

Bemis, Bethanee. *Disney Theme Parks and America's National Narratives: Mirror, Mirror, for Us All*. New York: Routledge, 2023. Print.

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Over the past few years, visitors and especially fans have slowly but steadily moved to the center of interest in theme park scholarship from the Humanities. Following Jennifer A. Kokai and Tom Robson's *Performance and the Disney Theme Park Experience* (2019) and the new edition of Janet Wasko's *Understanding Disney* (2020) – the original edition from 2001 was perhaps the first publication to offer an overview of “Disney audience archetypes,” including Disney fan(atic)s (see Wasko 2001, 195-215) – several monographs and edited collections have explored the (self-)conceptualizations and practices of (Disney) theme park visitors and fans, including Rebecca Williams' *Theme Park Fandom* (2020), Sabrina Mittermeier's *Fan Phenomena: Disney* (2022; which features a section about “Disney Theme Parks and Their Fans”), and Priscilla Hobbs' *Interpreting and Experiencing Disney* (2022; which contains a chapter by Bethanee Bemis, the author of the monograph under review here). While, with the exception of Williams' monograph, all of these titles focus on Disney theme parks and the majority of them also cover Disney fandom beyond the parks, they nevertheless must be acknowledged as, on the one hand, a partial answer to long-standing calls for what Wasko herself had called an “integrated approach” to the theme parks (one that takes into account the production and reception of theme park spaces by employees and visitors; Wasko 2001, 152; see also Raz 1999, 6; Lukas 2016, 168; and Clément 2016, 17-18) and, on the other hand and more specifically, a determined refutation of even longer-established conceptualizations of theme park visitors as a “passive, regulated audience” (Landau 1973, 592).

Notwithstanding its title – which may evoke Margaret J. King's 1981 reading of Disney's domestic parks as museums or “cultural preserves for the most nostalgic images and dreams of a nation” and “archive[s] of Americana” (King 1981, 116)¹ as well as similar early analyses of Disney theme parks as patriotic texts – Bethanee Bemis' *Disney Theme Parks and America's National Narratives* (2023) must also be seen in the context of this wave of publications on the practices and agency of theme park visitors and fans. Not only does Bemis' volume come with a “companion exhibition” at the Smithsonian's National Museum

¹ In fact, Bemis refers to King on the second page of the Introduction to her book, albeit to a much more recent publication (King 2011).

of American History, curated by Bemis and on display until March 2024, which is based on visitor agency: in February 2022, the National Museum of American History had called upon the public to submit “images that capture *your* experiences as guests at Disneyland and Walt Disney World” (see <https://americanhistory.si.edu/disney-parks-and-american-stories>), at least some of which are featured in the exhibition.² *Disney Theme Parks and America's National Narratives* itself also draws on visitor agency by generally conceiving of Disney theme parks as “physical place[s] for identity negotiation” (117). For example, in her Conclusion Bemis offers a new definition of the term “Disneyfication”³ as a “location-specific process by which the public and a corporation are engaged in a cultural ritual of transforming historical fact into the ‘national narrative’” (116-17). Hence, Bemis views the parks not simply as places for the preservation and dissemination of public memory and national narratives (as King had done) but also for their formation and negotiation: a stage on which visitors and designers constantly debate what America means.

The groundwork for this analysis is laid in the two chapters that form the second part of *Disney Theme Parks*, entitled “Negotiating American Identity at the Disney Parks”: while Chapter 5, “Protest at the Parks: Changing America via Disney,” discusses selected instances, both historical and contemporary, of people using the parks as a platform to voice their opinions, Chapter 6, “Retheming: Visualizing a Changing America at Disney Parks,” chronicles the ways in which the parks or individual elements have changed over time in response to customer feedback or broader cultural trends. Readers may already be familiar with at least some of the material discussed in these chapters: the history of gay activism at Disneyland and Walt Disney World, included in Chapter 5, for example, has already been covered by Griffin (2000; 2005); in turn, the various changes to the New Orleans-themed spaces at Disneyland – specifically, Aunt Jemima’s Pancake House and Pirates of the Caribbean – can also be found in this reviewer’s *Popular New Orleans: The Crescent City in Periodicals, Theme Parks, and Opera, 1875-2015* (Freitag 2021, 132-231). Both chapters are nevertheless extremely illuminating as the historical overviews showcase the sheer variety of political and social issues (as well as viewpoints) that have either been brought up by the public via active participation or activism at the Disney theme parks or that Disney has

² For a review of the exhibition, see <https://attractionsmagazine.com/mirror-mirror-reflections-of-american-stories-in-disney-parks-debuts-at-the-smithsonian/>.

³ Coined by Richard Schickel in 1968, the term “Disneyfication” originally referred to “that shameless process by which everything the studio later touched, no matter how unique the vision of the original from which the studio worked, was reduced to the limited terms Disney and his people could understand” (Schickel 1968, 220). Later the term also came to be used to refer to the increasing privatization of public urban space through design strategies adapted from theme parks (see, e.g., Warren 1994).

responded to via physical changes to the sites – from racism, sexism, and homophobia to the Vietnam War, immigration, and gun control.

How the Disney parks eventually came to serve as “a nonpartisan democratic space, even while they are private spaces” (86), and, simultaneously, as “a three-dimensional record of American social and political change in the ways [they] adapt[...] [their] representation of the national narrative” (106), is explained in the four chapters that form the first part of the volume, entitled “Establishing Disney Parks as Sites of American Identity.” Here, Bemis first discusses Disney’s use of American myths, folklore, and ideals in early films and TV shows (Chapter 1, “Disney and American Folklore: Disney Tells American History”) as well as Disney’s work for the U.S. government during WWII and the role of the parks in cultural diplomacy, e.g., as destinations for such official foreign visitors as politicians and diplomats and thus as places representing America (Chapter 2, “Disney Diplomacy and Morale: Disney Symbolizes America”). In Chapter 3 (“Disneyland and Walt Disney World: Experiencing ‘History’ and ‘Identity’ at Disney Parks”), Bemis takes readers on a tour of “four Magic Kingdom lands that encompass experiences of both American history and American identity” (39): Main Street, U.S.A.; Frontierland; Liberty Square (at Walt Disney World’s “Magic Kingdom”); and Tomorrowland. While curiously, this chapter largely refrains from applying the historical approach that forms the basic rationale for the second part of the book (which becomes especially noticeable in the case of the ever-changing Tomorrowland), it should nevertheless be recommended for paying particular attention to a dimension of theming that has been rather neglected by scholars so far: smells. To be sure, Bemis’ account of how the individual “lands” and their version of American history smell is rather impressionistic, but it may serve as an excellent starting point for future reflections on the complex “smellscapes” of theme parks (and the technology, logistics, and industry behind them).

Chapter 4, “Mickey Mouse/White House: Celebrating American Identity at Disney Parks,” finally, offers an intriguing discussion of presidential visits to and government-sanctioned national celebrations at the parks, including Ronald Reagan’s Inaugural Parade at Walt Disney World on Memorial Day of 1985 – the planned parade on inaugural day had to be cancelled due to inclement weather in Washington, DC– and the “America on Parade” cavalcades (1975-1976) at both Disneyland and Walt Disney World, which were designated as official bicentennial events by the U.S. Government. These and similar events, Bemis argues, lent further legitimacy to Disney’s domestic parks as seats of collective national

memory: “it was and is the continued validation the parks receive through visits from governmental figures and official national celebrations that place the Disney Parks alongside sites such as the National Mall and the White House ellipse, and Independence Hall as American ceremonial spaces” (70). Taken out of context, such a comparison of Disneyland with the National Mall, the White House ellipse, and Independence Hall may seem somewhat daring. Yet the material and the discussion offered in *Disney Theme Parks and America’s National Narratives* make a convincing case for why we should think of Disney’s domestic parks as sites of identity and public history. And within the context of current scholarly debates on visitors, Bemis’ volume also reminds us that fandom is but one facet of visitor agency: theme parks provide visitors with a stage for a large variety of acts and roles.

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