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### Disney's Racism and the Cycle of Oppression

Disney, a media company known for their cartoons, films, and other media, has been known for publishing material that could pass as racist. This begs the question: what is racism? Racism is a form of oppression. Oppression, according to Rita Hardiman, Bailey Jackson, and Pat Griffin, is a system that gives all the social power to members of privileged groups, who can be described as agents, and disadvantages marginalized groups, also known as targets (26-27). In the system of oppression known as racism, the privileged group is white people while the disadvantaged group is people of color (29). Given this context, racism can be defined as the system of oppression that privileges and overvalues white people, and disadvantages and undervalues people of color. The films *Song of the South*, *Mulan*, and *Pocahontas* contain racist ideologies that misrepresent history of race relations in the United States, draw on stereotypes of the groups that they are about, and misrepresent the cultures of people of color they are portraying, perpetuating the cycle of oppression that keeps white people in power and people of color a target group.

Perhaps one of Disney's most infamous films is *Song of the South*. *Song of the South*, a live-action and animation hybrid released 1946, has been pulled from store shelves by Disney in the United States as there is a myriad of controversy surrounding it regarding racism. *Song of the South* perpetuates racist ideologies through its skewed interpretation of history surrounding

antebellum slavery and Victorian post slave life in the nineteenth century. Disney's *Song of the South* romanticizes slavery in a way that makes it seem like it is a cake walk. Upon entering the protagonist's grandmother's plantation in Georgia, somewhere near Atlanta and Savannah, viewers are greeted with slaves who are clean—slaves who have decent clothing and are not wearing rags. The slaves on the plantation are happy too as they sing a song while they do their work. There are no signs of abuse from the slave owner on this plantation. This contradicts what many slaves had to say about their experiences and relationships with their masters on the plantation. According to William Wells Brown, white slave owners who were often regarded highly in the community would often beat their slaves. To put it in his own words:

I saw Mr. Page pursuing a slave around the yard, with a long whip, cutting him at every jump. The man soon escaped from the yard and was followed by Mr. Page... The same gentleman, but a short time previous, tied up a woman of his, by the name of Delphia, and whipped her nearly to death; yet he was a deacon in the [b]apist church, in good regular standing. (*Mickey Mouse Monopoly*)

Violence was a common form that racism took in the nineteenth century. Masters would beat their slaves, sexually assault them, and take advantage of them. This is not how slave life is presented in *Song of the South*.

Douglas Brode, author of *Multiculturalism and the Mouse*, argues that Walt Disney was actually being progressive when he produced *Song of the South* as it was his vision of what race relations in the United States should have and should look like (59). There are two problems with this idea. First of all, *Song of the South* is set in a historical setting, but the context is ahistorical. This leads viewers especially those who are young or are not familiar with United States history

to believe that slavery was easy for black people when in reality, slavery and the Jim Crow-era decades afterward were brutal and gory. The second problem with Brode's reasoning is that if Disney wants race relations to be like those seen in *Song of the South*, then Disney wants black people to be compliant with whites; in other words, he wants white people to remain in power. Throughout the film, the slaves in *Song of the South* are treated with respect but are happily subordinate to their white owners. This shows a clear racial dynamic between black and white people; whites have all the power while black people should remain subordinate. This is a message in the film that viewers will internalize.

*Pocahontas* reiterates *Song of the South* does because it misrepresents the history of race relations in the United States. This is seen in the musical number featured in the film, "Savages." "Savages" implies that both parties, the Native Americans, and the whites, do not understand each other. The white colonists think the Native Americans are savages and vice versa. At the end of the film, the white settlers end up leaving North America to go back to where they came from. This is a very skewed view of history that puts both parties at fault even though whites were the invaders, steal land and resources, and commit genocide against the Native Americans. Henry Giroux agrees with this point, saying:

What you often find in Disney texts, is not only a rewriting of history in ways that eliminate some of its most controversial political moments and free it of particular conflicts... or in many ways make it appear as if certain social events have nothing to do with power... *Pocahontas*, which is really about colonialism, it's about Native Americans being killed in terms that can be adequately described as genocide. That isn't what is shown in Disney films. (*Mickey Mouse Monopoly*)

When Disney rewrites and skews history in this way, white people are given power as it says they are not at fault. This powerful ideology is responsible for colonialism taking place to this day.

Annalee Ward, author of *Mouse Morality: The Rhetoric of Disney Animated Film*, claims that the film *Pocahontas* contains an antiracist moral code claiming “racism is wrong; stereotyping in general is wrong” (55). Ward’s point that Disney is implying that racism is immoral is contradicted as the film *Pocahontas* draws on and perpetuates the specific Native American stereotype that Native Americans are spiritual people and connected with nature. In fact, Ward contradicts herself by bringing this aspect of the film to light as a high point while remaining oblivious to the fact by saying that “[a]s a group, the [Native American] nation lives in harmony with nature” (42). A film cannot imply an antiracist moral code if the film itself draws on stereotypes, which are forms of racist ideologies.

The film *Mulan* contains an ideology that also perpetuates the cycle of oppression, too. It draws on Chinese culture and history, but it fails to do this as it pulls from other Asian cultures and the legend of Hua Mulan has been manipulated into a Disney story, or “Disneyfied.” According to Chyng Feng Sun, one of the filmmakers of the *Mickey Mouse Monopoly*, Disney has made significant improvements in representing *Mulan* and the Asian people compared to the Siamese cats in one of the only other Disney film that contains Asian characters, *Lady and the Tramp*. However, Sun goes on to explain that these improvements are only on a superficial level, saying:

If we compared the Siamese cats with Mulan, I must say that Disney has made very significant improvement in the visual portrayal of Chinese. However, in

order to create this model feminist figure, China is portrayed as probably the most sexist and oppressive society in all Disney's children's films. (Sun)

For example, the matchmaking scene where Mulan goes to see a matchmaker so she can be paired up with a potential husband for her parents. Sun points out that China did not have a matchmaking process like this. It is fiction made up by Disney to serve the plot of the film. The message is that Asians, particularly Chinese people are misogynistic—more so than whites. It is an ideology that viewers of *Mulan* will internalize. This is not the only mistake that *Mulan* makes either. In the same matchmaking scene, Mulan is dressed up as a geisha. Geishas are a Japanese tradition, not a Chinese one. However, the average viewer of *Mulan* may not necessarily know that geishas are a Japanese tradition, or even care. This perpetuates the stereotype that all Asians are the same; that there is no difference between Asian cultures of different regions and countries, which is another racist ideology.

*Mickey Mouse Monopoly* proves this point as the children interviewed believe the misrepresentations that are presented. For example, a young boy named Alexander is interviewed who takes the film *Pocahontas* as literal truth: “I liked *Pocahontas* kind of because the person who made the movie made a real story about Pocahontas. *Pocahontas* is true, and Pocahontas was real, and John Smith was real, and the Plymouth were real [sic], and the [Native Americans] were real” (Sun). The two nine-year-old girls who are interviewed, Abigail and Melina elaborated on Alexander's comment. Melina adds when Pocahontas saves the day by risking her life to keep John Smith from being killed in the war, both parties realized their mistake in misunderstanding each other and became friends at the end. Abigail thinks that the pilgrims return to Europe as they realize stealing land and resources from the Native Americans is wrong.

The children prove that the ideologies contained in the film *Pocahontas*, whether they were intentional on Disney's part or not, made their way into their minds. The children who will grow up believing these false notions of history that they learned, they will talk about it with their friends, thus spreading the ideologies around to more individuals. If the children believe the rewriting of history in *Pocahontas*, then there is no reason for them to not take in the stereotypes about Asians in *Mulan*, or the misrepresentation of plantation slave life if *Song of the South* is ever re-released. The ideologies that have been pointed out in the film are oppressive, and the system that is seen here is called the cycle of oppression.

The cycle of oppression can be split into three separate parts: the institutional level, the ideological level, and the individual level. Institutions bombard people with ideologies, which take on the form of widespread and sanctioned beliefs, values, and stereotypes. When people are bombarded with ideologies, they learn to accept them as truth--they internalize the ideologies. The people go back to the institution they work at and then spread the ideologies that they learned through the power of institution, which makes the cycle start all over again (Hardiman et al. 27-28). In the case of the films *Song of the South*, *Mulan*, and *Pocahontas* perpetuating this cycle, the institution of media, Disney to be specific, published these films which contain racist ideologies. The racist ideologies in these say that race relations between white people and people of color have been positive throughout history in the United States. They say that all Asian cultures are the same, they romanticize history, and they perpetuate harmful stereotypes about Native Americans. The ideologies are then passed on the viewers who watch these films. The viewers, who make up the individual aspect of the cycle of oppression internalized the ideologies inside the content of the films. In turn, the viewers, or individuals who make up the institutions

have internalized the ideologies, go back the institutions that serve as a gathering place for these ideologies. In the institutions, individuals conspire with people who have internalized similar messages found in the Disney films, if not the same ones, and the institution perpetuates the cycle once again.

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