POSTFEMINISM AT PLAY: PRETEND PLAY WITH DISNEY PRINCESS TRANSMEDIA IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT. This article examines how young children take up gender and sexuality discourses embedded in Disney Princess transmedia narratives and merchandise. A feminist ethnographic study conducted in two Canadian early childhood education and care (ECEC) classrooms found that young children often take up stereotypically gendered, heteronormative roles from princess transmedia during pretend play. The author contends that princess play includes problematic postfeminist themes, yet also offers agentic, pleasurable roles for children to embody. Disney's hyperfeminine princess aesthetic is sometimes utilized by girls to subvert inequitable gender hierarchies and claim powerful positions within play scenarios. However, femmephobia can result in reinforcement of hegemonic gender discourses via gender policing. Implications for gender equity in ECEC environments are discussed.

LE POSTFÉMINISME EN JEU: LES JEUX IMAGINAIRES AVEC LA NARRATION TRANSMÉDIA DES PRINCESSES DISNEY DANS L'ÉDUCATION PRÉSCOLAIRE

RÉSUMÉ. Cet article examine la manière dont les jeunes enfants s'approprient les discours sur le genre et la sexualité enracinés dans la narration transmédia et les produits de la marque Disney Princess. Une étude ethnographique féministe menée dans deux classes d'éducation à la petite enfance canadienne a déterminé que les jeunes enfants incarnent les rôles stéréotypés liés au genre et hétéronormatifs que l'on retrouve dans le transmédia des princesses pendant leurs jeux imaginaires. L'auteur soutient que les jeux de princesse comprennent des thèmes postféministes problématiques, mais qu'ils offrent également des rôles autonomisantes. L'esthétique hyperféminine du transmédia princesse de Disney est parfois utilisée par les filles pour renverser les hiérarchies inéquitables. Cependant, la femmephobie peut entraîner un renforcement des discours hégémoniques.

Launched in 2001, the Disney Princess brand has grown to become a multi-billion-dollar transmedia princess-industrial complex (Orenstein, 2011) designed to capitalize on the Walt Disney Corporation's promotion of a collective girl-power image. Over the past 20 years, the marketing messages associated with the brand have evolved from beauty, friendship and romance, to an ostensibly progressive feminist approach focused on heroism, bravery, kindness and diversity. In the licensed merchandise, however, tensions arise between Disney's progressive princessdom and postfeminist girlhood (McRobbie, 2009).

The current study employs a feminist poststructuralist and queer theoretical lens to examine how gender and sexuality discourses embedded in transmedia narratives and merchandise are taken up via pretend play in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings. It asks whether young children, primarily girls, embody the stereotypically gendered, heteronormative roles embedded in Disney princess transmedia, and what impact this may have on their co-construction of gendered subjectivities. In addition, it investigates whether the postfeminist discourses that media scholars suggest are present in Disney's newer princess films are present during pretend play. Observation of pretend play scenarios with toys and dress-up items suggest that transmedia-related princess play offers girls agentic, pleasurable roles. However, such roles can have a liberatory and/or confining impact on their gendered social positioning in the ECEC classroom.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Over the past few decades, Thorne (1993), MacNaughton (2000), Davies (2003), Blaise (2005), Robinson and Jones-Diaz (2006) and Gunn (2017) have drawn from feminist poststructuralist (Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1997) and queer theoretical frameworks (Butler, 2006) to understand how children constitute themselves as gendered beings. These approaches have challenged established perspectives in early years research that rely on a developmentalist view of gender as fixed, stable and biologically-based. Instead, feminist poststructuralists understand gender as a relational social construct in which children play an active role in co-constructing their own subjectivity through discourse and via interactions with the world around them. For its part, queer theory speaks to how masculinities and femininities operate within heteronormative frameworks to constrain individuals' possibilities for diverse, powerful, gender positionings. Children regulate, uphold, and transgress gender norms to generate a

sense of belonging, and position themselves within power hierarchies in the classroom. These positionings are never fixed, shifting from moment to moment depending on the people and interactions, as well as the cultural-historical context. As Blaise (2010) suggests, "children's identity construction is a dynamic and continuous process in a constant state of renegotiation" (p. 2).

Feminist Poststructuralism

Feminist poststructuralism emphasizes the contextual, culturally mediated nature of knowledge, looking to discourses to understand how subjectivity and reality are produced, and how power circulates between individuals, groups, and institutions (Weedon, 1997). Although discourse can refer to spoken or written language, poststructuralist theory examines what Gee (2011) terms big "D" Discourse: a set of understandings that result in the enactment of socially recognizable identities. Discourses maintain their own tacit boundaries and regulations that govern what is normal and acceptable, producing taken-for-granted "truths" about particular aspects of the societies we live in. Hegemonic discourses are those that gain the most traction, or that "at the moment, have the greatest influence on the collective imagination" (Davis, 2004, p. 127). Feminist poststructuralist theorists are specifically interested in how hegemonic discourses related to gender and sexuality are maintained or disrupted.

Queer Theory

Queer theory allows for radical re-imaginings of human identity, unconstrained by gender binaries or heteronormativity. Appropriate gender performances are tied to the notion that there are particular types of (hegemonic, dominant) masculinity that are required to balance out (emphasized, subordinate) femininity in order to meet society's expectations for male-female couplings (Connell, 1987)—thus invisibilizing non-hegemonic practices. Judith Butler (2006) proposes instead the notion of gender performativity, where gender is an effect produced through bodily practices and language. This has particular relevance in ECEC settings where children are actively working at establishing what it means to be a "boy" and/or a "girl" within a gendered, classed and racialized classroom environment. Queer theory also plays an important role in feminist ECEC research because early years education has lagged behind in developing more inclusive policies aimed at addressing the realities of transgender and nonbinary students (Janmohamed, 2010). Classroom practices remain mired in discourses of childhood innocence

and developmentalism which invoke moral panics regarding children and sexuality, particularly queer sexualit(ies) (Surtees & Gunn, 2010).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transmedia

Transmedia involves the cross-promotion of media franchises and characters via synergistic marketing through films, television, video games, books, apps and other media, in addition to the licensing of brands for the production of toys and merchandise. Transmedia has existed since the advent of comic strips and radio programs (Cross, 1997), and was then expanded with the introduction of federally deregulated program length commercials (PLCs) in the 1980s. PLCs were 30-minute serialized animated programs designed by toy manufacturers with the sole purpose of marketing lines of toys to children.

The original PLCs and their associated toys were highly gendered, with themes of femininity, passivity, and friendship for girls, and hegemonic masculine ideals of dominance, aggression, militarism and competitiveness for boys (Seiter, 1995). To increase profitability, marketers attempted to segregate potential audiences by age and gender. Following the introduction of PLCs, transmedia marketing became the go-to formula for children's entertainment (Kinder, 1991), and has continued with the rise in "smart" handheld communication devices and the proliferation of media streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and Disney+. Media corporations have also begun to recycle, reboot, or repackage previously successful franchises to appeal to younger viewers and their parents.

Although some ECEC classrooms favour more open-ended, educational items, transmedia artifacts easily find their way into classrooms in the form of toys brought from home, children's clothing, lunchboxes, classroom décor, and informal exchanges of media-related knowledge (Pugh, 2009). Pretend play in ECEC classrooms therefore offers a particularly interesting window into children's understanding and internalization of gendered transmedia narratives. Wohlwend (2012) suggests that during pretend play, transmedia artifacts serve as:

> Identity texts that circulate a dense set of expectations for children as viewers, consumers, producers, and players, producing a need for nuanced understanding of the complex ways that young children take up, replay, or revise the gendered messages designed into their favourite media. (p. 594)

These "anticipated identities" (Wohlwend, 2009) perform a cultural-historical function of maintaining a society's myths by reproducing archetypes such as princesses and superheroes. Pretend play also serves an anticipatory socialization function, as children take on adult roles and test out the boundaries of acceptable gender presentations. . Rees-Chappell (2008) terms the discursive space of transmedia-related play the "colonized imaginary" in which children "embody historically and culturally specific roles in dynamics of power contestation" (p. 9).

Postfeminism

Postfeminist discourses suggest that women engage in self-policing and hyperfemininity through consumerism out of their own free will and desire for pleasure (McRobbie, 2009). Women and girls are positioned as agentic, self-determined individuals who control their own destinies via the marketplace. However, Gill (2007) suggests this is simply "a shift in the way that power operates: from an external, male judging gaze to a self-policing, narcissistic gaze" where "the objectifying male gaze is internalized to form a new disciplinary regime" (pp. 151-152). Part of postfeminist media's attraction is that it embraces knowingness and irony in order to "wink" at purportedly sophisticated viewers to let them know they're in on the joke. Transmedia aimed at children, such as the more recent Disney Princess films, are particularly adept at poking fun at the sexism in the fairytale genre, while simultaneously capitalizing on its hyperfeminine aesthetic.

Disney Princess Transmedia

In developmentalist early years education, children are thought to be learning appropriately gendered behaviours and identities through pretend play and as such, to be meeting important developmental milestones (Howard, 2010). This psychologically-based approach, however, negates the sociocultural role that gendered transmedia artifacts and toys play in co-constructing gendered subjectivities in ECEC classrooms.

From a feminist perspective, gendered transmedia such as the Disney Princess brand pose a conundrum for ECEC educators who wish to promote gender equity in their classrooms. There is concern that girls will adopt submissive, objectified positions during transmedia-related play that will translate into oppressive hegemonic gender norms, or what Hoskin (2017) terms "patriarchal femininity". In patriarchal femininity, masculinity maintains a position of dominance and is tied to understandings of feminine individuals as White, able-bodied, submissive,

and lacking self-actualization. The hyperfemininity and passivity represented, particularly in the early Disney Princess films, may reinforce "a limited and static image of girlhood" (Golden & Jacoby, 2018, p. 299), "lock[ing] children into a set script from which it is very hard to deviate" (Linn, 2009, p. 39).

Despite concerns about gendered power dynamics tied to princess play, there have been remarkably few studies that analyze the interplay of Disney Princess transmedia, imaginative play, and gender issues in North American ECEC environments. The research that has been carried out (Golden & Jacoby, 2018; Kelly-Ware, 2018; Wohlwend, 2009, 2012) suggests that young children, particularly girls, often take-up stereotypically gendered roles when engaged in play with Disney Princess narratives or artifacts. Coyne et al. (2016, 2021) undertook the only longitudinal research on this topic with American children aged 3-6 years old. In their first study, engagement with princess toys and media over a one-year period (whether by girls or boys) resulted in increased feminine gender-stereotyped behaviour. The researchers remarked that though increased gender stereotyped behaviour may be problematic for girls, "princess media and engagement may provide important models of femininity to young boys, who are typically exposed to hypermasculine media" (2016, p. 1921). The second study, over a 5-year period, determined that high engagement with princess culture was correlated with lower adherence to hegemonic masculine norms in interpersonal relationships, and higher body image esteem in adolescence, particularly for children from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Their conclusions contradicted many feminist scholars' concerns over the potential negative impacts of princess media on young children. This may be due to the fact that much of the analysis of the Disney Princess canon has been theoretical, carried out within media and cultural studies (Do Rozario, 2004; England et al., 2011; Furo et al., 2016). However, hese theoretical critiques offer valuable insight into the gender discourses at work in Disney films over the years.

In *Snow White*, *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*, princesses were passive, pitted against wicked queens and step-mothers who represented a powerful, threatening femininity (Do Rozario, 2004). Disney's revival of the fairy tale genre in the early 1990s, and again in the 2000s, saw more agentic princesses such as Pocahontas, Mulan, and Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog*. Despite problematic cultural appropriations, the protagonists displayed heightened levels of independence, going to heroic ends to save their communities and/or families from violence, dishonor, or financial ruin. Whelan (2012) suggests Disney's *The Princess and the Frog* was an intentional response to feminist critiques,. In *Tangled*, *Brave*, and the

Frozen series, Reilly (2016) notes that modern princesses are more in charge of their own destinies.

While recognizing this positive evolution in the Disney Princess canon, numerous authors view the newer princess iterations as problematic in that they embrace postfeminist discourses (Charania & Albertson, 2018; Furo et al., 2016; Macaluso, 2016). They note that though the more modern princesses rebel against the constraints of princess-hood, they are ultimately situated "within the reassuring order of patriarchal realms" and subject to a "corseted curriculum" of proper conduct, politeness, and heteronormative marriage expectations (Furo et al., 2016, p. 208).. Even in *Frozen*, where the non-romantic narrative resolution is often celebrated as a feminist achievement, Charania and Albertson (2018) argue that Disney embraces a superficial, feel-good feminist discourse rather than an emancipatory one. While selling empowerment, Disney's well-oiled merchandise marketing machine has also brought a renewed emphasis on hyperfeminization in the form of narrowed waists, widened eyes, "more pink, more glitter, more curves, and more skin" (Gazda, 2015, p. 36), thus increasing the sexualization of the characters. There is little consensus then, about whether the more modern Disney princesses, and their marketing via the Disney Princess brand, provide progressive feminist role models for young audiences, or more regressive, postfeminist ones, and what the potential effects of these contradictory representations might be.

STUDY DESIGN

Feminist Ethnography

By adopting a feminist standpoint, feminist researchers aim to trouble a history of "androcentric, economically advantaged, racist, Eurocentric, and heterosexist conceptual frameworks" (Harding, 2004, p. 5). As feminism has evolved and become entwined with poststructuralism and queer theory, feminist theorists have moved from highlighting the experiences of women to deconstructing the notion of gender, as well as taking into account intersecting oppressions based on race, class, sexuality, and ability, among others. This has allowed for more complex, contextualized analyses of gender-related discrimination.

Feminist ethnographers have successfully employed ethnographic methods to study gender in the classroom through naturalistic observation, participant observation, discussion, and interviews (Blaise, 2005; Davies, 2003; Prioletta, 2020). Although my study was designed to involve naturalistic observation, working with young children is an unpredictable, messy process. During the field research, participants had

differing reactions to the presence of a researcher in their play spaces, which shifted as they got accustomed to my visits. At first some ignored my presence, occasionally climbing over me or sitting in my lap without acknowledging me – as if I was a piece of classroom furniture. Others treated me as an extra educator, glancing furtively in my direction for approval/disapproval of their play scenarios, or asking for help in donning pretend play costumes or reaching toys on a shelf. Still others took an interest in my note-taking and asked questions about what I was doing – effectively turning the tables on the research process. Although I tried to refrain from intervening in their activities, on occasion their engagement with me, or my own curiosity, got the best of me, and I asked a direct question regarding their play scenario. These questions were sometimes framed in gendered ways – which speaks to the difficulty of acting outside the gender binary and heteronormative discourses – while simultaneously exploring their effects. An adult/child hierarchy was also at play in how my comments or actions may have been interpreted or may have influenced play scenarios. This includes the pressure for children to get their gender "right" in the presence of an adult to garner praise or to prevent criticism.

Research Sites and Participants

My research was conducted at two sites, one being a daycare and the other a preschool, both in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Visits lasted 1-3 hours a few times a week over a period of seven weeks, totaling 44 hours of observation. The first field location was a medium-sized, privately owned, government-licensed daycare facility, and the participants were a 4-year-old pre-kindergarten group that consisted of 21 children. The centre was chosen due to its relatively diverse, English-speaking clientele from a range of working and middle-class families. Observations occurred at the end of the day during the free play period. The second field location was a privately-run, half-day preschool program. Participants were drawn from the four-year old class that met three times per week, with 13 children included in the study. This location was of interest because the educator/owners mostly eschewed transmedia toys and had a more developmental approach to early years education.

Methods

Field notes regarding speech, movements, and interactions were recorded on site by hand, transcribed using word-processing software, and coded by hand on printed transcripts. Key to the reseach were the toys, most of which already existed in the daycare or preschool. However, dress-up costumes were brought into both centres by the researcher during the last

few sessions to see what the children would make of them. Some were generic costumes featuring a variety of fictional archetypes (princesses, knights, superheroes, etc.), and real-world professions (police officers, construction workers, chefs, etc.), along with assorted items (animal costumes, fashion accessories, etc.). Others were transmedia character-branded items belonging to franchises such as the Disney Princess brand, Marvel and DC superheroes, PJ Masks, Paw Patrol, and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, among others. I chose these based on interests the children had displayed during my earlier observation periods, and given current trends in transmedia aimed at preschoolers.

Theming & Analysis

Specific passages from the transcribed field notes were extracted for analysis by identifying instances where media-based characters, toys, narratives, events, or themes were present during pretend play. The resulting excerpts mainly consisted of narratives involving princesses, superheroes, ponies, wild animals such as lions, or anthropomorphized everyday objects such as cars. When play involved branded objects such as Disney Princess figurines or costumes, My Little Pony toys, or Spider Man action figures, the links became explicit. However, inferences regarding media-based narratives during play were often more subtle. Children's understandings of fictional characters may have come from transmedia, but it may also have been gleaned from siblings, peers, or adults, making it a type of second-hand, socially constructed media-based knowledge. Determining the exact source of a pretend play scenario, is, of course, impossible, as imaginary play consists of an assemblage of previous experiences and exposures, yet close analysis of the selected passages did allow for inferences of their origins.

Pattern-based thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013) was then employed using a feminist poststructuralist/queer theoretical lens to identify themes related to hegemonic or counter-hegemonic gender and sexuality discourses within the transmedia-related play scenarios. This first involved numerous read-throughs of the transcripts and "sitting" with the data to generate initial codes, which were then grouped into themes. Disney Princess play, taken up mainly by girls but also by a few boys, is the main thematic category explored in this article, including three subthemes of appearance and assertiveness, star and sparkle power, and gender policing tied to femmephobia. My Little Pony and superhero play also touched on these subthemes. Feminist literature offering analyses of the Disney Princess brand, notions of sparkle/magic in media aimed at girls, postfeminism and femme theory are integrated into the discussion to aid in examining the complex and

often contradictory ways in which children negotiated their gendered subjectivity through the embodiment of transmedia characters.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Appearance and Assertiveness

On a late afternoon in the daycare classroom, the children's excitement was palpable as they sifted through a bag of dress-up costumes that had been brought in for them to play with for the first time. Several girls gravitated toward the generic princess costumes in pink and blue satin, and a purple tulle fairy dress. They overlooked most of the real-world occupational outfits and animal costumes, while the boys argued over a generic superhero costume and a knight outfit. Heated negotiations ensued among the girls, until Lauren, ignoring the others, donned the fairy costume (all names are pseudonyms, "<>" indicates action):

> Lauren: <Picks up the purple fairy costume and puts it on>. I'm a tooth fairy!
>
> Abigail: <Puts on the pink dress>
>
> Leia: <Puts on the purple wings>
>
> Tina <angrily>: Lauren! You need to share it [the purple fairy costume]!
>
> Charlotte: <follows Lauren around>
>
> Zoe: <Puts on the blue dress> Aren't I pretty?
>
> Cara (educator): Girls! You look *beautiful*!
>
> Cara (educator): <Handed gold armbands by a girl> I think these go with another costume.
>
> Leia: It's for superheroes.
>
> Abigail: Moi c'est la princesse! (*I'm the princess!*)
>
> Charlotte: Moi je suis une belle fée. (*I'm a pretty fairy.*)
>
> <The girls in dresses skip around the room, repeating the following in a sing-song voice>
>
> Girls: On est les plus belles! On est les plus belles! (*We're the prettiest! We're the prettiest!*)

It's perhaps not surprising that the dresses, despite being entirely generic ones, caused such a fuss. Although in this case they were not licensed Disney items, they maintained markers of the characters in the Disney Princess and Disney Fairies brands via their colours, styles, and fabric types which mirrored Disney's branding. The girls took up the anticipated identities of princesses and fairies, and the result was a multilayered performative embodiment of normative feminine ideals which draws from tacit cultural rules related to heteronormativity and sexual attractiveness. This could be seen in the focus on 'levels' of physical attractiveness as the children mentioned being 'pretty' or 'prettiest'. Although the girls often confined themselves to specific areas of the classroom during play, in this instance they skipped and ran around the entire room, clearly taking great physical pleasure in the pretense. The gender-appropriateness of their performances was then reinforced by the educator's reaction: "Girls! You look *beautiful!*". This type of highly feminized performance with an emphasis on beauty and appearance was repeated each time the dress-up clothes were brought in. Pleasure as it relates to appearance was a large part of princess play.

Over several similar visits, the importance of Disney's fairy tale aesthetic and beauty ideals was evident in the way players hierarchized even generic costumes in relation to colour and style. Girls frequently argued over who was the 'prettiest', and there was anger and jealousy displayed over who got to wear which dress. One afternoon, Charlotte, wearing a pink generic princess dress, declared herself "the most beautiful girl in the world", only to receive an angry retort from Camille because there were not enough dresses to go around, and she found herself unable to compete with the status conferred by Charlotte's attire. The colour pink, as well as the satin, sparkles and jewels of the Disney Princess aesthetic have become important signifiers of idealized femininity for young girls (Blue, 2017).

At the daycare, an older, large, grey plastic Fisher-Price castle was a very popular toy during free play. It was accompanied by a green storage bin filled with a variety of plastic figures including Disney princesses, Littlest Pet Shop animals, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle figures, superheroes, dragons, a white-haired fairy doll, small cloth/wooden dolls, and an assortment of plastic fast-food giveaway toys. The princesses included the majority of the original Disney Princess brand line up such as Aurora from *Sleeping Beauty*, Cinderella, Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*, Mulan, Snow White, Jasmine from *Aladdin*, Esmerelda from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*. It excluded Pocahontas as well as the princesses from the post-1990 films such as Tiana from *The Princess*

and the Frog, Merida from *Brave*, Rapunzel from *Tangled*, and Elsa and Anna from *Frozen*. *Frozen II* had not been released at the time of the study.

The princesses' positions as powerful yet constrained were evidenced during pretend play scenarios. There was a type of assertiveness or "bossiness" that appeared to draw on children's understandings of motherhood and female empowerment which was intertwined with tropes of hyperfeminine appearance and heterosexual fairy tale romance. In the excerpt below, Abigail at the daycare had set up Jasmine, Mulan, Aurora, Belle, and Cinderella in a circle around the inside of the main floor of the castle, and had a prince in her hand:

> Abigail: <lays the prince on the ground, turns the princesses as if they're "talking", then moves some of the princesses so their heads are out the castle windows>
>
> Abigail: <lays the prince down on the upper level inside floor of the castle>
>
> Abigail: <as Cinderella in the kitchen of the castle> Where's the milk can? I got the milk ...... chuuuu [pouring]. I'm going to buy some [unintelligible].
>
> Abigail: <as Cinderella – sings, moves her around castle. Has her climb castle using footholds> Ew! I'm getting out!
>
> Abigail: <has Cinderella walk towards toy bin. Zoe pulls out more figures: Esmerelda, another Aurora>
>
> Researcher: What are the princesses doing today in the castle?
>
> Abigail: Playing.
>
> <Esmerelda, Aurora, small pink figure are outside castle>
>
> Abigail: Let's go for our picnic – two sisters.
>
> Abigail: <as Mulan> I'm looking outside! I'm opening the window, it's too hot! This is too much, stop it. <Moves Mulan to top of castle> I'd like to see the manager.
>
> Abigail: <as Belle to the prince> This is the day we're going to marry ourselves [each other].
>
> Abigail: <as prince, exasperated voice> I KNOW. Everyone keeps telling me! <Prince looks out window> I want to come on your picnic!
>
> Abigail: <as Cinderella> Jasmine! I'm going outside.
>
> Zoe: <pulls more princesses out of bin, then says to me> Look at how many princesses I found!

> Researcher: That's a lot of princesses! There are a lot of princesses in that bin!
>
> Abigail: <nodding> There's ALL of them!

In this scenario the princesses were involved in directing the events of domestic life, including informing the resigned prince about his pending nuptials, and ignoring his request to join their picnic. Statements such as "I'm getting out" and "I'd like to see the manager" point not to submissive, passive roles but to agentic positions, despite a continued adherence to heteronormative tropes such as a fairy tale wedding. A few boys also adopted these assertive voices when playing with princess figures, namely Jeffrey, who, voicing Cinderella, refused to let Spider-Man in the plastic castle, thereby defending and controlling the domestic space. He also on occasion referred to Cinderella as "the mommy" and attempted to forcefully instruct the other princesses to get out of the (imaginary) rain and into the castle to avoid "ruining" their dresses. This "bossiness" in fact demonstrated leadership and initiative, while simultaneously remaining tied to concerns about beauty and appearance. However, there were also frequent play scenarios where princesses and other female figures were portrayed as submissive to male figures, or voiced as damsels in distress in need of rescuing.

This seemingly contradictory embodiment of power for girls is perhaps reflective of the gendered power dynamic in ECEC settings. In early years' settings, boys often control both physical space and access to play materials (MacNaughton, 2000) while girls frequently claim power through the labor and discipline of enacting "good students" (Martin, 2011) or "quasi-teachers" (Walkerdine, 1990). During field observations it became clear that expectations for girls' and boys' behaviour were different, particularly at the daycare, with girls being more easily chastised for loud or active behaviour. If the boys could play physically active, "rough" games that encompassed the entire room, then the girls distinguished themselves by occupying the kitchen corner or the castle table, "safer" domesticized play spaces where they often engaged as a group. When boys were not present at the castle play table, girls were more likely to play out more agentic roles within their pretend play scenarios. In addition, when physically donning princess costumes, girls took up physical space of the classroom, running, skipping, swinging purses and wands, and generally enjoying the freedom this garnered them. Part of this more agentic positioning that Disney Princess transmedia provides may be related to the celebrity status of the brand's protagonists, and its sparkly feminized aesthetics.

Star and Sparkle Power

To maximize profit from its popular female protagonists, Disney has created a type of Hollywood star-system for its princesses. The highest star power can arguably be attributed to Anna and Elsa from the *Frozen* series, who are often marketed separately in order to capitalize on their celebrity status. This helps explain why when the generic costumes were swapped out for Disney-branded princess costumes at the daycare, competition for princess attire intensified, and an argument broke out among several girls and one boy regarding who would get to wear the Anna dress. Children recognized the cultural capital of embodying what is currently most popular, as peer interactions "transform particular goods and experiences into a form of scrip, tokens of value suddenly fraught with meaning" (Pugh, 2009, p. 7).

The star power of the Disney princesses appears to be tied to the sparkly, bejewelled aspects of the brand aesthetic, which is woven throughout the related transmedia toys and merchandise. Kearney (2015) suggests that this "sparklefication" is a reflection of celebrity culture and has become a postfeminist visual trope: "sparkle is so ubiquitous in mainstream girls' culture – and so absent in boys' – it vies with pink as the primary signifier of youth femininity … girlhood's visual landscape … is now dominated by sparkly brilliance" (p. 263). The impetus for girls to shine and enact individualized star power is part of postfeminism's performative "can-do" girlhood which calls on girls to be simultaneously attractive and successful. According to McRobbie (2009), luminosity acts as a shifting spotlight that camouflages the labour and self-policing involved in maintaining "the technologies of self that are constitutive of the spectacularly feminine" (p. 60).

What became apparent in this study is that the notion of sparkle was often employed by the children in agentic ways to denote magic powers in pretend play scenarios involving both princesses and other feminized characters. An example of this was when Madeleine, at the daycare, used a shiny crown to give a My Little Pony figure the ability to fly. Another was when one of the girls wearing the Anna dress defended herself using a star-shaped jewel to "shoot" spells at the other children while she made magic sound effects. Several girls also imitated the transformation of the title character in Disney's *Cinderella* through the use of magic sounds, twirling motions, and sparkly wands. This use of magic spells or "powers" by the girls appeared to disrupt hegemonic gender tropes within play scenarios, aggravating the boys and leading them to attempt to confiscate the sparkly sources of power. For example, at the daycare, Charlotte, dressed as a

princess, used a sparkly magic wand against Charlie dressed as a knight, which resulted in a group of boys chasing her and pretending to grab the wand.

A similar scene occurred one afternoon at the daycare when Jada and a few other girls used shiny gold Wonder Woman wrist cuffs to "shoot" magic powers towards one of the boys, Kevin. In retaliation, he ripped one cuff off, stating "you have no more powers", then attempted to wrestle Jada to the floor to steal the other cuff from her. Although the boys frequently engaged in this type of rough and tumble play, this was the only time I observed girls involved in a pretend physical confrontation. This is perhaps unsurprising, because while girls' transmedia narratives call for shaming, rehabilitation, or accidental dispatching of villains, those aimed at boys call for "hand-to-hand or weapon-to-weapon battles", where the protagonists conquer the villains using brute strength, weapons, superpowers, or advanced technological innovations (Seiter, 1995, p. 161). As previously noted, girls in both ECEC centers were disciplined by educators more often than boys for rambunctious or loud behaviour, which also made them less likely to engage in physical play. Sparkle power therefore provided an outlet for physicality, as well as the cover of feminized transmedia narratives to lessen the potential for admonishment from educators.

Girls' use of magic and sparkle, then, constituted a clever redeployment of patriarchally feminine transmedia tropes to gain both physical freedom and powerful positionings frequently denied to them. It is a subtle, and perhaps in some ways unconscious, critique of the gendered constraints placed on girls both in feminized transmedia and in ECEC environments. Positioning sparkle as purely postfeminist, and girls as cultural dupes who might be freed by engaging in other types of play, ignores the opportunity it provides for temporary reversals of gendered power imbalances. The "respectable glamour" that Moseley (2002) discusses would still be a factor to be considered, though, as the power deployed remains tied to normative forms of femininity that repudiate difference,thereby marking racialized identities and queer sexualities as "aberrant femininities". This implies that children whose identities deviate from the normative White, heterosexual, hyperfeminine performativity of sparkle power may have more difficulty claiming space for themselves within pretend play scenarios. In addition, in true postfeminist fashion, the reclaiming of power in these instances relies on temporary and limited individual actions, rather than allowing for concrete changes to underlying structural inequities.

Gender Policing

Despite the opportunities for empowerment provided by sparkly princess transmedia, girls playing princess in the ECEC classroom still often find themselves trapped within what McRobbie (2009) terms the "double entanglement" of postfeminism. This is a simultaneous process of liberalisation of values related to gender, that coincides with the re-entrenchment of conservative modes of being under the guise of free choice. The double entanglement is complicated by the environment of the ECEC classroom itself, where peer and educator interactions serve to reinforce what counts as "gender intelligibility" (Butler, 2006). As Davies (2003) suggests: "subjection to one's own gender will more or less relentlessly take place, since any person who wants to be recognised as legitimate and competent must be appropriately gendered" (p. 161). Transmedia narratives, although offering emancipatory possibilities, reinforce this gendered divide, as children tweak their gender "intelligibility" during transmedia-based play to ward off rejection by their peers.

In adopting transmedia narratives or personas, children often engage in gender-stereotypical behaviours and then participate in gender category maintenance work, or gender policing). According to Francis (1998), gender is a public achievement central to recognition as a socially competent individual. Therefore gender category maintenance work involves "the taking up of a gender position with outward shows of stereotypical masculinity or femininity and coercing their peers to do the same, in an attempt to create a firmer gender identity" (p. 10).

Gender policing occurred in subtle and occasionally overt ways through the children's talk and actions. One example of subtle policing happened when several boys were playing with the plastic castle at the daycare, and Ryan had a Disney Princess figure in his hand. Thomas handed Ryan a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle figure and Ryan accepted it, placing the princess figure back in the toy bin. He was then allowed to join in the boys' fighting and rescue scenario. Use of the princess toy appeared to preclude his inclusion in the play scenario, which Thomas sought to rectify by handing him a more masculinized figure. Thomas was also prone to disrupting Ryan's non-transmedia-related pretend play when it veered toward feminized roles, such as feeding and changing a baby doll in the kitchen corner. In one instance, Thomas proceeded to smack the baby doll with a wooden spoon, and then wrestle another boy involved in the play scenario for possession of an oven mitt they were using as pretend food.

In another instance at the daycare, Kevin pretended to "brush" the non-existent hair of a Spiderman action figure and laughed. His laughter was likely to highlight that he understood this as a feminized activity usually engaged in by the girls with the My Little Pony toys, and therefore "silly" for a boy to engage in, particularly with a masculinized toy. Interestingly, when the girls played with the My Little Pony horses, they spent a great deal of time and energy brushing and beautifying them and discussed this as "important work". Through their talk they also explicitly distanced themselves from the "work" of building with Lego blocks, which they viewed as associated with boys. Another example is how girls who donned male superhero costumes were ignored or invisibilized by their peers, while girls who donned female superhero costumes – which generally mimicked a hyperfeminized, sparkly princess aesthetic – were accepted into princess play scenarios. In addition, at both the daycare and the preschool, numerous instances were recorded where boys would engage with what they considered to be "girl" toys (princess figures, dollhouses, ponies, etc.) only once girls left the play area, and there were no other boys nearby. In addition, they would generally abandon the toys when peers approached them, which speaks to the pressure to conform to gendered expectations in front of other children.

The most explicit example of gender policing occurred, however, when one of the boys at the daycare, Leo, donned a princess dress. The following exchange occurred:

> Leo: <puts on Anna dress>
>
> Sherry (educator): <to Leo> Very handsome!
>
> Sherry: Sofia! Look at Leo! <laughs a little>
>
> Sherry: <to researcher, out of earshot of child, laughing> Leo likes to wear dresses.
>
> Sofia: <sincerely, to Leo> Oh nice Anna!
>
> Leo: <tries to go in the large cardboard gingerbread house, but the boys who are already inside won't let him in. Sofia invites him to help her clean up the kitchen area instead>

Here one educator praises Leo by calling him handsome, while simultaneously expressing her discomfort through her laughter. The second attempts to offer support, particularly once Leo is rejected by the other boys. Notably, her response ignores the boys' reactions; it could even be read as reinforcing classroom gender hierarchies by inviting Leo to take up a domestic role and clean up instead of addressing the reason for the peer rejection. This scenario repeated itself on a following visit. This time

it was the girls in the class that mocked Leo's desire to embody the role of Anna, stating incredulously "but he's a BOY!", and snickering at him, which caused a different educator to come to Leo's defense. The girls' reactions speak not only to the strength of the association between princesses, femininity, and girlhood, but also to the power of the heterosexual matrix to enforce "rewards for appropriate gendered and heterosexual behaviors and … punishments for deviations from the conventional or 'normal' ways of being a girl or boy" (Blaise, 2005, p. 22).

One final striking example of gender policing was how boys, when utilizing the castle during pretend play at the daycare, expressed their disdain for the Disney princess toys by violently dispatching them from the top of the castle, and utilizing superhero action figures to punch or kick them. This was often done in a manner that physically removed the princess figures from the play frame, by sending them sliding across the table or onto the floor. Even Gaston from Beauty and the Beast, who is male with a muscular physique, was attacked in this way. Kevin, in one instance, had a super hero action figure attack the Gaston figure so violently that an educator reminded him to "play nicely". The attack on Gaston was then taken up by Thomas, who repeatedly threw the plastic figure at the side of the castle. Their actions were likely prompted by Gaston's association with the princess figures and therefore with femininity, or perhaps as a rejection of what Macaluso (2018) terms the character's "postfeminist masculine" role in the film narrative. Gaston "represents straight masculinity as foolish or comedic … in order to highlight capable, independent women" (p. 2).

Interestingly, boys were more likely to use "girl" toys if they were removed from their transmedia narratives. For instance, a small white-haired fairy doll who had no clothes and whose provenance was unknown, was often utilized by the boys during castle play, perhaps as a safer alternative to the princess figures who were too easily associated with the feminized aesthetics of the Disney Princess brand. The doll's popularity may alternately be attributed to the fact that it had moveable legs, something that was absent from the Disney Princess figures who were non-poseable, plastic statuettes. When one of the girls employed the white-haired fairy in superhero fashion, having it attack another figure, it was immediately referred to as a "mom" by the boys, perhaps in an effort to curtail the empowerment of the previously neutral figure.

Femmephobia

Boys' often negative reactions to the presence of hyperfeminized toys or transmedia play scenarios suggests that the maintenance of the gender

binary and gender hierarchies may be tied to the devaluation of the feminine, or femmephobia. Hoskin (2020) defines femmephobia as: "a type of gender policing that targets feminine transgressions against patriarchal norms of femininity (across genders, sexual orientations, and sex) in addition to the general cultural and systemic devaluation of all things feminine" (p. 2321). While overt sexism was likely to be caught by educators – such as when Christina, at the daycare, reacted to the girls' skepticism regarding Leo wearing an Anna dress by stating "Boys can wear girl dresses, girls can wear whatever, you guys can do whatever you want!" – femmephobia often went unnoticed. Hoskin (2017) suggests this is due to "the 'naturalized' subordination of femininity, which contributes to a striking pervasiveness of feminine devaluation" (p. 95). Interestingly, at the preschool, the exclusion of most modern transmedia toys, and a reliance on purportedly neutral educational themes such as dinosaurs and holidays, were designed to reduce gendered play. The exclusion of feminized toys, however, actually perpetuated a type of femmephobia which privileged masculine aesthetics and play scenarios.

McCann (2018) suggests that rejecting (hyper)femininity is not the answer, as it "does not address what underlies the issue in the first place: that there is a regulative system in place that defines how we ought to live our gendered lives" (p. 14). This argument is equally applicable to girls' princess play in in which hyperfeminine Disney Princess transmedia and its related narratives may not, in fact, be the problem. The issue may lie more in the ways in which gender and sexuality are regulated through the devaluation of femininity and through the segregated gender practices that permeate early years learning. Regulatory regimes such as developmentalism which view hegemonic gender discourses as normal and natural aspects of child development and which, as a consequence, do not question the gendered expectations and power differentials this creates, leave educators unsure of how or why to address gender issues in their ECEC classrooms (Prioletta, 2020). As one educator at the preschool stated, expressing resignation with regards to children's adoption of gendered pretend play narratives, intervention is not thought to be necessary because: "they're going to do what they're going to do anyway!"

CONCLUSION

If Disney's transmedia "operates as a pedagogy ... that helps teach us into particular ways of understanding the world, our selves, and others" (Garlen & Sandlin, 2016, p. 2), then what are children who play with Disney Princess and other transmedia in ECEC settings learning? My research study suggested that in the classroom environment, while playing

princess may involve embracing postfeminist discourses related to gender, it also involves strategic use of hyperfemininity to gain temporarily powerful positions. Such play also offers an affective, pleasurable space, where friendship and relationality are explored and strengthened through shared knowledge and exploration of fantasy worlds. Wohlwend (2017) notes that play with transmedia such as the Disney Princess brand can actually create a space of inclusion, bringing children who might otherwise have trouble interacting with their peers into highly recognizable fantasy narratives.

Feminist media studies scholars have been critical of Disney's fairy tale film narratives, and the patriarchal feminine tropes associated with the Disney Princess brand, including its hyperfeminine, sparkly aesthetic. Denigrating hyperfemininity as necessarily postfeminist and therefore undesirable, is, as McCann (2018) suggests, a conflation of the symptom with the problem. Perhaps we should be more curious about "the experiences, attachments, or desires that might be experienced around femininity" and the "possible capacities engendered by feminine embodiment" (pp. 61–62). The potential impact of feminine embodiment not only for girls, but also for boys and gender diverse children, is an area where more classroom study would be beneficial, as feminised masculinities have frequently been omitted from research on gender and childhood (Paechter, 2019).

Changing the terms under which we understand hyperfemininity does not negate the fact that there is a postfeminist ambivalence present in the themes that children might take up in princess play—as was the case in the present study. Expressions of female assertiveness which remain tied to heteronormative romantic fairy tale tropes, with their continued enforcement of a patriarchally feminine appearance, are problematic, despite any pleasure they engender. And although their newer films involve increasingly diverse princess representations, Disney's colonisation of the cultural imaginary through the Disney Princess brand's sometimes questionable transmediations remains an area open to critique. The resulting pretend play may invisibilize or exclude children who don't, or can't, buy into the often White, Eurocentric, classist notions of patriarchal femininity that the toys and other merchandise at times support.

One of the biggest questions this study raises, however, is not about princess transmedia itself, but rather about the structure of ECEC spaces with regards to femmephobia, gender diversity and heteronormativity. The naturalization of gender inequities, and the inattention to symbolic violence directed at hyperfemininity, raise important questions

about the hegemony of particular gender and sexuality discourses in early years' environments. As Surtees and Gunn (2010) note, it's remarkable that in a domain that has, in recent years, focused on diversity and inclusion, heteronormative (and I would add, gender normative and femmephobic) practices are still apparent. As far back as 1995, Alloway argued that: "early childhood education appears to be lacking an understanding of how socio-historical contexts set parameters that coerce individuals' lives with varying degrees of freedom" (p. 54). She suggested that a focus on child-centered pedagogy weakened educators' ability to intervene. The emphasis on free choice of activities and playmates results in a situation where "children's often highly gendered choices are used as testimony to the naturalness of the gender divide" (p. 62). Adherence to child-centered pedagogy can therefore inadvertently create or sustain a patriarchal classroom culture (Prioletta, 2020).

The "developmental gaze" (MacNaughton, 2000) that educators employ is often accompanied by liberal feminist approaches which suggest that the only thing necessary for gender equity is equality of opportunity. Christina's comment at the daycare of "you guys can do whatever you want!" is emblematic of this approach. Akin to the often criticized "colour-blind" approach to anti-racism, "gender-equal" pedagogical approaches "do not challenge the fundamental construction of gender as relational, [therefore] they can only moderate, rather than challenge, discriminatory constructions" (Francis, 1998, p. 147). Blaise (2005) suggests that what is required is a move towards what she terms postdevelopmentalism, or "alternative theoretical frameworks that can assist us to make sense of teaching, learning, and young children in new ways" by "attending to larger issues of fairness and social justice" (p. 3). Further, postdevelopmentalism would allow early years educators to act as agents of social change by adopting queer perspectives, that "would permit non-normative as well as normative gender-role identification, exploration, and adoption" (Janmohamed, 2010, p. 315).

A re-evaluation of children's – particularly girls' – fascination with hyperfemininity is also warranted. Hyperfeminisity's queer or transgressive properties could help subvert masculine dominance in ECEC spaces, including through its sparkly aesthetic. The role of gender policing and its ties to femmephobia also need to be looked at more closely. It would be helpful to create intervention guidelines for early years educators confronted with the inevitable pull of

Disney's princess marketing machine. Critical approaches to transmedia-related play might offer children the freedom to embody characters and narratives in a more subversive or empowering fashion. As it is unlikely that princess transmedia will disappear anytime soon, it's imperative to find ways to utilize children's fascination with transmedia narratives to support a more gender diverse and equitable early years play environment that will benefit all young learners.

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