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## **Star Wars: Galaxy’s Edge as Postcolonial Fantasy: Disney, Labor, and the Renegotiation of Border Discourses**

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In the summer of 2019, Disneyland opened Star Wars: Galaxy’s Edge, an immersive experience where visitors imagine themselves as members of a resistance army fighting against a colonizing power. As Disney’s theme parks have increasingly become conduits of global flows, the company’s original brand of U.S. exceptionalism has become incompatible with the company’s strategic needs. In this article, we argue that Disney’s newest themed land, Galaxy’s Edge, functions as a reworking of Disney’s colonial discourse and borderland narrative, where postracial borderland fantasies coincide with the conglomerate’s evolution from a national project to a global enterprise. Within this intergalactic borderland, racialized bodies play an important role in creating an authentic experience, but in doing so, perform various forms of labor on behalf of Disney. Through an analysis of the labor that racialized bodies perform at Galaxy’s Edge, we examine how Disney’s modern-day articulation of the borderland obscures the realities of the borderlands beyond the park.

*Keywords: Latinx, critical political economy, Disney, labor, borderland*

On May 31, 2019, The Walt Disney Company opened its latest theme-park expansion, Star Wars: Galaxy’s Edge, at its Anaheim location. Based on George Lucas’s global film franchise, Galaxy’s Edge offers a wholly immersive experience, where park guests are encouraged to imagine themselves as members of a resistance army fighting against an oppressive empire, known as The First Order. At Galaxy’s Edge, park guests are immersed in the world of the Black Spire Outpost, a settlement on the remote planet of Batuu, which is home to traders, smugglers, and others operating outside the formal economy.

At more than 14 acres, Galaxy’s Edge was Disney’s largest single-themed land expansion ever and involved a collaboration among engineers, designers, and story editors, who were collectively responsible for

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creating an entire world with its own history, language, and mythology. In its press materials, Disney has positioned Galaxy's Edge as a sort of global borderland, composed of signifiers of the global south as well as the U.S. American frontier. Pablo Hidalgo, Senior Creative Director for Lucasfilm, described the process of creating Galaxy's Edge this way:

The folks who designed it traveled the world and looked at places like Marrakesh, and other far-flung lands. But a lot is a little bit more homegrown. We talked about Westerns a lot, the idea of a frontier town somewhere in the Old West, where interesting characters convene and different things can happen. (Baver, 2019, para. 5)

Hidalgo's characterization of Galaxy's Edge as being based on "far-flung lands" and the U.S. Western frontier is appropriate (Baver, 2019, para. 5). The development of Galaxy's Edge in California required a massive reconfiguration of space, which embedded the new attraction onto Frontierland, a section of the park which itself was depicted as a borderland at the edge of an empire (Fjellman, 1992). In doing so, Disney not only affirmed Lucas's original vision of *Star Wars* as a space Western, but also extended the company's tradition of transforming the border into a commodity for public consumption.

Like the concept of borderland itself, theme parks are spaces of structured inequality, which often involve encounters between the self and racialized<sup>2</sup> Others. Thus, it is the material interaction between bodies that distinguishes Disneyland from other forms of cultural production. When Disney's Frontierland was originally designed, park visitors were circulated through a curated tour of U.S. exceptionalism, encountering bodies encoded as Mexican and Native American (Francaviglia, 1995). However, in an effort to meet changing technological, economic, and cultural developments, the park was meant to be updated periodically through the addition of new updates and overlays. Thus, Galaxy's Edge can be understood as an updated version of Disney's fictional borderland. However, as Disney's theme parks have increasingly become conduits of global flows associated with global tourism, the company's original brand of U.S. exceptionalism has become incongruent with the company's global ambitions, prompting a rearticulation of the border that better suits its economic needs.

We argue that Galaxy's Edge has been designed as a postracial fantasy, coinciding with Disneyland's evolution from a national project to a global enterprise. Within Galaxy's Edge, Disney strategically positions racialized bodies front and center to create a material foundation for playing out this postracial fantasy. Focusing on the various forms of labor performed by these bodies within a commercial setting, we examine the ways in which Disney's borderland discourses obscure the realities of life on the actual border. To ground our analysis, we draw on critical political economy, a tradition that calls for the interplay between symbolic and economic dimensions of the production of meaning (Hardy, 2014).

We also draw on Anzaldúa's (1987) concept of borderland, which can be understood as a space of inequality and shifting liminalities as experienced by people negotiating multiple cultural, linguistic, and racial identities. Scholars working within the realm of speculative fiction, have employed Anzaldúa's notion

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<sup>2</sup> We employ the term "racialized" to highlight that our analysis extends beyond the diversity of the bodies themselves. We argue that ethnicity is encoded through wardrobe and language in Galaxy's Edge.

of the border both to critique the inequities wrought by capitalism and to explore alternative possibilities for resistance (C. S. Ramírez, 2002; S. Ramírez, 2017; Rivera, 2014). At the same time, Anzaldúa's notion of the borderland is a useful framework to explore the inequities posed by capitalism in an era of increasing globalization (Fox, 1994; Reyes, 2015).

By situating our analysis within these conceptual frameworks, we examine Galaxy's Edge as a discursive space that both subverts and reifies capitalist and racial ideologies. As our object of study, we focus specifically on the Anaheim theme park because it most directly reflects Walt Disney's own view of U.S. exceptionalism and because it sets up the template by which all other properties are modeled.

### **Disneyland's Evolving Borderland**

Since its opening in Anaheim, California, in 1955, Disneyland has become a site of intersecting capitalist, colonial, and racial ideologies. But as Fjellman (1992) argues, in the structured space of the park, ideology is articulated spatially. History is not so much a time, but a place. Once visitors enter the park, they are inculcated into a version of U.S. exceptionalism that is retold in sanitized and remythologized form. This is particularly evident in Frontierland, which was meant to represent a particular geotemporal locale: the U.S. American West in the late 1890s. As Fjellman (1992) argues, Frontierland was meant to represent the shifting border as it moved from the Eastern Seaboard. But by celebrating a frontier that disappeared right before his birth, Disney was contributing to larger discourses about the United States' imperial past. With its replicas of railroads, steamboats, and lumber mills, Frontierland celebrated the exploitation of natural resources that facilitated the country's rapid economic growth.

According to Widdis (2019), the actual frontier border during the 19th century was marked by a significant degree of cultural hybridity, as intercultural accommodations were made to facilitate trade. In its original iteration, Frontierland represented the multicultural makeup of the West by including Anglo, Native American, and Mexican bodies, either in the form of live actors or as animatronic figures (Francaviglia, 1995). However, Disney's borderland was a highly racialized space that clearly demarcated between Anglo and the racialized Other. Native Americans played either the role of hostile native or the peaceful, industrious Indian. The original Frontierland also included a Mexican Village attraction, alluding to the West's Spanish history, but Latinxs<sup>3</sup> were otherwise peripheral to the narrative.

Disney's treatment of racialized bodies is consistent with larger discourses surrounding the concept of border, in which Latinxs and Native Americans have been reframed as intruders, despite their longstanding presence in the region (Anzaldúa, 1987). Here, it is important to consider that Disney's fictional borderland is situated in the actual borderland region of Southern California, in which social inequities continue to persist. Focusing primarily on the U.S.-Mexico border, Anzaldúa deftly explored the borderland as a space of continued conflict, largely related to colonization. As Anzaldúa (1987) describes it, the border is "an open wound where the third world grates against the first and bleeds" (p. 25).

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<sup>3</sup> By employing the term "Latinx," we join other scholars who are attempting to use terms that are more inclusive of nonbinary gender identities.

Scholars have built on Anzaldúa's framework to explore the problematic nature of globalization as bodies, information, and capital flow more easily across borders. As Fox (1994) argues, the border has become a trope that signifies both a geographic reality and a set of relationships among people. Studies of the borders and borderlands make wide use of binaries to explore these inequalities, serving as spaces where the third world meets the first world, citizen meets alien, legal meets illegal, human meets nature, and so forth. As Fox (1994) argues, narratives around borderlands are rarely site specific. Rather, the border is now found to be in any large, urban center wherever poor, displaced, ethnic immigrant, or sexual minority populations collide with the hegemonic population. These disparities become particularly manifest around issues of labor. Furthermore, borderlands are increasingly understood as trade zones that rely on labor. However, Rivera (2014) has argued that global capitalism has created a vast North American underclass, in which the labor of Latinxs in the United States and mestizos in Mexico provide the labor for the consumer class.

### **Star Wars and the Renegotiation of Border Discourses**

In 1984, a formal business relationship between Lucas and Disney's theme parks was established, which resulted in Lucas-themed rides, including Captain EO, Star Tours, and the Indiana Jones Adventure (Svonkin, 2012). However, when Disney purchased Lucasfilm Ltd. for \$4 billion in 2012, various Star Wars properties were meant to have a more transformative impact on Disney's theme parks.

Disney and *Star Wars* share similar ideological sensibilities. As Svonkin (2012) argues, both Disney and Lucas share an attraction to technology and a nostalgic fixation on the past. But while Disney's version of the past is more clearly a celebration of empire, *Star Wars* has reflected a more ambivalent relationship with colonialism. Written during Nixon's presidency and the final days of the Vietnam War, Lucas's saga is about a conflict between an alliance of oppressed peoples who are fighting off an evil empire that is all human, all White, and primarily British (Wetmore, 2005). Yet, much like Disney's version of empire, Lucas's franchise placed whiteness at its center. Over the years, Lucas's saga has been critiqued for its structured absence of people of color, and for developing alien characters with real-life antecedents. These characters are coded as racial "other" and presented as unequivocally abnormal and threatening (Nama, 2008).

But as the company has expanded, Disney has attempted to diversify in an effort to appease international markets, signaling the promise of the global marketplace. Integrating *Star Wars* into its global, product portfolio, therefore, meant divesting the films of their more problematic aspects and reinserting racialized bodies prominently into the franchise. Sean Bailey, Disney president of motion-picture production, asserted that "inclusivity is not only a priority but an imperative for us, and it's top of mind on every single project" (Ford, 2016, para. 4). Former Disney CEO Bob Iger put it more directly, stating that "diversity is not only important; it is a core strategy for the company" (Richardson, 2015, para. 3).

Galaxy's Edge's basis in science fiction can enable Disney to achieve its strategic objectives while raising new possibilities to renegotiate border discourses by critiquing the past and considering alternate political futures. As Lavender (2014) argues, science fiction can assist our understanding of the social changes occurring as the western world ceases to be dominated by the white majority. In particular, science fiction allows new possibilities to critique social inequities that exist on the border. Additionally, as Merla-Watson and Olguín (2017) note, science fiction produced in and around the borderlands has interrogated the problems of globalization and

neoliberalism as they relate to marginalized communities in the Americas, specifically in and around the U.S.–Mexico border.

Because of the possibilities available through the speculative, authors of science fiction have explored theories of borderlands in important ways. Arguing that Anzaldúa was the first Chicana science fiction writer, S. Ramírez (2017), argues that Anzaldúa worked through her ideas about the borderland by writing science fiction before anything else (including science fiction poetry). It is the reimagining of a new world, often based in science and technology, that allows content creators the ability to explore representational possibilities for bodies that are seldom positioned as heroic. As such, science fiction also allows for a critique of power structures and relations. Science fiction, then, can provide a space for borderlands to be reimagined.

As it relates to this study, Fox (1994) argues that borderlands must be increasingly understood as trade zones that necessitate labor. From this perspective, Galaxy's Edge raises unique considerations, given its unique relationship to globalization, in which increased flows of tourists emanate from many different countries, including those of the "orient" that once were places visited and consumed by those from "the west" (Urry, 2008, p. 152). Today, Disney's theme parks receive visitors from across the world, including former colonies. Additionally, residents with annual passes comprise a large portion of Disneyland's guests, most of whom come from Southern California, a multiethnic region.

Within the confines of Galaxy's Edge, racialized bodies play an important part in making visitors believe they are inhabiting an authentic borderland. Disney uses this gloss of diversity to create "authentic" experiences and reach out to various global audiences, while still centering normative Whiteness. In this type of tourism, exotic cultures figure as key attractions, but as MacCannell (1999) argues, bodies are made available for visual consumption as tourists hope for real performances and the impression of a genuine, unmediated encounter. However, there exist significant inequities within global tourism. Tourists engage with locals, who perform various forms of labor in transportation, hospitality, travel, design and consultancy (Urry, 2008).

In this article, we explore the various forms of labor that racialized bodies perform on behalf of Disney's Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge. In doing so, we explore the multiple gazes and positionalities of various actors in global capitalism by building on Anzaldúa's (1987) argument that borderlands serve as transitional spaces in which marginalized Others straddle multiple ways of being and seeing, a concept that she describes as *nepantla*. In this case, we explore both the shifting subjectivities of participants in a fictional borderland that itself is embedded within an actual borderland of the U.S. American West.

When "ethnic" peoples first became enmeshed in the global monetary system, they were discriminated against on the basis of color, not paid a fair market price for their labor, not educated, and labeled as inferior (MacCannell, 1999). But within Galaxy's Edge, when ethnic groups participate in a global network of interactions, it raises new possibilities for inclusion or the potential for the existence of *nepantla*. People who were once despised for being ethnically different are now accepted as moral if not economic equals.

In our exploration of the labor present within Galaxy's Edge, we employ a critical political economy approach, a line of inquiry that examines ways in which audiences are interpellated into broader corporate interests (Meehan, 2005; Wasko, 2001). This means not only looking at the meaning and ideology embedded

within Disney's theme parks but also at how the company is organized, funded, and regulated (Wasko, 2020). At the same time, we attend to the borderland discourses that flow throughout the park, and Galaxy's Edge in particular, especially in relation to the labor required within these zones and the types of possibilities available in this space in comparison to other sections of the park. As borderlands work within the context of colonization, we rely on an understanding of colonialism as both a political-economic reality and a system of cultural representation (Hall, 1997) that involves the construction of a devalued other, which is necessary to justify the subjugation of peoples under imperial control. To this end, we are interested in the ways in which Disney represents, and then economically leverages, the labor of the marginalized racialized other.

We conducted field research in the winter of 2019 at Galaxy's Edge in Anaheim during the opening year of the attraction. During the visit, we took comprehensive notes on the storylines and characters, the physical landscape, and the spatial design that shapes interactions among people. These observations were supplemented by paratexts surrounding the development and opening of the park, including press releases, public statements, and websites from Disney and Star Wars as well as the press coverage during the opening year, 2019. We also focused on Disney's corporate communications reports, which are designed to facilitate the sharing of information to various stakeholders (including investors, potential clients, and media analysts) to whom an organization is beholden.

Additionally, we analyzed a number of tie-in products that extend the Galaxy's Edge experience beyond the theme park, which included the Galaxy's Edge comic book series, two novels, a cookbook, and a travel guide. These products are used for cross-promotional purposes, what Wasko (2003) terms Disney synergy, which allow other units to benefit from the interest in Galaxy's Edge, but also serve the purpose of creating the history, characters, and mythology of the area.

### **Galaxy's Edge as Global Borderland**

At the Anaheim location, Galaxy's Edge is oriented at the North of the park and is buttressed by Frontierland to the right and Critter Country to the left, which has interrupted what Fjellman (1992) refers to as Disney's ideological journey through U.S. American history, in which visitors were led from Colonial America, through U.S. western expansion. As it does with its other theme park sections, Disney has gone to great lengths to give visitors the impression that Galaxy's Edge is a real place, that exists for the time period during which the visitors inhabit that space.

In its design, Galaxy's Edge was conceived of as a global borderland, which is consistent with Lucas's original vision for the franchise, which takes place not at the center of the galaxy, but at its margins. While the designers of Galaxy's Edge created an entire planet with its own architecture, history, customs, and traditions, they believed that visitors needed referents based in the real world. As Lucasfilm vice president and creative director Doug Chiang stated about Galaxy's Edge, "one of the interesting challenges for this was to find a world that felt exotic enough and yet felt familiar" (Baver, 2019, para. 3). To accomplish this exotic yet familiar feeling, the designers traveled to Istanbul, Turkey, and Marrakesh, Morocco, which, according to Disney, inspired the "Black Spire Outpost's authentically earthy, yet otherworldly environment" (Frye, 2019, para. 10).

In other ways, Galaxy's Edge resembles other global borderlands that exist within science fiction literature, which signify the changing social and cultural landscape of large, metropolitan cities that have emerged in the wake of globalization (Rivera, 2014). According to Rivera (2014) these cities host a lawless, black market economy of drugs and information. They often host distinct ethnic enclaves decorated with curious, non-Western symbols to signify their otherness. However, in an effort to make the setting more conducive to consumption, Disney has cleaned up the more unsavory elements. Instead, Disney has created a multisensory experience in which the sounds, smells, and flavors all evoke ethnic referents.

We also found that the presence of racialized bodies was essential to creating an experience that could be deemed as authentic, based on the Global South. The interactions among bodies are an essential component to the experience. According to Urry (2008), global tourism involves *corporeal* travel, in which aged, gendered, and racialized bodies, move from place to place, encountering other racialized bodies, objects, and the physical world multisensuously. But within the commercial setting of Disneyland, we found that racialized bodies perform particular kinds of labor on behalf of Disney. Specifically, we found that racialized bodies labor in three primary ways: as performers, as licensed characters, and as consumers.

### **The Labor of Racialized Bodies**

First, racialized bodies serve as performers that directly interact with the park guests. The diversity of the cast members at Galaxy's Edge is not simply a function of the diverse labor pool of Southern California, from which Disney draws. It appears as if these bodies have been deliberately coded as Other through the use of "local languages," phenotype, and attire. They speak in regionalisms and wear tunics, keffiyehs, and straw conical hats that are meant to signify difference. Additionally, Galaxy's Edge includes more non-White characters than do other themed lands in the park.

"Character," here, specifically refers to cast members who are playing characters from Disney franchises, as opposed to simply park cast members (i.e., gift shop employees). Disney is strategic with its casting practices, and when it comes to characters, the company carefully casts certain "types" for the roles they will play. The "types" involve voice, body type, age, and phenotype (Fantozzi, 2017). In the Fantasy Faire (the princess section of Fantasyland), for instance, non-White cast members often end up playing multiple non-White princesses. For example, a cast member playing Jasmine one week often plays Pocahontas the following week (depending on park needs).

Not only are Disney park employees (known as cast members) carefully chosen for the parts they will play, but once their shifts begin, they must engage in a never-ending state of performance. But the labor they perform on behalf of the company is made invisible and rendered "magical" (Bryman, 2004, p. 104). The Project on Disney (1995) explains that through the parks, Disney "marshalls the creative and emotional energies of its workers and creates a situation in which they are always performing for the company" (p. 113), though park guests are not to be aware of this performance. Their constant performance is coupled with the affective and emotional labor necessary to sustain all that is expected of them from park guests.

Galaxy's Edge, unlike other Disney themed areas, does not feature structured character meet-and-greets, thus adding a unique type of labor for the cast members to perform. Most of the other lands at the



park have designated times and locations for character appearances, but central to the experience at Galaxy's Edge is the uncertainty of which character guests will meet or which performances they will be able to watch. Here, the characters roam the land immersed in the world of Batuu, with various activities to engage in. Depending on the character, they may interact heavily with park guests, enlist guests to help in a task, or simply tell a quick tale. In these roles, the performers employ the vernacular of Batuu to assist with the illusion that guests are in a different land, with its own language. For example, "bright suns" is their expression for "hello" during the day, while "rising moons" is the phrase used for the evening and night, to bid someone farewell (Horton, 2020, p. 131).

Galaxy's Edge has been designed as a polyglot, where numerous languages are spoken, including Aurebesh, the fictitious language of Batuu (see Figure 1). Prominent signs are written in this "local language," a tactic meant to render the space exotic, which is consistent with Valdivia's (2020) argument that language plays an important role in the creation of mediated authenticity. By incorporating words that are difficult (or almost impossible) to pronounce in English, along with quick non-English phrases, the media render characters and locations as "exotic" or "authentic" but always falling outside of the U.S. national imaginary. Yet these words or phrases are made accessible and safe for the normative park guests to consume through translation and regulation processes (Leon-Boys, 2020). If confused by any of the signs in Galaxy's Edge, park guests can easily translate the language on the Disneyland mobile application.



**Figure 1. Aurebesh sign at the Black Spire Marketplace in Galaxy's Edge.**

Disney has curated a cast of characters for Galaxy's Edge from across its many properties. The most notable of these is Vi Moradi, a spy for the resistance. Moradi is one of the few Black, female characters in the Star Wars universe. Along with Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), she is currently only one of two Black female cast members at Disneyland who portray a Disney character. Moradi roams Galaxy's Edge at designated times, enlisting guests to help her in the crusade against the first order, but she is also the protagonist of the "Vi Moradi stunt show," a four-minute performance that takes place a few times a day, which culminates in her defeating the first order with the help of Chewbacca.

Racialized bodies perform labor as licensed characters in various ways. This kind of racialized labor extends beyond the theme park and into the tie-in products, including the comics, books, toys, and video games. For example, in addition to her work as a performer, Vi Moradi is also the protagonist in Delilah Dawson's (2019) tie-in book, *Galaxy's Edge: Black Spire*, which was released the same year that Galaxy's Edge opened. Additionally, human characters that are coded as Black, Latinx, and Asian were developed or created specifically for Galaxy's Edge. Similarly, Galaxy's Edge features the character of Izzy Garsea (pronounced Garcia), the protagonist in *Galaxy's Edge: Crash of Fate*. Written by Zoraida Córdova (2019), who is originally from Ecuador, the author integrates Latin American sensibilities into the story through the choice of various names such as the name Belan, Ata Walpa (Atahualpa), and Cuyacan (Coyoacán).

Then there are the prerecorded videos embedded within the attraction's two main rides, Smuggler's Run and Rise of the Resistance. Both attractions include prerecorded videos that feature actors from the most recent film trilogy, including African British actor John Boyega and Latinx actor Oscar Isaac, two actors that were hired as part of a strategy to diversify the Star Wars universe (Bastián, 2015). The cross-over between the films and the theme park is consistent with Disney's practices of building synergies across properties (Wasko, 2003). This is not to say that participants are unaware of Disney's racializing practices. Boyega has expressed an awareness of how ethnicity is being deployed on behalf of Disney in superficial ways. During an interview with *GQ*, Boyega was openly critical of how Disney has leveraged diversity, while continuing to sideline characters of color. He addressed the inconsistencies with marketing by explaining that Disney highlights characters of color through advertising, but then relegates them to the margins in the actual productions (Carras, 2020).

But as Urry (2008) argues, performers with their aged, gendered, and racialized bodies interact meaningfully with tourists, who perform forms of labor in their own right. Just as is the case with the live performers who are referred to as cast members, as soon as tourists (and any paying customers) enter the park they are Disney guests. These terms are part of the Disney parks' internal language and culture. When it comes to those visiting the park from outside of California, as Urry (2008) indicates, there have been large increases of tourists emanating from many different countries that were once considered to be part of the "orient" and were visited and consumed by visitors from "the west" (p. 152). These trends in tourism inform Disney's decision-making strategies. Furthermore, Disneyland draws recurring visitors from Southern California, which hosts significant Latinx, African American, and Asian American communities. Even South of the California border, Disneyland is also a prominent destination for visitors from Mexico. All of these different kinds of bodies, both national and international, comprise the fabric of the non-White Disneyland tourism, which the conglomerate is well aware of.

The labor that the racialized bodies perform as tourists is undeniably linked to ticket sales. At \$133 per ticket (for one-day, single park visits during the week), Disneyland generates significant income for the company. A large portion of these tickets are being purchased by people of color, especially the season passes that are purchased by those that live in the greater Los Angeles area, which is home to people from more than 140 countries who speak 224 languages that have been identified. Additionally, Los Angeles has a significant Latinx population, which accounts for 49% (U.S. Census, 2020). According to the Themed Entertainment Association, in 2017 Disneyland admissions were above 18,300,000 ("Theme Index," 2017). *The 2019 Annual Investor Report* reveals that by September 28, 2019 "Parks, Experiences, and Products" had generated \$26.7 billion USD (The Walt Disney Company, 2019). Although the parks took significant hits with the 2020–21 COVID-19 closures, they continue to form a central piece of the company's revenue generating puzzle.

The labor that the racialized bodies perform here extends beyond ticket sales to theme park purchases. Park guests are continuously encouraged to shop at the numerous retail outlets that pervade the park and to patronize the various eateries. A main feature of Galaxy's Edge is "merchant row" (see Figure 2), which is designed as an informal marketplace. The partially covered street is home to several local retail stores, including Black Spire Outfitters, an apparel shop, and the Jewels of Bith, where tourists can buy costume jewelry and handbags. The row also includes a creature shop, where tourists can buy toys, while engaging in the fantasy that they are buying exotic animals on the black market. This is a place where the formal market takes on the form of the informal. Souvenir shops with fixed prices are disguised as small, entrepreneurial businesses.



**Figure 2. Entrance to "merchant row" at Galaxy's Edge.**

### **Discussion**

Although *borderland* is primarily a spatial concept, the temporal factor becomes central for understanding the relationship among various actors (Widdis, 2019). Borderlands are complex sites of struggles and contradictions (C. S. Ramírez, 2002). Guided by this approach to studying borderlands, we analyzed Disney's Galaxy's Edge in relation to its temporal and geographic contexts, both at the park and beyond. Our assumption then is that the 19th century borderland that Walt Disney envisioned in 1955 reflects a different set of ideologies than the intergalactic borderland that Corporate Disney created in 2019.

As previously noted, Anzaldúa's ties to science fiction are vast as scholars have revisited her borderlands writings through the lens of science fiction (i.e., C. S. Ramírez, 2002; S. Ramírez, 2017). In this way, science fiction is understood as a space where non-White people can explore and critique the status quo and the relationships between nondominant groups and their material conditions (C. S. Ramírez, 2002). These texts not only provide spaces for a unique type of critique to unfold but they also allow non-White people a space to imagine alternate possibilities for themselves (S. Ramírez, 2017).

We keep this in mind and complicate previous arguments that Disney presents a cohesive ideological narrative (Fjellman, 1992; Real, 1996). Instead, we argue that it is more appropriate to think of Disneyland

as consisting of layers of competing ideologies, which not only represent the lands and periods they purport to represent, but also the socioeconomic conditions of the times in which they were designed and constructed. These layers are constantly rebuilt, keeping in mind how cultural influences and technological developments intersect with commercial goals.

At one level, the fictional borderland of Galaxy's Edge is a direct rebuke of Disney's original vision of the border, which celebrated U.S. exceptionalism and the subjection of ethnic others. Rather than serving at the periphery, the multiethnic inhabitants of Galaxy's Edge are elevated to the roles of heroic figures and become active agents in determining human destiny. Many are serving as members of a separatist army, which is actively resisting the kind of colonialist practices that are celebrated by Frontierland. Additionally, this space is teeming with discourses of rebellion (through the rides, merchandise, and cast members' dialogue).

In addition to the rebellion discourses, it is important to consider the role of language within Galaxy's Edge. As previously noted, the cast members in Galaxy's Edge speak numerous languages, including the fictitious Aurebesh. This mixture of languages, both spoken and written, is reminiscent of language hybridity on the actual borderlands beyond the park. Through Galaxy's Edge, Disneyland creates a space where the characters within Batuu, on the edge of a galaxy, appear to operate in a similar way to those who inhabit real borderlands. This experience is not only shaped by the presence of racialized bodies, but by the use of language within the space.

We see here how the borderland trope serves as another example of the layers on layers of competing ideologies present within Disneyland. However, what appears to be a rebuke of Disney's border, the inclusion of rebellion discourses, and the use of a fictitious hybrid language falls flat. The fictional borderland of Galaxy's Edge is bounded within the context of global tourism, which limits the degree to which the inequities inherent within the border can be interrogated. The possibility for the existence of *nepantla* is limited and constrained within consumerism and global tourism. In this way, Disneyland itself acts as a sort of borderland, a semiautonomous, privately controlled geographic location geared toward international exchange. Here, we borrow from Reyes's (2015) notion of Global borderland, which moves away from national borders toward specialized spaces that are defined by significant social, cultural, and economic exchange among nationalities.

We found that Disney employs various strategies intended to make the ideological readjustments necessary to accommodate its new economic reality. This new global reality calls for a different type of narrative, one which highlights racialized bodies, but ultimately to advance the conglomerate's economic goals. In an effort to facilitate these transnational exchanges, Disney must reach out to previously ignored audience segments, as demographic trends shift. In doing so, Disney's various spaces have been modified both to leverage the movie properties and to rectify gender and racial problems.

Profit motive shapes how Disney conceptualizes borderlands in a number of ways. First, resistance is highly controlled and presented firmly within the context of consumption. Galaxy's Edge is a place where the formal market takes on the form of the informal. Souvenir shops with fixed prices are disguised as small, entrepreneurial businesses. But as Eco (1986) points out, Disneyland encourages absolute passivity on the part of the visitor/consumer. By disguising the commercial enterprise as fantasy, visitors are purchasing, while believing that they are playing. There are a number of fake small businesses, meant only for effect, that are

interspersed with real Disney shops and eateries disguised as small businesses. A faux business selling artisanal products (carved wood) appears right next to The Toydarian Toymaker, a vendor that sells products based on Star Wars licensed characters (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3. The Toydarian at Galaxy's Edge.**

In this fantasy, visitors are operating outside the formal economy, where transactions can be negotiated, despite the reality that this is a highly formalized and structured marketplace, where the prices are fixed, and visitors are paying a premium. Visitors can also patronize a Droid Cart (see Figure 4), which resembles the ubiquitous *ambulantes* of Latin America. There they can buy a range of Coca-Cola products at a premium. The cart appears weathered and bears "foreign" markings, written in Aurebesh, although the Coca-Cola branding is clearly recognizable.



**Figure 4. Coca-Cola droid cart at Galaxy's Edge.**

Unique to this commercialized setting is the prominence of resistance narratives at Galaxy's Edge. This stands out in relation to the other themed lands, especially through the merchandise. We encountered products that promote subversion, such as T-shirts and general clothes that say "Resist," along with "Wanted" posters, but this form of subversion is sanctioned by the market.

However, struggle is purely spectacle. The conflicts alluded to in Galaxy's Edge have been detached from their original sociohistoric contexts. In what Garcia-Canclini (2001) calls the "frivolous homogenization" of diverse cultures by the market, the inequities faced by specific groups along the border, and the policing of those bodies have been reduced to a set of visual images that serve primarily aesthetic purposes (p. 133). For example, during their research, the design team looked to the Middle East to see how shopkeepers, restaurateurs and residents in historic neighborhoods adapted to strife and instability. According to Executive Creative Director, Chris Beatty, "We were looking for places that had a lot of conflict. That had a lot of history, romance and a lot of nationalities living together" (Martens, 2019, para. 24).

However, we found that these spaces are meant to only visually signify conflict. Having been divested of any racial politics, Galaxy's Edge simply ignores the inequities that lead to conflict between ethnic groups in such spaces. In this way, Galaxy's Edge resembles less the products of science fiction, which explore ethnic conflict in the wake of globalization, and more science fiction films which emerged in the postindustrial era, in which cooperation among various ethnic groups is presented as necessary for resisting power (Nama, 2008).

This strategy closely aligns with Disney's overall colorblind approach to race, in which diversity may be represented, but it is done so without addressing racial politics (Chávez, 2017). Because Disney both acknowledges race but disregards its significance in the plotting of Galaxy Edge's storyline, we found that performers and tourists of color engage a postracial fantasy in which race simply is not a factor. But as Garcia-Canclini (2001) has argued, colorblindness has been used as a strategy that has enabled powerful institutions to maintain the dominant social order. This became apparent in the interactions between performers and tourists. The park guests come to spend money, and have the resources to travel, pay the admissions fee, and buy the merchandise. These guests move side-by-side, with the cast members, who are grounded locally and paid for their services, receiving anywhere from \$11-\$15 an hour, wages which have long been central to employee protests (Picchi, 2018). Additionally, the guests and cast members within Galaxy's Edge operate alongside the licensed characters belonging both to Galaxy's Edge and Star Wars at large.

For the purposes of this study, we have focused on visible forms of labor, but we must also account for the invisible labor, including the "brown collar" workers (Catanzarite, 2000): the mechanics, cooks, custodians, who are integral to the operation. These workers have relatively little agency over their working conditions, demonstrating Cohen's (2004) argument that we are currently in a moment where it is very easy to be a spectator of global culture, but very difficult to be an actor. This became evident when, in 2020, Disney announced significant layoffs related to the COVID-19 pandemic. These layoffs mostly affected the Parks, Experiences, and Products unit, where 67% of those laid off were part-time workers, many of whom are people of color. Disneyland received the largest part of these cuts given that the state of California imposed stricter policies on this park than the other national park in Florida, which reopened in July of 2020 (after closing in March of 2020).

### **Conclusion**

In July 2020, actress Alex Marshall-Brown was sitting on a blanket outside of a church in Los Angeles. Marshall-Brown is known for originating the character of Vi Moradi during the Galaxy's Edge premier, but that summer she received national notoriety when two White men attempted to coerce her off the church premises. Claiming that she was a threat to children, the men threatened to call the police, posted a "No Trespassing" sign close to where she was sitting, and told her that "All Lives Matter," a rebuke to the Black Lives Matter movement (Lelyveld, 2020).

Marshall-Brown's harassment came at a moment in which nationwide attention has been paid to how racialized bodies are policed. But Marshall-Brown's experience also demonstrates the clear disconnect between her lived experiences as a racialized Other living in Southern California and that of her alter ego, Vi Moradi, who is highly empowered, and operates in a world in which race is a nonissue.

Originally, Disneyland was built as a White public space in which encounters like these would not occur because racialized bodies would stay safely in their place. Consider that in 1955 Disneyland was designed as a critique of Los Angeles (Marling, 1998), a city that was well on its way to becoming a global city. In doing so, Walt Disney deliberately built his park on an orange grove in Anaheim, and then replaced it with an idealized version of the U.S. that marginalized people of color.



Seventy years later, corporate Disney would create a fictional global borderland in which its inhabitants defy this very kind of policing and profiling. The inhabitants create new possibilities for themselves by resisting, starting rebellions, and even prominently communicating in languages other than English. This fictional global borderland would then be grafted onto a fictional Western frontier, which itself was embedded on to the real frontier, in which the marginalized peoples never really left. However, Disney's new space both celebrates global expansion and critiques it, reflecting the ideological contradictions embedded within Galaxy's Edge. As a borderland, prototypes of the Black Spire Outpost can be found within the genre of science fiction, which was meant to explore, and sometimes critique, the transformation of U.S. cities in the wake of globalization (Rivera, 2014). Within this space, there is a sort of call for global (intergalactic) solidarity among colonized Others, which is acceptable to Disney as long as it stays contained within the realm of fantasy and consumption.

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