

## Season 1, Episode 18: Disney x Pinkwashing

### SPEAKERS

Marcelle Kosman, Hannah McGregor

#### **Marcelle Kosman** 0:30

Hello, and welcome to Material Girls, a pop culture podcast that uses critical theory to understand the zeitgeist. I'm Marcelle Kosman.

#### **Hannah McGregor** 0:39

And I'm Hannah McGregor. And I am here to confess that Marcelle has absolutely broken me and I'm fully prepared to become a Disney adult. Marcelle, why would you do this to me?

#### **Marcelle Kosman** 0:50

It's an exact quote, people. I quoted Hannah McGregor's text to me word for word. We are obviously going to talk about Disney in this episode, but I thought that it would be helpful if, in the introductory segment, we just get off our chest the reasons why we might be compelled to become Disney adults, having just returned from a trip to the happiest place on earth.

**[Hannah laughs]** So, yeah, Hannah, you tell me: why did I do that to you?

#### **Hannah McGregor** 1:23

What a good question. Well, so Marcelle, I've known about your deep love for Disney since—2017, is that the first year you went?

#### **Marcelle Kosman** 1:33

I think it's 2018.

#### **Hannah McGregor** 1:34

2018. It was the same trip that you and I went to the Wizarding World of Harry Potter, which was the first and until recently, last theme park I'd ever been to. And you were coming off a Disney trip and you were—

#### **Marcelle Kosman** 1:51

Changed.

**Hannah McGregor 1:52**

You were changed. You kept talking about how you couldn't wait to get back to Disney, and then you went back to Disney again. And then through the pandemic, you kept talking about how all you want to do is go back to Disney. And truly, I just was like, "Well, whatever makes Marcelle happy, that's fine." But I had no history with Disneyland. No prior particular opinions one way or the other, really no knowledge at all. I was vaguely aware that Disney adults were a thing, and I obviously knew that these theme parks existed, but had never even considered going to them. And then you said that for your 40th birthday, you wanted to go to Disneyland with Eliot, and you invited me to come along. And you know I love being included.

**Marcelle Kosman 2:47**

And now look who's changed. **[Hannah laughs]**

**Hannah McGregor 2:51**

I guess I've changed. I guess I'm different now. Here's the thing that really has struck me in the wake of this trip, is it is such an intensely immersive and honestly overstimulating space, that my super overactive, constantly going brain—which never stops thinking about work, is like always making to-do lists in the back of my head, is always anxious about things—there was no room for anything but what was happening. Like, there just wasn't—I truly stopped thinking about work for a week, which is unheard of. A miracle. And when I got back to work, I thought that I would feel resentful and mad about returning to the real world. Which, you know, I partially did, because work sucks.

**Marcelle Kosman 3:53**

Totally. Yeah, same.

**Hannah McGregor 3:54**

But I also felt so refreshed. **[Marcelle laughs]** Like, I could not believe how much more patience I had with everyone and how much less irritated I was by emails. Because I had just honestly gotten to spend a week just having just no real responsibilities.

**Marcelle Kosman** 4:15

Yeah. **[Laughs]**

**Hannah McGregor** 4:18

Really making hard decisions like “what ride should we go on next?” And “have I had too much popcorn today?”

**Marcelle Kosman** 4:25

It’s true. It’s true. It was a phenomenal trip. **[Hannah and Marcelle laugh]** I know that that’s not what we’re here to talk about, which is why I wanted to talk about it now.

**Hannah McGregor** 4:38

Yeah, we have to mention it here so that we can write off the trip on our taxes.

**Marcelle Kosman** 4:44

**[Laughs]** It was for research.

**[Upbeat musical interlude]**

**Hannah McGregor** 4:48

Well, now that I got all that joy off my chest, I’m ready to ask the serious materialist question: what are or were the historical, ideological, and material conditions for our object of study to become zeitgeisty? Wow, Marcelle, why’s Disney so big?

**Marcelle Kosman** 5:08

Hang on to your Mickey ears and Maleficent horns and other Minnie-style ear hats, people, because I’m gonna go rogue.

**Hannah McGregor** 5:17

What?

**Marcelle Kosman** 5:18

I know, it's very uncharacteristic of me. But I was doing my research about whether or not Disney was guilty of pinkwashing and it kind of dawned on me that I don't think that Disney is zeitgeisty. I think pinkwashing is the thing that's zeitgeisty.

**Hannah McGregor** 5:36

Mmmm, oh, yeah, actually, you know, what? Really checks out. Are we gonna talk about Disney at all?

**Marcelle Kosman** 5:42

Yeah, we're totally gonna talk about Disney. But I think we need to talk about the zeitgeistiness of pinkwashing, where it comes from, what it is, etc.

**Hannah McGregor** 5:49

Can't wait.

**Marcelle Kosman** 5:50

In order to do that, we have to acknowledge that when people say pinkwashing, they might be referring to one of two things. So often people will use the term in reference to the Pink Ribbon Campaign.

**Hannah McGregor** 6:04

That's the breast cancer awareness campaign. So in that case, is pinkwashing like, the "look good, feel better" campaign when they told women with breast cancer to put on makeup?

**Marcelle Kosman** 6:16

I think that's a great example of it. Yeah, it's also—generally, it's when companies disingenuously brand their products pink for breast cancer awareness, while neglecting to reveal that those products contain carcinogenic chemicals, for example.

**Hannah McGregor 6:36**

While neglecting to say that actually they aren't aware of breast cancer at all.

**Marcelle Kosman 6:41**

True. So there was one example where the NFL was branded pink for the fine month of October and its tagline was, like, "Catch it early," or something. It was about mammograms. And so then people who actually in the breast cancer research area were like, "Hang on, you're neglecting a lot of stuff here when you just tell people to get mammograms and that's going to do it." Like that's not enough. This is misinformation. So I would encourage any listeners who are curious to learn more about the exploitation of the Pink Ribbon campaign to check out Karuna Jaggar's article for the *Huffington Post*, "Think Before You Pink: Stop the Distraction."

**Hannah McGregor 7:25**

Sounds great. Sounds great, Marcelle, but I do need to interrupt you here. So we're talking about pinkwashing, but I feel like I hear the word "washing" applied to a lot of things. So maybe we start there, rather than with the significance of the colour pink. What does it mean to "wash" something?

**Marcelle Kosman 7:43**

Exactly. And so Hannah, as you were saying, it's become pretty common to combine a term with "-washing," in order to draw attention to sketchy marketing coverup practices. So the OED defines the process of combining a term with "washing" as "forming nouns referring to the presentation of a company, product, person, etc, as associated with the social stance, cause, etc, indicated by the first element (see note), in order to influence public opinion in a way regarded as unfounded or intentionally misleading."

**Hannah McGregor 8:27**

Okay, so I feel like the one that I hear a lot lately is greenwashing, which is a company rebranding themselves or doing an initiative that makes them

sound environmentally friendly but that's not actually based in reality.

**Marcelle Kosman** 8:46

Yeah, it's like there's nothing sustainable about the practice. It just sounds good.

**Hannah McGregor** 8:51

Yeah. So is pinkwashing, like breast cancer awareness first, is that where that term comes from?

**Marcelle Kosman** 8:59

Yes.

**Hannah McGregor** 9:00

So starts with breast cancer.

**Marcelle Kosman** 9:02

Yes.

**Hannah McGregor** 9:02

That's the original pink.

**Marcelle Kosman** 9:03

Yes. Well, so this is the first use of the term as recorded by the OED. So that's always the caveat. But starting around like, 2011, the term "pinkwashing" starts to get used to refer to dubious queer inclusion or dubious queer inclusivity, like around the pride stuff, like when your bank is all of a sudden like "We love gays!" for one month every year.

**Hannah McGregor** 9:28

Yeah, or like, your beer company—

**Marcelle Kosman** 9:29

Yeah.

**Hannah McGregor 9:30**

—is like, “Oooh. Oooh. Rainbow cans!” Okay, guys.

**Marcelle Kosman 9:34**

So Hannah, would you believe that this use of the term pinkwashing actually comes from the anti-Zionist movement?

**Hannah McGregor 9:41**

I was spoiled on this detail by Instagram, like, this week, but boy did it blow my mind.

**Marcelle Kosman 9:51**

So mind blowing.

**Hannah McGregor 9:53**

Absolutely blew my mind. I had no idea that pinkwashing is a term that originated from the way that the state of Israel uses LGBTQ+ inclusion as a Zionist marketing tactic.

**Marcelle Kosman 10:14**

I know. It’s incredible. It’s incredible.

**Hannah McGregor 10:16**

Yeah.

**Marcelle Kosman 10:17**

So the origin of the term pinkwashing for this purpose starts around 2011, when the queer Jewish activist, writer, and scholar Sarah Schulman wrote an op-ed for the *New York Times* called “Israel and ‘Pinkwashing’.”

**Hannah McGregor 10:35**

And everybody was like, “Wow, this op-ed is going to be about how Israel supports breast cancer awareness.”

**Marcelle Kosman 10:42**

So in this article, Schulman argues that Israel’s—just like you were

saying, Hannah— Israel’s gay-friendly reputation was a deliberate part of a marketing campaign designed to make the country appear more progressive than specifically its predominantly Islamic neighbors. Okay, so, to quote the article, “The growing global gay movement against the Israeli occupation has named these tactics pinkwashing a deliberate strategy to conceal the continuing violations of Palestinians human rights, behind an image of modernity signified by Israeli gay life.”

So Shulman then clarifies further that the success of Israel’s pinkwashing campaign was a means not only to cover up its own human rights abuses, but also to minimize the existence of a gay rights movement in Palestine. And this is something that we totally saw after the October 7 attacks, where people were like, “Well, also the Palestinians hate gays and women.”

**Hannah McGregor** 11:46

Oh, yeah, no, I’ve had a number of people say to me with a kind of vicious satisfaction that I would be murdered in Palestine, which is, one, not the slam dunk that people seem to think it is in terms of argumentation, but, two, is so obviously tied up in this Islamophobic narrative in which leftist or progressive culture is impossible in majority-Muslim states.

**Marcelle Kosman** 12:20

Totally.

**Hannah McGregor** 12:20

Which is racist, just in case people don’t get the subtext of that. That’s what that is.

**Marcelle Kosman** 12:25

Yeah, just to be clear. That’s racist.

**Hannah McGregor** 12:28

So in this case, why pink? I mean, why not rainbow washing? Why pinkwashing?



**Marcelle Kosman** 12:38

Well, Hannah, do you know about the pink triangles?

**Hannah McGregor** 12:42

Oh, yeah, pink triangles are the thing that the Nazis made gay men wear in concentration camps.

**Marcelle Kosman** 12:50

That's right. That's right.

**Hannah McGregor** 12:51

Okay.

**Marcelle Kosman** 12:52

That's right.

**Hannah McGregor** 12:52

So it's a Holocaust reference.

**Marcelle Kosman** 12:54

It is. Yeah. And so for folks who are unfamiliar with the history of the pink triangle and how it came to be affiliated with the gay rights movement, I would recommend a short but really thorough article for *Time* by Olivia B. Waxman called "How the Nazi Regime's Pink Triangle Symbol Was Repurposed for LGBTQ Pride."

In short, gay men in Nazi concentration camps were marked with pink triangles in the same way that Jews were marked with yellow Stars of David. And so the pink triangle has this come to symbolize, in the queer community, surviving tremendous, oppressive violence. And given that the state of Israel was founded after the Holocaust for survivors of the Holocaust to have a safe place to go to, the accusation of pinkwashing to cover up its own human rights abuses is a very precise and deliberate phrasing.

**Hannah McGregor** 13:50

Gotcha. Hence, pinkwashing instead of rainbow washing.

**Marcelle Kosman** 13:53

Exactly.

**Hannah McGregor** 13:57

Okay, but it's really spread beyond Israel.

**Marcelle Kosman** 13:59

Oh, yes. Yes, absolutely. And reasonably so. So anytime we use the term pinkwashing we must remember that we owe a debt of gratitude to the queers of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement. Free Palestine, ceasefire, ceasefire now and forever, land back. Free Palestine.

**Hannah McGregor** 14:16

Hey, you know what? Fuck colonialism.

**Marcelle Kosman** 14:19

Yeah. Any opportunity to talk about why colonialism is the worst. So let's talk about pinkwashing in our own colonial state.

**Hannah McGregor** 14:30

Mmmm. Because we do love that here. And our neighbors to the south? Also big fans.

**Marcelle Kosman** 14:35

Big fans. So Hannah, if you were to think of, say, two recent, big corporate pinkwashing campaigns, do any two come to mind?

**Hannah McGregor** 14:48

**[Laughs]** Okay, so here are the two that I feel like I have heard discussed the most on the lefty podcasts that are the vast majority of media that I consume. Because that's mostly where I get all of my information. One is Target, and particularly I feel like Target has been discussed in the past year because they did a big corporate Pride marketing thing and then

when they got, I was about to say pushback from the right, but like, it was bomb threats, threats of violence, people going into target locations, and screaming at and threatening employees and quite scary pushback, they either pulled the line or took it out of stores so it was only available online, in a way that a lot of queer activists were like, this is actually worse. It's worse for you to claim to do this big marketing campaign where you're like, "We love the LGBTQ+ community unless people with guns tell us not to and then actually, sike, we don't love you at all," which is a really bad precedent to set.

**Marcelle Kosman** 16:08

We'll love you in secret.

**Hannah McGregor** 16:10

We'll love you in secret, but not out loud. I mean, I get it, like, part of it is that I get it, because Target employees are not paid enough to fucking deal with that. And also, it's like, cool, well, I guess if we focus our political inclusion campaigns on what corporations are doing, then we're fucked, because corporations are fundamentally cowardly. And then the other one, wasn't there a big thing with Budweiser where they did a campaign where they gave influencers customized cans, and I think they gave this prominent trans TikToker her own custom can and then the conservatives found out about it and started, I think, shooting cans of Budweiser with guns.

**Marcelle Kosman** 17:03

I mean, they were doing that anyway, let's be real. They do that for target practice.

**Hannah McGregor** 17:08

Oh, but I think they were full. I think they they indicated the anger by shooting the full cans.

**Marcelle Kosman** 17:13

Yeah, maybe.

**Hannah McGregor** 17:14

Again, I'm really just getting this news filtered to me through, like, Michael Hobbes, predominantly.

**Marcelle Kosman** 17:22

So the essential thing—I think what the angry people were doing specifically is less important for our purposes than the fact that both Target and Budweiser were like, “Oh, that was mistake. Yeah, not gonna do that anymore.” Which, you're right, employee safety is important. And it's not a zero-sum kind of thing. It's not like, well, in order to protect our employees safety, we then have to disavow all relationship to the LGBTQ+ community. Because, hey, some of those employees? Probably gay.

**Hannah McGregor** 18:04

I know. No, that's the wild thing, not mutually exclusive.

**Marcelle Kosman** 18:08

So this was last June, fairly, fairly recent and yet still manages to feel like 10 years ago. These are two really good examples of how flimsy corporate support for the queer community is. And I found an episode of NPR's *Fresh Air* that addressed exactly those two instances.

**Hannah McGregor** 18:26

Leftist podcasts.

**Marcelle Kosman** 18:28

Leftist podcasts. So NPR hosted by Ari Shapiro. Hannah, could I get you to please read Shapiro's introduction to that episode.

**Hannah McGregor** 18:35

Absolutely. “Only a few years ago, companies were often accused of pinkwashing during Pride month, pretending to support LGBTQ+ people while doing little or nothing behind the scenes. Well, now, as more states pass anti-trans and anti-gay laws, some companies are pulling back even from the appearance of support. Bud Light and Target both faced conservative backlash and took action to appease those critics.” So we've

got on one level, the critique of pinkwashing, as, like, you're making these campaigns where you claim that you support LGBTQ+ people, but you're not actually doing anything substantive that's actually helping, you're not pushing laws or policies that will support trans people, for example. And then we get a pretty clear example of how only skin deep these forms of seeming support are, because as soon as somebody pushes back, they're like, "Nevermind."

**Marcelle Kosman** 19:47

Yeah, so zeitgeist-ily speaking, we're in a weird place, because pinkwashing just is super commonplace, and having meaningful inclusion of queer folks in the brand marketing, so for example, when Anheuser-Busch hired Dylan Mulvaney to be the poster girl for their shitty beer, that was too much. And that caused a conservative backlash that was so frightening that Anheuser-Busch then canceled her contract. So, what's weird is that yeah, pinkwashing is everywhere, constant, really popular, zeitgeisty. And yet, there are certain things that cause—I don't even know what I'm trying to say here. God dammit.

**Hannah McGregor** 20:37

I mean, I think zeitgeisty things can also be the object of significant concentrated cultural hate.

**Marcelle Kosman** 20:44

Yes.

**Hannah McGregor** 20:45

Yeah, right. Like, it's in the zeitgeist, it's in the air. It's very popular, people are talking about it a lot. Part of why people are talking about it is that there is a significant conservative backlash against it. But there was significant conservative backlash against Barbie, because it was too feminist for a lot of people. So what it's tricky is, I think, a lot of the time, when we're used to critiquing a thing on the left, particularly in this case, when it's like a term we came up with—"we," speaking generally as queer, leftist cultural critics—it's a term we came up with, and then when people who hate us are like, "We don't want this thing that you've critiqued to

be possible,” we’re like, “Well, maybe we do want pinkwashing? No, we don’t. But I guess it’s better than this.”

**Marcelle Kosman** 21:43

Yeah, and I think that’s sort of the undercurrent of Shapiro’s introduction that I had you read there, which is like, “And now we can’t even have pinkwashing!” **[Hannah laughs]** Which, to be clear, I don’t think he’s saying. **[Laughs]**

**Hannah McGregor** 21:56

No, and it’s not useful. What this is ultimately demonstrating is the fact that pinkwashing is “washing,” that it hasn’t addressed any of the rot that lies beneath.

**Marcelle Kosman** 22:06

Exactly. The dead flies, if you will.

**Hannah McGregor** 22:09

And the spider webs and the chicken shit. Lotta chicken shit’s involved in this.

**Marcelle Kosman** 22:15

Have I got convinced, then? That pinkwashing is the zeitgeist?

**Hannah McGregor** 22:20

I’m certainly convinced that pinkwashing is a zeitgeisty topic, maybe in a sort of— not more popular than Disney, but more zeitgeisty than Disney.

**Marcelle Kosman** 22:30

Yeah, definitely. But never fear; we shall still talk about whether or not Disney is involved in pinkwashing.

**Hannah McGregor** 22:39

Oh, thank God. Because we did so much research. We pointed out every pride-themed thing that we saw.

**Marcelle Kosman** 22:45

I even took a few pictures. **[Hannah laughs]** So, okay, it's important to point out for listeners who are devotedly anti-Disney, as I was before I was changed, that Disney does in fact have branded Pride merch available all year long. So it's not just a June thing, it's a "you can always celebrate Pride at Disney" kind of thing. And some of its content is also legitimately inclusive. And a lot of that is subtext, like my favorite example, which is that Elsa is absolutely asexual, but some of it is also text-text. For example, there are two Pixar Spark shorts on Disney+, one is called *Out* and one is called *Float*, and both of these are stories about loving your queer children for their queerness and not despite it.

**Hannah McGregor** 23:41

Did they make you cry?

**Marcelle Kosman** 23:42

Obviously. Sobbed.

**Hannah McGregor** 23:45

Okay. **[Laughs]** Okay, you know what I would find really personally useful, Marcelle, is if a queer media outlet had compiled a definitive ranking of Disney's live action and animated LGBTQ+ characters.

**Marcelle Kosman** 24:01

Hannah, guess what? I have some news that you will feel ambivalent about. **[Hannah laughs]** The queer media outlet Pink News—

**Hannah McGregor** 24:12

Oh, no.

**Marcelle Kosman** 24:12

—has indeed published an article called "A definitive ranking of Disney's live action and animated LGBTQ character firsts." **[Hannah laughs]** But it is far from definitive. There are only 10 characters and they leave out Elsa, and the other obviously queer character, Maleficent. Like, how. Anyway.

**Hannah McGregor** 24:35

Yeah, no, I mean, this is outrageous. *Maleficent* is entirely about queer desire, but fine. Way to not know how to read your own movies. So they're only including canonically LGBTQ+ characters in this list?

**Marcelle Kosman** 24:52

No, no, that's what I wondered as well **[Hannah laughs]** and no, the answer is no, because they also include these vague, sort of "blink and you miss them" characters; like, there's an antelope couple in *Zootopia*, Bucky and Pronk Oryx-Antlerson, and there's a purportedly lesbian couple that you can see even in the *Finding Dory* trailer, but like, no. Anyway, I digress. Despite the glaring omissions, the list has reminded me of some of the granular strides that Disney films have made towards inclusion. Hannah, have you seen any of the following: *Elemental*, *Onward*, *Lightyear*, or *Strange World*?

**Hannah McGregor** 25:34

I think that I've seen—I really struggle with these one-word Disney titles. Is *Onward* the one where two brothers go on a quest?

**Marcelle Kosman** 25:49

I actually don't know. I haven't seen any. **[Hannah and Marcelle laugh]**

**Hannah McGregor** 25:53

Okay, I think I might have seen *Onward* and *Strange World*. I've definitely have not seen *Elemental* or *Lightyear*. But I think I've seen the other two, if they're the movies I'm thinking of.

**Marcelle Kosman** 26:01

I mean, we're— yeah, we're currently struggling right now. Listeners right now who have seen these movies are screaming.

**Hannah McGregor** 26:08

Yeah, well, listen, we've got a hard out, so we're not pausing to Google.



**Marcelle Kosman** 26:12

Yeah, it's too bad.

**Hannah McGregor** 26:13

We can talk about it in the comments on Instagram.

**Marcelle Kosman** 26:15

I mean, I did do some Google. But that was before. So all four of these films have canonically LGBTQ+ characters who we know in watching the films, we have textual evidence watching the films, are queer. But more importantly, as far as I'm concerned, they are played by out LGBTQ+ actors. So yeah, I think probably the one that people may have heard the most buzz about is that *Lightyear* has a lesbian side character named Alicia Hawthorne, who's played by Uzo Aduba. And she kisses her partner in the movie and this was like—

**Hannah McGregor** 27:00

That's huge.

**Marcelle Kosman** 27:01

—a big thing because Disney pulled the kiss because of backlash, and then reinstated the kiss because of—

**Hannah McGregor** 27:08

Because of backlash to the backlash?

**Marcelle Kosman** 27:09

—because of employee backlash.

**Hannah McGregor** 27:11

Ahhh.

**Marcelle Kosman** 27:13

I know.

**Hannah McGregor** 27:13

We're gonna get into that more, right? This employee versus audience backlash thing?

**Marcelle Kosman** 27:19

I think so, yeah, because ultimately, our question when it comes to queer content, is it just slow granular progress? Or is it just (no pun intended) lip service there to make Disney look progressive, and distract us from its otherwise harmful business practices?

**Hannah McGregor** 27:37

Marcelle, that feels like a really complex question. Can you answer it for me, please?

**Marcelle Kosman** 27:42

With a little help from my friends.

**Hannah McGregor** 27:46

Your friends theory?

**Marcelle Kosman** 27:48

Maybe.

**Hannah McGregor** 27:49

Okay.

**[Upbeat musical interlude]**

**Hannah McGregor** 27:55

Okay, people, listen up. This is the segment in which Marcelle will introduce us to some good old-fashioned theory that will help us determine what exactly Disney is up to.

**Marcelle Kosman** 28:05

Okay. And I'm really sorry, but here's the thing. I went rogue again.

**Hannah McGregor** 28:10

Marcelle, why do we even have a format if you're not going to follow it?

**Marcelle Kosman** 28:15

I did conduct research, I swear, I swear. But as I was reading about Disney and its business practices, I was like, "Whoa, I do not have the toolkit to analyze corporate business practice." So the theory that I have brought is not a theory.

**Hannah McGregor** 28:33

Is it like corporate analysis?

**Marcelle Kosman** 28:35

It's all kind of—okay, kinda. It's municipal analysis.

**Hannah McGregor** 28:40

Oh, no.

**Marcelle Kosman** 28:41

So I'm drawing on an article by Karine Duplan called "Pinkwashing Policies or Insider Activism? Allyship in the LGBTIQ+ Governance–Activism Nexus."

**Hannah McGregor** 28:57

Oooh, a nexus.

**Marcelle Kosman** 28:58

A nexus. And in this article, Duplan looks at what leads to making public spaces inclusive for queer and trans folks. She's not looking at marketing, but rather a public policy for queering urban spaces.

**Hannah McGregor** 29:14

Okay, that's interesting, because I think maybe we can have a conversation, maybe in the third segment, about Disney as a public/private space.

**Marcelle Kosman** 29:26

Yeah, maybe.

**Hannah McGregor** 29:27

But is she looking at, like, Anaheim?

**Marcelle Kosman** 29:32

**[Laughs]** She's writing about Geneva in Switzerland. Because despite its reputation, you may have heard of her. In the context of LGBTQ+ rights, it's remained really conservative and only recently made significant moves towards queer inclusivity and equality.

**Hannah McGregor** 29:51

Okay, you've written into the script me saying that that's weirdly similar to Disney, but I don't think it is. **[Laughs]**

**Marcelle Kosman** 29:59

It is! Okay, fine. All right. **[Hannah laughs]** Well, you might not think that that's weirdly similar to Disney, but I think it is. And what I found particularly useful about this article, despite having zero background in ethnographic research, was Duplan's argument that public policy officials "act towards a discreet queering of municipal governance from the inside."

**Hannah McGregor** 30:21

Okay, that does make me think about the conversations we've been having about Disney.

**Marcelle Kosman** 30:25

Okay. So she explores a phenomenon called "nexus-politics" that "accounts for the connection of alternative forms of political participation with conventional politics." So in other words, the presence of queers and queer allies in government allows us to think beyond a pinkwashing/authentic activism binary, and see instead "the ongoing dialogue between activist collectives and public officials that joined their forces together to increase the visibility of queer lives and concerns, and improve access to public spaces and services for those whose gender or sexual orientation

might still be considered as an impediment.” An impediment to accessing those spaces.

**Hannah McGregor** 31:14

Yeah, to public participation. So can we apply the same nexus, whatever it means, politics lens, when we look at how a conservative multinational corporation like Disney is making space for queer representation?

**Marcelle Kosman** 31:31

I sure as heck hope so, because that’s what I’m doing. **[Hannah laughs]** Because it seems to me having read this article, and understood most of it with a lot of effort, it seems to come down to having queer and queer-allied employees, which is something that Disney does have a lot of just by the fact of being one of the biggest employers in the world. It employs, like, 75,000 people in Florida alone.

**Hannah McGregor** 31:59

Yeah, it’s not just that it’s a big employer and so will have—like, I would guess that maybe it has a slightly above average, like, literally the average amount of queer employees, because it employs a lot of artists.

**Marcelle Kosman** 32:15

Totally. And I’ll give you a fun tidbit of information. In 1995, Disney started offering health benefits to employees’ same sex partners. So that makes it one of the first in the US to do so, and so if this is a company where you know that your same sex partner will have access to health benefits, you are going to try to work there.

**Hannah McGregor** 32:38

Absolutely.

**Marcelle Kosman** 32:39

So even company policies—

**Hannah McGregor** 32:40

That is specifically attracting, like, that as a policy that attracts more queer

people to work with your company.

**Marcelle Kosman** 32:49

Totally. Absolutely. So yeah, so Disney has a Pride collection. It's shockingly only had its Pride collection since 2018. One of the other things that I think is significant is that Disney donates profits from its Pride collection to specifically LGBTQIA+ organizations around the world, and it keeps a running list, a publicly available running list of the organizations that it's supporting. And I think that's kind of cool in terms of accountability.

**Hannah McGregor** 33:18

Yeah. And in terms of, again, thinking about, what are the kinds of things that are likely to have been pushed by employees? Because that's a dynamic that I think is really interesting here, is the kind of transformation of this corporation that happens because it has a lot of queer employees. And those employees are holding it accountable or pushing for things that aren't just about representation because they are about the employee experience.

**Marcelle Kosman** 33:54

Mm hmm. So speaking of the employee experience, though, Hannah, are you familiar with Disney's Four Keys?

**Hannah McGregor** 34:03

Are those, like, four keys that the four owners of Disney turned simultaneously to blow up the world?

**Marcelle Kosman** 34:10

So I had not heard of these Four Keys either until starting to research this episode, but they're foundational to employment at Disney. And so what I have for you to read, Hannah, is a quotation from a blog post by the Disney Experiences Chairperson, Josh D'Amaro, where he explains their importance.

**Hannah McGregor** 34:32

Will you tell me what Disney Experiences is?

**Marcelle Kosman** 34:35

It's the term that they give for the person in charge of all of the stuff that you as the attendee experience, okay, or that you as the consumer of Disney would experience. So it includes, like, guest relations at parks; I think merchandise is affiliated with it. Disney is a weird web and they use weird terms for things.

**Hannah McGregor** 35:04

Yeah, okay. All right. "Every Disney Parks cast member"—in parentheses here, they just call all of their employees cast members, I learned that on this trip—"is familiar with our longstanding tradition of The Four Keys—Safety, Courtesy, Show and Efficiency—which have guided our approach to guest service for more than 65 years. The Four Keys are one of the first things that cast members learn about when they join Disney Parks, Experiences and Products, and they are regularly reinforced throughout their tenure. Each cast member is asked to use The Four Keys as the blueprint for the decisions they make during the workday and the approach they bring to their interactions with others. Cast members around the world know them by heart and live by them in their roles every day as they create amazing experiences for our guests."

**Marcelle Kosman** 36:02

Thank you. Thank you. So according to D'Amaro's blog post, when employees around the world were asked how "to bring a greater focus to inclusivity, and belonging for our cast," the employees themselves suggested adding inclusion as a fifth key. And so given what D'Amaro has just described as being the "importance and foundational"-ness of these Four Keys over the last 65 years, I think it's kind of a big deal that Disney was like, "Okay, we'll add a fifth key."

**Hannah McGregor** 36:39

So they did, they added inclusion.

**Marcelle Kosman** 36:42

And so this blog post that I had you just quote from is part of the soft launch of the fifth key, which is Inclusion.

**Hannah McGregor** 36:52

Okay, so what does that mean to Disney?

**Marcelle Kosman** 36:56

**[Laughs]** I'm glad you asked, Hannah, because I'm going to give you another quote to read. Take a sip of water, because it's a long one.

**Hannah McGregor** 37:03

“Our new approach provides greater flexibility with respect to forms of personal expression surrounding gender-inclusive hairstyles, jewelry, nail styles, and costume choices; and allowing appropriate visible tattoos. We're updating them to not only remain relevant in today's workplace, but also enable our cast members to better express their cultures and individuality at work. Moving forward, we believe our cast, who are at the center of the magic that lives in all our experiences, can provide the best of Disney's legendary guest service when they have more options for personal expression—creating richer, more personal and more engaging experiences with our guests.” Hmm.

**Marcelle Kosman** 37:58

So the subtext here, I think, is we're not mandating our employees to look straight anymore. Which I think is huge, I think it's a really big deal. And like, not just straight, but also the thing about, “appropriate visible tattoos” is also, well, there are people who have tattoos for cultural reasons.

**Hannah McGregor** 38:17

Yeah. Same thing with hairstyles, right, like, hair and nail styles, jewelry, wearing visible tattoos, these are also ways that racism is encoded in corporate dress code practices. So there is definitely a sense here of “we are updating our understanding of what professional and appropriate dress looks like for our cast members,” and that is something that I would bet is driven by employees, and by both current employees and by a



desire to be an attractive employer.

**Marcelle Kosman** 38:54

Yeah, exactly. Exactly. So this is all part of the inclusive fifth key. And I left out stuff from the blog post about—this is also part of why they're turning a racist old ride like Splash Mountain into Tiana's Magical Bayou Adventure, whatever they're called, I don't know, it wasn't open when we went, so it's all part of a broad, across the board campaign to be better. I say hesitantly.

**Hannah McGregor** 39:24

Yeah. Oh, oh, it's so complicated.

**Marcelle Kosman** 39:28

I want to jump back to Duplan here, in light of the examples of employee-driven change at Disney, because Duplan's research into municipal governance revealed that we can see meaningful LGBTQ+ inclusion when policies are developed by and in participation with queers and queer allies. So she extrapolates from her own findings to argue that "it is through everyday practice of engagement within any institution, even including academia"—little dig there at you and me, Hannah—"that we can collectively support the creation of safer queer spaces for marginalized segments of the community." It just frankly, to me, doesn't seem that outlandish to suggest that inclusivity needs to start internally, you know?

**Hannah McGregor** 40:20

Marcelle, I have so many things I want to talk about. And I think maybe the easiest way to do it is by making you present a thesis that I can then dismantle.

**Marcelle Kosman** 40:31

Oh, yeah, I forgot that that's my favorite part of the episodes.

**Hannah McGregor** 40:36

**[Laughs]** Let's do it.

## [Upbeat musical interlude plays]

### **Hannah McGregor** 40:41

Alrighty, listeners. Push up on your lap bars to make sure they've locked, because Marcelle's theses can be loopy, unpredictable, and full of random turns.

### **Marcelle Kosman** 40:54

If pinkwashing is by necessity surface-level public image campaigning that masks ongoing harm, Disney does seem to be doing something different. As one of the most powerful organizations in the world founded on providing so-called family entertainment, and expanding its market reach in an era that is gradually revealing itself to be a neoconservative hellscape, Disney really doesn't need to bend to the will of its queer consumers, or does it? The conservative boycott of Anheuser-Busch resulted in a mere 1% drop of the company's global sales; Target's stock price dip coincided with high inflation and general curtailing of discretionary spending. So maybe hateful ideologies simply don't have the spending power that they once did. That said, as queers and queer allies, we need to be mindful that capitalism wants us to treat our money as if it's an extension of our beliefs, as though this is natural or even desirable. And so when you think about it, the market is just finding new ways to make us pay for our own representation. In this essay, I will...

### **Hannah McGregor** 42:11

I don't need to pick this apart as much as I claimed previously, because it's full of ambivalence. But let's talk about that ambivalence, because I hear it in your voice. And I feel it in my soul, which is like, this tension between saying, this is an enormous corporation with a huge amount of power, with power so significant that it can create these quasi-public but still extremely private spaces that feel like cities when you're in them, to the point that the most comparable example that you found—which I think is a legitimately comparable example—is municipal politics in the city of Geneva.

But that tells us something about the way in which this massive corporation essentially approaches being a political body in and of itself,

and that they are in many way, using their power to gently push LGBTQ+ inclusion as driven primarily by their employees. And that all of that is, in fact, symptomatic of a late capitalist hellscape.

**Marcelle Kosman** 43:35

Yeah, we live in hell. **[Hannah laughs]** But we can get rainbow Mickey ears while we're there. That's where we're at, basically. We live in hell, but at least when we go to Disneyland and somebody calls us a slur, we can get a cast member to come and actually deal with it instead of being like, "Oh, I'm sorry, ma'am."

**Hannah McGregor** 43:58

Yeah, I mean, not only can we get a cast member to come and deal with it, but then the cast members who are overwhelmingly queer make a real point of making sure that we know that we are welcomed there and desired there and part of the community there, which is above and beyond a sort of corporate level policy, right? It's in part a reality of creating a space in which a lot of the people who work there are queer and trans and gender non conforming, like, that then actually in a meaningful materialist way makes the space safer for other queer people to go.

I also can't—what is Disney doing politically in Florida? **[Marcelle laughs]** This is a question that's been on my mind that I absolutely haven't Googled, but I've been thinking about it in terms of like, they know that a lot of the people—like, probably a lot of Disney adults are queer, for example, and certainly, we've seen that they're influenced by decisions that are intended to keep them positioned as a really good employer for LGBTQ+ people. And obviously, the laws that are being passed in Florida right now make it both an incredibly unappealing place to live and work for queer and trans folks, and also an incredibly unappealing place, in fact, a dangerous place to visit for queer and trans folks. So are they pushing back against those laws?

**Marcelle Kosman** 45:40

So again, it's complicated because when we talk about Disney, we are

talking about the corporate entity that is Disney, but as we've just been talking about, the experience of being at Disney is driven primarily by the cast members. So for folks who are uninitiated, the Disney World Resort—theme parks, hotels, everything all combined together is the resort—had a kind of special tax status in Florida, up until recently, and it is also like run largely by queers, but puppet mastered by a few straight white men up at the top.

**Hannah McGregor** 46:25

Yeah, staffed largely by queers.

**Marcelle Kosman** 46:27

Yeah, yeah. So Disney gives money and has given money to every single Republican in the state of Florida. Disney is a donor, is a regular donor to the Republican Party, including to DeSantis, like, Disney gave money to Governor Ron DeSantis during his campaign, and so like—

**Hannah McGregor** 46:53

Do they also donate money to Democrats?

**Marcelle Kosman** 46:57

I don't know, because the because the articles that I was reading for this research didn't care. **[Laughs]** They were merely pointing out—

**Hannah McGregor** 47:04

Yeah, I mean, I guess it doesn't matter in terms of the actual impact. I'm just curious if it's, at a corporate level, if it's just like, anyway.

**Marcelle Kosman** 47:12

And it very well could be.

**Hannah McGregor** 47:14

They're probably donate any money to every politician that they want to like them, which is every politician, because they want laws passed that are, you know, favour them.

**Marcelle Kosman** 47:26

And I think it's also worth saying out loud that a lot of Democrats are also dirtbags.

**Hannah McGregor** 47:32

Oh, for sure. Undeniably. **[Hannah and Marcelle laugh]**

**Marcelle Kosman** 47:35

So the important thing is that Disney is a massive corporation that gives money to politicians, and those politicians use their power to enact actual harm by passing laws that prevent the discussion of non heterosexuality in say, classrooms, etc. So this is—I'm referring to what's called the "Don't Say Gay Bill." So when the "Don't Say Gay Bill" was up for debate, Disney employees were actively pushing then-CEO, Bob Chapek, to speak out against it. And he did not. His approach was that they would be silent publicly, but would do more work internally, and with the content they created to build a better world.

And Disney employees threatened to walk out, they were upset about this, and then after it passed, after the "Don't Say Gay Bill" became law, Bob Chapek issued a public apology to those employees for his own silence. And in that public apology, said, "Starting immediately, we are increasing our support for advocacy groups to combat similar legislation in other states. We are hard at work creating a new framework for our political giving that will ensure our advocacy better reflects our values. And today, we are pausing all political donations in the state of Florida pending this review." There's more, but I'll leave it there.

**Hannah McGregor** 49:24

And when was that?

**Marcelle Kosman** 49:25

This was March 11, 2022. And Chapek was very shortly after that point removed from the head, and then Bob Iger, who was the previous CEO, was reinstated.

**Hannah McGregor** 49:39

[Laughs] And he was like, “We’ll be reviewing nothing.”

**Marcelle Kosman** 49:41

It’s not like he’s a gay angel. So it’s complicated, because I think for us as non-employees, it’s easy to look at this with a lot of skepticism about how, well, that means nothing, but on the other hand, it is a public statement by the CEO of Disney that they’re not donating money because of this policy.

**Hannah McGregor** 50:03

Well, but then he was removed right after. Was he removed for the statement? Or was he removed for—

**Marcelle Kosman** 50:09

Sorry, no. He was not removed for the statement; he was removed for a whole variety—people, shareholders were unhappy in general. Disney was losing money. Can’t have that!

**Hannah McGregor** 50:18

Well, this is it, like, shareholders will remove a person in control if they’re losing money, and if they make decisions that are driven by employee satisfaction but that result in conservative backlash, that then results in fewer people going to the parks, then they’re going to back off or they’re gonna fire that person. So if their ultimate commitment is to the bottom line, this is what pinkwashing’s about, right? It’s like, you’ll do it insofar as it helps your business.

**Marcelle Kosman** 50:46

But Disney wasn’t losing money because of conservative backlash because Bob Chapek was like, “We’re not going to donate money to the Republican Party.” Disney was losing money because it had just come out of a two year pandemic and people couldn’t go to the parks, and also he had—he wasn’t a good guy, he implemented a whole bunch of things, he made things that used to be included in the price of attending cost extra and stuff. So I don’t want to give the impression that I’m a Bob Chapek apologist; I don’t care about that guy.

**Hannah McGregor** 51:11

No, no. And I don't, like, the individual white men in power mean very little to me, it's more sort of taking that step back and being like, at the end of the day, they're a business, and they're gonna make the decisions that are best for them as a business. And those decisions are not ultimately going to be driven by values. They're going to be driven by money.

**Marcelle Kosman** 51:37

I don't agree that they're not driven by values, because I think making money is a value.

**Hannah McGregor** 51:43

Oh, yeah, sorry. Yeah. **[Laughs]**

**Marcelle Kosman** 51:44

I see what what you're saying.

**Hannah McGregor** 51:47

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, they aren't gonna be driven by any other value.

**Marcelle Kosman** 51:50

Exactly.

**Hannah McGregor** 51:51

And this is, for me, where the whole public/private space thing comes in. So listeners, if you would like to hear more about some of the details of us getting hate crimed at Disneyland, the bonus episodes that we've recorded talk about it in more detail, but I keep thinking about the angry white man insisting that he was allowed to use slurs because of his First Amendment right. And the response on the part of both Raimi, whose partner's a lawyer, and the cast members, was, "This is private property; your First Amendment rights don't apply here."

And that is the way that they were arguing for like, you're not allowed—like, sure, you might be allowed to treat people like this as soon as you pass through the gates, but we have created a space that has many of

the trappings of the public sphere, that literally is like a simulacrum of the American public sphere, like, Downtown Disney, Main Street, USA, but that is, in fact, a corporately owned and private space. And in this corporately owned private space, we get to decide what behavioural norms are allowed and not allowed. And that that protection from the political environment of the country that we were in is part of what, at least for me, made me feel okay going on this trip, when otherwise I'm kind of scared of going to the US right now.

**Marcelle Kosman** 53:43

Totally. I know.

**Hannah McGregor** 53:45

But I was like, well, for the most part, I'll be inside this protected corporate bubble. And like, how does that both create a space that feels good to be in, but also disincentivizes engagement in the public sphere, or caring about the laws that make actual public spaces that you don't have to pay hundreds of dollars to access safe for queer and trans people?

**Marcelle Kosman** 54:16

Yeah. So this is the hellscape, right? Like, if you have a corporation, that is by and large responding to its employees gradually taking over the world and those employees are by and large queer and queer-allied, then sure, you can have a nice, magical, colourful world where people aren't allowed to hate crime you. But that is still a private space that you have to pay to access and is not the world that we live in. And so that's the rub. That's what's fucked.

**Hannah McGregor** 54:50

That is what's fucked.

**Marcelle Kosman** 54:50

One of the things about Disney World in Florida is that it used to be that when you got off the plane and went to the, you know, got your bags and everything. There were Disney-run buesses there to take you directly to your hotel in the property. So it really was like, you are not in Florida. You



are in Disney World.

**Hannah McGregor** 55:09

At no point do you need to be here.

**Marcelle Kosman** 55:11

Yeah. So that's the ambivalence. That's that's the "Yes, I like this. And I like escaping from the real world. But I also kind of wish that the real world were not hate crime-y."

**Hannah McGregor** 55:25

Yeah, I mean, that's, I think, the tension that I felt in general about how much I enjoyed myself. But a big part of why I enjoyed myself is because this space suspended so many of the things about day-to-day life that make it feel unlivable. And this is, I'm currently very slowly listening to Jenny Odell's second book, *Saving Time*, and she's got a section in it on theme parks, and on how much our generation likes spending money on immersive experiences, more than we like spending money on things, because our time has become so profoundly commodified, broken down into these units of potential productivity, that we are constantly trying to extract maximum value out of, and so the thing that makes the most sense to spend our money on is time. So we go to these parks to buy ourselves time outside of the relentless grind of capitalism, but of course, ironically, that possibility for time is itself a product of everybody around us working. **[Laughs]**

**Marcelle Kosman** 56:45

And also paid for by our relentless grind.

**Hannah McGregor** 56:49

Yeah, yes, sorry, we've reached the point in the episode where Coach simply must put an entire blanket over their head in despair. **[Laughs]** That's how we know we're really doing it. And while listening to that, I did have this this, like, "Will I end capitalism by not participating in this?" You know, I get caught in these theoretical loop-de-loops of, like, I don't think that I personally am going to end capitalism by boycotting Disney, and

also the BDS movement has said that the better strategy to use in relation to Disney is to write letters, which we have all been doing.

So in terms of boycotting as a tactic, that's at least one example of a political movement that has said boycott is not the tactic to use against this particular corporation. And also it's very convenient that I have come up with a theoretical argument to support continuing to do a thing that I enjoyed. But then what kind of grim, pleasureless politics am I advocating for, where the possibility of joy doesn't play a role in my political existence as a subject, and you see how now I'm just like, an ouroboros, just having a little ouroboros as a treat. And these are the traps that capitalism's constraining of our imaginations have truly closed us in. But at the end of the day, Marcelle, I am not convinced that what Disney is doing is pinkwashing.

**Marcelle Kosman** 58:35

**[Laughs]** I agree. **[Hannah laughs]** I don't think it's pinkwashing.

**Hannah McGregor** 58:39

I don't think it's pinkwashing. It's something else. It's something very complicated and very messy. But intriguingly, I don't think it's pinkwashing. Well, we'll come up with a different name for it.

**Marcelle Kosman** 58:54

That's right. Imagineer something better.

**[Upbeat musical interlude]**

**Hannah McGregor** 59:01

Material Girls is a Witch, Please production and is distributed by Acast. Why don't you enter a world of magic at [ohwitchplease.ca](http://ohwitchplease.ca), where you can find the rest of our episodes, access our transcripts, reading lists, and most importantly, our merch to commemorate your visit. We also have an excellent newsletter at [ohwitchplease.substack.com](http://ohwitchplease.substack.com) and an even better patreon at [patreon.com/ohwitchplease](http://patreon.com/ohwitchplease). Speaking of the importance of capitalism, please give us money so that we can pay people. Our Disney bonus episode comes out next week and Patreon is where you'll find part

two of that episode, where we tell you all about being hate crimed and our deep love for somebody named Robbie. You want to hear the story. So join today. We're also on Instagram, X, and Threads @ohwitchplease, and on TikTok @ohwitchpleasepod.

**Marcelle Kosman** 1:00:02

Thanks to Auto Syndicate for the use of our magical theme song "Shopping Mall." And of course, thanks to the hole Witch, Please productions cast: our digital content coordinator Gaby Iori **[sound effect: BOING]**; our social media and marketing designer, Zoe Mix **[sound effect: record player reversing]**; our transcriber, Ruth Ormiston **[sound effect: typing]**; and our executive producer, Hannah Rehak, aka COACH **[sound effect: sport whistle blowing]**!

**Hannah McGregor** 1:00:33

At the end of every episode, we will thank everyone who has joined our Patreon or boosted their tier to help make our work possible. Our enormous gratitude goes out to: Jackie T., getknittywithit, Jeanette B., Emily L., Emily H, atrichum\_regina, Jennifer K., Florencia H. V.—

**Marcelle Kosman** 1:01:00

Hi, Flo!

**Hannah McGregor** 1:01:02

—Izzy M., Kathryn G., Eric, Lena, Ellie, Megan W.—my friend, Megan's my friend, hi, Megan—and Kayla D. We'll be back next episode to tackle another piece of pop culture through a whole new theoretical lens. But until then...

**Marcelle Kosman** 1:01:25

Later, Disney animators!

**[Outro music: "Shopping Mall" by Jay Arner and Jessica Delisle]**