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Hidden Histories: Vaulting as Corporate Archival Practice

Bailey Apollonio

Abstract: *In this article, I insist on a broader conceptualisation of the Disney Vault, not only as a figurative place for films outside of their distribution windows, but also as an industrial practice of vaulting which continues to play a role at the Walt Disney Company. Drawing on primary resources and the company's home-video distribution history, I explore Disney's relationship to past, present, and future. I posit that mobilising the Vault as a branding tool has broader historiographical implications in that it works as a tool of public relations that obfuscates problematic corporate histories—even as the company continues to distribute content in the streaming age. Using* Song of the South *(Wilfred Jackson, 1946) and the film's paratexts as a case study, I consider how contemporary language surrounding the Vault has served to mask Disney's most problematic and notorious property in the streaming age. By painting the streaming platform as a democratic space of open access, Disney conceals a fraught past by guiding users to believe that they maintain complete access to the Disney collection. Recognising vaulting as an industry practice can help researchers more effectively account for the limitations of the corporate-owned streaming archive.*

Seven years after the debut of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (William Cottrell, David Hand, and Wilfred Jackson) in 1937, R.K.O. reissued the film using its initial success as a marketing tool. Under the header "Lucky Seven!", the following 1944 advertisement appeared in the *Showmen's Trade Review*:

> Seven years ago, in 1937, "Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs" made box-office history…
> Today, seven years later, it is writing a sensationally brilliant box-office chapter all over again…
> Seven years from now, in 1951, according to plans "Snow White" again will arise to become "Fairest of them all"…
> Seven years after that, in 1958—but let's not carry it too far!... right now let's just cash in to [*sic*] the limit while that Lucky Seven is hot—but burning! ("Lucky Seven!" 10–11)

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs reappeared in theatres in early 1952 and again in 1958. Disney then released the film on home video in 1994, reintroducing a Depression-era princess to new audiences. Time traveling from one decade to another while maintaining her popularity, *Snow White* exemplifies Disney's tactical marketing—leveraging their properties to audiences across time and space. This paper draws on primary resources and performs a case study of *Song of the South* (Wilfred Jackson, 1946) and the film's paratexts to explore Disney's relationship to past, present, and future. In doing so, I posit that mobilising the Vault as a branding tool has broader historiographical implications: it serves, ultimately, as a public relations tool that obfuscates problematic corporate histories, even as the company continues to distribute content in the streaming age.

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Capitalist enterprise and nostalgic past shape Disney's projections of a technological future. These intermittent releases created a feeling of a timeless archive of characters who stretch their popularity from generation to generation. This practice played a pervasive role in the management of their film distribution since the 1944 reissue of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, becoming a fully realised corporate tactic for Walt Disney Home Video in 1984. However, since the advent of Disney's streaming platform, Disney+, in November 2019, limiting access to Disney classics to increase their perceived value seems like an outdated tradition. Fans no longer need to wait or scour reseller sites for their favourite Disney film during the film's moratorium; seemingly, everything a nostalgic viewer needs is at their fingertips. If users are willing to pay the premium for Disney's streaming service, then, as a Google Ad describes it, "The Vault is Wide Open."

But how wide? Some Disney films are not yet available on the streaming platform due to licensing agreements with other platforms, and the company has excluded or edited others from their original versions. Critics of the streaming service quickly pointed out the exclusion of major titles such as *Song of the South*, while other controversial sequences, such as the nudity in *Splash* (Ron Howard, 1984), have undergone an editing process to appear more family friendly (Alexander). Those films deemed to have controversial content, such as *Dumbo* (Ben Sharpsteen, 1941) and *Peter Pan* (Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson, and Hamilton Luske, 1953) have had a twelve-second content advisory statement added at the beginning which states that the stereotypical depictions "were wrong then and are wrong now. 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." By approaching censorship in these varying ways, Disney creates a hierarchy of redemption, drawing a line between the films which can be considered critically in the pursuit of a brand-friendly future, and the more egregious titles destined for a permanent stay under lock and key.

Although Disney has apparently set aside the Vault as a marketing strategy, I insist on a broader conceptualisation of the Vault, not only as a figurative place for films outside of their distribution windows, but also as an industrial practice of *vaulting* which continues to play a role at different sites of the Walt Disney Company. The verbification of the "Vault" invites a three-fold definition. Vaulting first refers to the practice of safekeeping films as precious corporate valuables. Animation historian David McGowan recognises this practice as an exploitation of the cinephile's longing for absent films, "turning each cyclical revival into an 'event' in which the film can be re-experienced by older audience members and embraced by a group of new viewers" (54–55). By locking up corporate assets for a short while, Disney accrues interest on the cultural value of its property. Vaulting also suggests deathly permanence, a process whereby properties inconsistent with the mythos of the Disney brand find their final resting ground in the crypt. By casting off unattractive aspects of its legacy, Disney maintains positive brand equity, recognised by business scholars Michaela Robbins and Fritz Polite as one important quality through which the company maintains market dominance (14). In its third sense, vaulting as an industrial practice sanitises their corporate history, creating a homogenised image across time and encouraging positive, affective responses from audiences who are unaware of any problematic films/images of the past. For instance, despite using the Vault as a foil while marketing Disney+, many titles are still unavailable on the streaming site.

Packaging the Past

Critical approaches to Disney's treatment of its history express two dominant concerns. First, there is analysis of the company's approach to its own history, which could be understood best as a form of self-theorisation—an industry practice defined by media scholar John Caldwell as the way companies "reflect obsessively back upon themselves and invest considerable energy in over-producing and distributing this industrial self-analysis to the public" (1). For Disney, these acts of self-reflection can often surface in the form of remembering the company's founder, Walter Elias Disney. The second dominant concern is Disney's production and commodification of history in the theme parks and media library.

Media scholar Jason Sperb suggests that self-theorisation sanitises Disney's often problematic past to put forth a particular vision of the company which aligns with its contemporary corporate values (Sperb, "How" 49–52). Media scholar Janet Wasko begins her seminal text *Understanding Disney* by reflecting on the many histories of the company, noting that "the history of the Disney company has almost always been the story of Walt Disney" (9). Walt Disney's life story was curated by Walt Disney himself during his lifetime, and this practice has been continued by the Disney company after his death in 1966 (Wallace 134). Inasmuch as Walt Disney and his company are deeply imbricated, managing the historical image of Walt Disney is an act of public relations.

Different terminology has arisen through the years to approach the ways that Disney has packaged its history. Mike Wallace, for instance, uses his essay "Mickey Mouse History" to outline the way Disney corporatises its past, describing Disney's approach as "not to reproduce it, but to *improve* it", drawing on Walt Disney's production of Main Street as at Disneyland as one primary example (136). Wallace also connects this sanitising approach to Disney's film adaptation practices, noting the way Disney turns Brothers Grimm fairytales from somewhat gruesome stories into cheery cartoons (137). Following an especially critical analysis of the corporate investments in history in EPCOT's Future World, Wallace concludes that those investments should be understood as "a historicidal enterprise" (149). Drawing on an earlier iteration of Wallace's essay (written for *Radical History Review* in 1985), Stephen Fjellman adopts a similarly critical approach to the commodification and sanitization of history, which he calls "Distory", an approach that, according to Fjellman, responds to the nostalgic needs of the everyday theme park visitor (59–60). Both Mickey Mouse history and Distory point to the ways that Disney packages a sanitised vision of history for its audiences.

Disney's nostalgic approaches to representing history in its theme parks have also presented challenges for the company when seeking to expand their theme park properties. In November 1993, the company announced *Disney's America*, a never-built theme park project planned during Michael Eisner's tenure as Disney's CEO. The planned park, which would commemorate American history, was to be located in Haymarket, Virginia, not far from the site of the first Battle of Bull Run (Mittermeier 127). After announcing the park, the company faced immediate scrutiny from journalists and historians, despite claims that the site would engage seriously with history rather than offering a conflict-free picture of the past (Wallace 164). Perhaps unexpectedly, *Disney's America* complicates Wallace's reflections on Mickey Mouse History, as he concludes that the difficulties presented by Disney's involvement with the site emerge from the commodification and privatisation of utopian histories rather than the act of blending education

and entertainment (169–71). Political theorist Scott Schaffer adopts a similar stance as he takes up the park and its controversy to introduce his perspective that one of Disney's practices is the "perversion of local histories." "That is," he writes, "the Walt Disney Company co-opts local histories, without their corresponding local social and political geographies, reconstitutes them as the company's own, and sells them to Disney's customers as markers of American political, cultural, and imperial attitudes."

Evaluations of Disney's mixture of education and entertainment are not all negative. Historian Sabrina Mittermeier takes up *Disney's America* as a case study to consider the role of theme parks in the practice of edutainment. Offering an alternative perspective to Wallace, Fjellman, and Schaffer, Mittermeier argues that theme parks mythologise rather than historicise, fulfilling a different purpose than museums or other historical sites. She also notes that one benefit of the proposal of *Disney's America* was that it opened up a dialogue between academics and public historians (141–43). Mittermeier concludes that theme parks provide windows for attendees to enjoy historical presentations, and edutainment in theme parks can complement the work of historians (143). Historian Douglas Greenberg shares a similar sentiment in mobilising Disney in defence of public history. Also using the never-built Virginia park as a touchstone, Greenberg notes that Disney's approach to history includes elements of sentiment and nostalgia, which he claims may not be as antithetical to the practice of history as some would expect: "To say that we need to exploit that power in order to communicate more effectively with the public is not to abandon our scholarly obligations; it is rather to vindicate them" (303). Indeed, Mittermeier and Greenberg each offer an alternative perspective, showing that Disney's nostalgic and sentimentalised approach to the past can be engaging.

While I do not take a stance on the value of edutainment or public history in this article, I do engage with the idea that this nostalgia and sentimentalisation have the potential to be used as a valuable tool in the arsenal of corporate self-theorisation and corporatised histories. Disney's approach to its streaming service perpetuates similar practices that scholars and activists have already identified in the way the company approaches its own history and the representations of history in the parks. I seek to demonstrate that the company's practice of sanitation and conflict-averse history continues into the streaming age. I draw on these historical perspectives to demonstrate that the advertisement and distribution (or lack thereof) of film and video also contributes to an idealised vision of Disney's past.

Marketing with the Disney Vault

1984 brought a series of changes for the Walt Disney Company. In fear of a hostile takeover from investor Saul P. Steinberg, Disney sought a greenmail deal buyout, causing Disney stock to fall from mid-June to early July (Bleakley D1). With stock values slowly returning to their prebuyout value into September, Walt Disney's nephew, Roy E. Disney, compelled the company to replace CEO Ron Miller; the board soon appointed Michael Eisner (formerly president of Paramount Pictures) as Miller's replacement (Lewis 87–105). In the wake of its stock market scare and corporate leadership changes, Disney sought new ways to capitalise on old assets. Thus, they began listing popular Disney titles for sale in 1984 via the newly launched Walt Disney Home Video. According to a column in the *Chicago Tribune* in December 1984, the company began

releasing "untouchable" titles for home video distribution, which "refers to 15 revered classics of animation, beginning with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), that represent the treasure housed in the Disney vault" (Ryan). Beforehand, audiences could rent lower-calibre Disney titles such as *Old Yeller* (Robert Stevenson, 1957) or *Escape to Witch Mountain* (John Hough, 1975) from Fotomat, a drive-through film rental company, from as early as 10 May 1980. It is important to remember that the VCR had a very limited presence in this period: even as late as 1985, only around fourteen percent of US households owned one (Overly). However, the release of the classic titles on VHS in 1984 allowed audiences to own their favourite, big-name Disney titles previously unavailable for VHS rental ("Disney" 47). These "untouchable" titles never appeared on television and only appeared in theatres every seven years (Ryan 84). These news articles point to a gradual transformation of the Disney Vault; what began as a term for a pause in theatre distribution grew into an intentional marketing tactic for previously inaccessible films on home video.

One consistent practice that Disney maintained throughout their Vault advertisements was the improving quality and technological appeal of each subsequent collection, a technique of "repurposing" well-employed in media and entertainment industries (Negroponte 62–65). The earliest promotional material available for Disney's VHS release of *Robin Hood* (Wolfgang Reitherman and David Hand, 1973) from 1984 comes in the form of a dealer sales and preview tape. Marketed towards Disney VHS dealers, this tape begins with the opening of an animated vault, revealing the logo for the "Disney Classics", the first VHS collection of Disney titles, which ran from 1984 to 1994. Disney makes an appeal to dealers by emphasising the quality of their animation, marketing support, and colourful packaging ("1984" 16:27). When the DVD emerged on the scene in the late 1990s, Disney "repurposed" their vaulted films for release alongside the technological advancement of this new format (Sedman 50; J. Scott 19). When Disney began restoring their films to be released as Platinum Editions to general audiences, they increased the value of the films not only by improving the quality, but also by releasing a two-disc DVD with bonus features. In a 2001 advertisement for the DVD release of *Snow White*, Disney claimed it would "redefine DVDs" through a series of extras that "will allow [the viewer] to experience *Snow White* in different ways" ("2001" 0:31). In his study of Disney animation, McGowan notes that the bonus features on these rereleases appealed to audiences of all ages, while also offering a supplemental archive to viewers who want to learn more about a certain film (57). As technologies improved, Disney's continuing strategy of remastering and rereleasing capitalised on providing a corresponding improvement in their films, thus appealing to dedicated cinephiles and adding value to Disney classics. The appeal of renewed animation and bundling continued through 2019, when the company announced the re-release of *Cinderella* (Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson, and Hamilton Luske, 1950) as a bundled digital, DVD, and Blu-ray set ("Cinderella" 0:50). By bundling, Disney marketed the multiscreen aspect of the product, which meant that audiences could watch the film as a high-quality Blu-ray disc on the television, or on an easy-to-access digital edition on their phones. Overall, bonus features, quality, and bundling added value to rereleases of Disney's classic films, stoking interest for contemporary audiences.

Disney also appealed to an audience's desire for a complete collection of films. In many VHS advertisements, Disney promoted the release of whole collections. Disney would release vaulted films as a part of a collection; even if they were not released on the same date, they would appear under families of tapes such as the Walt Disney Gold Classic Collection or the Walt Disney Masterpiece Collection. For example, on the VHS Gold Classics Collection of *Saludos Amigos*

(Wilfred Jackson, Jack Kinney, and Hamilton Luske 1942) Disney advertised that new VHS and DVD copies of the collection would be made available on the first Tuesday of every month. By setting regular release dates, Disney fostered excitement and anticipation around the purchase and the pursuit of a complete collection. While this method of regular release did not continue into later Disney collections, the collections themselves did last. The last collection was the Walt Disney Signature Collection, which the company released between 2016 and 2019 on DVD.

Families were the target consumer for Disney's home video, and a common theme in marketing materials was the sharing of memories across generations. Media industries scholar Derek Johnson explores this phenomenon at length in his book *Transgenerational Media Industries*, exploring the ways in which adults can function as "agents of promotion and transmission" in passing on their fandom to their children (57). Print advertisements for Disney Home Video appeared primarily in women's or parenting magazines such as *Woman's Day*, *Good Housekeeping* or *Parents*; notably, both *Woman's Day* and *Good Housekeeping* are owned by Hearst, a company with which Disney shares ownership in multiple media ventures including ESPN and A+E. One advertisement from *Good Housekeeping* in 1994 invites readers to "Welcome Disney's Next Collectible Classic Into the Family!" by purchasing *The Fox and the Hound* (Ted Berman, Richard Rich, and Art Stevens, 1981) on VHS ("Welcome"). Another advertisement from *Parents* in 2001 calls *Dinosaur* (Eric Leighton and Ralph Zondag, 2000) "The #1 Family Film of the Year" to sell readers on both the VHS and DVD ("The #1"). In a single column advertisement from *Chatelaine* from October 1997, Disney promoted a "Fairy Tale Weekend Contest" for mothers and daughters alongside the release of *Sleeping Beauty* on VHS. Participation in the contest meant turning your information over to the trip's sponsors. The terms and conditions note, "Occasionally, the names and addresses that we receive may be made available to specific, reputable organizations whose products and/or services may be of interest to you" ("Enter" 104). While admittedly the sponsors also allowed for participants to opt out, the collection of information through this sweepstakes indicates Disney was developing an archive of mothers to market to. In 1993, mothers were an estimated eighty-six percent of Disney's primary customers ("Disney's *Homeward Bound*" 53). In this instance, Disney used the contest and rerelease of *Sleeping Beauty* not only to market the film to audiences across generations, but also to target those audiences more effectively.

Advertisements for home video collections also appealed to the development of cross-generational memories. On the Masterpiece Collection edition of *Cinderella* released in 1995, a commercial aired for the whole collection. The narrator notes: "Now you can own the movies you loved when you were young and share them with your children", as Dumbo slides down his mother's nose. "They are the Disney movies every child should enjoy in a collection every family should own", he continues. "Some memories are too precious not to share." In this way, Disney marketed their films as a cornerstone of precious childhood memories that parents bear a responsibility to share.

Early responses to the launch of Disney+ discuss the streaming service in terms that set the platform in direct opposition to the Disney Vault. Following decades of restricted access, the launch of the streaming platform appeared to democratise Disney films for subscribers. Marketing for the streaming service offered the tagline "Disney+: The Vault is Wide Open." The news coverage for the streaming service from multiple sources refers to the streaming platform as

"killing the Vault" (Toone; Perez). This language pits Disney+ against the Disney Vault in such a way that the expansiveness of the streaming platform starkly contrasts the restriction of the Vault from contemporary Disney practices.

Despite their differences, Disney nonetheless applied similar marketing tactics from the Vault commercials to the marketing of their streaming platform. For instance, language from Disney's Vault era persists in the appeal for consumers to possess a complete collection of films. Before logging into the platform, a user can scroll through a page that highlights the most marketable features of Disney+. One of these promoted features is the abundance of films available on the streaming platform, akin to owning a complete collection. In a block titled "The new home for your favourites", a grid of popular Disney titles appears, described as an "unprecedented collection of the world's most beloved movies and TV series." Disney fans could now access a considerable volume of classic Disney films without waiting for strategic rereleases or hoping that their favourites would appear in the most recent collection. Before the streaming platform launched, advertising language in promotional videos also emphasised the breadth of this collection. Against the classic blue background associated with the streaming platform, the Disney+ logo appeared with the following caption: "All of your favourites, coming soon" ("Start" 1:56). While the home video advertisements emphasised ownership of complete, bundled collections but limited availability to their titles, Disney+ instead underscores not only the ease of access to previously unavailable titles, but the expansiveness of the assortment as well.

Disney+ also makes a similar appeal to quality, presenting itself as the utopic and technologically streamlined resolution to decades of vaulted Disney films. As early as a 2014 interview published in the scholarly collection *Distribution Revolution*, Kelly Summers, former vice president of Global Business Development and New Media Strategy at Disney, explained Disney's hesitancy regarding digital delivery. Reflecting on Disney's technological improvements from the Disney Vault era, Summers explicitly emphasised the jump in quality apparent in the move from VHS to DVD. In releasing treasured films to streaming platforms, Disney had feared a devaluation of their titles. Ever cognisant of providing a quality product to their customers, Disney looked suspiciously on the quality of online streaming: "With each successive technology, we want a better consumer experience and to grow the overall business, but things going digital hasn't always enabled that" (Curtin et al. 68). Summers claimed that streaming films online originally meant providing Disney classics in standard-definition, which offered no obvious improvement to the quality of the films in comparison to their legacy editions. According to this interview (which, importantly, is its own kind of self-theorisation), Disney valued quality over convenience when making their treasured classics available to consumers. When Disney+ entered the market, marketing took special care to highlight the technological quality of streaming these Disney titles. Like the DVD and digital bundles, Disney+ promoted the multiscreen aspect, highlighting on its front page that users can access the platform from their TV, computer, phone/tablet, or gaming console. Moreover, they emphasise that users can access "dozens of titles in stunning 4K UHD", which means that dedicated cinephiles can enjoy the ease of access to their streaming site without sacrificing image quality.

One apparent difference between the Disney+ and home video advertisements is the intended audience. While home video commercials appealed directly to the "traditional family", Disney+ also markets its classic films towards the single nostalgic, adult viewer. While Disney's

recent acquisition of properties with more mature audiences (such as *Star Wars* and Fox) may in part explain the shift for advertising the platform itself, Disney markets even "classic" animated films towards the nostalgic viewer. For example, on the Disney+ YouTube account, more than twenty years after its 1994 release, an original release trailer for *The Lion King* (Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff) serves as promotional material for the streaming service. The only change to the trailer appears at the end, where the text "Stream *The Lion King* on Disney+ Starting November 12" appears against a cool blue background. The description of the video reads, "Remember who you were… when you first saw #TheLionKing," ("Lion King" 2:21). An original trailer for *Toy Story* (John Lasseter, 1995) also appears on this account, inviting viewers to "return to Andy's room with the original trailer" ("Toy Story" 1:30). Both Disney classics appeal to an adult audience's assumed impulse to satiate their nostalgia on the streaming platform. Instead of passing on their fandom to future generations, they are invited to return. Even with the advent of new technology and high-quality streaming experiences, Disney still gazes backwards into its media library and invites its users to do the same—but only as far as the Vault allows.

Vaulting *Song of the South*

The totality of Disney's appeal to a complete collection, technologically improved and fun for users of all ages, conceals a corporate history deemed unworthy of Disney+. To expand on this, I consider Disney's contemporary relationship to their controversial film *Song of the South*, unavailable in any country on Disney+. Notoriously, Disney has a complicated relationship with *Song of the South.* At some points in its history, the company has refused to distribute the film on the grounds of its insensitive depictions of Black labour in a postemancipation South. At other times, Disney freely distributed the film. Disney re-released *Song* in US cinemas in 1956, 1972, 1980, and 1986 (Sperb, *Disney's Most Notorious Film* 5).

In a 1970 column from Variety Magazine titled "*Song of the South* Muted", Ron Wise writes about a theatre operator, Jeff Begun, who sought out *Song of the South* for booking. Disney refused his inquiry on the grounds that "the company had no intention of re-releasing it because of the racial angle" (Wise 7). This article suggests a permanent shelving of the 1946 picture; however, *Song of the South* found its way back out of the Disney Vault and into theatres just two years later. Although *Song of the South* may seem permanently buried away in Disney's corporate memory, these comments—in conjunction with the later releases of the film—demonstrate the variability with which the company has approached their film holdings over time. Not only did Disney's approach to this film vary temporally within the United States, but also transnationally. While the company kept the film locked up at home after the Reagan era, Disney distributed the film in the UK as a Walt Disney Classic as late as 1992, when it was released in the Disney Classics collection (Fig. 1), and it was broadcast on the BBC even into the early 2000s. Disney also distributed *Song of the South* in Japan on laserdisc in 1990 ("Song" *Laserdisc)*. *Song* was never released for at-home viewing in the United States ("FYI").



Figure 1: *Song of the South* available for home-viewing in the UK.
***Dumbo* VHS inside cover by Buena Vista Home Entertainment Ltd, UK, 1992.**

During the 2020 Annual Meeting of Shareholders, shareholder Matthew Hanson asked about the reach of CEO Bob Iger's claim that Disney+ would eventually have the "entire Walt Disney Studios library." He also inquired about plans to include *Song of the South* with an accompanying disclaimer regarding outdated depictions. With regards to *Song of the South* and other similarly difficult films, Iger expressed his feelings that even with an accompanying disclaimer, "it's just hard, given the depictions in some of the films, to bring them out today without in some form or another offending people, so we've decided not to do that," ("2020 Annual" 40:35–41:00). By placing the focus on the way that *today's* audiences will receive the film, Iger sets aside the past while alleviating pressure from the company, developing fresh corporate mythology through the strategy of self-theorisation. He also suggests that as dominant discourse around palatable material changes and becomes more complex, *the audience* creates an environment in which *Song of the South* does not belong. However, it is worth noting here that even in 1946, *Song of the South* underperformed at the box-office and offended audiences in its own time (Sperb, *Disney's Most Notorious Film* 63–65). As a forward-facing solution, Disney conceals the film from their digital streaming archive without taking accountability for the film's creation.

Despite the film's intermittent disappearance, the legacy of *Song of the South* continues to permeate popular culture. Since its release, the film has inspired merchandise, music, and theme park rides. Notably, these elements of *Song of the South* are carefully amputated from the controversial legacy of the film, primarily (though not exclusively) contained within the live-action sequences. While various artists from Louis Armstrong to Paula Abdul have covered the film's most popular song, Walt Disney Records most recently released a mash-up of "Zip-a-dee-doo-dah" and *The Jungle Book*'s (Wolfgang Reitherman, 1967) "The Bare Necessities" on the album "Disney Dreamin' with Matthew Morrison" in 2020—the same year Iger deemed the film "hard" to bring out for contemporary audiences.

Another monument to *Song of the South*'s cultural legacy is Splash Mountain, a theme park ride appearing in three Disney parks including Disneyland (1989), Disney World (1992), and Tokyo Disney (1992). Through an analysis of film reviews, Sperb has demonstrated that many criticisms relating to the racism in *Song of the South* denounce the live-action sequences, while praise for the film celebrated the animated sequences ("Take" 930–02). In creating Splash Mountain, Imagineers responded to this criticism, deracinating *Song of the South* by including only what they considered to be the redeemable half of the film: the characters in its animation. What references there are to non-animated characters in the film are intentionally vague. The narrative of the ride follows the animated protagonists of *Song of the South*, Br'er Rabbit and Br'er Bear, as they navigate Br'er Fox's lair. The ride concludes with a fifty feet drop down a log flume as the animals make their daring escape. Noticeably absent, however, are references to the highly contested live-action sequences of the film. The only exceptions are a couple of uncited quotations written on the walls of the theme park entrance; only riders who had seen the film would know that the quotes come from Uncle Remus.



Figure 2: Uncle Remus with Br'er Rabbit in *Song of the South*. *Song of the South*. Dir. Wilfred Jackson, Walt Disney Productions, 1946. Screenshot.

However, as time continues rolling by, the "racially sanitized" Splash Mountain fails to meet the criteria for Disney's utopic "expression of neutral" (Sperb, "Take" 925). During a summer of demonstrations by the Black Lives Matter movement in protest of George Floyd's murder, a 2020 post on the company-produced Disney Parks Blog announced an upcoming renovation to Splash Mountain at Disney World and Disneyland. It announced the ride would be rethemed, which means that Disney would transform the space to "revitalize" the property (L. Scott 281). Disney's first Black Disney princess, Princess Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog* (Ron Clements and John Musker, 2009), and her friends have since replaced the Br'er animals on Disney's log flume ride (Ramirez). By retheming the ride from Splash Mountain to Tiana's Bayou Adventure, Disney has demonstrated they consider the earlier theming irrelevant to their current IP. As of the time of writing in May 2024, the current opening date for Tiana's Bayou Adventure at Walt Disney World, Florida, has been announced as 28 June 2024 ("Dreams").

Taking Splash Mountain as a case study is helpful for thinking about how vaulting operates geographically. In the Disney Parks Blog announcement, the company only declared a renovation to their United States theme parks, which means that Tokyo Disneyland will maintain the Br'er animal theme. While the Disney public relations team refused to comment on my inquiries about the contrasting approach to renovations, I sought to better understand the relationship between Disney and their collaborator on the Tokyo Disneyland project, the Oriental Land Company (OLC). According to a *Wall Street Journal* article from January 1978, the OLC covered the cost of preliminary planning efforts, and a *New York Times* article from December of the same year, having interviewed Takeo Sato, the director of OLC's general affairs department, notes that "The $300 million cost of construction […] will be met almost entirely by Japanese interests" ("Walt Disney"; Dahlby). After some difficulties garnering approval for the project from the Japanese government, Tokyo Disneyland finally opened in Urayasu, a city just east of Tokyo. While news coverage from the time focuses on the financial agreement between the OLC and Disney (for instance, Disney took ten percent of gate takings and ride tickets and five percent of food and souvenir sale under the original agreement), they are not as clear about how much creative control Disney maintains over their Japanese theme park ("Japan").

However, when Disney pursued government approval for the expansion of Hong Kong Disneyland, a special meeting was held with the Panel on Economic Development. On a fact sheet distributed to the Members and Committees of the Legislative Council of Hong Kong, the operational statistics of Tokyo Disneyland and Disneyland Paris were listed to provide the panel with context for the financial arrangements of Disney's international parks, supplying economic context for the proposed expansion of Hong Kong Disneyland in 2009. The fact sheet states: "Generally speaking, Oriental Land is the owner and licensee whereas Walt Disney is the designer and licensor […] Walt Disney earned a fee for developing the park, *retained complete design control,* and retained significant control over park operations through a series of highly detailed operating manuals" ("Fact Sheet" 2; emphasis added). While I cannot conclusively state that this document proves that Disney could perform a retheme on Tokyo Disneyland's Splash Mountain, it does suggest that Disney maintains design control in some capacity over the rides in the Tokyo resort. Whether OLC refused to pay for the retheme, Disney felt that their Japanese fans were differently impacted by the racial tension of the legacy of *Song of the South,* or any number of other bureaucratic reasons, the fact remains that Disney is locking away domestic representations of the Br'er animals while allowing them to continue abroad, albeit in what appears to be limited ways.

From this case study of *Song of the South*, I conclude that the practice of vaulting enables Disney to present differing images of the Disney brand across time and space. In 1970, Disney refused to distribute the film, knowing that it was insensitive and inappropriate. Nevertheless, they released it two years later. Transnationally, the film saw variable treatment in home video and broadcast release, demonstrating that Disney presents a variable image of itself around the world. In the digital space of Disney+, *Song of the South*'s absence among a rhetoric of abundance obfuscates the film's participation in Disney's fraught corporate history and perpetuates the company's ongoing process of mythologisation.

Conclusion

Vaulting has important historiographical implications for consumers and researchers of the Walt Disney Company. By manipulating the visibility of problematic aspects of Disney properties, they change the affective impression of the historical record. Moreover, the company's streaming platform, Disney+, is deeply tied to the company and advertised as an all-encompassing digital repository for Disney films. In this way, the platform serves as effectively a Disney film archive, albeit one with parental controls such as "Junior Mode", a setting "that only features content *suitable for a broad range of viewers*" ("Parental Controls"; emphasis added). Effectively, this creates another layer of vaulting that "protects" children from what might be deemed "unsuitable" content. Like all archives, the streaming platform has its own contours and limitations that stretch beyond its role as a commercial product. By establishing vaulting as a practice fundamental to the construction of Disney+, I suggest that researchers can more effectively account for the restraints of that archive. Apart from the streaming platform, understanding vaulting as an industrial practice elucidates Disney's tendency to follow popular opinion throughout history and geographical space. This practice allows the company intermittently to capitalise on problematic films and accompanying merchandise in favourable climates, only to hide those films during rainier seasons.

Vaulting as a business practice renders some aspects of the brand exceptional while drawing others out of the critical eye. These practices are a continuation of Disney's complicated relationship with the past which seeks to focus on utopian images uncomplicated by historical tensions. By adopting similar marketing principles to those of the advertisements for Walt Disney Home Video, Disney+ continues to draw on the exceptionalism of the Disney Vault rhetoric to draw in subscribers. However, the Vault also persists in another way: to keep undesirable histories of the Disney brand distanced from the current branding. This is not to say that those histories will always be undesirable for developing the corporate brand, but rather that they remain incompatible with the dominant current discourse. Vaulting is an industrial practice of selective history that seeks to explain how Disney maintains a publicly inoffensive brand.

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