

A Wish Stays With You

Hannah Doucet

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Abstract

This paper is written to accompany my MFA thesis exhibition, *A Wish Stays With You*. The show will be presented at the Special Projects Gallery at York University in Toronto and will include video works, photographs, and sculptures. This exhibition addresses the personal, political, theoretical, and aesthetic questions that have emerged through my research into the themes of illness, fantasy, and wish fulfillment. The work stems from my own experience receiving a wish trip to Disney World when I was ten after having just finished two years of treatment for Lymphoblastic Lymphoma.

My thesis research represents a ‘pulling back of the curtain’ on the long-standing relationship between the charitable organizations devoted to wishes and the corporate media giant Disney that spins tales of realized dreams. The work weaves together explorations of memory, fairy tales, art, architecture, corporate philanthropy, commerce, advertising, performance, death, illness, disability, and toxic positivity. My thesis satirizes, reflects on, and theorizes around aesthetic seduction at Disney and Give Kids the World Village (GKTWV), linking the worlds of healthcare, Disney, and wish-granting together for their joint pronouncement on the importance and necessity of happiness. Through my critical theorizing of this early-life wish experience, I interrupt the toxic stories I observe within the dual worlds of Disney and wish-granting, inserting nuance and complexity within otherwise purely positive narratives.

Key words: visual art, photography, video, sculpture, performance, autotheory, Disney World, Give Kids the World Village, wish fulfillment, fantasy, fairy tales, corporate philanthropy, commerce, advertising, cancer, illness, disability, toxic positivity

Land Acknowledgment

This project exists between three geographical locations; Kissimmee (Florida), Winnipeg (Manitoba), and Toronto (Ontario). These are the places where I have lived, travelled, researched, conceptualized and created this project. I want to start this paper by acknowledging these important places as Indigenous lands that I interact with as a settler of Polish, French-Acadian and British descent. Land acknowledgments are fraught, often considered hollow or performative gestures. As a settler artist, I still believe it is important to begin my paper by thinking through the Indigenous contexts of the land and pushing myself to consider my role in the ongoing colonial project of Canada.

My story starts with Winnipeg, so my land acknowledgment will as well. Winnipeg is on Treaty 1 territory, the traditional territory of Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, and Dene Peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation.¹ This complex, grimy, beautiful city is so important to me. Winnipeg is where I was born, became sick, got treatment, recovered, grew up, went to art school, and started developing this project. Winnipeg is home to many incredible Indigenous artists, writers, and thinkers I have learned so much from. I am so grateful to have been raised on these prairie lands. However, with this gratefulness, I recognize a responsibility to not be silent and complicit in the ongoing injustices against Indigenous peoples, locally and across so-called Canada.

1. "English Department Land Acknowledgment." The University of Winnipeg. The University of Winnipeg. Accessed May 5, 2021. <https://www.uwinnipeg.ca/english/english-department-land-acknowledgment.html>.

Walt Disney World and Give Kids the World Village are seminal locations in this project. They are around Kissimmee (just outside of Orlando), in central Florida, which are “the traditional Homelands and territories of the Seminole, as well as other historical groups including the Calusa and Tocobaga.”² This relationship remains entirely unacknowledged in the parks and corporation, with any reference to Indigenous peoples being largely racist and reductive. In the context of Disney World, it is particularly essential to think of the stolen Indigenous lands that have been put towards Walt Disney’s capitalist fantasy and world-building project. Disney reaps immense profit based on their private ownership of the land Disney World was built on.

I am newer to Tkaronto/ Toronto and still have a lot more learning to do about the Indigenous history and contemporary context of these lands. But I gratefully acknowledge that I currently live, work and create on the traditional territory of many nations, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishinaabek, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples.³

With these land acknowledgments, I wish to honour the Indigenous contexts of these lands, express the deep gratitude for the relationship I have with these places, and continue to push further to learn, understand and complicate my implications within the colonial project of Canada. While my thesis project is not explicitly addressing land or decolonial politics, in many

2. “Diversity and Inclusion.” University of South Florida. Department of Anthropology. Accessed May 1, 2021. <https://www.usf.edu/arts-sciences/departments/anthropology/diversity-and-inclusion/land-acknowledgment-statement.aspx>.

3. “Land Acknowledgement.” Art Gallery of York University, August 28, 2020. <https://agy.uart/land-acknowledgement/>.

ways, everything comes back to the land. It is my hope that my work engages with anti-capitalist dialogues to push towards a future where the land, plants, animals and humans are respected and cared for more than for-profit companies that cause immense damage globally.

Community Acknowledgment

My favourite part of being an artist is being in a community with other creative people. I rely so much on a reciprocal community of support to feel excited and inspired in my creative work. The pandemic's looming presence throughout my MFA program has been difficult for the isolation it has brought to my artmaking experience. However, it has further emphasized the importance and love I feel to my entire community, who have inspired me to persist on this project.

First, I want to gratefully acknowledge my collaborators on the primary video work within my thesis exhibition: Kaja Irwin for her cheerful presence (via zoom), patience and incredible choreography, Matt Schellenberg for his amazing talents and the creation of the accompanying score for my video work, Margarita Brighton for her fantastic videography and patiently helping me get in and out of my mascot costume. Finally, Toby Gillies for zooming with me to problem solve with Premiere Pro.

Thank you to my many friends, colleagues and professors who had studio visits with me which inspired and encouraged me to explore different avenues and push deeper within my work. In particular, my friends Rachael Thorleifson, Sophie Sabet, Hannah Bullock and Luther Konadu. To my sister, Emily Doucet, for patiently reading many drafts of my thesis, teaching me more

about writing in an academic context and providing insightful advice on moving forward with my text.

Thank you to my partner Mick for accompanying me on my research trip to Disney World and being my biggest support during the creation of this project. My amazing family who cared for me and supported me through my cancer treatment as a child, accompanied me on my wish trip to Disney World and continue to be glowing supporters in my life and art. Mom, Dad, Emily (again), Jacob, Olivia and Maia. I love you all so much.

I want to thank the wish kids and siblings I interviewed as a concept-building tool for this project for generously sharing your experiences with me.

To my committee, Nina Levitt, Allyson Mitchell, and Robyn Cumming thank you for your help and support throughout this year. I am thankful to have had such a powerful team of feminist artists and thinkers leading me this year. Your feedback has helped me deepen my engagement with the subject, pushed me to explore new writers, think about art-making differently, and strive to be more confident in my work. Thank you.

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“I would rather write nothing at all than propagandize for the world as is”

-Anne Boyer in *The Undying: Pain, Vulnerability, Mortality, Medicine, Art, Time, Dreams, Data, Exhaustion, Cancer, and Care*

1. Introduction

This paper is written to accompany my MFA thesis exhibition, *A Wish Stays With You*. The show will be presented at the Special Projects Gallery at York University in Toronto and will include video works, photographs, and sculptures. This exhibition addresses the personal, political, theoretical, and aesthetic questions that have emerged through my research into the themes of illness, fantasy, and wish fulfillment. The work stems from my own experience receiving a wish trip to Disney World when I was ten after having just finished two years of treatment for Lymphoblastic Lymphoma.

My thesis research represents a ‘pulling back of the curtain’ on the long-standing relationship between the charitable organizations devoted to wishes and the corporate media giant Disney that spins tales of realized dreams. The work weaves together explorations of memory, fairy tales, art, architecture, corporate philanthropy, commerce, advertising, performance, death, illness, disability, and toxic positivity. My thesis satirizes, reflects on, and theorizes around aesthetic seduction at Disney and Give Kids the World Village (GKTWV), linking the worlds of healthcare, Disney, and wish-granting together for their joint pronouncement on the importance and necessity of happiness. Through my critical theorizing of this early-life wish experience, I interrupt the toxic stories I observe within the dual worlds of Disney and wish-granting, inserting nuance and complexity within otherwise purely positive narratives.

My thesis exhibition's center point is a video titled *Watch in Awe*, featuring a sun mascot who welcomes an imagined audience, hyping them up for a performance. Then the mascot, alongside two backup dancers, performs a group dance to peppy and dramatic Disney-like music. This video satirizes and appropriates aesthetic tropes of Disney and acts as seductive welcoming into the Disney and wish-granting worlds that are explored within the exhibition. Positioned in front of the projected video is a soft sculpture of an enlarged quick-release pill capsule. The viewer is invited to sit on this comfortable sculpture as they are brought into this world of seductive positivity. To the right of the video, along an entire wall, is a long shimmering blue curtain (deep and bright blue-screen blue). This blue evokes a non-place yet suggests content just beyond your fingertips. Behind the curtain are three videos playing on monitors, one of a silent singing performance, and another of endless repetitive waving by the sun mascot character, a third of the sun endlessly bowing. These videos are presented alongside printed and mounted photographs. The mounted photographs are images I took at Disney World and Give Kids the World Village. This collection of images and videos are eclectically installed atop four large-scale vinyl photo prints of constructed fantasy spaces. In the middle of the space is a sculptural piece, a wire retail display bin filled with pill stuffed toys, with large smiles. The exhibition is installed with the curtain dividing the gallery into two distinct spaces that will incite different affective and intellectual experiences.

The following thesis paper will explore the artwork in this exhibition in relation to my life experiences and research. I will begin the paper by addressing autotheory as a driving methodology within my work. From there, my paper takes a similar chronology to my life experience, using my own Disney wish as a starting point, alongside an introduction of the non-

profit resort Give Kids the World Village. I then provide historical contextualization of wish-granting agencies, and a discussion of the forty-year partnership between Make-A-Wish and Disney. I will analyze the political histories that have contributed to a growth in corporate philanthropy and cause-related marketing. This is followed by my physical revisiting of Disney World and GKTWV in 2019, including conversations around death, disability, illness in relation to these fantasy spaces. Section nine discusses performativity in the Disney parks, and examines mascot as well as the work featured in my thesis exhibition. Finally, I address the trope of toxic positivity and how it appears in my own life and the narrative of my cancer experience. The paper ends with an reflection on the process of developing this thesis work and considers future directions of the project.

2. Autotheory as Methodology

This section delves into autotheory as an essential methodology in the conceptualization, research, and creation of my thesis project. Lauren Fournier's research within the field of autotheory helps ground a contextualization of my work as a contemporary feminist method of creation.

Both my visual and written thesis employ an autotheoretical methodology. Lauren Fournier's book *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* examines the emerging term/form/method of autotheory in the overlapping fields of writing and art.⁴ It is necessary to spend extended time with auto theoretical works to address the complexities that are held within

4. Fournier, Lauren. *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*. Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T. Press, 2021.

this term. However, as starting point, Fournier defines autotheory as: “a term that describes a self-conscious way of engaging with theory - as a discourse, frame, or mode of thinking and practice - alongside lived experience in subjective embodiment, something very much in the zeitgeist of cultural production today - especially in feminist, queer, and BIPOC - Black, Indigenous, and people of color - spaces that live on the edges of art and academia.”⁵ As a young feminist artist, I have often felt shame or embarrassment for creating from my own experience. I have questioned whether it is cheesy or indulgent, fearing if I draw too much from my own life that I will one day soon run out of material from which to create (as if life does not go on, creating new experiences). Instead, autotheory provides a rich feminist framework and methodology from which "theorizing from first person" is essential and a rich place from which to practice.⁶ With the potential risk of narcissism looming, autotheory positions theorizing from personal experience as a way to expand beyond one's embodiment to create a web of relationships, as Fournier states: "The singular can be a gateway to the multiple."⁷ The expansive nature of autotheory resonates within my thesis project and methodologies. In my thesis, I begin with my own childhood experience with cancer and resulting wish trip to Disney World. The "wish" was a starting point from which to theorize, connect to dialogues of other feminist artists and writers, and engage deeply, critically, and expansively within the cultural, aesthetic, corporate, and political histories that are entangled within this experience.

5. Fournier, 7.

6. Fournier, 8.

7. Fournier, 276.

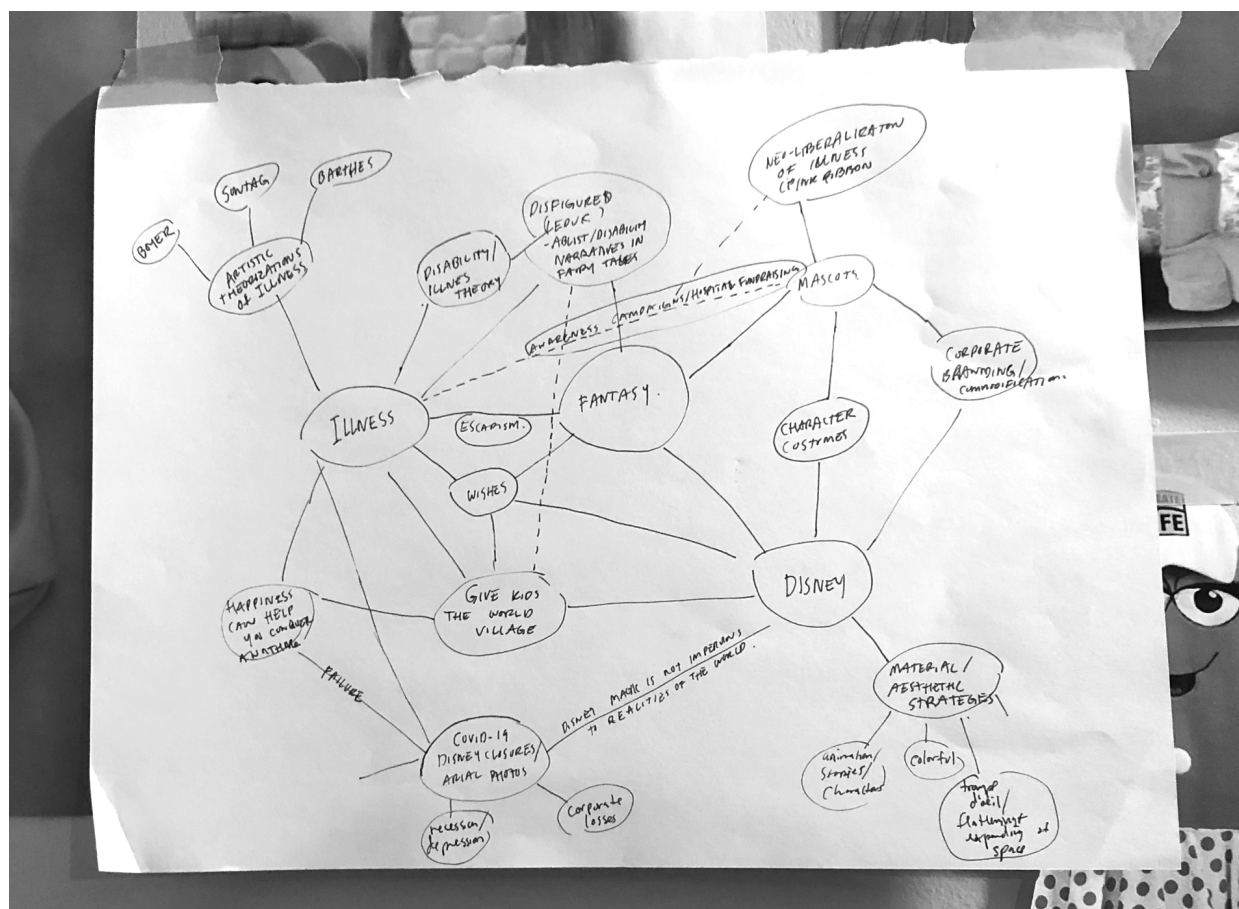


Figure 1: I often draw mind maps to work through ideas. I have many of these from the past two years. Spring 2020.

In 2019 I returned to GKTWV and Disney World on a research trip. A starting point for what would become my thesis project, a multi-year research-creation project, which "juxtapos[es] research with critical reflection" and creation.⁸ As I created this work, I looked at visual culture created by Disney and wish-granting agencies, I looked at old family photographs from my wish tip, I looked at my research images from 2019, and I read and read and read. Fournier writes: "The writer's memory of their lived experience is one material among others, like the theory and artworks and literary texts they reference."⁹ Similarly, my project is not purely an articulation of

8. Fournier, 7.

9. Fournier, 15.

memory, but memory is an essential material that makes up a larger and more expansive whole. I am better equipped to understand and critically engage with my embodiment through referencing theory and other pieces of writing. Theory, life, and practice work in tandem and enrich one another.¹⁰

In an earlier text on autotheory *Sick Women, Sad Girls, and Selfie Theory: Autotheory as Contemporary Feminist Practice*, Fournier writes that contemporary feminist artists and writers "use autotheory to make visible and then theorize experiences of illness, disease, pain, trauma, and grief—either personal or experienced by others—and to connect these experiences to political, social, and structural issues of concern to feminists."¹¹ While I have read many powerful auto theoretical accounts about experiences of breast cancer, including Audre Lorde's *Cancer Journals*, Anne Boyer's *The Undying: Pain, Vulnerability, Mortality, Medicine, Art, Time, Dreams, Data, Exhaustion, Cancer and Care*, Barbara Ehrenreich's "Welcome to Cancerland", and Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor*, I have yet to find a text that interrogates expansive, structural and political themes about childhood cancer. I guess children don't write autotheory. Childhood cancer is widespread, its causes are often inexplicable, and prognoses often terminal, while also a prominent philanthropic cause, making it a subject ripe for exploration and critical inquiry. The tragedy of sick children makes it seem untouchable for social critique as if the critique is directed towards the sick children. In fact, my research investigates the structures and systems that shape the experience of childhood illness. In an anecdote highlighting precisely this tension, Alison Kaufer, a researcher in gender, sexuality, and

10. Fournier, 101.

11. Lauren Fournier, "Sick Women, Sad Girls, and Selfie Theory: Autotheory as Contemporary Feminist Practice," *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies: Lives Outside the Lines: Gender and Genre* 33.3 (2018): 643–662.

disability studies, was asked by her student, "what kind of person says bad things about a billboard praising a little girl with cancer?"¹² Throughout this work, I have felt similar anxiety: *what kind of person* criticizes the fulfillment of sick children's greatest wishes? Perhaps having been a literal cancer poster child myself, I am aptly positioned for these inquiries.

3. My Wish & Give Kids The World Village

When I was ten, I wished to visit Disney World.

I was first told about the idea of "my wish" when I stayed overnight on CK5, a unit of The Children's Hospital of Winnipeg. A nurse told me that I could wish for whatever I wanted, and an organization would make it come true because I was sick. This idea absorbed and entranced me. Millions of possibilities flashed before my eyes. I can remember the moment she told me about making a wish, but I cannot remember how I settled on wishing to visit Disney.

There are many reasons I made this wish, yet none so tangible as to point my finger at. I don't think I yearned for Disney World but growing up in the 90s and early 2000s, Disney and Disney World were undoubtedly in the zeitgeist. Although I did not grow up with a television, I watched Disney movies at my friends' homes which perhaps made them even more entrancing. I wasn't particularly enamored with the princess aesthetic, and my parents didn't even encourage the Disney wish. However, I did love musicals, and still do. So there was a definite affinity with Disney in that sense. I would sit in my backyard and sing songs by myself. I dreamed of being in

12. Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 94.

a musical one day. My ninth birthday party was "over the rainbow" themed, inspired by my love of the Wizard of Oz (not Disney, but it still seems on-brand).

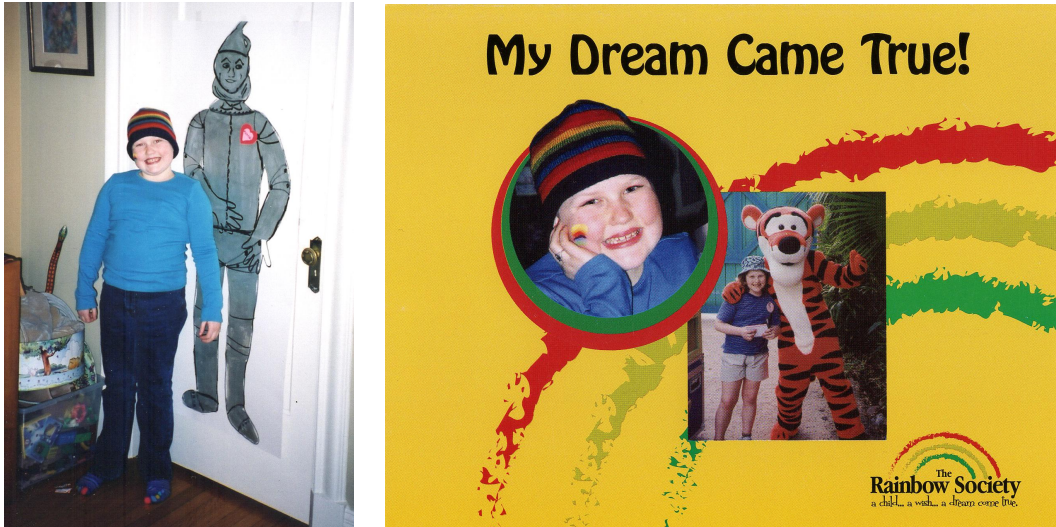


Figure 2 (left): Celebrating my ninth birthday with an "Over the Rainbow" Wizard of Oz themed birthday.
Figure 3 (right): An image from that birthday party used as a branding tool for a local wish-granting agency

Each year at least 13,000 critically ill children visit Disney World or another central Florida theme park as their wish.¹³ In 1986 Give Kids The World Village (GKTWV), a 31-acre non-profit resort opened. They accommodate critically ill children and their families wishing to visit Disney World, and were created in response to the ongoing popularity of the Disney wish.¹⁴ GKTWV hosts sick children and their families while they visit the theme parks. Since 1986, they have hosted more than 176,000 families.¹⁵ Since its founding GKTWV has expanded to be an 89-acre "whimsical storybook resort," which includes "166 villa accommodations, unique entertainment attractions, whimsical venues, and fun activities for children of all abilities."¹⁶

13. "F.A.Q. |," Give Kids The World Village, accessed February 1, 2021, <https://www.gktw.org/about/faq.php>.

14. Give Kids The World Village, "F.A.Q."

15. "Top-Rated Charity |," Give Kids The World Village, accessed April 1, 2021, <https://www.gktw.org/>.

16. "About Us: Give Kids The World Village: Top-Rated Charity |," Give Kids The World Village, accessed February 1, 2021, <https://www.gktw.org/about/>.

In 2003 a Winnipeg wish-granting agency called The Rainbow Society (now called The Dream Factory), fulfilled my wish. I was coming out of two years of chemotherapy and treatment for Lymphoblastic Lymphoma. My family of seven traveled to Disney World and Give Kids the World Village for my wish trip. We were picked up from our house in Winnipeg by a stretch limo and driven to the airport. When we arrived in Orlando, someone was waiting at the airport with a rainbow sign with my name. We were driven to GKTWV and brought to our villa. They gave us a camcorder and invited us to videotape our trip, which was later sent to us as a VHS tape. My 12-year-old brother took on the role of videographer. Unfortunately, the footage is so shaky that it is nauseating to watch.



Figure 4: Me and my 4 siblings at Give Kids the World Village for my Disney wish trip, 2003.

Visiting GKTWV was exciting. We stayed in our own brightly colored villa, where snacks and gifts were dropped off every day. We ate unlimited amounts in a dining hall that looked like a life-size gingerbread house. I ate enormous amounts of bacon and drank lots of pink lemonade. There was a free ice cream parlor—the novelty of which did not wear off throughout our week-

long visit. A movie theatre screened movies nightly, complete with a popcorn machine. There was also an arcade with games, a carousel, and a train that traveled around the whole village, a splash pad and a pool. There were nightly themed parties, one of which brought animators from Disney who drew kids' favorite characters. Christmas was celebrated every week at GKTWV: they made fake snow that slowly fell while Santa Claus visited families, and each kid got a present. We were given free tickets to all the Disney parks, including the water parks, and to Universal Studios. The village had its own mascot, a bunny named Mayor Clayton. He and his bunny wife made regular appearances throughout the week. The trip was amazing. My wish was very memorable. My exact feelings around the trip are fuzzy and distanced through memory, but I remember that it was a joyful experience.

It was not until years later that I started to think more about why I, and so many other children wish to visit Disney. This question is at the heart of my research.

4. Wish Granting Agencies

In many countries, children diagnosed with a critical illness are eligible to make a wish through various wish-granting agencies. Within this section I discuss the concept behind wish granting agencies, the history of the most well-known organization, Make-A-Wish's founding, and the proliferation of this model of non-profit around the world.

Wishes made with wish granting agencies are "official" wishes, a wish within a philanthropic industry that guarantees fulfillment. I'm fascinated by the language, thought and act of wishing,

which is then realized by staff at these agencies. In this context, wish-fulfillment is transformed into something tangible, executable, and aligned with corporate structures. The connection between critical illness and wish fulfillment is complex as if the illness has taken the place of the ritualistic wish object, the wishbone, the wishing well, the wish chip, the shooting star—the child wishes on their illness. Only those unlucky enough are eligible for this unique wish-making experience. The structure of wish-granting agencies deems sick children as deserving, worthy, and in need of a wish. Wish granting agencies propose that sick children NEED their wishes to come true to imagine a world where anything is possible: a world where triumphing over illness is possible. In an article entitled “The Cold Comfort of the Make-A-Wish Foundation” a former Make-A-Wish intern, A.K. Pradhan addresses their own criticality of the organization. They suggest that while it is indeed the children who receive a wish, the corporatization of granting wishes does more to soothe public anxiety about childhood illness:

The Make-A-Wish Foundation has become a treasured cultural institution that attempts to soften the shocking, inexplicable tragedy of childhood illness. At its best, the foundation's mission is a caring attempt to create meaningful experiences for a child with a grave illness. But what it ultimately offers is inevitably lacking compensation for the suffering of the children it purports to help. The "magic" of Make-A-Wish vanishes when you witness, as I did, the regulated, mechanized wish-granting process and its inability to reckon with the complexities of childhood illness. Make-A-Wish needs to be recognized for what it is: a misguided, but immensely satisfying coping mechanism for the general public.¹⁷

In a sense, the wish originates not from the child but from the agency. Through the benevolence of delivering the wish to the sick child, society is relieved of its guilt over the tragedy of children being critically ill. The public-facing narrative of childhood illness is transformed from tragedy to a celebration of playfulness and magic in the face of adversity.

17. A.K. Pradhan, "The Cold Comfort of the Make-a-Wish Foundation," *The Outline* (The Outline, December 12, 2018), <https://theoutline.com/post/6782/the-cold-comfort-of-the-make-a-wish-foundation?zd=1&zi=ihscrwi5>.

The origin of the current wish-granting agencies can be traced back, by the Make-A-Wish agency itself, to a singular moment. A 7-year-old boy with Leukemia wished to become a police officer in Phoenix, Arizona, in 1980.¹⁸ Christopher was nearing the end of his life, and it was his dream to become a police officer.¹⁹ Wishing to become a police officer could be perceived as a stereotypical choice for a young boy in the 80s. Perhaps his choice was an unconscious response to his illness. Did he feel weak? Did he think being a police officer would make him strong? Did he see the image of the police officer as the definitive good guy? A close family friend, Thomas Aitken, and his peers in the U.S. Customs office and local police department came together on April 29, 1980, to make Christopher's wish come true.²⁰ Christopher flew in a police helicopter and rode on a motorcycle for the highway patrol.²¹ U.S. Customs officers, local police, and Department of Public Service staff collaborated to make this wish possible. It was this group that went on to found Make-a-Wish America.²²

A 2015 promotional video commemorates this first wish.²³ The video was clearly intended to pull on heartstrings for the occasion of Make-A-Wish's 35th anniversary. It depicts the founding moment; the video features a group of entirely white (mainly male) founders, police officers, and border control agents. In the current moment, my view of this sincerely illustrated founding story is framed by large-scale organizing and calls for defunding and abolishing the police. I think about the 2020 police killing of George Floyd and the resulting global uprisings against anti-

18. "Our Story," makeawish.ca, accessed February 20, 2021, <https://makeawish.ca/about-us/our-story>.

19. Make-A-Wish, "Our Story."

20. Make-A-Wish, "Our Story."

21. Make-A-Wish, "Our Story."

22. Make-A-Wish, "Our Story."

23. The True Story of the Wish That Created A Global Movement. Make-A-Wish America, October 29, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uFzqF0b8Q94&t=1s&ab_channel=Make-A-WishAmerica.

Black racism, and closer to home, the police murders of many young Indigenous people in my home city of Winnipeg.²⁴ These government agencies perpetuate structural, systemic, and individual harm against Black, Indigenous, and P.O.C. individuals. I also think of the institutional violence perpetuated by the U.S. Customs & Border Patrol, specifically their ongoing separation of young Central and South American children from their parents. It was individuals employed in these carceral, colonial systems that birthed the organization Make-A-Wish America. It may seem wrong to question the kindness of this individual gesture for a dying boy, but this contextualization of the origin of the wish granting model is essential. It makes me think about who is deemed worthy of support in our society, of helping make their wildest wishes come true, and who is not. Some kids are put in cages, while others are asked what their greatest wish in the world is. Sick kids fall into the category of unquestionably deserving, sympathetic victims, but who is left out of this narrow vision of those deserving of wish fulfillment?

After Christopher's wish, Make-A-Wish was founded by his mother, Linda Pauling, and officer Frank Shankwitz.²⁵ Their mission was to "create life-changing wishes for children with critical illnesses."²⁶ Interestingly, they use the word "create" and not "fulfill." Make-A-Wish creates wishes. Their website goes on to write: "Wishes are more than just a nice thing. And they are far more than gifts, or singular events in time. Wishes impact everyone involved—wish kids, volunteers, donors, sponsors, medical professionals and communities. For wish kids, just the act

24. This article (<https://www.vice.com/en/article/n7jazz/winnipeg-police-killed-three-indigenous-people-in-10-days>) highlights the police murders of three young Indigenous people, that were in my mind as I wrote this. Their names are Eishia Hudson, Jason Collins and Stewart Kevin Andrews. "Winnipeg Police Cause Harm" (<https://winnipegpolicecauseharm.org/>) is also an important resource to look to in order to learn more about police violence in Winnipeg, they are a group of community-centered police abolitionists.

25. Make-A-Wish America, "The True Story of the Wish That Created A Global Movement."

26. "Our Mission." Make-A-Wish America. Accessed March 10, 2021. <https://wish.org/mission>.

of making their wish come true can give them the courage to comply with their medical treatments. Parents might finally feel like they can be optimistic...”²⁷ Make-a-Wish positions what they do as expanding far beyond the singular "wish moment.". Their mandate seems an apparent response to a more skeptical take of the organization, such as that detailed by the Make-A-Wish intern. If I consider this mandate in relation to my own experience, going to Disney World did not encourage me to go along with my treatment plan. It did not make me feel particularly courageous, or at least more than was already necessary. The wish was genuinely wonderful and could be seen as a week of respite. However, going to Disney World did not cure me.

Since the founding of Make-A-Wish in 1980, wish-granting agencies have proliferated around the world.²⁸ Make-A-Wish is only one of many wish-granting agencies that exist. There are many different wish-granting agencies across America and Canada. There are foundations for critically ill children, chronically ill, seriously ill, physically challenged, disabled and abused children. Some organizations consider the family income of the prospective wish kid and some that only consider children with chronic conditions or disabilities. There are even some that serve adult populations. Eligibility and requirements range from organization to organization. The largest and most well-known wish-granting agency remains Make-A-Wish, with local chapters in every American state and Make-A-Wish International with chapters in over fifty countries around the world, including most European nations, Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific Islands, Mexico, Panama, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Peru, Colombia, India, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, Shanghai, Singapore, Taiwan, Israel, Pakistan, Turkey, and the United

27. Make-A-Wish America, “Our Mission.”

28. "History," Make-A-Wish, accessed March 15, 2021, <https://www.worldwish.org/history/>.

Arab Emirates.²⁹ In Canada, there is one national office, eight local chapters, and five outreach offices.³⁰ Notably, Africa is the one continent where Make-A-Wish International has no local offices.

After its founding in 1980, the first official Make-a-Wish wish kid was seven-year-old Frank "Bopsy" Salazar, who made three wishes, which were all fulfilled: to be a fireman for a day, to ride in a hot air balloon, and to visit Disneyland.³¹ This first Disneyland wish started an ongoing relationship between Make-a-Wish and Disney—which continues today. In Canada and the U.S., half of all eligible children wish to visit Disney World.³² There is a definite peculiarity in this almost universal desire by sick children to visit Disney World. There is a connection between the popularity of this Disney wish and the prevalence of themes of magic, fantasy and wish fulfillment in the stories and world of Disney itself.

Of all the agencies, Make-A-Wish has the most publicly documented and long-lasting relationship with Disney. In the next section I will delve further into this long-standing affiliation.

5. Make-A-Wish x Disney

29. "Around the World," Make-A-Wish, accessed February 13, 2021, <https://www.worldwish.org/around-the-world/>.

30. Make-A-Wish, "Around the World."

31. Megan Griffo, "The Story Of Make-A-Wish's First Wish Kid Will Stay With You Forever," HuffPost Canada (HuffPost Canada, December 7, 2017), <https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/bopsy-fireman-make-a-wish>

32. Give Kids The World Village, "F.A.Q."

In this section, I look at the forty-year partnership between Make-A-Wish and Disney. I consider Amanda Leduc's theorization around disability tropes in Disney films and the implications of these biases when looking at the popularity of the Disney wish amongst sick and disabled children.

In 2020 Make-A-Wish and Disney celebrated 40 years of partnership "providing magic to wish kids and their families when they need it most."³³ In 40 years, Disney has helped Make-A-Wish grant over 140, 000 wishes.³⁴ They have been involved with Make-A-Wish since the first official wish. On the Make-A-Wish sponsorship page, Disney is listed as a "Mission Champion," donating more than \$5 million in cash donations and \$11 million annually, including in-kind donations.³⁵

The language and mission of fantasy and wish fulfillment ties these organizations' mandates. At the very heart of the Disney brand is the idea of wish fulfillment, an ethos present in the animated films that are also advertisements for the parks themselves. Disney World slogans proclaim: "where dreams come true," "let the memories begin," "where once upon a time happens every day." Disney World makes real what only existed in imaginations and fantastical films. The act of wishing to visit Disney World, this site of built and enacted fantasy, thematically supports the folkloric and fairytale origins of the very concept of making and

33. "Celebrating 40 Years of Life-Changing Wishes: Disney and Make-A-Wish," Disney Helps Grant Wishes Around the World (Make-A-Wish), accessed March 5, 2021, <https://wish.org/disney>

34. Make-A-Wish, "Celebrating 40 Years of Life-Changing Wishes: Disney and Make-A-Wish."

35. "Corporate Sponsors," Make-A-Wish America (Make-A-Wish), accessed February 10, 2021, <https://wish.org/corporate-sponsors>.

granting wishes. This shared space forms a natural partnership between charitable organizations devoted to wishes and Disney.

Considering that so many sick children wish to visit Disney World, I think it is important to think about Disney stories themselves. These are the stories that inform the entire ethos of the Disney empire, including the theme parks. What do these stories teach us at a young age? For this exploration I rely heavily on the elucidating book *Disfigured: On Fairy Tales, Disability, and Making Space* by Amanda Leduc.³⁶ Leduc writes through the lens of her own life as a disabled woman and young girl to engage with narratives of disability in fairytales. The ideas in one chapter of her book focus on Disney and were very impactful on my own research. The entire Disney empire is built on retelling and repackaging classic fairy tales for a North American audience. Leduc highlights the "Disneyfication" of fairy tales, which began with Disney's first full length animated feature film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937, which was adapted from the original by the Brothers Grimm.³⁷ The "Disneyfication" of traditional fairy tales continues today.³⁸ These retellings take well-known and more obscure fairy tales and repackage them with happier endings, glossing over more grotesque, alarming, or controversial elements of the original tales.³⁹ The results are easily consumable, sanitized, optimistic, and moralistic stories. Disney narratives are stories of transformation - do this, and it will all be okay.⁴⁰ This replicates the very basis of the American Dream, if you work hard enough you will be rewarded, a pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps-type mentality that in late-stage capitalism has been proven

36. Leduc, Amanda. *Disfigured: on Fairy Tales, Disability, and Making Space*. Longueuil, QC: Point-par-Point Inc., 2020.

37. Leduc, 85.

38. Leduc, 85.

39. Leduc, 10.

40. Leduc, 38.

to be a myth. When applying these tales of transformation to real life experiences of illness: you can try as hard as you can, do all the right things, and at the end of the day still be sick. In Disney stories, society does not require change. Through hard work, kindness, and tenacity, it is the individual who will succeed and transform into an able-bodied princess.⁴¹ Leduc writes that "[i]n fairy tales, the transformation of the individual relies on fairies and magic - or the gods- because it is understood that society can't (and indeed won't) improve."⁴² This individualistic perspective mirrors much of capitalism's failings, and connects back to the very individual-focused mandate of the wish granting model itself.

In Disney fairy tales, the prevalence of magic often helps a singular "disenfranchised" character, serving "to reinforce the class and societal structures already in place."⁴³ This individualized approach to change can also be applied to philanthropic and charitable practices. The charity relies on an individual making an active choice of generosity rather than on systemic change or collective responsibility.⁴⁴ It relies on wealthy individuals and corporations, who are positioned to help through financial support based on their profiting within capitalism. The charity model of disability "depicts disabled and ill people as victims of circumstance who are deserving of pity."⁴⁵ A link can be made between fairy tales and the charity model of disability within the Make-A-Wish organization and other like-minded wish granting agencies. These organizations

41. Leduc, 41. Leduc connects this focus on individual transformation to a perpetuation of the regressive medical model of disability. In the medical model of disability, disability is regarded as a defect, something to be fixed. This way of thinking places the source of the problem intrinsically within the individual— focusing on individual medical solutions. Alternatives to this model are the social model, which focuses on social and physical barriers that prevent a disabled person from engaging actively in society, and “complex embodiment” which draws from both the social and the medical model.

42. Leduc, 42.

43. Leduc, 45.

44. Leduc, 56.

45. Leduc, 55.

co-opt a fairy godmother-like approach to provide a child with a singular wish, ignoring more significant structural inequities that a child might face, or more direct ways to combat the existence of the illness such as subsidizing treatments or investing in research. Although, as observed in the plethora of breast cancer charities raising money for research, corporate philanthropic charities with exorbitant administrative costs investing in medical research are not necessarily the most advisable solution either.⁴⁶

The structure of the corporate charity provides a specific context and framework within which wishes can be articulated. A child may wish for anything, but in reality, it has to be achievable. Examples almost all revolve around material acquisition, celebrity meetups, and elaborate trips. While wish granting agencies function with a fairy godmother-like mentality, they do not perform magic because, of course, wishes are limited to achievable outcomes. It is interesting to note that children are not allowed to wish for money to pay their parents' rent or buy a car for their family to drive to the hospital. There are strict limitations to the practical application of a wish even if a family is in need of essential financial support. For charities such as this it is not as alluring to pay for basic and necessary expenses. Instead, nonprofits and the public alike are drawn to more performative and awe-inspiring acts of financial generosity, ones that yield attractive photo-ops.

I return once again to the former Make-A-Wish America intern writing about their complicated feelings towards the organization. I picture them as my imaginary co-conspirator in questioning the benevolent good of wish-granting agencies. They explain the mechanized process of wish-

46. Samantha King, *Pink Ribbons, Inc.: Breast Cancer and the Politics of Philanthropy* (Minneapolis, MN: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2008).

granting from within, describing how "one child [they] helped interview wished for a piece of milk chocolate — while others strike a more somber note, like the child who wished to never go to the hospital again. Both of them ended up taking all-inclusive trips to Disney World."⁴⁷ One child wishes for something so small and modest. In contrast, another child wishes for something all-encompassing and magical—to not visit hospitals, in effect to no longer be ill—the conclusion for both these expressed desires is a visit to Disney World. Internally, for wish-granting agencies, Disney is an easily achievable wish. There is a mechanized structure in place to make this wish a reality. Perhaps so many kids wish to visit Disney almost entirely because they are swayed in that direction by the internal mechanisms of the agencies themselves. If I take Make-A-Wish and their enduring relationship with Disney as any indication. It's possible wish-granting agencies would not exist without financial funding from Disney and the prevalence of the Disney wish.

What does Disney gain from this partnership?

6. Philanthropy & Corporate Marketing

This section addresses Reagan era neoliberal policies enacted in the U.S.A. and their resulting corporate, philanthropic, and commercial implications both in America and globally. Samantha King's research around "the politics of philanthropy" is applied to the many wish-granting agencies that began to proliferate in the early '80s and onwards.⁴⁸

47. "The Cold Comfort of the Make-a-Wish Foundation," A.K. Pradhan.

48. King, 4.

Most wish granting agencies started in the United States around the same time in the early 80s, while similar agencies worldwide came a few years later (the Children's Wish Foundation did not start in Canada till 1984). Each wish-granting agency has an individual story about the founding of their organization, often tied to a very personal and moving experience of losing a young family member or friend. However, I am interested in looking at the burgeoning model of wish granting charities through a systemic lens - investigating what prompted this sudden devotion to wish fulfillment and push in charitable actions on a larger scale.

In 1981 Ronald Reagan's Republican administration created the Task Force on Private Sector Initiatives "to encourage private sector activity in social programs, and increase non-governmental sources of support for nonprofits."⁴⁹ This plan heralded volunteerism and corporate giving as a more, in the words of Reagan, "humane, compassionate, and effective social system."⁵⁰ Samantha King's book *Pink Ribbons, Inc.: Breast Cancer and the Politics of Philanthropy* explores the connection between Reagan era policies and the rise of American philanthropy. Neoliberal policies enacted by Reagan's administration saw large-scale cuts to public welfare, accompanied "by reducing corporate taxes and increasing limits on charitable deductions for corporations by 5 %."⁵¹ This saw the budget of nonprofits dwindle. Effectively, these changes forced nonprofits to look for aid in the corporate sector.⁵² Corporations saw a 300% increase in "requests for aid" from nonprofits, and in the short term, there was an influx in corporate contributions.⁵³ However, as King writes: "the increased level of corporate

49. King, 4.

50. King, 5.

51. King, 5. While King considers these "politics of philanthropy" within the American context these neoliberal policies have spread around the globe, and can be widely applied to Canada in a contemporary context as well.

52. King, 5.

53. King, 5.

contributions facilitated by Reagan's tax cuts and incentives (which fell short of the estimated \$29 million needed to "bridge the gap") did not flow to those areas of provision—economic development, hunger relief, or job training, for instance—most affected by cuts in expenditure."⁵⁴ Instead, corporations used their decision-making power to give money to whatever causes they deemed as vogue, exciting and uncontroversial for their stakeholders. As this new push in strategic philanthropy emerged, corporations sought to align themselves with causes that would be mutually beneficial (both in terms of reputation and profitability), not necessarily those most in need. Wish granting agencies grew out of this era of public policy, enacted in a spirit of profound generosity and support for those "less privileged." Fulfilling the wishes of sick and perhaps dying children was deemed a perfect and worthy cause. A gesture that does not question the systemic context of the child and their experience of illness but provides a one-time band-aid fix for happiness, financed primarily by for-profit corporations, which benefit both in branding and through corporate tax breaks for charitable donations.

Cause-related marketing grew out of this era of strategic philanthropy in America in the mid-80s:

...companies and brands associate themselves with a cause as a means to build the reputation of a brand, increase profit, develop employee loyalty to the company, and add to their reputation as good corporate citizens. Unlike traditional charity promotions in which a brand or company simply donated money to a cause or sponsored a range or unrelated charity without a coherent strategy, cause-related marketing seeks to ensure that the brand and the cause share the same 'territory' in a 'living, altruistic partnership for mutual benefit'.⁵⁵

54. King, 5.

55. King, 9.

While King is writing specifically about the rise of breast cancer-related marketing in the U.S., this also contextualizes the ongoing relationship between Disney and wish-granting agencies, specifically Make-A-Wish. King writes that marketing professionals, first and foremost, see cause-related marketing as a strategy for selling products and increasing the value of a brand.⁵⁶ This strategy is not about philanthropy. It is "financially sound goodwill."⁵⁷ These strategies persist and proliferate to this day. Interestingly, Pamela Landwirth, C.E.O. of Give Kids the World Village, wrote a book on this very topic, *On Purpose: How Engagement Drives Success*.⁵⁸ Landwirth writes: "Employee engagement improves when workers feel their company is focused on more than just the bottom line."⁵⁹ However, she goes on to contradict herself by writing, "companies can improve their bottom line by joining forces with mission driven organizations."⁶⁰ Therein lies the paradox of corporate philanthropic generosity.

7. Cause-Related Marketing: Disney & Make-A-Wish Visual Culture

Now that we have a base knowledge of corporate philanthropy and cause-related marketing, this section addresses visual culture created as fundraising and advertising tools by the Disney & Make-A-Wish partnership and explores their affective and aesthetic potentials.

56. King, 11.

57. King, 11.

58. Pamela Landwirth, *On Purpose: How Engagement Drives Success* (U.S.A.: Pamela Landwirth, 2019).

59. Landwirth, 27.

60. Landwirth, 28.

In 2020 Disney created the *Wishes Come True Blue Color Collection* in honor of the 40th anniversary of their partnership with Make-A-Wish.⁶¹ Marketing a collection of Disney merchandise in Make-A-Wish blue, this was their first collection supporting a non-profit.⁶² The sale of these products "have unlocked a US \$ 500,000 from Disney to Make-A-Wish...feeling blue never looked so good".⁶³ Disney t-shirts, sweatshirts, travel mugs, backpacks, Disney face masks, and Mickey mouse ears—all blue. This collection also includes the first adjustable set of Mickey Mouse ears for "kids with all abilities."⁶⁴ With a portion of the funds being redirected to a charitable cause, this collection is the perfect example of cause-related marketing. The commodities being sold both financially and marketable benefit Disney as a corporation while also promoting their brand's reputation as a socially responsible organization. Instead of encouraging individual consumption to unlock a donation, Disney could donate money to Make-A-Wish directly. King writes, "consumers are yearning to connect to people and things that will give meaning to their lives."⁶⁵ Disney does just that by offering an appealing option: buy something for yourself and feel good about the purchase. Suggesting that an individual's consumption can make a positive impact on the world.

61. "Disney Celebrates 40 Years Supporting Make-A-Wish through Wishes Come True Blue Colour Collection, with a Portion of Proceeds Helping Grant Wishes across EMEA," The Walt Disney Company Europe, Middle East & Africa, October 22, 2020, <https://thewaltdisneycompany.eu/truebluwishes/>.

62. The Walt Disney Company Europe, Middle East & Africa, "Disney Celebrates 40 Years Supporting Make-A-Wish through Wishes Come True Blue Colour Collection, with a Portion of Proceeds Helping Grant Wishes across EMEA."

63. The Walt Disney Company Europe, Middle East & Africa, "Disney Celebrates 40 Years Supporting Make-A-Wish through Wishes Come True Blue Colour Collection, with a Portion of Proceeds Helping Grant Wishes across EMEA."

64. Mickey Mouse Adjustable Ear Headband – Wishes Come True Blue: ShopDisney," shopDisney.com, accessed April 7, 2021, <https://www.shopdisney.com/mickey-mouse-adjustable--ear-headband-wishes-come-true-blue-400925665450.html>.

65. King, 11.

Following the success of the *Blue Color Collection*, Disney released a limited-edition Mickey Mouse plush toy. Alongside the toy they released a short animation celebrating their 40 years with Make-A-Wish, which features the stuffed character.⁶⁶ Mickey Mouse is in perfect condition, except one of his ears is roughly sewn on with red thread. The sewn-on ear is an imperfection, deviating from the "normal" Mickey. When I first saw an image of this toy, I was struck by the incredibly clumsy oversimplification of illness and difference, especially since it was created to raise money for a charity for children with critical illnesses.

In a similar vein, The Children's Hospital Foundation of Manitoba holds an event each year called the Teddy Bear's picnic.⁶⁷ It is a free event in Assiniboine Park in Winnipeg, with lots of family-friendly activities. The most anticipated part of the picnic for my siblings and me was always the BASH tent (Bear Ambulatory Surgical Hospital). Here hospital staff volunteered to give stitches, cast broken limbs, do surgery, and bandage stuffed animals. Before coming to the park, we would frantically wound our stuffies to be ready for the surgical hospital. It is interesting to think about this event within the context of de-stigmatization of representations of illness. We eagerly sought out medical intervention for our teddy bears, even though it was entirely unnecessary. Illness is appealing for our teddy bears precisely because we could soothe and heal them. The reality of the illness in children's bodies is harsh and altogether unlike these simple and cute-ified representations within our stuffed animals.

66. Celebrate 40 Years of Disney and Make-A-Wish With New Short Film, YouTube (Disney Parks, 2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NeNHUrA34U&ab_channel=DisneyParks.

67. "The Secret To The Dr. Goodbear Clinic's Success." Children's Hospital Foundation of Manitoba. Accessed March 15, 2021. <https://goodbear.ca/read-our-stories/the-secret-to-the-dr-goodbear-clinics-success/>.

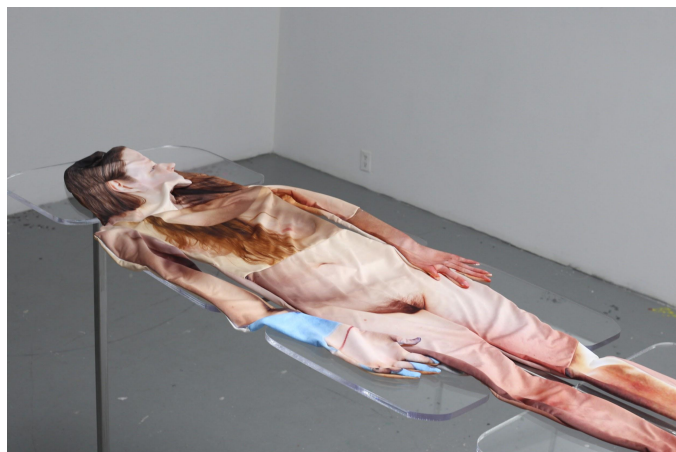


Figure 5 (left): Mickey Mouse Stuffie, screenshot from online Disney store

Figure 6 (right): *The Impossibility of Stitching a Body on a Scale of 1 to 1*, sewn fabric photographs, steel and acrylic, 2017

While going through treatment for Lymphoma, I had a recurring nightmare in which a doctor cut me up. He was trying to help me, supposedly. He attempted to put me back together, but he sutured my body into an unrecognizable form. In 2017 I made a fabric sculpture titled *The Impossibility of Stitching a Body on a Scale of 1 to 1* concerning these childhood anxieties. As a child, I was haunted by the idea of an authoritative figure suturing my body. In *The Impossibility of Stitching a Body on a Scale of 1 to 1*, I performed similar acts on a secondary, false body that existed through photographs. Both replicating the violence of this nightmare and negating it through performance, I wanted to reclaim agency within this cycle.

Mickey Mouse's stitched body reminds me of this earlier work. Both my piece and the healed Mickey contain suturing on a fabric body; the stitches and labor visible on the form's exterior. Although my work holds a more grotesque and strange relation to my physical body. Eight tiny stitches on Mickey's ear prompted these personal artistic and medical connections to my work, but that was not the intention of the toy.

Interestingly, the accompanying Disney animation told the story of a Mickey Mouse stuffed toy being passed down through three generations of a Filipina-American family.⁶⁸ As time passed, the toy became well-worn, and Mickey's ear was torn off. As a gesture of love to her grandmother, the granddaughter sews the ear back on and gifts her childhood toy back. What I read as an overt reference to suturing the body is a representation of love through generations. As sick kids, our bodies are often sewn together with lasting evidence of these painful but necessary incisions imprinted on our bodies. If the stitches had been meant to be a representation of illness, I would have been upset by the simplicity of the image, essentially, putting a band aid on a stuffy and claiming this represents the experiences of sick children. Yet the complete lack of a specified medical reference does not feel resolved for me. In general, we see a lack of representation of illness and disability in Disney movies, products, and media, and when we do, these representations are flat and perpetuate ableist stereotypes.

Make-A-Wish has effectively become part of Disney's exceptional advertising that paints a picture of themselves as the ultimate wish-fulfiller. If Disney is truly interested in the lives of sick and disabled children, they should also be turning inwards and examining their own implications in creating a world that is hostile towards ill and disabled bodies. As Leduc highlights in *Disfigured*, Ableism and negative depictions of disabled and disfigured characters is pervasive in Disney animated films.⁶⁹ All protagonists are depicted as the vision of "perfection": kind, beautiful and able-bodied, and primarily white.⁷⁰ To date, there are fourteen official Disney Princesses in the franchise, five are women of color.⁷¹ Leduc writes about how

68. Disney Parks, Celebrate 40 Years of Disney and Make-A-Wish With New Short Film.

69. Leduc, 99.

70. Leduc, 97.

71. "Disney Princess," Disney Princess, accessed May 26, 2021, <https://princess.disney.com/>.

Disney's fairy tale world is a place where disability and any deviation from an able-bodied norm become a shorthand for evil and distrustful characters: "The villains in Disney are sharp-edged and angled...To look at them is to know that they mean harm - to understand that the darkness of their hearts is made manifest in the way they move through the world."⁷² Scar of *Lion King* is named for his difference, Ursula of *Little Mermaid* is a fat woman, Captain Hook of *Peter Pan* is missing a hand. These examples of disability and difference in Disney use physical imperfection to declare these characters visually as villainous, implying that a character is evil. In her influential text *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag writes, "the disease itself becomes a metaphor, Then, in the name of the disease (that is, using it as metaphor), that horror is imposed on other things...feelings about evil are projected onto a disease. And the disease (so enriched with meaning) is projected onto the world."⁷³ These metaphors can be observed in popular uses of the language of illness to describe negative occurrences. I reluctantly admit that I bought a sticker from an art co-op at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic which declares "capitalism is the virus." While I agree with the anti-capitalist sentiment, I now realize that phrases such as this stigmatize illness, the sick, and chronically ill as less than or at a deficit.

The use of metaphor is also present as disability tropes in Disney animations. Leduc writes, "In this infrastructure, the fairy-tale princess cannot be in a wheelchair because to be in a wheelchair is to be weak. She cannot have a facial difference because to have a facial difference is to be at best an outcast, and at worst, evil", once you start to notice these tropes in the world around you, you start to see them everywhere.⁷⁴ These ideas are very deeply ingrained in our culture.

72. Leduc, 102

73. Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 58.

74. Leduc, 157.

Throughout her exploration of representations of disability in fairy tales, Leduc continually asks herself and the reader, "what might it be like if we tell a different story?"⁷⁵ Similarly, in her recent memoir *Sitting Pretty*, writer and educator Rebekah Taussig writes:

Disability can give us new stories for navigating an ever changing world. New stories like; *Maybe hard work has its limits. Maybe your efforts aren't the best barometer for predicting your successes. Maybe the state of your body isn't actually the ticket to happiness. Maybe when someone's difference scares you, that's the precise moment to lean in, shut up, and listen. Maybe true love can be tender and caring and steady. Maybe some shit just happens, and it's not for the greater good, but maybe you'll find a way to be okay anyway. Maybe there aren't happy endings....* We want to weave these stories into our collection, we want to consider disabled folks as worthy of their own, ordinary storylines, because without them, we are less robust, less flexible, and less equipped for the ride we're already on. So, yes, representation is nothing short of everything.⁷⁶

Tausig makes a crucial and poetic case for the importance of nuanced representation of disability within our media. Similar to Leduc, she demands better stories. While my thesis paper and exhibition are not creating these different stories. I see it as an intervention within these Disney stories—a moment to pause, to look critically at the narrative of the able-bodied magical happy ending—crafted by Disney, Make-A-Wish, and the healthcare sector. Disney rarely makes space for strong depictions of disabled, disfigured, different, or sick bodies. Yet, Disney World is continually the most popular for critically ill and disabled children. If Disney wants to closely align themselves with sick children, then the least they can do is provide nuanced and complex disabled and sick characters in their films. Sick children are not an advertising tool.

75. Leduc, 235.

76. Taussig, Rebekah. *Sitting Pretty: the View from My Ordinary Resilient Disabled Body*. S.l.: HarperOne, 2021, 101-102.

Some of the only normalized representations of illness and disability in Disney are used to advertise their partnership with Make-A-Wish. The establishing shot of the short video advertisement, *A Wish Stays With You*, begins with two teenagers looking out from behind curtains onto the stage of an empty theatre.⁷⁷ The young women grasp hands and walk onto the stage. They walk up to the microphone, and a bird flutters by. It flies upwards to reveal all of the Disney princesses staring down at the girls lovingly. The bird comes to rest on Snow White's fingers. One of the young girls looks up and smiles as the lyrics "when you wish upon a star" begins to play. A young couple walk down a sunny street pushing a stroller, behind them march Mickey and Minnie, the chipmunks, the princess. Oh! There is Captain Hook too. It is a parade of Disney characters. Mickey and Minnie hold hands in the background, in the foreground, the man takes the woman's hand. Right on, Mickey and Minnie, modelling the *perfect* heteronormative relationship! The man's name and the year of his wish trip to Disney comes onto the screen. It flashes back to the other scenes, with names and the year of their visits. The words "some wishes are so magical, they stay with you for a lifetime" appear on the screen to end the video.

77. *A Wish Stays With You* | *Disney & Make-A-Wish*, YouTube (Disney Parks , 2019), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLkwfrBk7Qc&ab_channel=TaborHill.



Figure 7: Film still from *A Wish Stays With You* | Disney & Make-A-Wish, 2020

The video fluidly weaves together Disney and Make-A-Wish, they become indistinguishable from one another. It makes visual the metaphorical intentions of wishes altering the direction of a child's life. The magical Disney energy follows these wish recipients in their lives as they grow older and stronger, helping them and encouraging them in their daily lives. While this video attempts to pull at the heartstrings with these touching scenes of support and strength, a more critical take is that the corporate characters of this large media conglomerate follow us wherever we go. In *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*, Henry Giroux writes that "Disney actively appeals to both conscientious parents and youthful fantasies as it works hard to transform every child into a lifetime consumer of Disney products and ideas."⁷⁸ In an age of brands tracking data and attempting to seduce consumers in ever more intrusive ways, I read these corporate mascot characters as lurking in the shadows of our daily lives, a more cynical

⁷⁸ Henry A. Giroux and Grace Pollock, *The Mouse That Roared Disney and the End of Innocence* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), xiv.

perspective on consumerist seduction in children's entertainment. Perhaps the pervasiveness of these characters is one of the reasons why so many kids think to wish and dream of Disney.

Thus far, I have analyzed the affective visual content that is marketed to convince the public of Disney's benevolence. In the next section I will explore my research trip to Give Kids the World Village in 2019, the complex physical space where the mandates of Disney and Make-A-Wish overlap.

8. Give Kids the World Village Research Trip

Within this section I explore my revisiting of Give Kids the World Village sixteen years after my initial wish trip. Through moments of observation and recollection, I think about the relationship between positivity, fantasy, happiness, illness and death that occur in this unique space.

GKTWV is a space where fantasy and illness coexist. This liminal space fascinates me. It is here that we see Disney's reverie of the able-bodied ideal confronted with the dimensionality, animation, and nuance of disabled and ill children. I have visited Give Kids the World Village twice. Once in 2003 and again in 2019. With funding from the Winnipeg Arts Council and Manitoba Arts Council, the second trip helped begin my research for this thesis. As an "alumni" of the village, I was allowed to return to visit for four days. This visit was my first time back in 16 years. I explored and photographed the site. I was struck by the uniqueness of a resort that exists solely for hosting sick kids. I began to think about how these spaces differ from those intended for the general public. In a community founded to provide space for sick children to

thrive beyond the limitations of their illness, does illness recede or come to the forefront? What does it mean to make space for sick children within Disney, a place that has continually perpetuated narratives that condemn different and disabled bodies?



Figure 8 and 9: Research Images at Give Kids the World Village, 2019

During my visit to GKTWV, I observed the playful and fantastical architecture and visuals of the space. The whole village had a "Candy Land" aesthetic stuck firmly in the 80s or 90s. The houses are brightly coloured, windmills spin on top of the villas, appearing to reference Dutch architectural styles. The village seems constructed to resemble a kid's dream, yet its bright over-the-top aesthetic is stuck in a nostalgic past. The imagery at GKTWV is playful and joyful yet feels dated. The structures are worn, teetering on the verge of breaking. The immersive fantastical scenes here lack the complexity of Disney. The character sculptures peppered throughout the resort occupy a space between two and three dimensionalities. Consider the airbrushed princess, her front and back printed and installed on flat metal sheets, cut and

sandwiched together. These works give the illusion of the character taking on real presence, assuming that we will ignore the metal structure of support, the clumsiness of these characters drew me in. The play between two and three dimensionalities is awkward, with its construction and artifice at once hidden and revealed. The inside of the characters is a dark grey—from certain angles, the backside appears as if a shadow is cast—mirroring the character's shape. When photographed, they are further abstracted, resembling collage cut-outs slapped into the environment. In this way, they fluctuate between object and image. The princess appears to be an off-brand imitation of Princess Frostine of Candyland, a princess amongst dollops of stiff whipped icing.⁷⁹ GKTWV is an immersive and playful space, but it pales compared to the expanded media environment that Disney World embodies.

Walking through the village, I was soon confronted with the ice cream parlour being torn apart—a jarring sight to witness that abruptly broke the nostalgia and sentimentality I had experienced in the rest of the village. The bulldozer tore down and scooped up the towers resembling banana splits and ice cream as if a messy toddler shoveling ice cream into a frenzied mouth. As I watched, I was brought back to my present body, walking through this space as a 26-year-old healthy, able-bodied woman. I wanted to cry but also wondered why the experience of watching this ice cream parlour being destroyed was so impactful, a place I had spent such a small amount of time in 16 years ago. This space is steeped in memories for me; everything I remember is mediated through the eyes of a 10-year-old. I was excited to experience it all through a different

79. “Queen Frostine.” Candy Land Wiki. Accessed May 3, 2021. https://candy-land.fandom.com/wiki/Queen_Frostine.

critical and adult lens, see what resonated as similar and what felt decidedly different. The destruction of this whimsical building I had been so excited to revisit felt devastating.



Figure 10 (left):: Family photo of the GKTWV ice cream parlor in 2003. They served unlimited ice cream for 12 hours a day for free. Figure 11 (right): My first day visiting GKTWV in 2019, they had just begun demolition on the ice cream parlor

As an adult at GKTWV, I noticed different things. I saw representations of disability everywhere (although primarily focused around depictions of wheelchairs), as well as the markers of accessibility, peppered throughout the village, such as the wheelchair-accessible swing. The snail on the merry-go-round built to fit a wheelchair user—my mind shifts to the insidious nature of this distinction. The disabled children are stuck with a snail or turtle, notoriously slow creatures. In contrast, other children get to ride on a zebra, lion, or unicorn. Even in a fantasy space, the disabled child is not granted the privilege of choosing what creature they identify with or whether they want the fantasy experience of mobile limbs.

Most strikingly, I notice the street names, each named after a child who has visited GKTWV and died, forming beautiful memorials for these children and their families. Once I was aware of the naming convention, it provided a somber tone as a visible acknowledgement of death within this joyous space. I witnessed the other alumni families, observing one from afar returning without their child that initially wished to visit. They were visibly overcome with emotion as soon as they entered the village. I vicariously experienced their pain through proximity; *I am here, their child is not.*



Figure 12: Photograph of a small portion stars on the ceiling of The Castle of Miracles at Give Kids the World Village, each star represents an individual child's wish, 2019

The Castle of Miracles is a castle-shaped building at GKTWV that has event spaces and play areas. The prized feature of the castle is the ceiling plastered with over 135 000 plastic gold stars.⁸⁰ I entered the Castle of Miracles and searched the ceiling for my plastic star. I had to ask a volunteer to help me find it. My name was so faded that I could hardly make it out. Each star

80. "The Castle of Miracles: Celebrating 25 Years of Stars, Magic, and Dreams." GKTW Blog. Give Kids the World Village, May 6, 2019. <https://gktw.org/blog/the-castle-of-miracles-celebrating-25-years-of-stars-magic-and-dreams/>.

signed by a child experiencing a critical illness, each representing a wish to visit Disney World fulfilled. When I first visited the village it was a purely joyful experience. But as an adult, I could see that death was present here too. The stars in the Castle of Miracles were like relics in an old cathedral. They allude to hope and healing — a false promise. In many cases, the wish makers may no longer be alive. The stars remain as a physical remnant or trace; something they once touched, a cheap acrylic star with the name scrawled with a sharpie. The name "Castle of Miracles" bugs me as an adult. The word miracle, in particular, does not sit right; it makes my skin crawl. It is not a miracle when someone recovers from illness. The converse is also inaccurate: death does not occur due to the absence of a miracle. The stars are presented as a gesture of love, but in some ways, it feels predatory. These families yearn for a miracle; they want a long and happy life for their child, a promise GKTWV cannot guarantee.

In my video, *Watch in Awe* the background of the dance sequence is filled with appropriated clips from Disney movies. Each clip depicts a moment of wish-making or wish-fulfillment (usually through magical means). Twinkling stars represent many wish-making scenes in Disney films. Tiana looks out her window and makes wishes for her future in *Princess and the Frog*, in *Peter Pan*, Wendy and her brothers fly towards the stars when fulfilling their wish to visit Neverland, in *Tangled* Rapunzel is fixated on the sky from her tower, Aladdin and Jasmine fly through the stars on the magic carpet ride. Often, the protagonist expresses their deepest wishes and desires to the stars. The stars twinkle back as if communicating through light. When I was young and wishing for things, expressing a desire for something outside of my control, instead of turning towards the sky (a divine force), I would often turn inwards and write in my journal, draw pictures, and express frustrations.



Figure 13: Stills of the background of my video piece, appropriated from Disney animated films, 2021

Swiss theorist Max Lüthi writes that fairy-tales "are a form of hope. We fill our heads with improbable happy endings, and are able to live - in daydream - in a world in which they are not only possible but inevitable."⁸¹ Disney fairy tale narratives are so embedded with hope, ever-

81. A.S. Byatt, "Introduction to the Annotated Brothers Grimm," in *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*, ed. Maria Tatar (New York, NY: Norton & Company, 2004), xx.

present with a "happy ending." Likewise, Lauren Berlant theorizes the concept of cruel optimism as "the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object.the fear is that the loss of the promising object/ scene itself will defeat the capacity to have any hope about anything."⁸² It is an interesting perspective on optimism and its problems. When I think of Give Kids the World Village and the context of childhood illness, I wonder, how do these fairy-tale narratives support us, and how do they harmfully implicate themselves in our understanding of reality? Berlant's conceptualization resonates here. This wish-granting format, and specifically the Disney wish, asks the wisher to maintain hope and attachment to capitalism, fairy tales and Disney, in order to maintain hope about anything at all. Why is there an insistence on happiness and the happy ending, and what role does this play at GKTWV? There is space for hope in the context of critical childhood illness, but there is also the blunt and incomprehensible reality that many children die from their illnesses. Embedded in the structure of wish-granting agencies and GKTWV is the inherent belief that fantasy can alter the direction of a child's life. When interviewed about the village, President of GKTWV Pamela Landwirth says they strive to: "create a feeling of such intense happiness that makes you feel like you can conquer the world, we want to send these kids back with that feeling, I can do anything, I can conquer anything because I've got this happiness."⁸³ Apart from the imperialist undertones of this statement, there is beauty and naivety in the idea that happiness can overcome illness. But conversely, if a child dies from their illness, is it because they were not happy enough? Did they fail to harness the power of happiness towards *fighting* their illness? When I think of the many kids I have known who have died, I get angry at this inference.

82. Lauren Gail Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 24.

83. *A Look at Give Kids The World Village (Interview with Pam Landwirth)*, YouTube (Midway to Main Street, 2019), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n2uX9bPe6AE&ab_channel=MidwaytoMainStreet.

Notions of happiness and positivity as forces that can heal illness is an underlying narrative so pervasive in the colliding worlds of healthcare and wellness, wish-granting agencies and Disney. The following section will further explore toxic positivity, looking at how performative characters manifest this ethos of capitalist positivity.

9. Performativity & Mascots

Within this section I discuss performativity in the Disney theme parks. I look at mascots as characters of perpetual optimism, explicitly looking at mascot manifestations in children's entertainment and healthcare contexts. This research leads into a discussion of video and sculpture works within my thesis exhibition.



Figure 14: Disney World/ Give Kids the World Village, Research Images, 2019

Part of what distinguishes Disneyland and Disney World from other amusement parks in North America is the strong connection between the parks and the visual worlds of cinema and television.⁸⁴ The parks' opening (Disneyland, 1955, Disney World, 1971) signaled Disney's entry into a new dimension in which guests could physically enter simulations of their favourite stories.⁸⁵ Every aspect of the parks was a revolutionary endeavour in immersive media.⁸⁶ My research trip allowed me to experience these spaces firsthand and has been foundational in conceptualizing my thesis work. I have spent hours poring over the thousands of photographs I took while immersed in these fantasy spaces, examining the colour, characters, and innovative architecture. In the spring of 2020, I collected many of these research images and digitally collaged them into abstracted layouts, from which I created two full-body zentai suits.⁸⁷ One suit uses images of GKTWV, while the other is made up of images from Disney World. In the video *Watch in Awe*, I wear these suits and perform for the camera, dancing and slowly moving. My body becomes coated in the imagery of these fantasy spaces like protection or shrouding. These two suited bodies perform like backup dancers for the primary performer, a sun mascot. The backup dancers are in the background, yet they set the scene. The bodies reference a specific space but perform in the non-place of a blue/green screen. The images of the fantasy spaces are further abstracted as they stretch to cover the body's curves. The spaces are themselves performing for the audience.

84. Jackson, Kathy Merlock, Mark I. West, Margaret J King, and J G O'Boyle. "The Theme Park: the Art of Time and Space." Essay. In *Disneyland and Culture: Essays on the Parks and Their Influence*, 5–18. Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Company Inc., 2011, 11.

85. Baker, "Inside the Disney Parks: The Happiest Place on Earth," 20-24.

86. Jackson, 11.

87. Zentai suits are skintight spandex suits that cover the whole body including the wearers face, another common term is "morphsuit" but this is a specific brand name.



Figures 15-18 (top left to bottom): *Untitled Zentai suit Hand*, Digital photograph, 2021; *Cropped still from "Watch in Awe"*, 2021; *Still of background morphsuit body from "Watch in Awe"*, 2021

An essential part of the immersive fantasy of the world of Disney is the pervasive elements of theatricality, spectacle, performance and interactivity. From the barbershop quartet singing down Mainstreet, U.S.A, the *Disney Festival Fantasy Parade*, *Move It! Shake It! MousekeDance It!* Street Party that happens twice daily, the *Happily Ever After* fireworks display occurring every evening, to the interactions that occur between guests and the Disney characters in costumes,

posing for photos, waving, hugging or giving a high five.⁸⁸ Part of what makes Disney World feel magical is the constant animation through performance. Disney draws from many different disciplines for inspiration: film, theatre, dance, musical theatre, and performance art. The experience of engaging with a performance at Disney World is vastly different from watching a film or sitting down in a theatre to watch a musical. At Disney, a performance could happen any time. The space of the performance is expanded, the fourth wall of the screen dissipates completely, and the guest becomes a part of the performance/film.⁸⁹ This experience is meant to shift the guest's perspective. Once one enters the theme park, logic and life's practicalities are meant to fade away. This immersion is articulated through the landscape design as guests enter into the parks, specifically the Magic Kingdom.⁹⁰ Each step towards the park immerses one further in the world of Disney, making the outside world feel more and more distant. When I was there as an adult, it was challenging not to get sucked into playing the role of an excited guest, as if a member of the chorus in a Disney musical.

Disney World's website describes their eighteen-minute nightly fireworks display, asking the viewer to: "Watch in awe as Cinderella's Castle becomes part of the story by magically transforming through amazing state-of-the-art projection you have to see to believe...discover the magic of the movie—and be inspired to find your own happily ever after."⁹¹ In the world of Disney, any vision a guest holds for their future is possible. In reality, their daily fireworks show,

88. "Entertainment Schedule," Walt Disney World, Disney, accessed 22/10/2019, https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/en_CA/entertainment/.

89. Jackson, Kathy Merlock and Mark I West. "Animator as Architect." Essay. In *Disneyland and Culture: Essays on the Parks and Their Influence*, 29–33. Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Company Inc., 2011, 30.

90. Wasko, Janet. *Understanding Disney: the Manufacture of Fantasy*. Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 2001, 168.

91. Walt Disney World, "Entertainment Schedule," Accessed 22/10/2019. https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/en_CA/entertainment/.

Happily *Ever After*, is estimated to cost \$41-50,000 per night.⁹² The performance that is meant to make guests feel a limitless sense of possibility costs the company at least \$ 15 million a year. This spectacle also harms the environment by exploding toxins into the air each night. A study published in 2020 tested the toxicity of particles emitted by fireworks. It concluded that "pyrotechnic [firework] display particles can produce adverse effects in mammalian cells and lungs."⁹³ This is a strong indication that, rather than providing limitless possibilities, sustained contact with this firework display might negatively impact guests' health and, even more likely, their staff. A company spokesperson Terry Brinkoetter admitted, "emotionalism is the heart and soul of our business. Disney is not shy. We go for the heartstrings."⁹⁴ These performances are scheduled every day yet they are designed to make each individual entering the park feel they are witnessing and participating in a once in a lifetime experience. Guests suspend disbelief while Disney profits from this seduction.

92. Christopher Luu, "Disney's Newest Show Is Its Most Spectacular Yet," Disney World Happily Ever After New Fireworks Show, April 19, 2017, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2017/04/150742/disney-world-happily-ever-after-fireworks>.

93. Christina Hickey et al., "Toxicity of Particles Emitted by Fireworks," Particle and Fibre Toxicology (BioMed Central, July 2, 2020), <https://particleandfibretoxicology.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12989-020-00360-4>.

94. Cher Krause Knight, *Power and Paradise in Walt Disney's World* (Gainesville, , FL: University Press of Florida, 2019), 29.



Figure 18: Stills from *Watch in Awe* video, 2021

After my 2019 research trip to Disney and GKTWV I became intrigued by the mascot costumes in the parks, particularly the repetitive ways they performed and interacted with the guests. These observations led me to investigate mascot culture more extensively. The mascot comes to mind as a character that embodies a spirit of boundless exuberance, optimism and positivity. There are mascots with different personalities, sad like Eeyore, strong like Mr. Clean, aggressive like many sports team mascots. However, most mascot characters perform perpetual optimism through continual gestures of encouragement, welcoming, and positive acknowledgment (think: waves, thumbs up, clapping, hugging, exciting a crowd). Mascots are used as representative symbols for a place, organization, team, product or idea. Most mascots are created for mass appeal; they are cute, fuzzy silly characters designed to make you feel good, which allows you to associate the

joyful feeling with what they represent. In her book, *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed reminds us that "optimism, hope and happiness can be technologies of control."⁹⁵ These characters are created, co-opted, commodified for capitalist intent, their employment of cuteness, enthusiasm and excitement for corporate ends. Similarly, James Freund writes scathingly about the danger and harms of brand mascots in the aptly titled essay, *The Smiling Faces of Capital and the 3 Vortices of Hell*.⁹⁶ He claims that as mascots proliferate on the brandscape, they are particularly insidious forms of advertising.⁹⁷ These "smiling faces of capital" are used as "cultural decoys; as unconscious self-distractions; as forms of cognitive-emotional bait; as managed distractions from corporate motives, methods and effects, as coy, cute, cuddly *sheep's clothing* worn by *financial wolves*."⁹⁸ Mascot's unending smiles draw attention, and in doing so, distract us from everything beyond the appeal of the commodity itself; with this in mind, it is particularly alarming that mascots are so prevalent in children's entertainment. Individual characters are picked out of popular movies, tv shows and video games. In the popular imagination, these characters not only represent the story they come from, but even more so, they come to embody the brand of the corporation that created the content. They insidiously impose themselves in the cultural psyche of children. Some of the most famous examples come from Disney in the form of Mickey Mouse and the Disney Princesses, but we can look across the industry and see similar examples. In the instance of Disney, these characters, for the most part, are taken from Disney-fied fairy tales. They become emblematic of the happy ending, steeped in positivity, optimism and perpetual joy.

95. Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 188.

96. Freund, James. "The Smiling Faces of Capital and the 3 Vortices of Hell." Essay. In *Brand Mascots and Other Marketing Animals*, edited by Stephen Brown and Sharon Ponsonby-McCabe, 255–66. New York, NY: Routledge, 2014.

97. Freund, 265.

98. Freund, 256.

My interest in this performance of positivity prompted me to make a mascot character. I created a joyful sun to be the primary character in my video work *Watch in Awe*, the sun radiates happiness. Wish-granting agencies position happiness and wish-fulfillment as a means of conquering illness. My sun character is a personification of the ethos of wish-granting agencies, an anthropomorphized sun that satirizes the insistence on positivity and stands in for wish-granting as a whole. The first video in the exhibition begins with the sun mascot performing welcoming gestures standing in front of a close-up view of the zentai suit featuring an image of the Disney castle. The image of the castle is distorted by the body's curves, slowly shifting and moving as the body breathes. In front of this background the sun performs stereotypical gestures: waving, blowing kisses, "raising the roof," quaking with excitement to an imagined crowd. This scene leads into a full-scale choreographed dance with the suited bodies acting as backup dancers to the sun. Disney-like music, composed by my collaborator Matthew Schellenberg, features a peppy, overdramatized and emotive score. The video appropriates aesthetic and material strategies from GKTWV and Disney and, in doing so, reveals the strategies of seduction. In eliciting a joyful, optimistic and positive response, I draw attention to the hyper-positivity of the organizations and sectors that overlap with the wish-granting experience. A second video work, *Forever Replicating Brightness*, examines more closely the relation between mascots and viewers. The mascot waves at the viewer and does not stop. What starts as a playful and familiar gesture then shifts into exaggeration and discomfort. The excited and positive energy directed is no longer soothing, the sustained and repetitive actions laying bare the construction of wish fulfillment and all the optimism bound up in it.

In my extensive research into mascots, I was intrigued by the fact that mascots are widely featured across the healthcare industry. In both corporate and non-profit contexts, mascots promote pharmaceuticals, hospitals, charities, foundations, and awareness campaigns. These are particularly absurd examples of mascots in consumer culture, that can be seen as harmful co-options of cuteness.

Pharmaceutical companies have the unique challenge of selling products that often aid with unappealing bodily conditions: how to advertise something the consumer might find gross, in a way that will come off as appealing, memorable and even cute. This issue is particularly prevalent in the US, where direct-to-consumer drug advertising is widespread. Some recent examples include Gut Guy, a bright pink cuddly large inflamed intestine that promotes Xifaxan, a pharmaceutical for Irritable Bowel Syndrome and Wally, the mascot for Rapaflo, a medication for dealing with enlarged prostates.



Figures 19-20 (left to right): Gut Guy from Xifaxan advertisements, Wally the Prostate from Rapaflo advertisements

It is fascinating to see the anthropomorphism of these individual parts of the body. The intestine itself becomes a cute smiling creature with two arms and two legs. Pharmaceutical companies

attempt to break the taboo against unmentionable symptoms by creating memorable and cute icons for these symptoms and their pharmaceuticals. One person on Twitter wrote: "the Xifaxan mascot is the cutest depiction of experiencing diarrhea ever."⁹⁹ In the American context, the corporate healthcare mascots are embedded within a consumer-driven market. Through their cuteness, they advertise for for-profit companies, fueling escalating drug prices and making medicine less affordable and accessible to those in need.



Figures 21-23 (Left to Right): Morgan D'organ, Dottie the Donor Dot and Mr. Testiculo

Mascots are also used widely in awareness campaigns in the non-profit healthcare sector. Minnesota's HealthPartners system created Petey P. Cup and Pokey the Syringe.¹⁰⁰ There is Dottie the Donor Dot, Wisconsin's official organ, tissue and eye donation mascot.¹⁰¹ Most strangely, Mr. Testiculo, a testicle-shaped mascot, is used to raise awareness about Testicular

99. "Xifaxan - Gut Guy: Generating Diarrhea Discussion," Clio Health (Clio Health, 2016), <https://clios.com/health/winner/14603>.

100. "Healthcare Mascots Wear Their Cause on Their Sleeves." Modern Healthcare, October 4, 2014. <https://www.modernhealthcare.com/article/20141004/MAGAZINE/310049958/healthcare-mascots-wear-their-cause-on-their-sleeves>.

101. Modern Healthcare, "Healthcare Mascots Wear Their Cause on Their Sleeves."

Cancer in Brazil.¹⁰² Morgan D'Organ is a giant pink liver that promotes organ donation in Illinois.¹⁰³ At the Children's Hospital Foundation of Manitoba I remember Dr. Goodbear, a big cuddly teddy bear that's a doctor. The mascots are positive and cute symbols for larger health-related issues or products, simplifying broader concepts into a recognizable and approachable form.

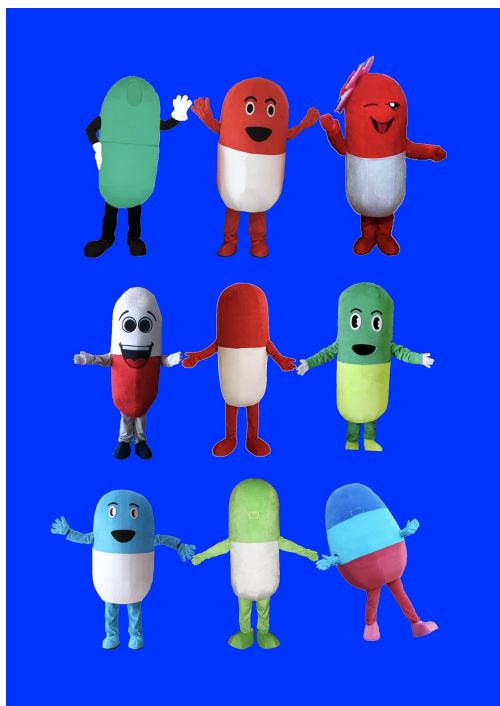


Figure 24: *It's a Small World After All*, Draft Digital Collage, 2021

As I scrolled the internet for the uses of mascots in healthcare contexts, I repeatedly came across images of rapid-release two-toned colour pill capsule characters. Some are branded for a specific pharmaceutical, others advertise a pharmacy, and many with unclear uses. Without the specificity of their intention spelled out, they smile maniacally, greeting an unknown viewer with

102. Williams, Stephen. "Mr. Balls, Aka 'Senhor Testiculo,' Goes to Bat for Cancer Research ." *nydailynews.com*, June 9, 2013. <https://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/senior-testicle-bat-cancer-research-article>

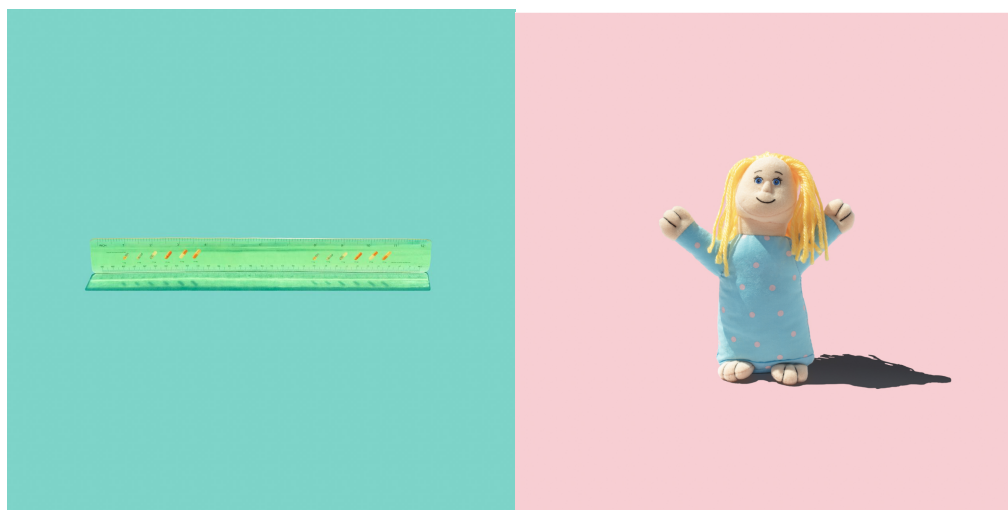
103. "Morgan D' Organ." *Gift of Hope Blog*, June 8, 2012. <https://iamareyou.wordpress.com/tag/morgan-d-organ/>.

open arms. I started collecting these images and placed them in a digital collage, making the pills almost hold hands, as if characters were swaying and singing on the Disney ride, *It's a Small World*. I texted the image to a friend, who replied, "I take the one on the bottom middle," a reference to the medication she takes daily for depression and anxiety.¹⁰⁴ Pills are small capsules that react, interact, heal, shift, strain, support, and soothe our bodies. Here, pill capsules are blown up in scale, details simplified, and anthropomorphized into performing creatures. They are cute. In the essay "Feline Fetish and Marketplace Animism", Yuko Minowa describes the elements that contribute to characters cuteness, "tend to be bipedal mammalian, non-sexual, and infantile, round, soft and vulnerable...*kawaii* characters."¹⁰⁵ These pills, as with most mascots, fulfill these categories of cuteness. But what does it mean for a pharmaceutical pill to be represented as *infantile, round, soft, and vulnerable*? Pills themselves evoke the vulnerability of our own bodies. I came across a particularly alarming example of a pill mascot that advertised an antipsychotic used to treat schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. It is difficult to conceive of the necessity or market viability of such an object rendered as a cute creature. Sianne Ngai writes about the "commodity aesthetic of cuteness," describing how "cuteness solicits a regard of the commodity as an anthropomorphic being less powerful than the aesthetic subject, appealing specifically to us for protection and care."¹⁰⁶ Cute mascots appeal to the consumer as a being that needs our love and participation within the capitalist structure. It is mind-boggling to see pharmaceutical companies putting into action these cute characters in the service of finding pharmaceutical commodities homes in our bodies, which may or may not need them.

104. Anonymous, text conversation with writer, March 10, 2021.

105. Minowa, Yuko. "Feline Fetish and Marketplace Animism." Essay. In *Brand Mascots and Other Marketing Animals*, edited by Stephen Brown and Sharon Ponsonby-McCabe, 91-109. New York, NY: Routledge, 2014, 95-96. Minowa, writes from a Japanese cultural perspective, where both mascots and cuteness are venerated.

106. Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 60.



Figures 25 & 26: Abbey Hepner, *Big Pharma*

Abbey Hepner's series titled *Big Pharma* features photographs of objects used for pharmaceutical marketing purposes, including mugs, office supplies, disposable cameras, stuffed animals and more.¹⁰⁷ She photographs them isolated on a coloured backdrop and removes any specific reference to the company or pharmaceutical that is being marketed. The objects that initially held dual roles, shed the marketing purpose, become symbols lacking referents. My father, an emergency room doctor, to our delight, would often return from American medical conferences with a bag full of pharmaceutical swag. It was all junk, but we would get excited by the little triangle highlighters or the different shaped stress balls, completely oblivious to the marketing intention of the object. These companies that profit from illness continually produce more and more garbage for our world.

Inspired by these absurd marketing techniques and the use of mascots in healthcare and pharmaceutical contexts, I created pill-shaped stuffed toys sewn from soft velvet fabric with cute

107. Abbey Hepner, "Big Pharma," Abbey Hepner, accessed March 13, 2021, <http://abbey-hepner.com/#/work/big-pharma>.

little button eyes and maniacal smiles. The pills are a simplified symbol for the larger topic of illness. The pill-shaped toys refer to the corporate context of pharmaceutical company swag (notoriously, there was a cute and furry oxycontin stuffed toy, although now-discontinued). They allude to childhood and the comfort and love of a stuffed toy. Additionally, there is the reference to the gift shop, which proliferates at almost every corner of Disney. Interestingly, I recently learned that Sick Kids hospital in Toronto has a Disney Store in the building, a far cry from the outdated gift shop at the Children's Hospital in Winnipeg when I was in treatment. The store's existence in the hospital further muddies the distinction between where a Disney wish originates. Sick kids passing by a Disney store every day on their way to treatment end up using their one wish to go to Disney World. As if this ends up being a surprise to anyone. I create stuffed toys of something that can both soothe and harm the body (chemo drugs are incredibly hard on the body) in a cute yet overwhelmingly positive form. They represent the vast territory of illness extending from its form.



Figures 27 & 28: Work in Progress documentation of pill stuffed toys, 2021.

10. Toxic Positivity in my own narrative

Thus far, I have addressed the rampant positivity in many different sectors related to the experiences of childhood illness. In this section I turn inwards and consider some of the ways I personally embody this ethos of positivity in ways that neither serve me or others. Through this reflection I ponder alternate possibilities for my wish and I consider my thesis exhibition and how it implicates these tropes of positivity.

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When I was a kid at Disney, Aladdin (*the* Aladdin, or rather the actor playing Aladdin for the day) referred to me as a boy. I looked up at him with disappointment. Someone in my family clarified that I was a girl with short hair. He looked back at me, took off my hat (my post-chemo protection), and said, "it's because I couldn't see your hair under there!" My precious, soft baby hairs were just starting to grow back after two years of chemo. In my head, I recoiled from his touch, but instead, I smiled back at him, swallowing my discomfort.

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Remembering this moment, I think that Aladdin had been spending too much time with Jasmine, beautiful, perfect Jasmine, with her long luscious flowing hair.

Writing about my childhood experience with cancer is challenging. I write from a distance as a necessity. I was sick as a child. I am now an adult. As I become more and more aware of critical disability studies and "sick theories" I am increasingly aware that I am not currently a sick person. I speak from my own life experience, but I also recognize my lack of adult lived

experience of illness and disability. I have distance from my experience, however they have marked me physically and emotionally. My health narrative conforms to the classic Disney narrative arc: a protagonist confronted with a difficult experience who *overcomes* hardship and is rewarded a “happily ever after” pronouncement. But unlike a Disney fairy tale, my story doesn’t end with that pronouncement. My life moves forward. I don’t want to hold an attachment to conforming my narrative to a Disney-style story. If I choose to attach my own life story to a Disney-esque narrative, I once again choose an individual triumph over a collective perspective. Although I am incredibly grateful to be alive, I don’t like the narrative of “survivorship”. These perspectives privilege those who are still alive over those who are not. My story/life turned out this way, and yet I have no idea why it did.

As a kid that had cancer, I was asked countless times to give speeches for fun runs, walk-a-thons and Terry Fox Day. I gave at least three speeches about my experience: twice in my old elementary school, one in high school to my peers. At the time, I was honoured to be asked, and I felt proud to speak about my experience. Looking back at one of these speeches, I spent three-quarters of it talking about all the amazing things CancerCare does for its patients. I would still not dispute gushing over the fierce team of people who provided me with my care. But I am most interested in the fact that even as a high school student, I knew my role as a *survivor* was to preach positivity and not publicly dwell on the lasting trauma from this experience. I knew (or felt I knew) that a positive outlook was the best way to contribute to the cause and to encourage philanthropic generosity in my teenage peers. In her 2019 book, *Undying*, Anne Boyer writes, " I would rather write nothing at all than propagandize for the world as is."¹⁰⁸ I wish I had read

108. Anne Boyer, *The Undying: Pain, Vulnerability, Mortality, Medicine, Art, Time, Dreams, Data, Exhaustion, Cancer, and Care* (New York, NY: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2019), 116.

Boyer's words as a teenager, afraid for my upcoming 'final' appointment at CancerCare and agonizing over the sadness and guilt I felt after the recent loss of my one and only friend from CancerCare. Boyer writes, " I do not want to tell the story of cancer in the way that I have been taught to tell it."¹⁰⁹ She would have made a better, more moving, probably more divisive speechwriter than I, although she probably would not want to give a speech at all. I no longer want to tell a story of all the *good parts* of having cancer as a kid. It bothers me that I had that inclination in the first place.

In this thesis project, the first thing I began making was the mascot. A bright sunny, smiling mascot that waves and smiles. Am I forever stuck in this cycle, replicating brightness and positivity, devoid of anything else? I hope not. In my video, *Watch in Awe*, I appropriate and replicate performative strategies of positivity to point towards the hollowness of these acts. The colourful background suddenly changes to black as the animated backdrops disappear. Each of the three characters are seen catching their breath, and then they individually disappear as well. I intend for this video to be an overwhelming affectual experience that visually and emotionally seduces the audience. The viewer can sit on a giant oversized two-toned pill to watch the video. Once positivity is established, I invite the viewer to peer behind a blue curtain, and enter another—a space of critical reflection. The space behind the curtain is set up in a way that further aestheticizes my studio research walls. Photos and videos are arranged, overlapping in some places in order to make connections between the images and to point towards various tangents of thought. The installation immerses the viewer in imagery, inviting them to piece together some of my thinking behind the project and draw their own reflections. In some ways, the installation

109. Boyer, 155.

strategy mirrors my own embodied experience, being taken and seduced by Disney and then stepping back and reflecting on that. Through the potential for critical reflection, I want to make visible the disappointment that my wish, while enjoyable, was so generic and utterly embedded within a corporate agenda.

Sometimes I wonder what I would have wished for if I had not used my one opportunity on the Disney wish. One of my deepest desires as a child was to be in a musical. My two best friends and I watched the 2002 film *Crossroads* featuring Britney Spears.¹¹⁰ The three main characters and BFFs bury a box containing mementos from their friendship in a park. The box also included little trinkets that allude to each of their dreams for the future. Darian, Jessi and I followed suit and buried a similar box in Jessi's backyard. Jessi put in a little keychain of an airplane (she wanted to fly), Darian put in a mini globe (she wanted to travel), and I put in a ticket to a play (an indication of my desire to be on Broadway).

In the introduction to *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*, A.S. Byatt writes: "I am not sure how much good is done by moralizing about fairy tales...telling children that virtue is rewarded, when in fact it is mostly simply the fact of being the central character that ensures a favourable outcome."¹¹¹ Like the story we observed in *Crossroads*, we wanted to be the central characters that succeeded through friendship and collectivity to achieve our dreams. Dreaming with my friends in retrospect feels much more impactful than wishing with a charity. I had not seen this movie in ages. The other day we watched it together, my two childhood best friends and I. We timed when we would press play and texted each other throughout the movie from across the

110. *Crossroads* (Paramount Pictures, 2002).

111. Byatt, xxiii.

country. It felt important to rewatch this childhood favourite with these two people, so crucial in my own coming of age story.

The three best friends in the film, Lucy, Kit and Mimi, were aspirational to us, although we were put off by the fact that they grew apart (this would never happen to us, we claimed, it did, but we have since drifted back). This is a story that takes up body issues, abandonment by a mother, sexual assault and rape, teenage pregnancy, and miscarriage—all during somewhat lighthearted group road trip across America. Darian remarked, "wow, this is a rough movie about womanhood. Who would have known when we first watched it."¹¹² While there is still a Britney-Spears-type shine over the darkness, it was not as peppy as our 11-year-old selves remembered it to be.

Darian was Kit, Jessi was Lucy, and I was Mimi. Mimi's wish was to put her feet in the ocean, mine to be in a musical.

It is interesting to me that this resonated as such a strong desire at the time. I was never particularly gifted at singing, dancing or acting—my elementary school music teacher often singled me out for being out of tune, an emotional wound itself. Nevertheless, when I watched musicals, my favourite Disney's film, *The Newsies* (1992), I was transported and transfixed. There was comradeship and joy in the expressions of narrative and emotion through song and dance. I was in love. However I never pursued my love of musical theatre in any way; never

¹¹². Darian Allen, text conversation with writer, April 1, 2021.

once was in even a school play. Yet now, in my late 20s, I find myself creating a body of visual artwork that makes space for this childhood fantasy.



Figure 29: Stills from in progress video *135,000 Plastic Stars*, I sing a Disney song and the footage is played in slow motion without audio, 2021.

In my thesis work, I take on many performative roles. I dance, I sing, I wear costumes, thereby self-fulfilling one of my childhood wishes. I address the emotive and personal connection many people feel with Disney, the longing many of their songs contain, and its effect on the body. Linking back to the limitations imposed on wish-making by the wish-granting agencies, I wonder: why didn't I pursue one of my actual childhood wishes through my wish? In one of my videos, I sing a Disney song that no one can hear, my face twists and turns as the song leaves my body. This video places me visually within the work. It embodies the complexity of my emotional relationship to the material.

11. Reflection and conclusion

Maggie Nelson ends the first chapter of *The Art of Cruelty* by bringing up Roland Barthes' insightful words, "I want to live according to nuance."¹¹³ I love this phrase. It encapsulates so

113. Nelson, Maggie. *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011, 13.

much about a way to be in and interact with the incredibly complex world around us. Barthes wanted to live according to nuance, Nelson aspires to as well, and so do I. Nelson sets this as the tone of her book by declaring, “...true moral complexity is rarely found in simple reversals. More often, it is found by wading into the swamp, getting intimate with discomfort, and developing an attitude for nuance.”¹¹⁴ This reverberates for me. I have waded into the swamp. My thesis project stems from a beautiful experience I had as a child with a charity devoted to making sick children’s dreams come true. However, in a world with nuance, there is much more to engage with there. My exploration into this experience has unraveled in tangential lines, circles, and spirals from the original experience. I have a web of overlapping and expanding thoughts to untangle.

My explorations continually bring up new questions for me. A significant outcome of my work over the past two years has been realizing my love for research and writing. These practices have stood as equally important to the creation of visual artworks. I love how the research, writing and visual art can work in tandem, intersect and diverge from each other in ways that enrich the overall project. My use of the mediums of photography, video and soft sculpture takes up the aesthetics of branding and marketing alongside built (and crumbling) fantasy spaces and research aesthetics borrowed from my studio wall. These visual languages of presentation (seduction) and research (critical engagement) form the basis of my exhibition. Throughout writing my thesis and creating my exhibition, I have come to realize that this project has a much longer life than my time in this program. I look forward to pushing forward with this project and seeing the new places it brings me.

114. Nelson, 13.

As I began to write this reflection, I came across a new video posted by Disney Parks on Youtube. The video is titled *Once Upon A Disney Wish, An Enchanting Reveal Of Disney's Newest Ship*.¹¹⁵ Actors, mascots, digital renderings and speeches by corporate Disney employees introduce the digital audience to the newest ship in Disney cruise's fleet through a 35-minute video. The ship is aptly named the *Disney Wish*. Partway through the tour around the ship, Bob Chapek, CEO of Walt Disney Company, announces that in honour of "world wish day" Disney will be donating \$ 1 million to Make-A-Wish as part of the launch of their cruise ship. Make-A-Wish and Disney once again collide to support Disney's agenda in a way that feels like something less than corporate generosity. The video's final scene shows Disney Broadway star Syndee Winters singing *When you Wish Upon a Star* superimposed on a digital rendering of a cruise ship while Disney mascots dance in the background. A screen behind her begins showing a slideshow of Make-A-Wish kids wearing blue Mickey Mouse ears. Winters sings, "when you wish upon a star, your dreams come truuuuuuuuueeeeee" as virtual fireworks go off in the background, cueing the end of her performance. If this isn't a perfect image to leave my reader with, I don't know what is. Sick children are used as an advertising tool promoting Disney's newest cruise ship amidst a global pandemic and climate crisis. I am left with Winter's song lyrics playing over and over in my head—a corporate anthem soliciting children (and adults) to continue to wish and dream of Disney.

115. *Once Upon A Disney Wish, An Enchanting Reveal Of Disney's Newest Ship* | Disney Cruise Line. YouTube. Disney Parks, 2021.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZpXJJQe1HQo&t=2093s&ab_channel=DisneyParks.

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Appendix A: Thesis Show Documentation





