



Performance and the Disney Theme Park Experience

The Tourist as Actor

Edited by
Jennifer A. Kokai · Tom Robson

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Performance and the Disney Theme Park Experience

“Building on an extensive body of transdisciplinary Disney scholarship, this collection brings a fresh critical perspective to the complex interactions between experiential commodities and the individuals who make meaning of them. With their focus on theme parks as performance spaces, these essays evidence Disney’s profound significance for theatre and performance studies.”

—Julie C. Garlen, *Associate Professor and Co-Director, Institute of Interdisciplinary Studies, Carleton University, Canada, Co-Editor of Disney, Culture, and Curriculum*

“This is a timely and fascinating compilation of essays on the performances of tourists and the worlds they help construct, perpetuate and dream into being in the many kingdoms of Disney. The diverse range of perspectives within contain a charm that both criticises and celebrates the performances of tourist actors and the realms they frequent: a most valuable contribution to Theatre and Performance Studies scholarship.”

—Caroline Heim, *Senior Lecturer in Drama, Queensland University of Technology, Australia, Author of Audience as Performer: The Changing Role of Theatre Audiences in the Twenty-First Century*

“The thirteen essays in this excellent collection offer a range of critical perspectives on Disney theme parks. Taking readers on a virtual tour of familiar attractions, from Tomorrowland and Frontierland to Splash Mountain and the Hall of Presidents, the authors present deep analyses of the scenography, costumes, choreography, dramatic tropes, and other performance elements that shape the tourist experience. An invigorating read!”

—Marlis Schweitzer, *Associate Professor, Department of Theatre and Performance Studies, York University, Canada*

“*Performance and the Disney Theme Park Experience: The Tourist as Actor* contributes to an burgeoning scholarly literature that examines the problems and potentials of ‘immersive industry’. Jennifer Kokai and Tom Robson draw together a rich combination of essays that provoke necessary debate in this area. In doing so they offer a collection that opens up arguments around the commercial, cultural and political impact of interactive Disney events for a contemporary audience. Combining theory and practice from the fields of business, culture, economics,

identity politics, performance, theatre and tourism, the scope of this book is broad in its appeal. There are chapters that examine the sinister hegemonic undertow that flows beneath Disney theme parks, as captured by Banksy, and equally those that highlight the pleasures and possibilities of these environments and the impact they might have not only on imagining but instating an inclusive world. By placing the tourist as actor at the centre of the analysis, this edited collection addresses issues of agency and repeatedly returns to the intersections of Disney worlds with immersive theatres. It offers clear illustration of the value of theme parks to the creative industries (not to mention the immersive economy) in providing access to artistic events for a vast and enthusiastic audience. Anyone with an interest in how immersive practices are at work in popular contexts—and how this wide-ranging form remains at the forefront of critical enquiry as much as creative practice—will benefit from reading this book.”

—Josephine Machon, *Associate Professor in Contemporary Performance*
Middlesex University, London, UK

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Editors

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*Oliver Kokai-Means
and
Annette & George Robson*

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PART I

Introduction



You're in the Parade! Disney as Immersive Theatre and the Tourist as Actor

Jennifer A. Kokai and Tom Robson

“STAND BACK, YOU FOOLS!”

At 3 pm on the afternoon of May 11, 2018, the Festival of Fantasy Parade proceeded down its usual route through Walt Disney World's Magic Kingdom.¹ Beginning in Frontierland, winding through Liberty Square, around Cinderella's Castle, and eventually down Main Street, USA, this parade has been a highlight of tourist afternoons since it debuted in 2014. Featuring Disney characters from dozens of stories and hundreds of performers, it is a boisterous and colorful street performance that entertains

¹ The title of this chapter is taken from the lyrics of the song “The Best Time of Your Life,” which replaced the original “It's a Great Big Beautiful Tomorrow” from 1974–1994. Sherman, Richard M. and Robert B. Sherman. *The Best Time of Your Life*, n.d. For more information on this alternative song and its purpose, see Li Cornfeld's chapter “Dream Away: Disney's Robot Dramas Revisited” in this anthology.

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children and adults alike. Among the high points of the Festival of Fantasy is the “battle” between Prince Phillip, of *Sleeping Beauty* fame, and the evil sorceress Maleficent, who has transformed into a fire-breathing dragon. The dragon, a Steampunk-inspired mechanical float driven by an operator, has an articulated neck and head that can swing, raise, and lower, and at various points through the parade a hot blast of fire escapes from its mouth.

On May 11, however, the parade took a different turn. While moving through Liberty Square, directly in front of the recently reopened Hall of Presidents, the Maleficent dragon float caught fire. Rather than spewing fire from its mouth, the dragon’s entire head caught aflame and burned into the sky.² Word of the fire spread quickly, with social media making sure that anyone with an interest in Disney parks knew of the accident. Disney fan sites aggregated these posts, and mainstream media picked up the story, with coverage ranging from the *Orlando Sentinel* to *Entertainment Weekly*. While the news accounts repeated the same scant information about the fire—which caused no injuries—the videos of Maleficent doing her best Lumiere impression are the most interesting.

One of the most widely distributed videos of the fire, from Instagram user Holly Roberge, shows a Disney employee spraying the burning head with a fire extinguisher, trying to douse the flames. Naturally this image of the fire being extinguished drew the most attention, but closer examination of the video reveals the equally fascinating behavior of the Disney park guests watching the event unfold. Examining the guests visible in Roberge’s video you can see that no one moves away from the fire. One guest in the foreground lifts his camera to take footage of the fire, as of course did Roberge to take the video that caught him doing so. Others opposite Roberge’s camera simply stare at the fire, with one woman seeming to smile at the potentially dangerous accident.³ Other perspectives on the fire reveal similar audience behavior. YouTube user Darkaxian shows a slightly later moment in the fire, and you can see that guests have been moved away from the head of the dragon. As the camera pans from the dragon’s head, where no onlookers stand, and down toward the tail it

² Porter, Stephen. 2018. “Fire-Breathing Maleficent Dragon Float Catches Fire in the Magic Kingdom,” *The DIS*, May 11, <http://www.wdwinfo.com/walt-disney-world/fire-breathing-maleficent-dragon-float-catches-fire-in-the-magic-kingdom/>. Accessed June 18, 2018.

³ Roberge, Holly. @hollyer. 2018. “#festival of fantasy,” Instagram, May 11, Accessed 2019 April 21. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BiprP9jdjR/?taken-by=hollyer>. Accessed April 21, 2019.

reveals a large crowd of gawkers, with most of them taking photos or videos with their phones.⁴

The longest video of the fire and its immediate aftermath appears on the Facebook page of Taylor Standridge, seemingly taken from the area of Liberty Square designated for wheelchair viewing of the parade. Standridge's video shows once again that most guests chose to watch the fire as opposed to fleeing it. A few guests, particularly those with very small children, move away. A few moments later a second woman, pushing a stroller, begins to move away from the parade route. However, she quickly stops, positions the stroller on the "safe" side of her body, and immediately turns back around to stare at the fire. Midway through the video Standridge pans to her left, past the dragon's tail, to show that the parade performers are continuing to clap and dance along with the music, even though the float in front of them has stopped. In what must have been a difficult moment for these performers, few tourists choose to engage with them; they are transfixed by the fire. Once the visible flames seem to have been extinguished, a group of cast members, wearing a somewhat motley collection of uniforms/costumes, begin shooing guests away from the area, though many guests do not cooperate. One woman in an electronic convenience vehicle simply stops in the middle of the sidewalk so she can continue to watch, and another woman remains standing on the same stone ledge she had been on for the duration of the video, never moving her focus from the dragon's head.⁵ Though it was unplanned, undesired, and frankly unsafe, the burning Maleficent is unquestionably dramatic and surely the highlight of those present's vacation.

WHAT'S REAL AT DISNEY AND WHAT'S REALLY AT STAKE

Just as this moment shows a struggle over control—park employees attempted to contain the burning float and the unruly guests, and the guests resisted to see the spectacle—scholar Thibault Clément sees Disney scholarship as a whole as fundamentally an argument about the "locus of control" between Disney and its guests; how much power does each

⁴ Darkaxian. 2018. "WDW Dragon Catches on Fire [Original Upload]." https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=32&v=9JU65og_TGY. Accessed April 21, 2019.

⁵ Standridge, Taylor. Facebook Page. <https://www.facebook.com/sk3letal>. Accessed June 18, 2018.

participant have in constructing reception, agency, and control?⁶ As demonstrated by spectators willing to brave a truly flaming dragon, Disney guests have more agency than Disney cares for and many scholars allot. Disney parks are multivalent, open to many different interpretations and ways of analysis; the scholarship on them is prolific and diverse in its approaches and perspectives. The scholarship is so extensive and varied, in fact, that numerous meta-analyses such as Clément's exist of the scholarship itself. The two extreme poles are scholars who see Disney purely as a force for cultural ill—using the term “Disneyfication” or “Disneyization” to highlight what these scholars view as the negative qualities of Disney. They see a virus created by Disney that has infected culture generally, with artificiality, consumerism, and lack of depth as its manifestations.⁷ Other scholars, especially those granted access to the Parks and Disney archive, and those allowed use of photography taken in the parks, uphold Disney for its cultural achievements and virtuosity in creating themed environments while presenting dubious arguments excusing overt racism and heteronormativity.⁸ Disney scholars have felt the need to clarify that they are not Disney fans, or embarrassedly admit that they are.⁹ Increasingly, scholars try to occupy perspectives within that continuum, recognizing that Disney, like every element of culture, contains both pleasurable and problematic elements.

By virtue of their status and their relatively early writings on Disney, much scholarship is dominated by a specific European strand of scholarship that interprets Disney parks using semiotics, interpreting the signs presented by Disney and analyzing what meaning they contain. Highly critical of Disney, prestigious scholars such as Umberto Eco,¹⁰ Jean

⁶ Clément, Thibaut. 2012. “‘Locus of Control’: A Selective Review of Disney Theme Parks.” In *Media: The French Journal of Media Studies* 2.

⁷ See Wasko, Janet. 2001. *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy*. 1st edition. Cambridge, UK : Malden, MA: Polity. Bryman, Alan. 2004. *The Disneyization of Society*. SAGE.

⁸ For example, see Brode, Douglas' works including, 2009. *Multiculturalism and the Mouse: Race and Sex in Disney Entertainment*. University of Texas Press. And 2014. *From Walt to Woodstock: How Disney Created the Counterculture*. University of Texas Press.

⁹ See the introduction to Knight, Cher Krause. 2014. *Power and Paradise in Walt Disney's World*. Florida: University Press of Florida, where she confesses to liking the parks and being known at conferences as “the Disney Girl.”

¹⁰ Eco, Umberto. 1987. *Travels in Hyperreality*, London: Picador/Pan Books.

Baudrillard,¹¹ and Frederic Jameson¹² all examined Disney through post-modern lenses to comment on Disney's existence as a sign with no referent, a hyperreal space that encourages mindless consumerism. In 1986, Eco famously characterized Disney as, "An allegory of consumer society, a place of absolute iconism ... it is also a place of total passivity. Its visitors must agree to behave like its robots."¹³ Clément sees *Vinyl Leaves*, by Steven Fjellman, arguably the most influential and complete work of analysis on Disney parks, as the American inheritor of these traditions.¹⁴ David Allen concludes that this strand of scholarship is ultimately rooted in a suspicion of middle brow culture that encourages the scholar to see tourists, and particularly American tourists, as "gullible grown-up children."¹⁵ What is missing in these analyses, he argues, is attention to reception and the guests' perception of their experience.

Allen counters that the focus on authenticity and whether the guests are "fooled" or not misses the point.¹⁶ Disney is not attempting to recreate actual structures or to simulate authentic experiences. Instead, Disney is using ideas and references and creating something altogether new. It is not a poor copy of reality, because there is no attempt to recreate reality. Allen uses quotes from tourists to demonstrate that guests are not fooled. Rather, part of the enjoyment of Disney is recognizing the skill of the Imagineers and reveling in the incongruity of the environments Disney creates. Or, occasionally, as in the case of Maleficent, how these skills fail. While Eco, Baudrillard, and Jameson see the guest as a passive recipient of commercialized falseness, Allen and others see Disney as essentially constructing enormous immersive theatre spaces where guests perform as actors. They know it is false and enjoy it all the more for that reason.

¹¹ Baudrillard, Jean. 1983. "Precession of simulacra", in *Simulations*, 1–79. Translated by Paul Foss, Paul Patton & Philip Beitchman, New York: Semiotext[e].

¹² Stephanson, Anders. 1987 "Regarding Postmodernism. A Conversation with Fredric Jameson." *Social Text*, no. 17, 29–54. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466477>.

¹³ Eco, 48.

¹⁴ Clément, Thibaut. 2012. "'Locus of Control': A Selective Review of Disney Theme Parks." *InMedia. The French Journal of Media Studies*, no. 2, November 15. <http://journals.openedition.org/inmedia/463>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Allen, David. 2012. "Seeing Double: Disney's Wilderness Lodge." *European Journal of American Culture* 31, no. 2, 123–144. https://doi.org/10.1386/ejac.31.2.123_1.

Frequently scholars, like Cher Krause Knight, will claim that “adults are still expected to surrender to Disney’s magic with childlike wonder.”¹⁷ While this claim is oft stated, it ignores the possibilities Disney offers for an array of guest engagement strategies and presumes that children are a universal group who experience the parks in the same way. Knight’s words make us ask how best to define “childlike wonder.” Why does childhood connote simplicity? Children often see more narrative possibilities in everyday encounters than adults do. How many parents have seen their children more engaged by the box a toy came in than the toy itself? Children often adapt their play objects to different narrative situations that stand in contrast to the intended reading of the toy manufacturer. Rather than assuming that Knight’s “childlike wonder” suggests only narrow reading opportunities for the Disney parks, we can interpret it to mean an even more expansive array of options.

While these studies take up epistemological Disney issues (i.e., how we know what we know about Disney and how our beliefs and opinions about the parks are shaped), other strands of scholarship have focused on Disney’s representations of gender, race, history, or nations across Disney’s media platforms. With the presumption that many children will choose to play with what’s inside the box, these scholars have examined what messages Disney properties convey with equally disparate conclusions. The Disney Princesses, for example, a marketing conglomeration of the heroines from various animated features, have drawn much criticism for their extreme femininity, impossible body shapes, and overwhelming whiteness. Recent years have produced films, *Pocahontas*, *The Princess and the Frog*, and *Moana* (with their lead characters available for meet and greets in the parks), that are an attempt from Disney to correct these absences. However, intersectional analysis proves the difficulty corporations have with navigating these topics. Megan Condis, for example, compares the qualities ascribed to white Disney Princesses and those of the more recent non-White (*Pocahontas*, *Tiana*, *Moana*) ones and concludes:

The princesses proved they were exemplary (human) women by demonstrating their benevolent superiority over their animal subjects. However, when the role of the Disney Princess expanded to include women of color, the line between the animal and the human seemingly grew a bit fuzzier.

¹⁷Knight, Cher Krause. 2016. *Power and Paradise in Walt Disney’s World*, 71. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida.

Rather than contrasting sharply against their fellow animals, princesses of color were often depicted as being of equal stature with their animal friends or even as having beast-like traits themselves.¹⁸

The introduction of Disney Princesses of color provided non-white young girls a character to identify with and encouraged society to expand their expectations of what a princess looks like. These representations have been incredibly important to girls and women of color.¹⁹ At the same time, these attempts carry with them implicit ideologies that non-white characters are more bestial or less industrialized.

Disney's representations of other nations and cultures have equally provoked complicated considerations of what authenticity, nation, and culture mean. Epcot's World Showcase, for example, is a collage of world landmarks representing countries who had the capital to participate sandwiched in next to each other with no regard to geography. Guests (moving clockwise) travel from Mexico to Norway to Japan in rapid succession. As mentioned previously, scholars like Eco find the World Showcase a poor simulation of authentic world locations. Responding to this, Hernan Tesler-Mabé points out the artificiality of nationalities and the dangerous populism of European countries. While illustrating how Disney compresses culture and is inherently inauthentic, he also asks that Europeans "might also reflect upon how such representations affect how Europeans view themselves and their patrimony, as well as how European self-understandings may be contingent upon the perspective (or imagined perspective) of the other."²⁰ While Disney's representations carry problematic capitalistic and paternalistic issues, the negative cultural reaction to these representations promotes avenues to positive cultural introspection. Overly deterministic readings of Disney attractions preclude the complicated ways that guests interact with them, the recognition of simultaneous embrace and rejection, and the idea that the guests are often fully aware of the negotiations they are making to do this.

¹⁸ Condis, Megan. 2015. "She Was a Beautiful Girl and All of the Animals Loved Her: Race, the Disney Princesses, and Their Animal Friends." *Gender Forum*, no. 55.

¹⁹ Hare, Breeanna. 2009. "Parents: Disney's 'Princess' Is a Hop toward Progress—CNN. Com." *CNN*, December 11. <http://www.cnn.com/2009/SHOWBIZ/Movies/12/11/princess.frog.parents/index.html>. Accessed July 23, 2018.

²⁰ Tesler-Mabé, Hernan. 2017. "A Mickey Mouse Kind of Europe: Representations of Europe at Walt Disney World." *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 25, no. 2, 197–214. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2016.1198692>.

TRANSGRESSIVE TOURISM

As regular Disney parkgoers, one a parent and one not, we have both engaged with this alternative understanding of surrendering to childlike wonder. Jenny recalls visiting Disney World with her son when he was ten years old. Accustomed to the fact that Disney was both pleasurable and a worksite for his mother, he took delight in giving himself research projects for the trip as well, such as waving at other guests and seeing how many were willing to wave back, engaging with those outside of their own parties. Rather than Disney allowing him only the role of child, Oliver chose to perform “academic” at the parks. Tom recalls visiting Disney with other childless adults and realizing the entertainment they derived from viewing all of the Magic Kingdom through a healthy layer of snark and cynicism. They did not succumb to the overt narratives on display, but rather cast themselves as “in the know.” Tom has also often visited the park with college students enrolled in classes built around analyzing Walt Disney World. Watching their sheer delight in finally understanding how forced perspective functions or how Disney frames a particular bit of history to achieve contemporary goals reflects nothing less than Boal’s statement that “learning is an emotional experience.”²¹ None of these could be conceived of as intended interpretations designed by Imagineers, but all generated joy in the tourist. As Knight herself says elsewhere in *Power and Paradise*, “Despite Walt’s efforts to manage Guests’ interpretations (carried on in perpetuity by his company), our reactions to Disney World can be guided but never completely prescribed; ultimately we discern and assign meaning to our own experiences.”²²

Scholars also often forget that children delight in transgressing boundaries and testing limits. This aspect of childhood is often minimized in Disney scholarship that capitulates to a nostalgic, simplistic notion of childhood. In actuality, deviant and defiant uses of the park that push the boundaries constitute a significant role for many users. While the parks erect barriers, queues, and dominant narratives for their guests, these controls are constantly circumvented by child and adult patrons alike. The parks benignly tell rambunctious children to stay off walls, fences, and other forbidden areas. More seriously, adult park guests also circumvent

²¹ Boal, Augusto. 2008. “Empathy or What? Emotion or Reason?” in *Theatre in Theory 1900–2000*, 394–396, ed. David Krasner. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

²² Knight 21.

allowed Disney spaces to forge their own paths in far more dangerous fashions.

Consider the case of notorious vlogger Adam the Woo. Adam, who though largely anonymous has over 340,000 subscribers to his YouTube channel, has the distinction of having been banned from both Walt Disney World and Universal Studios. Adam made a habit of breaking into backstage areas at theme parks, most famously Disney's abandoned River Country water park, which closed in 2001, and posting wildly popular videos online documenting these crimes. Among other things it revealed that Disney not only did not demolish any of River Country, but the lights remained on, the water fountains and bathrooms still functioned, and shockingly the music loop continued to play. The attractions and dining areas remained in place, now overgrown with plants.²³ Disney, upon discovering Adam's persistent trespassing, remained on alert for him. One day, as he tried to enter Hollywood Studios, Disney security apprehended him, escorted him off property, and informed him that he was banned for life. This ban, however, has since been lifted; Disney clearly has recognized that they can find a way to monetize this fan's version of reading against the text.²⁴

Reactions to Adam's escapades vary widely online. His large fan base clearly indicates a following, which one author refers to as being akin to a "cult."²⁵ Having twice visited Walt Disney World with a devoted Adam the Woo fan on days that Adam himself was in the park, Tom can attest to the ferocity of this fandom, as he had to spend several hours scouring Epcot for an Adam sighting. The result of this was an awkward conversation followed by a quick selfie with a seemingly somewhat intoxicated stranger. Others, clearly more sympathetic to the Disney company's official line, refer to Adam as, "A flaming idiot who consistently and repeatedly presented a danger to Cast and Guests despite warnings from management to

²³ Adam the Woo. 2010. "Walt Disney World RIVER COUNTRY—ABANDONED!" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q4JwgmPEIDQ&index=24&t=0s&list=PLBFB8598DD4AAC8CC>.

²⁴ Porter, Stephen. 2016. "3 Incidents that Got People Banned from Walt Disney World." *The DIS*, August 19. <http://www.wdwinfo.com/walt-disney-world/3-incidents-that-got-people-banned-from-walt-disney-world/>. Accessed June 19, 2018.

²⁵ Leibacher, Herb. 2013. "Banned from Disney for Life—Adam the Woo." *World of Walt*, January 24. <https://www.worldofwalt.com/banned-from-disney-for-life-adam.html>. Accessed June 19, 2018.

stop trespassing backstage.”²⁶ As for Adam the Woo himself, he simply says that since childhood he “always was fascinated more with what was behind the scenes than in front of the general public.”²⁷

Another example are the exploits of “Hoot” and “Chief,” who wrote the blog “Mesa Verde Times” until 2014. In the waning years of the Epcot attraction Horizons (1983–1999), these two patrons discovered that it was now possible to jump out of their ride vehicles and crawl around inside and underneath the scenery of the attraction. A long dark ride, Horizons took visitors through scenes of conceptual technologies that would shape the future and then offered visitors the option of seeing a fictional space, desert, or sea colony. As with many Epcot attractions, after sponsor GE pulled out the ride was left to slowly disintegrate, with fewer and fewer visitors, before eventually being torn and down and replaced.

It was during these years of neglect that “Hoot” and “Chief” began their documented explorations which they began sharing on the internet in 2009. The two were obsessive Epcot and Horizons fans, using cumbersome video recorders and film-based cameras to capture a clearly dying attraction. They claimed to spend up to eight hours at a time in the bowels of the ride. Their blog posts consistently demonstrate longing for a time when they saw Epcot as more centered on education than entertainment while at the same time regaling readers with claims of riding the attraction naked and nearly being caught by employees.²⁸ Though their conduct was illegal and highly dangerous, they viewed it as an important documentation task of a site they loved. Adam, “Hoot,” and “Chief” all found their own alternative versions of childlike wonder, based less in narrative and more in the danger of discovery. Their exploration of forbidden areas, and their accompanying revelations about the inner workings of the Mouse’s Kingdom, demonstrates genuine delight.

²⁶Alice Royal message board post, August 19, 2012. <https://www.disboards.com/threads/adam-the-woo-has-been-unbanned.3444137/>. Accessed June 22, 2018.

²⁷<http://adamthewoo.tumblr.com/bio>. Accessed June 22, 2018.

²⁸For example, the dramatically titled “Death of Epcot Center” post from May 23, 2010, which states, “I have always wondered at what time WDI ‘jumped the shark’ and ruined what was the mighty Epcot Center. Here is written proof, published by Disney, that by the late 80’s they were done trying to expand peoples [*sic*] minds and make them think. The paragraph speaks for itself. Unreal (“Since the World Began: Walt Disney World”).” The paragraph in question cites the shift with the Wonders of Life pavilion (now defunct) to a more entertainment based attraction.

Adam, Hoot, Chief, and their followers all cast themselves in roles at Disney. They attempt to construct an ambivalent middle where they are both fanatically devoted to Disney parks and position themselves in opposition to “normal” tourists who are looked down upon as naïve, exploited, and boring. They utilize the same iconographical images, purchase the same goods, experience the same attractions, and occupy the same spaces as all other Disney tourists, but attempt to differentiate themselves through clothing, behavior, tattoos, and other devices that signal they are different. The greatest fear, expressed over and over on the blogs, is being caught and losing access to Disney parks. Working within the structures of Disney, they attempt to perform what they see as a radically alternative Disney tourist. Although they take pains to differentiate themselves from the other guests, ultimately because they remain occupying the same structures and options available to anyone, we argue they have simply cast themselves as different roles in the collective immersive experiences Disney offers.

IMMERSIVE DISNEY

Recent years have seen a surge in interest in the genre known as immersive theatre, particularly through the work of the theatre company Punchdrunk and productions like *Sleep No More*, which began in London in 2003 and has had a New York staging running at the McKittrick Hotel since 2011.²⁹ In her landmark book *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance*, Josephine Machon describes “immersive experiences in theatre” as ones that “combine the act of immersion—being submerged in an alternative medium where all the senses are engaged and manipulated—with a deep involvement in the activity within that medium.”³⁰ Here Machon provides a solid base definition of immersive theatre performance, which encompasses the wide variety of performance options within the genre. As we have undertaken the analysis of Disney theme parks contained within this collection we have repeatedly found ourselves returning to this intersection with immersive theatre.

²⁹ Punchdrunk website. <https://www.punchdrunk.org.uk/sleep-no-more/>. Accessed June 28, 2018.

³⁰ Machon, Josephine. 2013. *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance*, 21–22, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

While the term “immersive theatre” belongs to the twenty-first century, we contend that the practice of immersive theatre has been going on in significant ways for decades. Specifically, the opening of Disneyland in 1955 introduced audiences to the type of immersive work that has become so celebrated in recent years. After all, what is a Disney theme park but “an alternative medium where all the senses are engaged and manipulated?” A Disney park employs every artistic tool to shape the tourist’s experience. The use of forced perspectives causes a guest to see things in a particular way. Disney pumps artificial smells into areas of the park to evoke emotional responses. Even the changing topography of the pavement to match the theming of the lands manipulates the guest into a particular engagement with the environment. This demonstrates the engagement of senses, but it is the second half of Machon’s definition that proves most interesting to the Disney tourist as actor. Machon asks us to consider the tourist’s “involvement” in creating the environment.

As the chapters in this collection establish, Disney guests participate far more actively in the onstage experience than many assert. Machon writes, “With immersive theatre, a childlike excitement for curiosity and adventure, perhaps equally a wariness of compliance, is activated in each participant.”³¹ As we have discussed, the presumption that “childlike” equates with passivity negates the broad experience of childhood, and also suggests perhaps limited interaction with actual children, who consistently read against scripted text and add their own multiple interpretations to stories and environments. Machon further suggests that the environments of immersive productions are “outside of ‘everyday’ rules and regulations,” much the way Disney’s environments celebrate the magical and fantastical.³² Finally, Machon contends that the “multidimensional medium” of immersive theatre “blur[s] spaces and roles.”³³ This is the crucial element of Disney as immersive theatre, and of the Disney tourist as actor. This blurring of roles occurs when the Disney guest speaks to a character performer, particularly when that interaction occurs in view of other guests. Tom recalls standing in line to meet Jack Skellington and Sally from *Nightmare Before Christmas* at a Disney Halloween Party and carefully observing how each previous guest spoke to the characters. Not wanting to repeat lines they had used, and not wanting to deliver a “bad

³¹ Machon 28.

³² Ibid. 27.

³³ Machon 27.

performance” with the character performers, he encountered more stage fright than he had since he stopped being an actor when he was twenty years old. In that moment of character interaction, with more than a hundred people in line behind him, all of whom had been waiting for at least an hour, Tom-the-tourist became Tom-the-actor.

The greatest tension in immersive Disney lies in the question of how much agency the tourist possesses, which is the same tension found in all immersive performance. Nandita Dinesh, drawing on Jan Wozniak’s work, questions whether immersive performances truly create “an atmosphere for spectators to be equal participants that co-create the work.”³⁴ Wozniak suggests that immersive theatre principally asks the spectator “only to ‘complete’ the performance because the show has already been scripted.”³⁵ Immersive Disney supports Machon’s view of immersive theatre over Dinesh and Wozniak’s, perhaps because immersive Disney takes a more expansive view of what constitutes “show.” “Show” need not be a traditional narrative, and “show” need not incorporate Aristotelian plot structure. In immersive Disney, “show” is everything the guest encounters, and the tourist often has the ability to collaborate in the writing of their own show.

RIDING OUR CAROUSEL OF PERFORMANCE

We invite readers of this collection to approach these twelve chapters and afterword much as they might approach a theme park. We have grouped the chapters into sections—or “lands” in Disney parlance—united around similar characteristics, subjects, and methodologies. Readers choosing to read this collection in order will find themselves immersed in certain topics for substantial time. Much like guests in a theme park, however, the reader of an anthology possesses a great deal of agency and can choose to read in alternate ways. A reader who jumps from chapter to chapter, crossing sections much like one beelines from Pirates of the Caribbean to Buzz Lightyear’s Space Ranger Spin, will find echoes from chapter to chapter. We encourage readers to tour this book in whatever way they wish.

³⁴ Dinesh, Nandita. 2017. *Memos from a Theatre Lab: Exploring What Immersive Theatre Does*, 11 New York: Routledge.

³⁵ Wozniak, Jan. 2015. “The Value of Being Together? Audiences in Punchdrunk’s The Drowned Man.” *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 12.1, 318–332.

The first section, “Time, Tomorrowland, and Fantasy,” focuses on the use of nostalgia and progress narratives in the Disney parks. Building off the extensive body of research into nostalgia, Disney, and tourism, these three chapters explore performed temporalities. While ostensibly asking guests to project themselves into the future or the past, all three of these chapters detail how Disney attempts to create a no-space of timelessness that unmoors visitors from linear time to allow them to construct their own temporality based upon personal narrative and nostalgic notions of childhood. The section begins with Tom Robson’s chapter examining the Main Street, USA and Tomorrowland areas of the Disney World park, demonstrating how Main Street functions as a theatrical lobby for theatrical audiences, distancing them from real time and molding them into participatory actors in Disney’s immersive theatre. From there, Victoria Pettersen Lantz’s chapter analyzes the depictions and absence of indigenous Americans, arguing that these depictions relegate Native American identity to historical or contemporary exoticism. Finally, Christina Gutierrez-Dennehy’s chapter utilizes both historical and field research to investigate Disney’s construction of medievalism, arguing that Fantasyland’s presentation of the middle ages draws upon both nostalgia and a democratic capitalist depiction where anybody can become a princess or a knight given sufficient money. Examined together, these chapters reveal fascinating and at times troubling aspects of the Disney parks’ relationship to time.

Section two, “Environments as Ideologies,” focuses on how the Disney park attractions, landscaping, theming, and characters promote or discourage certain kinds of tourist engagements. These three chapters explore how Disney environments encourage affective connections to characters while minimizing awareness of problematic depictions of issues and identities. Jennifer A. Kokai’s chapter examines the historical transformation from *The Living Seas* to *The Seas with Nemo and Friends*, comparing the role created for the tourist in each iteration of this Epcot pavilion. Next, Chase Bringardner’s contribution looks at the iconic Splash Mountain attraction, arguing that Disney’s attempts to move away from the racist content of its source material—the much-discussed *Song of the South*—have inadvertently created an equally problematic depiction of queer subjectivity through its presentation of Br’er Fox and Br’er Bear. Finally, Laura MacDonald’s chapter ventures into the newest Disney park, Shanghai Disneyland, analyzing the way that Disney utilized “glocalization” strategies in the construction of this park and how the company uses

the park to train Chinese guests in “appropriate” behavior privileging “Disney” culture and expectations over Chinese cultural norms.

The third section “Liveness and Audio-Animation” explores the two very different models of performer in the Disney Park: the human and the non-human. Two of these chapters offer in-depth analysis of Disney’s Audio-Animatronics—the computerized performing machines that populate Disney attractions—while the third looks at a particular category of live park performer, all united through the lens of how these actors shape guest performance. First, Li Cornfeld presents a dramaturgical history of one of Disney’s earliest and most enduring Audio-Animatronic attractions, the Carousel of Progress, first installed in the 1964 World’s Fair. She examines how the Disney Company worked to acclimate viewers to the idea of robot performers and what messages their usage was intended to convey. From there, Joseph R. D’Ambrosi examines another Disney World attraction with roots in that same World’s Fair, the Hall of Presidents, in which he argues that Disney’s use of Audio-Animatronics permits the company to construct a more utopian version of Donald Trump, suitable for family entertainment. Finally, Patrice Amon’s chapter examines Disneyland’s Royal Theatre and the ways in which the melodramatic imagination is employed as a frame for both the attraction and the park as a whole, with the theatre’s live actors encouraging/permitting guests to become performers themselves while on Disney’s property. Although Amon’s subject of study is live performers, she demonstrates how the underlying ideologies of their genre make their performances in some ways as repetitive and robotic as the Audio-Animatronics.

The fourth section, “Counter Identities,” all explore how Disney has dealt with “non-ideal” guests and how that has evolved over time, whether it is the exclusion of minorities through ticketing practices, the embracing of villains over heroes, or the appropriation of Disney characters and park attractions by marginalized subcultures like Goths. These chapters explore how the parks were designed for a white, middle class tourist, but have subsequently been appropriated by outsider identities. Jill Morris’s chapter chronicles the introduction of the “pay one price” system of amusement park admission, demonstrating how this shift helped Disney and other park operators create carefully controlled, “safe” spaces with a conception of guests as white and middle class, to the exclusion of other groups. Next, Christen Mandracchia charts the growing presence and fandom of villains in the Disney parks, showing how identifying and engaging with these villains was always a counter-narrative visitor practice and has