Disneyomatics: Media, Branding, and Urban Space in Post-Katrina New Orleans

By Helen Morgan Parmett

Following the events of Hurricane Katrina, the Walt Disney Company took on New Orleans as a special philanthropic project. For many citizens of New Orleans, Disney’s active role and its consequent partnership with the city is highly problematic, as evidenced by a spate of newspaper articles after Katrina that expressed fears about the rebuilding leading to the potential “Disneyfication” of the city. Citizens fear Disney will turn the city into something like Times Square—a space emptied of its former meanings and histories and rearticulated to Disney’s sanitized family brand, marked by racial, class, and sexual exclusions. Thus, in New Orleans, critics fear Disney’s potential to render the city, which already relies primarily on tourism as its main economic generator, into a whitewashed image of a Disney theme park. At a time when the images from Hurricane Katrina of floating dead bodies, mostly those of the city’s black and poor, is still burned fresh on the brain, Disneyfying the city appears as a particularly problematic and disturbing possibility.

But down in New Orleans, Disney has not bought any real estate designed to imprint its Mickey Mouse value system on those who enter. It hasn’t moved into Canal Street or the French Quarter, nor has it offered to take over the now-defunct Jazzland theme park. Instead, Disney presented itself as a “good neighbor,” offering the city a kind of corporate social welfare to help bring the city back. In what follows, I consider Disney’s two most visible charitable acts in New Orleans, what the company characterized as “gifts” to the city to help them recover: the film, The Princess and the Frog (2009) and Disney’s “Dreams Come True” exhibit at the New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA).
I argue that the partnership between Disney and the city of New Orleans\(^3\) resulting from the film and exhibit cannot be adequately explained as a Disneyfying of the city in Disney's sanitized and homogenized image. Instead, I suggest that Disney's practices in New Orleans are constitutive of a new relationship between media culture, urban branding, and urban renewal, what I will call "Disneyomatics." Disneyomatics has two central features that are distinct from the era of Disneyfication. First, Disneyomatics is aimed at the inclusion of racial and regional difference. Second, it works to "empower" (and capitalize on) marginalized spaces that are generative of creativity and difference toward the aims of neo-liberal self-governance. Examining the film and museum exhibit, I suggest post-Katrina New Orleans provides a useful case study for conceptualizing this new work that media companies like Disney are doing in their efforts to brand urban space in the contemporary
conjuncture.

Disney’s *The Princess and the Frog* is set in 1920s New Orleans. It features Disney’s first black princess and is the first of Disney’s fairy tales to be set in a real place. The film draws from a variety of cultural practices tied to New Orleans, many of them rooted in black history and culture. The “Dreams Come True” museum exhibit featured exclusive art from Disney’s fairy-tale animation library up through *The Princess and the Frog*. Disney marketed the exhibit as not only a promotion of the film but also as a key way to generate both local and global interest in New Orleans’ culture to help rebuild the city after Katrina. Thus, similar to Disney’s ventures in Times Square, Disney and city officials characterized the film and exhibit as a partnership that constituted an urban renewal and revitalization strategy. Yet, unlike Times Square, it is a form of media-based urban renewal that does not rely on the physical occupation of the brand in the city to empty out city spaces from their previous meanings. Instead, both the film and the exhibit explicitly draw from the city’s racial and regional histories, identities, and memories and the Disney brand is offered up not as a means of erasing these, but, rather, as enabling their reproduction.

In what follows, I first discuss the dynamics of Disneyfication before then turning to an analysis of *The Princess and the Frog* film and “Dreams Come True Museum” exhibit, where I point to the ways in which Disneyfication cannot explain these examples. I discuss how Disney’s and New Orleans’ partnership helps to rebrand Disney within the context of a “post-racial” media culture by associating it with the city’s unique diversity and cultural history. At the same time, Disney offers its brand to the city to enable it to rebrand New Orleans as a creative city to potential tourists and businesses looking to relocate. Then, I turn to discuss how the film and the museum exhibit are directed inwardly toward New Orleanian citizens as well, as a cultural technology of neo-liberal governance aimed at producing entrepreneurial citizens to further the aims of both profit and “empowerment” in the wake of Katrina. I consider how Disney’s ventures in New Orleans work as resources for helping to generate self-responsible citizens to carry out the city’s urban renewal strategy. I then discuss how these dynamics within the case study point toward a theory of Disneyomatics. I suggest that although the shift to Disneyomatics enables some spaces in the city to gain power and visibility in ways that Disneyfication did not, Disneyomatics also risk a new form of marginalization for those spaces that fail to cultivate the creative capacities necessary for life within neo-liberalism. In New Orleans, Disneyomatics produces a devastating rationality for the future of the city—that the responsibility for rebuilding falls squarely on the backs of citizens who are expected to rebuild the city on their own, rather than government, culture industries, or corporate philanthropy. Finally, I conclude with a reflection on how this theory might be applied elsewhere as well.

**Disneyfication**

Disneyfication refers to how public space, public life, and social objects and experiences are transformed into a Disney experience—how they are sanitized, homogenized, and made to simulate a nostalgic experience. As Bryman explains,

> Disneyfication is typically associated with a statement about the cultural products of the Disney company. To disneyfy means to translate or transform an object into something superficial and even simplistic...a process of sanitizing culture or history...rendering the material world being worked upon...into a standardized format that is almost instantly recognizable as being from the Disney stable.⁴

Disneyfication is foremost about consumption. It aims at creating an optimal space for the marketing and consumption of consumer goods and branded experiences. Disneyfication is the subject of a great deal of criticism, as is suggested by the usually pejorative use of the accusation that a space has been Disneyfied. Disneyfication is criticized for its homogenization,⁵ privatization,⁶ and commodification of public space as well as for its exclusionary nature and its simulative, rather than authentic, qualities.⁷

As Davis notes, "Disney was the first to really undertake (and understand the possibilities of) the meshing of mass media content, merchandising, and promotion in his 1950s theme park." Disneyland was initially launched in conjunction with Disney’s purchase of ABC as a way of materializing the Disney brand by creating an all-encompassing branded experience.⁸ Since the inception of Disneyland, Disney has since materialized in a variety of forms—Times Square’s New Amsterdam Theater, Disney Store, ESPN Zone, Club Disney, and others.¹⁰ Likewise, Disney’s configuration of space—its sanitization, control, choreography, and meaningfulness—has inspired numerous urban planners and architects.¹¹

In the 1980s and 1990s especially, cities turned to the Disney model as a strategy for economic development and urban revitalization.¹² Policy makers, urban planners, and architects across the country created carefully designed and controlled downtown spaces that would communicate a particular narrative by “drawing in and confirming the identities of the desired customers.”¹³ In order to do so, the space had to be emptied out of any previous localized meanings, bodies, and buildings that might contradict the desired branded image. A form of
privatized public space, all elements of the design and spatial layout in these Disneyfied spaces worked together to produce a holistic brand experience conducive to consumption.\textsuperscript{14} Likewise, the spaces were designed to discourage "undesirable" individuals or crowds from entering.\textsuperscript{15} These racial, class, and other exclusions were often written into the signifying systems of the buildings, making very clear who belonged and who did not.\textsuperscript{16}

Disney's role as a producer of public space is most evident in its role in the redevelopment of New York City's Times Square.
Figures 3, 4, 5. Times Square Before and After Disney

The city actively pursued Disney as a strategy for urban revitalization in the hopes that they would redevelop the area to make it more "family friendly." 17 It was a shift for Disney branding in that the company agreed to occupy a public space that pre-existed the arrival of their brand in ways that they would not be able to entirely control. Yet, it was precisely the Disney brand that the City depended on to facilitate the control of Times Square—not only as a form of economic revitalization, but also as a means of cultural change to bring family values and corporate ethos to the seedy red light district. 18 By disarticulating Times Square from the identities, histories, and memories that had hitherto given the space meaning, the Disney brand enabled the space to be rearticulated to a set of new meanings, identities, and histories. 19 Consequently, Disneyfication's spatial control in New York is criticized for how it promotes sexual, racial, and class divisions based on who is allowed access with relative freedom of mobility and who is not. 20

Disney's other main venture in producing public space is Celebration, Florida.
Celebration is a town just outside Disney World that, as in the case of Times Square, was the result of a partnership between Disney and state and local authorities. It provides another, yet different kind of example of Disneyfication by Disney itself. Like Times Square, it represents Disney's complete occupation and reconfiguration of a particular space. Yet, unlike Times Square, Disney soon withdrew from direct connection of its brand to the space and instead encouraged residents to develop their own means of self-governance. Andrew Ross suggests the town is a mark of Disney's future role as promoter of public space. Celebration is a carefully monitored and controlled town. It adheres to a stringent design and building code guided by the principles of New Urbanism that, like Times Square, is not so unlike the management of the Disney theme parks. Within these principles, however, it promotes Disney as a kind of good neighbor—one invested in the preservation of the wetlands, mixed income and mixed race housing, and active involvement in community. Though these aims played out on the ground in ways that were much more complicated, Ross suggests that Celebration is indicative of a shift in contemporary ways of living and thinking—one where the private realm of the marketplace enters the business of sponsoring the public realm and infusing it with public spirit.

Although New Orleans is often discussed as one of the most "authentic" and distinct cities in the nation, it has also been criticized for how it caters to tourists, which, for some, represents a kind of Disneyfication. Moreover, Disneyland's New Orleans Square also creates a sense of linkage between the city and the Disney brand. A fan of the city and Dixieland jazz, Walt Disney built New Orleans Square in 1966 amidst a battle over desegregation in the city. Against this background, New Orleans Square represented a nostalgic and whitewashed version of the city, one where "the racial and social discrimination implicit in New Orleans historical collective were blanks left to be filled in—or tacitly accepted—by the visitor." Furthermore, at the same time the sanitized New Orleans was being built in Disneyland, historic preservationists, developers, and city leaders "were producing an urban space that, if not as controlled as its Disneyland counterpart, nevertheless invited comparisons."
Disneyfied strategies are evident in various urban renewal projects in the city, including the building of the urban entertainment and shopping destination, Riverwalk Marketplace, and the efforts to convert the French Quarter into a family-friendly tourist destination. Having already been criticized as a "Creole Disneyland," with all the connotations of whitewashing and sanitizing of the city's mired history that term evokes, the more Disneyfication of the city has emerged as one of the central discourses guiding debates over the city's post-Katrina future.  

Yet, Disney's "Dreams Come True" museum exhibit and The Princess and the Frog(2009) movie suggest Disney's partnership with the City of New Orleans does not aim to empty out and occupy New Orleans in the same ways as it did in the case of Times Square and Celebration. Nevertheless, Disney's efforts are still constitutive of a particular kind of urban renewal and revitalization strategy that hinges on an articulation of the media brand to public, urban space. In the examples that follow, the Disney brand is co-articulated to the New Orleans city brand not through the buying up of real estate and the disarticulation of space from history, memory, and identity. Rather, the co-articulation of the Disney and New Orleans brands becomes a vehicle through which people with localized and regional identities, histories, and memories are invited to express
themselves. Disney’s brand in this case becomes a resource that citizens are encouraged to see as a vital means for both revitalizing and rebuilding the city as well as in empowering themselves. This is a decidedly distinct strategy from Disneyfication’s standardization and homogenization of space, and it is in this context that I argue the case of Disney in New Orleans calls for a rethinking of the Disneyfication thesis and propose the Disneyomatic as an alternative.

The following table illustrates some of the differences that I am suggesting between Disneyfication and Disneyomatics, as I will highlight through the examples from New Orleans:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disneyfication</th>
<th>Disneyomatics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coded/semiotic—spaces that produce meaning</td>
<td>Axiomatic—spaces whose meaning is generated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for its users</td>
<td>by the agency/action of users</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imposed meanings</td>
<td>Meaning generative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homogenous</td>
<td>Diverse, differentiated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Static</td>
<td>Dynamic, flexible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Globalized, erasing local meanings</td>
<td>Localized, encouraging the production of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>local meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simulated</td>
<td>“Authentic”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excludes social others</td>
<td>Includes some social others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whitewashed, sanitized</td>
<td>Post-racial</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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In what follows, I discuss Disney’s film and museum exhibit as a way to make clear how they complicate theories of Disneyfication. Following the discussion of these examples, I discuss how both help to explain a move toward a theory of the Disneyomatic production of space.

**Cultural Policy and the Rebranding of Disney and New Orleans**

Over the last decade, cities have employed new urban renewal strategies that aim toward the “empowerment” of neighborhoods and spaces that are associated with racial and ethnic Otherness. At the same time, media culture has moved toward the “post-racial,” where (often commodified) forms of racial difference appear as prolific and varied across a fragmented media landscape. Long critiqued for its whiteness and for how its participation in urban renewal had wiped out local culture, Disney’s partnership with New Orleans might best be understood in the contexts of these recent shifts in both media and cities. The partnership can be read as a means for racing and authenticating Disney’s brand and situating it as a socially responsible, corporate citizen helping New Orleans to rebuild and rebrand itself. Here, I argue *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) film and NOMA “Dreams Come True” museum exhibit help to promote the city’s brand as creative and cultural as well as family oriented, and, at the same time, they resituate Disney’s global brand as sensitive to regional and racial difference. This constitutes a shift in cultural-spatial logic that cannot be adequately explained through Disneyfication.

Disney first released news of *The Princess and the Frog* in 2006, right on the heels of Hurricane Katrina. The film was characterized as a gift and “love letter” to the city in its efforts to recover. The film is the first of Disney’s fairy-tales to be set in a real place. It features a variety of spaces in New Orleans as well as the Louisiana bayou. Some of the spaces in the city featured in the film are familiar, such as the French Quarter and the Garden District. Its heroine, however, hails from the Lower Ninth Ward, an area decidedly off the tourist map, made known to the outside world following Hurricane Katrina for its large number of black and poor residents killed, left stranded, or displaced by the levees’ breach. Setting the film in New Orleans, featuring Disney’s first African American princess, and, in the wake of Katrina, having her come from the Lower Ninth Ward, helps to reconfigure the Disney brand to fit within the changing contexts of a post-racial media culture. The film combats criticisms of Disney’s whiteness and problematic racial representations by critics who thought a black princess had been a long time coming. As Herman Gray (2005) notes, contemporary media and popular culture work more along the lines of a proliferation of difference, rather than through the practices of assimilation or Othering that were indicative of racial representations in the 1980s and 1990s. Representations of racial and ethnic identity today are ubiquitous, and, as Sarah Banet-Weiser suggests, they are used to market particular corporations as “cool, authentic, and urban.” There was a great deal of debate in the popular press over whether or not the film promotes positive or negative representations of African Americans. However, whether the representations were positive or negative, what is significant is Disney’s attempt to cultivate a brand strategy that works to produce Disney as diverse and responsive to its critics.

The *Princess and the Frog* articulates Disney’s brand to the history and identity of New Orleans as a racially
diverse urban enclave with a unique culture. The following clip illustrates how the film's setting in New Orleans positions the Disney brand differently than its other fairy-tales.

As many of the interviewees note in the clip, the film emphasizes New Orleans as a unique place, focusing specifically on its cultural distinctness and rich cultural history. The film reflects the Disney brand as sensitive to and respectful of these differences. Yet, the comments also only signal oblique references to race. Race is instead marked by more of a cultural lifestyle, through its links to jazz music or culinary traditions, rather than a history of racial struggle and injustice that constitutes political identities. These post-racial representations are indicative of a neo-liberal politics of race that celebrates and cultivates difference as individual lifestyle and marketed choice. Girls and other viewers are therefore enjoined to identify with black and New Orleans culture through purchasing Tiana dolls, navigating the streets of New Orleans in the video game, or cooking one of the recipes in Tiana’s cookbook.

Figure 9. Merchandise: Princess and the Frog cookbook

The film enables the Disney brand to be marked by its connection to, and (as the statements of the Disney executives in the clip suggest) reverence for, local, regional, and historical constitutions of cultural space. Even more significantly, however, the film's relationship to the city in its post-Katrina state enables Disney to appear as helping to maintain and bring these spaces forth.

This makes the statements made by former Mayor Nagin at the end of the clip particularly notable. Speaking to Disney, he suggests, "We [the city and citizens of New Orleans] are indebted to you. This [film] will go around the world and continue to tell the story about New Orleans and will tell the world that New Orleans is back because the Disney magic brought us there." His statement is both telling and curious. It is curious in the fact that it suggests that it was "Disney magic" that will bring New Orleans back despite the remainder of the clip emphasizing that it is in fact the cultural vitality and uniqueness of New Orleans’ character that make it a great American city. But this juxtaposition is telling, as it points to how Disney’s philanthropic social welfare is posed as a mechanism for bringing forth this vitality—for making possible the renewal of the city not in the image of a simulated Disney experience, but in an image of a diverse city with a rich cultural heritage.
Nagin's comments construct Disney as a socially responsible corporate citizen and, in so doing, an agent of post-Katrina urban renewal. This is evident in the way the film and the exhibit were characterized by the Walt Disney Company as gifts to the city. The value of Disney's gifts is explicitly connected to how they will provide stimulus to the economic recovery of New Orleans. The museum exhibit in particular, touted as an exclusive exhibit that can only be seen in New Orleans, establishes a time and space pressure that gives it a heightened form of value. They enable Disney to break through the noise and clutter of global culture.\textsuperscript{35} Disney's gifts to the city become more than another commodity whose value lies in its ability to imprint a standardized sameness, as more than an empty signifier of simulated meaning. Instead, these gifts invest Disney with emotional and affective, intensive qualities that are specifically tied to the meanings and places in post-Katrina New Orleans.

It is not only Disney who is banking on this partnership to benefit its post-racial rebranding as a socially responsible corporate citizen. Nagin's statements in the above clip also make clear how the city of New Orleans sees Disney as a means to facilitate its rebuilding and rebranding.\textsuperscript{36} In Nagin's terms, the partnership benefits New Orleans by helping to tell the outside world how "professional" the city is, but in a way that "people respect and understand how unique and different we are." This does seem to provide a kind of veneer to the city, one that is "professional," but it also does so in a way that is more than emptying out the city in a Disneyfied way in its emphasis on cultural difference.

The aims for this public/private partnership are further elucidated in the NOMA's "Dreams Come True" exhibit. Like the film, the museum exhibit was characterized as a "gift" to help in the Katrina recovery effort.\textsuperscript{37} The exclusive exhibit featured over 600 pieces of art from the Disney Animation Research Library organized around a storybook theme from Disney's classic animation fairy tales from the 1930s through today. Though Disney paid for much of the exhibit, it depended on the State of Louisiana to contribute $1 million for regional marketing.\textsuperscript{38} The ubiquitous posters promoting the exhibit throughout the city, then, were not the product of a massive Disney marketing campaign, but, instead, that of the State's.