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Sites of Historical Amusement: Tourism and the Recontextualization of American History

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SITES OF HISTORICAL AMUSEMENT:
TOURISM AND THE RECONTEXTUALIZATION OF AMERICAN HISTORY

By

BRENDAN S. MURPHY

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in the Liberal Studies Program in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in the Liberal Studies Program in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

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Brendan Murphy

Advisor: Linda Grasso

Through the analysis of a theatrical event staged in Brooklyn, New York, entitled *Black America (1895)*, this thesis interrogates cultural heritage tourism of the past and present and introduces a new classification of tourist site, “site of historical amusement.” In this current political moment, one during which regional pride and latent racism are bubbling to the surface, this study advocates for the continued interrogation of how the American story is bought and sold.

Sites of historical amusement are historically themed spaces that sell a recontextualized narrative that strips complexity from history, effectively flattening the past in order to create a cultural product palatable to the masses. Nate Salsbury’s *Black America* was a large scale plantation show that did this by presenting “authentic Southern Negro culture,” one that played on common tropes and the political realities of the day. *Black America*’s racist presentation attracted thousands of visitors during its short run, reinforcing longstanding and dangerous stereotypes of African Americans and elevating a nationalistic worldview rooted in white supremacy. This study uses *Black America* as a case study to explore the political and cultural work done at sites of historical amusement. It also identifies similar sites of the past and present,

including Buffalo Bill's Wild West, The Chicago World's Fair, Disneyland, and Disney's America, a failed 1990s Disney project.

Sites of Historical Amusement: Tourism and the Recontextualization of American History takes an interdisciplinary approach by pairing the previous scholarship on *Black America* with that of tourism studies scholars, scholars of memory and popular culture, and primary documents from museums and archives. In doing so, new connections between tourism, racial performance, and American history are made.

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Introduction

In February of 1895, the *Omaha Daily Bee* published an interview with famed showman, frontier legend, and hometown hero William “Buffalo Bill” Cody, during which Cody gave readers a sneak peek into his new endeavor. For years, Cody had been known for his Wild West shows, but this new project would be something different. It was a new form of entertainment entirely. Cody’s new project was an “exhibition of the history of slavery.” Still in the early planning stages and slated to open in Brooklyn, New York in May of that year, the outdoor spectacular would “graphically and humorously” trace the evolution of the African American through a series of tableaux, “depicting the negro as a savage, a slave, a soldier, and a citizen.” Along with songs and dances thought endemic to states south of the Mason-Dixon line, the show contained a pseudo-living history component wherein visitors could wander the grounds of a recreated Southern cotton plantation. The projected cast of one thousand African Americans would not only live on the grounds in small wooden cabins, they also would people a cotton field, complete with live cotton and slave drivers. The full scope of slavery was to be presented, from whipping post and auction block to Emancipation Day, in the spirit of authentically depicting the “good old times.” The show was to be called either *Afric-America* or *Black America* and was to be the greatest show the world had ever seen (“Buffalo Bill’s Wild West”).

Cody’s original plan changed significantly sometime between February and May of 1895. *Black America*¹, as the show came to be called, was indeed a hodgepodge of historical reenactment, ethnographic exhibition, and variety show. Visitors could walk through a field of small cabins and interact with the performers, the number reduced to roughly five hundred

¹ To distinguish the title of the show, *Black America*, from “black (African American) America,” *Black America* will be consistently italicized. It will not, however, be italicized in citations, parenthetical or otherwise, to stay true to the original typeface. Buffalo Bill’s Wild West will not be italicized, with the exception of book titles.

African Americans. The official performance followed replete with music, acrobatic acts, and patriotic displays. The most significant change was a matter of casting. Slavery was no longer the star. In fact, it was given a non-speaking role.

Black America was full of contradictions. It displayed an ahistorical, yet nostalgic version of the sunny Antebellum South. It created a separate, flattened ethnicity for Southern African Americans which separated them from their Northern kin. Yet, the reductive presentation of a general Southern African American culture was punctuated with performances by famous black entertainers. It provided visitors a chance to walk amongst the cast and their cabins when they were “slaves,” and then offered the safety and distance of a grandstand when the same performers showcased their individual talents. As horrifying as this racist, exploitative plantation show might seem today, the social and political realities of the 1890s made this idea not only possible, but marketable. And, for a few short months, audiences ate it up.

Spearheaded by Cody’s longtime business partner, Nate Salsbury, *Black America* opened in May of 1895 and played in Brooklyn for two months. Articles and advertisements provide evidence of *Black America*’s incredible success while in Brooklyn. A representative example is an advertisement found in the *New York Evening Post* with the headline, “The Most Attractive and Tremendously Novel Entertainment Ever Presented Anywhere on Earth” (27 May 1895). *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* ran advertisements that implied the show was approved by all swaths of the population: “Public - widely indorse (sic) it! Press - vehemently praise it! Pulpit - Unanimously approve it!” (23 June 1895). Taking into account the bias inherent within advertising, the diversity of periodicals in which these advertisements and reviews appear and the consistency of the praise can be seen as evidence of *Black America*’s popularity.

The show's run in Ambrose Park was followed by four months traveling throughout the country, with performances in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Washington D.C., and Baltimore. As the run progressed, it seems audiences lost interest. When it began to tour, the cotton fields and cabins did not travel with it. Upon returning to New York in September, the *New York Times* noted that the cast had been reduced to three hundred ("Black America at the Garden"). It was slated to open in London in October ("Black America"), but the date was pushed back to December 25th. Salsbury told reporters he was reorganizing the show for its European tour, and he would present it to American audiences one last time before it left for London. *Black America* never reopened (Hall 68).

Black America is the subject of a few scattered scholarly articles from the last few decades. It can be found in the footnotes in books about minstrelsy and black theater. The New York Public Library holds a single piece of sheet music and a small series of Nate Salsbury's papers. For the most part, if the show is mentioned, it is as yet another example of the racist exploitation of African Americans; of the last gasp of late minstrelsy; of the power of the white showman. These criticisms are all fair.

Now, the challenge. Try to set aside the complexities of the content as seen through our twenty-first century lens and place yourself in the mind of the late nineteenth century visitor. *Black America* was modeled after Buffalo Bill's Wild West, the world's most popular outdoor extravaganza. William Cody and Nate Salsbury, two famous showman with a history of successful spectacles, were attached to the project. It had something for everyone, as it was part historical reenactment, part ethnographic exhibition, and part variety show. *Black America* was transportative; while attending, visitors could escape their quickly industrializing cities and spend the day in the "Sunny South." They could stroll through rows of wooden cabins that

housed African American performers, see cotton ginned, and sit for a show full of acrobatics, military drills, and a massive chorus of voices. Furthermore, the site allowed audience members to experience the American South without the burden of its violent and oppressive history.

The living history element, the structured performance, the opportunity for escapism, and the chance to do it all for the low, low price of admission made this cultural experience more than a mere performance. “*Black America* was an unprecedented experiment,” Barbara Webb concisely states (64). It was a tourist site, amusement park, and cultural heritage experience all in one. It was a place where history was made fun. *Black America* was a unique tourist destination, one that blurred the lines between education, amusement, and history.

If scholars of history were to classify *Black America* as a tourist destination, which of our modern terminologies would be most appropriate? Technically, it predates our modern ideas of cultural heritage tourism. Nevertheless, was *Black America* an example of cultural heritage tourism, in that visitors ventured to the plantation in Brooklyn to connect with America’s past, albeit a reimagined one? Clearly, visitors were supposed to be entertained. Although the term “amusement park” was still a few years away, was *Black America* an early example of a theme park that provided thrills and excitement?

When an idea such as *Black America* sits far outside of the traditional boundaries of current scholarship, the boundaries must be expanded. *Black America*’s classification should be as much an amalgamation as the site itself. This study argues that to truly explore the multifaceted work done at the plantation in Brooklyn, a completely new term must be applied. Thus, *Black America* and other large scale, historically thematic amusement experiences will herein be called “sites of historical amusement.” Sites of this nature popularize history by selling a recontextualized historical narrative palatable to the masses and, in doing so, relegate their

subjects to the realm of stereotypes. Each site befitting of this term has four key tenets: they are historically themed; they utilize amusement as the entry point; they promote a general, palatable history utilizing collective memory; and they are a product of modernity.

Sites of Historical Amusement: Tourism and the Recontextualization of American History examines how tourists interact with American history within these complicated spaces by identifying the political and cultural work taking place. This study begins with the reasoning behind this scholarly intervention and the terms utilized within it, including a detailed explanation of the term “site of historical amusement.” Section two is a literature review identifying some of the previous scholarship conducted on *Black America* and additional scholarship employed in this interdisciplinary project. The third section provides the historical and social coordinates that allowed for the creation of *Black America*, including the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair and *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West*. Section four is a case study of *Black America*. Because *Black America* changed so drastically after leaving Brooklyn, the focus of this study is on the seven weeks it ran at Ambrose Park, during which it combined both a physical site and performance. The fifth section brings this definition into the present day through the analysis of current sites of historical amusement. In all, this study seeks to prove why this new term is necessary and how it contributes to the disciplines of both American and Tourism Studies.

Section I: Theoretical Framework

a. Intervention

The term “site of historical amusement” is more than a simple label, rather it is a new concept that will enrich the study of cultural heritage tourism. Tourism studies is a relatively new

and malleable field that is ripe for new additions. Dean MacCannell's *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, originally published in 1976 and last updated in 2013, along with John Urry's *The Tourist Gaze* (1990), remain the only two general explorations of international tourism and sightseeing (xvii). Clearly there is space for new discoveries and ideas.

Although *Black America* was successful while in Brooklyn, it is widely seen as a failure. When it is mentioned in scholarly texts, it is often as a footnote. When it receives a paragraph, it is to explain its dismissal on the grounds of blatant racism, its short run and inevitable closing, or its odd mix of late-minstrelsy, ethnography, and spectacle. It is not seen as a prime example of any one thing. This study advocates for an exploration of *Black America* precisely for that reason. By declaring it an optimum example of a site of historical amusement and placing it squarely within its historical moment, we are able to see a strong example of a messy concept, something far more fruitful than the converse.

The term site of historical amusement does not advocate that guilty parties be absolved or historical context go unaddressed. The following pages will paint a picture of a racist site during which African Americans were put on display for the entertainment of a white audience. It is important to recognize, however, that our reception of *Black America* in 2018 is clearly more nuanced than that of the audiences of 1895. We have further defined terms and concepts that allow us to unpack our challenging history. When *Black America* is removed from its time period, we remove the agency of the historical actors. The show was indeed racist, but it is unfair and unhelpful to dismiss it for that reason entirely. Webb argues for the validity of exploring these messy experiences in her article, "Authentic Possibilities: Plantation Performance of the 1890s" (2004). "When we banish popular plantation performance to the sphere of the racially false on the basis of theme or genre," writes Webb, "we risk diminishing our understanding of

the complex and messy process of African American identification” (82). It is clear from the historical record that the audience was comprised of both black and white visitors. It is vital that we question the complex motivations of the tourists and the layered influences of the site. In doing so, what new discoveries might be made about tourism, memory, and place?

b. Tourism, Memory, and Place

Today, interacting with history, both the personal and the collective, is a multimillion dollar industry. Every town seems to have a historic house inside which a historic “first” happened. Genealogy went from being a profession to a hobby. It seems as if one can’t go a day without seeing or hearing an advertisement, whether it’s on the subway or tucked between songs on the radio, for a DNA kit that tells us who we are down to our very molecules. We can now be Irish or Nigerian, for example, even if we’re centuries removed.

This phenomena is fairly new. Many historians posit that the impetus to explore and preserve our history on such a massive scale or, as David Lowenthal calls it, our “appetite for ancestors” (84), is a response to our current moment. Technology has led to the ability to mass market. Modernization has resulted in an increase in mobility and a loss of physical sites of history, causing people to cling to what remains. David Glassberg describes this desire to locate one’s past and to belong to it as a “sense of history.” A sense of history, writes Glassberg, “is akin to what environmental psychologists describe as a sense of place - not quite territoriality, as among other animals, but a sense of locatedness and belonging” (7). In a constantly changing and evolving world, this sense of belonging must be pursued, and that pursuit has resulted in the modern concept of cultural heritage tourism.

To fully understand how sites of historical amusement differ from cultural heritage tourism and amusement parks, the terms must first be defined. Although there are variations on

the definitions of cultural heritage tourism depending on the organization, the National Trust for Historic Preservation's definition encompasses the key tenets: "Cultural heritage tourism is traveling to experience the places and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past and present. This includes historic, cultural, and natural resources" ("Defining Heritage Tourism"). Encompassed within the concept of authenticity is a clear time frame. Visitors must have an understanding of when: when did the event take place, when was the object used, when were the structures built. This understanding comes from a desire to educate, a core value within cultural heritage tourism.

Often, cultural heritage tourism is broken into two distinct categories, one that encompasses the other: cultural tourism and heritage tourism. As noted above, cultural tourism includes the desire for an authentic interaction with the places and activities that represent the stories of a culture's past and present. Sometimes this includes first-hand contact with people whose ethnic and/or cultural background is different from that of a tourist's. Cultural tourism can take place anywhere - a museum, a historic site, or a restaurant. Because culture is a created product, cultural tourism allows for interaction with the past to happen apart from the physical location where the events took place.

Heritage tourism is a subset of cultural tourism. Heritage tourism requires one to travel. For instance, if a family traveled to a Civil War battlefield, they might walk or drive through the landscapes on which soldiers fought and died. Yet, because cultural productions take such varied forms, all heritage tourism is also cultural tourism. The battlefield is a cultural product, having been used and altered by soldiers.

It could be argued that *Black America* loosely fits the definition of cultural tourism, however, that term does not engage the amusement and entertainment aspects at the site's core.

Amusement parks require physical locations, themes, and thrills—all of which *Black America* offered. A comparison between *Black America* and Coney Island's Sea Lion Park, the first permanently enclosed amusement park in North America (which coincidentally opened in the same city and year as *Black America*), yields notable similarities between the two. Although *Black America* did not have amusement rides, it perpetuated stereotypes of an “exotic” African American identity in an attempt to provide similar thrills to amusement parks of the day.

Sea Lion Park and the subsequent amusement areas that would develop during the final years of the nineteenth century borrowed heavily from the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, as did *Black America*. They projected grandeur and wealth, yet they were available to the working class. Women and men, married and single, immigrant and American, all found themselves riding the same rides and walking the same boardwalks. Unlike more policed entertainment such as dance halls and public parks, amusement parks were “laboratories of the new mass culture” (Peiss 10). At Coney Island, visitors were allowed to step outside of themselves and be anonymous in public. In suspending roles and loosening the reins of etiquette, visitors were allowed to interact across gender and ethnic boundaries in ways rarely before seen. The opportunity to challenge societal expectations was only one way these sites attracted audiences. Coney Island was also about thrills.

The amusement rides and animal shows were meant to excite. Displays of oddities, whether they were sideshow freaks or members of an “exotic” Filipino tribe, provided titillation. John F. Kasson writes, “Their grotesque presences heightened the visitor's' sense that they had penetrated a marvelous realm of transformation, subject to laws all its own” (50). *Black America* was equally subject to laws all its own, as visitors stepped off the filthy streets of Brooklyn and into the tranquility of the Antebellum South.

Today, we actively engage in all of these forms of tourism in different ways, each one producing what MacCannell calls a “cultural experience” (71). MacCannell breaks down these “cultural experiences” into three parts: a model, the representation of an aspect of life; a medium, the way the information is transferred; and the influence, the product of the interaction. Applying this framework to *Black America*, the model was the physical space, both the recreated village and the performance arena. The medium was the interactions with the landscape and performers. The influence on the tourist is far more challenging to summarize, as the exploration of *Black America* will show.

The word tourist is often used derogatorily. Highbrow “travelers” want to travel “off the beaten track,” while a “tourist” enjoys a manufactured and heavily curated cultural experience. This study pushes against that idea, as does MacCannell and other scholars of tourism. For one, there is little to be gained from stereotyping a whole class of people as uncultured. In addition, every cultural experience results in an influence, regardless of how “authentic” it may be. Whether we’re traveling to Alaska to learn about totem carving from Native carvers or watching a documentary on the History Channel, we’re engaging in a cultural feedback loop. We, the tourist, have a hand in creating popular history because popular history is created for us. It is a commodity to be bought and sold, and we determine the whims of the market. The Native communities in Alaska have curated how they display their culture based on the cultural experiences they’ve had with tourists, both positive and negative. The History Channel sells us what it thinks we will buy. Sites of historical amusement are subject to this feedback loop even more so than sites of cultural heritage tourism, as they must maintain the pulse of their audience and stay relevant. Actual history, it could be argued, only gets better with age.

c. Sites of Historical Amusement Defined

There are numerous scholars, most of them historians, who would say that history and popular culture are like oil and water. Popular culture is lowbrow, while the discipline of history is highbrow. The product of the two is popular history, often classified as reductive, uncomplicated, and biased. Michael Wallace goes so far as to call pop culture “historicidal” (qtd. in Glassberg 5). The reality is that the vast majority of the public consumes the past through the medium of popular culture, be it television, film, or historical fiction. Popular history connects the present to the past in a way that academia cannot. It is palatable, consumable, and the public is hungry for it. Sites of historical amusement are popular history manifested.

There are four key tenets that distinguish sites of historical amusement from other forms of tourism. First, they are historically themed. Sites of this nature might showcase a certain time period or event in history, and the activities within the site follow suit. However, these sites are not always specific to a certain time or place. Instead, they create and manipulate an abstract sense of nostalgia for the past, something novelist Douglas Copeland has coined “legislated nostalgia” (77). This reverence for the past is one manufactured for individuals who did not live it, yet long for it nonetheless.

Second, sites of historical amusement use amusement as the entry point rather than education. They present history as an activity to partake in rather than a concept to explore. Undoubtedly, museums and cultural institutions today work to ensure tourists enjoy their visit. They do this using education as the medium: “learning is fun.” For sites of historical amusement, education is merely a welcome byproduct.

Third, sites of historical amusement are powered by a collective sense of history. Although we all live within our own consciousness, our memories are rarely our own. Glassberg

contends that our memories are shaped through “group communication, intimately linked to the collective memory of a community” (10). Our communities and the ways in which we interact with them shape our individual perceptions of the world. We, in turn, feed those perceptions back into the community. This process is often called collective memory. Collective memory is the product of discrete memories converging in a common space, gaining a common meaning. During this process, the intricacies of the individual experiences are often lost. Quoting MacCannell, “The underlying structure of touristic imagery is absolutely plastic, so its eventual form is a perfect representation of the collective conscience” (143). Sites of historical amusement capitalize on this by selling a narrative that appeals to our collective memory, a single, plastic cultural product palatable by all.

Sites of historical amusement use “truth markers” to activate a community's collective memory. These are individual objects or signifiers that stand for larger ideas (MacCannell 89). Although they come from the realm of stereotype, truth markers are not inherently negative. They can be helpful in getting a group to focus on an idea or topic. For example, when we see an eyepatch or a pegleg, we think of pirates. However, truth markers undeniably remove complexity, as they are often used to illustrate complex regions and diverse communities with a few key objects. Teepees have become synonymous with Native Americans, although the majority of Native people did not live in them. For *Black America*, the African American race serves as a truth marker for the American South. Truth markers used for historically marginalized and oppressed communities reinforce stereotypes and prevent true cultural understanding.

The collective memory used to power sites of historical amusement can be divided into three main categories. First, sites of historical amusement are often temporally unspecific. The

time period explored by these experiences is undefined, resulting in an amalgamation of events that do not always reflect an accurate chronology. Second, they are spatially vague. The location at which the cultural experience is performed does not necessarily reflect the content of the performance. The sites are “storied places,” but their histories have been manufactured by artists and writers, born out of an otherwise ordinary environment (Lopez 44). Third, these sites present a loose cultural portrait, one that is often reductive and general. Because of this cultural vagueness, the individuals portraying the culture on display need not be authentically of that culture.

Lastly, all sites of historical amusements are products of the time period in which they are created. Often these sites are created as reaction to a lost or disappearing past. Moreover, the social, political, and cultural factors of the day guide the presentation.

When visiting a site of historical amusement the public explores their own sense of history. They create spaces for collective memory, something that is incredibly significant for identity creation. Our shared past connects us with our community members, be they familial, local, national, racial, or religious. When that collective memory is abused, however, it can be as destructive as it is constructive.

d. Implications

Sites of historical amusement do powerful cultural and political work. Much of this work is inherently problematic, some of it quite dangerous. Above all, these sites are ahistorical. In part, this is because they are physical places that root themselves in history unrelated to their geographic location. This is problematic in that it separates the past from its moorings, untethering the story and allowing for wild recreations. Unfaithful recreations often become reinventions. In addition, the history they create lacks context, painting a reductive portrait of an

incredibly complex narrative. The influence from these sites permeates the collective memory of the tourists, affecting how they interact with history outside of the confines of the site.

The legislated nostalgia engaged at sites of historical amusement encourages tourists to look back on the past with rose-colored glasses. These sites often trivialize history, eliminating the complex, complicated, and violent aspects and replacing them with an affirmed sense of American nationalism and adoration for those in power. In our modern vernacular, we might call this the “it was better back then” phenomena, a desire to return to a past thought more prosperous. In reality, the majority of “back thens” were just as complicated, if not more so, than our modern present. If tourists adhere to this idealized past, they might seek to make the present and the future mirror it at the expense of those for whom the “back then” was more treacherous than the present.

Sites of historical amusement can be culturally damaging as well. The history produced at these spaces often reduces people and culture down to well-trodden tropes. Without fully realized characters, tourists are more likely to elevate their own cultural experience and, in turn, degrade the Other, seeing them as unrefined or primitive. For historically marginalized communities, this can reinforce stereotypes, hinder progress, and create a false sense of history in the viewer. Moreover, these stereotypes are then transposed on the present, perpetuating the exotification and, in turn, condoning exploitation.

Historians would argue that sites of historical amusement transform history from a discipline into entertainment; something to be experienced and enjoyed rather than analyzed and interrogated. Scholars of popular culture like MacCannell, Lawrence Levine, and George Lipsitz challenge this notion, saying that popular history can be enjoyed and critiqued simultaneously. In his book, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (2001), Lipsitz

frames this argument in terms of negotiation. When presented with popular history, tourists do not passively receive or actively challenge the historical imagery. Instead, tourists often negotiate between their personal sense of history and the past they see in front of them. At sites of historical amusement visitors may receive narratives contradictory to the beliefs that they hold, making negotiation paramount. However, when information is sold as entertainment, this negotiation is less likely, inserting an inherent contradiction within Lipsitz's argument, one that plays out at sites of historical amusement.

If, in fact, individuals do negotiate with the historical imagery presented to them, is there a possibility for these sites to impact meaningful social change? There is evidence of minority communities exploited within these sites locating moments of agency and progress. As Barbara Webb, Lori Brooks, and others have argued, these sites provided “an occasion for innovation and professionalization of African American performance” (66). Famous African American performers such as Billy McClain and his wife, Madame Cordelia, used *Black America* as a stepping stone. This was possible, in part, because of the massive reach of the site, specifically to white audiences.

Few cultural producers have a longer reach than the Walt Disney Company. Disney's eleven sites of historical amusement engage millions upon millions of people yearly. When it comes to history, scholar Mike Wallace equates engagement to education. “It is possible that Walt Disney has taught people more history, in a more memorable way, than they ever learned in school” (158). Although education is not at the forefront of sites of historical amusement, they undeniably do educational work. *Black America* and Buffalo Bill's Wild West, just like Disneyland does today, served as teachers of popular history. Nothing says that the educational

work done at these sites must be negative. If these sites have the power to rewrite history and guide societal thought, is it possible that they can tell the truth?

The following sections will provide a detailed exploration of *Black America*, both the previous scholarship and the event itself. In doing so, this study will unpack the political and cultural work being done at sites of historical amusement. In addition, it will identify and analyze events that influenced the creation of Salsbury's plantation show, including Buffalo Bill's Wild West and the Chicago World's Fair. These comparisons serve to illustrate that sites of historical amusement can take various forms. *Black America* was a unique experience, but in no way was it an anomaly.

Section II: Literature Review

Historical scholarship provides the foundation for an exploration of *Black America*, but it is a rather sparse foundation. Perhaps the lack of academic study on *Black America* is due to its short run. It had a mere six months to generate its historical records, which include newspapers, scant photographs, and a few recollections from some of its key players. Thus, this study takes an interdisciplinary approach, combining primary source material with previous historical scholarship, critical race theorists, and scholars of tourism and American studies. By doing so, previously unexplored connections between tourist sites and racial performance are uncovered.

Nearly all who have looked at *Black America* in depth have framed it within the discussion of performance, black theater and critical race theory. Within these areas, much of the work has been focused on the relationship between the white observer and the black Other, representation, and authenticity.

Lori Brooks' "Journey to a Land of Cotton: A Slave Plantation in Brooklyn, 1895" (2014), looks at *Black America* as it relates to its white audience. She argues that the show was

not so much a presentation of Southern African American culture as much as a didactic morality play for a Northern audience. “The slavery theme,” writes Brooks, “functioned as an ironic model of social order and civil virtue” (61). By portraying Southern African Americans as childlike and uncivilized, she claims, Salsbury both reinforces commonly held racial stereotypes and appeals to a white audience in search of reassurance. Although small, the numbers of African Americans in New York were slowly climbing, a fact not lost on New Yorkers. Along with the arrival of millions of immigrants from Europe, the migration of Southerners brought with it a desire for “racial clarity” (61). *Black America* provided that by reinforcing ideas about Southern African Americans that made Northern African Americans become less threatening. Brooks also notes that shows in the vein of *Black America*, including *South Before the War* and *In Dahomey*, tacitly advocated for segregation as they proved that African Americans were of a lesser race and needed to be controlled.

Although Brooks articulates the various ways in which plantation performance reinforced racial stereotypes, she also argues that the show empowered African Americans to both work within and rebel against the dominant narrative, using their participation as a springboard after the show closed. These ideas of agency are at the core of Barbara Webb’s earlier article, “Authentic Possibilities: Plantation Performance of the 1890s” (2004). Webb uses two case studies, *Black America* and a similar show, the same used by Brooks, entitled *The South Before the War*. Based on these two performances, she argues that plantation theatre in the late nineteenth century was a site of black agency, empowerment, and mobilization.

There is a narrative within the study of black theater that the African American experience was one of steady progress. Each performer used the headway created by their predecessors and peers as a stepping stone away from the age-old tropes and toward an authentic

African American cultural presentation. Webb sees this interpretation as filled with “longstanding progressively oriented assumptions” in need of interrogation (64). In both shows, Webb locates moments of agency and empowerment that are not contingent on breaking through or away from stereotypical African American roles. “We should not define authentic turn-of-the-century black performance as inherently unrealized, stifled by the minstrel mask,” Webb states, “Rather, we might consider that black performers created possibilities for racial and cultural identification in the process of their engagements with the constraints of minstrelsy and stereotype” (64). Webb’s argument is supported by scholars such as Paula Marie Seniors and Katarina Dyonne Thompson, both who have studied similar paths of resistances within early slave performance and black musical theater. All of their work supports the creation of the term “site of historical amusement” to better understand the interactions between these constraints, which are separate from “stifled” past explorations.

Moreover, the argument that performers found moments of agency during the run of the show diverges from Brooks’ in that, although she notes instances of empowerment, those instances came after the closing of *Black America*. For example, Tom Fletcher, a noted African American vaudevillian, gave credit to *Black America* and other such performances for creating the first generation of black vaudevillians, some of whom got their start in the cabins of Ambrose Park (Brooks 67). For Webb, however, if all historical interpretations use “white fantasy and minstrel precedents” as evidence of the lack of black agency, we risk ignoring the subtle rebellions of the oppressed (65). Even so, Brooks’ argument is echoed by other scholars in the field, such as David Krasner’s work, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theater* (1997).

Like Brooks, Krasner describes *Black America* as something that had to be moved past in

order to create opportunities for individual black performers. Nate Salsbury is often the focus when this argument is present. Krasner writes, “There can be little doubt that the representation in *Black America* was sanitized by Salsbury in order to promote a ‘safe’ view of plantation life” (24). This statement is undeniably true. Krasner gives much power to Salsbury and his vision and argues that Salsbury’s portrait of African Americans as a collective whole outweighed the few individuals whose talents were showcased. The few performers who headlined were those who’d gained some access to white society. In doing so, Salsbury separated the two groups and reinforced the notions that Southern African Americans were all the same, while the “civilized” African Americans were more white than black.

Roger Allen Hall’s “*Black America: Nate Salsbury’s Afro-American Exhibition*” (1977) explores similar themes. Hall asks questions about the state of black entertainment as it was viewed by whites in the late nineteenth century. Hall also investigates some crucial differences between Buffalo Bill’s Wild West and *Black America*. He argues that the success of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West was partially based on its time and proximity. Although the Indian Wars were not completely a thing of the past in the 1880s, most people in northern cities would never come in contact with a Native American or a cowboy, making the central elements of the show unusual and unique. “Although *Black America* was based on another time,” writes Hall, “its central element, the 500 performers, were blacks, and almost anyone in any northern city in 1894 could see black people” (55). Hall claims that it is for this reason that many of the events that worked well in the frontier show, such as races and feats of strength, fell flat in *Black America*. Hall concludes by posing a variety of reasons for *Black America*’s eventual closure, among them its inability to match the power of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West.

Black America borrowed heavily from Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, and this study would be

remiss to ignore the extensive research done on the long-lasting frontier phenomena. In addition to looking at frontier extravaganza through similar lenses to that of *Black America*, such as performance, authenticity, and representation, many scholars have explored how William Cody created and sold a fictional American story by using his celebrity and capitalizing on the nation's collective sense of nostalgia for a passing age. In her book, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West: Celebrity, Memory, and Popular History* (2000), Joy Kasson writes that the frontier extravaganza "represented a kind of memory showmanship" (8). Cody was at the head of the most popular traveling show of all time and arguably curated the collective memory Americans have of the West today. Kasson's argument could easily be transferred to *Black America*, as plantation shows of the turn of the century were key in perpetuating stereotypes of African Americans that also continue to manifest in the present day.

Kasson's work provides a strong bridge between the previous scholarship on *Black America* and the focus of this study. Similar to scholars who have studied plantation performance, Kasson uses ideas of myth and memory in exploring Buffalo Bill's Wild West, as does scholar Louis Warren's *Buffalo Bill's America: William Cody and the Wild West Show* (2005). Warren looks at how Cody manipulated his real experiences as a soldier and scout to gain the American people's respect, a respect he then capitalized on to propel himself to stardom. In the national spotlight, Cody was able to create a site of historical amusement representative of America. Warren's argument traces a similar path to Webb's, as both comment on the potential of these sites to create space for performers, be they Native American or African American, to gain traction by manipulating stereotypes for professional and political gain.

Using the past scholarship on *Black America* and *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* is an excellent way to begin the exploration of sites of historical amusement. This work brings up ideas

surrounding stereotypes and racism; history and memory, and education and amusement. Moreover, these articles and books all touch on how the American people were participating in the consumption of American history, each individual a member of what David Lowenthal calls “the cult of heritage” (51). Lowenthal’s *The Past is a Foreign Country*, originally published in 1986 and revised multiple times, is a formative text that explores history and memory from antiquity to today. He separates his text into four themes: wanting, disputing, knowing, and remaking; all of which make an appearance within sites of historical amusement. Lowenthal’s thesis supports the work done by all of the aforementioned scholars: “Yet our legacy, divine and diabolical alike, is not set in stone but simmers in the incipient flux of time” (610). The past is not antediluvian, it was created by humans and constant reexamination is not only inevitable, but necessary.

Section III: Influences: Buffalo Bill’s Wild West and the Chicago World’s Fair

From the very beginning, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West was recognized as a piece of theatrical innovation. Active from 1883 until 1917, Cody utilized the popular traveling circus as a foundation. He then expanded the concept by pairing the circus and its animal shows and feats of skill with thematic narrative drama, all which took place in his manicured version of the American West. As Cody’s business partner, Salsbury played a key role in the frontier phenomena since 1883, both as a manager and a producer. Thus, it seems only appropriate that Salsbury modeled his sunny South off of Cody’s wild West.

Buffalo Bill’s Wild West was indeed a precursor to *Black America* and is also a representative example of a site of historical amusement. By identifying and analyzing the

elements of Buffalo Bill's Wild West that made their way into *Black America*, we can better examine the evolution of these sites.

Both Cody and Salsbury utilized their personal histories to generate audiences. Salsbury was the leader of a popular black faced minstrel troupe, Salsbury's Troubadours. Cody was a mythic frontier hero, a persona generated through his adventures as a scout and soldier in the American West. In truth, the adventures that Cody passed off as authentic were largely exaggerated and sometimes downright lies. What is clear, however, is that Cody used his own experiences, providing him with the authenticity needed to elevate his status and bring in audiences. Salsbury utilized this same tactic, selling "real negroes." At both sites, authenticity was a loose concept in no short supply.

Over the years, Cody's cast swelled and diversified in response to the shifting political landscape. Sharpshooter Annie Oakley and Sioux chief Sitting Bull joined the cast in 1885. Members of the 9th Cavalry, a unit of African American soldiers, were brought on alongside Russian Cossacks and Mexican military men. By the time the show performed in Brooklyn in 1894, it had over 600 performers and a longer name, Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World, a title that noted the inclusion of new and exotic fighting forces. Four years later, Theodore Roosevelt's own Rough Riders would charge up San Juan Hill during the Spanish-American War. Responding to the press coverage, Cody included members of Roosevelt's unit in his show and recreated the heroic charge for audiences across the United States. By utilizing Roosevelt's soldiers, Cody effectively glamorized and preserved the legend, just as Salsbury would attempt to do with his fictional recreation of the American South.

Roosevelt's soldiers were not the only one of Roosevelt's cultural products that Cody used in Buffalo Bill's Wild West. Sites of historical amusement are products of modernity,

shaped by the social and political forces of the day. In the late nineteenth century, Americans were guided by a “red-blooded model of Rooseveltian masculinity” best embodied by Theodore Roosevelt himself (Murphy 89). A rancher, hunter, and member of the New York elite, Roosevelt showed Americans that a man could be both strong and virile as well as a refined family man. Roosevelt’s ideal man was who Cody’s audiences wanted to see on the frontier, thus, Cody himself embodied this Rooseveltian sense of masculinity and wove the narrative into his show. For example, in the closing act, “The Attack on the Settlers Cabin,” Native American riders attacked a white family’s homestead, only to be driven back by Cody and his comrades, all with guns blazing (Warren 102). Cody’s savagery was absolved by his chivalrous defense of the white settlers. Cody wove this celebration of American masculinity into Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, effectively riding the wave of an evolving social norm. Just as Cody latched on to a dominant social trend, Nate Salsbury would capitalize on social and political elements of the day in the creation of *Black America*. Salsbury’s site showed the clear influence of white America’s reaction to heightened African American visibility as well as a renewed desire for political reunification between the North and the South.

In 1893, Cody and Salsbury made history at the Chicago World’s Fair. Christened “The White City,” due to the massive ornate white buildings, designed by renowned architect Stanford White, the Chicago World’s Fair stood as a testament to American exceptionalism and generated such a powerful sense of nostalgia, and with it a desire for structure, civility, and white homogeneity. This narrative was easily sold to an anxious American public living in an age of industrialization and shifting demographics. Cody tapped into this nostalgia. At the fair, historian Frederick Jackson Turner presented his essay entitled, “The Significance of the Frontier in

American History.” In it, he stated that the frontier as Americans knew it was gone. Thanks to Cody, it hadn’t gone very far. Visitors needed only cross the street to relive it in all its glory.

Before the opening of the exhibition, Cody and Salsbury built a monumental amphitheater just outside of the official grounds. Over the six months of the fair, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World ran 318 times. With an average of 12,000 visitors per show, Cody introduced his version of the American frontier to nearly 4,000,000 tourists (“Midway Shows Coming Here”).

Although Buffalo Bill’s Wild West was not technically a part of the fair, Cody’s show was clearly influenced by it, both in size and message. The fair created an “ideal” America by carefully curating the presentation of the Other. Othering is fundamental to our identity, both personally and collectively. “Every person and thing is an Other to us,” writes historian Philip Deloria. “We situate some Others quite closely to the Selves we are calling into being; others, we place so far away as to make them utterly unhuman” (21). The Chicago World’s Fair did this through the segregation of the “primitive” and the non-American.

The exposition contained a famous mile-long ethnographic exhibit called the Avenue of Nations along the Midway Plaisance. Visitors walked down the manicured promenade and viewed “villages” of exotic people from around the globe, including Egyptian belly dancers, Native Americans, Africans from Dahomey, and Germans from Bavaria. Grouping all of these individuals together created a narrative of Otherness, each group’s difference seeping onto the next. The Chicago World’s Fair embodied American exceptionalism by elevating the American above all other races and cultures, more specifically, the white American.

Othering was foundational to Cody and Salsbury’s sites as well, as both capitalized on difference using stereotypes embedded in white supremacy. Cody presented the “uncivilized

savage” and Salsbury presented the “docile slave.” African Americans were unable to directly challenge these stereotypes, as they were largely excluded from the Chicago World’s Fair. There were a few notable instances, however, where the African American Other was deemed “interior,” meaning part of American society (P. Deloria 21). Nancy Green, a former slave living in Chicago, was one of the few exceptions. She was “invited” to don a red kerchief and serve as the living advertisement for a revolutionary new food product, Aunt Jemima’s Pancake Mix (Rydell xix). The red kerchief was a powerful truth marker for the mammy stereotype, and the R.T. Davis Milling Company exploited it, perpetuating a stereotype of black servitude. When Others become part of a group—a nation or a society—they retain their difference. In the white/black dichotomy of 1895, that difference was illustrated through subservience.

A second notable exception was “Jubilee Day.” Allegedly in response to demands for inclusion from prominent black activists like Ida B. Wells and Frederick Douglass, the fair’s white Board of Directors set up watermelon stands and specifically invited African American families and their children. Jubilee Day created a schism between Wells and Douglass, as Wells boycotted the day, while Douglass used it as an opportunity to reach an audience of both blacks and whites with a speech entitled “The Race Problem in America.” The stories of Green, Wells, and Douglass and their varying degrees of involvement in the fair was a story that performers in *Black America* played out as well. Many looked for moments of agency, but at what cost?

Joy S. Kasson asks these same questions in regard to Native performers in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West. Many historians have argued that Cody’s traveling show gave Native performers opportunities they would find nowhere else. Yes, they were required to play “stage villains,” but they also displayed skills that reflected positively on Plains Indian culture, such as horsemanship, dance, songs, and games (J.S. Kasson 163). At times, however, these songs and dances lacked

complexity, as they were simplified for white consumption. Cody also paid his performers well. The much needed money Native performers were able to send back to their families bolstered their tribes, starving on underserved reservations in the West. Furthermore, Cody's show both reinforced and challenged some stereotypes simultaneously. Historian Vine Deloria has noted, "For some, work in the Wild West was, literally, an alternative to imprisonment, for Cody's reputation as an Indian fighter allowed him to get permission to employ individuals who were widely viewed as dangerous" (V. Deloria). By portraying "dangerous" Native Americans in a variety of lights, many of whom were dangerous merely for their brown skin and foreignness, Cody was painting a more nuanced picture of Native Americans than often seen in the media of the day.

Did Nancy Green's participation earn her the opportunity to gain a measure of fame as an early icon of America's culture of mass consumption? Or will she only be remembered as what Maurice Manning has called, "a slave in a box"? (Rydell xx). Did Native Americans consent to the flattening of their culture or, indeed, preserve it by making it fit for mass consumption? Sites of historical amusement often put performers in complicated positions where they must locate the line between empowerment and exploitation.

In 1894, the year after the Chicago World's Fair, Cody and Salsbury moved their then stationery show from the United States' second largest city to its fourth, Brooklyn, New York. Ambrose Park was a 24-acre parcel of land adjacent to the 39th Street Ferry. The ferry connected with Whitehall Street at the tip of Manhattan, which at the time was a hub for ferry traffic for both New York and New Jersey. Concurrently, the elevated train lines continued to expand like a root system across both cities. With a population of nearly 800,000, Brooklyn alone could have filled the seats at Ambrose Park for the length of *Black America's* run. With the additional

assistance of ferries and trains, however, the *New York Times* reported that Ambrose Park could easily be accessed by 3,000,000 people of its own (“Midway Shows Coming Here”).

Cody and Salisbury set to work creating a frontier village unlike anything the world had ever seen. The crew constructed teepees, tents, and cabins to house the performers as well as covered grandstands surrounding a gigantic arena for the show itself. Although Ambrose Park had all the trappings of a rugged company town, civility and modernism were in no short supply. As part of the ethnographic component, the tents, teepees, and cabins were not hidden from view, hence the rows of tents for the performers were often flanked by manicured gardens and flowerbeds (“City Camp Life”). The walkway represented civility and advancement, while the grassy area off to the side was the home of the “real” frontier. Had Buffalo Bill’s Wild West truly exemplified an unrefined, male-dominated company town, it would never have garnered the success that it did. William Cody turned the seemingly uncivilized frontier into a land of white family values safe for men, women, and children.

At the end of an incredibly successful run, Cody packed up his show and went back out on the road. Salisbury remained in Brooklyn and, in early 1895, set out to turn the grassy plot along the East River from the plains of the American West into a Southern plantation.

Section IV: *Black America*

a. Black America: a Case Study

Black America is a strong example of a site of historical amusement, as it displays clearly the four key elements: it is historically themed; it utilizes amusement, not education, as the entry point; its influence is created through the use and manipulation of collective memory; and finally, although it explores history, the history presented is shaped by the social and cultural

climates of the present. These categories, just like sites of historical amusement, lack clear boundaries and overlap one another. What is clear, however, is that when these tenets come together, powerful cultural influences are produced.

Historically Thematic

Black America was rooted in the history of the Civil War, but the narrative of the conflict was heavily curated, stitched together with truth markers from both the Antebellum and present-day South. Furthermore, although it displayed signifiers of the war, the influences and effects of the conflict were erased from the narrative all together. There was very little mention of slavery and no mention of the violence and oppression surrounding it. Thus, *Black America* was historically themed, but the history it drew from was an invented past.

Salsbury's fictional past was authenticated through the use of signifiers of the past, easily identified by the audience. For example, the site opened an hour before the staged performance, during which visitors could walk amongst "authentic slave cabins" and watch a ginning demonstration at the cotton field. Both the field and gin were worked by performers preparing the cotton for market. Once the cotton had been ginned and baled, the performers would undo it in preparation for the following performance. Depending on the newspaper, the cotton gin was reported to be anywhere from 40 to 100 years old. African Americans were associated with the rural Antebellum past. Placing them in small cabins adjacent to a cotton field, one worked by "former slaves," was illustrative of the Antebellum South ("Black America on View)."

The show contained signifiers of mid- and post-Civil War America as well. During the closing number of the performance, one entitled "Historical Pictures," men and women marched single file, entering from alternate sides, and joined together on the stage while "mammoth portraits" of famed abolitionists were shown behind with the assistance of an electrified

contraption at the back of the stage: Abraham Lincoln, General William Sherman, Frederick Douglass, and John Brown (“‘Black America’ is Open”). The chorus sang music ranging from popular minstrel and Civil War tunes to hymns. A reporter from the *Brooklyn Citizen* particularly enjoyed “John Brown’s Body,” “Tramp, Tramp, Tramp,” and “Poor Old Slave” (“‘Black America’ is Here”). The cotton gin, portraits, and songs were-all markers of the Civil War, specifically chosen to support Salsbury’s altered historical narrative by avoiding any clear mention of the enslaved and only focusing on the heroes and the freed. Although depicting African Americans in the Antebellum South implies a system of slavery, their state of bondage was never explicitly stated.

For sites of historical amusement, the facts are less important than the act of looking back. Salsbury’s version of the American South generated a collective sense of nostalgia. David Lowenthal explores nostalgia extensively in his book, *The Past is a Foreign Country*. In it, he explains that nostalgia is often associated with a warm, personal memory, yet the converse is also true. Nostalgia can be both collective and painful. Communities often seek out experiences of horror or sadness in an attempt to live in that historical moment or locate a false narrative that feels safer. For instance, when Americans think of the Great Depression, many with no personal connection think of lines of unemployed men, while those who lived it might remember “the smell of new-mown hay and honeysuckle wafting in the breeze” (Lowenthal 39). By reaching back to something painful and assigning new memories, they also create a false sense of accomplishment. At sites of historical amusement, selling this idealized history is imperative. In the case of *Black America*, tourists looked at a war that took over 600,000 lives and saw a time of stability when African Americans were docile and all was right with the world. Visitors who

have no connection with the past are able to safely participate in it while those who lived it can relive it through rose-colored glasses.

This idea moves parallel to Brooks', who also argues that *Black America* was rooted in the "cultural and narrative act of remembering" (61). The tourist wants to see security and civility, not war or violence. It showcased a community of loyal African Americans comfortable on their land with no intention of migrating north, something hundreds of thousands of African Americans had done in the latter half of the nineteenth century. This demographic shift had some Northerners on edge, leery of African Americans and the threat of economic competition. *Black America* used legislated nostalgia to create a fictional age of stability, one that made the present look far more stable than it actually was. This was a dangerous act, as it encouraged its audience to envision southern, rural African Americans as unchanging and static—as the "ideal African American,"—and therefore vilified those who sought to change their station, like their northern neighbors.

By using Civil War iconography, *Black America* appeared to be historical in nature. History provides the scaffold to understanding issues of the present. Tourists who accepted Salsbury's narrative, one that removed violence and presented African Americans as static, were ill-equipped to process the present day issues of civil rights, enfranchisement, and lynching. In an ideal world, sites of historical amusement would inspire curiosity in the tourist and encourage them to seek a deeper understanding of the past and present. However, the risk of blind acceptance outweighs the unreliable benefits of inspiring interrogation.

Amusement as Entry Point

It would be unfair to say that *Black America*'s audience had no knowledge of American history or the present-day American South. It would be fair, however, to say that Nate Salsbury probably didn't care either way. *Black America* is a perfect example of how sites of historical amusement use entertainment, not education, as the entry point. Sites of historical amusement stimulate the tourist, but do not require them to interrogate what they see as long as they enjoy their visit.

When education and *Black America* are mentioned together in newspaper articles, there is usually a clear implication that it was supposed to be delivered through entertainment. *The New York Sun* spells this out explicitly: "We get a glimpse of the workings of [the African American] mind, learn what appeals will move him and in what lines he is most likely to make progress, and we see this nonetheless clearly that the exhibit is put in the guise of entertainment and not of instruction" (*New York Sun* 6 June 1895). *The Indianapolis Journal* was more pointed, saying that *Black America* was "a place to see real negroes, not study the negro question" ("Strange Exhibition"). At sites of historical amusement, escapism comes with an added consequence. For the *Journal* reporter, *Black America* provided a space to step away from the political discussions of the day. At the site, the reporter was inundated with imagery of a happy and servile community and was not openly encouraged to challenge those ideas nor provided with the historical context to do so. For those debating the "negro question," *Black America* provided an answer, one that perpetuated stereotypes and returned "the negro" to a place of subservience.

Like amusement parks, a key element of sites of historical amusement are the thrills and excitement promised. *Black America* offered both. "The Ninth Cavalry (colored), U.S.A. displayed their abilities as riders, after which there were colored boxers, colored jugglers, and

colored runners, until the audience was fully satisfied of the versatility of the southern negro” (“‘Black America’ is Open”). All of the entertainment offered featured African Americans performing talents involving physical strength or music; controlled, non-threatening, and expected. The idea that all African Americans possessed physical and vocal talents was a myth generated centuries before and fanned during the days of slavery.

Buffalo Bill’s Wild West had sharpshooters and battles on horseback, events that would not have been acceptable if done by African Americans. The exception was the 9th Cavalry, an African American unit famous for their role in the Indian Wars. The soldiers did military drills and showcased their talents on horseback. Their status as Union soldiers was of paramount importance. Although they would always be black, their military uniforms served as a marker of civility that read well with white audiences and permitted the use of guns. All sites of historical amusement are carefully curated and policed. In the case of *Black America*, this prevented the performers from showcasing talents that fell outside of their commonly associated categories.

Salsbury was quick to rotate out acts, sometimes due to poor reception, while often it was simply for variety’s sake. In late May of 1895, early in the run, Salsbury removed the “March of the Amazons.” During the march, groups of women were paraded through the arena in leopard print outfits, labeling them as primitives from “darkest Africa.” These “March of Civilization,” scenes, depicting the evolution of a people, were a common trope found in minstrel shows and other more traditionally theatrical plantation pieces. As of mid-June, the march had been revived by “general request” (“Changes in ‘Black America’”). In this, the audience had role in shaping the content. For Salsbury to know which acts were enjoyed and which unwanted, he had to have his finger on the collective pulse.

Amusement parks redefined how the differing social classes participated in leisure. As Kathy Peiss explains in her book, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (1986), Coney Island's three distinct parks all marketed to different social groups (136). Amusement parks on the whole adopted this model, recognizing that industrialization and immigration had drastically widened the possibilities of who might visit. Salsbury only had one site, meaning he needed aspects that would attract individuals from every class within the walls of *Black America*. The acrobats and boxers might have appealed to the working-classes, while the "March of Civilization" and Civil War tunes attracted middle- and upper-class individuals. Imagine a group of working-class youth watching two older African American men, clothed in linen garments reminiscent of those worn by enslaved Africans, as they gin cotton. Next to them stands a middle-class family, a husband and wife with their young children, as well as family of recently arrived immigrants from Eastern Europe. Although all of these tourists might have been attracted to *Black America* for different reasons, they come together in their interaction with American history, Southern African Americans, and the present day South. By using entertainment as the entry point, sites of historical amusement strengthen the collective at the expense of the Othered, as the desire to attract an audience transcends the desire to produce a historically accurate cultural product.

Sites of historical amusement are willing to abuse history for the sake of profit. This is particularly troubling at a site that professes authenticity, as every addition to the show is an addition to the historical narrative created. Many of *Black America's* acts would have been deemed racist no matter what show they might have appeared in, but at a site of historical amusement this type of blatant exploitation does double damage.

Collective Memory

The purpose of *Black America*, stated repeatedly in advertisements, was to “entertain and amuse” (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle* 2 July 1895). The challenge was creating something that would appeal to the widest margin of entertainment goers, especially in New York in 1895. Immigrants from Europe were flooding into the tenement districts of Brooklyn and Manhattan, African Americans were migrating to the North in record numbers, and the factory boom had created a wage earning working-class with quarters to burn. To sell *Black America* to a diverse audience, Salsbury created a production with multiple entry points: a cheap fee, a variety of acts, and an uncomplicated version of history palatable to the masses.

Black America's use of popular imagery and a collective understanding of the past produced a site with no distinct boundaries of time or space and without a clear articulation of culture. The lack of specificity transformed a complicated history into a world without depth or contradictions. Although this vagueness makes sites of historical amusement popular and palatable, the act of forgetting comes with many casualties.

Collective Memory: Temporally Vague

Sites of historical amusement are temporally vague and the history explored is often without a clear timeline or event markers. As we have seen, *Black America* was historically themed in part because it conflated the Antebellum South with the current state of the region, creating a reimagined historical narrative devoid of the horrors of slavery. By telling the story of the African American without exploring the Civil War and slavery, issues that are systemic suddenly lose their moorings. Furthermore, without historical context, the tourist does not have the opportunity to see a historical progression which unfairly freezes the communities featured at these sites.

Although historically themed, *Black America* was not an exclusively historical experience. Part of the goal was to present Southern African Americans “as they really are” and to give a picture of “life in the sunny south” in the present day (“Black America’ Five”). Yet, the Antebellum truth markers implied that the African Americans presented were indeed living as they did in Antebellum days. *The New York Sun* noted this contradiction by saying, “One object of *Black America* is to depict the negro life of the South, together with some of the characteristics of the old slave life.” In this reporter’s eyes, the site was depicting modern Southern African Americans practicing “traditional” customs. Never did they practice “modern” customs, nor did their lives look any different than they had fifty years before. “We see him as a whole race was less than a quarter of a century ago and as a good part of it still is,” wrote the *New York Sun* (“Black America’ Five”). *Black America* implied a lack of progress on the part of Southern African Americans. By presenting them as static and unchanging, *Black America* effectively removed the historical context, collapsed history, and transposed the stereotypes of the past onto the people of the present.

Black America featured no white performers. Commonly, advertisements sold the show as being authentic for this reason; it had “All Blacks - No Whites” (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle* 28 May 1895). By removing the white oppressor, the history that was being reimagined was one that painted slavery as more of a loose time period, “the days of slavery,” rather than the physical act of owning another human being. When there is mention of a white slave owner, he is just off to the side or out of the frame and always a “kind and appreciative master” (“Wild Negro Chants and Dances”). This imagined past allowed white tourists to move through the rows of cabins blamelessly, as the cast was portraying happy, docile individuals free of oppression. It also

revised the picture of African Americans as a problem to solve. The problem had been solved, as the African Americans of *Black America* were content with their station.

Without giving context, including a timeframe, tourists were unable to accurately place what they were seeing within reality. This can be incredibly detrimental, as it prevented the visitor from making any connections to the current day. Furthermore, by allowing visitors to walk through a plantation devoid of oppression, it removed some of the blame ascribed to Southern plantation owners and all whites who benefited from slavery and black oppression.

Collective Memory: Spatially Vague

The term heritage tourism is reserved for sites that explore the history of the region in which they are located. Sites of historical amusement differ from heritage sites as they do not need to be built where the events depicted took place. *Black America*, although set in the South, was exclusively performed in the North. Because of this, sites of historical amusement tend to lack historical weight and “sense of place.” Although detrimental to the telling of an authentic history, this spatial vagueness is a boon for these sites, for it frees them from the restraints of a physical history and allows for exaggeration and imagination.

One example of these blurry spatial boundaries can be found in the physical landscape of the site. Buffalo Bill’s Wild West and *Black America* both had walls around them. The walls were clearly functional, as they prevented rogue audience members from receiving the entertainment for free, but they also served to separate the historic from the non. “Just as whiteness is defined by blackness, a historic place is defined by its non-historic surroundings,” writes Glassberg (157). Cody and Salsbury elevated the historical authenticity of the site by dividing it from the rest of the modern world and creating a physical gateway to a historic past.

Black America showcased “plantation life,” a phrase which carries with it the promise of an actual plantation. That is not what Salsbury provided. Instead, he created an ethnographic exhibit that exists nowhere in reality. Visitors were able to wander the grounds through the rows of tiny wooden houses and see a purportedly authentic village with actual inhabitants, as the majority of the performers did live within the cabins with their families. This idea was lifted directly from Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, as visitors were encouraged to walk down manicured paths lined with teepees to see the Native people in their “natural habitat” (Warren 197). On May 26th, a reporter from the *Brooklyn Citizen* described walking through the rows of wooden homes and exploring the grounds. The implication is that what he was seeing was an accurate reflection of present-day African Americans in the South.

A visit to the various cottages yesterday showed them to be perhaps the most contented body of people that can be found in Brooklyn. They are all well housed in the new log cabins that have been built, and after the afternoon’s toil is over, they gather around their humble homes or in the cotton fields that have been transplanted from the South and sing and smoke and recite tragedy and comedy and play cards until the call comes to them to go into the arena for the evening performance (“How Black Americans Live”).

The *Brooklyn Citizen* reporter envisioned the small village and the life within, painting a picture of an idyllic Southern hamlet. This image was possible because Salsbury only presented half of the picture.

The walk through the village presented a picturesque scene of life in the South. “In fact, it is the typical Southern plantation, rather condensed, of course, but still full of interest,” wrote an *Eagle* reporter (“Black America on View”). The reporter noted that the plantation was condensed, implying that something was missing, something had been collapsed to make room

for the cabins. *Black America*'s Southern plantation lacked both white cast members and the physical structures associated with a white Southern history. There was no whipping post, auction block, or plantation house. In this, the spatial and temporal blurriness within sites of historical amusement often work together, creating a humble paradise that is and has always been.

Reporters admitted that the site was not truly authentic. In addition to the cotton and cabins, *Black America* had buffalo. Reported in the *Brooklyn Citizen*, the site received a loan from the traveling wild west show “consisting of eight bulls, three cows, and two calves” (“How Black Americans Live”). They reportedly formed a picturesque—though somewhat incongruous—supplement to the entertainment. Tourists understand that sites of historical amusement are fictional spaces and not linked to the land, and they are willing to overlook inauthentic aspects as long as they have an authentic aspect to fall back on. MacCannell discusses this in a chapter of *The Tourist* titled, “Staged Authenticity: Arrangements of Social Space in Tourist Settings.” In it, he explains that “backstage” areas are sometimes necessary to ensure “staged” areas appear “real” (95). For example, imagine a character in a play with the ability to fly. Tourists suspend their disbelief and ignore the wires and harness in order to become engrossed in the action taking place on stage. In many ways, by documenting the inauthenticity of some elements in *Black America*, like the buffalo, the reporters silently enforced the truth behind others.

Salsbury's working-class audiences could not visit the South for real. However, for their transportative two hours at *Black America*, they were tourists safe behind the mask of white supremacy. Rebecca Cawood McIntyre explores this idea in her fascinating book, *Souvenirs of the Old South: Northern Tourism and Southern Mythology* (2011). “By luring Northerners with

sentimentalized slave stereotypes, writers reassured whites who were uneasy about the murky status of the former slaves by reassuring that blacks were not only different from but inferior to whites” (101). Salsbury’s *Black America* reassured its audience through the removal of the physical markers of slavery, made possible by the spatially vague nature of sites of historical amusement.

The fact that *Black America* was a recreated plantation, albeit an abridged one set in Brooklyn, was not an issue for Salsbury or the tourists. It was a site of historical amusement, not of history. However, by not authentically recreating the plantation village yet still claiming authenticity, Salsbury provided a false reality for the sake of profit. Stripping white tourists of any connection to the situation of African Americans further reinforced ideas of white supremacy and black servitude.

Collective Memory: Culturally Vague

One of the most damaging aspects of sites of historical amusement is the flattening of culture. Salsbury did not have to work hard to produce a culturally reductive version of Southern African Americans, as white America had done that long ago. *Black America* created a space between minstrelsy and anthropology, one that fictionalized the history and culture of Southern African Americans and reduced it to a collection of generalities. Historian Karl Hagstrom Miller calls this precarious space “folkloric isolation” (101). When in folkloric isolation, the cultures and customs stand alone, unconnected to reality. Sites of historical amusement thrive on the freedom offered by this separation from reality, as it lets them create their own context for the culture exhibited. In this, folkloric isolation is simply a marketing tool.

Black America did incredible damage by stating that the cast was comprised of authentic Southern African Americans and then proceeding to have them sing the same standard

minstrelsy songs. This collapsed folklore and minstrelsy, creating a new culture attributed to “real southern Negroes” (Miller 100). Newspapers reported Salsbury’s talent scouts were roaming the country in search of “the cream of musical talent from the plantations of Dixie land” (“Views and Interviews”), painting a picture of a cast full of “authentic” Southern African Americans. As reported by a variety of papers, the opening number of *Black America* was “Watermelon Smiling on the Vine.” It was followed by “Raise the Food To-Night” and “Oh, Dat Watermelon” (“Black America’ is Here”). It can only be speculated what the original lyrics were to any of these songs, as they have gone through a multitude of iterations since. Many of them are now accepted folk songs, having been recorded by white singers in the 1930s and 1940s. As luck would have it, we can get a snippet of the lyrics from a secondary source.

As reported on October 17th, 1895, in the “Gossip Pure and Simple” column on “The Women’s Page” of the Washington D.C. *Evening Times*, Count Weissnichtwo, a member of D.C.’s social elite, hosted a dinner party. As per the column’s author, a Miss Marchmont, “the most amusing part of the whole evening was the Count’s rendition of “Watermelon Smiling on the Vine,” which classic he heard when he was in New York recently and saw ‘Black America.’” With the greatest enthusiasm he sang:

Hambone am sweet, bacon is good,
 Possum is very very fine
 Oh, give me, oh, give me, oh, how I wish
 You would,
 That watermelon smiling on the vine.

Sites of historical amusement are not necessarily “lowbrow entertainment” and the tourists who attend them are not solely working-class individuals, attracted by a cheap entry fee. In addition

to providing a better understanding of the songs that were sung at *Black America*, this article is incredibly significant to historians seeking to understand the influence the show had on its upper-class visitors.

There is a possibility that Count Weissnichtwo purchased the sheet music to “Watermelon Smiling on the Vine,” a popular practice in the late nineteenth century. Another example of sheet music produced is songwriter Harry H. Zickel’s booklet of novelty sheet music entitled “Black America (a Negro Oddity)” in 1895. There is a dedication on the inside cover: “Respectfully Dedicated to Mr. Nate Salsbury.” A march and two-step, the lyrics and their treatment of African Americans is quite typical of popular music of the day and similar to “Watermelon Smiling on the Vine.”

Come ‘long you darkies, yes come eb’ry one,
 Come ‘long you darkies, join in de fun
 Music does ring, an’ de birds dey all sing
 Oh, come ‘long you darkies, yes come eb’ry one
 Come ‘long you darkies, join in de fun
 Music does ring, an’ de birds dey all sing
 Oh come ‘long you darkies come.
 See whar de twinkling stars am shining,
 See war de silber moon am climbing.
 Come ‘long you darkies, come. Come.

These two songs clearly made it out of the confines of the site of historical amusement and into the common vernacular. Sheet music such as “Black America” could have been purchased quite cheaply by all classes, inserting the culturally reductive portrait painted by *Black America* into

upper- and working-class homes. It normalized these “coon songs” even more than the stock minstrel performances did, as minstrelsy utilized an acknowledged mask while *Black America* purported to remove it. By pairing “real” Southern African Americans with songs like “Watermelon Smiling’ on the Vine” and “Black America,” Salsbury used Miller’s concept of folkloric isolation to market an “authentic” Southern black culture, created by whites and for whites.

In addition to the music, Salsbury costumed his “real” cast in stereotypical clothing that reflected an unchanging African American community. By doing so, he effectively validated the stereotypes even more so than minstrel shows of the day. We can see this through the scant photographic evidence of *Black America* (Abbott 393). Three promotional images were taken, all that show the cast mid-song or dance. Their costumes pictured are exactly as described in the press. “The white straw hats of the men and the red bandanas of the women give a picturesque appearance...” (“Black America is Open”). These items of clothing are truth markers of a rural, unrefined Southern African American community.

Salsbury was insistent that they were not costumes, however, because his show contained no actors. Rather, the African Americans in *Black America* were dressed in traditional and historically accurate clothing. “The negro of the South is a distinct type,” wrote the *New York Times*. “He has little in common with his Northern brother, and is therefore of much more interest, as some of the characteristics of slavery days still cling to him” (“Wild Negro Chants and Dances”). Regardless of what time period the clothing was ascribed to, by using it as representative of a primitive, rural community, urbanites were able to look at their own clothing and feel superior in their current state. This implication of a “primitive nature” can also be seen in derogatory language that described the performers as childlike. In reference to the grandeur of

the arena, the *New York Tribune* wrote: “They are delighted with the gilt and the braid, the immense arena and the vast collection of white citizens whom they amuse. It is all play for them” (“Tuneful ‘Black America’”). For white audiences, the African American role is to perform for them. In this, sites of historical amusement further perpetuate this destructive binary that sets one group far above the other.

Sites of historical amusement provide opportunities for tourists to elevate themselves above an Other. McIntyre notes that this was a common theme in late nineteenth century tourist literature. She writes, “Descriptions and visual representations of black clothing further reinforced whites’ sense of their own superiority and blacks’ supposedly natural inferiority” (115). William Cody used the same technique in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West. The rhinestones and tassels that adorned Cody’s costume, although impractical for actual scouting, presented him as a gentleman cowboy far more civilized than his Native American foe.

In addition to music and clothing, Salsbury’s cast was both dehumanized and exoticized through racist descriptions of their bodies. The similarities between the languages used to describe enslaved Africans being sold and that used to describe the performers is particularly unsettling. Reporters commented on skin tone, body shape, and dress. “So uniformly ebon in hue,” wrote the *Nashville American*, “that there must have been a sleek effort at securing uniformity of color in selecting them” (“Actors Gone Abroad”). The performers’ bodies were violated by the white gaze as they were described once again as chattel, prized for their ideal features. The women in particular were classified based on their skin tone and complexion. The *Omaha Daily Bee* decided that the finest specimens were the octoroons and quadroons (“Types of African Beauty”). The reporters were not commenting on their features as standards of beauty,

rather as markers of difference. All of these observations reinforced notions of exoticism and further flattened African American culture into something stereotypical and marketable.

By separating Southern African Americans from the greater whole and exotifying them, Salsbury was exploiting a fictional racial division. Furthermore, by applying the title of real and authentic to individuals performing a culture created by whites, Salsbury participated in the widespread erasure of actual black culture. The Southern African Americans were rural, docile, and satisfied, unlike their Northern relatives. They lived in small cabins, dressed just as they had pre-Civil War, and their customs and songs were signs of a rather primitive people. This picture was like an often played song, one to which everyone knew the lyrics and could sing along.

Product of Modernity

Sites of historical amusement are products of their time. They feed off nostalgia and a desire to look back on a passing age. Buffalo Bill's Wild West was a response to a disappearing frontier. *Black America* was a product of industrialization, a renewed obsession with reconciliation between the North and South, and popular culture.

Gilded Age cities were quickly industrializing, teeming with newly arrived immigrants and questionable political dealings which dominated the socio-political landscape. Americans needed another world to live in; they yearned for a more pleasing past. Thus, during the Gilded Age, millions of Americans were looking to the old South as a source of nostalgia. It was seen as something that was conquered and gone, which fostered a desire to preserve its legacy. The South wanted to keep its culture and traditions, slavery notwithstanding, and the North wanted to see a country whole, both in the past and present. However, to truly use the South in this way, all Americans had to remove the horrors of the war and slavery. Historian David Blight sees two parallel histories created through this desire. First, Americans were allowed to believe the war

did not happen and the country was whole, just as it always was. Second, when they did look at the war, they were allowed to see it as a truly American story, one of freedom and independence. Either way, history was recontextualized and race was removed. *Black America* was a manifestation of this reimagined American dream.

The late nineteenth century was a time of renewed fervor for reconciliation between the North and the South, from which *Black America* pulled directly. In July of 1888, veteran George L. Kilmer published a list of twenty-four Blue-Gray reunions of one kind or another between 1881-1887 (Blight 190). Their popularity only increased during the early 1890s. During these reunions, veterans or reenactors would ceremoniously replay certain key moments of the Civil War, like the surrender at Appomattox. African American soldiers were not included and there was scant mention of slavery, illustrating that this pageantry was framed through the lens of white supremacy. The war was depicted as being about state's rights. Thus, even with the North victorious, it validated the South's role, often as defenders of freedom. In *Black America*, we can see the influence of these reunions in the pro-Union songs, portraits of Civil War heroes, and displays by the 9th Cavalry—these all fit squarely into the 1890s obsession with reconciliation pageantry.

In addition to the political influences, sites of historical amusement utilize the popular culture of the day in their presentation, giving visitors an accessible entry point into the narrative. This can be seen in both the songs presented in the actual show and the language used by the performers. Although reports said that Salsbury required “no acting” on the part of his cast, insisting that they live up to the moniker “real,” there is little doubt that the public interactions between cast and tourist were significantly curated and policed.

Gilded Age literature was also rife with reconciliation pageantry and stock characters. Stories from both Northern and Southern writers would appear as serials in newspapers, which spread this narrative to a wide audience. These presentations cultivated the collective memory that allowed *Black America* to exist by generating the picture tourists expected to see. One of the more prolific proponents of this ahistorical apologist literature was Thomas Nelson Page. His most popular work, published in 1887, was called “In Ole Virginia, or Marse Chan and Other Stories.” Page wrote from the perspective of a slave and his characters spoke in dialect. Sam, a character from “In Ole Virginia,” recounts his experience living in slavery:

Dem wuz good ole times, marster - de bes' sam ever see! ...

Niggers didn't hed nothin' 't all to do - jes' hed to ten' to de feedin' an' clearnin' de hosses, an' doin' what de marster tell 'em to do; an when dey wuz sick, dey had things sont 'em out de house, an' de same doctor can to see 'em what ten' to de white folks when dey wuz po'ly. Dyar warn' no trouble nor nothin' (10).

Equally popular was Joel Chandler Harris. Harris' folktales were Southern American takes on African stories he heard while growing up in a predominantly African American town. In his stories, a faithful former slave, Uncle Remus, tells a young white boy tales of the trickster Brer Rabbit and his friends. These tales were also told in dialect and painted a picture of peaceful Antebellum plantations. Indeed, Brer Rabbit would become one of the most popular characters to come out of nineteenth-century literature.

By writing stories about a “peaceful” South, Page and Harris defended the region's honor by removing blame. In addition, this narrative celebrates white supremacy as a benevolent force and the ideal state of the South. *Black America*, along with Page and Harris, was serving ideas of reconciliation and reunion under the guise of popular stereotypes. Since sites of historical

amusement do not advocate for interrogation, this discovery simply validated and reinforced the tourists' perceived ideas as truth. Tourists take with them these reinforced values, perpetuating the demand for history that validates their current ideas and opinions.

b. *Black America*: Possibilities for Progress

As this study emphasizes, sites of historical amusement are unquestionably dangerous. They flatten history and reduce the historical actors to stereotypes, allowing the tourist to look down from a state of superiority. Yet, we would be remiss to ignore the perspectives of the faces looking back up. In what ways do sites of historical amusement engender opportunities for progress? Although the evidence of the African American reception to *Black America* is sparse, what is there showcases how African American performers utilized the site's reach for professional gain.

The cakewalk was one of the more popular acts within *Black America*. A fixture in minstrel shows throughout the United States, cakewalks consisted of black couples, often in outlandish outfits, dancing in a large circle. White audiences saw this dance both as a traditional expression of African American culture and as representative of the community's lower-class status. Cakewalks played on the stereotype of the hyper-sexual black person and were seen by some as a safe form of slum tourism. In addition, cakewalks contributed to the exotification of African Americans. The dancing was often described by white journalists as "grotesque," and the participants were encouraged to make their presentation as animated as possible. By showcasing cakewalks, Salsbury and his contemporaries reinforced stereotypes of working-class African Americans and ascribed those stereotypes to the collective whole. However, this narrative does not take into account the dancers' motivation for participating.

Later scholarship has pinpointed the origin of the cakewalk, now commonly ascribed to holiday celebrations in the slave quarters and having roots in African dance, and it also served as an outlet of satire. As per Brooke Baldwin, the “grotesque walking” was actually an outlet for satirizing their oppressors and their mannerisms (208). Pre-emancipation, enslaved Africans also used the cakewalk as a silent protest against their white masters. The same can be said for post-emancipation African Americans, writes Krasner, “resistance was often combined with the appearance of accommodation” (5). Opportunities for agency such as this raise the possibility that performers in *Black America* used popular minstrel song and dance to entertain and subvert simultaneously.

Thinking more about the cakewalk’s presence in *Black America*, it is interesting to revisit Webb’s argument that these spaces provided professional opportunities for African Americans. Webb notes that cakewalking was associated with African American youth culture and that cakewalk champions often enjoyed a level of celebrity in the North (71). African Americans would follow the careers of local champions and pay to see them perform. Thus, this cakewalk could be viewed as an opportunity for silent resistance as well as a chance for black Americans to find professional acclaim. This could be said about Nancy Grace, the woman who introduced Aunt Jemima at the Chicago World’s Fair. However, the counter argument says that Green and others who participated in these racist spectacles were merely apologists, defaming their race.

In June of 1895, Peter Margo, an African American visitor to *Black America*, was ejected from the grounds after he stormed the stage. “When the cakewalk was introduced he became very boisterous and tried to jump over the railing into the arena, with the expressed purpose they were burlesquing his race” (“Didn’t Like Cakewalk”). The fervor with which Margo protested the cakewalk is incredible, especially in an arena full of white audience members in 1895. In a

second example, although not commenting on *Black America* specifically, an editorial was published in the *St. Louis Appeal* disparaging any self-respecting African American who participated in a cakewalk. “The cakewalk,” the author writes, “is a resurrected amusement of the ‘quarters’ of the Southern plantation in Antebellum days and no strictly first class Afro-American of to-day would enter such a contest” (“The Renaissance of the Cake Walk”). *The Appeal* was an African American periodical, evidence of a larger discussion on this topic within the African American community that did not make the white papers. As the author sees it, appropriately so, the cakewalk was being used as a tool by white entertainers at the expense of black participants. By showcasing cakewalks, these entertainers reinforced stereotypes of working-class African Americans and ascribed those stereotypes to the entirety of the African American race.

Similarly, musicians found fame amongst the ranks of *Black America*’s cast, although they were forced to use racist material to garner it. For instance, Billy McClain, a famous showman in his own right, was instrumental in the creation of *Black America*. For the first few months of the show he managed the company as well as conducted the orchestra. McClain was only one of the African American celebrities who took to the stage. Others include Madame Cordelia, McClain’s wife, and Madame Flower, a soloist who’d made a name for herself in the South, along with acrobat and contortionist Charles Johnson (“At ‘Black America’”). In very few circles were African Americans marketed for their true talents specifically for white audiences. If the cakewalk is a place for subversive opportunities, headlining is an even more public place to garner fame and success.

Not only were African American performers making a name for themselves with white audiences, they were also entertaining members of the black community as well. For example,

during a promotional parade down New York's Fifth Avenue, African Americans reportedly turned out in great numbers. Wrote the *New York Times*, "The parade attracted great attention, particularly from the colored people of this city, who thronged the sidewalks and crowded into the gutters along the line of the parade from start to finish" ("A 'Black America' Parade"). This interest could be interpreted as a simple attraction to a free spectacle or a desire to see themselves and other "real negroes" represented. When entertainment is limited, all of it is valued. Either way, it is evidence of knowledge. *Black America*, although created by and for whites, did not operate in a white vacuum.

Salisbury also targeted black audiences, sadly but not unexpectedly, for the purpose of making a spectacle for whites. On June 20th, he hosted a "Pickaninny Day," an event very similar to the Chicago World's Fair "Jubilee Day," during which African American mothers with children under the age of two were admitted for free. "Raphael cherubs done in chocolate were thick as blackberries at Ambrose Park yesterday," read the *Eagle*. The mothers, having been invited to see the "antics of their colored brethren from the south," were joined by a delegation of white mothers who inevitably came to see a congregation of black mothers and their children ("Pickaninny Day at Ambrose Park"). It is unknown if the arena seating was segregated, but the idea of white women and their children sitting with black families in 1895 seems unlikely. Brooks sees this event not as a genuine invitation to African American mothers, but a way to reinstate social order during a time of African American advancement. The Southern black children of *Black America* and Northern black children of New York and Brooklyn would be interacting, viewed as a cohesive group by white audience members. According to the logic of the day, Brooks writes, "all black babies—whether born in New York City or South Carolina—were (or remained, as the logic held) essentially 'pickaninnies'" (64). By making all babies

pickaninnies, all African Americans become Southern and therefore adhered to Salsbury's reductive portrait. In this, Salsbury and his white audience were remaking not only history, but race as well.

Interestingly noted, however, is that the cakewalkers on "Pickaninny Day" threw in "extra graces and curves" due to their "appreciative audience." The *Eagle* indicates that the mothers and their children came to see the dances and songs, perhaps the talent, of their fellow African Americans. *Black America* created spaces for black Americans to be seen or to be ogled at, depending on the gaze ("Pickaninny Day at Ambrose Park").

Black America encouraged visitors to enjoy their experience and didn't ask them to question or complicate the story being told. It provided thrills and laughter. However, Webb argues that we should allow for the possibility that all the participants had agency and actively sought the fame they cultivated. Furthermore, they understood the precarious waters in which they swam. If so, *Black America* and other sites of historical amusement were public places that put individuals in front of a large diverse audience. Perhaps larger than they could find in any other venue at that time.

c. *Black America*: Conclusion

Black America's use of history was heavily curated, creating a false narrative that removed slavery from the story of the Civil War. The African American situation in 1895 was a product of hundreds of years of violence and struggle, a story deemed too controversial to tell. When sites of historical amusement omit aspects of history, they prevent the tourist from identifying a clear chain of events that lead to present-day issues. Because of this, visitors saw what was purported to be a picture of the African American of the present day in the same

position as that of the enslaved in the past, implying a lack of progress. This is a dangerous view for white Americans to hold in any decade, as it allows them to dismiss moments of advancement as outliers and double down on an image of an African American community content with their station, one of their own design.

As a site of amusement, *Black America* created what Walter B. Weare has labeled “a kind of utopian apartheid,” in which whites and African Americans lived a separate existence, but agreed to work together for the good of the nation. Of course, African Americans did not agree to any such agreement. Some actively sought opportunities for subversive rebellion and public acknowledgement. Either way, sites of historical amusement create spaces where this “utopian apartheid” works to convince tourists that everything is as it should be and that they should work to keep it that way.

There have been multiple claims about why *Black America* closed in December of 1895, only six months after it opened. Nate Salsbury was in ill health, for one. In addition, as the show traveled the reviews became more lukewarm. Without the physical site to ground the variety show, the show looked more like minstrelsy than it had before, and minstrelsy was no longer the popular form of entertainment it once was. Historian Robert Toll goes so far as to say that it was *Black America*'s comedic corpulence that signaled minstrelsy's death (263). Salsbury, of course, didn't see it that way. He is quoted in the *Telegraphic News* from Philadelphia in November of 1895 saying, “There seems to be a popular impression that a performance of this kind is suitable only to the taste of the poorer classes, those whose tastes have not been elevated.” Salsbury, of course, felt this was “decidedly not the case” (qtd. in Hall 60). Some scholars have claimed the absurdity of the content was the show's undoing (Warren 435). Audiences loved watching the history of the American West, but were less attached to the American South. This is a possibility,

as the West was truly the land of reconciliation—there was no North or South, only Americans versus Natives. Us versus them. Either way, there is no definitive answer. It seems plausible that Salsbury’s tale of an African American utopia was not exciting enough to generate sustained audiences. What is known is that *Black America* ended up losing Cody and Salsbury significant sums of money (J.S. Kasson 217).

One reason for its possible failure stands out among the rest, however. Harry Tarleton, longtime tent attendant to William Cody, said in regard to *Black America*, “It was an enterprise a little in advance of its time” (Account of Black America). What about the show was ahead of its time? Would something like *Black America* have worked in a different decade, when race relations were not what they were? In 1993, Disney would test this theory and find out the answer the hard way.

Section V: Disneyland and Disney’s America: Cultural Companions

In late 1993, the Walt Disney Company announced its intention to build a historical theme park called *Disney’s America* in Haymarket, Virginia. The plan had been in the works for a few years, but the announcement came as a surprise to many, including the residents of Haymarket. An hour west of Washington D.C. and only 3.5 miles from the Manassas Battlefield, this site seemed ideal to Disney executives. It took advantage of an important transportation corridor and would build off Washington D.C.’s pre-existing tourist capital. As the final selling point, *Disney’s America* would use American history as its overlying theme, making its proximity to numerous Civil War battlefields and heritage sites ideal.

The proposed site was to be roughly 3,000 acres. By the year 2010, those acres were projected to contain a 405-acre theme park, 2,281 residential and guest units, 300 campsites, 1.9 million square feet of commercial space for retail and offices, two golf courses, and, to top it all

off, a 37-acre water park. In addition, an anticipated 8,000,000 annual visitors would be day-trippers. As an aside, the site would be about $\frac{1}{8}$ the size of Florida's Disney World (Synnott 43).

The plan seemed a surefire bet. Disney was a multi-billion dollar global empire. Since the creation of Mickey Mouse in 1928, Disney had been churning out products of collective memory by distilling American core values, such as thrift and patriotism, into consumables. In 1955, Disney opened the gates of Disneyland, its first physical site where tourists could experience "America as it should be." Historian Steven Watts summarizes: "Disneyland was a unique embodiment of prosperous, middle-class, postwar America. As nothing else did, it stood, quite literally, as a monument to the American way of life. Millions of citizens journeyed there to pay homage to the idealized image of themselves created by a master cultural mediator" (as quoted in Zuelow 166). Disneyland, by all accounts was, and is, a site of historical amusement with distinct similarities to earlier sites like *Black America*.

The original park was divided into four parks. Frontierland, where tourists experienced the American past through a romanticized lens, a place where Davy Crockett and his trusty gun "Betsy" ruled the roost, is an obvious descendant of Buffalo Bill's Wild West. In Adventureland, visitors entered through a gate adorned with "African tribal masks" and viewed a "primitive Other" through a sanitized and reductive African tribal landscape. This park could and should be tied to turn-of-the-century plantation shows and ethnographic exhibits like *Black America* and Chicago's Midway. Both Frontierland and Adventureland are illustrative of the parallel histories created through the use of collective memory. They engaged and expanded upon common stereotypes and themes already familiar to the masses. The cultural vagueness served only to reinforce "otherness," both of the tourist and the toured. Tomorrowland and Fantasyland were the remaining two parks, the first predicted a technologically advanced future and the second

transported visitors into fairytales and storybooks. Both sites provided the spatial and temporal vagueness that took visitors away from reality and made it all the easier to buy the fictions being sold at the other parks, ideas of civility, stability, and whiteness.

Disneyland was a product of its time, a reaction to the growth of the suburbs and a renewed sense of patriotism during the post-WWII boom, activated by fears of Communism. Similar to *Black America*, Disneyland presented a hyper-idealized version of a prosperous, post-war America. However, walking down Mainstreet, USA, visitors were not presented with a romanticized present so much as a reimagined past. Mainstreet was set in 1900 and celebrated glorified small towns during a time in which they were primarily middle-class and white. In 1955, Disneyland was celebrating the year 1900, when everything was supposedly simple. *Black America*, produced in 1895, shows us that Disney's idealized past was in no way simple at all.

By 1993, Disney was an empire with sites of historical amusement all across the globe, exerting its influence through television, movies, and merchandise. Thus, it came as a surprise to chairman Michael Eisner when historians, civil rights groups, and the general public pushed back against his proposed Disney's America.

Although Disney's America was to have a core Civil War element, due in part to its geographic location, it was slated to tell an overarching American story. There were to be depictions of Native American life, a recreation of Ellis Island would serve as a multi-ethnic food court, and there would be a high-speed ride that would take visitors through an old steel mill. Think Space Mountain set in turn-of-the-century Pennsylvania. WWII and Vietnam would also be features, as would a section that featured a family farm and a state fair, to play up the nostalgia for small town America (Zenzen ch. 11).

Historians and civil rights groups had a right to be worried. Sites of historical amusement flatten both history and culture and, as a mouthpiece for a diverse and inclusive American culture, Disney's track record was certainly poor. *Dumbo* (1941) and *Peter Pan* (1953) contain jarringly racist depictions of African Americans and Native Americans. And then there is the infamous *Song of the South* (1946), a film which has not left the Disney vault in nearly 30 years. *Song of the South* is essentially a revamped *Black America*, as it uses similar source material and stereotypical "happy slave" tropes. It depicts Joel Chandler Harris' Uncle Remus, a loyal and contented ex-slave, and Brer Rabbit and friends, all of whom represent aspects of Southern culture. Jason Sperb, who wrote an entire book on the production, reception, and legacy of the film, calls it "one of Hollywood's most resiliently offensive racist texts" (Sperb 91). Even so, it sets the scene for one of Disney World's most iconic rides, "Splash Mountain," which opened in 1989, well after *Song of the South* had been widely tucked away. As of 1993, Disney's foray into more inclusive programming included only *Aladdin*, a film whose portrayal of Middle Eastern culture has been noted as equally problematic.

Scholars and historians opposed Disney's America for two reasons. First, they didn't approve of the ways that Disney had previously handled images and themes from American history. Although Disney created fairy tales, the presentation of elements of American history that were identifiable were incredibly problematic. *Peter Pan* (1953) included a song titled "What Made the Red Man Red," in which the Native people are depicted using exaggerated physical and vocal stereotypes. Disney's *Pocahontas* (1995) was actively being created during the debate surrounding Disney's America. The film told the highly embellished story of a Powhatan woman and her interactions with Jamestown's colonists. In truth, history tells us that Matoaka, Pocahontas' real name, was a captive of the colonists whose interactions with John

Smith were in no way romantic. After the release of the film *Chief Roy Crazy Horse*, then leader of the Powhatan Renape Nation released a statement saying, “It is unfortunate that this sad story, which Euro-Americans should find embarrassing, Disney makes 'entertainment' and perpetuates a dishonest and self-serving myth at the expense of the Powhatan Nation" (Crazy Horse).

Historians and scholars argued that examples such as these proved the Walt Disney Company lacked the cultural sensitivity deemed necessary to tell the story of a people who underwent systematic genocide at the hands of the American government.

In response to the criticism, Robert Weis, senior vice-president of Walt Disney Imagineering, insisted that Disney’s America would tell a nuanced story and promised that Disney’s America would show “the Civil War with all its racial conflict” (Hartman). He wanted visitors to the site to have the chance to feel as though they were part of history. Weiss claimed that the emotional power of the park would make visitors “feel like a Civil War soldier” and “feel what slavery was like during the time period, and what it was like to escape on the Underground Railroad.” In addition, he noted that the park had to tell the darker parts of history, otherwise there would be no sense of moral uplift. Weiss and Eisner’s intentions may well have been good, but historians remained doubtful that Disney could indeed manage to tell the American story in all its complexity. William Styron, Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist, recognized Disney’s 1st Amendment right to tell whatever story they felt appropriate, but questioned whether their stated goal of telling a nuanced story was even possible. He speculated that the cultural product would be a “funhouse concept of our past at *any* place in the nation.” Furthermore, “the park could never show the desperate clash of ideals and the indwelling agony” (Synott 53). For Styron, noting the lack of spatial specificity, it would be impossible for Disney, a company constructed on family values, to tell an all-encompassing and complex story. Other

historians were more pointed. For all his talk of the “darker parts,” Weiss did not advocate the inclusion of rape, whippings, or genocide, also known as “the truth” (Synnott 53).

For historians and scholars, the arguments against Disney’s presentation of American history were best summarized by a political cartoon drawn by Tom Toles, a satirical cartoonist for the *Buffalo Times*. Toles drew an image of Goofy’s head superimposed onto the iconic image of a young Vietnamese girl burned by napalm (Hartman). To them, Disney and the “darker parts” of American history were incongruous.

Disney’s America and *Black America* seem to have been cut from the same cloth. Not only were the two sites similar in content, but the political and cultural work they did were equally parallel. Good intentions aside, both sites flattened history and turned horrific events into entertainment, disrespecting the histories of the disenfranchised and oppressed. In doing so, they created spaces of white fantasy by removing blame, flaming a sense of nationalism that supported a narrative of a white America. Although education of some sort was inevitable, neither site presented a complicated history that begged interrogation, putting forth amusement as the desired goal and education was a byproduct.

In addition to issues with the content, there was also concern about the negative impact a theme park of that magnitude, let alone one with a focus on American history, would have on the visitorship of the eighteen Civil War battlefield sites within a 30-minute drive of the park. Protect Historic America, a group of historians and scholars, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation both mounted campaigns against the site. James McPherson, Princeton professor and President of Protect Historic America, expressed concern for the region’s history as a whole, not just the battlefields. "Inevitably-tragically-urban sprawl will reach for miles in every direction, all along the key roads intersecting the region, destroying the character and cheapening

the historical attractions that do not actually get bulldozed” (qtd. in Synott 54). There is great power in spatial temporality. Disney’s America could tell any story it wanted, rerouting tourists from those battlefields that allegedly told only one. Sites of historical amusements are like shopping malls, where a visitor can get everything they think they need and, in the process, many things they do not.

Were there possibilities for progress within Disney’s America? Inevitably, Disney’s America would have employed African Americans, both in hospitality roles and as actors playing historical characters. Yet, like Nancy Green wondered, must the road to success be paved in stereotypes? Furthermore, even if the actors at Disney’s America had been allowed to tell a more nuanced story, the inauthenticity of the model would have cheapened the influence it provided.

On September 17th, 1994, roughly 3,000 protesters marched on the National Mall to demand the project’s relocation or complete halting. In late September, Disney pulled the plug on the Haymarket site. They pledged “immediately to seek a less controversial site where we can concentrate our creative vision.” They recognized that the proposed site had become a source of divisiveness and impeded “pride and unity for all Americans,” their stated intention (Zenzen ch. 11). In 1995, when the fate of the future of the project was still up in the air, Synott posited two possible paths for the venture: “Ultimately, the company must decide whether it wants to use its resources to educate visitors, as does a historic site like Colonial Williamsburg, or entertain them with nostalgia and fantasy-like playlands.” Had there been any scholarly outcry against *Black America*, it might have sounded quite similar. Unlike *Black America*, however, Disney’s America never got off the ground.

The last straw was location. Local residents were less than thrilled at the possibility of massive infrastructural changes, including the widening of two major interstates that would accompany this project and the increase in traffic, both foot and vehicle, into their small Virginia towns. This raises interesting questions about American society's tolerance for recontextualized popular history. Had Disney's America actually been greenlit, visitors would have gone. Disney is a massively popular enterprise and scholars of history do not speak for the greater American whole. If historians help police American history, perhaps the most powerful aspect of sites of historical amusement is that they are above the historical law.

Conclusion

Sites of Historical Amusement: Tourism and the Recontextualization of American History introduces the term "sites of historical amusement" and outlines the four key tenets: they are historically themed; they utilize amusement as the entry point; they promote a general, palatable history utilizing collective memory; and they are a product of modernity. Furthermore, this study articulates and analyzes the political and cultural work that takes place at these sites and the damage they can do to both the past and the present. Yet it also recognizes that popular history is a powerful form of communication.

Sites of historical amusement are incredibly powerful in the ways that they manipulate and recontextualize history. These sites exist in the space between education and amusement, truth and fiction, authenticity and inauthenticity. Their undefined boundaries allow them to reach massive swaths of the populace and perpetuate dangerous stereotypes and assumptions. They contribute to the continued primitization of cultures, promote a value system built upon oppression, and condone political apathy. They are at best "historical fiction" and at worst

completely ahistorical. They trivialize even the most layered and brutal of events. Above all, their most powerful trait is the fact that people love them.

The relative success of *Black America* and complete failure of Disney's America are evidence of social and cultural evolution. What was once acceptable is now taboo. Since 1993, the Walt Disney Company has made great strides in terms of diversity and inclusion in their films and theme parks. In some ways, we can credit sites of historical amusement like those discussed in this study for that progress, as the collective memory they thrive upon is also a driving force behind social change. Regardless of what professional historians would like, all tourists have the power to reimagine the past based on their own personal sense of history. They also have the power to reject it and demand a different one. Either way, sites of historical amusement, as products of modernity, ebb and flow with the collective tide.

If we are to use popular history to create tourist sites, let *Black America* and Disney's America serve as both a warning and a guide. Today, sites must tell nuanced and complex stories generated through participation. Those represented must be a part of the construction. Additionally, sites that claim authenticity must be specific and transparent. Most importantly, cultural producers must understand their moral, political, and cultural responsibilities. Today's mass consumer culture is more powerful than it was in 1895, as it presents itself at all times and from every angle. Thus, creators of sites that utilize popular history must know that tourists will buy what they sell.

We must always remember that the burden of our history rests not solely on the shoulders of those who profit from it. We are all cultural producers. We as consumers must take responsibility as well, as we shape the popular narrative that is sold to us in the form of movies, television, and sites of historical amusement. Sites of historical amusement are a part of our

culture. We should not take the failure of Disney's America as evidence of their impending demise. In today's technologically connected world, they are expanding and evolving at a rapid pace. Employing the same tools Salsbury used to create *Black America*, cultural producers are now using websites and social media as their medium. In our current political moment, one during which regional pride and latent racism are bubbling to the surface, sites of historical amusement pose an even larger threat than ever before. By defining them and understanding just how damaging sites of historical amusement can be, we as a society can actively interrogate the historical narratives we create to ensure we are doing justice to all American stories.

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