

Splash Mountain and the Significance of the Laughing Place in Relation to *Song of the South*

Splash Mountain is among one of the most iconic and memorable rides in Disneyland. Since its debut in 1989, the ride has become a critical success, with other theme parks such as Disney World and Tokyo Disneyland constructing their own variations of the log ride. While the tunes that accompany Splash Mountain are undeniably entertaining and distinct, they are a part of a complicated and problematic history. In order to gain an understanding of what the Laughing Place mentioned in the lyrics could signify, it is important to understand Splash Mountain's ties to the source material that inspired it: the Disney film *Song of the South*.

Part I: The Creation and Downfall of *Song of the South*

Song of the South is a live action, musical film released in 1946. A project that Walt Disney was developing for years, he was very interested in adapting the classic children's stories of Brer Rabbit's adventures. These stories are based in African American folklore in response to the master-slave dynamics, offering stories to help illustrate these relationships. These classic, folklore tales were adapted by Joel Chandler Harris in order to preserve these stories that were previously told orally. Harris created Uncle Remus as a creative means of telling these stories and making them more accessible. Walt Disney described reading these stories in his youth, and wrote that "...their timeless and living appeal...their homely philosophy and cheerfulness...made the Remus legends the top choice for our production with flesh-and-blood players" (Korkis 252). Not only did he

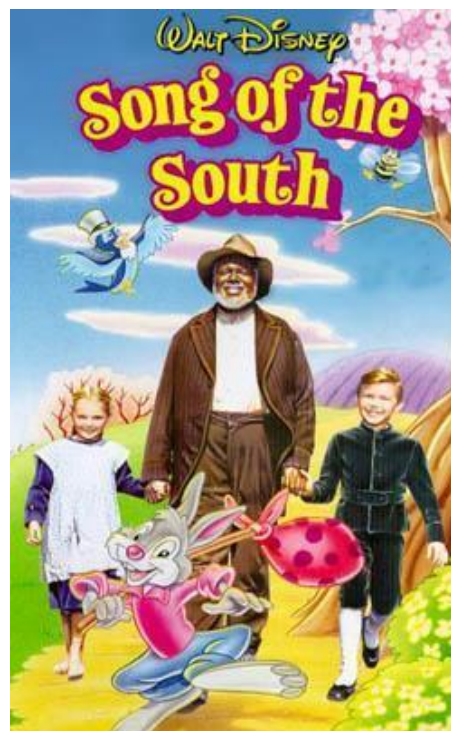


Figure 1: Walt Disney's *Song of the South* poster, 1946

want to faithfully adapt these stories, he also wanted to combine live action scenes with hand drawn animation as seen above in Figure 1. After years of complications with the screenplay, casting, and writing, the final product of *Song of the South* tells the story of Uncle Remus and the tales he recites for a young boy visiting the plantation named Johnny. These tales are accompanied with animated sequences that help tell the stories of Brer Rabbit, a mischievous rabbit seeking adventure and his Laughing Place, making each tale exciting and palpable. Uncle Remus uses the stories of Brer Rabbit to disguise lessons for Johnny to learn, leading him to rely on these stories to inform his decisions. After the debut of the film, *Song of the South*'s lead actor, James Baskett, was the first African American actor to receive an Oscar for his performance a couple of years later, and the now classic song "Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah" won an Academy Award the same year of the movie's release (Inge 223). These positives gave Disney hope that the film would be one they could be extremely proud of, a product to serve as their Laughing Place of fun and joy that people could love.

While there were encouraging statements about the movie at the time of its premiere, the criticisms far outweighed the praise. Controversies were quickly sparked over the unapologetic portrayal of plantation life and slavery, and while "...*Song of the South* [is] a remarkable artistic merit...[it] helps to perpetuate a dangerously glorified picture of slavery...an idyllic master-slave relationship" (223), something that shocked Walt Disney. Furthermore, these stereotypes can be found in the film's animated sequences. For example, Brer Rabbit encounters a trap set by Brer Fox called a "tar baby," which resembles an African American and reinforces harmful stereotypes. Despite the outrage, *Song of the South* was periodically re-released over the years by Disney in the hopes that it would be received more positively over time, that "perhaps the political climate had changed" (229). The movie continued to receive consistent backlash, and as

a result, Disney has not released the film again since 1986. It became clear that *Song of the South* was a film ignorant of the hardships of slavery, a story that was unclear and indecisive in its “...[portrayal of] the South before or after the [Civil War] and not understanding the consequences of that nondecision” (229), making the film one that could not be accepted by moviegoers regardless of the time period. To amend these wrongs, Splash Mountain was born nearly 40 years after the movie’s initial release, and Disney’s attempts to cover up *Song of the South* and create a new Laughing Place by forcing it into obscurity, in many ways, could not have been more successful.

Part II: The Splash Mountain Normative

Splash Mountain was conceived at a time when Critter Country—a themed area of the park with restaurants and shops called Bear Country at the time until 1989—was often deserted,

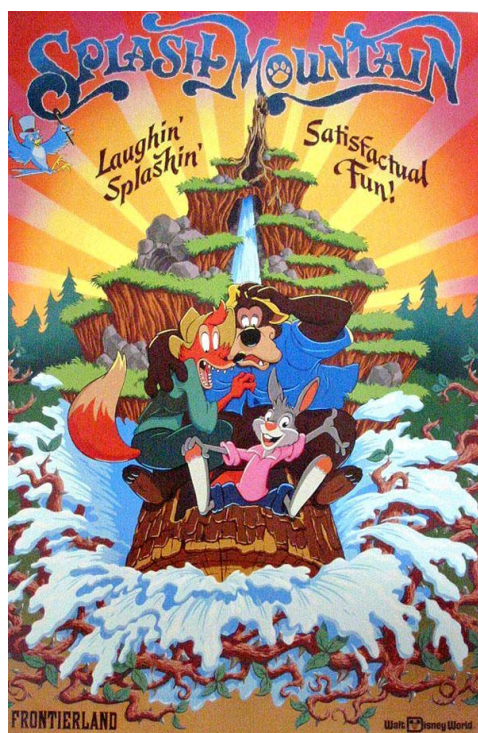


Figure SEQ Figure 1 of 2: Figure 1: Splash Mountain poster, 1989

while the rest of the park overflowed with tourists. To offset this, the goal was to create a fun and exciting ride that people would want to visit frequently. In addition, the developers also wanted to ensure that the theme of Splash Mountain would fit with the overall look and feel of Bear Country, and thus, Splash Mountain borrowed inspiration from *Song of the South*’s animated stories of Brer Rabbit. For all of the criticism *Song of the South* received, the animated scenes were consistently met with positive feedback “...for their usual Disney energy, engaging humor, and technical virtuosity” (Inge 222), which

supported the decision to adapt the animated characters and create a new, fun ride for consumers,

as pictured on the left. While Jason Sperb writes that Disney believed that this would be an effective means of marketing, he also suggests that “Disney’s public rationale for adapting *Song of the South* to match Bear Country also explicitly deflected attention away from the film itself” (Sperb 170), and this affirms Disney’s attitude towards *Song of the South* following what would be its final re-release in 1986. This was just 3 years prior to the grand unveiling of Splash Mountain. As a result, Disney’s marketing strategy was designed to promote the well-received animation sequences of the film in the form of a fun attraction, effectively burying the past mistakes and controversies *Song of the South* left behind.

Because Disney carefully selected what to adapt from *Song of the South*, the more acceptable, consumable Splash Mountain was able to replace its predecessor. With Splash Mountain’s surge in popularity and prominence, the majority of “...Disney theme park guests [enjoyed] the Splash Mountain attraction...sometimes not even knowing that the ride and merchandise associated with it were based on a classic Disney film” (Korkis 242), supporting Disney’s objective to make *Song of the South* a forgotten remnant of the past. But while Splash Mountain acts as a kid-friendly version of *Song of the South*, the strings that connect the two are undeniable. Between being an adaptation of Brer Rabbit’s adventures as seen in the movie, and including quotes by Uncle Remus—most of which are not credited to him—painted on the walls that decorate the waiting lines in Disneyland’s Splash Mountain, it becomes clear that Splash Mountain cannot exist without *Song of the South*. Perhaps this is what makes the history of *Song of the South* so difficult for both Disney and consumers to forget, with the film still garnering discussion and fame despite its infamous lack of accessibility. While it has not erased *Song of the South*’s legacy completely, Splash Mountain has inserted itself into the recent memory of consumers very strongly. Disney’s marketing strategy and the appeal of Splash Mountain has

caused it to become a “translation of film into a three-dimensional experience” (Fee 36), therefore allowing it to easily manipulate the perception of consumers and present new meaning to the adventures of Brer Rabbit. This is readily apparent in the ways that Splash Mountain adapts one of the many classic adventures of Brer Rabbit, a decision that fundamentally changed the perception of his character.

Christopher Peterson writes that in the “Wonderful Tar Baby,” a story that was also adapted in *Song of the South*, Brer Rabbit encounters a “tar baby,” a mass of tar in the shape of a human dressed in ragged clothes, created by Brer Fox and Brer Bear as a trap for Brer Rabbit. Brer Rabbit asks the “tar baby” various questions before becoming frustrated at its silence, eventually punching it in a fit of rage and becoming stuck to the tar, leading to his capture. While this scene itself is a deep metaphor symbolic of the slave-master dynamics that the Brer Rabbit stories themselves are inspired by, the scene also presents a dark form of violence for an otherwise fun, playful Disney character. Brer Rabbit’s lack of hesitation to punch the tar baby as a result of its “perceived failure to respond” presents negative connotations associated with “...the inability of this mass of tar to feel pain [and reflects] the racist denial of black sentience” (Peterson 33). Splash Mountain, while following the story of Brer Rabbit and his capture by Brer Fox, alters this event by having him become stuck to the honey inside of a beehive, as seen below.

Figure 2: Brer Rabbit's capture (left: *Song of the South*, right: Disneyland's Splash Mountain)



This not only eliminates any hints of racial violence but it also portrays Brer Rabbit as more innocent and relatable, because becoming stuck to a beehive with an implied food source is much easier for audiences to swallow than an act of aggression against a non-sentient humanoid object. With this black and white narrative set in place, Disney subverts the controversies found in *Song of the South* and encourages a more straightforward, good versus evil story through Splash Mountain, in which all Brer Rabbit wants to do is find happiness in his Laughing Place while the conniving Brer Fox stands in his way.

Part III: The Many Meanings of the Laughing Place

While the experience has been molded to fit what Disney wants people to see, it also prevents *Song of the South* from being completely forgotten. The borrowed stories and characters play a role in this, but in addition to that, the often mentioned Laughing Place throughout the ride serves as the inextricable link between Splash Mountain and its source material. The Laughing Place has evolved into more than just the lyrics of catchy tunes. It has become a literary device through which Disney tells its narrative, and it validates Splash Mountain as the replacement of *Song of the South* as Disney's new Laughing Place.

Referenced throughout the lyrics and songs on Splash Mountain, as well as in *Song of the South*, the Laughing Place is unclear in its origin and purpose, and its significance shifts throughout the progression of the ride. Based on the lyrics alone, the idea of visiting the Laughing Place serves as a motivator for Brer Rabbit and the rest of the animals featured throughout Splash Mountain. This also true of the Laughing Place in *Song of the South*, functioning as the destination for Brer Rabbit while also being referenced by Uncle Remus through the stories that he tells, conveyed in animated sequences. At the beginning of the ride, Brer Rabbit refers to his decision to leave the briar patch as the first step in finding his own Laughing Place through his solo in the opening number, "How Do You Do?":

*I'm lookin' for a little more adventure,
I'm headin' for a little bit of fun now,
I'm hopin' for a little more excitement,
Time to be movin' along!*

*I've had enough of this ol' briar patch,
I think an adventure's about to hatch,
I'm movin' on, say goodbye to me,
Down at the Laughin' Place is where I'll be!*

*I'm lookin' for a little more adventure,
I'm headin' for a little bit of fun now,*

*I'm hopin' for a little more excitement,
Time to be movin' along!*

*I nailed up my door, I'll see you around,
The Laughin' Place is where I'm found!
You're headin' out and not comin' back,
But I'm comin' too, I've packed my sack!*

*I'm headin' for a little bit of fun now,
Time to be movin' along.
Time to be movin' along!*

These lyrics indicate that Brer Rabbit's Laughing Place is a location that is far away and is something which he needs to find through exploration. There is also a clever change in the lyrics, featuring Brer Rabbit breaking the fourth wall and referring directly to the audience—in this case, the riders in the log—and expressing interest in joining them while they journey to the Laughing Place. This also informs the notion that the riders themselves seem to be looking for their own Laughing Place, and that this journey through Splash Mountain will provide them with the answers they need.

The next song featured on the ride, "Everybody Has a Laughing Place", is also included in *Song of the South*. In the film, Uncle Remus tells a story to cheer up the children, and the scene transitions into a musical, animated number, in which Brer rabbit eventually outwits his captors while singing "Everybody Has a Laughing Place." The song is quite short and serves a narrative purpose of being both a song and moral for the children to learn and appreciate. The Splash Mountain iteration of the song not only adds lyrics, but expands on what the Laughing Place could be:

Hee, hee, hee, ho, ho, ho

Boy, are we in luck!

We're visiting our laughing place

Yuk-yuk-yuk-yuk-yuk

Everybody's got a laughing place

A laughing place to go-ho-ho

Take a frown, turn it upside down

And you'll find yours we know-ho-ho

Honey and rainbows on our way

We're laughing 'cause our work is play

Boy, are we in luck

We're visiting our laughing place

Yuk-yuk-yuk-yuk-yuk

Everybody's got a laughing place

A laughing place to go-ho-ho

Take a smile, wear it for a while

And you'll find yours we know-ho-ho

Honey and rainbows on our way

Take that frown, turn it upside down

And soon you'll find you're here to stay

Everybody's got a laughing place

A laughing place to go-ho-ho

Come on in, give us all a grin

And you'll find yours I know-ho-ho

Laughing is how we spend our day

Honey and fun is what we make

Boy, are we in luck

*We're visiting our laughing place
Yuk-yuk-yuk-yuk-yuk*

*Everybody's got a laughing place
A laughing place to go-ho-ho
We've found one that's filled with fun
And you'll find yours we know-ho-ho*

*Everybody's got a laughing place
A laughing place to go-ho-ho
Take a frown, turn it upside down
And you'll find yours we say-hey-hey*

The lyrics of the song imply that the Laughing Place is not exclusive to Brer Rabbit, and that everyone is capable of finding it if they turn their frown “upside down” and focus on having fun. It is seen as a place that everyone can enjoy with the right mindset. In addition, this song also breaks the fourth wall by inviting the riders to the animal’s laughing place, encouraging them to participate in the fun and joy. This indicates that they have already found their laughing place, and that perhaps the riders will be able to as well.

The only time that the Laughing Place doesn’t maintain this quality of awe and wonderment is in the song, “Burrow’s Lament.” An original score written for Splash Mountain that wasn’t in *Song of the South*, Mother Rabbit sings a cautionary tale to her young children while expressing her fears for Brer Rabbit and describing the Laughing Place as a place where no one should venture to:

*What can poor Br'er Rabbit do,
To keep from becoming rabbit stew?
Mournin' Br'er Rabbit is wasting my breath!
The rabbit is facing certain death!*

*Don't you go to the Laughin' Place,
Or the fox will get you too!*

*Stay away from the Laughin' Place!
You must beware, the fox is there!
Don't go in!*

*Old Br'er Fox has got his way,
In the Laughin' Place this very day!*

“Burrow’s Lament” is not only a notable shift in tone and style from the rest of the Splash Mountain soundtrack but it plays at the climax of the ride when Brer Rabbit’s fate seems to be sealed following his capture at the hands of Brer Fox and Brer Bear. The scene is a powerful

moment in the story for the characters and also serves as the exciting buildup for the end of the ride. The fact that this song isn't featured in *Song of the South* supports the new story that Disney wishes to tell within the confines of Splash Mountain, keeping the emphasis on Brer Rabbit's journey to the Laughing Place and what that signifies while avoiding any clear references to the original *Song of the South*, both borrowing inspiration from the film while trying to replace it at the same time.

Following the long drop from the highest point of the ride, there is a final area where the animals are all joyously singing the iconic song from *Song of the South*, "Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah." In this song, the Laughing Place is not directly mentioned again, and Brer Rabbit's lyrics in the song are no longer about the adventure he so longed for:

*Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, zip-a-dee-ay,
Home sweet home is the lesson today
Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, zip-a-dee-ay,
I'm glad to be here, and I'm sure gonna stay
I'm through with moving on now
It's where I'm born and bred in,
The briar patch is where I'm headed*

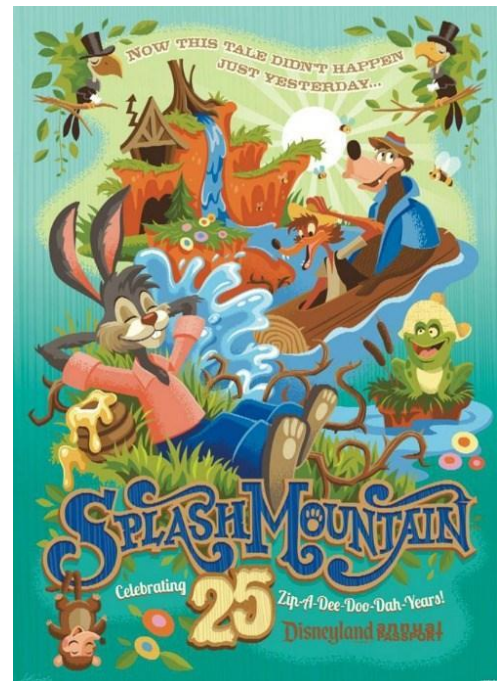
Brer Rabbit's solo, exclusive to Disneyland's Splash Mountain, is focused on the lessons he learned and his desire to stay in the briar patch where he was born. The absent reference to the Laughing Place is notable, as Brer Rabbit mentioned it more than once in his first solo of "How Do You Do?" and this presents a shift in his views. To him, the Laughing Place was once synonymous with adventure and glee, but following his harrowing escape from Brer Fox and Brer Bear, he chooses to stay home, as seen above. The meaning of the Laughing Place changes based on the viewer's outlook, and for Brer Rabbit, it comes to symbolize his home where he feels safe. This transformation reinforces that the Laughing Place's existence and significance is dependent on the viewer. In addition, the significance of these lyrics and Brer Rabbit's journey is

a unique feature and narrative within Splash Mountain, and a story that isn't found in *Song of the South*. This also provides new insight to the lyrics of "Everybody Has a Laughing Place," allowing the song to represent more than the characters brought to life by animatronics. Now, the song is capable of representing the people riding Splash Mountain and Disney's history with the failures of *Song of the South*:

*Everybody's got a laughing place
A laughing place to go-ho-ho
We've found one that's filled with fun
And you'll find yours we know-ho-ho*

These lyrics confirm the primary, masked purpose of Splash Mountain's role in the Disney narrative. Through the strategy of selectively telling the story and representing the characters in alternative ways, Disney has found the perfect medium through which to tell a new version of *Song of the South*. The emphasis on Brer Rabbit and the rest of the animals finding a Laughing Place that is "filled with fun" inspires the riders to do the same. The ride serves as a clear metaphor of Disney's attitude towards *Song of the South*, cleverly disguising its legacy and controversies through Brer Rabbit's personal journey to find his Laughing Place and ultimately offering a better alternative through his home in the briar patch.

In the metaphor, Brer Fox represents Disney in control of the Laughing Place, or their history and the story they wish to tell. Mother Rabbit's lament for Brer Rabbit reveals the truth and signifies the buried legacy of *Song of the South*. Brer



Rabbit represents the riders and visitors to Disneyland in search of happiness and their Laughing Place, and even when Brer Rabbit discovers that adventure may not be what he truly wanted, he gains a newfound appreciation for his home, causing his personal Laughing Place to shift. This can also be tied to the riders and Disney, because while many viewers are often appalled by the controversies of *Song of the South*, Splash Mountain retells the story in a new and inventive way without the strings of history and race attached, allowing people to enjoy the ride more.

Similarly, Disney also wanted to leave behind its past

Figure 4: Splash Mountain poster, 2014

mistakes, and with the success of Splash Mountain, it became a new Laughing Place for the company as one of the most marketable and beloved rides in the theme park, as seen in Figure 4.

When Walt Disney discussed his decision to move forward with creating *Song of the South*, he hoped that, "...nothing of the spirit of the earthy quality of the [Remus] fables [would be] lost" (Kirkus 252), because ultimately, he wanted it to be a story about people living together in harmony. While the sincerity of his wish was lost in translation in *Song of the South*, Disney was able to recapture the magic that made the Remus stories timeless and famous through Splash Mountain. The Laughing Place has the potential to be anything and everything, and while Splash Mountain may have been created for the sole purpose of burying the company's past mistakes, it became a Laughing Place in its own right and continues to inspire joy and celebration around the world.

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