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**TROUBLE IN PARADISE: IMPACTS OF THEME PARK TOURISM ON  
THE MENTAL HEALTH OF EMPLOYEES IN ORLANDO, FLORIDA**

by

LEA HARVEY  
B.A. Rollins College 2017

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Anthropology  
in the College of Sciences  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

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Major Professor: Beatriz Reyes-Foster

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## **ABSTRACT**

Tourism is a topic that has gained much attention within the realm of anthropology over the past few decades. Anthropological research of the tourism industry has been largely devoted to the study of the tourist gaze and its subsequent sociocultural impacts as well as the benefits that travelers reap from their colonialist excursions. However, the voices of those who form the foundation of this industry, the laborers, remain almost entirely absent from said discourse. Furthermore, there is a lack of anthropological consideration for the relationship between tourism and mental health experiences of employees within the tourism industry. One specific region that is rife with information on tourism and its effects is Orlando, Florida. This research employs participant observation and semi-structured interviews to analyze the lived mental health experiences of current/former Disney cast members as a direct result of their employment within Disney and the Orlando theme park tourism industry. Not only does this thesis aim to backtrack the erasure of the perspectives of tourism employees and help create a space for them to make their voices heard, but it also attempts to bridge the gap of consideration for the impacts of tourism on the mental health of tourism employees within anthropology and touristic studies. Through the application of my own research as well as the minimal amount of relevant anthropological and touristic studies literature, I argue that Orlando theme park tourism exists as a type of structural violence that utilizes performativity and a neoliberal market to cast tourism employees in a slot of servitude that is nearly impossible to escape. As a result, this research possesses great potential to highlight the ways in which Orlando can become the happiest place on earth for its residents and employees, not just those who engage with it for their own leisurely gain.

*To anyone who has ever made me laugh*

*You saved my life*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to begin by thanking the individuals who participated in this study. Your honesty, bravery, and vulnerability made my research possible. Thank you for sharing your stories with me; they are representative of a step towards a world where the discussion of mental health, particularly the mental health of individuals who are often overlooked, is commonplace.

Thank you to my faculty advisor, Dr. Beatriz Reyes-Foster. One of the only constants throughout this tumultuous process was you. Working with you has been nothing short of a pure joy and honor. I would also like to thank the remaining members of my thesis committee, Drs. Shana Harris and Nesselte Falu, as well as Dr. Lana Williams for their feedback, support, and kindness. The four of you have been pivotal to my development as both a student and a woman.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“Happily ever after my ass! I just want to go to bed.” (Magic Kingdom guest, July 2019)

On a sweltering early evening in July of 2019, a disgruntled guest barked the aforementioned quote over the phone as they made their way past Casey’s Corner on Mainstreet USA in Disney’s Magic Kingdom. As the scent of popcorn wafted through the air and other guests took Instagram pictures with their Minnie ears and Mickey pretzels in front of Cinderella’s Castle, the frustrated guest trudged towards Adventureland until they were out of earshot. Although this moment lasted only a matter of seconds, it is indicative of a larger theme that transcends time and space within Orlando’s theme park tourism industry: the expectation of Disney to create literal happiness for its tourists.

A city that boasts itself as the “Theme Park Capital of the World®” (VisitOrlando.com 2019), Orlando, Florida is no stranger to the presence of tourists with high expectations; in 2018 alone, 75 million people traveled from around the globe in order to experience the unique thrills and chills that only Orlando’s theme park tourism industry can provide (VisitOrlando.com 2019). While its status as one of the world’s premier vacations destinations has created an invaluable foundation of economic security that supports the city and its residents, the sheer volume of annual visitors that flock to Orlando casts an immense shadow over the significantly smaller number of individuals who live and work in a region that is commonly referred to as “the happiest place on Earth.” In fact, Orlando’s 2018 estimated population of 285,713 people is approximately 262.5 times smaller than the population of the 75 million vacationers who journeyed to Orlando for touristic consumption (Census.gov 2019).

Based solely on the statistical evidence provided above, it is apparent that Orlando, Florida exists as a center for tourism, consumerism, and leisure that prioritizes the millions of visitors it draws in annually instead of the people who call it home and not the happiest place on Earth. Despite the city's myriad options for theme park entertainment, Walt Disney World is the standalone champion of Orlando theme park tourism, towering high over its competitors atop a pedestal coated in magic and pixie dust. Disney has solidified its status as not only the most popular theme park tourism destination in Orlando, but in the entire world, as a result of its Magic Kingdom; in 2018, Disney's Magic Kingdom attracted nearly 21 million visitors from around the world (CNN.com 2019). For the 20.9 million tourists who traveled to Magic Kingdom in droves to have their own taste of magic, Disney is a place where dreams come true. But what of the individuals who work tirelessly to these tourists' dreams come true? Moreover, is Disney's Magic Kingdom also the happiest place on earth for the people employed to make it as such?

With Magic Kingdom being the face of Orlando theme park tourism, the people that the company employs, also known as "cast members," arguably serve as the backbone of the city's theme park tourism industry. The immense pressure from park visitors and management alike to create magical moments that will last a lifetime is part of their everyday job routine, but the impact that going above and beyond to make Magic Kingdom the happiest place on earth for its guests has on the cast members' own happiness is seemingly absent from the discussion of theme park tourism in Orlando. While Disney has made it its mission to tend to the happiness and wellbeing of its millions of annual visitors, the wellbeing of its employees is often overlooked. For this reason, this project seeks to analyze the relationship, if any, of theme park tourism in Orlando and the mental health of those employed in the tourism industry there, with Disney's

Magic Kingdom serving as the focal point of analysis due to its iconic representation of theme parks in Orlando.

This research employs feminist ethnographic research methods, namely participant observation and semi-structured interviews, to analyze the lived mental health experiences, both positive and negative, of current/former Disney cast members as a direct result of their employment within Disney and the Orlando theme park tourism industry. Not only does this thesis aim to backtrack the erasure of the perspectives of tourism employees and help create a space for them to make their voices heard, but it also attempts to bridge the gap of consideration for the impacts of tourism on the mental health of its laborers, which has been glaringly obvious in the fields of anthropology and touristic studies thus far. Through the application of my own research as well as the minimal amount of anthropological and touristic studies literature relevant to the topic of the mental health of tourism laborers, I argue that Orlando theme park tourism exists as a type of structural violence that utilizes performativity and a neoliberal market to confine tourism employees to a slot of servitude that is nearly impossible to break free of. As a result, this research possesses great potential to highlight the ways in which Orlando can truly become the happiest place on earth for the individuals who live and work there, not just those who engage with it for their own leisurely gain.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the last few decades, the number of studies of tourism and anthropology has proliferated. As it stands, the bulk of literature that falls under this broad research umbrella concerns itself with the anthropological definition of tourism and the roles that laborers fulfill within it as well as the residential perceptions of tourists and travelers. However, there remains one topic in particular that is seemingly absent from anthropological discourse on tourism that cannot nor should not be overlooked: the mental health of laborers in the tourism industry. As previously stated, relevant literature largely focuses on tourists and their impacts on the physical health of locals and their residential environments (Baptista 2012, Himmelgreen et al. 2012, Hoskins 2002, Hutchins 2007, Mitchell 2011, Stronza 2011, Wallace 2008). Rarely are the psychological effects that tourism has on its employees taken into consideration, however, limiting this discussion to a select few anthropological and touristic sources (Cross 2006, Gmelch 2012).

Although data on vacationers' influences on the corporeal wellness of workers in the tourism industry can be utilized to make inferences on the status of their mental health, there exists little to no direct discussion of the mental repercussions, such as anxiety or depression, that can occur as a result. To draw attention to this detrimental deficiency and subsequently narrow the gap of available literature regarding tourism's impacts on the psychological wellbeing of its employees, I draw on prior arguments that tourism exists as a form of structural violence fueled by colonialism which serves to erase the perspectives and experiences of individuals living and working in vacation hotspots (Gmelch 2012). This violence utilized by tourists mandates that tourism employees always perform in the manner that is expected of them, whether it be catering to the needs of guests or putting their cultures and practices on display as a form of entertainment. The performativity that is required of those employed by institutions of

tourism is further maintained by self-governance and surveillance on behalf of the laborers, leading to the commodification of native identities and cultures. The notion of putting a price on the cultural practices, behaviors, and selfhood of tourism workers forces them to quite literally sell themselves as part of the neoliberal markets. The prospects of structural violence, performativity as reinforced by governmentality, and neoliberalism collaborate to ultimately have a substantial impact on the mental health and wellbeing of tourism laborers, one that can no longer be overlooked.

Due to the psychological nature of this project, I will also take available literature on the anthropology of mental health into consideration to highlight the links that exist between anthropology, mental health/illness, and the impacts of tourism. Furthermore, literature pertaining to the tourism of Walt Disney World and Orlando, Florida are included in attempts to identify any information relevant to the relationship between tourism and mental health of tourism laborers in this specific region. The study of tourism's impact on the mental health and wellbeing of residents and laborers in vacation destinations will not only diversify the breadth of knowledge available regarding the anthropology of tourism but will shed light on any "trouble in paradise" being experienced by the very people who labor to create the visage of paradise for touristic consumption.

### Tourism and its Hierarchy as Structural Violence

In order to understand the finer nuances of tourism as it relates to anthropology, one must first have a firm grasp on the definition of tourism in general. Anthropologists have extensively studied and written about tourism. In attempts to define the term, some have argued that the realm of tourism is far too expansive to break down and explain with a singular definition

(Lanfant et al 1995), while others have indicated that tourism boils down to simplistic factors such as travel, time devoted to leisure, and pleasure financed by disposable income (Smith 1989, Gmelch 2012). In essence, tourism is an industry founded on travel as a form of leisure that tourists devote a portion of their income to in order to experience new places, sights, and cultures as provided by hosts and laborers. As indicated by Stronza (2001, 262), much of the anthropological discourse on tourism has constructed a false dichotomy of tourists versus locals that limits research to the scope of the tourist's gaze and their impacts on residents and laborers within the communities that they exploit for recreational purposes. Rather, anthropologists should be considering aspects of tourism that delve beyond these rigid categories, such as the mental health and wellbeing of laborers within the tourism industry (Ladkin 2011). Oftentimes it is the roles that tourism requires its laborers to play that exacerbate symptoms of mental illness (Cross 2006), and previous works of literature allude to the fact that anthropologists should pay more attention to these roles to better understand the relationship between tourism and anthropology.

The social hierarchy of tourism that prioritizes the voices of tourists has made this a challenge, however; it has subdued laborers into a slot of servitude, rendering their perspectives and experiences largely undiscovered and/or unconsidered (Gelbman and Collins-Kreiner 2016). Within the context of tourism, the proverbial savage slot (Trouillot 2003) has come to be replaced by what I refer to as the "servant slot," a societal role reserved for individuals employed by the tourism industry who sacrifice their health/wellbeing, ways of life, and/or cultural identities in order to serve tourists and guests (Faulkenberry et al. 2000). As tourism development continues to globalize with time, the locus of attention has been largely devoted to the outlook of the tourist, rendering the thoughts, feelings, and opinions of employees almost



invisible. The concept of structural violence is utilized as a tool by both tourists and the tourism industry as a whole to facilitate this near erasure of laborers' points of view from discussion.

As defined by anthropologist Paul Farmer in *An Anthropology of Structural Violence*, “Structural violence is violence exerted systematically... by everyone who belongs to a certain social order... the concept of structural violence is intended to inform the study of the social machinery of oppression” (2004, 307). Worded differently, structural violence is the use of societal institutions and infrastructure to inflict harm, literal and/or figurative, upon marginalized groups and social strata perceived to be “less than.” This concept is at the very core of tourism, for the individuals privileged enough to engage in touristic consumption manage to not only appropriate the resources, cultures, or identities of hosts, but to control and manipulate employees in an oppressive fashion (Boissevain 1996, Heldt Cassel and Maureira 2017, Li et al. 2016, Roland 2006, Sacramento 2018). While I engage with violence here on a more symbolic level that has embedded itself within various societal institutions, previous literature has demonstrated the link that exists between touristic endeavors and physical violence. For example, Ness (2005) highlights the ways in which the physical alterations of tourism landscapes at the hands of tourists acts as a form of violence verging on the brink of terrorism due to the embeddedness of the cultural identities of employees and residents within their home environments. Regardless of the manner in which it is inflicted, it has been made apparent by anthropologists and touristic studies scholars alike that structural violence is active within the tourism industry and prioritizes the viewpoints of tourists over the individuals who sacrifice their health and wellbeing for the satisfaction of those who are, in essence, modern-day colonizers.

Farmer further corroborates the belief that the structural violence of tourism is utilized to erase the perspectives and experiences of those it employs via his argument that “while certain

kinds of suffering are readily observable... structural violence all too often defeats those who would describe it" (1997, 272). This statement is demonstrative of the fact that violence that has been engrained into societal infrastructure not only blatantly ignores the suffering of individuals in lower social strata but deprives them of their ability to speak out against the unjust conditions that they are subject to. Additionally, struggles with mental health are not commonly perceived as "readily observable" due to their origins within the human mind. Mental health conditions have been traditionally overlooked as a result of biomedicine's prioritization of physical conditions and symptoms over the psychological, social, and emotional affects and subsequent lived experiences of individuals effected by mental illness (Berrios and Marková 2015). In this way, the structural violence that governs the tourism industry silences its laborers on multiple levels; not only are their voices muffled to begin with due to the oppressive nature of tourism that places tourists and guests on a pedestal, but their perspectives and experiences with mental health are further excluded from anthropological discourse on tourism as a result of the greater societal inability to readily observe and recognize mental illness as valid. These factors combine in a melting pot of violence that confines tourism laborers into the slot of servitude, where they are required to perform the roles that tourists expect of them.

#### Residents'/Employees' Perceptions, Perspectives, and Performativity

Despite the failure of many people who participate in the tourism industry's ability to recognize this fact, "residents' attitudes are of practical importance to all tourism stakeholders including planners, marketers, investors, tourists, and the residents themselves" (Bayno and Jani 2016, 41). As indicated by this quotation, the opinions and feelings of individuals who live and work in tourist destinations are pivotal to the tourism industry. Jacobsen (2000) further elaborates upon

the importance of residential perceptions in the tourism industry, stating that the consideration of their opinions “contributes to one of the principal issue areas in the academic body of knowledge in this field, that of travel-related roles and the typological aspects of international tourism” (296). A significant amount of work within this realm has been devoted to negative perceptions that residents and laborers have of tourists, such as the work of Gelbman and Collins-Kraner (2018) as well as that of Hoskins (2002), who indicates that “tourists are perceived as predatory voyeurs on Sumba, a once remote area now receiving increasing numbers of foreign visitors” (797).

While residential perceptions of tourists are negative in many regions of the world (Ramos et al. 2016), they are not all bad. For example, McCaughey et al. (2018) indicate that local perceptions of cruise tourism in Esperance, Western Australia are mostly positive due to the industry’s existence as a source of economic revenue and opportunity for sociocultural exchange with passengers. Additionally, Simoni (2014) discusses the potential for tourism to foster positive exchanges and even friendships between tourists and locals. Examples such as these indicate that while local perceptions of tourists are largely negative, tourists can also be viewed in a positive light that highlights the possibility for growth and change. Contrary to the belief that residents and employees of vacation hotspots solely live to serve guests, a number of anthropological works indicate that tourism laborers are capable of reaping benefits from the very institution that often subdues them; Gillespie (2006) goes so far as to suggest that residents possess the ability to reverse the gaze that tourists place upon them in efforts to regain their autonomy. The existence of a modicum of potential benefits for tourism laborers does not signify that negative views of tourists are unfounded, however. While it does not speak to the specific impacts on the mental health of employees of the tourism industry, a fair amount of

anthropological literature is devoted to the stresses that tourists place on residents and laborers within tourist destinations (Boissevain 1996, Gmelch 2012, Van den Berghe 2004), which largely stems from the fact that employment within the realm of tourism is an act of performativity.

Based on the pretense that “nearly all tourism experiences are carefully crafted and staged by someone” (Chambers 2005, 35), it can be stated that the role of the local laborer in the tourism industry is primarily performative (Naidu 2009, Shuman 1993); workers are tasked with marketing their culture as a “novelty”, putting certain aspects of their everyday life on display for an audience of tourists and exaggerating different cultural practices through performance in exchange for payment (Mitas and Bastiaansen 2018, Potuoğlu-Cook 2006). It is evident that the tourism industry has generated myriad employment opportunities and avenues for social mobility of local residents, but it is not without economic, social, and psychological consequences (Fagertun 2017). While working within the realm of tourism has been known to foster some positive experiences for workers (Janta et al 2010), the pressures of fulfilling their expected roles generates stress that can adversely affect the mental health of tourism laborers (Cross 2006). Painting a positive image of the vacation destination within the tourist’s mind is a challenging enough task for the laborer (Baum et al 2007), but simultaneously managing to be “novel” enough, “foreign” enough, or “indigenous” enough to appease the expectations of tourists serves as yet another form of othering (Van den Berghe 1994) that places exponential pressure on employees. In this way, residents’ and employees’ cultural identities have been transformed into roles that must be portrayed in the precise fashion that will give the audience (tourists and guests) what they want. Although tourists and guests are the individuals that force tourism laborers to figuratively and/or literally perform, I believe that the Foucauldian concept of

governmentality (Foucault 1979) can be used to understand how employees of the tourism industry in order to maintain the façade that is required of them.

If Foucault's (1979) governmentality, as explained by Nikolas Rose (1996, 152), can be thought of as "the complex of notions, calculations, strategies, and tactics through which diverse authorities... have sought to act upon the lives and conducts of each and all in order to avert evils and achieve such desirable states as health, happiness, wealth, and tranquility," then it is evident that this concept is can be applied to tourism (Guerrón Montero 2014). On a literal level, governments often play a hand in their nations' tourism industries, with their economies and policies having an impact upon and being impacted by institutions of tourism (Padilla et al. 2017). On a much smaller person-to-person scale, the main tenants of tourism allow for tourists to govern natives and employees via their idealized expectations and preconceived ideas of cultures, practices, and ways of life which they seek out for consumption (Roland 2014). As if this were not enough, tourists also employ governmentality vis-à-vis their confinement of tourism laborers to a slot of servitude in which they are required to do the bidding of their guests so as to ensure their achievement of the aforementioned "desired states." Based on the current global climate surrounding tourism, it is evident that the notion of governmentality has permeated the touristic realm so much so that laborers have learned to govern themselves as part of their performative responsibility. It is through self-governance that employees of theme park tourism and similar industries can certify that they are meeting guests needs/wants and providing service with a smile, even if guests are not watching them (Gmelch 2012). Similar to this, natives and tourism workers can surveil their behavior to confirm whether or not they are portraying their cultures, identities, and personhoods in the way that tourists want to see. It is this very same performativity that has led to the commodification of local culture and exploitation of native

practices and ways of life as a form of entertainment, specifically in regions that had been previously untouched by outsiders (Bunten 2008, Davidov 2010, Faulkenberry et al. 2000, Feldmann 2011, Heldt Cassel and Maurera 2017). This commodification process has led to the forced participation of many locals and tourism laborers in the neoliberal market.

### Touristic Commodification and Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is a global force that has left its mark on countless industries worldwide (Ganti 2014). Not unlike the majority of topics that compose anthropological discourse, it is a challenge to provide a widely accepted definition for this term. According to Ganti (citing Steger and Roy 2010, 14 and Boas and Gans-Morse 2009, 144), neoliberalism can be understood as “a set of economic reform policies... which are concerned with the deregulation of the economy, the liberalization of trade and industry, and the privatization of state-owned enterprises... with tremendous economic, social, and political implications” (2014, 91). In the context of the tourism industry, I interpret neoliberalism as a free marketplace where tourists, natives, tourism laborers, and touristic institutions interact with one another through the exchange of privatized goods and services. As previously indicated, the performativity required of tourism laborers serves to commodify their behavior, culture, and way of life, essentially putting a price tag on their existence. The commodification of natives’ and employees’ identities forces these individuals to participate in the neoliberal market. The relationship between neoliberalism and tourism has reaped both positive and negative effects on the laborers of this industry (Bunten 2008, Ramos et al. 2016, Sacramento 2018).

To begin on a more positive, albeit brief, note, the forced participation of tourism laborers in the neoliberal market does bestow some benefits upon the individuals that it exploits.

The commodification of the cultures and identities of laborers is seen by some as an opportunity to generate a source of income, increase social mobility, and gain a higher degree of autonomy and responsibility within the community (Fagertun 2017, McCaughey et al. 2018, Stronza 2005). Additionally, it helps to promote “an empowering sense of belonging to a trans-local... community” (Wadle 2010, 141). While these examples exhibit the beneficial repercussions that the active role of tourism laborers and natives in a neoliberal market can bring about, they do not do much in the way of neutralizing the largely negative impacts that the commodification of cultural practices has on the health, wellbeing, and financial stability of laborers employed by the tourism industry.

In terms of the negative effects of neoliberal markets on tourism laborers, the examples are abundant. The bulk of the detrimental ramifications that occur as a result of the commodification of individuals employed by the tourism industry most frequently take shape in the form of economic struggles, strained relationships between community members, and a loss of meaning behind cultural identities and practices once held dear (Baptista 2012, Li et al. 2016, Mitchell 2011, Sandford 1987, Skoczen 2008). In the case of the Danube Delta of Romania, for instance, “the economic incentives of tourism have triggered a series of negative effects on the value system, changing the locals’ attitude towards hard work and money, creating competition, tension and resentment between local families” (Ivan 2017, 133). Further corroborating this notion, Davidov (2010) draws on the perspectives of both tourists and shamans in remote Kichwa villages of Ecuador to examine the ways in which “shamanism has become a commodified cultural object, entering the global marketplace in a “sanitized” form... during the commodification process” (392). She states that a new wave of younger Kichwa shamans have sacrificed tradition for the sake of participating in the neoliberal market of their region, one that

values falsified shamanic displays and drug-based ethnotourism, which commodifies the sacred use of ayahuasca for recreational use at the hands of outsiders. In a similar vein, Hutchins (2007) analyzes the impacts of ecotourism in the Ecuadorian Amazon on Kichwa communities as well as how this form of tourism influences these laborers' roles in the neoliberal market. Not unlike Ivan (2017) and Davidov (2010), Hutchins argues that when tourists participate in ecotourism, "indigenous identities and bodies are dressed up for the tourists' gaze, and... places, meanings and symbols are reinterpreted within a market framework" (2007, 76). These few examples are demonstrative of the numerous significant sacrifices that tourism laborers and/or natives must make when their identities are commodified for touristic consumption, a process which may have an impact on the mental health of the individuals that it abuses.

### The Anthropology of Mental Health

In order to fully appreciate the impacts that tourism has on the mental health of those employed by it, it is necessary to surveil the available anthropological literature on mental health, a concept that serves as the driving force of this research. Despite the increase in the frequency with which it is being discussed, many often struggle to define mental health in concrete terms. However, medical anthropologist and psychiatrist Arthur Kleinman has devoted much of his pivotal research to not only understanding the true meaning of mental health, but analyzing it through the lens of medical anthropology. Kleinman (2012) argues that "mental health" was coined as an umbrella term used to "encompass not only dementia, psychosis and depression/anxiety disorders, but also to include a wider set of problems from substance abuse, serious school failure and family breakdown, to violence and its traumatic consequences" (117). In simpler terms, mental health has come to signify pathological psychiatric disorders as well as social



suffering and its affects that have a direct negative impact on the human mind. Moreover, mental health is not just determined by one's mind; rather, societal institutions and infrastructures, such as politics and economics, can impact a person's mental health just as much as their brain chemistry might (119).

In addition to Kleinman, one figure who has been pivotal to the development of the subfield of psychological anthropology is Michel Foucault. Many of his works discuss the natural order and where we as humans fit into it, but his work in *Mental Illness and Psychology* (1954) does so on a psychological level. According to Foucault (1954, 44) "we must now place ourselves at the center of this experience; it is only by understanding it from the inside that we will be able to set up within the morbid world the natural structures constituted by evolution." In essence, we must understand who we are and what we go through on a psychological level in order to understand the world around us and the institutions that comprise it. That very belief is at the core of this study; the mental health and wellbeing of tourism employees must be taken into consideration in order for the industry to function at its maximum capacity.

Another pioneer in the field of psychological anthropology who draws on the work of Foucault is Nikolas Rose. Perhaps one of his most iconic works of literature, *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood* (1996) analyzes the ways in which psychiatry and psychology have led to the development of the concept of the self and are subsequently developed by it. His work demonstrates the importance of psychology to our very existence as human beings in neoliberal society, an argument that this project holds very dear. Rose emphasizes the significance of considering the psychological aspects of not only ourselves, but the world around us. According to the author, a greater consideration for the psychological would allow for a better understanding of our individual roles "as inhabitants of this particular

spatiotemporal time zone” (21). On the basis of this excerpt alone, it is clear that a more thorough analysis of the relationship between mental health conditions of tourism laborers and their occupations would shed light on the injustices and/or victories that they may experience as a result of their employment within the tourism industry. Based on the notion that “psychology can provide social authority with a basis that is not merely technical and scientific but 'ethical'” (87), employees of tourism could potentially regain some of their autonomy if they were able to allocate the necessary time and resources to mental healthcare; rather than bending over backwards to please tourists and exploit their own cultures and/or identities, tourism laborers being able to tend to their mental health needs would increase their social authority by putting their health and wellbeing before that of tourists, an act that is ethical in its attempt to generate equality of care among guests and hosts alike.

In addition to the work of Foucault (1954) and Rose (1997), Nichola Khan (2017) analyzes the concepts of mental illness and psychology through an anthropological lens. Her examination of the very nature of mental disorder as well as three specific cases of mental illnesses demonstrate for the reader how crucial it is to consider mental health as part of everyday life. In a broader scope, Patel et al. (2013) observe mental health and mental illness throughout various regions of the world as part of their analysis of the institutions of mental health care that people have access to around the globe. These two books exhibit the need for a more in-depth look at the global health epidemic of mental illness and how it affects many aspects of peoples' lives, such as access to care and employment. Employment within the tourism industry can no longer be excluded from this pivotal discourse.

## Tourism in Disney

Previously published literature regarding employment experiences at Walt Disney World serve as a good jumping off point for the investigation of how Orlando theme park tourism affects the wellbeing of its workers. While anthropological publications on Disney can be hard to come by, there do exist some outside sources that peer into the world of employment at Disney. For example, Salisbury (2016) documents her time as an employee of Disney's guest relations sector and demonstrates the ways in which interacting with Disney tourists can be both a reward and a burden. Similarly, Ogren and Ogren (2015) draw on their own personal accounts to outline how employment by Walt Disney World has changed over the course of several decades. Moreover, Nabbe (2015) retells his diverse experience of having worked as a variety of positions at Disney to provide an inside look at what it is really like to work for "the mouse." Between having served as part of the custodial staff to having performed as a beloved character, Nabbe demonstrates for the reader the positive impact that being an employee of the theme park tourism industry can have on the mental health and wellbeing of an individual.

While ethnographic accounts of what it is like to have been employed by Disney are sparse, information on the official Disney website offers up very surface-level data on what it is like to work for the corporation as well as the benefits that this employment entails. As indicated by Disney, there exist only minimal health benefits for employees who are relatively high up on the corporate ladder. Mental health benefits are not included in this package, and lower-level employees do not have nearly as much access to said benefits. In addition to the lack of mental health resources that they make available to their employees, Samman (2010) indicates that Disney can also be detrimental to the mental health of its laborers on account of its "iconic representation of our racialized discourse regarding civilization and progress, providing a typical

Eurocentric understanding of modern global history as entertainment” (308). Worded differently, Disney exists within an ethnocentric bubble that draws on the identities of the peoples it employs as a form of entertainment while simultaneously differentiating them from Western civilization. This is relevant to prior discussion of the commodification of marginalized identities for the entertainment of tourists; Disney capitalizes on the lived experiences of the “Other” and markets them as a novelty to be consumed by guests in the park. This furthers the exploitation of tourism laborers at the hands of tourists, potentially reaping disastrous effects on the mental health of employees who seek only to make others happy.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted through the use of ethnographic fieldwork beginning in October 2018 and ending in September 2019. Semi-structured interviews of current/former Disney cast members were conducted in tandem with roughly fifty hours of participant observation and informal conversations with guests and current cast members in Disney's Magic Kingdom and Disney Springs. The following is an explanation of my field site selection, research design and methods, data analysis procedures, and limitations/reflexivity.

### Field Site Selection

The Orlando theme park tourism industry is a vast entity that consists of an overwhelming number of attractions and hotspots for tourists to both consume and be consumed by. Despite the myriad options for entertainment that would leave any tourist's head spinning like a Wonderland teacup, Orlando's theme park tourism industry is based on a hierarchy with one very clear choice at the top of the pyramid: Walt Disney World. When confronted with the task of describing Orlando, words such as "Disney," "Mickey Mouse," and "magic" are likely to come to the minds of most visitors. With its unique penchant for creating magical moments and going above and beyond to make each guest feel like the most important person in the park, Disney solidified its spot atop the proverbial food chain of theme parks in Orlando several decades ago. Disney World's four theme parks (Magic Kingdom, Animal Kingdom, Epcot, and Hollywood Studios) each bring something special to the table that keeps millions of people coming back to Central Florida every year. However, Magic Kingdom has become an iconic representation of Disney World on the whole due to the astronomical number of visitors that the theme park heralds annually. For this reason, Magic Kingdom was chosen as my primary field site. The option to

conduct research in multiple Orlando theme parks was considered, but as a result of its high populations and reputation as “the happiest place on Earth,” Magic Kingdom became the focus of this project.

In addition to Disney’s Magic Kingdom, Disney Springs was chosen as a secondary location for fieldwork. Disney Springs, located on Disney property near the four theme parks, consists of an assortment of restaurants, retail shops, and live entertainment that serves as an alternative for those who still want to partake in the Disney experience without shelling out hundreds to thousands of dollars in the parks. While dining and souvenirs are not free, parking and entrance to Disney Springs are. Although it is not a Disney theme park, Disney Springs is still one of the more popular tourism destinations for both visitors and Orlando residents alike, making it a great candidate for participant observation. The bulk of my fieldwork was conducted at Magic Kingdom, but Disney Springs provided me with a fresh take on Disney from outside of its most popular theme park as well as some financial relief due to its cost-free entrance.

### Research Design

This research project sought to analyze the mental health experience of current and former Disney cast members as a result of their employment at Disney. At the core of this study was the following research question:

**RQ1:** What relationship, if any, exists between theme park tourism in Orlando and the mental health of those employed in the tourism industry there?

Multiple ethnographic research methods were employed in a combined effort to seek the answer to this question, with the methodology of feminist ethnography at its very core. I consider feminist ethnography to be a collection of techniques used to highlight inequality, power imbalances, and privilege of dominant identities while simultaneously celebrating marginalized identities and helping to create a space in which they can make their own voices heard.

According to Davis and Craven (2016), feminist ethnography “takes into account all people in a field site/community/organization... peoples’ statuses, the different ways in which (multiple) forms of privilege allow them to wield power or benefit from it, and the forces and processes that emerge from all of the above” (9). Additionally, feminist ethnography often appeals to emotion via the use of personal and theoretical writing techniques that can tug at the reader’s heartstrings in tandem with qualitative data and methods. I label this research as a work of feminist ethnography due to its consideration of the tourism industry from the perspectives of its often-overlooked employees, its analysis of said individuals’ personal identities (such as gender, sexuality, ability, etc.) and their roles within workplace infrastructures governed by power, and its values-driven nature that appeals to emotion through the use of qualitative research methods. In the case of this research, these qualitative methods include participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and informal conversations with guests and employees of both Magic Kingdom and Disney Springs. Explanations and justifications of each research method can be found below.

### 1. Participant Observation

Perhaps the most central research method to ethnography, participant observation was utilized as one of the main research methods in this study. Participant observation can be thought of as the process by which researchers completely immerse themselves in the environment and everyday

lives of a study's participants so as to gain as rich an understanding as possible of the viewpoint of the individuals participating in the study. Some key aspects of participant observation as defined by DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) are gaining both literal and figurative access to the field, building a trusting and reciprocal relationship with research participants, conducting interviews, engaging with the community as both active participant and objective observer, etc.

The participant observation completed in this study took place at various locations within Walt Disney World's Magic Kingdom. Roughly 45 of the 50 total hours that I spent conducting participant observation were done at Magic Kingdom. This process involved observing interactions between cast members and guests, watching parades and stage performances, meeting characters in full body suits as well as face characters, waiting in line for rides, sitting in the guest relations building to see how issues were handled by guests and cast members, etc. I also attended a special villain-themed after-hours event that required the purchase of a separate ticket so as to gain understanding of Disney's more elite events and their treatment of the guests who attend. Detailed field notes were taken during the participant observation process, which were then converted into a personal field journal that allowed me to express my own thoughts and feelings and reflect on what each journey into the field meant to me.

The remaining five hours of participant observation were conducted at Disney Springs. My observation activities there included dining at restaurants so as to observe guest to cast member interactions, walking through World of Disney (a large souvenir shop with anything available for purchase that a Disney fan could ever want) and watching people shop, and even riding the iconic hot air balloon that floats high above the beautiful scenery of I4 traffic. Participant observation in both Disney Springs and Magic Kingdom was pivotal to this research because it allowed me to immerse myself in the world of Orlando theme park tourism, observe



both guests and Disney cast members in the happiest place on Earth, and even pose as a tourist in a city that I have lived in for many years now.

## 2. Semi-structured Interviews

Interviews are a staple of any ethnographic work. As indicated by Gobo (2008), the role of the interview as part of ethnographic research is to “reveal the cultural meanings used by actors, and to investigate aspects of the culture observed which are still unclear or ambiguous even though they have been subject to close observation” (191). Interviews are often used together with participant observation to corroborate previous findings and add a more personal account to the research being done. For this reason, semi-structured interviews were utilized as another main method of research in this project.

Interviews have the power to provide participants with an alternative venue to further express their thoughts and feelings on a specific topic while simultaneously providing the researcher with fresh insight that participant observation alone could not uncover. Semi-structured interviews are a unique category of interviews in which the interviewer develops a list of broad questions and/or talking points that encourage the person being interviewed to share their story and any information they may wish to disclose in the manner that is most comfortable for them. One example of such a question included in this study was “Could you describe what a typical day on the job was like for you?” The complete interview guide can be found in Appendix B.

Semi-structured interviews were an apt research method for this project because they prompted participants to answer a list of low-pressure questions in the most authentic way possible without creating the feel of a rigid interrogation. Additional follow-up questions were drafted during interviews depending upon the responses of each participant. Interviews were

conducted at times/dates and in locations chosen by the interviewees that were off of Disney property. This precaution was taken to ensure that participants felt as comfortable and safe as possible and were less likely to filter their responses in attempts to appease their current/former employer. Participants were recruited through personal/professional contacts, snowball sampling, and a social media recruitment post, with the final number of interviews conducted reaching 21. Individuals participating in interviews either chose their own pseudonym or one was provided for them.

### 3. Informal Conversations

A third research method used in this study was informal conversations. These brief, confidential conversations can be used in the field to get a snapshot into the lives of the individuals who live in the community being worked with. Although they typically only last a few minutes, informal conversations possess great potential to uncover the most powerful and authentic of responses from community members. I engaged both cast members and guests at Magic Kingdom and Disney Springs in informal conversations regarding their experiences at Disney. Guests were typically asked about their day in the park, their interactions with cast members, and their reasons for coming to Disney. Cast members were asked about their overall mood, job responsibilities, and interactions with guests. Questions in each scenario were determined by the individual being talked to, but most conversations lasted around five to ten minutes.

### Sample and Recruitment Methods

The bulk of the participants in this study were recruited via personal and professional contacts. I began by contacting people I had met in my personal life or at school/work who either worked for Disney in the past or are still employed by the company. This proved to be an enlightening

experience, for I know more people who have worked or do work at Disney than I had initially realized. Most acquaintances were reached out to in person or via email. While I was already familiar with a substantial number of Disney employees, it was not enough to reach my goal of conducting 20-25 semi-structured interviews. Once I interviewed each current/former Disney employee I already knew, I applied the recruitment method of snowball sampling.

A common and effective recruitment method in anthropology, snowball sampling is the recruitment of new participants through those who have already participated in the study. Worded differently, people who have already participated in the study put the investigator in contact with eligible participants whom they know from their own lives. Many of the participants whom I had known prior to this research were able to connect me to friends, family, and coworkers who have worked for Disney that I would not have known otherwise. Snowball sampling proved to be very beneficial in this study, for it yielded a high number of interested candidates who I shared mutual contacts with. However, I still needed a few more participants following my use of snowball sampling.

To find my last few participants, I turned to social media. Although I initially wanted to avoid utilizing social media as a recruitment method for fear of being unprofessional, the results of my social media post were too quick and successful not to employ. A Facebook status that advertised my study and its requirements was utilized to recruit the last few participants. A few of my Facebook friends shared the status, while others tagged their friends in the comments. This social media recruitment post was the last push that I needed in terms of finding participants; posting about my research online helped me to reach a total of 21 current/former Disney employees willing to participate in interviews regarding their mental health experiences as a direct result of their employment within the Orlando theme park tourism industry.

Of the 21 individuals that participated in the semi-structured interviews, 18 were former Disney employees and two are currently employed by the company. The remaining participant was a former cast member at the time of their interview but has since been rehired by Walt Disney World to resume their position as a cast member. 17 of the 21 participants were white/white Hispanic women, a statistic which will be further discussed in the limitations and reflexivity portions of this paper. One mixed-race woman, one Asian woman, one white male, and one Hispanic white male composed the remaining five participants within the sample. Below is a demographic representation of the participants of this study.

Table 1: Participant demographics

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Sexual Orientation</b>
Charlie	75	M	White Hispanic	Heterosexual
Rose	23	F	White	Homosexual
Ellie	26	F	White	Undecided
Alice	32	F	White	Heterosexual
Cedar	29	M	White	Heterosexual
Percie	24	F	White	Bisexual
Periwinkle	48	F	White	Heterosexual
Farrah	25	F	White	Heterosexual
Melinda	30	F	White	Bisexual
Amethyst	24	F	White	Bisexual
Tyson	35	F	Asian	Homosexual
Pearl	26	F	White	Heterosexual
Tricia	24	F	White	Heterosexual
Charlotte	25	F	White Hispanic	Bisexual
Giselle	25	F	White	Heterosexual
Skipper	37	F	White	Homosexual
Felicity	25	F	White	Bisexual
Aurora	24	F	White	Heterosexual
Halle	25	F	White	Queer
Lola	32	F	White	Heterosexual
Penelope	25	F	Mixed-race	Pansexual

### Data Analysis

As previously indicated in the research design section of this paper, data was collected during participant observation in the form of field notes. These notes were handwritten in real-time on a

notepad in bullet-point format. Once having returned from the field, I converted the notes that I had taken that day into a Microsoft Word document that represented the data in a more organized, legible format. The document of field notes was later reviewed for statistical data, underlying themes, and significant concepts that may have been helpful in answering my research question. In tandem with my field notes, a field journal was kept as a way to express my own thoughts and feelings associated with each particular experience in the field. With each entry in my field notes, I would write anywhere between one and four typed pages about my time in the field, what I saw, and how I felt. This allowed me to establish an emotional connection with the shorthand bullet points I scribbled on a notepad earlier that day.

Audio files of the interviews were stored on my password-protected personal computer. Each audio file was encrypted with a password and subsequently deleted as I transcribed each interview in full. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants and no record of identifiable information was kept. Once an interview was transcribed and its corresponding audio file terminated, I reviewed each transcription and began coding the interviews for key themes and topics that could help answer questions and analyze available data. Recurrent codes included “structural violence,” “mental health,” and “performativity.” The emotional nature of responses was also coded for, such as “happy,” “sad,” “angry,” etc. Coding my field notes and interviews highlighted crucial information that both enriched and expedited my data analysis.

### Limitations

While this study has always possessed great potential to uncover myriad information regarding the impacts of theme park tourism on the mental health and wellbeing of the individuals it employs, it has also carried with it some limitations that impeded upon my research capabilities.

Some of these limitations include personal bias and lack of diversity among the participant sample. However, the largest limitation that this study faced from beginning to end was the financial cost associated with entering my primary field site, Disney's Magic Kingdom.

The financial burden of having your dreams come true at Disney is a phenomenon that most people struggle with. For many of the park's guests, a trip to Magic Kingdom is a once in a lifetime opportunity that has taken years of saving to bring to life. Similarly, the finances required to collect substantial data for this project were a significant source of concern and created a barrier to my field site that I was unsure I would be able to breach. However, being awarded a research grant from the Trevor Colbourn Anthropological Endowment Fund created an immense support system that helped me to eradicate the financial limitation of this project almost entirely.

Depending upon the age of the guest and the time of year, a one-day ticket to Disney's Magic Kingdom can cost anywhere between \$109-\$139 (Disney 2019). As a graduate student from a working-class background, paying over \$100 each time I wanted to access my primary field site was not an option, nor was purchasing an Annual Pass to gain access to all four theme park as frequently as desired within a one-year timeframe. Fortunately, I was awarded funding from the Trevor Colbourn Anthropological Endowment Fund in the amount of \$274.24 to purchase a four-day Park Hopper Plus ticket that I was then able to upgrade to a Gold Annual Pass on my own. Having an Annual Pass with minimal blockout dates allowed me nearly uninhibited access to my field site, therein limiting the financial limitation that Disney placed on my research.

Aside from the monetary limitation associated with theme park entrance fees that I managed to evade while conducting my research, another limitation that has impacted this

project is the lack of diversity among the interview participants. Of the twenty-one individuals that I interviewed, seventeen were white or white Hispanic women. Only two participants were male, while the remaining two were women of color. Although a wide variety of sexualities, socioeconomic classes, and mental/physical disabilities were represented within my research, there is a clear lack of gender and racial representation. This is a limitation in that it hinders the consideration and examination of more visible identities as part of employment within the Orlando theme park tourism industry. The identities that we carry shape every aspect of our lives, both personal and professional; in other words, who we are affects what we do, including what we do for work. Due to the demographics of my participant sample, I was able to ascertain a firm understanding of the lived experiences of white women as Disney cast members.

However, I was not able to dive as deep into the ways in which racial and gender identities impact employment experiences within Walt Disney World. I consider this a limiting factor that hindered me from gaining a richer, more inclusive understanding of how employment at Disney may or may not alter the mental health of individuals from all walks of life. There exist three potential explanations for this deficiency within my sample: My own identity as a white woman, Disney's own lack of representation among cast members as noted during participant observation, and the pervasive stigma of mental health discussion among men as well as people of color.

While the consideration of my own personal identities in tandem with my research will be analyzed more in depth in the reflexivity section of this paper, I believe that my existence as a white woman could have influenced the recruitment process and the individuals who were interested in disclosing their mental health experiences during their time at Disney to me. Another explanation for the gender and racial/ethnicity gap within my sample population is



Disney's own lack of representation among the cast members who work most directly with guests and play bigger roles in "making magic," which is a phenomenon that I observed while conducting participant observation in Magic Kingdom. Lastly, the stigmatization of mental health discussions and the under-reporting of mental illness among men and people of color could be another potential reason for the deficiency of gender and racial variation within this study. This possible explanation is corroborated by Bharadwaj et al. (2015), who indicate that "males are more likely to under-report mental illness than females," alluding to the high rates of stigma and discomfort experienced by men regarding the discussion of mental illness (18). They cite Livingston and Boyd (2010) to demonstrate increased stigmatization regarding mental health among people of color over white people, but also exhibit via their own findings that "individuals from Asian, African, or Middle Eastern ethnic backgrounds are significantly more likely to under-report mental illness... whereas having European ancestry decreases the probability" (18).

A third limitation that I experienced during my research process was personal bias relating to participants. Although snowball sampling garnered the most participants, a few of the participants in this study were individuals whom I already knew. The personal nature of my relationships with participants carried with it the potential to skew my results. For example, my analysis of interviews with participants that I already knew prior to this study may have been altered by my subliminal perception of that individual, their willingness to confide in me as a friend rather than investigator, my interpretation of that individual's experiences as a result of my prior knowledge and familiarity with them, etc.

In addition to personal bias relating to participants, another form of bias that acted as a limitation within this research was that of selection bias. Selection bias occurs when the

participants chosen to be part of a study do not necessarily represent the target population of said study. For example, my recruitment methods specifically sought out cast members willing to discuss their mental health experiences during their Disney tenure. However, the 21 participants in this study are not necessarily a holistic reflection of the tens of thousands of cast members employed by Disney World. This can be argued on account of the possibility that there are many cast members at Disney whose mental health was not impacted by their employment at Disney and did not consider themselves apt for this research due to its discussion of cast members' mental health experiences. At the same time, other cast members may have had their mental health impacted by working for the mouse but felt uncomfortable talking about it, therein excluding them from participating in this study. Moreover, it is possible that individuals suffering from mental illness relating to their theme park employment would be more likely to volunteer for an interview. While I consider this limitation to have a minimal impact on my research due to the variety of mental health experiences had by cast members (ranging from negative to positive to none) who did participate, it is important to consider how my own actions influenced the individuals who chose to participate. In addition, recognizing selection bias allows us to open our eyes to the fact a sample population does not always fully encapsulate a target population. That being said, the current and former Disney cast members who participated in this study do not fully represent all Disney cast members or their mental health experiences that stem from their employment.

### Reflexivity

The fact that who we are as individuals colors every component of our lives cannot be stressed enough. The identities we possess are crucial to our existence and should be celebrated, but it is

important to recognize when they impact the world around us and the subsequent way in which we perceive it. While it is impossible to remain entirely unbiased while conducting research, anthropologists have a responsibility to reflect upon the role that their own personhood played throughout their research design process, data collection, and analysis. As a queer white woman who is still engaged in an uphill battle with mental illness and psychological disability, I consider it a personal duty to hold a looking glass to myself and analyze how who I am has affected the research that I have done.

Perhaps the largest impact on my research, my own mental health journey sparked an interest within to me to hear about the psychological journeys of others. Knowing my own experiences with mental illness inspired me to explore the struggles of other people with struggles similar to my own, more specifically people whose perspectives are often overlooked or erased. Even though my own mental health served as a driving force for this project, I had to remind myself several times throughout the research process that not everyone knows what it feels like to be depressed, to be anxious, to be obsessive, etc. Moreover, people without a predisposition for mental illness may not react to or be affected by events in the same way that people with a mental illness, myself included, would. Upon hearing stories from current/former cast members about being sexually assaulted by guests while in character, being spat on and screamed at by guests for issues such as inclement weather or long wait times for rides, and being discriminated against by upper-level management, I often found myself thinking that these are instances that would take years to a lifetime for me to recover from on an emotional and mental level. The ability of some interview participants to let go of memories such as these and still indicate that their time at Disney positively impacted their mental health was difficult for me to comprehend due to my own relationship with my mental health. Throughout this process, and

even still, I have to keep reminding myself that not everyone will experience a mental illness in their lifetime regardless of the trauma that they may experience in or out of the workplace.

Refraining from allowing my own reactions to stories of maltreatment at the hands of Disney guests and employers has been difficult, but it is something that I made a point to do in order to minimize bias.

As previously indicated in the limitations portion of this paper, my status as a white woman could have played a hand in my participant sample. While participation in this study was voluntary and most participants were recruited via snowball sampling, being a white female may have been a contributing factor in the high population of other white women within my sample. Although unintentional and coincidental, I hold myself and other white anthropologists to a higher standard in regard to white privilege within their research, which is what I am attempting to do by drawing attention to the lack of racial representation in this study.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: THE PRECARIOUSNESS OF PIXIE DUST: DISNEY AND STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE**

Violence is traditionally thought of as the infliction of bodily harm unto another. However, structural violence operates on a more symbolic level that permeates societal infrastructure and oppresses the “Other” from within. To reiterate the definition provided in the Literature Review chapter, structural violence can be thought of as “violence exerted systematically... by everyone who belongs to a certain social order” so as to further oppress individuals belonging to marginalized groups and those residing within the lower echelons of social stratification (Farmer 2004, 207). This symbolic form of violence is often employed by societal institutions, social elites and the upper class, as well as dominant identities in order to erase the voices and perspectives of marginalized populations from existence. This is a trend that is commonly seen in both anthropology and touristic studies, fields that fail to consider the tourism industry from the point of view of tourism laborers. In anthropological and touristic studies literature, tourists have been given priority over the individuals who make the tourism industry possible in the first place. This concept is not confined to the words on a page or a classroom discussion, however; my research has proven that this occurs in real-life tourism institutions, specifically that of the Orlando theme park tourism industry.

### **Results**

The results of said research allude to the fact that Disney cast members’ mental health may suffer as a result of tactics utilized by the corporation, namely structural violence. Following extensive review of my interview transcripts and field notes, one fact became abundantly clear: Employment at Walt Disney World, and within the greater scheme of Orlando theme park

tourism, does affect the mental health experiences of current and former employees. Although a number of factors may have contributed to each individual’s relationship between their mental health and Disney, such as pre-existing mental health conditions as well as personal identities and external affairs, the majority of participants reported that “working for the mouse” negatively impacted their mental health. A breakdown of responses can be observed in the following table:

Table 2: Breakdown of participants’ experiences as cast members

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Time at Disney</b>	<b>Cast Member Status</b>	<b>Impact on Mental Health</b>	<b>History of Mental Illness</b>
Charlie	8 yrs.	Former	Positive	No
Rose	3 yrs.	Former	Negative	Yes
Ellie	1 yr.	Former	None	Yes
Alice	3 yrs.	Former	Negative	Yes
Cedar	2 yrs.	Former	Negative	No
Percie	9 mos.	Current	Negative	No
Periwinkle	15 yrs.	Former	None	No
Farrah	1 yr. 8 mos.	Current	Positive and Negative	Yes
Melinda	5 yrs. 1 mo.	Former	Negative	No
Amethyst	3 yrs. 2 mos.	Former	Positive and Negative	Yes
Tyson	6 yrs. 6 mos.	Former	Negative	No
Pearl	4 yrs. 6 mos.	Former	Negative	No
Tricia	5 mos.	Former	Negative	Yes
Charlotte	3 mos.	Former	Positive and Negative	Yes
Giselle	3 mos.	Former	Negative	Yes
Skipper	4 mos.	Former	Positive	No
Felicity	9 mos.	Former	Positive and Negative	Yes
Aurora	4 mos.	Former	Positive and Negative	No
Halle	4 mos.	Former	Positive	Yes
Lola	4 yrs.	Former	Negative	Yes
Penelope	9 mos.	Former	Negative	No

As depicted in Table 2, over half of the participants in this study indicated during their interviews that their time as a Disney cast member had an adverse effect on their mental health and wellbeing. The eleven individuals belonging to this category were women, two of whom were women of color. In terms of their positions, the individuals whose mental health suffered were employed in a variety of locations and occupations throughout Disney World, including attractions and operations, merchandising, hotels, parade control, character acting, food and beverage, research, tours, and the Disney Vacation Club.

In tandem with the consideration of Disney's impacts on the mental health experiences of its employees, it was also significant to consider the mental health histories of the individuals participating in this research. An individual's mental health status prior to their employment carries the potential to influence their experience on the job. Therefore, I asked each participant if they had any history of mental illness prior to working for Disney. As depicted in Table 2, eleven participants indicated that they had a history with mental illness prior to working at Disney. Interestingly enough, the same eleven individuals who reported that they had pre-existing mental health conditions prior to being a Disney cast member were not the same eleven individuals who reported that working for Disney negatively impacted their mental health. While there was a degree of overlap between the two groups, some of the individuals who reported having a history of mental illness did not indicate that being employed by Disney had a strictly negative impact on their mental health, while others who had no prior experience with mental illness began to exhibit symptoms of mental health conditions during and immediately after their employment at Disney. These statistics suggest that having a pre-existing mental health condition can impact a person's occupational experiences, but that it is not a guarantee in every

case. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to the analysis of the role that structural violence plays in the scheme of these findings.

### Power Imbalances

If there is one thing that this research has made evident thus far, it is that Walt Disney World, specifically Disney's Magic Kingdom, is the most important component in securing Orlando's status as the "theme park capital of the world." This hierarchy that prioritizes Disney over the several other theme park options in Orlando has trickled down into Disney's theme parks, creating a hierarchical structure among cast members that places those on the front lines in parks and working directly with guests at the bottom of the ladder. Melinda, a character actor in Magic Kingdom for roughly four years, indicated that there is a cast member hierarchy that prioritizes certain positions over others, such as characters who performed in parades being more important than characters who only did meet-and-greets with guests (Interview with Melinda, May 2019). The toxicity of this workplace stratification that allocates more power and prestige to certain individuals reinforces the further marginalization of entry-level cast members without a leadership position or a position viewed as significant.

One exemplification of how power imbalances among cast members can affect mental health experiences at Disney is Charlie, a white Hispanic male who served as a duty manager at one of Walt Disney World's many resorts in Orlando for several years. Charlie was one of only three participants in this study who indicated that his employment at Disney positively impacted his mental health and wellbeing. His status as the highest-ranking cast member in this study in terms of leadership must be taken into consideration regarding his mental health experience while employed by Disney. In his leadership position, Charlie indicated that Disney was "a fun



place to work,” on account of it being a vacation environment where people visit in order to relax. However, he did find himself resolving guests issues frequently due to the fact that cast members in non-leadership roles are not equipped with the necessary tools do so. When asked why managers are often called on by lower-level cast members to tend to guests’ issues, he explained that entry-level cast members “have no power to do anything” (Interview with Charlie, October 2018). This statement demonstrates the unequal distribution of power among cast members at Disney, a telltale sign of structural violence. Despite Disney and its guests’ high expectations of cast members to make others happy, it would appear that cast members are rendered almost powerless to do so.

This is a sentiment that was corroborated via my informal interviews with cast members in Magic Kingdom. For example, an attendant at the Dumbo ride in Magic Kingdom’s Storybook Circus region reported that she often deals with irate guests who expect her to be able to manage situations that are either out of her control or have nothing to do with her, such as inclement weather or the attitude of another cast member working in a separate area of the park. She stated that she sends people to Disney’s guest services building at the front of Magic Kingdom in instances such as these, for she does not have the power to help these individuals and guest services is better equipped to do so.

### Symbolic and Literal Violence

Unfortunately for a number of cast members, the unrealistic expectations of tourists coupled with their lack of power to solve real problems often leads to violence, both symbolic and literal. When asked what their interactions with guests were typically like, participants often shared heartwarming stories of times that they were able to improve the quality of a guest’s experience

and make their trip all the more magical. However, others could barely stand to look me in the eye as they recounted truly horrific experiences with cantankerous parkgoers whose entitlement, which is fostered by the Disney rhetoric of dreams coming true and magic transpiring before their very eyes, took a turn for the worst, ultimately resulting in threats, screaming, and sometimes physical violence.

One participant who experienced violence at the hands of those in power at Disney as well as the park's guests is Amethyst. Amethyst, a former merchandise cast member in Magic Kingdom, stated that the mental and emotional abuse she received from cast members in leadership positions was a large factor in her departure from the company. In addition to the sexism she experienced from her male managers after expressing interest in moving up in the department and taking on more responsibility, she also had to endure being yelled at by her managers in front of guests for matters that were out of her control. While disagreements with leadership can be part of any job, it is safe to say that no job should require its employees to accept being screamed at and publicly humiliated by their manager in exchange for ten dollars an hour, all the while being powerless to do anything about the situation.

As if this were not enough, Amethyst had to deal with violence, both structural and physical, from guests in Magic Kingdom as well. When I asked her about her interactions with guests, she said that they were mostly pleasant and that she enjoyed getting to know people in the parks. However, she continued with this truly horrific quote about some of the guests she encountered during her employment at Disney:

I would have a couple that were actually, like, terrible. My first Christmas I worked there I had someone throw this rolled-up throw blanket at my face and tell me that they were

glad I was here working on Christmas and not home with my family because I was a bitch... I've had people spit on me... cuss me out, obviously. I've had someone, like, push me, like put their hands on me. Um, I had a grown man grab my boob and try to give me a five-dollar bill... and when I tried to tell my managers about any of these situations, nothing was ever done (Interview with Amethyst, June 2019).

Not much analysis is required to pick up on the themes of violence and abuse that are contained in this excerpt. Maltreatment from guests is something that almost every participant in this study experienced during their time at Disney, but it continues to happen even still. To add insult to metaphorical (and in some cases physical) injury, higher-ups in Disney have blatantly chosen to ignore the suffering of cast members for the sake of accruing revenue and maintaining the visage of magic for guests who commit acts of violence against the very individuals who are trying to create said magic for them. Thinking back to the aforementioned definition of structural violence, working on Disney's frontlines could not be a more accurate depiction of this concept; cast members are made to suffer for the benefit of dominant identities and institutions (guests and management), their perspectives are often erased and/or ignored, and they are powerless to stop it.

Another cast member who was forced to undergo structural and literal violence from guests and Disney's infrastructure was Periwinkle, a former character actor who portrayed "fur" characters (characters that require a full-body suit, like Eeyore or Tigger) as well as "face" characters (characters like Snow White or Cinderella, whose faces can be seen by guests). Periwinkle reported that her mental health was not impacted by her employment in the realm of Orlando theme park tourism, but the stories that she shared with me are riddled with clear

evidence of structural violence inflicted by Disney and its guests. She was very clear that she loved working at Walt Disney World and would not take back the experience, but she did share with me what she considers to be the worst experience she had while performing as a fur character:

The worst experience I ever had was in White Rabbit. I was at the, um, Grand Floridian... and I went over to a table and these guys literally pushed me down onto the table, flipped my back on the table, and felt me up. And my lead... never even saw it because they were somewhere else, you know, with the other characters. You try to keep your character, as in not talking- “on stage” is what they call it. You’re not really supposed to talk on stage, so you try to explain to your leadership who that is and what they did and everything, and you can’t really give that to them to understand that we need to go backstage... And then you explain to them what goes on and by the time they get out there, these kids are gone. It’s demoralizing... and it makes you not want to be out there” (Interview with Periwinkle, May 2019).

The harrowing violence experienced by Periwinkle in this situation was two-fold: She experienced literal violence as a result of her sexual assault by the young male guests, but Disney’s company policies and infrastructure inflicted structural violence upon her that made her incapable of speaking up about her experience. In Periwinkle’s case, her voice was erased both literally and figuratively due to Disney’s guidelines regarding character actors’ behavior while around guests. This topic will be discussed more in-depth in future chapters, but the performative aspect that comes with working at Disney requires cast members to put up a cheerful front while

in front of guests until they can express themselves more openly once they are out guests' line of sight, also known as being "backstage." Because she was in costume, Periwinkle had a difficult time explaining to her supervisor that something violent had occurred. By the time that she managed to convey this to her leader and then explain what had transpired, her assailants were already gone and successfully evaded any potential negative repercussions. Thus, Periwinkle was inaudible and powerless despite the presence of a higher-up to whom she relayed the events. Although the supervisor in Periwinkle's case utilized a more passive form of violence to erase her perspective, a number of participants in this study experienced more direct structural violence from their management in the form of workplace discrimination.

### Workplace Discrimination

Despite its self-identification as an Equal Employment Opportunity employer, several of the current/former cast members who participated in this study reported experiences of workplace discrimination from their supervisors. The most reported forms of discrimination that participants experienced included sexism, ableism, ageism, and racism. Discrimination is often utilized by dominant identities to further oppress marginalized identities. Because participants reported being discriminated by their higher-ups, I consider this to be a textbook depiction of structural violence; individuals in power utilize their elevated status to push disenfranchised individuals even further down the metaphorical ladder. Below ensues a description of each category of workplace discrimination as experienced by the participants of this research and observed during participant observation.

#### 1. Sexism

Due to the high number of female participants in this study, stories of gender-based prejudice from supervisors were in no short order. For example, Amethyst expressed significant initiative and desire to serve in a leadership position during her time as a merchandise cast member in Magic Kingdom. Not only did her aspirations go unheard by her male supervisors, but they reportedly told her that she would never serve in a leadership position specifically because she is a woman (Interview with Amethyst, June 2019). On the other hand, Lola, a former in-park researcher, Disney Vacation Club representative, and VIP tour guide, experienced gender-based discrimination from both male and female supervisors. While serving as a tour guide, Lola stated that she dealt with sexism from her male boss due to his allotment of preferred tour locations, groups, and times to tour guides whom he felt were most attractive. As if this were not enough, she also indicated that her former female supervisor who served in a position of great power within the company often put her down, deemed her “emotionally unstable,” and went so far to sabotage her chances of earning a promotion due to her alleged fear of another strong female in a position of power at Disney (Interview with Lola, September 2019).

## 2. Ableism

Despite explicitly stating in its Equal Employment Opportunity statement that disabled individuals are welcomed cast members at Disney, participants in this study have revealed that this statement could not be further from the truth. Rose, a former attractions operator in Disney’s Hollywood studios and Epcot, began her time at Disney as an able-bodied individual. At the beginning of her Disney career, Rose stated that she loved doing her job and going to work every day at Disney. This changed after about two years in, however, once she made the switch from Hollywood Studios to Epcot. A number of factors contributed to the decline in mental health that she experienced while serving as a cast member, such as anxiety-inducing job requirements and

toxic work environments, but her physical disability was one of the primary components. Although able-bodied at the beginning of her Disney tenure, she was rendered disabled in a severe car crash that required her to use a cane to supplement her mobility. With the weight of a physical disability added to the mix, Rose needed a little more time to complete the work-related tasks she was delegated prior to her car accident. She stated that her managers required that she and her coworkers put 150% effort into their work, but Rose had to sacrifice even more than this in order to keep up with her able-bodied coworkers in the manner that was expected of her. When asked if her coworkers and supervisors were accommodating in regard to her disability, she stated that

They definitely were not. A lot of prejudice from able-bodied cast members. They were upset with me because I was not able to go at their pace even though they knew that I was disabled. There were days where, after my shift, I would start crying because I had gone through so much. It really, in a way, is abuse because they're pushing me to go against my limits and there were times where I just had to go against my limits, and it would drain me. It would drain me completely... physically, emotionally, and mentally, and I was completely stressed out because of it. And my managers, they turned the other cheek, had a blind eye to this. They knew that I had my disabilities, but they didn't do anything to accommodate for it... and did nothing for the cast members who were discriminating against me about my disability (Interview with Rose, October 2018).

This brief excerpt is indicative of some of the horrors that disabled cast members experience while working for Walt Disney World. Not only was Rose made to feel less than by her peers

due to her physical disability, but her voice went unheard when she sought aid from those in power. Her inability to complete her work at the same pace as her coworkers coupled with the systematic silencing of her requests for the help she needed were huge contributing factors in her work-related nightmares, severe anxiety regarding work, and bouts of crying that she experienced on her way to work almost every day. Rose's time at Disney demonstrates that not only is structural violence part of the company, but it inflicts serious harm upon the mental health of the individuals that it targets.

### 3. Ageism

Ageism, a lesser-known form of discrimination pertaining to an individual's age, was more apparent during the conduction of my participant observation in Magic Kingdom. While in the theme park, I observed that the custodial staff was primarily composed of elderly individuals, more specifically elderly women of color. Stripping these individuals of access to a variety of roles within the park by confining them to more subservient positions not only deprives older cast members of chances at growth and upward mobility, but it deprives Disney World of the opportunity to create a more diverse, well-rounded environment that better represents all ages and walks of life.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, a number of interview participants reported that Disney College Program cast members are not treated as well as part- or full-time cast members. Disney's College Program is an opportunity for college students and recent grads to utilize a semester of their college years to be employed by Disney. According to Aurora, a former food and beverage cast member in Magic Kingdom and part of the College Program, non-College Program cast members can often be ruder to the College Program cast members on account of their lack of status within the company. Furthermore, tasks that are considered undesirable by



part- and full-time cast members tend to be forced upon the College Program students by entitled cast members with more seniority and clout who considered College Program cast members to be “second-class citizens” (Interview with Aurora, September 2019). A number of other College Program cast members who participated in this research stated that the housing that Disney affords its College Program employees is dismal at best, with up to six people sharing a cramped three-bedroom apartment (Interview with Giselle, August 2019). Not only are the living conditions that the College Program kids must contend with abysmal, but the travel provisions that Disney has put in place to shuttle them from their apartments to the theme parks is unreliable and often makes these cast members late for work. As reflected by the experiences of elderly cast members and College Program cast members, both older and younger cast members are pushed to the bottom rung of Disney’s hierarchy by part- and full-time cast members with more seniority and better social standing.

#### 4. Racism

In addition to the majority of the custodial staff at Disney being senior citizens, these individuals are primarily elderly women of color. The confinement of elderly people of color to custodial positions is a reflection of the institutionalized racism used to oppress people of color within Disney. This is not the only signal of racism within the confines of Walt Disney World, however; the lack of employment opportunities at Disney for people of color is apparent across the board, but specifically within the division of character actors. I believe that this concept can be explained by the persistence of colonialism and nationalism in Disney, a theme which I further elaborate upon in the following section.

## Colonialism

Often referred to as the handmaiden of anthropology, colonialism is a topic that is exponentially relevant to an array of anthropological concepts and topics. While it is often associated with the conquest of faraway places and systematic oppression of indigenous groups at the hands of antiquated white male anthropologists with savior complexes, colonialism is still alive and well today in Orlando, Florida through Disney. Since its arrival in the 1970s, Walt Disney World has infiltrated a surprising amount of aspects of life in Orlando. Whether it be in the form of a Mickey Mouse head-shaped electrical pole at exit 64 on the infamous I4 or a barrage of Disney souvenirs at the front of random department stores throughout the greater Orlando area, Orlando residents can go hardly anywhere or do anything without seeing something that has been sprinkled with Disney's proverbial pixie dust.

As one of the city's largest colonizers, Walt Disney World's reach has come to extend far beyond the confines of Orlando; one participant who worked in merchandising in a massive Disney store in a metropolitan area in South Florida indicated that she felt within the grasp of Orlando theme park tourism even from over a hundred miles away in a location that was considered to be a more affordable alternative for individuals who wanted the "Disney experience" but could not afford entrance to the theme parks (Interview with Charlotte, August 2019). Even within the city limits of Orlando, the majority of residents have either worked for Disney or have at least one acquaintance who has been employed by the mouse.

In terms of its employees, colonialism has taken the shape of institutionalized racism within Disney's theme parks as well as Disney Springs. This is a trend that I noticed during my participant observation process. During my time in Magic Kingdom especially, I observed that roughly 70% of the custodial staff were elderly women of color, primarily elderly black women.

This non-coincidence was mirrored in the custodial staff of Disney Springs as well. In addition to composing most of the custodial staff at Disney Springs, people of color also made up most of the physical taskforce in restaurants and bars. For example, young black and Latinx people were most visible in table bussing and food running positions, while servers and hosts/hostesses were primarily white.

Despite the high rates of cast members of color as part of Magic Kingdom's custodial staff, the theme park is severely lacking in terms of racial representation. For example, most cast members in positions that dealt directly with guests were typically white. This became particularly noticeable to me when I sat in the Guest Relations building at the front of the theme park to observe guests with qualms and questions interact with cast members whose purpose is to solve problems. While the person in the highest position of power was a Hispanic male, all seven of the cast members working directly with the guests were white or white-passing. Furthermore, all six cashiers in the big top souvenir store in the Storybook Circus area of the park were white women. These may be just two examples, but they are indicative of a larger institutionalized issue that dominates Walt Disney World.

Perhaps the most prevalent area of racial underrepresentation in Magic Kingdom is that of character actors. This is related to the lack of characters of color in Disney and Pixar's movies and television shows, but the number of characters portrayed in the park is even less so. Every afternoon at 3 PM, the Festival of Fantasy parade makes its way from Frontierland all the way down Mainstreet USA to the front of Magic Kingdom. This quintessential parade features several grandiose parade floats decked out in confetti, glitter, and props related to Disney movies that inspire awe within even the most difficult of guests to impress. The floats in this specific parade feature classic Disney characters, such as Mickey and Pinocchio, but shine a spotlight on

a number of Disney princesses and princes. While there are far more white princesses and princes in the Disney universe than royalty of color, only two characters of color are part of this parade: Princess Tiana and Prince Naveen. In a similar vein, only four characters of color are able to be met in Magic Kingdom: Aladdin, Princess Jasmine, Princess Elena of Avalor, and Princess Tiana. Of these four, Princess Tiana is the only character of color who can be met on a fairly regular basis in her semi-permanent spot shared with Rapunzel in Fantasyland.

While my semi-structured interviews were not able to uncover much information regarding the relationship between race and mental health experiences of cast members at Disney, my participant observation was able to shine a light on how engrained institutionalized racism as well as structural violence in the form of colonialism are in everyday life as a Disney cast member. While I cannot speak to the impacts that more physical labor-intensive positions, such as custodian or food busser, can reap on cast members of color's mental health and wellbeing, it has been made abundantly clear that the lack of opportunities for employees of color to interact with guests, create magical moments, and portray a character who they feel represented by are regular occurrences of structural violence within Walt Disney World.

Interspersed with the remnants of colonialism within Walt Disney World is the concept of nationalism. Prior to this research, the notion that Disney is a place that requires all visitors to engage with pro-USA propaganda and force-feeds them nationalist rhetoric was a thought that had not occurred to me. However, observing the daily Flag Retreat Ceremony at the entrance to Magic Kingdom in tandem with my time spent in Liberty Square, a colonial American-themed sector of the park, opened my eyes to some of Disney's beliefs and intentions when Magic Kingdom was first constructed. Regardless of the fact that international tourists, namely from Latin America and Brazil, compose a fairly large fraction of the 20.9 million guests that the

theme park hosted in 2018, Walt Disney World is a place that prioritizes American guests and values nationality to an oppressive extent.

As previously mentioned, the Flag Retreat Ceremony is part of the everyday rituals of Magic Kingdom. While I had not heard of this spectacle before this study, Percie, a current parade and crowd control employee, informed me of its existence. When I asked her to explain the process, she told me that it is a ceremony that occurs every early evening at the flagpole near the entrance to the theme park. One random U.S. military veteran is selected to help bring down the American flag for that day in order to honor them for their service. The process is preceded by the selection of a random child from the park who leads the crowd in the recital of the Pledge of Allegiance. The Dapper Dans, a group of cast members who perform as an acapella group, sing the national anthem and God Bless America over the park's sound system. Once the musical numbers have been completed, the flag is lowered by the veteran and everyone applauds them. They are then awarded a certificate and photographed with parade cast members to commemorate their participation in the ceremony (Interview with Percie, April 2019). Even as an American guest, I found this ceremony to be strange. The air was uncomfortable at best, with less than fifty individuals participating in the festivities while hundreds of others rushed by or looked on in confusion. In a theme park that attracts an exorbitant number of foreign guests, the fact that there is an exclusive ceremony that caters to American nationalism and militarism seemed out of place and unnecessary. It might be a small world after all, but it is clear in Magic Kingdom which nation takes precedence in said world.

Disney's nationalist agenda is furthered by the existence of Liberty Square, a region of the park dedicated to the aesthetic of colonial America. Not only does this perpetuate and romanticize the previously discussed theme of colonialism, but it proves the existence of

nationalism within the walls of the Magic Kingdom. Even in a theme park with areas dedicated to fantasy, adventure, and the future, “America” has somehow become a theme that collaborates with these other concepts to create magic for guests who would not recognize most of the people included in the Hall of Presidents ride. As someone who was born and currently resides in the US, even I do not find a ride that features talking animatronic versions of our founding fathers to contribute to Disney’s status as the happiest place on earth. For the individuals who travel across the globe to visit and/or work for Disney, the nationalism that hides in plain sight possesses great potential to stifle their nationalities and keep them from expressing all of who they truly are.

### Mental Health and Counseling Services

With the amount of pain, both mental and physical, that Disney cast members appear to experience at the hands of the corporation’s infrastructure, it is crucial that services to cope with said pain are afforded to employees. That being said, Disney does offer a number of health services to its cast members, namely its Employee Assistance Program. The Employee Assistance Program is a counseling service that permits Disney cast members up to five free counseling sessions with a licensed professional while working for the Walt Disney Company. While this program sounds beneficial in theory, it is virtually non-existent among cast members; of the 21 participants in this study, one participant reported having utilized Disney’s counseling services. It is important to note, however, that one participant of the group of twenty who did not take advantage of Walt Disney World’s counseling services worked at a Disney location in South Florida and therein did not have access to counseling that is afforded to cast members working in the theme parks. Regardless, I believe that this clear lack of usage is a result of two factors: poor marketing of the program and fear of cast members regarding confidentiality.

As I conducted more interviews, I began to notice the lack of participants who attended counseling sessions as part of Disney's Employee Assistance Program. The puzzled looks when I so much as mentioned the notion of free counseling at Disney served as a sign that something was askew. As a follow-up question to whether or not participants utilized the counseling service, I began asking if participants knew about the program's existence at all. An alarmingly low number of individuals knew about the program, with the bulk of participants responding to that questioning by telling me that our interview was the first time that they had even heard about the counseling services offered by Disney. Tricia, a former attractions operator in Animal Kingdom, spoke to the deficient amount of cast members who utilize the counseling service by stating that the program itself "is not really talked about..." (Interview with Tricia, August 2019). The lack of marketing of one of Disney's only opportunities for its cast members to make their voices heard and share how their mental health has been impacted by their employment is one of the most violent acts committed against cast members by the company; not only are cast members' perspectives being glossed over while they are on the job, but the primary resource for them to share their stories and unload some of the mental burden associated with being a cast member is not easily accessible.

The singular participant who attended counseling at Disney, Lola, stated that she only went to one session because her counselor provided ineffective mental health counseling services. Because of her insufficient counseling experience with Disney, Lola receives mental health treatment off of Disney property (Interview with Lola, September 2019). One other participant who receives mental health counseling is Halle, who stated that she did not consider utilizing Disney's counseling services because of her preestablished connection with her own counselor. The possibility that cast members may already have their own therapist prior to

working at Disney and therefore do not need to utilize the mental health benefits of the Employee Assistance Program should be considered when reflecting upon the shockingly low number of individuals who are enlisting the help of Disney counselors.

While a few other participants expressed interested in utilizing the counseling services, they ultimately opted not to out of fear that the counselors would breach their confidentiality and report whatever was said during their session to the higher-ups at Disney. Cast members' fear in confiding in Disney counselors speaks to the notion of extreme performativity in Disney, which I argue is a weaponized extension of structural violence that is employed to subdue cast members into thinking, feeling, and behaving in the manner that the company wants. The performative aspects of being a Disney cast member will be discussed in the Chapter Five.



## **CHAPTER FIVE: PLAYING THE PART: CAST MEMBER PERFORMATIVITY**

One of the most iconic aspects of Disney is the spectacular show that it puts on for guests, both inside and outside of its theme parks. Whether in the form of its classic films that have gone down in cinematic history or its dazzling shows, parades, and fireworks displays in the theme parks, it is impossible to deny that Disney knows how to put on a performance that people will remember for years to come. Several coveted employment opportunities in the parks are based on performance and require cast members to dance, act, and sometimes even sing for the thousands of guests who enter the grounds on a daily basis. For example, Periwinkle portrayed various characters in both Magic and Animal Kingdom, performed in parades, and even danced in prominent stage shows during her time as a cast member. While certain employees such as Periwinkle do play overt performance-based roles in the theme parks, my research has showed that Disney cast members are forced to engage in performativity as part of their job requirements. Worded differently, all cast members are part of the larger show that Disney puts on, whether they want to be or not.

In this context, I engage with the concept of performativity as an individual's fulfillment of a specific role that extends beyond their usual persona as a result of societal and institutional pressures. Performativity coerces humans into thinking, feeling, and behaving in the manner that they believe is expected of them from others and ultimately themselves. The pressure to always serve demanding guests with a smile and create magic right before their very eyes is the epitome of performativity as experienced by countless cast members, a phenomenon that over time transformed into self-governance and fear for many of the participants in this study. I argue that the performativity of Disney cast members is maintained through the language and

colloquialisms utilized among cast members to reinforce the performance aspect of their jobs, Disney's job requirements and expectations of the individuals it employs, and the environmental cues put in place to reiterate the magical show that is constantly playing out around the parks' guests, who serve as said show's most important actors. That being said, I also argue that guests of Disney engage in performativity as a result of pressures from Disney to have the most magical day ever as well as competition reinforced by social media. At its very core, Walt Disney World functions as an ongoing performance in which employees and guests alike have their own unique parts to play.

### The Language of Disney

Hall (2008) states that one of the most pivotal factors in the maintenance of performativity is the language utilized by those partaking in the performance. This claim is perfectly exemplified by the colloquialisms utilized by employees of Disney to discuss various aspects of their jobs and work lives. Perhaps the most glaringly obvious instance of performativity as reinforced by language is the designation of all individuals employed by Walt Disney World as "cast members." As stated by Pearl, a former food and beverage cast member in Magic Kingdom, "Anybody that works for the Walt Disney company in some way, shape, or form is considered a cast member... and that's just their way of identifying their employees" (Interview with Pearl, July 2019). On a fundamental level, any and all people who work for Disney, from the literal performers to the custodians to the office staff, are cast members. Out of context, the phrase "cast member" indicates that a person is part of a show or performance. Referring to Disney employees as such implies that they are all part of one ongoing performance, no matter what role they were cast in.

While the term “cast member” is a more widely known example of the performativity associated with working at Disney, the semi-structured interviews that I conducted with current and former cast members revealed more privatized lingo that further alludes to the unending performativity associated with being employed there. Another exemplar of this notion is the use of the term “costume” in place of “uniform.” Rather than referring to their required workplace attire as their uniform, Disney cast members must regard them as costumes. Not unlike the term “cast member,” referring to uniforms as “costumes” is not unique to a specific position or occupational title; all cast members who are at work in their required outfit are in costume. Although all cast members are in costume while they are working, costumes vary by position and by region of the park. To illustrate, a custodial cast member’s costume typically consists of a white linen button-down shirt (long or short sleeves dependent on cast member) and white shorts or pants with black non-slip shoes, whereas as Penelope, a former ride operations host for The Magic Carpets of Aladdin, The Enchanted Tiki Room, and The Swiss Family Robinson Treehouse in Magic Kingdom, described her costume as a loose-fitting shirt with an intricate red, yellow, blue, and green design scheme and matching red pants that were on par with the Aladdin and Jasmine theme of the area she worked in (Interview with Penelope, September 2019). In the traditional sense of the term, a costume is worn during a performance or to shed the remnants of ourselves and step into the persona of someone else. Disney’s use of the term is a mere signification of a uniform, but it reinforces the idea that Disney cast members are engaged in a constant performance in which they portray someone other than who they really are.

Equally as important is the colloquialism of being “backstage.” Cast members utilize this term to mean that they are out of sight of guests. Being backstage could mean walking through Magic Kingdom’s underground tunnels to get from the employee parking lot to their job post,

sitting in the breakroom, working in an area marked “cast members only” etc. In other words, the curtain has closed and cast members are now safe from the watchful eyes of the park’s visitors. The very use of the term “backstage” implies that there is a stage upon which a performance is being conducted, a performance in which the cast members are the stars and the audience is composed of tourists and guests of the theme parks. Moreover, the ability to go “backstage” at Disney brings with it the opportunity to pull back the metaphorical veil and see how the magic really works, but Lola relayed that being backstage at Disney is far less than magical: “You get these rose-colored glasses of, like, the magic and... being able to go backstage... So you go backstage and you see Peter Pan making out with a Lost Boy and Tinkerbell smoking a cigarette. It’s not that magical back there (Interview with Lola, September 2019).

Contrary to being “backstage,” being “onstage” is used to signify that a cast member is in front of guests. This can be both literal or figurative; cast members whose jobs are performance-based are often on a literal stage, whether in one of the several theater shows or part of the performances that take place on the stage in front of Cinderella’s Castle in Magic Kingdom. For cast members whose positions are not explicitly performative, such as ride operators or custodians, being onstage can mean anything from interacting with guests while they wait in line for a ride to mopping a crowded bathroom in Fantasyland. While these actions are not inherently performative, deeming them as taking place “onstage” to mean that they are occurring in front of guests makes them so. Keeping up with the theater motifs, the act of being onstage means that a person is performing a role different from themselves that they must portray successfully for an expectant audience. This term is used in a similar sense for Disney cast members; when you are “backstage” and out of guests’ line of sight, the stage lights have gone out and the performance

has ended, even if only for a moment. When you are “onstage,” however, you must perform your role in the manner that is expected of you by guests in order to emulate the magic of Disney.

### Job Requirements and Performativity

In order to emulate the magic that Disney is renowned for, the company has in place several requirements that cast members must abide by as part of their performance for guests. I consider these requirements to be separated into two overarching categories: appearance and behavior. Although both are significant in their own right, a combination of the “Disney Look” and the magical cheeriness that Disney is known for is necessary for cast members to fulfill the expectations that the company and its guests have put in place for them.

#### 1. Appearance-based Performativity

On its careers website, Disney refers to what is known as the “Disney Look”:

The Disney Look is a classic look that is clean, natural, polished and professional, and avoids "cutting edge" trends or extreme styles. It is designed with our costumed and non-costumed cast members in mind. Our themed costumed cast members are a critical part of enhancing the experience of our Disney show, and our non-costumed cast members also play an important role as representatives of the Disney brand (Disney 2019).

This excerpt is riddled with performativity, both in the form of language and appearance requirements put in place for employees of the company. It is clearly stated that Disney is putting on a show for its guests, with both costumed and non-costumed cast members playing parts in said performance. These telling signs of performativity are indicative of Disney’s prioritization

of performativity over authenticity regarding its cast members. While restrictions regarding appearance are not uncommon in the professional realm, the measures put in place by Walt Disney World for the sake of achieving the “Disney Look” serve to stifle members’ creativity and expression of the self, which is a concept that was apparent during my participant observation as well as my semi-structured interviews.

While in Magic Kingdom and Disney Springs, the cohesiveness of all cast members’ appearances was more than apparent. Most Disney films encourage viewers to be proud of who they are and the way that they look, but this sentiment does not apply to the individuals who work for the company. During my participant observation, I noticed a number of cast members who had to remove their ear gauges while at work, leaving droopy and concaved ear lobes in their stead. Others sported clear piercing retainers and/or scars from where piercings had been taken out and subsequently closed over for the sake of playing their part in Disney’s show. Noticeably absent from the cast member population were any hair colors that branch outside of “natural” (e.g. blonde, brown, black, or red), nor were there any elaborate nail colors and/or styles (e.g. neon, black, bright nail polish or long, acrylic, or bedazzled manicures). Continuing with the aforementioned theme of gendered experiences and workplace discrimination based on gender, the majority of appearance requirements are geared towards women and more feminine trends. The lack of freedom regarding cast member appearance was a topic that a number of participants in this study took issue with, particularly female participants.

For example, Penelope recalled that she was required to dye a streak of blonde that she added to her natural hair back to its original color due to Disney’s expectations of its cast members to fulfill the roles that company has assigned them. Rather than abandoning her creative freedom, Penelope styled her hair for work in a manner that rendered her blonde piece

unnoticeable so that she could keep this symbolic streak of self-expression (Interview with Penelope, September 2019). Penelope was not the only one who felt inhibited by the “Disney Look,” however; Lola stated that she struggled with the inability to choose her own nail color and often felt frustrated because of Disney’s hyper-focus on which shades of the same color were considered appropriate versus inappropriate (Interview with Lola, September 2019). Moreover, Ellie, a former ride attendant in Magic Kingdom, touched on Disney’s stipulations regarding tattoos. Because of a tattoo on her forearm, Ellie reported that she was required to wear long sleeves underneath her regular uniform shirt in the sweltering Florida heat to hide her tattoo (Interview with Ellie, December 2018). The stigmatization of tattoos in the professional sector is not unique to Disney but requiring cast members to cover their bodies with long sleeves and/or pants for the sake of not breaking character in Disney’s unending performance, regardless of the weather conditions, puts the physical health of its employees at risk. In this way, the “Disney Look” is not only detrimental mentally and emotionally, but physically as well.

## 2. Behavior-based Performativity

In addition to Disney’s appearance requirements of its cast members, the company has extensive, and sometimes exhaustive, attitude and behavioral requirements of its cast members as part of their roles within the larger Disney performance. Known for their overt cheeriness and devoted subservience to guests, cast members are held to an extremely high standard by the Walt Disney Company and the guests who use it for touristic consumption. Regardless of the specific role that they are assigned, an exorbitant amount of pressure is applied to cast members to make Disney the happiest place on earth and create magic for its tens of thousands of daily visitors. When discussing the typical persona of a Disney cast member, Lola stated that “people think of Disney and they think of the happiest place on earth and where dreams come true, so if their dreams

aren't coming true and they aren't happy, they expect Disney to make them happy" (Interview with Lola, September 2019).

In order to maintain this visage, many cast members use cheeriness, positivity, and resourcefulness to inspire happiness within guests. For some individuals who work for Disney, this is not necessarily a performance; a number of cast members I observed in the parks appeared authentic in their enthusiasm. For example, a balloon salesman on Mainstreet USA in Magic Kingdom told me during an informal conversation that he always has fun at work because he gets to make people happy. In another instance, I noticed a cast member passionately singing along with the music from a parade that had just gone by. When I asked if she ever gets tired of the music, she replied by saying "No! You either gotta own it or it's gonna..." and then trailed off, as if something were keeping her from being honest about how hearing the same song several times every day actually makes cast members feel. During an informal conversation with guests in the waiting line for Splash Mountain, a young couple reported that roughly 95% of cast members in Magic Kingdom were authentically pleasant and a key component in making Disney a "stress-free environment." Not unlike the actors in a performance, this research has revealed that Disney cast members work tirelessly under stressful conditions in order to provide its audience with a stress-free environment where they can abandon their own problems for a little while.

Although the famous Disney persona that cast members portray comes naturally for some, filling these shoes requires more of a performance for others. Amethyst described the typical attitude of a cast member as "overdramatically... pixie dust and Disney" (Interview with Amethyst, June 2019). This statement was corroborated by my own personal experiences with employees of Magic Kingdom and Disney Springs, the majority of whom always told me to



“have a magical day” in sing-song voices whilst beaming at me. Positivity and helpfulness are standard components of any customer service position but being the physical embodiment of pixie dust is a role that not all people are born to play. Not unlike learning lines and practicing facial expressions and blocking, stereotypical cast member behavior can be learned and practiced with time. This is not a process that is free of emotional or mental strain, however; cast members like Amethyst and Charlotte indicated that their positions forced them to break free of their more timid shells in order to play their assigned parts in the manner that was expected of them (Interview with Amethyst, June 2019; Interview with Charlotte, August 2019). Farrah, a “fairy godmother” makeover artist in the Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique, alluded to the performativity aspect of her position and the strain that it can cause by clarifying that her job often requires her to enthusiastically interact with the children whom she makes over whilst telling them stories and/or calming them down if they are not thrilled about their experience, but this performative aspect of her position is something that she struggles with on a day-to-day basis (Interview with Farrah, May 2019). Similar to Farrah is a Cedar, a former park entrance attendant at Magic Kingdom, who reported that he felt drained by the performative expectations of being a cast member. According to Cedar, working for Disney required him to put on an exhaustive persona as part of Disney’s “show” in order to make Disney as magical as the guests were expecting it to be. (Interview with Cedar, March 2019).

#### Performativity as Reinforced by Environmental Cues

To further compound the utilization of cast member colloquialisms as well as appearance and behavioral requirements of employment, Walt Disney World has put in place a number of environmental cues around its theme parks and Disney Springs in order to remind both cast

members and guests of the roles that they play within Disney's larger performance. Although often subtle, these understated allusions are visible throughout the parks for those who are aware of the fact that performativity is what drives Disney, not pixie dust. Examples include the use of "Cast Members Only" signs, placards, and entryways, euphemistic construction coverings used to conceal any sight of rubble and/or dust associated with the building of new park attractions, restaurants, and/or stores, as well as the implementation of status symbols like red carpets in areas with high guest volumes so as to reiterate their significance and notoriety while in Disney. Despite being relatively covert in nature, Disney has filled its tourist destinations with messages about who we are and who it wants us to be; we need only peer through the looking glass to find out.

Arguably one of the most prevalent signs of performativity within the theme parks, the term "cast members" permeates almost every aspect of working for and visiting Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida. While it has been analyzed in a linguistic and social context, the frequency with which the term appears visually throughout Disney should also be considered. In a typical workplace, areas that are off-limits to individuals who are not employed there are often designated as such. These areas are often labeled as what they are, such as a maintenance area or a supply closet, so as to keep out unauthorized individuals. Disney, however, has labeled almost every region of the parks that is prohibited for guests with signs that state "Cast Members Only." One such example can be found below:



Figure 1: Cast Members Only sign on custodial supply closet in Walt Disney World. Photo credit: Lea Harvey

Signs and placards such as the one pictured above are in abundance in Walt Disney World. They are often used to designate supply closets, break rooms, maintenance areas, stocking rooms, etc. While these areas serve very normal, unmagical purposes, marking them as accessible to cast members only while simultaneously withholding their true mundane purpose sprinkles a little pixie dust on everyday items, like mops and bleach. At the same time, these inscriptions remind

both guests and employees alike that the individuals employed by Disney have been cast in a performance, one that must maintain somewhat of an air of mystery and intrigue in order to protect paying customers from the fact that sometimes a mop is just a mop and not a magical entity.

On a more subliminal level, another environmental indicator utilized to perpetuate the façade of performativity within Disney is the underground tunnel system beneath Magic Kingdom. Unbeknownst by the majority of visitors, there exists an intricate system of tunnels beneath the bustling streets of Magic Kingdom that cast members are required to use in order to navigate the theme park. Aurora described the tunnel system utilized by Magic Kingdom cast members as an initially very intimidating and confusing travel system that emulates the feel of an underground subway station (Interview with Aurora, September 2019). Beneath the magical celebration occurring on the surface of Magic Kingdom, countless cast members employ the tunnel system to travel from the cast member park entrance to their job post without being noticed by guests. This system is put in place so that an in-costume employee of the Jungle Cruise, for example, is not spotted walking through Fantasyland by a guest. Operating under this logic, seeing a cast member in their territory-specific uniform in a region of the park that has a different uniform does not maintain the illusion of magic. Worded differently, cast members ruin the magic for guests unless they are at their assigned location doing the job that Disney hired them to do. As if the tunnel system's confusing and oppressive nature were not enough, utilizing them adds significant travel time to cast members' already lengthy journey in and out of Magic Kingdom. Cast members often have to arrive extra early and leave extra late to navigate the tunnels and clock in on time, all for the sake of keeping up performances.

On top of its use of “Cast Member Only” signs within its theme parks and Disney Springs to remind all people in the parks of their roles within its never-ending performance and its underground tunnel systems, Disney takes extensive measures to cover up any construction and associated rubble that is occurring in view of guests. Construction typically signifies growth and forward momentum, but the Walt Disney company goes to great lengths to conceal this development from view of its guests as part of its performativity initiative. As a global conglomerate, Disney is constantly adding new attractions, stores, restaurants, and other forms of entertainment to its theme parks and tourist destinations to further encapsulate its spectators. In order to hide any of the impurities associated with development as well as to prevent any of the pending magic from escaping before the final project is revealed to guests, large walls are constructed around the construction sites. These walls completely enclose whatever is being constructed and stretch well above the heads of even the tallest parkgoers to keep the magic in and the prying eyes out. They are often painted a pastel blue, pink, or purple so as to remain attractive to the eye, but appearance may vary dependent upon location. They are typically emblazoned with the moniker of “Dream Builders” followed by the phrase “Pardon our pixie dust!” Oftentimes, these barriers are adorned with inspirational quotes from Walt Disney himself about building and working with one’s hands. The act of covering up construction sites with the illusion of pixie dust and dreams being built perpetuates the cycle of performativity at Disney through environmental cues. The walls that are built to mask the processes occurring behind them serve as a reminder for guests that magic and dreams are continually being constructed within the confines of Walt Disney World. Moreover, even run-of-the-mill dust and rubble that are part of any regular construction site are assigned the role of “pixie dust” within Disney’s show. These environmental cues demonstrate for guests that construction at Disney is not

unattractive or an inconvenience, but rather a pending magical opportunity for your dreams to come true via the power of inspirational quotes and pixie dust. In reality, what lays behind these walls are further opportunities for guests to pay the literal price of magic and shell out more money at new shops, food and beverage stands, etc.

Aside from the subliminal messages throughout Walt Disney World aimed at reinforcing the performative aspects of being a cast member and the construction of “magic,” performative cues have been placed in the parks and resorts to remind guests of their elevated status and importance while they are on Disney property. As a result of these cues, guests are ascribed their own roles within Disney’s performance that will be further elaborated upon in the following section. According to Alice, guests of Disney have a heightened sense of “entitlement” that stems from their purchase of an elaborate vacation (Interview with Alice, February 2019). This is further extrapolated by Disney’s mantra of magic and happiness, which guests are reminded of by the signifiers that Disney has implicated in its parks, ultimately encouraging guests to behave in the ways that Disney expects of them as well. One such example that I noticed during my participant observation was the massive red carpet conveniently placed in the Guest Relations building in Magic Kingdom. According to a ride attendant in Magic Kingdom, Guest Relations is a department within the theme park where any guests with questions, concerns, or complaints can go to speak directly with a cast member (Informal conversation with Magic Kingdom cast member, April 2019). From my brief discussion with the aforementioned cast member, I ascertained that Guest Relations is a place where guests who are upset often go to voice their opinions. To verify this, I sat in the Guest Relations building on a red velvet cushioned bench for almost an hour and simply watched and listened to guests and cast members interact with one another. During my time there, I couldn’t help but notice the elaborate red carpet that ran

throughout the building where the guests stood and out the front door down the steps of the building where they first enter. It is a well-known fact that a red carpet is often utilized as a status symbol that only the most honorable and important of individuals may walk upon. That being said, it is not a coincidence that a red carpet is present in the designated location for guests to express their discontent to people who are of a lower social stratification than themselves at the time. The presence of this environmental signal confirms for guests their heightened sense of significance while subliminally reiterating that they too have their own parts to play within Disney's performance.

#### Performativity of Guests

While the performances, both literal and symbolic, of Disney cast members are at the helm of what makes Walt Disney World so magical, the people that the corporation employs are not the only ones who have a part to play; guests of Disney, and within the Orlando theme park tourism industry overall, interact with the concept of performativity as well. Whereas cast members experience it more directly through company regulations and expectations from guests/higher-ups, patrons of Disney World experience performativity as a direct result of Disney's mantra that guests should experience literal magic while they are in the self-proclaimed happiest place on Earth. Additionally, the pressures and competition of social media have transformed the act of going to Disney for entertainment and fun with friends and/or loved ones into an opportunity to take the most trendy and picturesque photos that prove for the rest of the internet just how much more magical one person's day at Disney was than another's. In essence, guests of Disney World have also been assigned roles within the Disney show, whether they realize it or not.

As previously stated, a number of social and environmental cues have been implemented throughout Walt Disney World that assigns guests parts within the very same performance that they have come to watch. Some of these signals include the aforementioned red carpets in Magic Kingdom's Guest Relations sector, the complete subservience of cast members to the needs and wants of guests, and Disney's overall mantra of being the happiest place on earth where all of your dreams will come true. These signals remind guests that not only do they have a part to play in Disney's performance, but they have the starring role. These expectations mandate the behavior of parkgoers, for they behave in whatever manner is likely to yield the most magic. Unfortunately, this often results in the suffering and maltreatment of cast members at the hands of guests.

With the advent of social media, a day at Disney World with loved ones has been converted into a competition over who can take the most aesthetically pleasing, stereotypically Disney pictures and post them to the Internet for the most "likes." Taking pictures at Disney has always been part of the Disney experience; the existence of cast members whose sole purpose is to take guests' photographs in front of Cinderella's Castle or with character actors is proof of this concept. However, internet influencer culture has pushed Disney attendees to adopt a more performative role that is based on capturing the best selfies or pictures of food and souvenirs rather than experiencing the most magic. This phenomenon was more than apparent during my participant observation thanks to the thousands of guests I witnessed trying to take pictures of their signature Disney snacks, such as Mickey pretzels and pineapple Dole whips, or their \$27.99 Minnie Mouse ear headbands against the backdrop of Cinderella's Castle. Despite my presence as a researcher who is fully aware of the notion of performativity and its impact on Disney, I often found myself participating in the trend of guest performativity as encouraged by social



media; below is a photo that I posted to one of my social media accounts following a long day of research at Magic Kingdom.



Figure 2: Photo with Rapunzel posted to my social media account. Photo credit: Lea Harvey

Even though I was well aware of the toxic nature of the performativity associated with being at Disney, I was still unable to resist the pressure to perform in the manner that was expected of me and document my Disney day in the form of social media posts that would be seen by others. This is demonstrative of the fact that although Disney cast members carry the brunt of the performative weight that it is created by Walt Disney World, guests of the theme parks also have their own performative roles to play in Disney's larger performance.

## Impacts of Performativity on Mental Health

Analysis of data regarding the performativity of Walt Disney World cast members has revealed that the performance requirements of employment at Disney does have impacts, both positive and negative, on the mental health experiences of cast members during their time with the company. While each individual's experiences were often impacted by their own identities and history with mental health, cast members are able to have both positive and negative mental health experiences in the short-term. For example, people like Charlotte and Amethyst who had experienced social anxiety prior to their employment at Disney reported that the stereotypical Disney cast member persona that they were required to don actually helped them to abandon some of their previous issues with socialization and break out of their shells (Interview with Charlotte, August 2019; Interview with Amethyst, June 2019).

While some individuals experienced positive mental health repercussions during their tenure as a Disney cast member, my participant observation and semi-structured interviews have exhibited that cast members are more likely to undergo negative mental health experiences as a direct result of the performativity associated with working for the mouse. The statement is exemplified by one of my informal conversations in Disney Springs with a Disney Vacation Club representative, who told me that although he loves his job, being constantly shut down by guests becomes mentally draining after a while. Another individual who felt mentally exhausted as a result of his Disney cast member persona was Cedar, who confided in me during our interview that "it is mentally draining at times... having to put a smile on your face and to go about your day even if you're not in the best mood" (Interview with Cedar, March 2019). The behavioral requirements of the performativity that comes with working at Disney World puts a mental and emotional strain on the people who work there due to their necessity of appearing

cheerful while onstage coupled with their requirement to leave their personal lives at the door and not allow whatever may be impacting them externally to impact their work. Cast members also suffer on a mental level due to the appearance-based performance that comes with the job. For example, Lola revealed during her interview that “every day when I went to work, I was putting on a mask... I was never myself. I was truly stepping onstage into a character” (Interview with Lola, September 2019). Based on my findings, the company’s mandates regarding appearance not only stifle the creativity and expression of the individuals it employs, but they have a direct negative effect on cast members’ mental health experiences due to their inability to be who they really are.

Although my research was intended to reveal how serving as a Disney cast member impacts one’s mental health experiences at the time of employment, my semi-structured interviews revealed that the show that Disney puts on has drastically impacted the mental health and wellbeing of numerous cast members in such a negative fashion that they are still engaged in Disney’s performativity despite having departed from the company several years ago. The body language and behavior that I observed during my semi-structured interviews are living proof of the lasting negative mental health repercussions that former cast members continue to experience to this day. For example, most interview participants noticeably lowered their voice when they said anything remotely incriminating about the corporation despite having been disaffiliated with the corporation for quite some time now. Sideways glances over their shoulders as they shared with me some of their darker experiences as a Disney cast member were indicative of the anxiety that has blossomed from engaging in the Disney performance. The tears that prickled some participants’ eyes during our discussions served as reflections into their distant yet all the more relevant past with Disney, a past that is colored with performative anxiety and exhaustion that

converted the passion and excitement that individuals like Rose, Alice, and Amethyst once had for being Disney cast members into sheer, unadulterated dread that often manifested itself in the form of crying before, during, and after their shifts (Interview with Rose, October 2018; Interview with Alice, February 2019; Interview with Amethyst, June 2019). Moreover, there were a number of current cast members who turned down my interview requests because they were afraid that what they might say during the interviews would get back to the company somehow. These truly heartbreaking reactions served as a clear indicator for me that the performativity that goes hand-in-hand with working at Disney World is utilized in order to further oppress and erase the individuality and personhood that cast members bring to the table at the beginning of their Disney careers. The performance-driven employment that many of the interview participants had to undergo during their time at Disney has induced a fear within these individuals that appears to transcend time and space. This begs the question of whether or not the price of magic is worth the benefits that putting on the mask of a Disney cast members entails.

## CHAPTER SIX: THE PRICE OF MAGIC

The price associated with a trip to Disney is not a secret; the number of matching t-shirts that had “#Broke” scrawled in the iconic Disney font above the Mickey Mouse ears insignia or the phrase “Most Expensive Day Ever” printed proudly across peoples’ chests in Magic Kingdom made it obvious that guests of Disney are not only aware of how much partaking in the festivities of Walt Disney World costs, but they are proud of it. Since its inception, Walt Disney World has steadily transformed itself into a financial giant whose influence reaches nearly every continent and corner of the globe. In the brief span of a few decades, Disney has managed to create and privatize its own neoliberal market in which the main exports are happiness, magic, and pixie dust. For the individuals who are able to reap the benefits of the theme parks and resorts in full, Disney has managed to put a literal price on magic. However, what of the individuals who make the magic happen? In other words, what is the price of magic for the cast members who create it?

Many tourism industries function as neoliberal markets in which tourists and tourism employees interact through the exchange of privatized goods and services. To reclarify the meaning of neoliberalism in this context, this term is utilized to signify “a set of economic reform policies... which are concerned with the deregulation of the economy, the liberalization of trade and industry, and the privatization of state-owned enterprises... with tremendous economic, social, and political implications” (Ganti 2014, 91 [Steger and Roy 2010, 14 and Boas and Gans-Morse 2009, 144]). In many tourism industries that fall under the guise of neoliberalism, the behavior, culture, and way of life of tourism employees becomes commodified as a result of their forced participation in a neoliberal market (Baptista 2012, Li et al. 2016, Mitchell 2011, Sandford 1987, Skoczen 2008). Although tourism laborers in destinations around the world are often required to sacrifice their cultural practices and ways of being for the sake of

earning a living, Disney cast members must also confront commodification in order to participate in the market of Orlando theme park tourism but in a different form. I argue here that rather than commodifying their own culture, Disney cast members are forced to commodify their individuality and personhood in order to make a living in Disney's neoliberal market. This process is driven by guests' desire to feel special in a sea of tens of thousands of other people who all want their own little taste of magic and are willing to pay whatever amount of money is necessary to achieve it. For most cast members, however, the cost that is associated with the creation and experience of magic is not financial; it is their own identity. As a result of their loss of identity while working for Disney, cast members often struggle to depart from the company and find an alternative source of income that is more sustainable. Therefore, I argue that working for the Walt Disney Company, and within the confines of the greater Orlando theme park tourism industry, forces Disney cast members into a societal slot of servitude that mirrors Trouillot's (2003) concept of the "savage slot," further perpetuating the vicious cycle of structural violence that continues to oppress tourism laborers.

### Making Magic into Money

In order to understand how Disney's neoliberal market strips its cast members of their agency and traps them in the "Disney Bubble," we must first have a firm understanding of how Disney's neoliberal market functions. As previously stated, Walt Disney World's main exports are magic, happiness, and pixie dust. As a result of the immense cost that typically comes along with a trip to Disney, most guests expect to be lavishly compensated with said pixie dust and the resulting memories of unadulterated happiness that will last them a lifetime. Even though the majority of attendees have paid similar amounts of money to enter the park, the majority of visitors expect to

be treated as if they are the most special person in the theme park on account of the amount of money that they have paid to be there. While some guests are satisfied by the standard experience that the average \$120 ticket buys them, others are left wanting more. Some individuals go so far as to attempt to purchase experiences within the park that are simply not for sale. According to a young woman with whom I had an informal conversation in Magic Kingdom, she had been lucky enough to walk hand-in-hand through the park with Winnie the Pooh after having her picture taken with the character. This is a rare occurrence and not an experience that is available for purchase, and yet other guests reportedly followed after them, asking the character attendant how much it costs to have that experience. Despite all that Walt Disney World and its theme parks have to offer, guests are often insatiable and unsatisfied by the endless attractions, shows, shops, and dining opportunities that are at the ready. Their desire to feel more special and experience more magic than other guests is not easily quelled, and it is one that requires sacrifice on behalf of Disney's cast members. Three methods by which Disney has attempted to quench the metaphorical (and often literal) thirst for magic is the creation of "magical moments" by cast members for specific guests as well as the existence of "extra magic hours" and special events that require the purchase of separate tickets. Although an array of factors contributes to the manufacturing of Disney's neoliberal market, the aforementioned processes by which cast members attempt to satisfy parkgoers' pension for pixie dust have had the most direct impacts on putting a price on magic as exhibited by my research.

One method by which cast members attempt to subdue guests' voracious appetites for magic is through the use of "magical moments." Giselle, a former cashier at one of Disney's many resorts, described magical moments as instances in which cast members can go above and beyond the call for guests who appear to be having a rough day or are in need of a pick-me-up

(Interview with Giselle, August 2019). Magical moments are employed at each cast member's discretion, but they are typically used when guests of the theme parks or resorts are unhappy and their problems can be solved with a quick fix. For instance, a cast member providing a child who lost their souvenir Mickey stuffed plush toy with a replacement or giving a guest a free Mickey pretzel would serve as magical moments. While there are limitations in the financial amount and frequency with which magical moments are created, these occurrences bring joy to guests and cast members alike; in fact, a number of the cast members that I interviewed relayed to me that creating magical moments for guests were some of the best memories that they have of their time at Disney. Although magical moments can come in the form of experiences, such as walking through Magic Kingdom with Winnie the Pooh, magical moments do often come with a calculable financial cost. This reiterates Disney's ability to have put a literal price on the magic for guests.

I am lucky enough to have experienced my own magical moments while in Disney, both prior to and during my research. While conducting participant observation at Magic Kingdom, my very own magical moment was delivered to me in the Guest Relations building. After observing guests with issues interact with cast members devoted to solving their problems, I decided that I wanted to have my own experience with a Guest Relations cast member. I stood in line on the ornate red carpet for about ten minutes before I was ushered towards an enthusiastic young female cast member behind a large wooden counter. In order to spark a conversation, I fabricated a false concern regarding my Fast Passes, the three free shortcuts for attraction lines that Disney provides to all guests. Despite the fact that I was docile and completely understanding of the company's policies regarding Fast Passes, the assisting cast member wanted to go above and beyond to correct my issue. After an enjoyable ten-minute conversation, she



disappeared behind a door marked “Cast Members Only.” Upon returning, she provided me with a voucher for three free bakery treats from any of Walt Disney World’s shops. In essence, I was provided with \$15 worth of food in order to diffuse a potential unhappy experience. On that particular day, my price of magic came in the form of two birthday cake scones and a giant Mickey-shaped cookie.

Another method by which Disney manages to monetize magic is through its option to purchase “extra magic hours.” Extra magic hours are an exclusive offer available only to individuals staying at Disney resorts and hotels and serve as incentive to book a stay at one of their several vacation options. Extra magic hours allow guests of Disney’s hotels to enter one of the theme parks (specific park dependent upon time of year) before the theme park’s official open time. This provides guests with an exclusive magical experience that allows them to interact with the park’s amenities before the arrival of the droves of other guests who only paid the standard \$120 entrance fee. Under the guise of providing guests with the ability to experience more magic than the standard guest, Disney further perpetuates its monetization of magic by encouraging guests to funnel more money into the company’s resort sector through the promise of extra magic.

Not unlike its extra magic hours, Disney also hosts a number of private events each year that require the purchase of an additional ticket in order to be part of the special show being put on. Examples of these events include Mickey’s Not-So-Scary Halloween Party, Mickey’s Very Merry Christmas Party, and Disney Villains After Hours. Taking place in Magic Kingdom, these annual events require special tickets that must be purchased separately from the regular park entrance fee. Once inside, guests can experience unique decorations, merchandise, food and beverage options, themed parades, and an overall change in ambience that only occur at these

events. Not unlike Disney's extra magic hours, these themed parties serve as opportunities for guests to experience more than the standard amount of magic and for Disney to turn a larger profit from peoples' desire to consume as much pixie dust as possible.

In hopes of gaining a better understanding of these events, I attended the Disney Villains After Hours even on August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Even though I am an Annual Passholder, I was required to pay \$110 in order to gain access to this special event. This was less expensive than tickets for non-Passholders, however, who had to pay \$140. Although we were allowed into Magic Kingdom as early as 7 P.M., regular guests did not have to evacuate the park until 9 P.M., at which point the festivities began. This particular event featured exclusive villain merchandise and themed foods and drinks as well as a villainous new stage show in front of Cinderella's Castle led by Hades from the Disney film *Hercules*. Below is a picture of Cinderella's Castle with a felonious twist, featuring Hades' Underworld throne onstage in front of it.



Figure 3: Cinderella's Castle during Disney Villains After Hours special event. Photo credit: Lea Harvey

Slight additions were made to the Pirates of the Caribbean ride as well as the Space Mountain rollercoaster to honor the night, while the general feel in the theme park was much darker and eerier. The event ended at 1 A.M. with Maleficent's fire-breathing dragon parade float barreling down Mainstreet USA. As we filed out of the park, we were seen off by classic Disney villains

like Lady Tremaine, Gaston, and even The Big Bad Wolf. While this was by no means an inexpensive affair, it was eye-opening to see how the more elite guests of Disney prefer to celebrate their devotion to the conglomerate. Regardless of the exorbitant entrance fee and equally high costs of the unique food and merchandising available for purchase at these events, guests are willing to pay the literal price of magic that Disney has set in order to feel a little more special and experience a little more of the trademark Disney magic that its fans so desperately crave.

One final example of Disney's monetization of magic is cast member wages. Despite the high market value of "magic," cast members earn a comparatively low income in order to create it. Regarding financial compensation, Lola reported that "it is impossible to live by yourself in Orlando and work as an hourly cast member at Disney... and you're getting paid to get yelled at" (Interview with Lola, September 2019). Lola was not the only participant of this study who took issue with the paychecks that cast members were taking home. Tyson and Penelope both indicated that their mental health suffered as a direct result of the unsubstantial revenue that being a Disney cast member accrues, ultimately contributing to their departure from the company. For example, Tyson stated that her mental health began to suffer because of her Disney employment when her job at Disney became her only job. This caused a significant amount of financial anxiety on account of the fact that she was not able to survive off of her Disney paycheck (Interview with Tyson, June 2019). When asked about her mental health experiences as a cast member, Penelope drew particular attention to the unsustainable wages afforded to Disney cast members and the impacts that they have on employees' wellbeing: "Your job is to make everyone else that pays this money to be there happy, but how do you do that knowing you can't pay your bills?" (Interview with Penelope, September 2019). The unjust

wages earned by Disney's employees is not a secret unbeknownst to them, and yet, many continue to be employed by the Walt Disney Company. I attribute this, in part, to the existence of the Disney Bubble.

### "I Was Just a Number to Disney"

While the price of magic for the average guest is associated with the entrance to Disney World and one or two souvenirs, the toll that cast members must pay for magic is much heftier. As a direct result of Disney's use of structural violence to subdue its cast members into performative roles that are mere semblances of their former selves, I argue that employment at Disney commodifies cast members' identities on the whole. In a similar vein to tourism industries that subdue their employees into putting a price on their cultural identities and practices, employment at Disney requires cast members to commodify their own individuality for the sake of making guests feel significant and earning barely enough money to get by. The erasure of cast members' personhood occurs for a number of reasons, but I believe that the two primary sources of this diminishment of cast members' identities stems from the overreaching number of individuals employed by the corporation in tandem with its performative requirements that erase any remaining uniqueness that cast members may have about themselves. The result is a sea of faceless, nameless, interchangeable employees whose sole purpose is to make guests feel like significant individuals despite the company's flagrant lack of regard for the individuality of the people who help it stay afloat.

Many participants in this study often spoke to their feelings of invisibility within the company. An astronomical number of people may be needed to run a company like Disney as smoothly as it does, but being surrounded by so many replaceable and unfamiliar coworkers who

are all vying for the same opportunities can lead to feelings of invisibility and hostility that can cause cast members' mental health to nosedive. One participant who struggled with this issue is Tyson. When asked why she ultimately terminated her employment at Disney, she stated that she was simply a number to Disney and did not feel as if her presence mattered to anyone in the company (Interview with Tyson, June 2019). Disney's mantra that all guests deserve their own unique Disney experience that makes their wishes come true does not appear to transfer over to its cast members. The erasure of Disney cast members' autonomy for the sake of creating magic for its guests is further extrapolated by the company's performative policies that limit its employees' ability to express themselves through behavior and appearance. Because of these two factors, cast members are forced to commodify their own individuality and existence as their own person in order to survive, not unlike tourism laborers in varying industries who must commodify their culture in order to make money in the neoliberal market that they have also been forced to participate in.

An additional participant who drew attention to Disney's sacrifice of its cast members' individuality for the sake of creating magic was Alice. When asked if she had any advice for people considering employment in Orlando theme park tourism, she had the following to say: "If you're someone that really wants to be treated fairly or wants to move up in the world or is outspoken in any sort of way with your opinions and thoughts that it may not go over well... if you're looking for freedom to be yourself, Disney is probably not the place" (Interview with Alice, February 2019). As indicated by this quotation, not only are cast members required to abandon their autonomy to be a cast member, but they must do so in exchange for maltreatment and insufficient opportunities for upward mobility.

## The Disney Bubble

To reiterate a sentiment that has been a guiding force throughout this study, Disney sits atop the hierarchy of Orlando theme park tourism. Being part of this cash cow endows its employees with a sense of status that lifts them over the heads of the employees of other Orlando theme parks because of Disney's social and infrastructural influence. Because of the "magic" that is often associated with being employed by Disney, cast members can become trapped in what is known as the "Disney Bubble." This term is taken to mean the unique league of its own within which Disney exists and cultivates its own culture, language, customs, etc. Participants indicated that it is all too easy to become ensnared in the standalone culture of Disney World, rendering some individuals incapable of leaving. Felicity, a merchandise employee at one of Disney's resorts, spoke to the existence of this bubble and the toll it takes on cast members' mental health and wellbeing: "The culture there is kind of like a bubble... so being trapped there definitely takes a negative effect on your mental health" (Interview with Felicity, September 2019). Although other participants did not mention it by name, they did hint at existence of the Disney Bubble. For example, Alice stated that her friends who have remained with the company often express their desire to find employment elsewhere but struggle to do so because Disney is all that they know. She referred to this process as being "entrenched in the culture" that operates within Walt Disney World. Alice further elaborated upon this by stating that

they don't know how to function outside of Disney anymore because Disney is its own beast. It operates so uniquely from so many other businesses that I've worked for that these people are, like, scared to leave because they don't know how to function professionally outside of a Disney workplace (Interview with Alice, February 2019).

Alice's quote not only highlights the existence of a culture that is unique to serving as a Disney cast member, but also the commodification of cast members' individuality and subsequent inability of cast members to piece back together the remnants of their personhood as a result of said culture.

The notion of the Disney Bubble was also touched on by Melinda, who conveyed that this concept was something that she had experienced firsthand during and immediately after her exit from the company. Melinda, the former character actor, went so far as to say that she experienced "Disney Depression" after terminating her status as a cast member. According to Melinda, Disney Depression is the culmination of feelings of extreme sadness and loss of a sense of self/purpose after quitting Disney. She stated that the sense of purpose that she felt while serving as a cast member had suddenly evaporated once she left the company. This notion of Disney Depression, bouts of deep sorrow relating to feelings of a lost sense of purpose and identity after departing from Disney, are indicative of an overarching theme that hangs over Disney like a dark thunderhead: employment at Disney not only robs cast members of a sense of who they are, but it restricts them to a slot of servitude that convinces these individuals that a Disney cast member is all that they will ever be.

### The Servant Slot

A term first coined by Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2003), the "savage slot" is a designated social stratification reserved for peoples, typically indigenous groups and/or disenfranchised populations, who often serve as research topics for primarily white, Western anthropologists. Despite their existence as autonomous, free-thinking individuals, these people continue to suffer



at the hands of “othering,” which often typecasts them into the societal role of the savage. While not the same, I have drawn parallels between Trouillot’s notion of the servant slot and my own research to create a concept that I believe plays a definitive role in the realm of Orlando’s theme park tourism industry, more specifically within the borders of Walt Disney World: the servant slot.

I define the servant slot as a social stratification that has been crafted specifically for tourism laborers. Rather than being confined to the role of a savage, employees of tourism industries around the world have become indentured to the individuals that they service as a result of the forced commodification of their cultures, ways of life, and in the case of Disney cast members, their identities. As demonstrated by the findings of this study, the servant slot is a prevalent part of life in Walt Disney World. Based on the stories shared with me by the participants of this study in tandem with prior research regarding the oppression of tourism employees, I argue that the systematic robbery of cast members’ individuality at the hands of performative expectations, guests’ desires, and structural violence utilized by Disney to subdue its cast members has locked many Disney employees into a role of servitude that they are nearly incapable of escaping. Their inability to evade this social slot stems from their loss of a sense of self coupled with their reliance on their own commodification in exchange for insufficient financial compensation. This slot of servitude acts as an extension of the Disney Bubble; the unique culture of working at Disney traps its cast members inside of its own world, but the infrastructural, occupational, social, and neoliberal requirements of serving as a Disney cast member are what place these individuals in the servant slot that is nearly impossible to escape due to their lack of identity and individuality, ultimately rendering them incapable of finding employment elsewhere. To make matters worse, the high expectations that Disney has regarding

the amount of time cast members must devote to their jobs leaves them with minimal time and resources to seek employment elsewhere, burying them deeper within the Disney Bubble (Interview with Alice, February 2019). However, this societal slot is not sealed in cement; I genuinely believe that a number of actions can be taken by Disney and its cast members to burst the bubble and seal over the slot.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSIONS, SIGNIFICANCE, AND THE FUTURE**

In a final analysis, this research has demonstrated that there does exist a relationship between the Orlando theme park tourism industry and the mental health experiences of the people that it employs. Priority was given to Walt Disney World, specifically Magic Kingdom and Disney Springs, on account of its holistic representation of Orlando and its high volume of annual visitors from around the world. Through the utilization of participant observation, semi-structured interviews of current and former cast members, and informal conversations with guests and cast members in my field sites, I was able to uncover the fact that not only does working at Disney impact the mental health experiences of its cast members, but it does so in a manner that is primarily negative. Although elements such as a history of mental illness and factors within individuals' personal lives did influence the nature of their experiences while employed there, many participants indicated that they experienced high amounts of stress, anxiety, and depression as a direct result of their status as a Disney cast member. The main contributors to the decline of participants' mental health during their time at Disney were poor management, unrealistic expectations that required them to overexert themselves, entitled guests, and lack of sufficient financial compensation. This information was then utilized to argue that theme park tourism in Orlando is a form of structural violence that employs performativity in a neoliberal market to further oppress and marginalize its employees into a vicious cycle of subservience that is almost harder to escape than to be part of.

Although over half of the participants in this study reported that their mental health experiences as a Disney cast member were negative, this is not to say that Walt Disney World and the greater realm of Orlando theme park tourism have not made strides that should be

applauded. Despite the overwhelmingly detrimental experiences of several of this study's participants while at Disney, many others indicate that there were positive repercussions of working for the mouse; a number of individuals stated that playing the part of a happy person and having to smile all day long helped them to become happier people in a "fake it til you make it" fashion. Others alluded to the fact that the job requirement of being social and interacting with as many guests as possible helped them to shed some of their social anxieties and come out of their shell. Additionally, Disney does have free counseling service in place for cast members as part of their Employee Assistance Program. While it is both underutilized and undermarketed, its mere existence represents Disney's attempt to provide a modicum of emotional and mental support for the people that it employs. For many of the participants in this study, the negative aspects of working for Disney outweigh the positives, but the fact that there are positives should be recognized.

### Suggestions for the Future

This research has shined a light on the failures and victories of Disney World as part of Orlando theme park tourism, but it has also revealed potential solutions that could help pop the Disney Bubble and improve the mental health experiences of its cast members. Some of the main issues experienced by the participants in this study were negative guest interactions, lack of individuality and expression, and a deficiency in infrastructural support from the company itself. While these problems will not be solved overnight, there are a number of solutions that can be employed to get the ball rolling in regard to the eradication of the servant slot. Some suggestions include better advertising of Disney's counseling services, more freedom afforded to cast members in terms of self-expression and appearance, in-depth leadership training that covers the

various types of workplace discrimination and how to combat it, and an abandonment of Disney's toxic rhetoric that it is the happiest place on earth. These are not quick fixes that the company can employ immediately; they will take time and effort on behalf of the company, its cast members, and its guests. However, the work is well worth it if it means that all people in Orlando, not just its tourists, can experience some of the happiness that it is so renowned for.

### Significance and Contributions

As previously stated, the available anthropological discourse on both tourism and mental health continues to expand on a daily basis. More and more anthropologists are beginning to analyze the various facets of tourism and its effects on those who choose to partake in it, as well as its impacts on the cultures and environments of the individuals who facilitate it, the residents and locals who are often forced to offer up their rituals and ways of life as souvenirs. At the same time, the subfield of psychological anthropology has gained exponential popularity in the past century, making the study of mental illness and disorder one of its primary research topics. Despite the leaps and bounds in research that have occurred in both areas, the field of anthropology has largely failed to realize the connection that exists between the two. This research project is significant, not only to anthropology, but to the fields of tourism and psychology as well, because it has demonstrated the overlap that exists between the tourism industry and mental health. Furthermore, it has drawn attention to the perspective of a crucial group of people who are also directly affected, both positively and negatively, by touristic endeavors but seldom listened to: the laborers within the tourism industry.

This study is significant to anthropology in that it considers two popular topics within anthropological literature, tourism and mental health, from the perspective of people who are

both employees and locals in regions that are governed by tourism. Although much anthropological literature has devoted itself to the study of how tourist practices influence the lives of people who participate in it, not nearly enough consideration has been given to the perspective of the very people who make the tourism industry continue to grow and expand. Moreover, what little devotion of anthropological research has been given to the study of tourism from the point of view of residents and workers examines strictly the physical and sociocultural ways in which these individuals are impacted by tourism and tourists. Seemingly absent from this discussion is the further examination of the ways in which the mental health of those employed by the tourism industry is affected by their occupations. Therefore, this study is significant to anthropology on account of its analysis of the ways in which the mental health of employees of theme park tourism in Orlando, Florida is directly influenced by their roles within the tourism industry. This anthropological study demonstrates the relationship between tourism and mental health, a link that most anthropologists have failed to recognize until now. Because of this study's reliance on theories and concepts from various disciplines, its findings are also significant to the fields of tourism/hospitality and psychology. The findings of this project have presented information pertinent to the study of tourism from the viewpoint of its employees, demonstrating how tourism as a whole can be improved for the individuals who keep it up and running. In a similar vein, it has revealed information relevant to the psychological study of tourism and the manner in which psychology and mental health are changed as a result of tourism and vice versa.

In addition to its abilities to provide new insight into the realms of anthropology, tourism, and psychology, this project has highlighted both injustices and victories that exist within the regime of theme park tourism in Orlando. The results procured from participant observation and

informal conversations in Magic Kingdom and Disney Springs in addition to the semi-structured interviews with current/former employees of Walt Disney World have revealed how the mental health of current/former Disney employees has been affected by their time at Disney. Their responses have shed light on the health benefits and policies that exist for employees of Orlando tourism institutions as well as any subsequent changes and improvements that must be made. It is my sincerest of hopes that this research will be analyzed and put into effect in order to better the lives of the people who makes the lives of others better: the tourism laborers.

## **APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER**





UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

**Institutional Review Board**  
FWA00000351  
IRB00001138  
Office of Research  
12201 Research Parkway  
Orlando, FL 32826-3246

EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

April 8, 2019

Dear Lea Harvey:

On 4/8/2019, the IRB determined the following submission to be human subjects research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review:	Initial Study, Category 2(iii)
Title:	Trouble in Paradise: Impacts of Theme Park Tourism on the Mental Health of Employees in Orlando, Florida
Investigator:	Lea Harvey
IRB ID:	STUDY00000277
Funding:	Name: University of Central Florida Foundation, Grant Office ID: Department of Anthropology Internal Funding, Funding Source ID: n/a
Grant ID:	Department of Anthropology Internal Funding;

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made, and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request so that IRB records will be accurate.

If you have any questions, please contact the UCF IRB at 407-823-2901 or [irb@ucf.edu](mailto:irb@ucf.edu). Please include your project title and IRB number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

Renea Carver  
Designated Reviewer

**APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED  
INTERVIEWS OF CURRENT/FORMER DISNEY CAST MEMBERS**

1. When/for how long did you work for Disney?
2. What position did you hold at Disney?
3. Could you describe what a typical day on the job was like for you?
4. What were your interactions with tourists/guests like?
5. Do you have any significant memories/experiences from your time as a theme park employee?
6. Was there anything that you enjoyed about your job?
7. Was there anything that you did not enjoy about your job?
8. Have you experienced any mental health issues/mental illnesses prior to your employment?
9. Would you say that your employment in the theme park tourism industry impacted your mental health/wellbeing?
  - a. If so, how?
10. Did you ever take advantage of Disney's counseling services? Why or why not?
11. Would you say that your employer was accommodating in the event of illness or absence from work?
12. What are your thoughts on the Disney Labor Unions?
13. What advice would you have for someone who was considering employment at a theme park in Orlando, Florida?

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