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ENG 3140: The Post-Colonial Nature of Disney: The Ruining of a Childhood

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ENG 3140

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The Post-Colonial Nature of Disney™: The Ruining of a Childhood

Topic Rationale

“Savages, savages!” scream the English colonizers at the Native Americans in the Disney film, Pocahontas. This quote exemplifies the postcolonial tensions that are present in several of Disney’s movies. However, the characters in Disney movies tend to be romanticized. Thus, we judged that Disney’s children’s characters were the perfect basis for our Post-Colonial video. The princesses we chose to look at were Ariel (and Ursula), Jasmine, Pocahontas, Cinderella, and Rapunzel (with focus on Mother Gothel). Each of these princesses had their own cultures and were oppressed by a colonizer, either literally or figuratively. Yet, the classic Disney movies glossed over this colonization in favor of a romantic, happy-ending plot. By creating song parodies of each princess’s song, we highlighted the already existing colonial nature of the movies, while also connecting to the post-colonial literature read in class.

Text to Video Connections

At the beginning of our film, the princesses are forced to “whistle while they work” as they are being forced into their occupations as princesses. Here is the first instance of textual example in the video; the princesses read the various books from class as they prepare for work in their dressing room. The occupation of princess requires women to look content and joyful. The different princesses each have varying levels of acceptance for their plight, as is shown by

the different ways they all sing the first song. The child, of course, thinks they are volunteers, just as the citizens of North Korea “volunteer” to clean the city and act perfectly as it is shown in *Pyongyang: A Journey in North Korea*. The princesses, like the North Korean volunteers, have to act perfectly content, though they are clearly not.

Our first set of Disney characters, Ariel and Ursula from *The Little Mermaid*, paralleled the movie *Black Girl*. Ariel wanted nothing more than to live life on the surface world, just as Diuana wanted nothing more than to go to France and live the life she is dreaming of there. Unfortunately, both characters found that life is not as they expected it would be when they arrived at their dream destinations. In order to achieve her dream of becoming a human, Ariel gave up her voice to Ursula, the sea witch, in order to be transformed into a human; Diuana gave up her family and her freedom in order to be swept away to France to live life trapped in a small apartment and treated as a slave. Both Diuana and Ariel did not think of the consequences when they bargained for what they wanted. Ariel was blinded by the thought of seeing Prince Eric that she didn't think about how she would need her voice. We illustrated how easy it is to be swayed into doing something terrible in order to get what you want by having Ursula enter during Ariel's song, convincing Ariel to give up her voice. Diuana was so excited to be in France and to be surrounded by French culture that she did not think about how her life might be different in a European culture rather than in an African one.

In class we watched *1947* and discussed the Indian/Pakistani relations. Clearly, the movie *Aladdin* relates to this movie. Not only is the mythical setting of *Aladdin* in the Middle East, but *Aladdin* also has the same tensions about one's home that *1947* does. Jasmine felt trapped in the castle because she wanted to be out in the city. When she escaped, she was almost beaten up. Later, when the guards realized she was the princess, she was returned to where she “belonged” -

in the castle. This plight relates to 1947 because Jasmine is not allowed to be where she identifies as home, which is similar to how many Hindu and Muslim people during the Partition were not allowed to be at their homes. Thus, we drew a connection between the two texts by changing a few of the lyrics of “A Whole New World” to relate specifically to the Partition.

After reading *The Business of Fancy Dancing*, we decided to include Pocahontas to depict the loss of Native American Culture. In both the film and book *The Business of Fancy Dancing*, the narrator was facing the effects of his decision to conform to the “white world.” Pocahontas faced the same decisions with her relationship with John Smith. In our rendition of “Colors of the Wind,” Pocahontas laments over her slavery by the white people, the loss of her family, and how the white people see and treat them. In the original version, Pocahontas only spoke about nature to help show the divide between the European culture and the Native American culture. By including her slavery and the perspectives of white people specifically, we are able to point out the darker side to the story of *Pocahontas* that Disney does not.

After reading *Pyongyang: A Journey through North Korea* and seeing how the North Koreans seemed to be brainwashed, we decided that we wanted to include that tension in our video as well. We compared the implied feelings of the North Korean citizens toward their government to the feelings of Rapunzel towards her mother, Mother Gothel, who demands she never ask questions and never leave her tower. Mother Gothel sang of all the horrible things that would surely happen to Rapunzel if she left the safety of her tower. When we included “Mother Knows Best” we understood it symbolically as “Mother *Country* Knows Best.” The relationship depicted between Mother Gothel and Rapunzel parallels the relationship between North Korea and its citizens. As the North Korean government shelters its citizens from outside influences and convinces them that their leader knows best just like Mother Gothel does to Rapunzel.

Next, Iqbal says in *Tulip in the Desert* that slavery is just in your mind, and if you believe yourself to be free, you will be—which we paralleled through Cinderella’s lyric, “The dream that you wish WILL come true.” The problem that our Princesses have proven is that this self-agentic theory is problematic if not entirely false. The princesses wish they were free as they show through “Whistle While you Work” and their other various song parodies, but in the end they are not free. They are ushered back into Disney World at the end of “A Dream is a Wish” by their guardian/colonizer.

Clearly all of our princesses have issues of identity just as Changez does in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Ariel, a mermaid, wishes to be human. Ursula pressures her to change into a human. Jasmine lives in the castle but wishes to be outside with Aladdin. Pocahontas is a Native American, but she has a relationship with John Smith, a man who is negatively impacting her culture. Cinderella is living the life of a servant, but is actually of a higher class. Rapunzel is forced to stay in the tower with her mother, but she can sense that there is more to life than just life in the tower. In summary, our Princesses embody the internal struggle with being colonized.

Finally, our princesses embody aspects of Fanon’s *Toward the African Revolution*. Just as Fanon attempts to write a letter to the colonizer, our princesses attempt to explain their situation to the child to enlighten her about colonization. Though the child is confused and a little upset at the end of her trip, she is now aware that Disney is not all it seems. Yet, in the end, it is only the Princesses who can choose to change their situation.

Process

Originally, Ashley had the idea of using Disney princesses and Kelsey had the idea of using our own recorded music. We then started work on this project right away. We further developed the idea because we all love Disney, and as we have all gotten older we have seen the obvious post-colonial points they make. We brainstormed by gathering as many songs and moments from the movies that spoke to the nature of colonization, which was very easy. We then limited our songs and Disney's down to the ones we thought easiest to include in our video. Some of the songs, like *Colors of the Wind* from Pocahontas needed very few word changes because the original was already blatantly relevant to the course (Pocahontas being a Native American was a direct parallel with *The Business of Fancy Dancing*).

We all wrote and sang our own songs. Our first few meetings were spent practicing and organizing the songs. Then, we recorded them with Alicia accompanying each song on the piano, and her friend Ben Shepler handling the digital mixing process. After we recorded our songs, we created an informal script to surround the songs. Since the plot of the movie is a young child going to Disney World, it was not necessary to have an overwhelming amount of dialogue. The majority of the speaking lines are extemporaneous. We had an idea of what we wanted to be said and we allowed for the natural lines to be created as we filmed. The movie really formed itself while we did the filming. One of our first major obstacles with the creation of our movie was the actual filming process. Because we had to wait for the final recordings of the songs before we filmed, there were only a few weeks left for the filming. Also, since it was November, the sun set really early, leaving very minimal time for us to film outside. Instead, we decided to film everything inside. Since our Disney World was supposed to be a lot less phenomenal than the real one, filming everything inside allowed for a more claustrophobic, depressing feel to the movie. The indoor setting also gave the feeling of a lack of individuality for each of the

princesses. Altogether, the filming location made the movie feel reminiscent of the way North Korea was described in *Pyongyang*. We all came together with multiple costumes and a projector to film our final video. Maddy did the filming because she has a high quality camera that works well in low light.

After we filmed the entire movie, Maddy took the footage home and edited it. She also figured out how to add the Disney animation in the beginning to make the movie look more authentic. We all came together one more time to review the movie and to add the lyrics on the screen.

All and all, we all worked really well together during this project. Everyone divided up the work and helped out offering up lyric options, finding costumes from home, and really being accommodating to roadblocks along the process. The hardest part of the project was actually finding a time where all five of us could meet to film. Everyone involved in our process are incredibly busy and highly motivated people (We had to work around four job schedules, as well as organization meetings, class schedules, and Alicia's need to work on her Law school applications). While we all wanted to give our input and help as much as we could on the project, our time where everyone could meet together was incredibly limited. We were able to work around this conflict most of the time by using a Google Doc that could be accessed from anywhere, but we did have to clear our schedule for an entire afternoon and evening in order to film the project.

Conclusion

The entire experience of planning, filming, and editing this project was a rewarding one. Because the five of us have always been passionate about our childhood Disney characters, the

project did not seem like another mundane assignment. In fact, it was fairly easy for us to parody the songs we chose and connect them with some of the books we have read in class. Without much difficulty, we could see how many of the princesses within the movies are “colonized” in some way or another, or how the lyrics could easily be changed to seem that way. In the end, even though the child has some bad experiences during her time at Disney World, she still leaves happy and will forget the troubles she sees. This is similar to how people who see these injustices will forget them instead of working to change what is happening to colonized people. In the same way, people watch Disney movies and romanticize them without seeing the underlying moral issues the movies present—for that reason, we took advantage of those connections and enjoyed the process of combining our love of Disney with our Post-Colonial academic endeavors.