Chapter 15

"Eating the Other" at Disney's Animal Kingdom Park and Resort

By Ani Steele

> The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture.
>
> – hooks 2012

Introduction

Often, the work of portraying Africa to the world has not been in the hands of the people represented. More often than not, the messages, stories and depictions of Africa are filtered through the observations and interpretations of those outside of Africa, and especially, those in the global north. In fact, it has been through the observations of white missionaries, scientists and explorers that the basis for what is "Africa" and therefore, also often what is "Black", has been established for western audiences. W.J.T. Mitchell eloquently explained, 'When we look *at* something we always, necessarily, look *from* somewhere else' (Grinker, Lubkemann and Steiner 2010: 3 as cited by Parasecoli 2010).

The western understanding, or misunderstanding of Africa is structured through the American/European framework of their values, assumptions and beliefs (Grinker et al. 2010). This western-centric gaze gives 'power to order objects and persons into a world to be known and to lay it out before a vision capable of encompassing it as a totality' (Grinker et al. 2010: 3) to the observers, also known as American/European views. Additionally, this authority in looking also allows the see-er to be seen and to become visible as a subject since it is their view and values that their subjects are being depicted through. Many claims of unbiased, authentic representations of Africa, even when the intentions are positive and well-meaning, are misleading. Positive intent alone does not nullify the stereotypes of Africa and Africans when it is only celebrated through the viewpoint of the standard western gaze.

This is where the Walt Disney Company and their Animal Kingdom Park and Resort, specifically, enters the conversation. The Walt Disney Company is an enterprise consisting of theme parks (in the US and overseas), animated and live-action films, film production companies, their own town and government, ESPN, streaming services, the Disney channel, the Disney cruise line and is a major employer and economic source in the state of Florida as well as California. It all started with a mouse character, namely Mickey Mouse and the first theme park, Disneyland opened its doors in 1955. Sixteen years later, plans for Disney World began with four major kingdoms finding their home in Kissimmee, Florida: Magic Kingdom (1974), EPCOT (1982), Hollywood Studies (1989, formerly MGM Studios) and the final land, Animal Kingdom, opening in 1998. It is no overstatement what the cultural impact Disney possesses at home and abroad. Since Oswald and Steamboat Mickey, Walt Disney, his animators and his Imagineers (engineers with a fun twist) have helped construct Americana culture; they have been a source of education and entertainment as well as a global power whose influence cannot be overstated.

Within Disney's Animal Kingdom are four lands: Africa, Asia, Pandora: The World of Avatar, and Dinoland U.S.A. Harambe Village, Africa, is where you can visit the Harambe Market, go on a "two-week" safari, buy "hand-carved" kitchen spoons or flutes, and dance to the drums played by the "locals" (Disney Cultural Representatives). Disney is the industry leader in the art of storytelling in their films and parks. Their carefully crafted worlds incorporate fantasy and culture, myth and truths through the cultural representatives, menu offerings, buildings and structures, music and clothing. And yet, it is this dedication to immersive, fantastical storytelling first, rather than portraying the true and complex experience of Africa, which draws Disney into trouble. Disney creates an Africa which is palatable for the general white, middle class, American audience. They present an opportunity to visit the whole continent of Africa without leaving the American shores and here lies the problem. Without calling themselves the experts on Africa, Disney positioned themselves as the real thing, where visiting Harambe is the same as walking the streets of Johannesburg, South Africa or Lagos, Nigeria. Guests walk away with reinforced stereotypes of Africa and Africans which are then brought home and shared along with their souvenirs with their families and friends.

Another way to reinforce these stereotypes or incomplete narratives of Africa is the way in which African cuisine, food cultures and food practices are written about and portrayed by professionals who the public sees as an expert on the topic. Instead of seeing the African continent as 'a place of blending of many cultures, a process called syncretism' (Grinker et al. 2010: 7), Ako-Adkei (2015)

points out, American/European audiences still view African foods as a monolithic eating experience that is the same across climatic zones and people, resulting in the stereotype of a single Africa.

Workneh (2020) explains how 'in imagining the Other, the colonizer posits its own culture as the normal, central, and typical, and views the native and his or her worldview ... as the outlier, the fascinating, the exotic' (122). This perspective can be found in a 2002 article in the popular wine magazine '*The Wine Spectator*', titled '*Lion King Dining*'. Mariani (2002) reviewed Jiko-The Cooking Place, one of the African themed restaurants at the Animal Kingdom Lodge and wrote the following about the food, wine and décor:

> To sample the best of South Africa, you need travel no farther than Jiko, in Florida's Disney World ... Set in an African-themed restaurant in a Florida resort lodge ... and people will not likely expect top -quality cooking and wine service ... the convivial waitstaff, mostly young Africans, is decked out in vivid African fabrics and bright, plaid head scarves ... Jiko sells the lion's share of several small South African wineries (112–114).

Another review of the styling and design of the Animal Kingdom Lodge falls into the same trap:

> The subtle references to Disney's famous icon are relegated to mere cameo appearances. Clearly, Africa is the star of Disney's newest resort ... this exotic lodge is the latest answer to Disney Chairman Michael Eisner's mandate to create architecture that is never boring .... The "Africa" that lies over the threshold of the main lobby is neither cartoon nor caricature, but an innovative reconstruction of Africa's art, culture, and way of life ... huts and low walls corral the seating arrangements in the 280-seat family restaurant, Boma in its stead is an assemblage of eclectic huts and houses with a mix of colored euki wood, thatch, and other traditional African materials that make this seem more like a marketplace than a restaurant (Out of Africa 2001: 237–238).

Both reviewers gladly revert to the old tropes of the happy native (convivial wait staff, mostly young Africans), the exotic and fascinating (vivid African fabrics; exotic lodge, architecture that is never boring, neither cartoon nor caricature, yet an innovative reconstruction) and typical stereotypes that leave the authors in awe at the presentation of this Africa with their eclectic huts, and coloured *euki* (*sic*) wood. It is the belief that this is the only version of Africa which lends them to believe

in the trueness of this place. To quote Grinker et al. (2010: 11): 'For this reason, representations of Africa generally tell us far less about those who are being represented than they do about the preoccupations and prejudices of those engaged in the act of representing.'

I must confess that I have been a fan of Disney animated films and their parks since I was a young girl. Disneyland was the first vacation my brother and I went on with my dad after my parent's divorce. Disneyland, "The Happiest Place on Earth", was exactly that for me. It was a place where other families, kids, adults, couples, whoever, were all normal and without dysfunction. At least on the outside. This fandom led me to visit Disneyland and Disney World multiple times, even interning at Disney World during the spring semester of my freshman year at college. Therefore, my expertise of Disney is not one of an outsider who has studied and observed, but that of one who has seen it as a safe space for most of her life.

Based on my previous visits and experiences, it was not a stretch to visit Animal Kingdom as part of my research in October 2021. Part of visiting the Park in person was to have first-hand experience of how the multiple layers of theming, stories, stereotypes and truths were blended into one another to create a space where fantasy and culture, embellishment and truth were one and the same. Not only was I able to observe and process the bold and muted details in the space in my own way, I was able to witness how other guests and their families processed this information as well. Additionally, I analysed the menus and cookbooks from Disney and their African-inspired restaurants to provide a well-informed critique of how they present "their" Africa at the Animal Kingdom.

Studying Disney, studying food

To answer my question about Disney's use of food and other cultural items as authenticators of their Africa, I stayed at the Animal Kingdom Lodge in October 2021 and performed participant observation in the park and restaurants. Additionally, I analysed the cultural texts of cookbooks, restaurant menus and Disney published texts and assessed their techniques of how they staged their African inspired spaces. Through this, I hoped to address: how Disney, as an influential conduit of stereotypes in globalised popular culture, turns to food and dining spaces as cultural authenticators in representing Africa. A related purpose was to reflect on how Disney reinforces and even intensifies hegemonic stereotypes about Africa and people of African descent through its treatment of African food and dining experiences.

1) How does Disney use food and dining experiences as cultural authenticators for their presentation of their Africa?
2) How does Disney's version of Africa contribute to or limit the ways in which the cultures and peoples of Africa are presented to western audiences?

African-inspired spaces at Disney World included the Kenyan festival booth at Epcot for the International Food and Wine Festival, Tamu, Tamu and Harambe Market (both quick service restaurants), Sanaa, *Boma*-the Flavours of Africa, Tiffins, and Jiko-The Cooking Place (Due to COVID-19, I was not able to eat at Jiko, however, their menu was available online). Lastly, Disney-published cookbooks, '*Taste of Epcot: Festival Food from Around the Globe'* (Brandon n.d.) and *'A Cooking Safari with Mickey: Recipes from Disney's Animal Kingdom theme park and Disney's Animal Kingdom Lodge'* (Brandon 2015) were drawn upon to analyse the way African food is spoken about and what dishes are used.

Goffman's (2007) dramaturgical theory emphasises the actions and efforts we take to craft our presentations to the public. According to this theory, individuals construct and assign what they allow to be on their "front stage", also known as, what people see. For example, one's Instagram profile, daily outfits, choice of slang one does and does not use are constructions of what is on front stage for people to easily access; it is what one wants the public to see. There is also a "backstage" and it is here where one reserves what one does not want the public to know. Examples of the backstage are family holiday dinners, cultural hair secrets, expressions of vulnerability etcetera. These stages are situated to adjust and control how individuals are perceived by others. I argue this ability to decide what is placed in the front stage and what is reserved for the back stage, a person, culture or community can decide how much of themselves they are willing to share.

In relation to Disney and their Harambe, Africa, there is an attempt to control the perception of their front stage by presenting African cuisine and culture as if the Imagineers and/or Disney itself are experts of Africa's "backstage". This is important, because if one realises Disney's Harambe is a construction and not the real thing, then it shatter's Disney's attempt to integrate the audience into their hyper-realistic space. One no longer needs to go to Harambe to see Africa at home, because everyone knows this Africa is not truly *real*. It relates back to Fjellman's (1992) concepts discussed in his book, '*Vinyl Leaves: Walt Disney World and America'*: the 'real real, the real fake, the fake real, and the fake fake' (255). The "real real" are the animals and people, the "real fake" is the animated Mickey Mouse, the "fake real" is the Mickey Mouse that one meets at Disney World even though

you know he is only a character and the "fake fake" are the stories of a magic carpet ride and a cuddly, blue alien in Hawaii. Disney needs their food, restaurants, attractions, hotel and staging to make guests feel they are viewing the intimate backstage of Africa, also known as the "real real" or their storytelling does not work. It is "fake real" at best; however, this is not what the visitors are paying to see.

At the beginning of this research, I thought about the value of authenticity, positivity and respectfulness in representations which counter stereotypes, especially of Africa and African bodies through food. Now, however, I would expand attention to the problems of representing Africa and African food to include seemingly positive and respectful representations. As I go on to show, many repeat limiting stereotypes even when they seem laudatory, reinforcing binaries between Africa as, for example, "natural" and "spontaneous" versus the west as rational and "boring". My analysis, therefore, focusses critically on the semiotics of, for example, language, décor, bodies and food items, rather than on obviously disparaging or racist meaning-making. I believe that it is only through humble exploration of another culture *and* the ability for members of that community to see themselves in this presentation, that stereotypes about Africa and African food can be challenged.

For this research, I began by breaking down what the Disney Park and Resort used for their tools of storytelling, which then led into how they are representing a continent of people. Part of Disney's storytelling is dependent on their use of edutainment, a blend of entertainment and education. As I combed through the pictures, restaurant menus, cookbooks and the notes I took from my observations and online materials, I identified two themes under entertainment, two which fell under education and a final theme under experiential experiences. These themes are discussed in the following subsections.

Disneywashing

Pulling from Fjellman's (1992) definition of Disney Realism—which is the use of countless coordinated details, such as cultural ambassadors, cuisine and décor—to over-stimulate one's power of discrimination, I came up with *Disneywashing*. A play on whitewashing, this theme incorporates examples of "fun, safari-themed" language to describe meals or experiences. In addition, this also includes the use of Disney characters, such as a Simba cupcake or dressing Mickey and Minnie in matching safari garb to Disneyfy the presentation of Africa.

The effect of *Disneywashing* a place is like whitewashing histories and cultures. Whitewashing gives control to the narrator and when one has control of the story, they have control over the people and how events took place in those stories. It also allows white audiences to feel comfortable and avoid any guilt in the acts of oppression and white supremacy they (or their ancestors) have willingly engaged in. Harambe Village must be *Disneywashed* for it to maintain the exotic and fantastical story of Africa which has been told for centuries, however, is still a place white people will feel safe (physically and emotionally) to visit. It must be enticing enough to encourage the bored American's adventurous spirit, but not radical enough to provoke un-magical conversations. Enough truth needs to be present for the fantasy to be accepted. This appears to be very effective considering the number of people who visit the Continent looking for Harambe Village and finding something different instead.

Language is a powerful tool in any storytelling. While Disney relies on visual and sensory cues to incorporate their guests into their lands of real and make believe, the use of language is still a major component to a well-told story. Through reading their menus, both in person and online, and reading descriptions of their dishes and dining spaces, I found Disney used descriptions which related to adventure, travel, culinary exclusivity and fun experiences to describe their offerings. For example, the savanna was often used to invoke imagery of spaces or as the descriptor of dishes.

> *'Step inside this exquisite, East-African inspired eatery, which evokes a traditional spice market, decorated with handcrafted wares under the graceful branches of an acacia tree.'* (Description of Sanaa, table service restaurant)
> *'Set off on a safari of flavor as you enjoy traditional Kenyan food and beer.'* (Kenya, booth Epcot's International Food and Wine Festival)
> *'Savanna Spring rolls'* (recipe from *A Cooking Safari with Mickey*)

The use of Disney characters and movies were also used to make African food more approachable and familiar. *Zawadi* Marketplace is the onsite gift shop at the Animal Kingdom Lodge where souvenirs and staple groceries can be purchased (a quick google search taught me that *Zawadi* is Kenyan for gift). Souvenirs include Mickey and Minnie plushies in safari wardrobe and an orange tank top of Goofy with the saying "Safari so Good" printed on the front (see appendix for photos taken by the author). This was also true for the souvenirs sold within the theme park. An interesting depiction of a "Disneyfied" version of African culture were two fables, Fauna and Environ. Both

used the African fable story telling structure to relate a Disney-created story about the birth of the dung beetle and explain the purpose of savanna fires. For example, here is the story Fauna:

> Weary of the scarcity of food, a wise old stork called a council. "Giraffe," he said, "You alone can reach the tender leaves of the trees. Let the others eat the grass." To the zebra and wildebeest, he said, "Do not feed in one place, move to where the grass is always fresh and tender." So, one by one, he showed the animals how to share the savanna. Finally, a tiny voice said, "What about me?" Looking down at a small beetle, the stork laughed and said, "My friend, the others will leave plenty behind for you." And that is how the dung beetle came to be. –A Disney tale of the Savanna, signage at the Animal Kingdom Lodge and Resort (see appendix for photo)

This blending of what is Africa with what is Disney is subtly displayed here. Part of African culture is the transmission of oral history and stories, providing answers to the creation of the planet, weather patterns, and the birth of animals, insects and humans. What Disney has done here is "Disneyfied" an African cultural component to increase the playfulness of the space and the perception of Africa.

Savouring the exotic

Savouring the exotic involves instances when visitors can experience a variety of African cultures and foods by using specific ingredients in certain dining styles (quick service, table dining, fine/signature dining) and through souvenirs available for purchase, such as cooking utensils or cookbooks. This theme indicates the guest's ability to consume parts of Africa in both physical and metaphorical ways. This consumption of the "Other" is discussed by hooks (2012) in her essay, '*Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance'*, and later in Bryman's (2004) term, "Disneyization". To truly understand the impact of "savouring the exotic", I need to take some time to explain the pitfalls of consumption culture.

Packaging of the "Other" within the US's capitalist, patriarchal and white supremacist society is a longstanding practice. The commodification of the "Other", particularly those considered different or non-white, has been ingrained in western culture for centuries. As explained by hooks (2012), in a consumer-driven culture, ethnicity is often treated as a spice, used to add flavour to an otherwise mundane mainstream culture. Even within places like Disney World, where everything seems to

be up for sale, white audiences can indulge in a taste of the exotic, seeking an escape from their everyday lives. However, this desire and sense of entitlement to experience and purchase aspects of another culture can lead to harmful acts of appropriation. Even when done with seemingly harmless or respectful intentions, such consumption often reinforces harmful stereotypes and beliefs, rather than challenging them.

Bryman's (2004) concept of "Disneyization" parallels hooks' (2012) discussion of the commodification of the "Other". "Disneyization", akin to "McDonaldization", but with Disney's principles at its core, is infiltrating various sectors of American society (Bryman 2004). It comprises theming, the blurring of consumption boundaries, merchandising and emotional labour. The blurring of consumption boundaries, refers to the trend where different realms of consumption intertwine, making it harder to differentiate between them. This concept mirrors hooks' (2012) observations about how the "Other" is packaged for consumption by white audiences across various mediums, including food, film and theme parks.

With this understanding in mind, it is understandable why the act of "savouring the exotic" is an important component of Disney's use of food and cuisine for their storytelling. Disney's brand relies heavily on nostalgia and escapism. Their products must be marketed so that the visitor wants to take a piece of it home with them or crave their next opportunity to visit the parks. Marketing of an orange "Safari so Good" tank top is transparent in its attempt for a visitor to take a piece of Disney home with them. With food and dining, however, there must be other strategies for one to "savour" the experiences and food engaged with at the resorts and parks. For a theme park like Animal Kingdom, whose partial goal is to present an "authentic or traditional" view of Africa, the type of food served through specific dining outlets is important to consider in the structuring and location of these spaces.

Quick service restaurants, such as Tamu, Tamu, Kenya's booth at EPCOT, the Mara and Harambe Market served items that were "American favourites" and used similar ingredients at each location, such as berbere spice, Ghanaian chocolate, tamarind, Kenyan coffee, or guava. Typically, these restaurants target young families and quick stops while in the park; prices were typically under US$15, and the use of African ingredients were used to flavour American dishes. For example, at the Mara, I had a berbere spiced bacon cheeseburger, but without the menu description listing berbere spice as an ingredient, I would not have thought it anything more than your average American style

cheeseburger. In this way, these restaurant styles were used to introduce a foreign flavour profile on a familiar food item, such as a cheeseburger.

The table service restaurants, such as Sanaa, were slightly more expensive, ranging from US$15 to $34.99 per adult meal. As such, the ingredients and dishes offered were more "African", not relying on the backdrop of American favourites to introduce the guest to new flavours. Sanaa, is a fusion restaurant, describing itself as "the art of African cooking with Indian flavours". Ingredients here are still "accessible" to the American palate, however, flavours of Africa and India are present. Chicken, berbere spice (which is present at almost every African themed food establishment), tamarind, *boerewors* (South African sausage), curries and Kenyan coffee and beer made common appearances throughout the menu. *Boma*-the Flavors (*sic*) of Africa used the format of a buffet to introduce various dishes for guests to sample and savour, allowing them to dip their toes into traditional African spices and dishes.

The fine/signature dining restaurants such as Tiffins and Jiko- The Cooking Place, were more focussed on a modern, upscale approach to traditional African favourites. Reservations to these restaurants are hard won and the price for an adult meal begins at US$35. It could be reasoned there is an assumption that this is a more adventurous or curious group of guests, therefore, ingredients such as chakalaka (spicy South African vegetable relish), lamb, *braai* (bbq) spiced veal, wild boar, hibiscus, West African Koki corn, or Egyptian *fatir* (flat) bread are "safe" to present at these dining locations. It also does not hurt that guests of these types of restaurants most likely occupy a higher financial class, thus able to afford these luxuries and are perceived to be more open-minded to exotic flavours.

In the Disney sponsored cookbooks, *'A Cooking Safari with Mickey'* (Brandon 2015) and *'A Taste of Epcot: Festival Food from Around the Globe'* (Brandon n.d.), similar ingredients were used as was found in the quick service and table service restaurants: Durban style chicken, berbere braised lamb, mango, chakalaka, *bobotie* (a South African dish of minced meat with curry, dried fruit, and an egg-based topping), beef and corn mealie pap (cornmeal porridge). Lastly, African items, such as drums, jewellery, hand carved items and other artwork were offered for purchase or used as museum-like exhibits for guests to admire. These were some of the ways Animal Kingdom Lodge and Park encouraged its guests to savour their time at the park and recreate those memories at home.

Authenticity (real or created)

To savour a culture which is new and unknown, one must believe in the story being told. The use of structures, façades, textures, paint, furniture and descriptions are all tools to give a depiction of Africa that is in a Disney reality. Surprisingly, the word "authentic" was not used as often as I expected. Adjectives such as "traditional" or "African- this, Kenyan, or Ghanian, or West African that" were alternatively used in describing dishes.

There was a conscious choice by the decision-makers and Imagineers at Disney to avoid entangling their version of Africa with the real Africa. They were presented with a challenge of how to give guests an experience of an African village without having to acknowledge some of the history, good and bad, of that place. Wright (2007: 66) explains in the *'Imagineer's Guide to Animal Kingdom'*,

> There was a conscious effort not to rely heavily on colonial architectural forms, as these outside influences would take us away from *our* African story; Another reason we created a fictitious place is that it allowed us to avoid becoming linked to the political history of any specific country (emphasis added).

Instead, Disney let the décor, food and descriptions do the talking for them.

At Harambe Village at the Animal Kingdom Park and the Kenyan festival booth at Epcot, the structures are composed of exposed brick and textured walls, straw and thatched roofs, crates, and posters advertising for community events, jobs and announcements, giving flesh and bones to this created world. The Animal Kingdom Lodge's lobby and select rooms were structured as an art museum. Encased in glass were horns, masks, tools and other items that resembled lost artifacts, all accompanied with informational placards explaining the cultural and/or historical status of the item. For example, a sixteen-foot, multi-coloured mask used by the Igbo tribe of Nigeria cordoned off by ropes and five small, glass displays, these displays discussed the culture of the Igbo people, while providing pictures of the ceremony in which this mask would be used (see appendix for photos).

The restaurants and other spaces in the lodge draws visitors into an African "marketplace" using African prints, textures, cloths, and other cultural materials used as seating, décor, tables and

lighting. These details are not used in their literal use—shields are not used as shields and the colourful, wooden beads are magnified to be used as pillars instead of hair adornment—however, the simple *knowledge* and *use* of these details persuades visitors that they are experiencing a true African place, people and culture, even if they do not understand the meanings of those details. The Tiffins restaurant in the Animal Kingdom Park amplifies the strategy of modelling its space after an art space. Disney's Animal Kingdom Lodge (n.d.) website describes Tiffins as 'a gallery of art based on the travel and adventure that inspired the creation of Disney's Animal Kingdom'. This can be seen clearly as the burnt-orange-coloured walls are a canvas for the pieces of buildings and materials which would later inform the construction of Harambe Village's building and spaces (pictures in appendix).

Africa, nature and animals

Disney attempts to celebrate the art and food offerings that represent Africa, however, some of the representation points back to old and known stereotypes. This was done in part because of the company's desire for Animal Kingdom to focus on the conservation and care of the wildlife species in the continents of Africa and Asia, rather than on the people in these spaces. As such, the people and places had to provide a context for where these animals would be found, neglecting the possible damage this could cause. The stereotypes of Black people as animalistic and primitive can be strengthened when they are only spoken of and celebrated when it comes to their proximal relationship to the native wildlife of the African continent.

Imagineer Wright (2007) explains the choices made in the Africa Disney chose to create:

> Certainly there are places in Nairobi or Lagos or Johannesburg in which one could mistake the setting for any large, modern city around the world. But to focus on that here would be to miss the point- this story is about animals, not humans (66).

Wright (2007: 66) continues by saying, 'While a cultural backdrop adds detail and enriches the experience, the core story-line only deals with human development to the extent that it affects the animal kingdom'. Considering that the park was opened in 1998, this guide was published in 2007 and this piece was written from 2021–2022, it could be argued that Disney has recognised some of their errors and have attempted to rectify this by incorporating more African art, artifacts and cultural representatives.

However, some of the marketing for restaurants such as Tiffins and Sanaa focussed on the 'spectacular views of African wildlife on the lush sunset Savanna outside' (disneywold.com for Sanaa), while Tiffins had a designated dining area titled the "Safari Gallery" to showcase the work of the Imagineers and animal scientists as they travelled through eastern and southern Africa. Although there are cultural representatives for the guests to interact with (due to COVID-19, there were few cultural representatives that I could identify), there are no examples of the work Disney put into understanding Africanness or specialists they tapped to help contextualise their Harambe Village or their resort.

The last data point I want to point out is the informational posters hung in two of the hallways I passed by daily. One was titled "Mysterious Africa" with Black children painted in white paint while the other "Masks of Africa" displayed men and women with painted faces. Depending on the guest viewing these images, it could solidify the stereotype of the primitive, single Africa or could be seen as one chapter in the lives of African people; the benefit of the doubt must be heavily assumed to believe that all guests view these depictions without prejudice or confirmation of their anti-Black beliefs.

Food adventures by Disney

Browsing through the Disney World website, I was surprised at the conspicuous absence of the foodie's beloved adjective, "authentic". Authenticity can be likened to Bourdieu's habitus, behaviour and relational structures which lead to power, legitimacy and distinction, also known as social capital (Sánchez Prado 2020). Keep this in mind as we circle back to the discussion on Goffman's (2007) dramaturgical concepts. For Disney to convince guests they are engaging in the true backstage of African culture and not an elaborately staged front, there must be a belief that what is being shown is what truly happens in the everyday life of Africans. Since food and travel are seen as opportunities of "learning about the other", the demand for what is authentic has come centre stage. The ability to state that you had an "authentic" Mexican meal at the hole in the wall restaurant in an obscure part of town serves two purposes for the foodie: 1) it allows them to wield a privilege of authority and expertise on another culture and 2) it gives them substantial social capital in their own communities.

Lisa Heldke calls these types of eaters, "food adventurers". Food adventurers seek to consume

another culture without understanding and appreciating the 'social dynamics underlying ethnic foods' (as cited in Sánchez Prado 2020: 5). White individuals and organisations play an integral role in perpetuating the food adventurer. Sánchez Prado (2020) assessed this relationship in his article regarding Diane Kennedy and Rick Bayless' position of authority and rights of authenticity in Mexican cooking. No one wants to be accused of cultural appropriation or as hooks (2012: 374) phrased it, 'eating the Other', but this is what happens; white chefs who can commodify the cuisines of the colonised, marginalised, and the global south for their own benefit, are appropriating the experiences of the other.

Therefore, the challenge for white subjects, who prize ethnic culinary traditions, is to engage with it as part of an "anti-colonialist project" (Sánchez Prado 2020). Sánchez Prado (2020) cites Lisa Heldke to define food anticolonialism as 'ways of approaching food that foster a respect for one's own tradition without advocating isolationism and cultivates an openness to other traditions without objectifying them or treating them as resources from which to support one's own lifestyle' (570–571). Sánchez Prado (2020) argues that Bayless and Kennedy could hold both titles as food adventurers and proponents of food anticolonialism. Yes, there are components of these white chefs integrating themselves into the Mexican food world for their own economic benefit, however, they have also provided an alternative narrative to the American and European public about what Mexican culture is that these audiences may not have accepted from anyone else.

Where does this leave Disney? As I said before, there were few claims to authenticity in the descriptions of their restaurants, spaces, or parks. Wording such as "African-inspired", "resembling a lively African marketplace", "South African wines transport you to the heart of Africa", "a delicious blend of traditional African, Indian, and Mediterranean cuisine" allows the company to skirt the controversial "authentic" label while still strongly implying that they are the real deal. On the other hand, they may provide an opportunity for people to go out of their comfort zones and try something new through an organisation people generally trust.

A Goofy-sized problem arises when the company streamlines the complexities of Africanness and foodways into a more consumable bite. In fact, one could argue this practice is anti-Black as Black cultural food practices and traditions are boiled down and "Disneyfied" for the American public. While there are plenty of details and moments of engagement with what is "Africa", these dishes, ingredients, and food cultures are sampled throughout the regions of Africa and presented as a

complete representation of Africanness. It falls into anti-Black practice for its action of simplifying and objectifying the foodways, culture and the people of Africa. What Disney misses is creating the Animal Kingdom space as a 'Black sense of place' (Newman and Yung 2020: 133) instead of a blank page in which they can rewrite the narrative and history of African experiences and foodways.

I felt the disconnect between connecting the creativity, ingenuity and development of the dishes and ingredients served at Disney's restaurants to the hands, minds and stomachs of the African people. Yes, there were pictures of women and men with painted faces as masks or holding village-wide celebrations, showcasing a sense of "Black Joy". A connection was made for the guests between the typical African art one is accustomed to, however, there was little connection between the people and their direct interaction with the food being served. Yes, it was South African or west-African inspired dishes, however, these generalisations allowed a disconnect between the stomachs of the guests and the African culinary history the visitors were engaging in. There were pictures of Black faces when it came to the stereotypical presentation of African décor, masks and expressions, yet that same representation was muted in the dishes and dining spaces.

This is why the generalisation can fall into an anti-Black practice to consolidate the experiences and voices of so many into a few instances or menu items. Although Disney is trying to point to Black culture, it feeds into an anti-Black narrative which disallows both the ordinary and spectacular of African food and culture to be present. Disney is faced with this "problem" discussed by W.E.B Du Bois who highlights the elephant in the room for white allies and progressive companies (Williams-Forson 2014)—how to tackle representation and equality without making themselves (white people) uncomfortable or African/Black people aware of their constant reminder to white audiences of past and current wrongs. Instead, we dine on ribs, *bobotie*, passion fruit and tamarind dishes to avoid looking each other in the eye about how it feels for the Black diaspora community to be constantly seen as a problem. By avoiding the whole, and hyper focusing on a few details like maize, jollof rice or fufu, Disney celebrates their African representation without rocking the boat too much for their non-Black visitors.

This section ends with a warning by hooks (2012: 380),

> The over-riding fear is that cultural, ethnic and racial differences will be continually commodified and offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate – that the Other will be eaten, consumed and forgotten.

The desire to know other cultures and the people within those cultures is not inherently wrong, however, hooks (2012) stresses that one must think critically of *why* these desires exist and how they impact the subjects of those desires.

Conclusion

Disney's Animal Kingdom and Animal Kingdom Lodge promise you a trip to the countries of Africa without the need of a passport. Walking through the Harambe Market, dining at Jiko-The Cooking Place, travelling through the Kilimanjaro Safari or viewing the African savanna at sunset from the comfort of your balcony, these are experiences which promise to transport one to the Africa that you have heard about, but never seen. The use of décor, furniture, textiles, people and food were positioned to be the cultural authenticators Disney needed to sell the legitimacy of this version of Africa. The presentation of the backstage of African culture and traditions is dependent on the familial, cultural and linguistic capital cultivated by African communities for centuries, despite the constant barrage of white supremacy and bigotry.

Disney is praised for their unparalleled attention to detail in how their worlds are created, and the Animal Kingdom Park is no exception. The ability to create a world that is at once fantasy, but also a replication of the real world, is the result of hyperrealism. This ability to "Disneyfy" a place or people within the context of a hyper-realised space allows Disney to decontextualise the details and social commentary under which these cultural activities take place. I am giving Disney the benefit of the doubt of no intended maliciousness in this presentation of the "Other" through their food and dining, that it was a business decision by a capitalistic entity needing to make board members and investors happy with a consistently successful revenue stream.

This, however, does not let Disney off the hook for their participation in encouraging "food adventures" by serving cuisines to guests who then fail to continue their own personal learning about African cultures, partaking in the white supremacist act of "eating the Other". Several "African descriptors" admonished by Wainaina (2008) were present in various forms at the Disney site.

> Always use the word 'Africa' or 'Darkness' or 'Safari' in your title...Never have a picture of a well-adjusted African on the cover of your book, or in it, unless that African has

> won the Nobel Prize... If you must include an African, make sure you get one in Masai or Zulu or Dogon dress. In your text, treat Africa as if it were one country. It is hot and dusty with rolling grasslands and huge herds of animals and tall, thin people who are starving...Make sure you show Africans have music and rhythm deep in their souls... Animals, on the other hand, must be treated as well rounded, complex characters... Never, ever say anything negative about an elephant or a gorilla. Elephants may attack people's property, destroy their crops, and even kill them. Always take the side of the elephant. (Wainaina 2008: 2–3)

You get the gist. Disney has an opportunity to engage in food anticolonialism by showing the full breadth of diversity and beauty of African cultures by erasing the single Africa narrative of straw huts and painted bodies. For myself, dining at their African-inspired restaurants allowed me to try dishes I have not experienced before and to enjoy the experience of viewing wildlife from the comfort of my hotel room balcony. It also afforded me the chance to hear how other guests were engaging in the same space I was experiencing, and many walked away with the understanding that "*Jambo*" was how "*they"* say hello and that all the cultural representatives spoke Swahili (despite their recruitment from various African countries).

A limitation of this study was the limited time I had to visit the park, going once for a period of four days during the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, I was not able to personally visit Jiko-The Cooking Place, a high end African and Indian fusion restaurant, nor engage with any of the cultural representatives. Because of travel restrictions and visa complications, the cultural representatives were not available in this presentation of Africa, however, glimpses of them were present with a Black man carving wooden figurines outside of the resort's gift shop and the empty stands where the cultural reps should have been.

Within the broader discussion about how Africa has been, is and should be represented, I have hopefully identified how nuanced the work is to adequately represent the varying expressions of African culture and cuisine. Especially when it is a white corporation that is taking it upon themselves to showcase a community of people, who have traditionally been the subject of racism, colonialism and demeaning language, as part of a theme park. Even the concept of presenting artifacts in a museum-like manner rings of the eighteenth-century explorer visiting the "Dark Continent" and

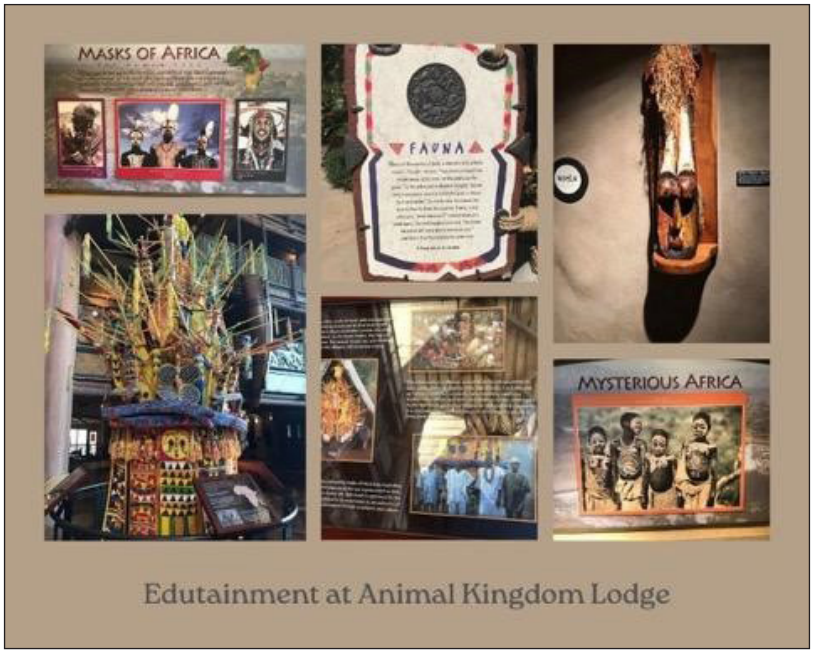
taking whatever they wanted. Further study must be done to explore how white allyship can lend itself to dismantling food colonialism, yet also give more space for Black voices, chefs, cooks, artists, performers and scholars to be the leaders for how these spaces are formed.

Spaces must be made by us for us, but recognise that we (Black and other people of colour) must also inhabit spaces which were not initially made for us. Disney parks and resorts were created for the enjoyment of all, even if it was not particularly made for the comfort of Black folks. This, however, does not mean that people of colour must abstain from these venues of joy, entertainment and fantasy. At the beginning, the hope of this project was to have a reckoning between myself and Disney, however, I realise that this phenomenon goes beyond just Disney.

Part of my goal as a scholar is to ensure that my learning does not stay only within the rooms and pages of academia. The use of this research could inform how all people can joyfully interact with this space while also holding space that this is not the full story of a group of communities. This upcoming generation demands transparency, and Disney can now prepare for these demands by refraining from telling a single story of Africa. The stories and narratives of the various regions, countries, cities, villages, homes and individuals are too plentiful to be captured in a single moment. Indeed, eating *mealie pap* (corn porridge) from South Africa with a Kenyan coffee crusted beef tenderloin does as little for the representation of African food as it does for the "progressive" image of the company itself.

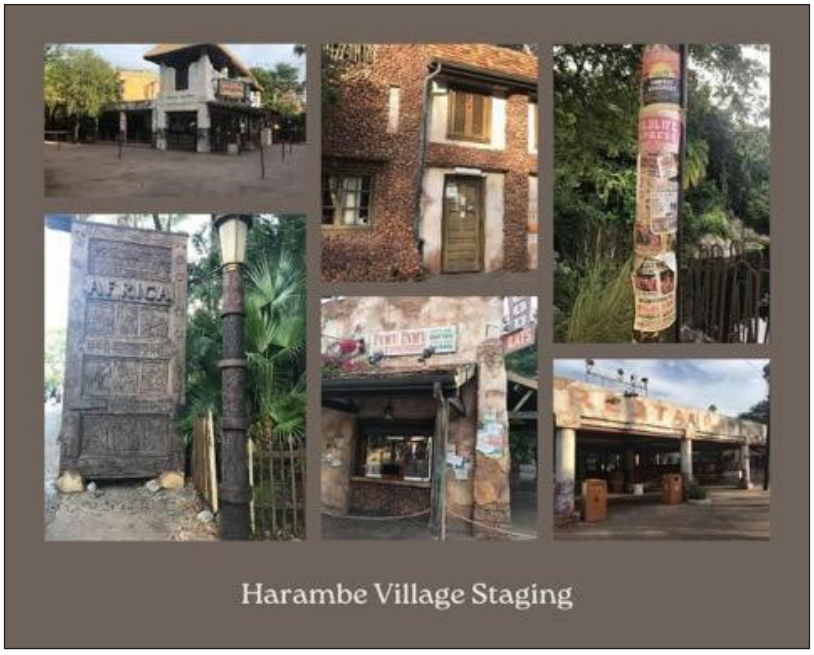
Appendix

Pictures taken by the author from a trip to Disney World Resorts, October 2021



Edutainment at Animal Kingdom Lodge

Buying Africa



Harambe Village Staging

Staging and Dining of Harambe Market


BOMA
BOMA
Boma Staging and Dining


SAFARI GALLERY
WELCOME
TIFFINS
Tiffins Staging and Dining

Sanaa Staging and Dining

Kenya and The Mara

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