerful force connecting the United States and the world. It communicates across territorial, religious, political, and cultural divides.”²³ The company that once began in a small studio in Los Angeles has now gained the power to shrink the vast world into something that can fit into a 15-minute dark-ride. How does this happen? The answer lies in the previous statement: “Disney culture promotes innocence.” The origins of the company are based upon children-based content like cartoons and theme park rides, letting the company go unchecked by society even as they expanded beyond a children demographic. The promotion of innocence has allowed the company to expand over the years to control their image to the public and instill Disney culture on a global scale. The Walt Disney culture focuses on developing human resource strategies that weave Disney values into the minds of their employees. The strategies help to inspire their workers, who then pass on the inspiration to customers and keep them coming back for more magical memories. The weaving of values can vary in intention: one is it wants to uphold the innocence within their company to help maintain the childhood spirit in viewers and the visitors to the parks, or two: influencing individuals to conform to the innocent facade so they do not look too closely at the companies’ tactics and secrets. In totality the company has achieved both intentions. The corporation controls the view of the company by putting a chokehold on their affiliates and allowing only positive attributes to be released to the public. The darker secrets of the company remain hidden like sexual assault case and deaths that occur in the Disney parks.²⁴

²⁵ Although the lack of attention to their negative attributes is a tactic used by other companies outside of Disney, the acts warrant attention by the public and should not be ignored. The basis of Disney culture is to keep the “happily ever after” signs up to deflect the public’s attention to

²³ John Wills, “The World According to Disney,” in *Disney Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 52.

²⁴ Michael Cavanaugh, “John Lasseter Left Pixar after a Sexual Harassment Scandal. He’s Now Heading Another Animation Studio,” *The Washington Post* (WP Company, January 9, 2019).

²⁵ Marie Rossiter, “9 Tragic Deaths That Happened at Walt Disney World,” *WGBA* (WGBA, June 15, 2016).

only the smiling face of Mickey Mouse. The company has created a protective shield around itself, and a major component of their shield is the relationship between Disney culture and American culture.

The roots of the Walt Disney Company began in America, and since the beginning of the company the two have become intertwined with one another. In essence, there could be no Disney culture without American culture and vice versa. The cultures heavily rely on one another both in achieving a positive facade and creating an identity for the United States. John Wills notes: “The Walt Disney Company was also something that Americans could rely on. The studio served as a US institution, a cultural cornerstone, and a comfort blanket for the nation.”²⁶ The content Disney produces has become a safety blanket for Americans and when things become difficult like world wars or domestic violence, the population turns toward Disney for a positive perspective. The company is a pinnacle of hope to most Americans and just as Americans see Disney as a part of their culture, Disney includes America in its identity. Wills comments on the close-knit relationship when he asserts, “Discarding Disney is tantamount to shredding the traditional American Dream and becoming decidedly un-American.”²⁷ The relationship is so strongly established that during the attacks on September 11th, 2001, Disney parks saw themselves as potential targets and swiftly closed all their locations.²⁸ Although many large establishments followed a similar procedure, Disney served an important role in helping the American people recover afterwards when the parks opened on September 12th. The Walt Disney Company and American culture are essential to one another and require protection from negative publicity. To attack Disney culture, one is attacking American culture and would

²⁶ John Wills, “The World According to Disney,” in *Disney Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 73.

²⁷ John Wills, “Disney Values,” in *Disney Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 132.

²⁸ Jim Hill, “What Was It Like at Walt Disney World on 9/11,” HuffPost (HuffPost, November 7, 2011).

ultimately be deemed anti-American or anti-hope. The relationship benefits both cultures as they serve as protection for one another to the point of becoming untouchable in the public's eye.

Another example of the strong relationship was displayed in the creation of Disney's America, a theme park designed for Haymarket, Virginia, an area right outside of Washington D.C.²⁹ The attraction planned to showcase United States history through the eyes of Disney creators. It was to include Civil War reenactments, Native American settlements, a county fair, a WWII inspired Victory Field, a Great Depression family farm, and a recreation of Ellis Island. However, due to protests of authenticity, location, and racist attributes, the idea was abandoned.

Disney culture is accomplished by appropriation and the creation of "Distory," the rewriting of history to fit the values of the Walt Disney Company. Wills work focuses on the infamous use of "Disney magic" to alter history when he asserts, "'Disneyfied history thus meant 'good history,' with difficult topics such as slavery kept outside the berms.'"³⁰ Although such topics were going to be discussed in Disney's America, topics like slavery would be introduced to the audience through a disney-ified perspective. The Disneyfication of history to create Distory is a form of cultural appropriation because many viewers, especially children, will view the information given as fact rather than fiction. For example, the Disney version of Pocahontas that was released in 1995 contains a Europeanized tale of the historical figure of Matoaka. Although the film was reviewed as portraying a more accurate representation of Native Americans, compared to works like *Peter Pan*, the consequences of the film are severe.³¹ Children who view the film, or anyone who does a simple Google search will instantly be

²⁹ Matt Blitz, "The Story of The D.C.-Area Disney Park That Almost Was," DCist (WAMU 88.5 - American University Radio, October 4, 2019).

³⁰ John Wills, "The World According to Disney," in *Disney Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 63.

³¹ More information on the cultural appropriation taking place in Disney's Pocahontas can be found under the Native American culture section.

confronted with an image of Disney's idealized version of Pocahontas. Only upon further investigation will the viewer come across more historical representations of Pocahontas, such as Simon van Posse's Pocahontas portrait.³² Through representation like those in the Disney film, history has been altered to conform to Disney and therefore shows the power Disney has gained through cultural appropriation. The power of Disney is further explored in Henry Giroux's, *The Mouse that Roared*: "...it [Disney] also makes a claim on the future through its nostalgic view of the past, which displaces a trenchant public memory with fantasies of simplicity, purity, and wholeness."³³ The memory of Pocahontas has suffered from Disney's claim on the future; however, Disney's power is not contained within their films. The Epcot World Showcase performs a similar effect to Pocahontas, as the attraction displays segments of various cultures through dark rides, food, and employees from the represented countries. The showcase will most likely be the first interaction children will have with the cultures, and it will immediately have the Disney brand attached to the memory. Disney has a claim on childhood experiences, good and bad, and therefore holds an overwhelming amount of power over how children will view the world.

The depiction of cultures in their films, and Epcot, provides the experiences and content to hold educational value to both children and adults. Although Disney and Pixar films are generally viewed as entertainment for children, the films hold value that extends beyond childhood. Giroux explains, "Animated films, promoted as fantasy and entertainment, appear to fall outside the world of values, meaning, and knowledge often associated with more pronounced

³² The historical representations of Pocahontas are by no means accurate representations of Pocahontas because consequently we will never be able to tell the authentic story of Pocahontas because her story is subjected to a European perspective.

³³ Henry A. Giroux and Grace Pollock, "Children's Culture and Disney's Animated Films," in *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*, Updated and Expanded (Oxford, UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 95.

educational forms such as documentaries, art films, or the news media.”³⁴ The films are the precursor to other educational sources, and while the Disney films may only present a fraction of the culture, they are a learning tool for children. The animated features produced by Disney are generally the first encounter children will have with new concepts like friendships, growing up, and even death. Wills asserts when stated, “Disney movies have introduced children to such adult themes as melancholia, loss, violence, and death. The corporation thus exercises tremendous influence over childhood imagination, behavior, and values.”³⁵ They serve as glimpses into the real world for children in a stylistically pleasing and entertaining format. The films should be examined thoroughly because they are reaching a more vulnerable demographic of viewers. The Walt Disney Company has been described as, “a trusted extension of the family,”³⁶ and Wills asserts, “.... the Walt Disney Company educates kids in how to behave and what is good and bad about society. It teaches a moral code, where good always conquers evil.”³⁷ The films created by Disney should not immediately garner the stamp of approval, because as this research will examine, Disney and Pixar films contain content that is questionable, and titles accused of cultural appropriation.

Protecting Disney Culture

The Disney company has an image they wish to maintain, and so the corporation takes precautions to sustain their “trusted presence” in households. The secrecy of the company became apparent while trying to obtain an interview from a cast member to include within the

³⁴ Henry A. Giroux and Grace Pollock, “Children’s Culture and Disney’s Animated Films,” in *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*, Updated and Expanded (Oxford, UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 97.

³⁵ John Wills, “Disney Values,” in *Disney Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 106.

³⁶ Ibid, 106.

³⁷ Ibid, 106.

research and trying to access the Walt Disney Archives. The personal encounters with the company thus far are supported by Giroux , because he explains, “Quick to mobilize its monolith of legal representatives, public relations spokespersons, and professional cultural critics to safeguard the borders of its ‘magic kingdom,’ Disney has aggressively prosecuted violations of its copyrights and has a legendary reputation for bullying authors who use the Disney archives and refusing to approve their manuscripts for publication.”³⁸ ³⁹ The company has created a strong defense against such accusations as cultural appropriation or lawsuits filed against them, to the point of being nearly untouchable. One of the many defenses to deflect appropriation accusations is the infamous claim of artistic license. An artistic license is defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as, “the way in which artists or writers change facts in order to make their work more interesting or beautiful.”⁴⁰ The changing of facts, or cultural aspects, makes the influence turn from fact to fiction and the final product should be presented as such. The distinction between fact and fiction is an issue prevalent throughout Hollywood and within the Walt Disney Company. For example, companies like Netflix have used artistic license to save themselves from backlash for shows like “The Crown,” which does not claim to be historically accurate, yet many in the audience view it as a documentary.⁴¹ The Netflix series only affects a small population of people, however when depicting a whole demographic of individuals under false representations the effects can be devastating. Artistic license is not a safeguard against cultural

³⁸ I have reached out to the Walt Disney Company, The Walt Disney Archives, The Walt Disney Family Museum, Disney College representatives, and past employees who all have deemed it “virtually impossible” to speak with them and obtain a personal interview. I have received documentation from the Walt Disney Archives to help in my research, however nothing substantial that concerns the direct topic of Disney’s management of cultural representation in their animated films. The process has been ongoing for a year, and I remain determined to obtain an interview with someone who works or has worked for the company (specifically in their animation departments).

³⁹ Henry A. Giroux and Grace Pollock, “Children’s Culture and Disney’s Animated Films,” in *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*, Updated and Expanded (Oxford, UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 94.

⁴⁰ “Artistic License,” English-Danish Dictionary - Cambridge Dictionary, accessed June 3, 2021.

⁴¹ Dani Di Placido, “Netflix’s ‘The Crown’ Sparks Concerns Over Artistic License,” *Forbes* (Forbes Magazine, December 2, 2020).

appropriation and should be continuously challenged by the public when used to protect against accusations of appropriation.

The protection of culture extends beyond artistic license and is a large factor in producing new defenses to protect the Disney values. The employee policy manual covers the procedures for Walt Disney employees including park and supervising staff. The manuals and standards of business follow a similar format to most procedures produced by large corporations. However, the policies emphasize on the reputation of the company through the editions from 2016-2018. In the 2016 employee policy manual the former CEO, Robert Iger, introduces the company in a brief statement that contains the following: “Because we each hold ourselves to the highest standards, our consumers around the world and our colleagues across the company trust us to do the right thing, to behave ethically and respectfully, and to represent and reflect this phenomenal company in the best possible way at all times.”⁴² The largest movement to uphold the company's values to do the “right thing” and behave ethically is the creation of the Stories Matter movement. The initiative is best described by a page dedicated to the movement on the Walt Disney Company website that states, “We can't change the past, but we can acknowledge it, learn from it and move forward together to create a tomorrow that today can only dream of.”⁴³ The site acknowledges past issues with Disney films that depict stereotypical and appropriated characteristics of cultures. The films mentioned on the website, *Aristocrats*, *Dumbo*, *Peter Pan*, and *Swiss Family Robinson*, are accompanied by an explanation of why the content has been issued an updated advisory on their new streaming service, Disney+. The original advisory was a single sentence located at the end of the details of the film that stated: “This program is presented

⁴² (The Walt Disney Company, *The Walt Disney Company, and affiliated companies Employee Policy Manual* 2016), 2.

⁴³ “Stories Matter,” The Walt Disney Company (The Walt Disney Company, 2020).

as originally created. It may contain outdated cultural depictions.”⁴⁴ The warning was easily missed, and many viewers claimed it wasn’t enough. In 2020, the service would update and expand the advisory to be its own section under details that read: “This program includes negative depictions and/or mistreatment of people or cultures. These stereotypes were wrong then and are wrong now. Rather than remove this content, we want to acknowledge its harmful impact, learn from it and spark conversation to create a more inclusive future together. Disney is committed to creating stories with inspirational and aspirational themes that reflect the rich diversity of the human experience around the globe.” **(Figure 4)** ⁴⁵ The advisory is additionally placed before films where viewers must watch the text for twelve-seconds before the movie begins. The list of films that are advisable has expanded as well to include several titles beyond Disney classics like the film *Aladdin* that was released in 1992. ⁴⁶

The advisory is included in the Stories Matter movement that also encompasses an advisory council. The council is made up of several third-party organizations that help guide the company on what is and is not advisable content. The council includes, but is not limited to, Illuminative, the NALIP, CAPE, AAFCA, RespectAbility, GLAAD Media Institute, and Tanenbaum.⁴⁷ The organizations fight for the representation of different races, disabilities, sexualities, genders, and religions in the entertainment business. With the help of these organizations the company is trying to uphold their promise to do the “right thing” and behave ethically. In the past month, Disney has once again updated their advisory, however the update only affects children’s accounts. A child’s account is for kids seven years of age and under that

⁴⁴ Bryan Pietsch, “Disney Adds Warnings for Racist Stereotypes to Some Older Films,” The New York Times (The New York Times, October 19, 2020).

⁴⁵ “Stories Matter,” The Walt Disney Company (The Walt Disney Company, 2020).

⁴⁶ Bryan Pietsch, “Disney Adds Warnings for Racist Stereotypes to Some Older Films,” The New York Times (The New York Times, October 19, 2020).

⁴⁷ “Stories Matter,” The Walt Disney Company (The Walt Disney Company, 2020).

has parental controls restricting what the children can access. The new update has Disney taking on the role of parents as advisable films like *Peter Pan* and the *Three Caballeros*, are no longer available to be searched or viewed by children (**Figure 5**). The change is arguably a major setback as it no longer allows for children to view the advisory and to ask questions about the representations. The censorship is also problematic as many Disney Park attractions still contain appropriated and harmful content relating to cultural representations. For example, “Peter Pan’s Flight” which follows the storyline of the first *Peter Pan* film still contains depictions of the natives of Neverland who have stereotypical attributes related to Native Americans (**Figure 6**). The attraction should contain an advisory for children about the representation since the film contains an advisory on the adult accounts. The decisions surrounding the advisories are changing as Disney continues to try and correct mistakes made in their past and achieve their “happily ever after” agenda.

The Walt Disney Company promotes the innocence of childhood but should not be treated like a virtuous child. The Walt Disney Company is at its basic form a large corporation that will make mistakes and should be held accountable.⁴⁸ An ongoing example is the situation involving the live-action *Mulan* filming location. The movie was filmed in New Zealand and the Xinjiang region in China, which is home to the mass internment camps that hold Uighur Muslims in the area. The act of filming in the location prompted fans and the public to call for a boycott of the film, especially as the end credits pays a special thanks to officials and police who are aiding in the genocide.⁴⁹ As of this writing, the company has yet to comment on the incident or take accountability for the cultural issues present with the film. However, fans and the public

⁴⁸ Lily Kuo, “Disney Remake of *Mulan* Criticized for Filming in Xinjiang,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, September 7, 2020).

⁴⁹ Amy Qin and Edward Wong, “Why Calls to Boycott ‘*Mulan*’ Over Concerns About China Are Growing,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, September 8, 2020).

are holding the company responsible, even if they lack to see their responsibilities. The obstacles set in place by the company should not deter their mistakes from being publicized, and instead should be acknowledged by the public and corporate officials. If left unchecked, like it has been in the past, the Walt Disney Company will continue to grow until it is sacrosanct.

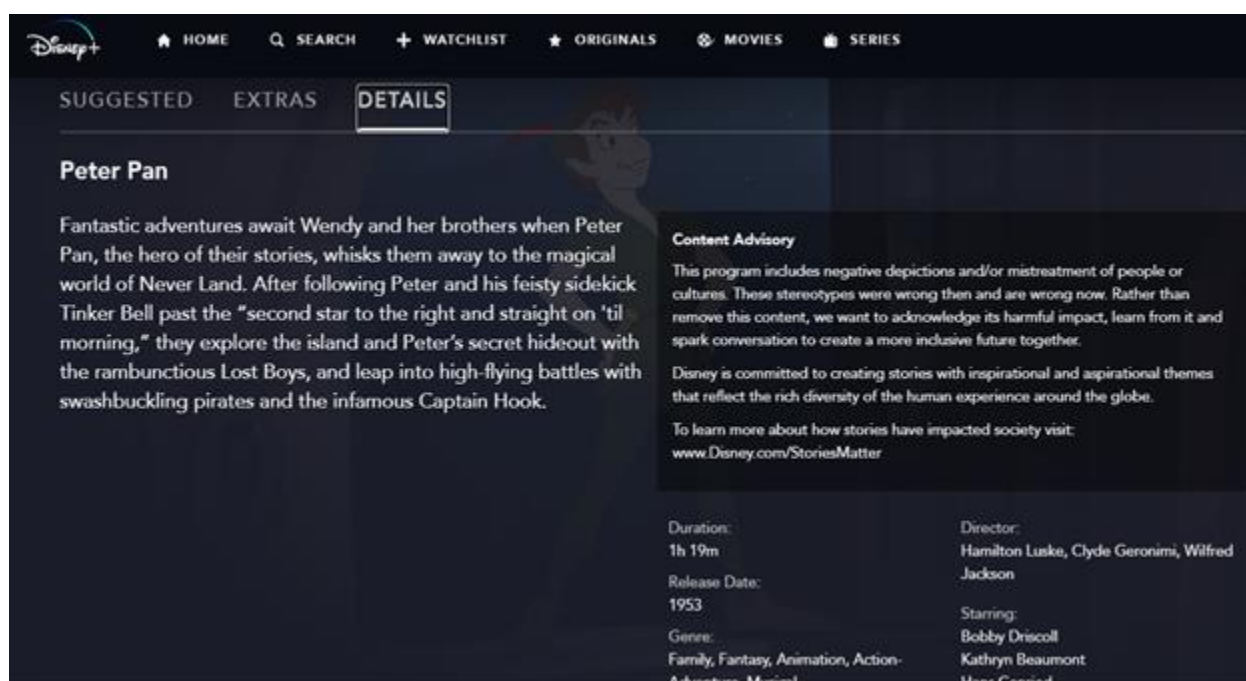


Figure 4: The Walt Disney Animation Studios, *Peter Pan* Advisory, Disney +, 2020.

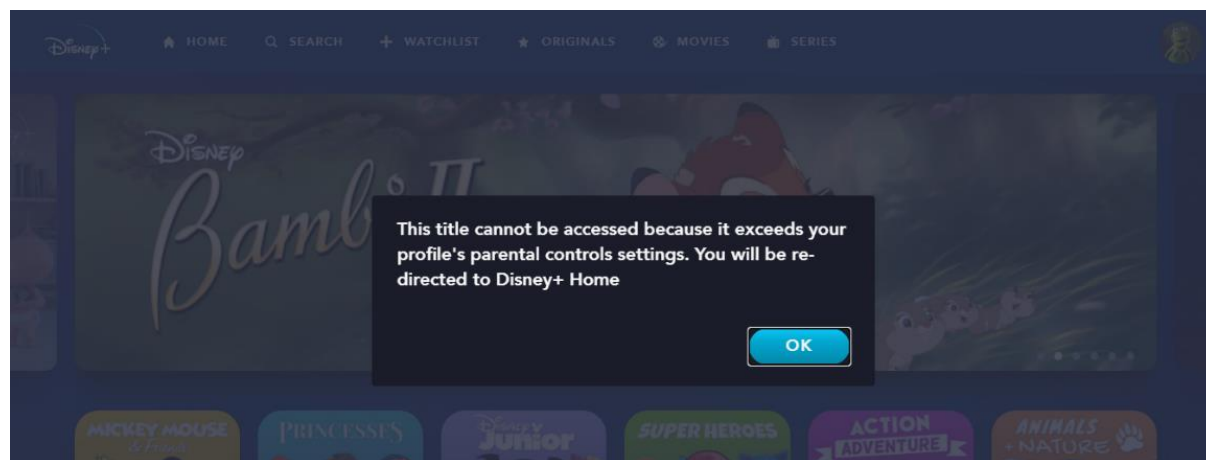


Figure 5: The Walt Disney Company, *Children's Account Restriction*, Disney +, 2021.



Figure 6: The Walt Disney Company, *Peter Pan's Flight*, Walt Disney World, Orlando, FL, 2021.

Film Case Studies

The analysis of the films, *Peter Pan*, *Pocahontas*, *The Three Caballeros*, and *Coco* will be broken down into the following categories: story/history, the Disney/Pixar film, reactions, and art historical references. The history of the cultures, Native American and Mexican, will also be briefly covered with a focus on the aspects of the culture that are seen within the films. The Disney and Pixar films will be broken down into several themes displayed in the stories that have been categorized as cultural appropriation. The reactions of those that do and do not identify with the cultures will be considered to provide a general impression of the films. Finally, artistic references used by the animators will be considered along with art sources that depicted the cultures throughout history.

Part One: Native American Cultural Representations

Peter Pan (1953)

History/Story-J.M. Barrie Play

Walt Disney's *Peter Pan* is based upon J.M. Barrie's original play "Peter Pan and Wendy" first published in 1904. The play was adapted into a novel in 1911 and now is commonly published as simply *Peter Pan*. The tale has undertaken several film adaptations over the years with the addition of Walt Disney's animation version from 1953 and an upcoming live action version set to premiere on their streaming service.⁵⁰ Although the films have varied in storyline the original fantasy remains of a boy taking children on the adventure of a lifetime to the dream-like landscape of Neverland. The island of mystery contains adventures with the lost boys, pirates, mermaids, and the people who J.M. Barrie refers to as "redskins." The term is one that dates the material and alludes to the historical nature of both play, novel, and film adaptations. The term is also accompanied by other derogatory terms applied to Native Americans in pop culture. In the article, "The Racist History of Peter Pan's Indian Tribe," written by Sarah Laskow, the author addresses other terms applied to the Natives of Neverland: "Peter Pan's creator, J.M. Barrie, described Neverland as an island of 'coral reefs and rakish-looking craft in the offing, and savages and lonely lairs, and gnomes who are mostly tailors, and caves through which a river runs, and princes with six elder brothers...and one very small old lady with a hooked nose.'" ⁵¹ The term "savage" is used when describing the warfare of the natives: "By all the unwritten laws of savage warfare it is always the redskin who attacks, and with the wiliness of his race he does it just before the dawn, at which time he knows the courage

⁵⁰ Savannah Walsh, "Peter Pan & Wendy: Everything We Know About Disney's Live-Action Remake," ELLE (ELLE, January 25, 2021).

⁵¹ Sarah Laskow, "The Racist History of Peter Pan's Indian Tribe," Smithsonian Magazine (Smithsonian Institution, December 2, 2014).

of the whites to be at its lowest ebb.”⁵² The quote is followed by another use of the term: “It is written that the noble savage must never express surprise in the presence of the white.”⁵³ The term is attached with the word “noble” which will be further explored when examining the contents of Disney’s *Pocahontas* film. The use of savage is used to distance the natives from civilization as they are only on the island with the intention to hunt the pirates and kill any lost boys who get in the way. The other term commonly used throughout the novel and in pop culture is the use of “redskins.” The destructive term is applied to the natives when describing the dynamics of Neverland: “The lost boys were out looking for Peter, the pirates were out looking for the lost boys, the redskins were out looking for the pirates, and the beasts were out looking for the redskins.”⁵⁴ The war-driven characters allude to the art historical nature of the depiction of Native Americans who were commonly villainized when partnered with Caucasian characters. Barrie’s adaptation is no different in the fantastical land of Neverland where the natives are slaughtered by the pirates in a similar nature to the raids conducted during the Creek War in Colorado in 1864.⁵⁵ The innocent preconceptions of fairy tales are wrongly applied as the events, terms, and topics discussed in many stories, like J.M. Barrie’s story bleed over into what is occurring in society. The longevity of fairy tales also prompts issues as Barrie’s story has been renewed and remained relevant through the productions produced by the Walt Disney Company.

⁵² J. M. Barrie and Peter Hollindale, *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens; Peter and Wendy*, World’s Classics (Oxford University Press, 1991), 63.

⁵³ Ibid, 64.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 28.

⁵⁵ Donald L Fixico, “When Native Americans Were Slaughtered in the Name of ‘Civilization’,” History (A&E Television Networks, March 2, 2018).

Disney Film- “What Makes the Red Man Red?”

The Walt Disney feature film, *Peter Pan*, was released to the public in 1953 and renewed the interest in J.M. Barrie’s story for generations. The story follows a similar plot to the original play and is described on Disney+ as: “Fantastic adventures await Wendy and her brothers when Peter Pan, the hero of their stories, whisks them away to the magical world of Neverland. After following Peter and his feisty sidekick Tinker Bell past the “second star to the right and straight on ‘til’ morning,” they explore the island and Peter’s secret hideout with the rambunctious Lost Boys, and leap into high-flying battles with swashbuckling pirates and the infamous Captain Hook.”⁵⁶ The description is a loose summary that has omitted the involvement of another group on the island that is identified as the “redskins.” The natives of Neverland follow a similar suit to the characters seen in the original play as they steal the darling children and Lost Boys after they set out to hunt the “Indians” (**Figure 7**). The storyline also follows the story of Tiger Lily who is captured by Captain Hook to lure Peter Pan out of hiding. The character's problematic representation climaxes with the creator’s inclusion of the song “What makes the Red man Red?” The song is brought about after Peter Pan and Wendy save Tiger Lily from the pirates and are celebrating with the natives. The song reinforces the racist slur as the natives sing about why their skin color is “red”: “Let’s go back a million years/ To the very first Injun prince/He kissed a maid and start to blush? And we’ve all been blushin’ since.”⁵⁷ The song continues, “The real true story of the red man/ No matter what’s been written or said/ Now you know why the red man’s red!”⁵⁸ Although the lyrics prompt a child-like context the issue with the lyrics concerns the

⁵⁶ *Peter Pan*, Disney + (Walt Disney Company, 1953).

⁵⁷ The Jud Conlon Chorus & Candy Candido, “What made the red man red,” track 13 on *Walt Disney’s Peter Pan: An Original Walt Disney Records Soundtrack*, Walt Disney Records, 1953.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

long-embedded racism that is directed toward individuals based upon their skin color. The slur “redskin” has been used throughout history and has been immortalized in contexts like the Washington National Football Team mascot, which will be discussed later in the art references.

The use of the slur also prompts the larger discussion that has surrounded the movie that these are not intended to be representations of North Native Americans and are never directly identified as such. The individuals in the movie and in J.M. Barrie's writings are identified as the Natives of Neverland that belong to the Piccaninny Tribe who are commonly referred to as “redskins”, “savages” or “injuns.” It is through the references to “redskins” and “savages” that the connection to North Native American tribes becomes apparent as the slurs have been commonly attached to the indigenous groups in the United States throughout history. The necessity to create a native group in a far-off fantastical world would have led J.M. Barrie to look for inspiration outside of the United Kingdom, and the United States had already created a characterized version of the Native Americans that was ripe for the picking. The association with the North Native Americans is also felt by the Native American community who have commented on the issues of Walt Disney’s representations.

The reactions to the Walt Disney production and several other adaptations are predominantly negative due to the use of Native American racism to establish the characters as indigenous people. The play written by J.M. Barrie is still largely performed, however has been altered from the original with the role of Tiger Lily being the major difference. The production of the play being performed at the Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington D.C. in 2020, cast Isabella Star LeBlanc, who is Sisseton Wahpeton Dakota, for the role of Tiger Lily. The actress was confronted with the casual use of the “r-word” while performing in Washington D.C. where the pride for the Washington Redskins team was strong. The article in the USA Today,

“Disney Plus Needs to add some context to racist ‘Peter Pan’ Now,” by Erik Brady, the author comments, “Most of us grew up with the story of Peter Pan. LaBlanc did not. Her parents never let her watch Disney cartoons. Nor did they read the book to her, because Barrie’s Tiger Lily speaks gibberish, smokes a peace pipe and puts her ear to the ground to hear who’s coming.”⁵⁹ The close association with the Native American communities is prominent and one that contributes to the characterization and commercialization of a static image of Native American culture. The reviews for the film continue to grow, and like the changes taking place with the Splash Mountain attraction in their parks, Peter Pan’s Flight is now under debate to be “reimagined” to fix the racist elements involving the native scene.

The discussion surrounding the Peter Pan’s Flight attraction involves changing or completely removing the Natives of Neverland from the ride. The rumor to “reimagine” the ride have sparked heated debates on discussion forums like Inside the Magic, which is a Disney focused blog, that allows for fans to express their ideas about the latest Disney news. The discussion around the Peter Pan ride have sparked outcry from those considering the movie an untouchable “classic” and more calmer voices from people who identify with the Native American culture. One discussion thread follows the user Pricella Leavers commenting, “It is my opinion that we have become a ‘Cancel Culture’ which directly goes against the ‘All Inclusive’ rhetoric everywhere. Leave Peter Pan Alone; yes, there were Native Americans (Indians) in the movie, it is real, they exist!! Peter Pan did not spin this into a bad thing, they were friends in the movie... What’s the problem?”⁶⁰ Another user, Elizabeth, simply responded to Pricella, “We don’t look like that.”⁶¹ The term “cancel culture” has become a trendy topic of debate, because

⁵⁹ Erik Brady, “Disney Plus Needs to Add Some Context to Racist 'Peter Pan' Now,” USA Today (Gannett Satellite Information Network, July 18, 2020).

⁶⁰ “Guests Speak out on Possible Reimagining of Peter Pan's Flight,” Inside the Magic, March 3, 2021.

⁶¹ Ibid.

many argue that by removing elements that are seen as problematic, society is canceling the past and are doomed to repeat the mistakes. However, the same user, Elizabeth, is not prompting the natives in the ride to be removed, instead she comments, “Speaking as a Cherokee woman, it would be really nice to have them represented respectfully. It's not like it would take much.”

⁶²Several commenters for and against the rumored changes quoted Walt Disney and one individual, Jake N., wrote, “Walt Disney said, ‘Disneyland will never be completed, as long as there is imagination left in the world.’ He intended for it to change. This whole notion of ‘keeping the classics’ motif is totally contrary to his vision about moving forward. It’s not about keeping the past.”⁶³ The company has not commented on the rumors, however the comments for and against the film illuminate the strong feeling embedded within Disney films. The issues surrounding the ride extend to the original film, as the Natives are continually reflected in a visualization that is dated and static.



Figure 7: Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson, & Hamilton Luske, directors, *Peter Pan*, 1953, Disney+.

⁶² “Guests Speak out on Possible Reimagining of Peter Pan’s Flight,” Inside the Magic, March 3, 2021.

⁶³ Ibid.

Art References- Pop Culture

The story of Peter Pan by J.M. Barrie and Walt Disney's films are heavily influenced by the art historical trends that depicted Native Americans in stereotypical representations. The long-standing use of derogatory words like "redskin" and "savage" are exemplified and widely distributed in images like *Cigar Store Indians*, advertisements for *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* show, Frederic Remington paintings, and more recent material like the "Howdy Doody" character Chief Featherman, in addition to the former Washington's National Football team mascot. The historically appropriated images were readily available to American animators who were in search of inspiration to bring J.M. Barrie's Natives of Neverland to life.

The *Cigar Store Indians* began production in the 1850's when tobacco stores began commercializing in the United States (**Figure 8**). The statues were generally created by artists left anonymous, but the example seen here is from Samuel Anderson Robb who is thought to have begun production of the statues in the 1880s. Similar to other *Cigar Store Indian* carvers, like John Cromwell, Robb began his career as a ship carver who focused on carving ship figureheads. He would start to produce hundreds of Indian statues that became associated as the "mascot" for tobacco stores across the United States.⁶⁴ The Indian symbol served as an indicator of the tobacco stores and would further stereotype the communities as tools of commercialization. Although the Indian was not solely used to categorize tobacco stores, the depiction displayed in the carvings was largely used by Americans to classify the culture in a static caricature image.

The carvers of *Cigar Store Indians*, like Sebb, did not identify with the culture they were representing, and therefore did not know the value of the attire or symbols. Although the

⁶⁴ Alan R. Sawyer, "American Folk Art," *The Art Institute of Chicago Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (February 1, 1953), 13.

intentions may not have been malicious, the stereotypical representation of Native Americans wearing the headdress and ceremonial attire became the generalized image of the culture and people. Many of the cigar store carvings were not identical, however the larger population of pieces that survived featured the figures wearing a headdress that can be traced to the attire of Great Plain natives, and many First Nation and indigenous groups. The feathered headdresses, or “eagle-feathered war bonnets,”⁶⁵ was an item that was earned by male warriors who used the accessory as a symbol of status. The pieces were constructed by warriors who displayed an act of bravery in battle which was rewarded with an eagle feather. Although the headdress is commonly depicted in scenes of battle, many of the pieces were used primarily for ceremonial purposes as they would have been difficult to maneuver in combat. The works of George Catlin focused on recording “the appearance and customs of America’s native people,”⁶⁶ including the ceremonial attire of the natives⁶⁷, that was influenced by the artist’s encounters with Native Americans during his travels of the west (**Figure 9**). The Smithsonian Museum of Art explains the process of Catlin’s travels to contextualize the large collection they possess of the artist’s work: “In 1832, Catlin made an epic journey that stretched over 2,000 miles along the upper Missouri River. St. Louis became Catlin’s base of operations for the five trips he took between 1830 and 1836, eventually visiting fifty tribes.”^{68 69} The representation of an array of tribes allowed for a more diverse and challenging image of Native Americans to the public. The generalization of Native Americans under one uniform image plagued society and continues to

⁶⁵ Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank, “Feathered War Bonnet (Article) | West,” Khan Academy (Khan Academy), accessed June 10, 2021.

⁶⁶ “George Catlin and His Indian Gallery,” Smithsonian American Art Museum (Smithsonian American Art Museum), accessed June 10, 2021.

⁶⁷ The image on page two is by George Catlin titled, *Kee-o-kuk, The Watchful Fox, Chief of the Tribe*, 1835. Catlin described the painting as a “noble” looking man.

⁶⁸ The image to the right is Catlin’s work, *Stu-mick-o-sucks, Buffalo Bull’s Back Fat, Head Chief, Blood Tribe*, from 1832.

⁶⁹ “George Catlin and His Indian Gallery,” Smithsonian American Art Museum (Smithsonian American Art Museum), accessed June 10, 2021.

be a cultural issue, as history and art historical works provide a general impression of Native American life. The work of Catlin challenges this notion as he is depicting a variety of Native American tribes from modern day North Dakota to Oklahoma. However, many of the images still represent the natives in ceremonial attire like that seen in Sebb's wood carving. The imagery of ceremonial attire is complex due to the depictions cementing an impression of the native community, however remaining an important part of Native American traditions. The visualization of Native Americans decorated with feathers and with little to no clothing became the racist stereotypical shorthand for depicting indigenous people in a way that indicated the "nativeness" of the people. When portrayed to the public in works like Catlin and Sebb, the images retain their two-dimensionality as many viewers do not understand the value of the attire and instead interpret the images with ideas that conform to pre-established notions of the culture.

The original audience for the statues used the imagery to indicate the store's contents allowing the stereotype to be distributed with surface level information, like the role of Native American mascots that represent athletic teams. The use of cultural mascots in American sports has sparked several controversies across different teams, the most publicized being the former Washington Redskins National Football Team (**Figure 10**). The team had long held on to their name, however in 2020, the team officially announced that it will drop the racist slur.⁷⁰ The change comes after FedEx and other major contributors for the team announced they would pull their contracts with the team if a change did not occur. Currently the team has yet to announce a new name, however the question remains how the team will handle fans who refuse to change their racist behavior that is associated with the former name. In the New York Times article, "Washington N.F.L Team to Drop Name," the issue was addressed as the authors stated, "The

⁷⁰ Ken Belson and Kevin Draper, "Washington N.F.L. Team to Drop Name," The New York Times (The New York Times, July 13, 2020).

Washington team's most immediate task is changing its official branding, but it is unclear how the team will address fans who continue to wear headdresses, war paint, and other stereotypical imagery to games, and if it will replace its fight song, 'Hail to the Redskins,' which contains references to 'braves on the warpath' and is played after touchdowns at home games."⁷¹ The behavior of fans contributes to the stereotypical display of Native Americans in an environment where a curator at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington D.C. states, "...is not the ideal venue to educate the public about Native issues."⁷² **(Figure 11)** The address of the venue is important when considering the lack of context attributed to sports mascots and commercial characters. The public nature of the work allows an array of viewers to interpret the information as fact, even when the truth is not present. Similar issues are applied to other areas of entertainment like the popularized shows to feature cowboys versus Indians.

The drawl of cowboy versus Indian's was popular in television and theatres throughout the mid-1950s to 1970s. The wild west was popularized in television shows like "Gunsmoke", "F Troop", and "Howdy Doody" and were a large part of feature films like "Ghost Riders of the West," "Flaming Star," and more recent films like the remake of "Lone Ranger" (2013) starring Johnny Depp as Tonto. The precursor to such theatrical representations was the Buffalo Bill's Wild West show which began in 1883. The attraction was started by Bill Cody who had grown up during the expansion West and was an active scout during the Indian Wars. The show contained several acts and re-enactments that featured Native Americans who were portrayed by primarily Oglala Lakota people. The performances that featured the Native Americans conformed to the portrayals in later theatrical productions that villainized the Native Americans

⁷¹ Ken Belson and Kevin Draper, "Washington N.F.L. Team to Drop Name," The New York Times (The New York Times, July 13, 2020).

⁷² Jennifer Schuessler, "Seeing Native Americans Nowhere, and Everywhere," The New York Times (The New York Times, July 14, 2020).

(**Figure 12**). The show's representation is confirmed in a PBS article that states, "...the Indians were always the aggressors -- attacking wagon trains, settlers' cabins, and Custer's forces. The reality was quite different — attacks on settlers' wagons had been quite rare, and it was the whites who kept breaking treaties with the Indians, not the other way around."⁷³ The aggressive nature of the Natives Americans was in response to the broken treaties and abuse from the American government. Both sides displayed violent tendencies, however the American violence is omitted to paint a more black-and-white image of the conflicts. The advertisements reinforce the idea of the right and wrong as it campaigns, "wild rivalries of savage barbarians and civilized races."⁷⁴ The advertisement implies another offensive term to the Native Americans outside of "redskins" as their violent nature and actions in the show classify them as "savage." The same vocabulary is applied to Frederic Remington's work, *The Attack*, that focuses on depicting the west (**Figure 13**). The naming of Remington's piece associate's violence with the scene as well as the mysterious depiction of a shadowy figure with little to no description except for the stereotypical indicator of a Native American feathered war bonnet. The "attack" is not directly addressing a strike on Westward expanding Americans, however from performances like those in Buffalo Bill's Wild West show and its advertisements, many viewers may imply the strike is occurring on "innocent" travelers. The show helped to establish the Native American actions in a more three-dimensional performance and served as an example of a romantic version of the West, "...where cowboys battled Indians,"⁷⁵ that, "would shape the Hollywood Western for decades to come."⁷⁶ The performances would also influence representations seen in popular

⁷³ "Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show," PBS (Public Broadcasting Service), accessed June 10, 2021

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

children's entertainment like "Howdy Doody" and contribute to the representation present in Walt Disney's *Peter Pan*.

The culturally appropriated portrayals of Native Americans in Disney's film are influenced by art historical representation previously discussed and opens the culture to an impressionable demographic when displayed to children. The "Howdy Doody" character Chief Featherman can be discussed in relation to Walt Disney's production of *Peter Pan* because the show/film were targeted toward the same audience and released at the same time in the early 1950s (**Figure 14**). The Natives of Neverland and Chief Featherman appear to be cut from the same cloth as they speak in a broken English dialect, dress in the attire seen in previous works, and contributed to children's first impression of the Native American culture. The film categorizes the natives as "redskins" resembling the current discussion surrounding the Washington NFL team, which was another area that children could have encountered the world outside of film. The term is argued as innocent within the contexts of J.M Barrie's book/play and Disney's production, however if the child were to use the term in the "real world" the behavior is problematic and impactful to the community it's referencing. The impact has been addressed by the advisory now present on the film, however the film retains the word and therefore should be approached as historical content that needs to be addressed as unacceptable in modern society.

The Walt Disney production conforms to the preconceived representations of caricaturing Native Americans through the creation of the natives of Neverland. The act of creating a caricature entails the artist exaggerating and distorting the characteristics of someone or something that results in a fantasized version of the original subject. The Disney creations are classifiable caricatures as the artist exaggerated the facial features of the natives to have large noses, hair that hangs over their eyes, and all the characters feature elements of the stereotypical

Native American attire, like the war bonnet or feathers (**Figure 15**). The same attributes are seen in the “Howdy Doody” character, Chief Featherman, whose name also asserts the stereotype of associating feathers with the culture. The actor has altered his appearance to caricaturize the identity with larger eyebrows, a prosthetic nose, and wears an elaborate war bonnet. The characters do not claim to be authentic representations, however, are extensions of previous art historical work that has wrongfully painted an image of the culture. The representations also distance the viewer by having the characters speak in a broken English dialogue. The Natives of Neverland and Chief Featherman have a similar broken English that makes them appear different and unable to completely communicate with society. The barrier of language appears to be child-like, and while the content was targeted toward children, the introduction of a broken English dialogue in association with Native Americans asserts the impression of a lack of intelligence. The pose of the characters also asserts a common association with the Native American culture as the position of the legs was once defined as “Indian style.” The representations did not classify themselves as authentic characters for Native American cultures, however when viewed by children without context, the representations may be seen as fact and carry stereotypical connotations into their later lives.

The Walt Disney production of *Peter Pan* and the J.M. Barrie novel were products of the visual artwork that was produced before their creation. All artwork gains inspiration from outside resources which when reproduced overtime, will create an artistic trend seen in the larger art canon. Although many of the artworks presented here are not considered frequently by art historians, the work has inspired and led to the production of one another to eventually help create Walt Disney’s *Peter Pan* in 1953. The Disney film is an educational resource for children that allows them to begin understanding and become exposed to new ideas, like the concept of

culture. Children who have not attended school to learn about the Native American community will likely find that the Disney films are the beginning to understanding a culture outside of their own. However, when presented with representations like those of *Peter Pan* and the next film that will be discussed, the effects can be damaging, especially when history classes will reiterate the appropriated information.



Figure 8: Samuel Anderson Robb, *Cigar Store Indian*, ca. 1850, 66 ½ in, carved painted sculpture, private collection.



Figure 9: George Catlin, *Stu-mick-o-sucks, Buffalo Bull's Back Fat, Head Chief, Blood Tribe*, 1832, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC.



Figure 10: Washington Redskins Football Helmet, photograph, 2020, Getty Images.



Figure 11: Christian Petersen, Two Washington fans watch a game against the Arizona Cardinals on October 12, in Glendale Arizona, photograph, 2014, Getty Images.

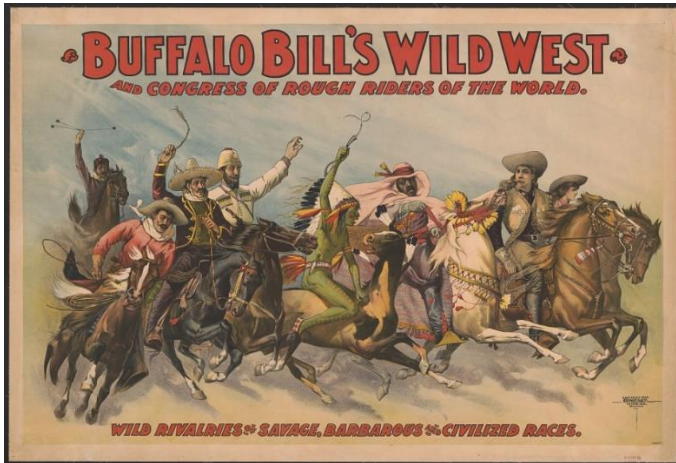


Figure 12: Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World Wild rivalries of savage, barbarous and civilized races, 1898, Print chromolithograph, 71 x 106 cm. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C.



Figure 13: Frederick Remington, The Attack, 1907, reproduction of painting, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC.



Figure 14: Bob Keeshan as Chief Feathermen, *Howdy Doody*, ca. 1950s, black and white photograph. HBCU Photo Bank, NBC Universal.



Figure 15: Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson, & Hamilton Luske, directors, *Peter Pan*, 1953, Disney+.

Pocahontas (1995)

History-A European Perspective

The historical accounts of the real person who inspired the Disney fairytale is subjected to both a European perspective and a broken narrative. The story of Pocahontas, or Matoaka, is problematic because it is told from the perspective of European explorer, John Smith. The details of Matoaka's life are subjected to the perspective of Smith and the truth of her life has been scattered across several retellings throughout history. Matoaka's story is addressed in Daniel K. Richter's book *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America*, where he recounts the beginning of Matoaka's story: "She was born in 1595 or 1596 as one of perhaps ten daughters and twenty sons of Powhatan, the *mamanatowick*, or paramount chief, who presided over the approximately thirty local communities and 15,000 people of Tsenacommacah, the

‘densely inhabited land’ later called the Virginia Tidewater.”⁷⁷ The lack of information makes many aspects of Pocahontas’ life, like her birth year and circumstance of her death, a question to historians and therefore nothing is concrete. The story and interference with the settlers is the main focus of John Smith’s accounts and in the Disney film, as the encounters would be seen as the founding of the future United States of America. Due to the association with the future United States, much of the history has been surrounded in mythic renditions. In an article published by Time, “The Real Story of Pocahontas: Her Life, Death and Meaning” Karen Kupperman states, “In his 1624 *Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles*, Smith wrote that she risked her own life to save him, but modern scholars think she was probably playing a scripted role in some kind of adoption ceremony. Afterward, Powhatan called Smith his son.”⁷⁸ The assertion of Pocahontas playing part in the scenario between the indigenous and settlers would help establish her place in history at a young age. The individual is placed into the role of being a bridge between the two cultures (indigenous and English settlers) which ultimately becomes the focus of the Pocahontas myths. The events of her life that are seen throughout the retellings that are nearly identical to one another concern the construction of the “noble savage” character.

The “noble savage” was a character created by the Europeans to oppress and stereotype the indigenous people they were encountering on their voyages. The character is not explicit to North Native Americans; however, the imagery is heavily placed within the areas that would become the United States. In Michael Gaudio’s, *Engraving the Savage: The New World and Techniques of Civilization*, the author asserts: “Western myth of what it means to be a savage,

⁷⁷ Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: a Native History of Early America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 70.

⁷⁸ Karen Ordahl Kupperman, “The Real Story of Pocahontas: Her Life, Death and Meaning,” Time (Time, March 12, 2019).

which is that a savage is precisely one who lacks perspective on the world.”⁷⁹ The noble savage therefore embodies the innate goodness of humanity, which was represented in the Pocahontas story when she made the ultimate commitment and converted to Christianity. The conversion came after events described by Richter: “The young captive spent most of the next year as a hostage at Jamestown under the supervision of Deputy Governor Thomas Dale, and at Henrico, in the house of the Reverend Alexander Whitaker. During that period, she received instruction--indoctrination might be a better word--in Christianity.”⁸⁰ The term “conversion” appears too innocent for the event that transpired as it’s unclear the context provided to Pocahontas from the settlers or what options were given outside of the act to convert. The use of “indoctrination” to describe the conversion is grounded in religious beliefs to accept the practice without skepticism, however the circumstance of Pocahontas’ stay as a forced captive exposes the question of a consensual transaction to Christianity. Also, the language barrier between the Native Americans and the settlers needs to be considered because the two parties have a mutual incomprehension of one another. The two parties saw each other, and understood each other, but did not fully comprehend the customs, traditions, and dialogue of the other side. The conversion of Pocahontas would help establish the “noble savage” as she was maintaining her indigenous appearance physically but transforming to a European spiritually. The act would symbolize how the indigenous people could be saved and how they could be controlled.

During the time she was held at Jamestown, Pocahontas would meet and marry her husband John Rolfe, who would accompany her to England in the early 1600s. The events

⁷⁹ Michael Gaudio, *Engraving the Savage: The New World and Techniques of Civilization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xx.

⁸⁰ Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 72.

leading to her death show the broken narrative of her life as the circumstances surrounding her death in England are unclear. In Edwards' work the author states, "...1616, Pocahontas went to London, and she was received at court as an "Indian Princess." She died of tuberculosis and was buried at Gravesend in 1617 as she was about to return to Virginia."⁸¹ The cause of death is specific in Edwards' account, however in other accounts, like in Daniel Richter's book the circumstance of death is not clarified; Richter asserts: "Two months later she succumbed to an unidentified ailment at Gravesend, as she prepared to travel home on a ship commanded by the same Samuel Argall who had captured her."⁸² The "two month" period refers to the time from when she arrived in England to her death. The lack of evidence to support the cause of death or her birth draws the question of truth to the version of Pocahontas that is taught as fact. The alterations of the story to fit within the European narrative are problematic and have exercised the truth to become arguably folklore. The historical European narrative arguably aligns closely with the Disney-ified version that has seamlessly interwoven itself to further altar the true story of Matoaka.

Disney Film- "Savages"

Though the story of the real Pocahontas is complex, the Disney version has simplified the story line to focus on the romantic and fictional relationship between Matoaka and John Smith. Throughout the film as feelings form between Pocahontas and Smith, the plot contains several details that can be classified as appropriated material. Although the Disney film should not be considered as a historical documentary, the appropriated features adhere to art historical material

⁸¹ Leigh H Edwards, "The United Colors of 'Pocahontas': Synthetic Miscegenation and Disney's Multiculturalism," *Narrative* 7, no. 2 (May 1999), 150.

⁸² Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: a Native History of Early America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 75.

that propels stereotypes that impact the Native American community. The film has been accused of rewriting history to fit within the Disney culture and societal standards at the time the film was made.

The rewriting of history to conform to the Disney culture is not an isolated event with the film *Pocahontas*, however the involvement of historical events and people make the film a target of cultural appropriation. The story of Matoaka has been viewed as the story that bridges the gap between settlers and Indians that helped to develop the land that would become the United States of America. The Disney film follows the historical documents of the past that portrayed the meeting of settlers and Native Americans where both parties benefited from each other. In Leigh H. Edward's article, "The United Colors of 'Pocahontas': Synthetic Miscegenation and Disney's Multiculturalism," the author asserts: "Disney's rewriting of colonial relations in Virginia can take the liberty to portray a nostalgically-inflected peace between natives and settlers, depicting natives as historic symbols, precisely because Euro-Americans have displaced and marginalized American Indians and their cultures and appropriated many of their resources."⁸³ The appropriation of the Native American culture is repeated by Disney from its depictions of the culture in *Peter Pan*, to the shaping of the historical figure, Matoaka, in their version of *Pocahontas*. The appropriation of the characters into the "historical symbols" conform to the same stereotypes of depicting the Natives as the "other," such as the heightened focus of nature that is used to categorize the Disney character's decisions. The fantasized elements and rewriting of the story can be attributed to the children's audience to make the story engaging and entertaining; however, the marketing of the film as "authentic" is problematic outside of the targeted demographic of viewers. The assertion of "authenticity" carries weight as the material

⁸³ Leigh H Edwards, "The United Colors of 'Pocahontas': Synthetic Miscegenation and Disney's Multiculturalism," *Narrative* 7, no. 2 (May 1999), 153.

then enters into the space of being considered fact. The label of “authentic” may have been applied to the film due to Disney hiring cultural consultants that identify as Native Americans, such as voice actor, Russell Means and educator, Shirley (Little Dove) Custalow-McGowan. However, the reactions from individuals within the community took issue with the label of authenticity even with the consultants present.

Shirley (Little Dove) Custalow-McGowan is a member of the Powhatan community and she traveled throughout Virginia teaching people and children about her culture. Disney would hire her as a cultural consultant, however upon seeing the first drafts of the film she is quoted as stating, “My heart sorrowed within me. ...Ten-year-old Pocahontas has become twenty-year-old Pocahontas. The movie was no longer historically accurate.”⁸⁴ She also asserted, “Disney promised me historical accuracy, but there will be a lot to correct when I go into the classrooms.”⁸⁵ The “promise” of an accurate film may not be legally binding, however the depiction of cultures in films prompts a larger discussion about asserting the American company into a predominantly European narrative. The reaction by Custalow-McGowan is not isolated as many members of the Native American community, like the author of the article Jacquelyn Kilpatrick who identifies as a “mixed blood”⁸⁶ woman states, “instead of progress in depicting Native Americans this film takes a step backwards-a very dangerous step because it is so carefully glossed as ‘authentic’ and ‘respectful.’”⁸⁷ The mark of authenticity is problematic, especially when discussing a large and complex culture that encompasses several hundred different identifications and titles. The settlers in the film personify these ideals of grouping

⁸⁴ Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, “Disney’s ‘Politically Correct’ ‘Pocahontas,’” *Cinéaste* 21, no. 4 (1995), 37.

⁸⁵ Elaine Dutka, “Disney’s History Lesson: ‘Pocahontas’ Has Its Share of Supporters, Detractors,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles Times, February 9, 1995).

⁸⁶ Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, “Disney’s ‘Politically Correct’ ‘Pocahontas,’” *Cinéaste* 21, no. 4 (1995), 37.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 36.

indigenous people of North America into one broad and dated term of “savage” in the movie. The term, as discussed in *Peter Pan*, is meant to distance the groups, however in *Pocahontas* the term is heavily used by both sides. The voice actor for Powhatan, Pocahontas’ father, Russel Means who does identify with the culture, shares a different opinion about the film as he is quoted in the Atlantic, “The Eurocentric males are admitting why they came here- to kill Indians and to rob and pillage. That’s never been done before.”⁸⁸ The material that supports Mean’s assertion is the beginning lyrics sung in the title song Virginia Company, where settlers sing: “We’ll kill ourselves an Injun”⁸⁹ and the repeated chorus, “It’s glory, God, and gold/ And the Virginia Company.”⁹⁰ The intentions of the settlers are made clear and more aligned with the intentions of the historical settlers who traveled to North America under the Virginia Company. The mixed reviews from those hired by Disney is also reflected by viewers and remains a point of discussion as the film is reviewed by the Disney Advisory Council to determine if it’s required to attach the advisory on Disney+.

The requisites to issue an advisory on a film is not provided by the Walt Disney Company, however a topic of debate for *Pocahontas* to be given a warning is the language used throughout the movie. The term “savage” carries a derogatory and negative connotation, especially when applied to an individual or group. Throughout the course of the film that term is used to reference both settlers and the indigenous people with a whole song dedicated to the violent title. The song is summoned in *Pocahontas* as a precursor to the battle about to ensue between indigenous and settlers after Thomas killed Kocoum and the Native Americans captured John Smith to execute him. The song serves as a call to war as the English sing, “Here’s what

⁸⁸ Sophie Gilbert, “Revisiting 'Pocahontas' at 20,” The Atlantic (Atlantic Media Company, May 21, 2016).

⁸⁹ Disney Studio Chorus & Mel Gibson, “The Virginia Company (Reprise),” track 3 on *Pocahontas: An Original Walt Disney Records Soundtrack*, Walt Disney Records, 1995.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

you get when races are diverse/ Their skin's a hellish red/ They're only good when dead/ Their vermin, as I said/ And worse/ They're savages! Savages!"⁹¹ The indigenous people reply by singing, "They're different from us/ Which means they can't be trusted/ We must sound the drums of war/ They're savages! Savages!"⁹² The use of the term is directed toward both parties; however, the word has been utilized to describe Native Americans throughout the course of history with the stereotype of the "noble savage." The term is used outside of the song in abundance to establish the "neutral" territory that is being battled over in the film. In "Reservations About Films: Disney's Pocahontas," Cindy Dunne asserts: "Throughout the movie, Disney does show that the Natives and the Settlers viewed each other as savages. They are depicted as mirroring each other in terms of their anger and use of harsh language, as if they are equally at fault and fighting on neutral territory for their stake in the 'New World.'" ⁹³ The equality of the circumstances is notable as history never addresses the lack of choice present to the indigenous people who encountered settlers. The non-consensual encounter is one-sided as the settlers knew that people awaited them in the "new world", yet it's not clear if indigenous people recognized people outside of the Northern and Southern American territories. The relationship between the land and the owners is not clearly stated in the film, however through the reciprocal relationship between settlers and indigenous, the viewer is inclined to believe that the land being disputed belongs to neither party. Although, the English settlers sing in the "Savages" song, "Drive them from our shore!"⁹⁴ The indication of Native Americans' pre-existing relationship to the land where the English settlers have disturbed is not clear. Edwards

⁹¹ Disney Studio Chorus & Mel Gibson, "Savages," track 12 on *Pocahontas: An Original Walt Disney Records Soundtrack*, Walt Disney Records, 1995.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Cindy Dunne and Jordan Kolinski, "Reservations About Films: Disney's Pocahontas," *Lakota Children's Enrichment*, September 11, 2015.

⁹⁴ Disney Studio Chorus & Mel Gibson, "Savages," track 12 on *Pocahontas: An Original Walt Disney Records Soundtrack*, Walt Disney Records, 1995.

elaborates in her article, “For example, anthropologist Pauline Turner Strong points out that the word "savage" dominates the film as settlers and Natives both repeatedly hurl the epithet at each other in dialogue and in song; she argues that the film distorts the history of colonial uses of an ideology of "savagism" to justify exterminating and dispossessing native peoples because it tries to make the savagism seem reciprocal.”⁹⁵ The reciprocal nature of the term in the Disney film is associated with the fight over mutual land, by making the debate appear fair as both are being equally villainous. The mutual land in discussion is in fact not mutual territory, but was indigenous land occupied and owned by the Native Americans. The hurtful term, savage, has now become a part of mainstream American culture, however the pre-existing history that justified the actions of the settler’s remains to be seen in Disney’s film.

The version presented by the Walt Disney Company in their production has been advertised as authentic but is argued to be a representation of modern societal beliefs reflected in the characters and plots. The character of Pocahontas has been appropriated due to the historical documentation of the individual being ignored, and instead replaced by other non-white characteristics from various ethnicities (**Figure 16**). The Disney animator, Glen Keane who drew Pocahontas is quoted as describing her, “..."ethnic" features, such as her "Asian" forehead, which is much lower than Ariel's. In his narrative and literary juxtaposition of these two faces, Keane effectively describes a white norm versus a brown variation, a non-ethnic animated face versus an ethnic one. In his distinction between Ariel and Pocahontas, Pocahontas is no longer specifically American Indian but rather an undifferentiated visual compilation of non-white ethnicities.”⁹⁶ The combination of several marginalized groups into one character meant to

⁹⁵ Leigh H Edwards, “The United Colors of ‘Pocahontas’: Synthetic Miscegenation and Disney's Multiculturalism,” *Narrative* 7, no. 2 (May 1999), 159.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 152.

represent a separate culture is highly problematic. The character is not a fictional creation like those of other Disney princesses, but a real historical figure who was once alive. The film has also collectively been quoted as reflecting modern desires to show the progress of historical depictions of the person. In Pauline Turner Strong's article, "Animated Indians: Critique and Contradiction in Commodified Children's Culture," the author asserts: "In short, Disney has created a New Age Pocahontas to embody our millennial dreams for wholeness and harmony, while banishing our nightmares of savagery without and emptiness within."⁹⁷ The message from Strong is re-asserting the film's relevance to modern views of Native Americans, however the aspects of the film that are identified as cultural appropriation are seen throughout art historical works that are comparable to Disney's version of the woman.



Figure 16: Gabriel, Mike, and Eric Goldberg, *Pocahontas*, 1995, Disney +, Walt Disney Company.

⁹⁷ Pauline Turner Strong, "Animated Indians: Critique and Contradiction in Commodified Children's Culture," *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 3 (August 1996), 416.

Art References-Contact and History Content

The film reflects several stereotypes commonly applied to Native Americans in pop culture material that builds from *Peter Pan*'s representations by engaging with material from the contact period and images that were used to help “understand” the newly encountered people. The story of Pocahontas is confined to a European perspective that is firmly stationed within the early 1600's when settlers began coming to North America, and the art that was produced from this time period created an image of the “noble savage” character that has influenced Native American representations for centuries. The “noble savage” character is implied within the Disney production and within historical material that specifically represents the story of Pocahontas' life and her influential role within history.

The artwork that helped create the “noble savage” character is Theodore de Bry's work, *Indians worship the column in honor of the French king/The Natives worship in the column erected by the commander*, from 1591 (**Figure 17**). The image features several indigenous people kneeling and praying to the column in the background with the “noble savage” in the foreground standing beside the French men. The scene reflects the recurring theme of the artist trying to depict and therefore understand the newly encountered individuals in the “new world.” The author of “Crossing Gazes and the Silence of the ‘Indians’: Theodor De Bry and Guaman Poma de Ayala,” asserts, “The De Bry collection was an early instantiation of that centering narrative that saw all parts of the globe and all time as viewable from the vantage point of northern Europe; De Bry's collection was one of the very first publications to succeed in building a local narrative and selling it as a global-perhaps universal-one.”⁹⁸ The process of creating the images by Theodore de Bry shows striking similarities to the Walt Disney

⁹⁸ Walter Mignolo, “Crossing Gazes and the Silence of the ‘Indians’: Theodor De Bry and Guaman Poma De Ayala,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 41, no. 1 (January 1, 2011), 208.

productions as the two work to profit from images that are creating fictional characters meant to reflect real people. Theodore de Bry's works were created from a similar vantage point as armchair anthropology where the individual never encounters the people they are writing or visualizing and yet their depictions are taken as fact. The work depicted here is visualizing the noble savage character who is described by Michael Gaudio in *Engraving the Savage*: "The savage is a (by-)product of Western representation, not a living and breathing agent in history."⁹⁹ The character was meant to embody all indigenous or "wild" people who had not been corrupted by civilization and therefore showed the innate goodness of humanity. Here Theodore de Bry is representing the character through the indigenous people conforming to the French customs while still retaining their stereotypical attire. However, the acts and attire being expressed conforms to the "noble savage" character rather than to historical fact. The distance of Theodore de Bry to the subject matter also allows for the details and plots to be exaggerated to a fairytale rather than historical documentation. The perception of a character being attributed to the indigenous people is also found in other works, such as theatrical costumes by Indigo Jones, *Costume Design for Indian Torchbearer*, from 1613 (**Figure 18**). The association of stereotypical aspects of the culture, such as feathers, is attributed to the Native Americans to create identifiable visual characters that expand beyond the written word. The process of performing in Jones' costumes also creates a sense of ownership over the indigenous people being portrayed. The same assertion can be applied to two-dimensional works as well, as artists like Theodore de Bry are claiming the indigenous people when creating the characters that were largely distributed to Europeans.

⁹⁹ Michael Gaudio, *Engraving the Savage: The New World and Techniques of Civilization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 25.

The Disney production of *Pocahontas* shares characteristics with the Theodore de Bry images by creating characters based on specific attributes of the “noble savage” character. The character that is most reflective of the “noble savage” in *Pocahontas* is her father, Powhatan. The character is described by Sohail Inayatullah and Gail Boxwell in, “Walt Disney and the Double Victimization of Pocahontas,” when stated : “Her father, Powhatan, is the very embodiment of the noble savage-not the first time this character type has appeared on film, or had the voice of Native American leader Russell Means.”¹⁰⁰ The character shares characteristics with the Theodore de Bry depiction by wearing little clothing, bearing a sculpted naked chest, and crowned with a ring of animal attributes like feathers or furs. The two have a demanding presence as their height difference is prominent when compared to that of settlers and other indigenous people (**Figure 19**). When combined with the musculature of the character, the presence of the characters demands attention as they are the beacon of the goodness of humanity. The film also presents several stereotypes applied to both sides of the conflict. The Pocahontas character is described as embodying, “...the natural idyll of harmony with nature, peace, and bounty, but she is also a restless spirit looking for something more in her world...”¹⁰¹ The emphasized connection to nature, while important to the Native American culture, is a characteristic when present in pop culture without context makes the culture appear less intelligent and guided solely by indivisible forces in the natural landscape. The film also presents several stereotypes attributed to the settlers such as John Ratcliff’s character being a “stock villain”¹⁰² personifying the desire of the English aristocratic society to find gold in the “new

¹⁰⁰ Sohail Inayatullah and Gail Boxwell, “Walt Disney and the Double Victimization of Pocahontas,” *Islam, Postmodernism and Other Futures: A Ziauddin Sardar Reader*, 2003, 128.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 128.

¹⁰² Ibid, 128.

world” and John Smith representing the “spirit of the settlers.”¹⁰³ However, the stereotypes surrounding the settlers are not as damaging as the ones surrounding the Native Americans, as the caricature Disney representations continue to plague the image of the modern indigenous communities.

The Theodore de Bry works helped globalize the image of indigenous people in North America, however the presence of Pocahontas within English society allowed the Europeans to encounter the “new world” in the flesh. Pocahontas traveled to England with her husband John Rolfe and their son in the early 17th century where she would represent the indigenous people in the “old world.” Simon van de Passe is depicting Pocahontas upon her arrival to the “old world” dressed in European attire and unlike the “noble savage” seen in Theodore de Bry, her appearance is reflecting the societal standards of the European aristocracy (**Figure 20**). Pocahontas is dressed in a style that could be worn by European nobility with a lace collar, patterned bodice, and a large top hat. The change of appearance is a visual representation of her role in society to act as the bridge between Europeans and Native Americans to reflect a “good Indian.” The fancy dress shows the European’s ability to “civilize” the indigenous people, while still allowing them to be distanced from the majority of society due to their difference in physical appearance. In a later rendition from 1760-70, the physical features of Pocahontas have been integrated further into a European perspective (**Figure 21**).¹⁰⁴ The portrait was modeled after Simon van de Passe’s original etching, however with the application of color and oil paint, the unknown artist has stripped away the indigenous identity further by lightening Matoaka’s skin, changing the color of her eyes, and replacing her black hair with a light brown. The application

¹⁰³ Sohail Inayatullah and Gail Boxwell, “Walt Disney and the Double Victimization of Pocahontas,” *Islam, Postmodernism and Other Futures: A Ziauddin Sardar Reader*, 2003, 128.

¹⁰⁴ The painting is commonly referred to as the *Bootton Hall Portrait* after its original display location, which was the ancestral home of John Rolfe.

of European characteristics strips the authenticity of the document further from the already fantasized version created closer to her lifetime by Simon van de Passe.

The connection between Pocahontas' indigenous status and her European identity are also written in the inscription surrounding the etching. The inscription identifies Pocahontas under her real name Matoaka and her English name Rebecca with more information provided under her image such as her age, status as a noble of the indigenous society, and her marriage to John Rolfe. The portraits do not reflect the image of Matoaka; however the material is useful when understanding her life. The Walt Disney Company would take Simon van de Passe's depiction into account when researching for the film. The historical material containing Pocahontas, like Simon van de Passe's portrait, are referenced by the film's supervising animator who is quoted as having, "...researched the paintings of the real Pocahontas but wasn't very impressed, so he made a few 'adjustments.' Besides her beautiful 'more Asian' eyes, he gave her a body with a wasp waist, sexy hips and legs, and breasts that are *truly* impressive. He says, 'some people might see her as sexy, but she's not Jessica Rabbit. I think she looks rather athletic.'"¹⁰⁵ The animators wanted to create a character, however the name Pocahontas belonged to an actual individual. The process of artistic license and other measures to protect artists to express their creativity, are not justifiable as the story of Pocahontas belongs to an individual that has already undergone serious alterations throughout history and art.

The story of Pocahontas has been reconfigured, reproduced, and dismembered to fit a European perspective that is idealized through history paintings. A history painting is a visual representation of a historical event, and in many cases the visualization is idealized. In John Gadsby Chapman's *Baptism of Pocahontas* from 1840, an idealized scene of Matoaka is

¹⁰⁵ Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, "Disney's 'Politically Correct' 'Pocahontas,'" *Cinéaste* 21, no. 4 (1995), 37.

represented as she is kneeling before a priest in a beautiful white gown (**Figure 22**). The scene reflects the concepts seen in Theodore de Bry and Simon van de Passe's works that show how the indigenous people can reach salvation and become civilized. The "consent" present is a large factor within Pocahontas' story as it remains unclear if she understood what was transpiring or the leverage present in her conversion to Christianity. The title of a history painting implies a sense of historical truth, and the placement of the painting asserts a factual presence, however one function of these types of paintings was to serve as propaganda.¹⁰⁶ The Chapman painting can be viewed at the United States Capitol rotunda in Washington D.C. The image is displayed alongside John Trumbull's *Declaration of Independence*, *Surrender of General Burgoyne*, *Surrender of Lord Cornwallis*, and *General George Washington Resigning His Commission*, along with John Vanderlyn's *Landing of Columbus*, William Powell's *Discovery of the Mississippi*, and Robert Walter Weir's *Embarkation of the Pilgrims*. The area encompasses the story of America from the travels of the pilgrims to military defeats, and right in the center is the story of Pocahontas. The story is summarized on the Architect of the Capitol website that emphasizes the importance of the painting when asserting, "...this ceremony and her subsequent marriage to John Rolfe helped to establish peaceful relations between the colonists and the Tidewater tribes."¹⁰⁷ The quote further cements Pocahontas' story within the European narrative and the necessity to have the painting within the Capitol rotunda. The presence of Chapman's depiction provides the representation of Native Americans in the history of the United States; however it is selecting a moment when the indigenous people are aesthetically retaining their native attributes while conforming to the European narrative. Although the consensual issue

¹⁰⁶ More information on the genre of History Paintings can be found in the introduction to Paul Barrow's book *Visual Culture in Britain*. (Barlow, Paul. "Introduction: The Death of History Painting in Nineteenth-Century Art?" *Visual Culture in Britain* 6, no. 1 (2005): 1-4.)

¹⁰⁷ "Baptism of Pocahontas," Architect of the Capitol (Architect of the Capitol), accessed October 25, 2021.

remains, the actions of Pocahontas becoming a Christian and therefore representing the indigenous ability to be “saved,” allows the indigenous traditions and attributes that distinguish them visually as the “other,” to maintain the distance.

The combination of historical material and cultural consultants has helped guard *Pocahontas* from being labeled with an advisory on Disney+, however the film is far from being historically accurate or free of cultural appropriation. The lack of an advisory can be attributed to the “progress” created from the representations seen in *Peter Pan*, however the reactions from those within the community like Shirley (Little Dove) Custalow-McGowan, should not go unnoticed. The protection of cultural consultants does not serve as a valid excuse to subject the Native American community to a handful of individuals when the culture is a complex network of over 500 tribal nations.



Figure 17: Theodore de Bry, *Indians worship the column in honor of the French king*, 1591, 178 x 214 mm, engraving on paper, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC.



Figure 18: Indigo Jones, *Design for the Memorable Masque: An Indian as a torchbearer*, 1613, illustration, Chatsworth, Devonshire Collection, Derbyshire, England.



Figure 19: Mike Gabriel & Eric Goldberg, directors, *Pocahontas*, 1995, Walt Disney Company Production, Disney +.



Figure 20: Simon van de Passe, *Pocahontas*, 1616, 17.2 x 11.8 cm, engraving, Royal Collection Trust.



Figure 21: Unknown, *Pocahontas*, 1760-1770, 76.2 x 63.5 cm (30 x 25 in), oil on canvas, U.S. Senate Collection, Washington DC.



Figure 22: John Gadsby Chapman, *Baptism of Pocahontas*, 1840, 365.7 x 548.6 cm (144 x 216 in), oil on canvas, Capitol Rotunda, Washington DC.

Modern Native American Representations

There is no simple solution to resolve centuries of misrepresentation of Native Americans, however modern artists are making strides to break away from Theodore de Bry's works and the Disney representation of Pocahontas. The emergence of Native American artists needs to be considered by the Walt Disney Company for influences in future productions and when assessing past content. The modern Native American artists are voicing their opinion on how they should be represented within American culture, museums, and on social media. The performative works of James Luna, Instagram/ Tik Tok influencer James Jones, and the two-dimensional works of Kent Monkman and photography by Wendy Red Star, reflect a new and modern view of Native American culture.

The performative works of James Luna and Kent Monkman's works directly interact with the representation of Native Americans and the culture within museum and curatorial settings. James Luna is a Luiseno Indian artist who challenges the image of the Native American in historical works by performing in installations like his piece *Artifact* from 1985-87 (**Figure 23**). During the performance he displayed his near-naked body in a display case at the Museum of Man in San Diego. The exhibit also featured personal belongings and identification of his scars in a fashion that resembled the display of archeological finds. The Jstor Daily reported, "...he challenged exhibition practices that often relegate Native American culture to natural history museums, as if all that is left are objects from an extinct people, rather than showcasing contemporary art from a culture very much alive."¹⁰⁸ The piece allowed for a museum setting where viewers feel comfortable entering and observing a culture. However, when presented with an actual individual from a marginalized group, the tension of creating an "other" is strained. The relationship of an "us" and the "other" relies upon the distance that museums permit as viewers can create their own assumptions about the subject and not be corrected right away. However, Luna's performance shrinks that space and now viewers are directly confronted with the feelings and views of the "other" who is a Native American individual. The work conforms to the ideals of subjecting Native Americans to the past, however makes the viewer question the obsolete nature of the culture as James Luna is living and breathing in front of them. The work of Kent Monkman displays a similar purpose to challenge the view about a contemporary Native American individual.

Kent Monkman is a Cree visual artist who is a member of the Fisher River Cree Nation in Treaty 5 Territory and is based in Toronto, Canada. His work, *Resurgence of the People* from

¹⁰⁸ Ellen C. Caldwell, "How Luiseno Indian Artist James Luna Resists Cultural Appropriation," JSTOR Daily (JSTOR, December 25, 2015).

2019 pronounces the Native American voice and presence in art historical works (**Figure 24**). The *Resurgence of the People* takes influence and compositional arrangement from Emanuel Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware* from 1851 (**Figure 25**). Leutze's piece is celebrating a historical moment in American history, and Monkman's piece while following a similar composition is celebrating the resilience of marginalized groups. The *Resurgence of the People* is currently on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, and the website describes the piece as "...a testament to, and celebration of, Indigenous resilience over time, particularly in the face of pernicious and persistent colonizing forces, both political and cultural."¹⁰⁹ The comparison to Emanuel Leutze's work allows the historical painting to be reconstructed both visually and contextually. The visual element allows for the representation of marginalized groups to come center stage, and this includes Monkman's "...gender-fluid alter ego Miss Chief Eagle Testickle..." and other groups present in the boat. The visual representation also is reminiscent of the discussions surrounding immigrants who travel by sea to escape their countries and immigrate to others.¹¹⁰ Monkman is reasserting the indigenous voice by showing the resilience of the culture and people who just like George Washington can wade through dangerous waters to reach the other side of the river. The challenge to historical notions of Indigenous peoples is exemplified as the Leutze painting has become a part of the Native Perspective addition at the Metropolitan Museum of art where Monkman's work remains on display.

The Native Perspective is an exhibition that invited native artists and historians to respond to eighteenth-and nineteenth-century Euro-American works that are on display in the

¹⁰⁹ Randall Griffey, "Kent Monkman Reverses Art History's Colonial Gaze," The MET (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, December 17, 2019).

¹¹⁰ Stephanie Busari and Niamh Kennedy, "42 Migrants Dead after Boat from Yemen Capsizes off Djibouti Coast," CNN (Cable News Network, April 16, 2021).

American Wing of the museum.¹¹¹ The Metropolitan Museum of Art comments on the addition as, “Offering a multiplicity of voices and perspectives, the contributors present alternative narratives and broaden our understanding of American art and history.”¹¹² The program follows a similar suit to Monkman’s work as it provides a different perspective on history from the voices of those that have been marginalized in history and museum representations. The Emanuel Leutze piece once held a Native Perspective that has since been moved to the museum archives but addressed the place of Native Americans within American wars as they fought on both sides- British and American. The historian commentator for the image, Alan Michelson (Mohawk), asserted: “The boatman pictured in the stern wears Native moccasins, leggings, and a shoulder pouch, and likely represents an Indigenous member of Washington’s troops.”¹¹³ The author continues with the recount of the fate of many indigenous allies suffering a common fate of being victims of massacres.¹¹⁴ However, the “extinct” presumption applied to Native American culture is challenged and proved inaccurate when looking at the works of contemporary artists like Monkman, Luna, and the photography of Wendy Red Star.

The Crow artist, Wendy Red Star celebrates her Native American identity through her photography that focuses on Crow subjects. The work of Red Star is described in an Aperture publication: “Red Star’s work is humorous, surreal, and often abrasive, yet deeply rooted in a celebration for Crow life. Red Star’s work responds, on her own terms, to these misrepresentations of Native Americans.”¹¹⁵ Her work comments on the photography of Edward Curtis which focused on photographing Native Americans in the early 20th century in a

¹¹¹ “Native Perspectives,” The MET (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2019).

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Alan Michelson references the Gnadenhutzen Massacre, where a Pennsylvania militia killed ninety-six Christian Lenape.

¹¹⁵ Abaki Beck, “Decolonizing Photography: A Conversation with Wendy Red Star,” Aperture (Aperture Foundation, December 14, 2016).

stereotypical stoic nature (**Figure 26**). The work of Red Star challenges these representations by presenting the Crow culture in a humorous and modern setting. The work *Twin Peake or Bust #9* from the series *White Squaw* (**Figure 27**), incorporates the humor that Red Star describes as a part of her background: “I come from a humorous background, not just my Crow side, but my Irish side as well. I’ve always seen things through this ironic lens.”¹¹⁶ The humorous nature of several of her works shatters the assumptions made through Curtis’ photography by asserting the part of the culture that enjoys humor. The lack of humanity stems from the compression of the culture into one solitary image that is the “noble savage” stuck within the confines of history. Red Star comments on these assumptions when she explains, “I think people are surprised when they find a Native person because in the consciousness of America it’s like we don’t exist. We are these mythical creatures.”¹¹⁷ Her work helps deconstruct the preconceived notions surrounding Native Americans from a personal level. In *Peelatchiwaaxpáash/Medicine Crow* (*Raven*), the work helps address issues seen in *Peter Pan*, through the commentary that surround the Medicine Crow (**Figure 28**). Red Star has circled and commented on the features of the Crow leader that are commonly appropriated into American culture. The artist helps contextualize the features by asserting comments like, “Hair bows were out of fashion in 1880,” or “eagle feather fan symbol of leadership.” The comments are attributed to Red Star’s assertion, “I do a lot of research-based work and I think that education is important, and the Native perspective hasn’t been shared at all.”¹¹⁸ The work is adding an element of contextualization that was not present in the original photographer and led to the stereotypes now present in works like Walt Disney’s *Peter Pan* and *Pocahontas*. The works of Ken Monkman, James Luna, and

¹¹⁶ Abaki Beck, “Decolonizing Photography: A Conversation with Wendy Red Star,” *Aperture* (Aperture Foundation, December 14, 2016).

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Wendy Red Star, provide the voice of the marginalized Native American culture to be heard within history and the museum settings.

The world of social media has created a platform where thousands of artists can be seen and shared on a rapid global scale. The Tik Tok platform skyrocketed during the pandemic and allowed James Jones to go viral with educational videos that showcased his practice of hoop dancing (**Figure 29**). In an article published by Vogue, the practice is described as an “...Indigenous healing dance, where each hoop represents honoring the circle of life; it is often performed at powwows and other cultural events.”¹¹⁹ James Jones is a Cree who is a full-time speaker and performer of several different dances like hoop dancing, grass dancing, and fancy dancing. He told Vogue, ““I started out as a break-dancer when I was a youth and transitioned to my traditional dances as I started to reconnect with my culture.”¹²⁰ Many of his videos showcase cultural dances and educational lessons about the culture. In one video Jones breaks through presumptions about Native American dress by showing his various outfits for his “different personalities, Indigenous styles,” that break through the misconceptions that every Native American is consistently dressed in the ceremonial outfits that Jones labels as his “events/powwow,” attire. The attire is something commonly used to photograph and visualize the Native Americans as seen in Curtis works, however Jones has contextualized the attire to fit within only special events and powwows. The ability to share his personal journey contributes to adding to the voices of the Native American community to a large audience of viewers, many who are the targeted demographic for Disney films.

The Walt Disney films, *Peter Pan* and *Pocahontas*, have accelerated the historical stereotypes found in Theodore de Bry’s works and Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show, which

¹¹⁹ Christian Allaire, “James Jones Is Bringing Indigenous Style and Dancing to TikTok,” Vogue (Vogue, July 12, 2020).

¹²⁰ Ibid.

continue to linger. The company has made a stand against the stereotypes present within *Peter Pan*; however, work continues to be underway as the voices of artists like Wendy Red Star and Kent Monkman enter the art world. The work by Native American artists needs to be understood and be inserted within the historical contexts of artworks to create a truthful image of The United States.



Figure 23: James Luna, *Artifact Piece*, 1985-1987, performance.



Figure 24: Kent Monkman, *Resurgence of the People*, 2019, 335.28 x 670.6 cm (132 x 264 in), acrylic on canvas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, NY.



Figure 25: Emanuel Leutze, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, 1851, 378.5 x 647.7 cm (149 x 255 in), oil on canvas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, NY.



Figure 26: Edward S. Curtis, *Shows as He Goes*, half-length portrait, 1905, 43 x 30.5 cm (16.75 x 12 in), photographic print, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC.

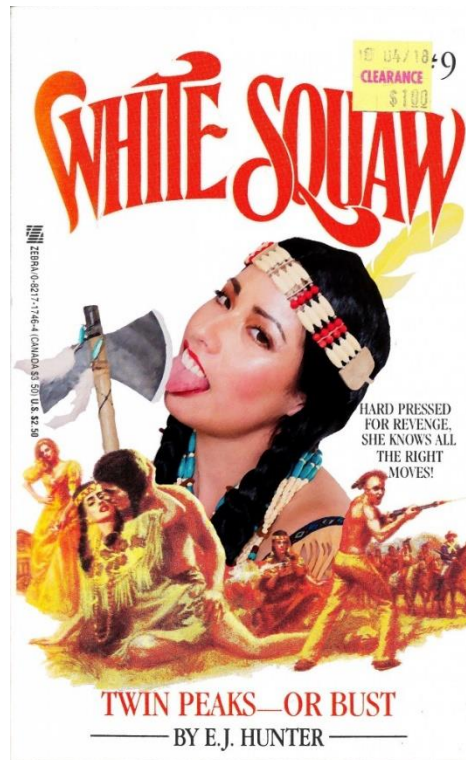


Figure 27: Wendy Red Star, *Twin Peaks or Bust #9 (White Squaw Series)*, 2014, archival pigment print.

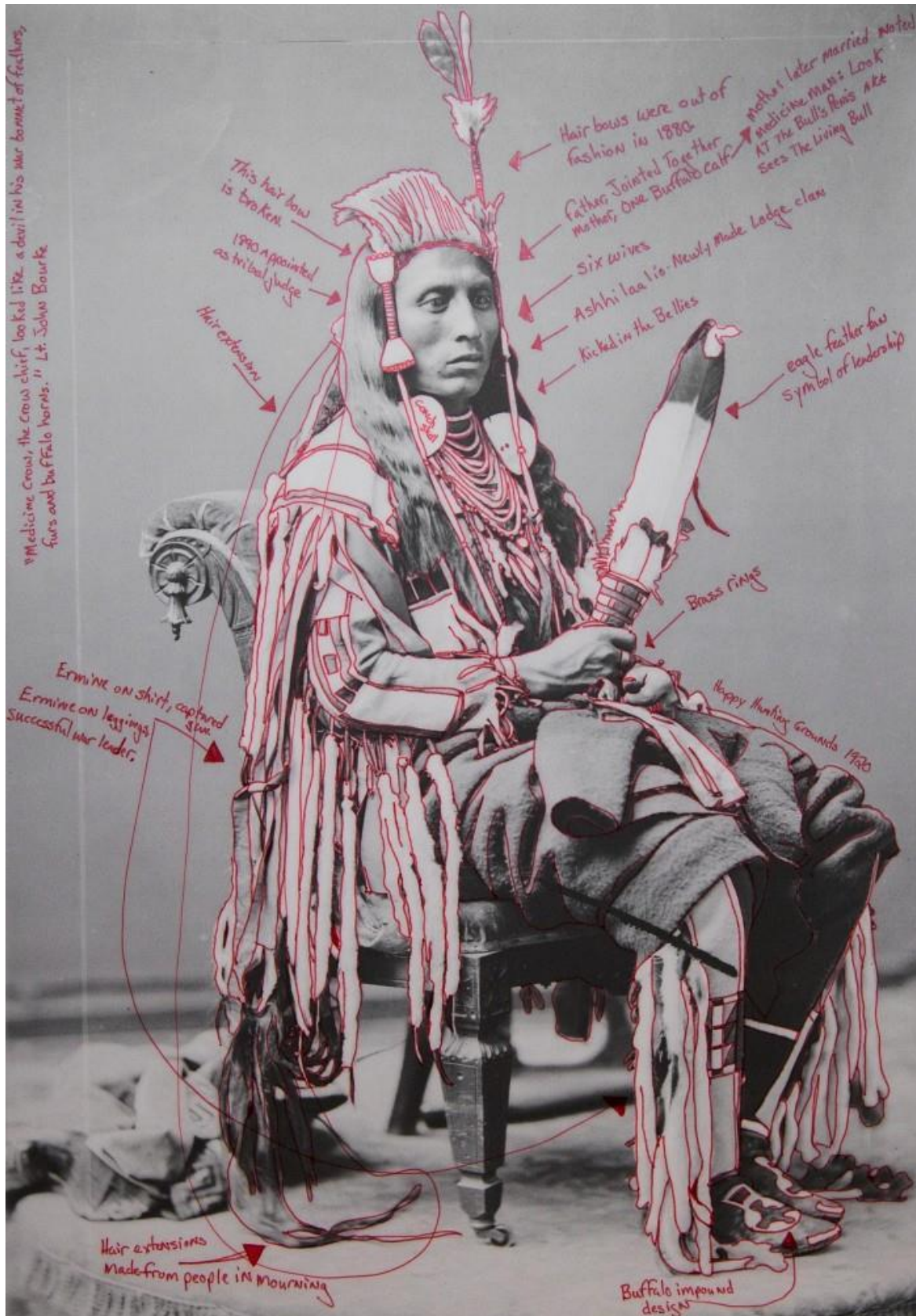


Figure 28: Wendy Red Star, *Peelatchiwaaxpáash/Medicine Crow (Raven)*, 2014, archival print.



Figure 29: James Jones, *NotoriousCree*, 2020, performance, Tik Tok.

Part Two: Mexican Cultural Depictions

The Three Caballeros (1945)

History-The Good Neighbor Policy and Goodwill Tour

The Three Caballeros was produced in 1945 and is often categorized with *Saludos Amigos*, which the studio produced in 1943. The films are similar in content as they feature popular Disney characters, like Donald Duck and Goofy, traveling through various places throughout central and South American countries. The two differ however, as *Saludos Amigos* did not feature Mexico and as a result the company produced *The Three Caballeros* in 1945. The two films were created through research trips where Walt Disney¹²¹ and several of his colleagues went to South and Central America to explore various cities, traditions, and landscapes. *The Three Caballeros* was a product of said trips and features Donald Duck receiving several gifts that when opened transport the viewer to various cities throughout Brazil and Mexico. Donald Duck is accompanied by Panchito and Jose Carioca who form the three caballeros. The films

¹²¹ To learn more about the *Saludos Amigos* research trip watch *Walt Disney and El Grupo: The Untold Adventures* on Disney +.

featuring South American culture would be created as a result of the Goodwill Tour and the Good Neighbor Policy.

The Good Neighbor Policy was enacted by Franklin Roosevelt in 1933 and was meant to create strong relationships with Central and South American countries. In Earl Beck's article, "The Good Neighbor Policy, 1933-1938," the scholar explains: "The Good Neighbor Policy may be defined as the recognition upon the part of the United States of the full maturity of the Latin American countries, and, consequently, the treatment of them as equals in the preservation of the peace of this continent, the conduct of their own domestic affairs, the establishment of better trade relations, and the effecting of understanding and appreciation for the culture of the other countries of the hemisphere."¹²² The policy was initially started in 1933 but would influence an era of creating trade relationships with Central and South America. This period of time would prompt Walt Disney and a group of his staff to embark on the Goodwill tour around South America in 1941. The world had been thrown into upheaval with World War II and the Disney Company was facing several devastating strikes, and so Walt Disney, to escape the negativity, would begin his travels in Brazil.

The trip and policy shared an intertwined mission, as the policy was striving to create strong relationships with the countries in Central and South America to secure their support with the allied side against Nazi Germany; Disney was seeking to find new markets to compensate for the lost markets in war-torn Europe.¹²³ The work of Sean Harrington, "Disney's 'Good Neighbor'," also asserts: "The political goal of the mission was to promote North American culture and values while at the same time encouraging support for the Allies in the event that the

¹²² Earl R Beck, "The Good Neighbor Policy, 1933-1938," *The Historian* 1, no. 2 (1939), 113.

¹²³ Manuel M Martin-Rodriguez, "The Best Mexican Is a (Day of the) Dead Mexican: Representing Mexicanness in U.S. Animated Films," in *Latinx Cine in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Frederick Luis Aldama (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2019), 356.

United States would have to enter the war.”¹²⁴ The two cultures, American and Disney culture, meet once again to help one another in a time of great upheaval. The newly formed Internal American Affairs (IAA) department was sponsoring celebrities to visit Central and South American countries and draw influence from the places to put in their films. The initiative was meant to promote and create positive relationships with the countries, however many of the government sponsored trips ended poorly. Walt Disney was one of the celebrities approached by the government and was sponsored to take a journey to South and Central America, where he would gain inspiration for future films.¹²⁵

Disney Film-Stereotypes

The endeavors would eventually produce *Saludos Amigos* and then two years later *The Three Caballeros*. The films are often generalized together, however the following research will admit *Saludos Amigos* due to its lack of specific Mexican culture content. In fact, *The Three Caballeros* has been argued to have been produced due to the *Saludos Amigos* excluding Mexico. Scholars like Martin-Rodriguez assert in his article, “The Best Mexican is a (Day of the) Dead Mexican: Representing Mexicanness in the U.S. Animated Films,” when he states: “Though they were a common fixture in early silent films and talkies, Mexico and Mexicans did not appear in U.S. animated films until the World War II era, in the full-length feature *The Three Caballeros*, and only as a result of complaints against the Disney studios when *Saludos Amigos* managed to skip that country in its depiction of Latin America.”¹²⁶ The first attempt to

¹²⁴ Seán Harrington, “Disney’s ‘Good Neighbor,’” in *The Disney Fetish* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press: John Libbey Publishing, 2015), 157.

¹²⁵ Keith Gluck, “Walt and the Goodwill Tour,” The Walt Disney Family Museum (The Walt Disney Family Museum, September 8, 2016).

¹²⁶ Manuel M Martin-Rodriguez, “The Best Mexican Is a (Day of the) Dead Mexican: Representing Mexicanness in U.S. Animated Films,” in *Latinx Cine in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Frederick Luis Aldama (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2019), 356.

depict South and Central American countries excluded a country that had not appeared in animated films yet. This begs the question: why wasn't Mexico featured in *Saludos Amigos*? It is the closest Central American country to the United States and the easiest to access from the Walt Disney Studios in California. The answer remains unknown; however, the company would correct its mistake with *The Three Caballeros*, which still garnered issues related to cultural appropriation.

The plot of the film described on Disney+ states: "When Donald receives magical gifts from his friends Jose Carioca and Panchito, they become his passport to a fantastic musical journey full of surprises."¹²⁷ The film begins with its Disney fanfare and the classic Donald Duck character, however once the gifts are unwrapped, the issues of cultural appropriation begin to occur. The rest of the three caballeros are introduced to the audience as the debonair Brazilian parrot, Jose Carioca, who was first seen in *Saludos Amigos*, and the bombastic Mexican rooster, Panchito Pistoles (**Figure 30**). The two guide Donald Duck through Brazil and Mexico as live action and cartoons coincide together. The problematic element quoted by scholars, like Martin-Rodriguez, references the characters. The author states, "The gun- toting, happy- triggered Panchito is one of Disney's most stereotypical characters, combining the images of the violent bandit, the macho, and the Latin lover."¹²⁸ The stereotype is one that has still appeared in American entertainment, however in the case study of *The Three Caballeros* the age of the film should be mentioned. The film was created over 70 years ago, during a very different time that did not have the awareness toward representation in entertainment that is present today.

¹²⁷ *The Three Caballeros*, Disney +. (Walt Disney Company, 1944).

¹²⁸ Manuel M Martin-Rodriguez, "The Best Mexican Is a (Day of the) Dead Mexican: Representing Mexicanness in U.S. Animated Films," in *Latinx Cine in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Frederick Luis Aldama (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2019), 357.

The film garnered both positive and negative reviews upon its release. The New York Times reporter, Bosley Crowther, released a critical review in its edition from February 5th, 1945. The review focuses on the artistic elements of the film and the reputation of Walt Disney. Crowther reports, “What Mr. Disney and his artists have accomplished is a firecracker show which dazzles and numbs the senses without making any tangible sense.”¹²⁹ The dialogue of Crowther is critical of the film as he puts the work in the context of Disney previous hits, like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and dismisses the work as confusing. The reporter does not touch upon the cultural content of the film, but instead dismisses the movie as something that overall makes no relative sense. He goes on to explain that “There is no question that Mr. Disney has got here a brilliant, fluid style for presenting musical pictures and that his enthusiasm expressed through it is great. But he hasn't quite brought them into order. His film is flashy and exciting—and no more.”¹³⁰ The film’s overall purpose was not to create an elaborate plot and story, but instead fix the mistake of excluding Mexico from *Saludos Amigos*. Harrington’s work asserts his review on the cultural material as he reports: “*The Three Caballeros* received quite negative reviews, firstly for its self-conscious style of animation and secondly for its vulgarity and lack of subtlety engaging with Latin America as subject matter.”¹³¹ Harrington’s assertion shines light onto Crowther’s response to the film because it could be argued that Crowther had no response to the cultural material because Americans had yet to encounter Mexican culture in the context of animated films. The film confronts the viewer directly with Brazilian and Mexican culture as the whole film centers around the cultures with Donald Duck being the only American

¹²⁹ Bosley Crowther, “THE SCREEN; ‘Three Caballeros,’ a Disney Picture, With Actors and Animated Characters, in Debut at Globe Theatre,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, February 5, 1945), 1.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Seán Harrington, “Disney’s ‘Good Neighbor,’” in *The Disney Fetish* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press: John Libbey Publishing, 2015), 164.

presence. The movie serves as a quick essentialized glimpse into the cultures and provides little to no context of what is being depicted to the viewer. The film is credited as the first film to depict Mexican culture in an animated feature film and would remain the only animated film for a span of over 70 years.



Figure 30: Norman Ferguson, Clyde Geronimi, Jack Kinney, Bill Roberts, & Harold Young, directors, *The Three Caballeros*, 1944, Walt Disney Company Production, Disney +.

Art References-Costume Books and World Showcases

The depiction of Mexican culture extends beyond animated films by being a pinnacle pavilion within Epcot's World Showcase. The showcase is best described in terms of the historical event known as World's Fairs which were common during the 19th century (**Figure 31**). In Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo's book, *Mexico at the World's Fairs: Crafting a Modern Nation*, the author asserts this comparison when stated, ""In effect, Disneyland has become the model of twentieth-century world's fairs, a "degenerated utopia" that was a particular ideology materialized in the form of a myth."¹³² The theme park opened in 1982 and the Mexico

¹³² Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, "Introduction on the Universe of Fairs," in *Mexico at the World's Fairs Crafting a Modern Nation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 11.

Pavilion was a part of the original attractions to entertain guests on the grand opening (**Figure 32**). The pavilion features a “pre-Columbian pyramid,”¹³³ similar to the Templo Mayor in Mexico City, surrounded by a jungle to simulate the landscape of the Yucatan. Inside the Plaza de Los Amigos guests are submerged in a twilight atmosphere that emphasizes the smoking volcano and grand Mayan pyramid behind the restaurant and marketplace. The temple is separated from the main area by the dark ride, *The Gran Fiesta Tour starring the Three Caballeros*. The ride replaced the former attraction, El Rio del Tiempo that carried visitors through various scenes depicting Mexican culture. Now the Gran Fiesta Tour takes passengers through various scenes of Mexico with Panchito and Jose as your guide in search of the missing Donald Duck. The ride follows a similar path to the *Three Caballeros* and carries over many of the questionable aspects of the movie.

The ride has recently come under the attention of fans due to Disney’s new installation of advisories and elimination of the content on Disney+. The streaming network has removed the film from children’s accounts, so the film is becoming irrelevant to children who will be visiting the pavilion in the future and many adults share a similar perspective as the original *Three Caballeros* is not a part of Disney’s blockbuster arsenal. The relevance to visitors and its questionable content of its rides is not new to Disney Parks as the company recently released the project to re-theme the *Splash Mountain* attraction.¹³⁴ The retheme decision is set to take place soon and will transfer the ride from focusing on the controversial film *Song of the South* to follow the plot of the *Princess and the Frog* which was released in 2009. The same debate has taken place around the Mexico Pavilion since the release of *Coco* in 2017. Fans have created

¹³³ “Epcot World Showcase - Mexico,” Disney Information, 2021.

¹³⁴ George Pennacchio, “Disney to Transform Splash Mountain to ‘The Princess and the Frog’ Theme at California, Florida Parks,” ABC7 New York (WABC-TV, June 26, 2020).

petitions and argue that the *Coco* would be better suited for the dark-ride because it is a film dedicated to Mexico, while the *Three Caballeros* shares its plot with Brazil.¹³⁵ The ride still remains the Gran Fiesta Tour starring the *Three Caballeros*, however the retheme for the pavilion may be more imminent as the ride continually needs upkeep and is posing more and more issues with age.

The stereotypes present in the Disney film are expressed in the artwork that was produced in a similar process as the Disney film, traveler's artwork or commonly referred to as costume books. The precursor to the Costume Book was the Casta paintings that emerged after the conquest of Mexico in the early 1500s. This type of art led a similar message to the World's Fair where artists would visualize the societal structure of New Spain with the depiction of interracial couplings that lead to offspring (**Figure 33**). The images helped to stratify society internally and externally as the series were viewed by foreign audiences, like the setup of the World's Fair and Costume Book art. The depictions seen in Costume Book art are almost exclusively from 19th century traveling artists who were some of the first artists to enter Mexico upon its official opening of its borders in the 19th century. The 19th century saw a heightened expression of culture with costume book imagery and the hosting of several World's Fairs. In Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo's book, *Mexico at the World's Fairs: Crafting a Modern Nation*, the Mexico section, "...fed the hunger of these exhibitions for exotic objects and people. Mexico thus offered indigenous food and drink, dresses, and tipos populares (popular characters) at the fairs; in the same way, it exhibited the head of the Indian Juan Antonio in Paris 1889 and Indian people in the so-called Street of Mexico exhibited at the 1901 Buffalo world's fair."¹³⁶ However, similar to

¹³⁵ Ken Storey, "The Odds of a New 'Coco' Ride at Epcot Just Got a Lot Better," *Orlando Weekly* (Orlando Weekly, August 10, 2019).

¹³⁶ Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, "Introduction on the Universe of Fairs," in *Mexico at the World's Fairs Crafting a Modern Nation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 7-8.

the World's Fair exhibitions, costume books did not represent the entire culture and tended to fix the culture in a static state that focused on the past or created an "exotic" image of the culture. Unfortunately, audiences and viewers were led to believe that such representations were "a general picture of the world."¹³⁷ Due to Mexico's "official" opening in the 19th century, the world was able to see the country beyond the World's Fair in the works of German artists Carl Nebel and Johann Moritz Rugendas.

The artists focused on depicting the Mexican landscape and the people who lived in the country. Carl Nebel was a German architect, engineer, and draftsman who explored Mexico from 1829 to 1834. Johann Moritz Rugendas was also a German artist who had his work displayed and well-received in Mexico after his death in 1925. The artwork created by the traveler artists posed similar issues to the *Three Caballeros* as it was created by Europeans for a European audience who interpreted many of the images as exotic. In Mey-Yen Moriuchi's book, *Mexican Costumbrismo Race, Society, and Identity in Nineteenth-Century Art*, the scholar states, "These images are traditionally read as nineteenth-century traveler art, that is, art produced by European artists of non-European subjects for a European audience. They can be understood in the post-colonialist context as images of dominance that served to exoticize and subordinate the lands across the Atlantic."¹³⁸ The images are a visual representation of cultural appropriation that have very little or a lack of context.

An example of this can be seen in Carl Nebel's, *Tortilleras* from 1840 where a woman is depicted wearing a loose fitted apron that exposes the side of her breast to the viewer (**Figure 34**). The woman could have been sexualized by Nebel, or he could have authentically

¹³⁷ Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, "Introduction on the Universe of Fairs," in *Mexico at the World's Fairs Crafting a Modern Nation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 3.

¹³⁸ Mey-Yen Moriuchi, "Traveler-Artists' Vision of Mexico," in *Mexican Costumbrismo: Race, Society, and Identity in Nineteenth-Century Art* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), 32.

represented the scene he was viewing. However, the context was lost upon the intended audience and became sexualized due to the exposed female body. The artist's intentions are unclear, however Moriuchi expands upon the misinterpretations as he explains, "Traveler artists' representations were generally understood as authentic and objective documentation of what the artists saw and experienced. I would argue, however, that these 'scientific illustrations' reveal the subjectivity, bias, and even romantic sensibility of their creators."¹³⁹ The issue arises once again that these images are labeled as "authentic", like Disney's advertisement of their culture-focused films like *The Three Caballeros* and *Pocahontas*. Moriuchi also asserts that the artwork is "scientific illustrations" which exhumes a connection between costume book imagery to those of Theodore de Bry and Spanish conquerors encountering the "new world." The works of art created by early Europeans who were first encountering the natives of the Americas were thought to be showing authentic representations but are now largely categorized as biased depictions. Although Mexico had been occupied by the Spanish since the 15th century, the costume book imagery is rediscovering Mexico for a European audience and again falling into the tropes of the past by being exoticized and romanticized by artists. Carl Nebel's work also serves as problematic as Moriuchi states, "...Nebel focused on the images and provided very little text explaining them. He boasted of the modern quality of his project, claiming that his art depicted the newest, most important, and most interesting sights in Mexico."¹⁴⁰ The Disney films provide little context to accompany the cultural representations in the film, except the advisory, like Nebel's lack of context to his images.

¹³⁹ Mey-Yen Moriuchi, "Traveler-Artists' Vision of Mexico," in *Mexican Costumbrismo: Race, Society, and Identity in Nineteenth-Century Art* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), 32.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 39.

The history surrounding Nebel's image is similar to that of Disney's research trips, but the content of *Tortillas* also serves as a similarity between the two art producers. In the *Three Caballeros*, the characters visit a beach in Acapulco, Mexico, where Donald Duck continually chases after the women on the beach (**Figure 35**). The film depicts the women as sexualized objects and is addressed by Sean Harrington in his book *The Disney Fetish*: "The Three Caballeros is perhaps the most blatant manipulation of sexual hegemony that Disney had so far released. The film demonstrates the process of hyper-realizing sexuality within animation had been experimented with in Disney's production of wartime propaganda in the years prior to *The Three Caballeros* 1945 release."¹⁴¹ The film is not an isolated event of Disney demonstrating a strong sexual theme in their films; however, the themes are specifically related to a cultural figure who is representing Mexico. The oversexualization of Mexicans in pop culture is a prevalent issue and is commonly expressed through depictions of the violent bandit, the Latin lover, and the macho.

The work of Johann Mortiz Rugendas was not as problematic as Nebel's works, however Rugendas still had controversy surrounding his works. His piece, *La Reina del Mercado* (*The Queen of the market*) from 1833 follows a similar style to the artwork scattered throughout *The Three Caballeros* when the viewer is serenaded with a love song from Mexico (**Figure 36**). The style of the images that flash through the film in a montage allows the viewer to take a break from the story line to interpret for themselves (**Figures 37 & 38**). The atmospheric elements of the Disney artworks provide impressions of the Mexican landscape that are comparable to Rugendas' works like the *Queen of the Market* and his other South American artworks, like *Chilean Riders* from 1835-1836 (**Figure 39**). The essence and atmospheric elements of

¹⁴¹ Seán Harrington, "Disney's 'Good Neighbor,'" in *The Disney Fetish* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press: John Libbey Publishing, 2015), 158.

Rugendas' works can be attributed to his inspiration of Delacroix and J.M.W Turner (**Figure 40**). Johann Mortiz Rugendas' artwork and the same style is seen in the Disney film which provides equal amounts of detail in their contents. For example, the detail seen in the attire of the people in the street scene from *The Queen of the Market* is like that of the women in Disney's film. The women in Disney's depiction are wearing a headpiece that resembles a Huipil Grande that is worn during festivals in Mexico (**Figure 41**).¹⁴² The skirts contain the elaborate embroidery that is seen in areas of *The Queen of the Market* such as on the skirts and headdress of the young girl dressed in green to the right of the composition (**Figure 42**). The overall essence of the Disney and Rugendas works provide a fantasy and dreamlike environment that allows the viewer to interpret the scene for themselves.

The atmospheric elements in the images are achieved through the blurring of the backgrounds and the color choices. The blurred backdrops for the scenes in Disney's images allow the viewer to focus on the central elements and emphasizes the montage effect (**Figures 43 & 44**). The serenading of the audience allows the images to float by as if from a dream. The cohesive colors allow the dreamlike element to become a fantasized representation of Mexico (**Figures 45 & 46**). The work of Rugendas also only demonstrates a small fraction of Mexican culture and should not be interpreted to represent all of Mexico or Mexicans. Rugendas work is unified by the dominant warm color palette that expresses a hot summer day as people shop on the streets of a Mexican city. The background contains blurred architecture while the foreground highlights people of different walks of life surrounding a woman as she tries to sell her products in a covered stand. The scene appears candid and painted in the moment, however it should not be taken as fact. The representation of cultures in an artistic medium can pose issues as the

¹⁴² Mario Mercott Francissco, "The Huipil Grande from The Istmo of Tehuantepec: Mexico's Most Fascinating Fashion Accessory," trans. Fernando Toledo Cruz, Haute Culture Textile Tours, June 5, 2019.

images are interpretations by the artists and generally are adjusted to create a pleasing composition.

The Disney images and Rugendas images would have delivered similar messages back to European audiences about Mexico due to their similarities in style and content. Rugendas' works would largely go unnoticed by audiences as he was expelled from Mexico for his political views and would only gain attention again in the 1920s. The works of Nebel and Rugendas could have served as inspiration for the making of the *Three Caballeros* due to the similarities seen between the film and the works of costume book artists. The process to create costume book imagery also is similar to Disney's Goodwill Tour that produced works meant to represent cultural elements and make the films more "authentic." The content of the film and artwork depicting Mexico during the early 1800s helped to create stereotypes that continue to plague Mexicans in pop culture today.



Figure 31: Unknown, *Pavilion of Mexico, Paris Exposition*, 1889, album photo print, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC.



Figure 32: Unknown, *The Mexico Pavilion*, Walt Disney World, Orlando, Florida.



Figure 33: Unknown, *Detail of first two groups, Casta Painting*, 18th century, oil on canvas, Museo Nacional del Virreinato, Mexico.



Figure 34: Carl Nebel, *Tortilleras*, 1836, lithograph.



Figure 35: Norman Ferguson, Clyde Geronimi, Jack Kinney, Bill Roberts, & Harold Young, directors, *The Three Caballeros*, 1944, Walt Disney Company Production, Disney +.



Figure 36: Johann Moritz Rugendas, *La Reina del Mercado* (*The Queen of the market*), 1833, oil on canvas.



Figure 37: Norman Ferguson, Clyde Geronimi, Jack Kinney, Bill Roberts, & Harold Young, directors, *The Three Caballeros*, 1944, Walt Disney Company Production, Disney +.



Figure 38: Norman Ferguson, Clyde Geronimi, Jack Kinney, Bill Roberts, & Harold Young, directors, *The Three Caballeros*, 1944, Walt Disney Company Production, Disney +.



Figure 39: Johann Moritz Rugendas, *Chilean Riders*, ca. 1835-36, 36 x 18 cm (10.2 x 7 in), oil on canvas, Private Collection Michael Graham-Stewart.



Figure 40: Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Slave Ship* (*Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On*), 1840, 90.8 x 122.6 cm (35 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 48 $\frac{1}{4}$ in), oil on canvas, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA.



Figure 41: Unknown, *Traditional Mexican Huipil Grande*, 2018



Figure 42: Johann Moritz Rugendas, *La Reina del Mercado* (*The Queen of the Market*) detail, 1833, oil on canvas.



Figure 43 & 44: Norman Ferguson, Clyde Geronimi, Jack Kinney, Bill Roberts, & Harold Young, directors, *The Three Caballeros*, 1944, Walt Disney Company Production, Disney



Figure 45 & 46: Norman Ferguson, Clyde Geronimi, Jack Kinney, Bill Roberts, & Harold Young, directors, *The Three Caballeros*, 1944, Walt Disney Company Production, Disney +.



Pixar Animation Studios

Coco was not the first feature-length film to break the silence of depicting Mexicans in animated films. In 2014, 20th Century Fox attempted to represent Mexicans in animation by releasing *The Book of Life*, three years prior to the premiere of *Coco*.¹⁴³ The Walt Disney Company created *Coco* by producing the film through Pixar Animation Studios. Pixar had a long history before it was purchased by Disney in 2006, including the production of commercials and short films.¹⁴⁴ The relationship between the two companies began in 1986 with Pixar and Disney collaborating on CAPS (Computer Animation Production System) which helped to revolutionize the traditional form of creating animated films. In 1991, Disney and Pixar announced an

¹⁴³ Charles Solomon, "Review: Too Much and Too Little in Overwrought, Mexican-Themed 'Book of Life,'" Los Angeles Times (Los Angeles Times, October 16, 2014).

¹⁴⁴ "Our Story," Pixar Animation Studios, accessed June 28, 2021, <https://www.pixar.com/our-story-pixar>.

agreement to “make and distribute at least one computer-generated animated movie.”¹⁴⁵ The company would release *Toy Story* in 1995 and begin to focus on creating more computer-generated films. In 1997, the collaboration between the Walt Disney Studios and Pixar Animation Studios would be revised to include the agreement to jointly produce five movies over 10 years. Two years later Pixar would make history by releasing *Toy Story 2*, which was the first film to be completely created and exhibited digitally. The company would open their own studios in Emeryville, California, and continue to produce high grossing films like *Monsters Inc* (2001), *Finding Nemo* (2003), *The Incredibles* (2004), and *Cars* (2006). The studios would merge with The Walt Disney Company during its 20th anniversary and go on to create blockbuster hits and Oscar winning films, like *Coco* (2017).

The clarification of the difference between the Pixar Animation Studios from the Walt Disney Company is demonstrated in the content of their films. The first Mexican representation was provided by the Walt Disney Company in the *Three Caballeros*, and although 20th Century Fox released *The Book of Life* three years prior, Pixar’s representation of Mexicans in pop culture has largely been categorized as a positive representation. The title of Pixar attached to the film, could be one of the reasons for the positive reaction. Scholars, such as Giroux, have vocalized a difference between the two companies when he asserts: “...without a healthy dose of cynicism of the kind provided by Pixar, animated films might be far less appealing to a new generation of kids and adults.”¹⁴⁶ The Pixar company was not a product of Disney, like Touchstone Pictures, but instead originated as a rival company. Disney entered the collaboration once Pixar had technology that Disney saw as beneficial to their future. The relationship between

¹⁴⁵ “Our Story,” Pixar Animation Studios, accessed June 28, 2021, <https://www.pixar.com/our-story-pixar>.

¹⁴⁶ Henry A. Giroux and Grace Pollock, “Children’s Culture and Disney’s Animated Films,” in *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*, Updated and Expanded (Oxford, UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 119.

both Pixar and Disney is also addressed as Giroux asserts: “But Pixar’s relationship with its corporate parent does not necessarily follow the standard Disney script of submission to a benevolent authority.”¹⁴⁷ The company feels more grounded to the public as it is more accessible. The company has its own website ¹⁴⁸ independent of the Walt Disney Company website, and it has a thorough analysis of each film that includes information about research trips, character developments, and production details.

Giroux’s assertion also interjects about the difference in content from Disney films versus Pixar films. The Pixar films are arguably more catered to a mature demographic as they focus on themes related to internal emotions,¹⁴⁹ family dynamics,¹⁵⁰ and philosophical interpretations of life.¹⁵¹ Disney films allude to the larger complexities of life, such as the loss of a loved one or parent, however the films’ central themes do not generally revolve around such themes in a way similar to Pixar interpretations. An example would be in Disney films, like *Cinderella*, the main character faces the loss of a parent dying in the beginning of the movie. However, the plot swiftly moves on from the tragic event and the story continues. In Pixar’s *Coco* the film gravitates toward the tragic event and goes a step further to analyze death by assessing the topic of the impending fate in everyone’s lives. The Pixar films are represented on both their website and upon release as having more substance when compared to their corporate company’s releases.

¹⁴⁷ Henry A. Giroux and Grace Pollock, “Children’s Culture and Disney’s Animated Films,” in *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*, Updated and Expanded (Oxford, UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 119.

¹⁴⁸ “Pixar Animation Studios,” Pixar Animation Studios, accessed March 2, 2021.

¹⁴⁹ Referencing *Inside Out* produced by Pixar Animation Studios on June 19, 2015.

¹⁵⁰ Referencing *Coco* produced by Pixar Animation Studios on November 22, 2017.

¹⁵¹ Referencing *Soul* produced by Pixar Animation Studios on December 25, 2020.

Coco (2017)

History-Day of the Dead Celebrations

Coco demonstrates a film with substance as it focuses on introducing the concept of death through the celebrations of Día de Los Muertos (Day of the Dead) in Mexico. The plot of the film is described on Disney+ as: “In Disney-Pixar’s extraordinary adventure, a boy who dreams of becoming a great musician embarks on a journey to uncover the mysteries behind his ancestor’s stories and traditions.”¹⁵² The film is set within the celebrations of Day of the Dead in Mexico primarily observed during the Roman-Catholic celebrations of All Saints’ and All Souls’ Days from November 1st to November 2nd. The origins of the holiday have been largely debated by scholars, such as Stanley Brandes who address the holiday in his article, “The Day of the Dead, Halloween, and the Quest for Mexican National Identity.” He asserts: “We do know that in the 1740s, in Mexico, All Saints’ and All Souls’ Days began to assume the flavor of contemporary events. It is from this time that we first hear from a Capuchin Francisco de Ajofrín of the commercial production and sale of whimsical figurines made of the sugar paste known in Mexico as alfenique.”¹⁵³ The middle ground between the opposing sides in the debate of the holiday’s origins is that modern celebrations are a combination of both indigenous and Spanish traditions. In 1519 the Spanish would begin to introduce and force their customs on the indigenous people; and in 1521 New Spain (modern day Mexico) would be established by the conquistadors and the Spanish Crown. New Spain was built on the foundations of the Mexica city of Tenochtitlan and used most of the existing infrastructure. As culture and art show, indigenous culture adapted and changed to colonial reality.

¹⁵² *Coco*, Disney + (Walt Disney Company, 2017).

¹⁵³ Stanley Brandes, “The Day of the Dead, Halloween, and the Quest for Mexican National Identity,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 111, no. 442 (1998), 363.

The Spanish were largely able to conquer Mexico due to the introduction of destructive diseases like the plague, measles, smallpox, and indigenous allies. The illnesses would make the indigenous people encounter death rapidly and on a large scale as the epidemics killed millions of indigenous people across Mesoamerica. Brandes elaborates as he states, “Under the circumstances, it seems realistic to posit that the Day of the Dead became ritualistically elaborate in Mexico as a by-product of the enormous loss of life during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.”¹⁵⁴ The abundance of death presumably caused a case of widespread and shared trauma that is being recognized with the current Covid-19 pandemic at time of this writing.¹⁵⁵ To cope with such loss, the remaining indigenous people may have turned to emphasizing death within the Spanish celebration of All Saints’ Day. The embrace would lead to the abundance of skeletal imagery present in Day of the Dead celebrations in Mexico and the focus on the deceased relatives in various traditions, such as building the ofrenda.¹⁵⁶ The traditions and celebrations are summarized by Brandes when he states: “The Day of the Dead helps to create an interpretation of the world in which Mexico is unique, culturally discrete, and above all different from the two powers that have dominated the country throughout its long existence: Spain and the United States.”¹⁵⁷ Although the celebrations have become identified with Mexico’s nationality, the government has largely been involved in promoting Day of the Dead celebrations to the globe as addressed by Brandes :“In 1971, governmental agencies intervened in such a way

¹⁵⁴ Stanley Brandes, “Sugar, Colonialism, and Death: On the Origins of Mexico's Day of the Dead,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 39, no. 2 (1997), 289.

¹⁵⁵ Amanda B Clinton, “Scaling up to Address Global Trauma, Loss, and Grief Associated with COVID-19,” American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association, December 9, 2020).

¹⁵⁶ The ofrenda is an offering altar to the deceased family members and generally consists of marigold decorations, candies, and other foods that the family members favored while living. The altar was meant to help replenish the ancestors when they traveled from the land of the dead during the celebrations in November. The tradition plays an essential role in *Coco* as it begins his journey to the land of the dead to find a member of his family to bless his musical career.

¹⁵⁷ Stanley Brandes, “The Day of the Dead, Halloween, and the Quest for Mexican National Identity,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 111, no. 442 (1998), 359.

as to transform entirely. It was in that year that the Ministry of Tourism of the State together with two state agencies-the Casa de la Cultura and the sanias began a campaign to attract tourists to Michoacan. towns, among them Tzintzuntzan, as targets of tourism.”¹⁵⁸ The celebrations, such as those in Mexico City have become large attractions for tourists who wish to experience Mexican culture or partake in the large party that takes place every year. However, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the large festivities have been scaled back to only include those in the local areas and close family members. The traditions of Día de los Muertos are constantly changing to remain relevant to changes in society, such as the pandemic, but *Coco* focuses on some of the traditions that persisted with the celebrations throughout time.

Disney Film- Establishing Distance

The film was created in a similar process to previous cultural films where animators were sent on research trips to Mexico over a six-year “creative process.” The process is referenced in John Riofrio’s book, *Latinx Cline in the Twenty-First Century*: “Seeking to better understand the nuances of Mexican life, these research trips put the filmmakers in close contact with Mexican people, Mexican music, and Mexican customs.”¹⁵⁹ It is important to note here that the research trips were meant to focus on the “nuances” of Mexicans life rather than creating a generalized image of the country. The subtleties within a culture can make a difference between a poorly reviewed film like *The Three Caballeros* versus an appraised film like *Coco*. The film was largely successful among audience members, and those who identified with the Mexican culture as Riofrio expands, “In a historical moment that disparages Latinx communities by dismissing

¹⁵⁸ Stanley Brandes, “The Day of the Dead, Halloween, and the Quest for Mexican National Identity,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 111, no. 442 (1998), 368.

¹⁵⁹ John D. Riofrio, “(RE)ANIMATING THE DEAD: Memory, Music, and Divine Justice in *Coco*,” *Latinx Ciné in the Twenty-First Century*, 2019, 382.

them as “rapists,” “murderers,” and “illegals,” Coco asserts their nobility, their capacity for love and loyalty; indeed, their very *humanity*.¹⁶⁰ The stereotypes applied to Mexicans, like those displayed in *The Three Caballeros*, have expanded since the first representation of Mexicans in animated films. The stereotypes conform to the heightened response of racism directed towards Mexicans during the early 2010’s and saw a spike during the 2016 United States Presidential election. *Coco*, however, has been reviewed as a film to fight such stereotypes and focus on the importance of family relationships.

The film has been negatively reviewed by scholars, like Martin-Rodriguez, who assert, “...while Mexico offered them access to traditional cultural practices and artisanal crafts, Pixar reciprocated with a manufactured, large- scale commercial package that unleashed some of the ugliest consequences of the tourist-based economy of dependency that *The Three Caballeros* first represented.”¹⁶¹ The popularity of the films is problematic as it creates a Disneyfied version of the culture that is desirable and consumable to a wide demographic of people, like Americans. The appeal to experience the authentic *Coco* story brings visitors to Mexico that helps the economy in the country, however commercialized traditions like those of Dia de los Muertos. The products are no longer authentic to the culture, and while that may not be the mission for Disney to create true representations, the audiences it reaches may perceive it as fact. The negative reviews by scholars is also attributed to themes of cultural appropriation in the film that relate to distancing the viewer from Mexican culture.

¹⁶⁰ John D. Riofrio, “(RE)ANIMATING THE DEAD: Memory, Music, and Divine Justice in *Coco*,” *Latinx Ciné in the Twenty-First Century*, 2019, 383.

¹⁶¹ Manuel M Martin-Rodriguez, “The Best Mexican Is a (Day of the) Dead Mexican: Representing Mexicanness in U.S. Animated Films,” in *Latinx Cine in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Frederick Luis Aldama (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2019), 370.

The film repeats a stereotype of distancing the viewer from Mexican culture, by placing the film entirely in Mexico and in the land of the dead. During early stages of production, the main character, Miguel, was going to be from the United States and was visiting his family in Mexico where he would learn about Day of the Dead; however, the idea was changed to keep the film entirely in one country. Martin Rodriguez asserts the issues with a such an approach as he elaborates: “...when it comes to representing Mexicans— animated Hollywood has always resorted to the trope of distance: ancient Mexicans are preferred to those in our present times, and south of the border Mexicans appear in far greater numbers than those in the United States.”¹⁶² The entertainment industry is more comfortable with representing a static version of culture, rather than the ever-changing culture that is practiced within Mexico. The film ignores that many families both in Mexico and around the world share international connections. The scholar addresses corporations outside of Disney who have repeated these mistakes when he asserts, “Like most of their forerunners, *The Book of Life* (**Figure 47**) and *Coco* take place south of the border, constructing Mexico as always forever foreign and not as the southern half of a vibrant transnational web of cultural, economic, social, and family relations that transcends geopolitical boundaries.”¹⁶³ The team found most of the inspiration for the film in Mexico, even finding a woman who created alebrije’s to be the reference for Miguel’s abuela. ¹⁶⁴ However, animators failed to interview or refer to other sources of the culture, such as the prevalent Mexican American communities within the United States. The film is “atemporal” with a “dormant present” that has no “visible future,” and the static nature is represented beyond the

¹⁶² Manuel M Martin-Rodriguez, “The Best Mexican Is a (Day of the) Dead Mexican: Representing Mexicanness in U.S. Animated Films,” in *Latinx Cine in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Frederick Luis Aldama (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2019), 358.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 356.

¹⁶⁴ Mariana Uribe, “We Took a Trip to Mexico with the Filmmakers Behind Disney Pixar's *Coco*,” Disney News (Disney News, February 27, 2018).

films again as the Mexico pavilion in Epcot features a step pyramid that has defined Mexico in textbooks for years. The film is briefly able to break free of its historical static nature when addressing the borders within the film that are reminiscent of the immigration discussion in 2017.

The film introduces the land of the dead through an impressive marigold bridge that opens every year on Dia de los Muertos allowing the dead to return and see living family members. The bridge, however, can only be crossed if a living family member includes a picture of the deceased on the ofrenda. The rule is heavily enforced as the character, Héctor, is unable to cross due to his family disowning him (**Figure 48**). The situation is heartbreaking as the gravity of Héctor's crossing means life or (final) death for the character. Although the characters are animated and far from realistic, Martin Rodriguez makes the connection between Héctor's situation and the current situation of many Mexican families who have families across the United States border. He explains, "For example, although some reviews have celebrated *Coco* for not making overt references to the political climate in the United States or to U.S.- Mexico border issues, I cannot help but wonder how many immigrants in the United States who cannot go visit relatives in Mexico or elsewhere (or whose relatives cannot cross into the United States) must have made precisely those kinds of connections when witnessing Héctor's plight at the border checkpoint in the land of the remembered."¹⁶⁵ The discussion of immigration¹⁶⁶ has been a growing topic among presidential campaigns and the attention on detention centers along the borders as more details have been released on the treatment of those who are detained.¹⁶⁷ *Coco*

¹⁶⁵ Manuel M Martin-Rodriguez, "The Best Mexican Is a (Day of the) Dead Mexican: Representing Mexicanness in U.S. Animated Films," in *Latinx Cine in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Frederick Luis Aldama (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2019), 373.

¹⁶⁶ Jie Zong and Jeanne Batalova, "Mexican Immigrants in the United States," Migration Policy Institute (Migration Policy Institute, October 11, 2018).

¹⁶⁷ Emily Kassie, "Detained: How the US Built the World's Largest Immigrant Detention System," The Guardian (Guardian News & Media Limited, September 24, 2019).

is addressing the heartbreaking reality of immigration in a child friendly manner and applies its Disney ending by Héctor being able to see his family. However, Riofrio addresses an issue with *Coco*'s portrayal when he asserts: "The DEAD HAVE IMMIGRATION. It feels heavy to type that and it was a moment of horror— to hear a theater laughing at jokes that were playing out in people's everyday lives, a lot of them, their fellow countrymen, and one of them specifically sitting in that theater."¹⁶⁸ The scene is available for interpretation, however when applying this to a mainly American audience the weight of the situation may be lost if there is no connection to the gravity of immigration. However, the intentions of the marigold bridge are not directly addressed by the creators of the film who focus on how strongly they have represented the connections of a Mexican family.

The immigration discussion surrounding *Coco* extends into the reactions from both cast members and those in the audience. The reactions in review are from those who worked on the film and members of the audience who identify with Mexican culture. Several of the actors produced remarks when promoting the film in 2017. Since 2016 the United States has seen a heightened sense of racism¹⁶⁹ toward the Hispanic community that has created the demographic to become the targets of violence, such as the event in an El Paso Walmart where the gunman was targeting "Mexicans."¹⁷⁰ The climate of 2017 prompted many actors from the film to connect the movie to the politicized events occurring at the time. In the article, "Latino Artists and Cultural Leaders Weigh in on How 'Coco' Got It Right." written by Claudia Puig and published in Los Angeles Times, the reporter interviewed several actors like Benjamin Bratt who

¹⁶⁸ John D. Riofrio, "(RE)ANIMATING THE DEAD: Memory, Music, and Divine Justice in *Coco*," *Latinx Ciné in the Twenty-First Century*, 2019, 389.

¹⁶⁹ Dani Anguiano, "It's Worse than Ever': How Latinos Are Changing Their Lives in Trump's America," *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, October 7, 2019).

¹⁷⁰ "Texas Walmart Shooting: El Paso Gun Attack Leaves 20 Dead," *BBC News* (BBC, August 4, 2019).

is quoted in the article: “‘I am certain that Disney/Pixar did not set out to make this a political film, but that is exactly what they have done,’ said Benjamin Bratt, who provides the voice of Ernesto de la Cruz, the musical star idolized by the film’s central character, 12-year-old Miguel. ‘Coco’ inspires love around the world, and for Latinos in particular. It’s a reminder that we are worthy of loving ourselves. And if this ain’t a revolutionary act, I do not know what is.’”¹⁷¹ The politicization of the movie fights against comments made by government officials and a growing number of Americans, who direct racism toward the demographic of individuals. The film diminishes such acts of hate by focusing on the love shared by the Rivera family both living and deceased. Marcel Davison Aviles, the lead cultural consultant at Pixar supported Benjamin Bratt’s comments and states, “‘It [the film] validated the notion that I’m increasingly believing in more and more: When change happens for the better, it’s because something happens in the zeitgeist that pushes popular culture and contemporary attitudes to a place of empathy and greater acceptance.’”¹⁷² Puig Davison emphasizes the focus of “empathy” and “greater acceptance”, something *Coco* is pioneering as it shows a piece of Mexican culture that focuses on the humanity of people. The love and loss experienced by the Rivera family is something everyone must come to terms within their own life, regardless of your culture or ethnicity. The film represents a fraction of Mexican culture and cannot be a representative for the entire culture, however it is serving as a tool to show the similarities felt by all families that their love is eternal.

The film was well reviewed by the public, however the use of cultural elements in the film, made many leery of the film due to past experiences of being represented in productions like *The Three Caballeros*. Carlos Aguilar, a United States resident from Mexico was quoted in

¹⁷¹ Claudia Puig, “Latino Artists and Cultural Leaders Weigh in on How ‘Coco’ Got It Right,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles Times, February 22, 2018).

¹⁷² Ibid.

Puig's article: "“My family back in Mexico City was shocked and moved by how truthfully the film captured traditions and Mexican idiosyncrasies,” he said. ‘They couldn’t believe that an American studio had made the film, as it felt like an authentically Mexican work of art.’”¹⁷³ The “truthful” depictions of the Mexican traditions and characteristics quoted by Mr. Aguilar, was also present when Lee Unkrich was quoted in *Vanity Fair* when describing the film as a “love letter to Mexico.”¹⁷⁴ The opinions will differ for every viewer, especially those connected to the culture, however the majority of reviews are positive and the film received an 8.4 out of 10 from reviewers on IMDB.¹⁷⁵ However, the voice actor, Garcia Bernal, who lent his voice to the character of Héctor is quoted by Puig: ““To be honest, in the beginning, when I was approached for the part, I was quite curious and with a little bit of concern in terms of where they were going to take it and how it was going to be,’ García Bernal said. ‘Día de los Muertos is maybe the most meaningful celebration we have. It’s very spiritual.’”¹⁷⁶ The “curiosity” and “concern” stems from previous experiences of Mexicans depicting, like those seen in *The Three Caballeros*, and the beginning production issues surrounding the copyright lawsuits. The film is prone to its faults; however, the company needs to be held responsible and recognize the issues that will arise when depicting cultures in films. The problem was addressed with the use of cultural consultants like Lalo Alcaraz, however the pressing issue for upcoming films, like *Encanto* (a film depicting the Columbia culture) where the plots are inspired by cultures rather than directly depicting them, the boundaries of cultural appropriation can become blurred.

¹⁷³ Claudia Puig, “Latino Artists and Cultural Leaders Weigh in on How ‘Coco’ Got It Right,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles Times, February 22, 2018).

¹⁷⁴ Joanna Robinson, “Pixar’s *Coco* Is a ‘Love Letter to Mexico’ When It’s Needed Most,” *Vanity Fair* (Condé Nast, December 6, 2016).

¹⁷⁵ “Coco.” IMDB. IMDB.com, November 22, 2017.

¹⁷⁶ Claudia Puig, “Latino Artists and Cultural Leaders Weigh in on How ‘Coco’ Got It Right,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles Times, February 22, 2018).

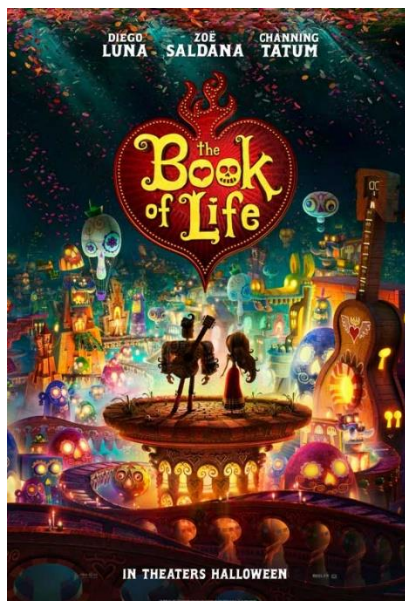


Figure 47: Jorge R. Gutierrez, *The Book of Life*, 2014, Reel FX Animation Studios & 20th Century Fox Animation, Disney +.



Figure 48: Lee Unkrich & Adrian Molina, *Coco*, 2017, Pixar Animation Studios, Disney +.

Art References-Mexican Artists

The research trips undertaken by the Pixar Studios subjected the film to take place entirely in Mexico and found influence in prominent Mexican artists that are a part of the art canon, such as Frida Kahlo. Kahlo was born in Mexico in 1907 and had a long-lasting artistic career that began after a bus accident in 1925. Her career centered around painting self-portraits in a surrealist style that expressed her pain, loneliness, and losses. Her works were displayed throughout Mexico and in Paris exhibitions until her death in 1954.¹⁷⁷ The artist belongs to the canon of art historical works due to her work expressing Mexican culture beyond the country's borders. Her works like *Self Portrait Along the Borderline Between Mexico and the United States* from 1932, display the characteristics commonly applied to Mexico from her perspective (**Figure 49**). The artist stands between two scenes that represent a rural landscape (Mexico), and an industrial factory (the United States). The United States side features skyscrapers to the far

¹⁷⁷ "Frida Kahlo," Biography (A&E Networks Television, April 22, 2020).

right, machines in the foreground, and a factory that spews smoke. The clouds obstruct the United States flag and stars that are dim in comparison to the vivid depictions of the solar entities on the Mexico side. On the other side of the statuesque Kahlo, Mexico is represented through the ruins of the Mexica empire, artifacts like skulls/idols, and indigenous plants in the foreground.¹⁷⁸ The contrast is striking between the two areas and the elements on the Mexican site are represented in areas of *Coco* that focus on ancient Mexica elements to depict the land of the dead.

When Miguel begins to cross the marigold bridge and travels through the land of the dead, he is confronted with several elements of ancient Mexican cultures. Upon entering the land of the dead, Miguel is guided across the marigold bridge where he spots the remains of pre-contact ruins that are also connected through marigold bridges (**Figure 50**). The structures are reminiscent of the architecture seen in Kahlo's portraits and images that generally accompany Mexico when described to a tourist.¹⁷⁹ Although the pyramids remain an object of Mexico nationality and a reversion back to connecting to Mexica roots, the structures can hinder the country as it enforces a static image of the culture that is stuck in the past. However, *Coco* accomplishes using images of the Mexica without focusing on the elements. The immediate reference as seen here, may reflect the Mexicans desire to associate the holiday with the Mexica rather than the Spanish to establish distance from those that conquered them in the early 1500s.

The presence of Kahlo in the discussion of *Coco* is fundamental as the Pixar animators share a similar view to the role of Kahlo's importance in representing the country. Her work was influential to the film and the creators paid tribute to the artist with a representation of her in the

¹⁷⁸ "The Life and Times of Frida Kahlo. Works of Art. Self Portrait Between the Borderline of Mexico and the United States," PBS (Public Broadcasting Service, 2005).

¹⁷⁹ The temples are also represented in the Mexico Pavilion in Epcot's World Showcase.

land of the dead (**Figure 51**). She plays a pivotal role in helping Miguel pursue his musical career and reuniting his family.¹⁸⁰ She is depicted as a skeleton and in front of a work that strongly resembles herself portraits that largely show her among foliage and in the presence of animals. Her work *Self Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird*, from 1940 as had several themes applied to it, however, follows a similar pattern to her other self-portraits with the dense foliage as a background and animals as company (**Figure 52**).¹⁸¹ The depiction seen in *Coco* shows the elements attributed to Kahlo, by herself, and further asserts a connection to pre-contact cultures. The symbolism of the hummingbird has been associated with Mexica deities like Huitzilopochtli, the god of war. The content of Kahlo's work is reiterated in *Coco*, and the references to pre-contact material can be traced back to more specific accounts of Mexica artifacts.

The ancient temples appear throughout the film when Miguel and Héctor venture into the land of the forgotten. When venturing into the neighborhood of Chicharrón, a friend of Héctor, Miguel walks down the steps of another Mexica temple and encounters images of skeletons and iconography like artifacts from the Mexica (**Figure 53**). The skeleton imagery is prevalent in *Coco* due to the film being partially set in the Land of the Dead and the details present on the temples closely identify with the structures built by the indigenous people. When the characters are traveling down the stepped pyramid to retrieve a guitar, the details of the temple are shown to represent figures like those seen on the Temple of Quetzalcoatl (feathered serpent) in Teotihuacan, Mexico (**Figure 54**). The temple belongs to a larger complex known as a metropolis that was acquired by the Mexica in the seventh century long after it had been

¹⁸⁰ Michael Cavanaugh, "Frida Kahlo Empowered an actress to Fight Harassment. Now She Voices Frida in 'Coco,'" The Washington Post (WP Company, November 22, 2017).

¹⁸¹ "Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird by Frida Kahlo," Harry Ransom Center, accessed October 13, 2021.

abandoned.¹⁸² The site contains several temples; however, the figural heads present on the Temple of Quetzalcoatl reflect the animated temple closely as the figures of Quetzalcoatl and a possible early representation of the god Taloc, God of rain and warfare, extend from the talud-tablero pyramid base to create a detailed silhouette. The location of the temple in relation to the Avenue of the Dead resembles the placement of Mexica features in the Pixar film (**Figure 54**). The pre-contact structures in the film are seen in relation to what is referenced as the “forgotten”, people who are not present on an ofrenda or remembered by living relatives. The association with the “forgotten” helps to show the same themes produced within Kahlo’s works that Mexican culture is connected to the pre-contact history, however it is not a static culture. The temples “within” *Coco* are not being forgotten but are placed alongside the modern elements of the Land of the Dead, as witnessed when Miguel crosses the bridge. The elements of the Temple of Quetzalcoatl are also present at the Mexico Pavilion in Epcot as the structure is shaped with figural sculptures reminiscent to those seen at the historic site and then in *Coco* (**Figure 55**). The pre-contact content was problematic in the depiction of The Three Caballeros, but in *Coco* the elements are seen in relation to more modern artists who identify with the culture being represented, like Frida Kahlo and Jose Guadalupe Posada.

Jose Guadalupe Posada was a Mexican illustrator and political satirist that became famous for his lithography and etching techniques. His most popular works were the illustrations that critiqued and depicted political figures, like the dictator Porfirio Diaz, as lively skeletons. The works eventually became synonymous with the Day of the Dead and gained in popularity due to their relatability to a large population of Mexicans. The illustrations were displayed in tabloids across Mexico and during his lifetime he would produce about 20,000 drawings.¹⁸³ One

¹⁸² Maya Jiménez, “Teotihuacan,” Khan Academy (Khan Academy, 2019).

¹⁸³ “Mexican Artist José Guadalupe Posada,” Posada (The Posada Art Foundation, 2014).

of Posada's most famous works, *La Calavera Catrina*, has become an image used to decorate for Día de los Muertos and helped to unify people through the inevitability of death (**Figure 56**).

The image of *La Calavera Catrina*, shows an average deceased woman dressed festively in a hat and smiling even given her circumstance. The message of his cartoons and the lively characteristics of his skeletons is the basis of *Coco*. The film recognizes death not as a boundary, but another stage of life that will occur for everyone. Posada's creations display death in a lively manner seen throughout *Coco* where the deceased carry-on with daily activities and visiting family on Day of the Dead. The practice of viewing the boundary of death and living in close relations is also seen in other practices, such as the building of shrines to Santa Muerte, saint of death who is worshipped alongside general Catholic traditions. Santa Muerte represents a new religious movement that is rapidly growing. The visual depiction of Santa Muerte, a skeletal woman, is like what is depicted in Posada's works, as the spirit connects living practices to death symbolism.

The style of Posada's skeletons is similar to *Coco*'s skeletons due to the resemblance to sugar skull designs that are used by the living. However, the decorations are not elaborate, like those seen in *The Book of Life*, where it detracts from the realistic qualities of the skeletons. The skeletons in *Coco* are designed with intricate and delicate designs painted around the facial features of the skulls. The same details can be seen in Posada's works like his etching of *Calavera Oaxaqueña* from 1910 (**Figure 58**). The style allows for realistic elements combined with the artistic representations seen on sugar skulls. The Posada skeletons retain their anatomically artistic skulls and skeletons as seen within *Coco* where the structures of the individual skeletons apply to the living individual. The skeletons of Miguel's past family members demonstrate an array of skeleton types that coincide with the living characteristics of

the individual and allow the characters to become personalized (**Figure 59**). The attribution of difference after death is seen throughout Posada's works and allows the individuals to be easily identified in both artforms. The style throughout *Coco* combines the elements of more modern Mexican artists when compared to the *Three Caballeros* content, however it's arguable that The Walt Disney Company could look toward even more modern representations of the culture to create a larger picture of an evolving Mexico.



Figure 49: Frida Kahlo, *Self Portrait Along the Borderline Between Mexico and the United States*, 1932, 12 ½ x 13 ¾ in, oil on metal, collection of Mr. and Mrs. Manuel Reyero, NY.



Figure 50: Lee Unkrich & Adrian Molina, *Coco*, 2017, Pixar Animation Studios, Disney +.



Figure 51: Lee Unkrich & Adrian Molina, *Coco*, 2017, Pixar Animation Studios, Disney +.

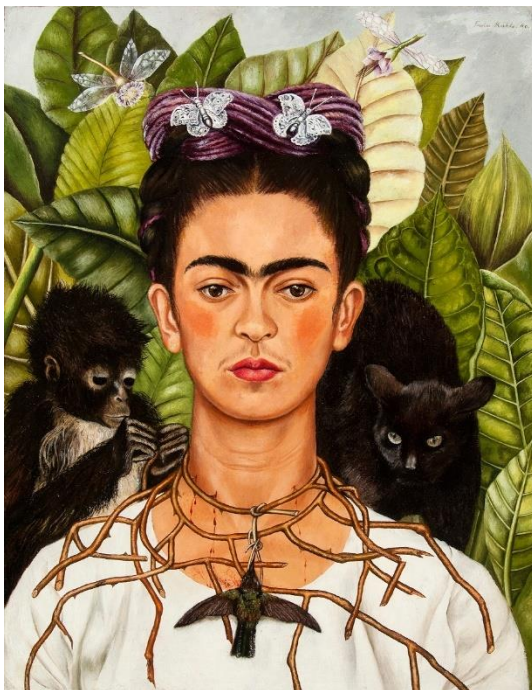


Figure 52: Frida Kahlo, *Self Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbirds*, 1940, oil on canvas, 24 ½ x 18 ¾ in, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, Austin, Texas.



Figure 53: Lee Unkrich & Adrian Molina, *Coco*, 2017, Pixar Animation Studios, Disney +.



Figure 54: Mexica, *Temple of Quetzalcoatl (feathered serpent)*, Teotihuacan, Mexico, ca. 400 BC.



Figure 55: Mexica, *Avenue of the Dead*, Teotihuacan, Mexico, ca. 400 BC. 1.5 miles long.

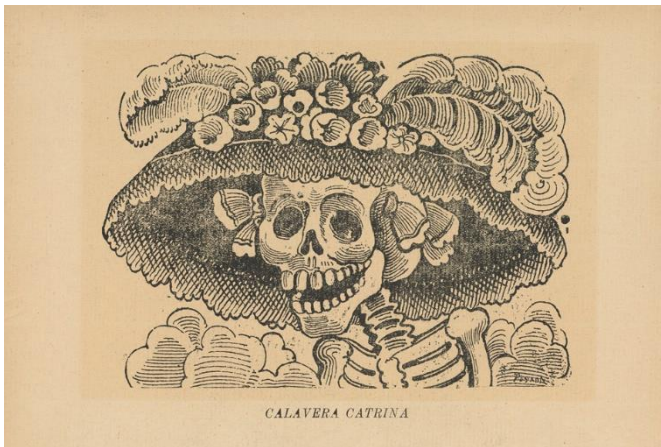


Figure 56: Jose Guadalupe Posada, *La Calavera Catrina*, ca. 1910, lithograph, Museum of Jose Guadalupe Posada, Aguascalientes, México.



Figure 57: Steven Bragg, *Shrine to Santa Muerte*, 2014, photograph.



Figure 58: José Guadalupe Posada, *Calavera Oaxaqueña*, ca. 1910, relief print, 21.3 x 33.8 cm, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC.



Figure 59: Lee Unkrich & Adrian Molina, *Coco*, 2017, Pixar Animation Studios, Disney +.

Modern Mexican Representations

The production of *Coco* sparked an interest in Mexico that had been relatively untouched by animation studios since *The Three Caballeros*. However, the production did face major backlash when lawsuits began to emerge about the copyrighting of the phrase “Día de los Muertos.”¹⁸⁴ The lawsuit was issued due to early production efforts to title the film *Día de los Muertos*, however after severe backlash, Disney would switch it to *Coco*. The incident did not go unnoticed as critics raced to comment on the company policies.

The Chicano artist, Lalo Alcaraz voiced his opinion both verbally and through his creation of *Muerto Mouse* (**Figure 60**). The depiction is a cartoon of a skeletal Mickey Mouse attacking a street in a Godzilla-fashion with the headline “It’s Coming to Trademark your Cultura!”¹⁸⁵ The illustration demonstrates Alcaraz’s frustration with the company that was also the subject of a previous print he created in 1994 titled, “*Migra Mouse*.” (**Figure 61**) The earlier print involved the relationship between the Walt Disney Company's involvement with California governor Pete Wilson’s campaign who was trying to enact racist and unconstitutional immigration laws. The prints are similar as both handle Disney’s involvement with the United

¹⁸⁴ Ben Child, “Disney Drops Bid to Trademark Day of the Dead,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, May 8, 2013).

¹⁸⁵ Lalo Alcaraz, “Lalo Alcaraz: Author, Artist, Cartoonist, Pocho,” Lalo Alcaraz, February 2, 2020.

States' relationship with Mexico. Lalo Alcaraz commented on the 2013 lawsuit by asserting: “...Walt Disney Company lawyers made a boneheaded move and attempted to trademark the term ‘Día de Los Muertos’ for merchandise for their upcoming Pixar DOD [Day of the Dead] themed movie *Coco*. Needless to say, everyone was horrified, and I drew this cartoon in response to their action, and they quickly withdrew their applications.”¹⁸⁶ The company would take extra precautions after the lawsuit by hiring Alcaraz as a cultural consultant to avoid future mistakes. However, the hiring of cultural consultants does not always create a perfect final product, as demonstrated by *Pocahontas*. The consultation of people, like Alcaraz, helped to alter the movie and prompted the predominantly positive reviews for the film.

The works of Alcaraz demonstrate the need for The Walt Disney Company to consider modern artists from the cultures being represented in their films. The works of Alcaraz commented directly on the company, however the works of other artists like the Assembly of Revolutionary Artists of Oaxaca (ASARO) demonstrate a call to action on politics occurring in Oaxaca, Mexico. The organization was created after the Mexican government used violent force against protestors demanding equal rights for, “...disenfranchised groups like farm workers, indigenous peoples, and women....”¹⁸⁷ The protests generally occurred annually to demand for better teacher salaries and school budgets, however in 2006 that changed with the interference of the Mexican government. The event in 2006 sparked the artistic movement that is committed to creating social change through art (**Figure 62**). The works are reminiscent of Jose Guadalupe Posada’s etchings by being created from woodblock printing techniques. The style is like the early 20th century artist and the content shares commonalities as both artists create work to

¹⁸⁶ Lalo Alcaraz, “Lalo Alcaraz: Author, Artist, Cartoonist, Pocho,” Lalo Alcaraz, February 2, 2020.

¹⁸⁷ “Asaro-Asamblea De Artistas Revolucionarios De Oaxaca (the Assembly of Revolutionary Artists of Oaxaca) Prints on Display in New Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art Exhibition,” ASARO-Asamblea de Artistas Revolucionarios de Oaxaca (The Assembly of Revolutionary Artists of Oaxaca) (The Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, 2014).

comment on societal events. Although Posada's *La Calavera Catrina* has been credited as one of his “famous” works, many of his illustrations commented and satirized political figures in the Mexican government at the time. The work of the ASARO shares a message of representation and reform in a format that builds from Posada’s creations. The works allow the artists to express their opinions openly, just like Alcaraz, on pressing issues in the country. It should be noted that the topic of ASARO’s works may not be child appropriate and serve no purpose within *Coco*, however the evolving artworks of Mexican artists should be seen and considered in a similar respect to Alcaraz’s works to help portray cultures within Disney films.

The works of Mexican artists should be considered, in addition to Mexican American artists who are a prominent voice within the United States. Katrina Puente is a Mexican American artist based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania who is heavily influenced by her life growing up on the coast of California. The artist is best known for her papel picado works that are produced for several occasions outside of the traditional venue of Día de los Muertos celebrations (**Figure 63**). Puente describes the inspiration for her artwork on her website: “Growing up on the central coast of California, my paintings, drawings, and modern Papel Picado installations reflect La Sirena and the Mexican cultural heritage of the Santa Ynez Valley where I grew up.”¹⁸⁸ She also adds, “One hundred years ago, people brought her clothes to mend; she sewed designs for Indigenous communities, toggled the border between Mexico and Texas and hand-delivered her work to clients. Working from home, heart, and by hand is my way of honoring the practice of focusing as far as the ancestors can see.”¹⁸⁹ The papel picado works are commonly associated with Mexican folk art and are made from an ephemeral material, like tissue paper. The process to create the works varies from artists, as seen in Puente’s works

¹⁸⁸ Karina Puente, “Karina Puente Arts Studio,” Karina Puente Arts Studio, 2020.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

that are described as using a different type of material to make the works more durable: “These hand cut pieces are made from a sturdy, fibrous paper blend that has the drape of fabric and the wonderful translucency of the tissue paper used in traditional papel picado.”¹⁹⁰ The pieces vary in size and with Puente’s works the artwork is customized for special events like weddings. The practice of creating works for both museums and other personal venues allows the traditional art to expand beyond the confines of Day of the Dead celebrations. Puente’s works are her, “.... favorite way to honor legacy,” and bring the works of art into everyday life. The traditional artform is also demonstrated in other artist’s works, like Catalina Delgado-Trunk.

Delago-Trunk’s works predate Puente’s creations and demonstrate a similar process to create intricate designs with ephemeral materials. Catalina Delgado-Trunk is a native of Mexico who immigrated to the United States where she learned how to draw in community college.¹⁹¹ Her works are based upon themes related to traditional Mexican and Meso-American subjects such as religious symbols like the *Mariposas Guadalupe*s and references to Mexica mythology, as seen in the depiction of *Cóyotl Ináhuatl* (**Figures 64 & 65**).¹⁹² The works intricately help narrate stories from Mexico’s history and mythological events, similar to the beginning credits of *Coco* where the Rivera family history is explained. The work of Delago-Trunk was also featured within the exhibition displayed within the Mexico Pavilion at Walt Disney World.

The art historical trends of appropriating a culture through visual means continues to plague representations as seen through Walt Disney animated films, however the images are being challenged by modern artists. The works of all the modern artists discussed throughout the cultures, Native American and Mexican, assert their voices into the narrative of American

¹⁹⁰ Karina Puente, “Karina Puente Arts Studio,” Karina Puente Arts Studio, 2020.

¹⁹¹ “Papel-Picado - Museum of Florida History,” Museum of Florida History (Florida Department of State, 2021).

¹⁹² “Calaca Arts,” Papel picado / cut paper by Catalina Delgado Trunk - Calaca Arts - Fine Art portfolio, accessed October 24, 2021.

history that had suppressed marginalized groups. The new artworks allow for the narrative to be encompassing and more complete, however the trends have yet to be entirely changed. The Walt Disney Company and many major companies within the United States are setting the course for the future of the country and need to make strides to become more inclusive. The Walt Disney Company is setting the course for the art historical world, as animation is reaching global audiences in ways that expand beyond museum settings. The company needs to progress with their initiatives, like the Stories Matter Movement, to help educate and stop contributing to the cultural appropriation seen throughout art history.

IT'S COMING TO TRADEMARK YOUR CULTURA!

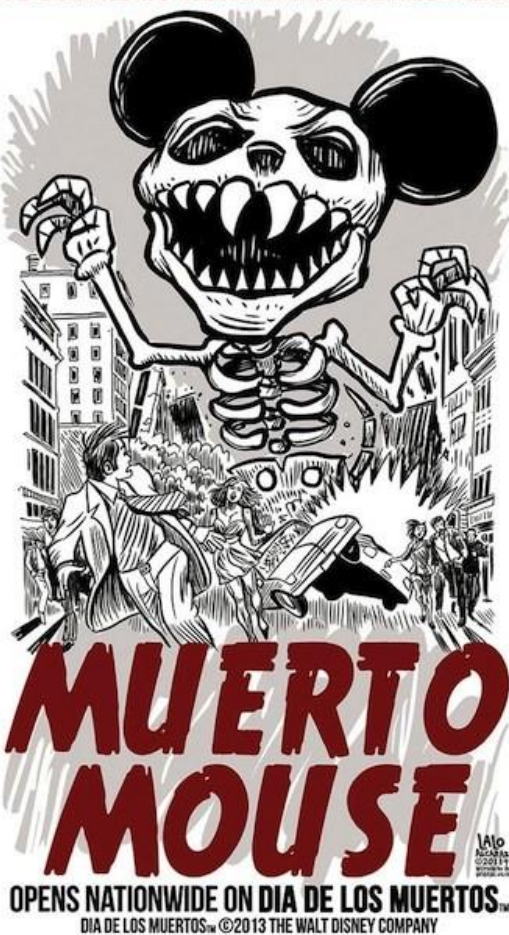


Figure 60: Lalo Alcaraz, *Muerto Mouse*, 2013, glossy print, 12 x 18in, Lalo Alcaraz Art Shop.

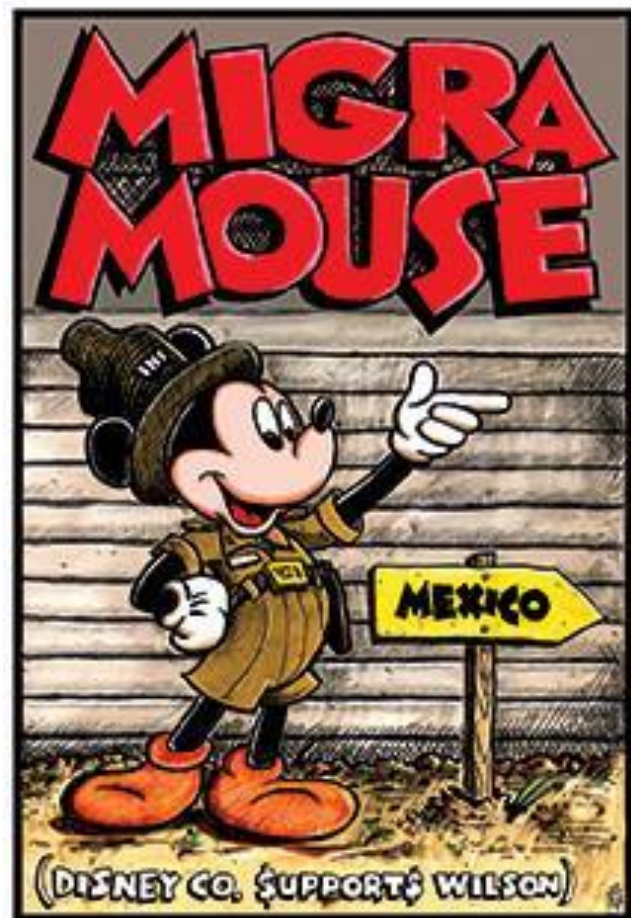


Figure 61: Lalo Alcaraz, *Migra Mouse*, 1994, glossy print, 12 x 18in, Lalo Alcaraz Art Shop.



Figure 62: ASARO, *Calaveras with Helicopter*, 2006, ink on paper, 27 ¼ x 39 ½ in, Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, Voices and Choices Center, Kutztown, PA.



Figure 63: Katrina Puente, *"Look Up! Look In,"* 2019, Kimmel Center, Philadelphia, PA.



Figure 64: Catalina Delgado-Trunk, *Mariposas Guadalupe*, unknown, hand cut paper over paper collage.

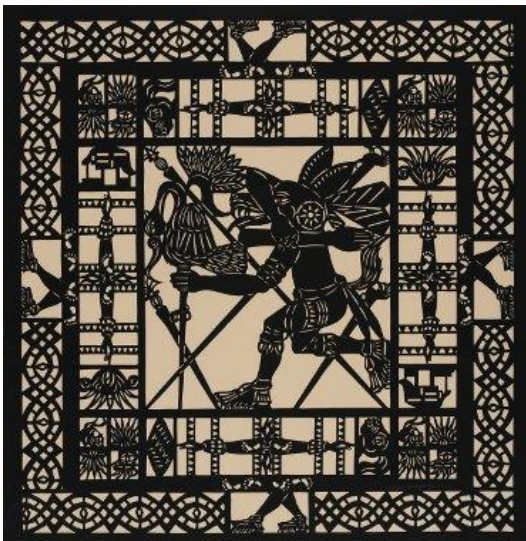


Figure 65: Catalina Delgado-Trunk, *Cóyotl Ináhuatl*, unknown, hand cut paper over paper, 31 x 36in.

Conclusion-Solutions

Cultural appropriation is a large systemic problem that is not easily resolved through the course of one paper, however solutions can be proposed to the Walt Disney Company to expand their Stories Matter movement and provide an educational moment on the Disney+ platform. The acts of appropriation are being confronted through the advisory present on several “Disney classics,” but more can be done. The voices of those represented in the films should be represented beyond the advisory council and expressed on the Disney+ platform in a similar fashion to the Native Perspective exhibition seen at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Walt Disney Company should provide a place on the movie’s that contain cultural representations for “Additional Information” where documentaries, artworks, and interviews from the cultures represented can be viewed. The works of modern artists should be considered as the works help break away from the appropriated trends displayed throughout art history.

The streaming service provides a place to provide educational resources about Native American and Mexican culture to audiences that want to learn about the cultures. The films, *Peter Pan*, *Pocahontas*, *The Three Caballeros*, and *Coco*, are created for the enjoyment of children and function as the gateway for children to learn about Mexican and Native American cultures. The “Additional Information” would provide resources from the communities represented in the film and help expand on the purpose of the advisories present on the films. The resources would follow the guidelines for children and adult profiles on the streaming services, so only appropriate material could be accessed on children accounts. The material could include a variety of information that would build upon the features seen in the films such as documentaries and interviews from artists. The company has experience with creating material to supplement a film as seen with the recent *Into the Unknown: Making Frozen II* and has acquired

National Geographic, which could be beneficial when creating educational resources about the cultures.

The creation of a section on Disney+ would allow the voices of the people represented in the film to express their ideas and help educate the public in a time when cultural competence is a large topic of conversation. The section would be formatted like the other sections seen on the streaming service where the company could be transparent about the process to create the film and allow for a platform for indigenous artists to speak (**Figure 66**). Artists like Kent Monkman, Wendy Red Star, Lalo Alcaraz, and Katrina Puente could showcase their artwork by relating the material back to what is seen in the Disney films representing their cultures and expand on the information provided in the cartoon. The advisory council that has been established to administer the advisory for films could be utilized in the project to help select the appropriate material to help provide non-culturally appropriated resources to the public.

The necessity to expand beyond the advisory is required as the animation studios are shifting from making content based on films, like *Pocahontas* and *The Three Caballeros*, to films inspired by different cultures. The move from “based” to “inspire” holds the same issue of culturally appropriating material, as seen with the *Frozen* films produced by the Walt Disney Company in 2013 and 2019. The film was “inspired” by Scandinavian culture, specifically the Sami people who reside in present day Finland, Norway, Sweden, and parts of Russia. The first *Frozen* film garnered a large debate on social media that was prompted by the opening song “Vuelie” in the film that was written by a Southern Sami composer, Frode Fjellheim.¹⁹³ The song draws upon an ancient practice known as joik, that was forbidden when Nordic Indigenous

¹⁹³ Radheyan Simonpillai, “Disney Signed a Contract with Indigenous People before Making *Frozen II*,” NOW Magazine, November 19, 2019.

communities were Christianized.¹⁹⁴ The selective nature of inspiration for the film prompted the Sami to contact the Walt Disney Company to collaborate on *Frozen II*. The agreement is explained by Radheyen Simonpillai in a *Now Magazine* article, “To make sure cultural erasure didn’t happen in *Frozen II*, Sámi leaders entered into a contract with Disney that affirms ownership of their culture. This time, filmmakers Jennifer Lee, Chris Buck and producer Peter Del Vecho sought out expert advice on how to respectfully portray Indigenous culture, which is heavily and intricately featured in the film and its reconciliation plot.”¹⁹⁵ The collaboration was cemented in a “hand-written document” that outlined the actions needed for the Sami to retain their culture while allowing the public to learn about their traditions. The input and changes can be seen in the film through the Sami inspired Northundral people in addition to the “Vuelie” being sung by the Sami inspired characters. An agreement of the contract also allowed for *Frozen II* to be dubbed into a Sami language, like the projects to dub *Moana* into Māori, Tahitian, and a couple Hawaiian dialects.¹⁹⁶ The *Frozen* films were not meant to be based upon a culture, however being “inspired” by cultures still prompts the question of culturally appropriated material.

The impact of Disney on young children’s lives is substantial and the momentous moment of including animation into art history, museums, and scholarly material would allow art history to remain relevant in societal discussions. If Disney were present in museums alongside the artworks of Kent Monkman or Lalo Alcaraz, the two could work in dialogue with one another and bridge the gap between young people and the larger art institutions. The invitation to walk into a museum has long been extended to art scholars and while it may be unintentional or

¹⁹⁴ Radheyen Simonpillai, “Disney Signed a Contract with Indigenous People before Making *Frozen II*,” *NOW Magazine*, November 19, 2019.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ “Walt Disney Animation Studios’ ‘Moana’ to Be First Film Ever Translated into the Tahitian Language,” *The Walt Disney Company*, October 25, 2016.

intentional, art institutions feel like mausoleums to the past's largely white-male demographic. Hence, the issues with cultural appropriation, but the Disney content faces similar issues. The two have more similarities than differences yet remain divided between acceptable institutional artworks and mass-media works.

The Walt Disney Company needs to do better. Disney has the power to transform the artworld and instill a new kind of magic in the lives of thousands of children. Museums hold the same magic, but there is a disconnect between traditional institutions and groups outside of their target adult demographic. Disney is the key to introducing children to the magic that is within traditional artforms housed within museums, like painting, music, and sculpture. The power of art, animation and traditional, is not measurable and truly fulfills the hackneyed phrase of being a universal language. If united, the content seen in museums and the animations produced by the Walt Disney Company would connect children young and old to engage in the issues that plague our society. The visualization of issues in museum collections and Disney films is the idyllic place to open discussion about topics like inclusive representations because it creates a space where the next generations of future art historians can engage in the conversations. The two institutions, museums and Disney, share a common goal to educate and inspire the next generation. To do this society needs to listen to marginalized groups and continue discussions of inclusivity; museums need to broaden their art canon's and accept the modern forms of art, like animation, and the Walt Disney Company needs to acknowledge their mistakes and live up to their promise to provide inclusive magic for the children they inspire. The Walt Disney Company needs to change; they need to do better.

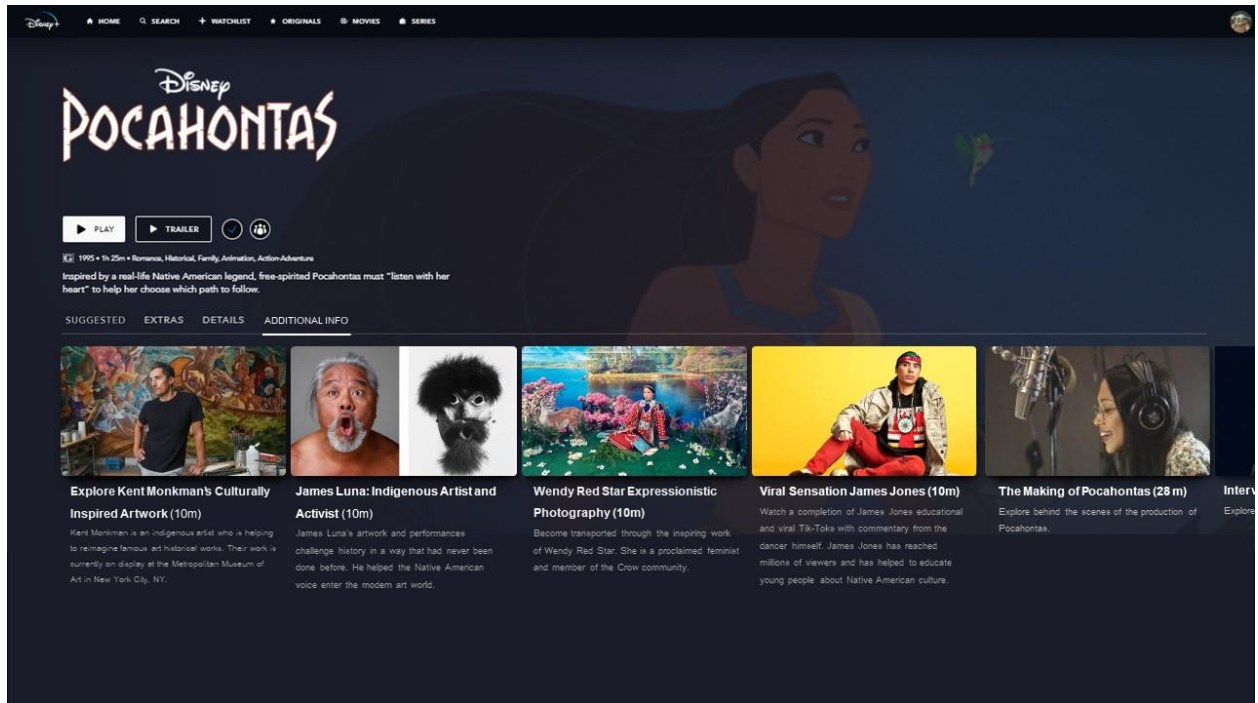


Figure 66: Disney + Mock-Up, Additional Information Section.

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