

Cotton plantations and non-consensual kisses: how Disney became embroiled in the culture wars

The company has been addressing its historical racism and sexism, adding disclaimers to films and altering theme park rides. But these moves have stirred contempt as well as approval



Unkiss that kiss ... Snow White being given that 'true love's kiss' by Prince Charming in 1937.

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Thu 17 Jun 2021

Very little ammunition is required for a culture war these days, so long as your troops are primed to mobilise at the drop of a blog. Julie Tremaine and Katie Dowd, two writers for the online newspaper SFGate, discovered this last month. Their review of the revamped Snow White ride at Disneyland was generally positive, but queried a new scene showing the prince giving Snow White the all-important “true love’s kiss”.

“A kiss he gives to her without her consent, while she’s asleep, which cannot possibly be true love if only one person knows it’s happening,” they wrote. “It’s hard to understand why the Disneyland of 2021 would choose to add a scene with such old-fashioned ideas of what a man is allowed to do to a woman.”

Matters escalated quickly and predictably. Within 24 hours, the review was reported across Twitter and conservative media. Fox News ran 13 segments on the story in one day: “Cancel culture going after Snow White”; “The woke movement taking aim at Disneyland”, etc. Senator John Kennedy was brought on to express his disdain: “We

are so screwed ... I don't know where these jackaloons come up with this stuff." The UK's Sun chimed in: "Snow White may be CANCELED" [sic]. As did Piers Morgan in the Daily Mail: "Leave Snow White's Prince alone, you insufferable woke brats." Then Fox News reported on that: "Piers Morgan slams consent criticism over revamped Snow White ride." And so forth. All of them triggered by a single paragraph in an online review.

Disney increasingly finds itself caught in the crossfire of these skirmishes. Understandably, to some extent, since it is the biggest target. Already a byword for family entertainment, Disney is now the dominant purveyor of popular culture following its gradual acquisitions of Marvel, Star Wars, Pixar, Avatar, Alien, The Muppets, The Simpsons and numerous other household-name properties. But having successfully captured entertainment's centre ground, Disney now finds itself under attack on both flanks. From one side, it is criticised for its old-fashioned and bigoted legacy; from the other, it is criticised for being too "woke". What's an unprecedentedly powerful media corporation to do?

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It would be fair to say Disney had some ground to make up. In the era of #TimesUp, #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, the company has had to take a look at both its current practices and its back catalogue. With the launch of its streaming service, Disney+, in 2019, that back catalogue became both an asset and a liability. The classic Disney films are part of the draw for subscribers, but Disney's history of racist caricatures and ethnic stereotyping has been well documented and routinely criticised: the crows in Dumbo that drew on racist minstrel caricatures of African Americans; the Islamophobic tropes in Aladdin; the mockery of Native Americans in Peter Pan ... the list goes on.

Contrary to the hysteria, Disney has not "cancelled" these titles; nearly all of them are available on Disney+. However, they are appended by an advisory notice warning of "negative depictions and/or mistreatment of people or cultures." "These stereotypes were wrong then and are wrong now," it reads. "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." As well as Dumbo, Aladdin, The Aristocats and Peter Pan, the advisory notice appears in front of titles such as The Muppet Show (the episode where Johnny Cash sings in front of a Confederate flag), and the live-action 1960 adventure Swiss Family Robinson (for its stereotyped Asian pirates).

Last October, the company also introduced its "Stories Matter" initiative, pledging to be more inclusive and consultative, and acknowledging Disney's responsibility to "consciously, purposefully and relentlessly champion the spectrum of voices and perspectives in our world". Disney has been making progress in this area with its recent movies, such as Moana, Coco, Zootropolis, Raya and the Last Dragon and Soul – all of which steered away from white, western, male-dominated perspectives. Its remakes of titles such as Aladdin and Dumbo have also been an opportunity to scrub out contentious aspects of the originals.



Visitors ride Disneyland's Splash Mountain, based on Song of the South but set to be re-themed to star characters from 2009's The Princess and the Frog.

On the theme park side, too, Disney has also been removing problematic aspects of its rides and committing to workplace inclusion such as allowing gender-inclusive hairstyles, jewellery, nail styles, costume choices and even “appropriate visible tattoos”. (Before 2012, front-of-house workers were not even permitted to have beards). As with the movies, there is a long history here. In the 1990s, for example, Florida's Walt Disney World opened a resort named Dixie Landings, which was themed as a pre-civil war cotton plantation (it was renamed in 2001). Recent changes include the tableau on the Pirates Of The Caribbean ride showing women tied up and being auctioned off under a banner reading “take a wench for a bride” (removed in 2018). Or the Jungle Cruise ride's Trader Sam, a caricatured African tribesman selling shrunken heads (removed in 2019, perhaps in anticipation of Disney's big-budget Jungle Cruise movie, due later this year).

Last summer, Disneyland, California, re-themed its Splash Mountain log-flume ride around the 2009 animation *The Princess and The Frog*. Previously, it had been themed around the notorious 1946 movie *Song of the South*, one of the worst chapters in Disney's history. Even before it was released, *Song of the South* drew objections from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) among others for its Black stereotyping and its depiction of happy, singing slaves on an idyllic southern plantation. Disney ignored the criticisms and released the movie anyway, then re-released it several more times up until 1986 (the fact it did decent box office every time tells its own story). *Song of the South* was quietly removed from circulation after that, but in 1989, Disneyland still chose to theme its expensive new Splash Mountain ride around the film. It is one of the few titles not on Disney+.

Disney employees were always saying: Hey, this doesn't feel right to me. But there was a culture of ignoring things

According to one long-term Disneyland employee (who did not wish to be identified), the parks' problematic aspects were regular topics of conversation among staff. "Disney would get complaints all the time from people inside the company, who were saying, like: 'Hey, this doesn't feel right to me.' But there's a culture that has existed for a long time of ignoring these things. By staying silent, they just created a bigger and bigger problem." Black visitors, especially, often felt unwelcome when confronted with rides such as Splash Mountain, the employee says. The Black Lives Matter protests of last summer were a catalyst for change: "Now the company has gone in the opposite direction of saying: 'Hey, if you see something that seems problematic, or seems like it's not going to be welcoming to our audience, talk about it, send an email, bring it up with your leads.' That openness to conversation didn't exist prior to 2020."

Every change Disney makes in this direction is more ammunition for the "Disney pushing its woke agenda" outrage machine. The Snow White incident followed in the wake of similar flare-ups over, to name a few, the inclusion of a gay character in the 2017 live-action remake of *Beauty and the Beast*; the advisory notices ("Disney+ cancels the Muppets?"); the dismissal of Mandalorian actor Gina Carano after she appeared to compare the treatment of Republicans in the US to that of Jewish people in Nazi Germany; and even Disneyland's relaxation of its employee dress code.



The problematic gang of crows in Walt Disney's Dumbo, 1941.

Earlier this month, the anti-woke brigade felt they had struck gold with the disclosure of an internal Disney document titled "Allyship for Race Consciousness" that gave advice on how to talk and what to do about race issues. It discussed concepts such as systemic racism, white privilege and offensive rhetoric such as "all lives matter", and pointed to external reading materials. The document was advisory, rather than proscriptive, but in the words of the journalist Christopher Rufo, who exposed the document, it was proof that "Disney executives have elevated the ideology of critical race theory into a new corporate dogma". Or as Tucker Carlson

put it on Fox News, “Disney is encouraging book-burning, telling us that equality is wrong, that we’re not all equal and that some of our lives matter more than other lives.”

Disney – which declined to comment for this piece – responded with a statement that “these internal documents are being deliberately distorted as reflective of company policy, when in fact their purpose was to allow diversity of thought and discussion”. This is the larger culture war some conservatives are itching to wage: that Disney is part of a radical socialist agenda; that examining the US’s racist past is itself somehow racist; and that white conservatives are the real victims. As with the often-misused word “woke”, “critical race theory” is a vague, semantically elastic notion rather than an actual thing, but Republicans are now passing legislation to ban its teaching in schools. And, inevitably, some conservative pundits have been calling for people to boycott Disney. For its perceived “cancel culture”, Disney itself must be cancelled.

Historically, Disney reflected Walt’s vision of an America that in many ways had already passed

Walt Disney himself strove to avoid political statements, the better to claim that his films were for everyone. But he engaged in anti-trade unionism and McCarthyist anti-Communism in the 1940s, and generally leaned towards conservatism in his espousal of “traditional family values”. He may not have been overtly racist but he was at best stubbornly ignorant of cultural sensitivities and non-white sensibilities. His attitudes were reflected in his products.

“Disney has never been apolitical,” says John Wills, director of the University of Kent’s Centre of American Studies, and author of *Disney Culture*. “Although it gives a superficial identity that its stories and its products are harmless entertainment, there have clearly been agendas within Disney over time and those have very much shifted over the past 100 years. Historically, Disney was about Walt’s vision of preserving an America that in many ways had already passed. It’s a kind of nostalgia for a fairly conservative landscape.

This is not the first time Disney has been targeted for departing from those values. In 1996, Christian groups led by the Southern Baptist Convention and the American Family Association waged a nine-year boycott of the studio for “increasingly promoting immoral ideologies such as homosexuality, infidelity, and adultery”. Their motivation was the adult-oriented films such as *Priest* and *Pulp Fiction* (being released by Disney subsidiary Miramax), its ABC talkshow presented by Ellen DeGeneres, an out lesbian, and its gay-friendly employment terms.

This is the other reason why Disney has become such a target in the culture wars. If culture is upstream from politics, as the saying goes, then Disney is close to the river’s source. Its products are not only near-ubiquitous, they are aimed at children. Indeed, they are among the first movies and characters many of us see. Every generation has grown up with them, and absorbed their values. So nostalgia for the Disney of the past readily feeds into nostalgia for the America of the past – at least for those who believe the past was a better place.

The backlash against Disney reassessing its history, and discussing matters such as white privilege and systemic racism, mirrors current interrogations of America's own racist history. For some, putting a disclaimer in front of Dumbo or questioning Snow White is on a par with removing Confederate statues or teaching schoolchildren about slavery.

If Disney is forced to pick a side, the conservative agenda is likely to lose out, says Shilpa Davé, assistant professor of media studies at the University of Virginia. This is not purely a matter of principle. "It's self-interest, too," she says. "What has happened is that they realise that they have to appeal to a changing demographic, so the bottom line for them is: how are they going to get more customers? And how are they going to appeal to new generations? And so part of this is: yes, we want to include diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, because that's where our generations are going. They have to be forward-thinking if they want to succeed. We live in a global world. And we also live in a racially diverse, a class diverse, a religiously diverse world, and we cannot isolate ourselves. Corporations understand that."

The Disney employee agrees: "It's quite fascinating to see how there's this whole thing of: 'They're bowing to the woke mob.' It's, like: no, they're doing this because it's good business to do things that appeal to a larger demographic. They can't just appeal to the conservative audience, they need to appeal to everyone. Capitalism isn't on your side here."



Keira Knightley, who promoted Disney's The Nutcracker and the Four Realms by saying she wouldn't want her daughter to see Cinderella or The Little Mermaid.

There will surely be further battles to come. Just as Disney's legacy on race has undergone an overhaul, so the Snow White incident suggests issues of sexual consent could be the next battleground. This is not a new problem. In 2018, the Frozen voice actor Kristen Bell told reporters she used Snow White to teach her daughters about

stranger danger and consent, asking them: “Don’t you think that it’s weird that the prince kisses Snow White without her permission?”

Keira Knightley raised similar misgivings the same year, even as she was promoting Disney’s *The Nutcracker and the Four Realms*. Knightley did not want her daughter to watch *Cinderella*, a story about a woman who “waits around for a rich guy to rescue her”, or *The Little Mermaid*, who “gives up her voice for a man”. *Teen Vogue* went even further in a 2017 article titled, “Why These Disney Films May Help Perpetuate Rape Culture”, which also named *Maleficent* and *Beauty And The Beast* as problematic. How long before we see advisory warnings in front of those titles, too?

Most of Disney’s classic stories were already out of date to begin with. Adapted from European folk tales, they were rooted in patriarchal values and considerably more violent. In the original fairytale, the Evil Queen demands the huntsman kill Snow White and bring back her liver and lungs. When he brings back the organs of a deer, the queen eats them, believing them to be Snow White’s. There is no “true love’s kiss” either; Disney added it in. In the original, Snow White awakens when the poisoned apple is dislodged from her throat.

The same goes for *Sleeping Beauty*. In Basile’s original, the heroine is not awakened with a kiss; she is raped in her sleep. She wakes up with twins nine months later. Essentially, it is all the same process: just as Walt Disney refashioned those stories to fit in with mid-20th century American values, so contemporary audiences now find Disney’s versions an awkward fit with 21st-century values. Even tales as old as time have a sell-by date.