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The Wonderful World of the Exotic:
Cultural Experimentation at Disney World's Epcot Center

Walt Disney World has been a representation of the wholesomeness and advancement of the United States since its opening, an icon people around the globe aspire to visit and experience. A clear recognition of this global community is present in the World Showcase at Epcot Center, throughout which individual pavilions feature eleven nations.¹ Disney Corporation recognizes that performances, architecture, and food are the most accessible qualities of foreign cultures, and so includes them on each of the pavilions.² Kristin Hoganson's theory, that the exploration and domination of other cultures occurs through the consumption of ethnic foods in the private setting of the home, provides a useful lens when viewing this topic. Using her work on ethnic food in cookbooks as a framework, this paper views the foods present in the public setting of Epcot Center as representations of exotic cultures that are easily consumable by park visitors, most often Americans. An opportunity to consume these foods is an indication and demonstration of a luxurious lifestyle and dominant world standing.³ The accessibility of ethnic food at Epcot Center is evidence of America's dominance over other cultures and its desire to reduce them to bite-sized, Americanized representations for the enjoyment of consumers.

Walt Disney's first conception of Epcot Center was EPCOT, the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow, in which residents would live and an ideal city would be formed around community and state of the art technology. Disney died before this version was realized, and Epcot Center, not EPCOT, opened in 1982. It was the compromise made by the Disney Corporation (hereafter used interchangeably with "Disney"), and bore a striking resemblance to

the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition.⁴ Epcot Center is composed of Future World, in which visitors experience a wealth of futuristic technology, and World Showcase, in which traditionally styled pavilions represent eleven nations: Mexico, Norway, China, Germany, Italy, United States, Japan, Morocco, France, United Kingdom, and Canada.⁵ When looking at a map of the World Showcase it is clear Epcot is strongly promoting the United States as it is directly across the lagoon from the entrance, has much larger traditional architecture than any other nation, and is flanked by Italy and Japan, whose pavilion sights are not nearly as grand.⁶ Being located in the United States, there is some justification of the pride taken in "The American Adventure." However, if the goal of the park is to present a unified world community, the United States pavilion would be expected to resemble the others in terms of stature and grandeur.

Architecture representing the most well-known and status-filled images of the international countries houses the many themed food establishments, selling an experience that appeals to the eyes in addition to the nose and taste buds.^{7,8} The setting seeks to imply the authenticity of the food, as do the servers themselves, as workers in each of the pavilions are international residents participating in an internship position (naturally the Disney Corporation, not the international interns, determines the cuisine to be served).⁹ I recall my own visit to Epcot as a child and my amazement at being served a crepe by an actual Frenchman. This feeling of disbelief and luxury is what Disney is aiming for – the recognition that it is a right of park visitors to treat these cultures as entertainment rather than peers, and the acknowledgement that it is Disney that is providing this culinary opportunity.

Epcot is therefore providing international tourism within the United States – representations of global places that are more clean, safe, friendly, and therefore better than the originals.¹⁰ Looked at differently, the American version of these nations and their cuisines is

preferable to the nation itself. Of course, economic concerns are ever present when it comes to international travel, and in these cases it is possible Epcot Center may be the next best thing if global jet setting is too expensive. However, because of these constraints, the Disney version of the world is the version visitors become familiar with and use as their interpretation of the entirety of the original country. Because Disney promotes these nations in what appear to be the most positive and appealing light, preconceived negative connotations have the potential to be alleviated and result in improved visitor opinions and a wider view of the world community. The opposite, grossly generalized stereotypes, also have the potential to be formed as Disney has appropriated the characteristics of the nations, and food in particular, that it finds the most attractive and particularly profitable. A third possibility, that visitors will consider these nations as mere sources of pleasing food items and not as unique cultures with representative cuisines, reduces these nations to food suppliers instead of distinct and valuable locales.¹¹ In this way, Disney has manipulated the food and performance cultures of these nations primarily to increase revenues, and secondarily to provide a semi-authentic international experience.

As noted by Nelson, food is the chief ambassador at Epcot, encouraging experimentation with the exotic in the safety of the theme park.¹² The Disney Corporation at large is encouraging this exploration by using some of its television stars as role models. An image of Disney stars preparing to eat an unspecified dish for a public service announcement entitled, “Try New Foods” indicates Disney’s urging that children take advantage of their global prowess and to consume as many cultures as possible.¹³ Cultural exploration is wonderful, as is bolstering children’s desire to try new things. Disney, however, promotes these values through an entitled American lens. This once again asserts that we are all part of one world, but America is the

premier member of that world. This is detrimental to the goal of Epcot – to promote a world community filled with respect and exploration – but positive for its revenues and patriotism.

This opinion of American preference is applied to the appearance of Epcot workers as well. As noted by Nelson, “The world’s people may be different, but at EPCOT they all display the hygienic and sartorial ideals of mid-America.”¹⁴ Presenting international food workers in a familiar, American fashion likely makes visitors more comfortable sampling their ethnic dishes. This act removes an authentic performance element of food and cultural representation, homogenizing the international presence at the park to present Disney’s idealization of exotic cultures. This idealization culminates in the decor of the San Angel Inn restaurant in the Mexico pavilion. Neon colors abound as a blue mural depicting a forest and volcano contextualize a large three-dimensional pyramid in the center of the dining room. Small trees are situated next to the pyramid to give the illusion that the forest is emerging from the background, and the tables and chairs are fluorescent reds, greens, and yellows and are carved and painted with colorful flowers.¹⁵ The entire scene is a bit of an assault to the eyes and screams “American Resort,” but is no doubt extremely attractive to young children who are being encouraged to explore “authentic” Mexican cuisine in an “authentic” setting. This doctored representation of Mexican dining is not authentic, but that was not the intent. It was designed to be exciting, unusual, and, chiefly, profitable. This restaurant is just one of many representations of altered ethnicity present at the park, and literally illustrates the distortion of cultures.

Food is used at Epcot Center to assert America’s dominance over the rest of the world, paralleling Hoganson’s similar view in regards to consuming the exotic through home cooking. The simplification of cultures and the augmentation of food and performance fulfill Disney’s desire to consolidate some of the world’s most unique cultures into easily digestible portions of

entertainment. This can be detrimental to the accurate perception of these cultures, and can even affect the cultures themselves as they may feel pressure to adapt and embody the characteristics put forth by Disney. Although Disney's encouragement of trying new things through these reduced cultures is somewhat noble, it is presented in an Americentric manner. Perhaps if natives of each country ran their respective pavilions instead of just staffing them a more authentic, unified presentation would result.

¹ Epcot Center, "Overview," Walt Disney World, <http://disneyworld.disney.go.com/parks/epcot/> (accessed May 20, 2011).

² Steve Nelson, "Walt Disney's EPCOT, and the World's Fair Performance Tradition," *The Drama Review: TDR* 30, no. 4 (1986): 129.

³ Kristin L. Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of Domesticity, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 114, 120.

⁴ Stephen M. Fjellman, *Vinyl Leaves: Walt Disney World and America*, (Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford: Westview Press, 1992), 85-86.

⁵ Epcot Center, "Overview," Walt Disney World, <http://disneyworld.disney.go.com/parks/epcot/> (accessed May 20, 2011).

⁶ Map of Epcot Center, Lake Buena Vista, Florida, ca. 2011 featured in "Walt Disney World Resort," Disney, <http://disneyworld.disney.go.com/wdw/parks/maps/mappopup?id=EpcotMapPage>, accessed May 21, 2011.

⁷ Alexander Wilson, "The Betrayal of the Future: Walt Disney's EPCOT Center," in *Disney Discourse* ed. Eric Smoodin (New York: Routledge, 1994), 123.

⁸ Fjellman, *Vinyl Leaves*, 317.

⁹ Epcot Center Call Center Operator, phone conversation with the author, May 21, 2011.

¹⁰ Michael Sorkin, "See You in Disneyland," in *Variations on a Theme Park* ed. Michael Sorkin (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992), 216.

¹¹ Lucy M. Long, "Culinary Tourism," in *Culinary Tourism* ed. Lucy M. Long (University Press of Kentucky, 2004) 22.

¹² Nelson, "EPCOT, and the World's Fair," 139.

¹³ Gene Duncan, "Disney Healthy Eating," Associated Press, photograph, March 17, 2011, <http://apimages.ap.org>.

¹⁴ Nelson, "EPCOT, and the World's Fair," 141.

¹⁵ Photograph of San Angel Inn restaurant, Lake Buena Vista, Florida, ca. 2011 featured in "Epcot Dining and Restaurants," Disney, <http://disneyworld.disney.go.com/dining/san-angel-inn/>, accessed May 21, 2011.