Pretty Pretty Princesses: Hegemonic Femininity and Designated Masculinity

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"I look so pretty," I utter, looking at myself in drag for the first time. Looking in the mirror at my drag mother's quick makeup job, I realized I had maybe never felt completely that way before: pretty. This was not an issue of low self-esteem or an absence of support regarding my physical appearance. Instead, I was articulating language that wasn't meant for me. From birth, I was swaddled in blue and given action figures, Matchbox cars, model tractors, wrapped in the language of the masculine – "he's so handsome!" "Oh, he loves the ladies, doesn't he?!" "He *really* likes the *blondes*!" The differences in the language I articulated looking at the beginnings of my alter ego Rosie's face – the irony of a wig that is both *blonde* and *pink* is not lost on me – and the narrative I was expected to fulfill through K-Mart trips down the "Blue Aisle" and baggy boys' bootcut jeans were striking. My exclusion from my sister and cousin's "Girls Only" hangouts coupled with my belief that my glances down the "Pink Aisle" had to be stolen and fleeting informed me from an early age about my side of the gender binary: I was a boy. By extension, pretty wasn't for me.

In dealing with this pre-formed exclusion, I want to stress how moments in which I was able to express a seemingly foreign femininity were impactful temporalities that laid a foundation for a more permanent embodiment and understanding of femininity. In doing so, I'm careful to articulate my understanding that a single femininity does not and cannot exist. Additionally, the femininities I witnessed, aspired to, and took on in

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crafting my gender identity do not exist in a vacuum. Although I strive to interrogate the dissonance felt between birth-assigned sex and gender identity/expression, it is central to my analysis of hegemonic femininity that any presentation of femininity be understood as raced, classed, and otherwise constituted by various axes of identity. In the scope of this project, I am most immediately at war with the femininity that is presented as "acceptable," a hegemonic feminine aesthetic and way of being that is white, straight, moneyed and cisgender – for all intents and purposes, "normal." My idolization of this mass-proliferated femininity is indicative of the dyadic presentation of masculinity and femininity, which, while not excusing some of my buy-in to a singular femininity, situated me in a monolithic category that lacked the texture of an intersectional approach to identity.

In considering my culturally specific access to and embodiment of femininity as a "designated-male-at-birth" (DMAB) person through the temporal sites of the 1990 board game *Pretty Pretty Princess* and drag performance, I consider the unseen cultural logics at play for the boy(?)-child to grow into femininity, even as it excludes him. In intermingling these two sites, I build off the assertion that *Pretty Pretty Princess* and the popular princess culture which surrounds it display and expect a narrow femininity that is intentionally classed and raced, thereby creating an exclusionary femininity. When accessed by the DMAB person, a certain sifting is required, a working within a feminine framework to create a renewed understanding of what femininity can mean. Though I initially engaged with *Pretty Pretty Princess* and drag as sites of gender performance and identification, my cultural position outside of femininity as determined by my sex designation at birth has allowed me to consider how the hegemonic femininity – constructed first by *Pretty Pretty Princess* - I engaged with continues to prevent access to others who fail to meet rigid feminine expectations.

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"Is there any way I can help?" My mother repeats her refrain over the phone as I begin to explain my autoethnography. It is a gesture that indicates her support yet understands her removal from the realm of my academic work. When I reply, "Yes," I know she's taken aback. I explain that as I will be taking a look back at my childhood for part of this article she might be able to fill in my gaps of memory. When I had the chance to visit home in April 2015, a drive back from the Detroit Metropolitan Airport became notably tenser as I detailed the work I was doing. As I relayed my preliminary discussion of those parts of my childhood that are incongruous with my gender identity, she was quick to interrupt: "Did I do this to you? Were you unhappy?" In that moment, I could not find the language to explain to this woman who raised me what it felt like to be a gender outsider in a binary gendered world.

Kate Bornstein says it best in *Gender Outlaw*, describing the cultural gender system "as a particularly malevolent and divisive construct, made all the more dangerous by the seeming inability of culture to *question* gender, its own creation" (12). The "original gender outlaw," Bornstein's perspective highlights the tension of being an invisible or incomprehensible outsider to a paradigm that avoids naming itself so as to reify its certainty. In my conversation with my mother, I don't believe *Gender Outlaw* would have been the easiest starting point, though I wish I could have articulated the murkiness of gender as Bornstein does. Where my mother was troubled by how her individual actions might have affected my journey to my gender, I have found myself dealing with "a world that insists we are one or the other - a world that doesn't bother telling us what one or the other *is*" (Bornstein 8). To remove the onus from my mother, I would have needed to articulate the system that invisibilizes itself by maintaining the requirements of binary gender as a matter-of-fact construct outside of human creation. I still work to disentangle myself from this rigid and insidious policing of gender. In the moment of uncomfortable silence before we altered our topic of conversation, I ruminated on my approach to this project as well as those facets of gender policing that might remain blind spots for me.

Perhaps an introduction to privilege via someone such as Peggy McIntosh would be most useful to my mother, but our exchange and the internal questioning I began regarding my analysis left with me an obvious go-to. In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, José Esteban Muñoz is concerned with how the universal fiction of identity is more easily understood by the minoritarian subject, those subjects needing "to interface with different subcultural fields to activate their own senses of self" (5). Muñoz's articulation of the unique (dis)placement – understanding the location of the minoritarian subject as being one both of presence in one's "place" and distance from the majority – proves more useful than a discussion centered only on privilege or identity formation. This perspective deals with the complex and often-contradictory actions minoritarian subjects must undertake as their processes of identity formation are held within and work against oppressive, hegemonic logics of identity and access.

In detailing how minoritarian subjects work through cultural logics, Muñoz builds upon an identity-in-difference model utilized by radical women of color and Third World feminists. Through this model, Muñoz sees these identities "emerge from a failed interpellation with the dominant public sphere…predicated on their ability to disidentify with the mass public and…contribute to the function of a counterpublic sphere" (7). In his dissection of identities-in-difference, Muñoz utilizes Norman Alarcón's reading of a shared perspective that exists in the vein of radical women of color writing, noting a future-looking quality that follows the recognition of one's imperfect present (7). A recognition of the imperfect present and a hopeful look towards the future are apparent in Muñoz's framework, as the act of disidentifying through performance carries with it complicated formations of identity with/in-between cultural logics, but also a pushing back against these forces. A breakdown in the one-way communication from the dominant cultural logics on the part of the individual, such as Bornstein's keen awareness of a system that does not explicitly define its parameters regarding gender, has the potential to incite a transformational and transgressive performance against these logics.

Considering my performance in *Pretty Pretty Princess* as disidentificatory is dangerous. Concerned as Muñoz's work is with an intersectional approach to identity that critiques the barriers to accessing identity created by monocasual, normativizing protocols—e.g., woman=white woman; black=black male—filtering my own childhood experience through the lens of disidentification must be engaged with a careful interrogation of the cultural logics at play (8). As Muñoz is heavily concerned with a queer of color perspective, my application of his theoretical framework is grounded in a critical awareness of the barriers to identity I have experienced. Further, my approach is concerned with those I have not experienced and how they are made visible through the backwards-looking perspective of a scholar. Muñoz cautions against blind spots regarding race in the fields of queer theory and those branches of cultural studies not built around racial identity. My analysis cannot include race (and the entangled notions of class that come with "royalty") as an afterthought if it is to avoid that myopia, but must instead have intersectionality at its core.

Approaching the genre of autoethnography, then, I find myself most immediately situated in the "queer autoethnography." In "Telling Stories: Reflexivity, Queer Theory, and Autoethnography," Adams and Holman Jones discuss the methodological possibilities created by the intersection of the autoethnographic and queer theory disciplines. In doing queer autoethnography, Adams and Holman Jones argue that it is a reflexive process of (re)turning, in which "we revisit, shift, and refigure earlier iterations of our queer work, showing what it means to be reflexively queer…tracing the importance of using reflexively queer autoethnographic work for socially just means and ends" (108). (Re)turning to both my childhood performance during *Pretty Pretty Princess* and my young adult donning of drag regalia, I have to understand the initial allure and embodiment of femininity as being disconnected from my current understanding of what constitutes a disidentificatory performance. Yet, from these experiences I can turn out a new, nuanced understanding of how both performances are informed by/inform their cultural locations at the moments they occur. It is Adams and Holman Jones' usage of reflexivity that grounds this approach, a practice of "listening to and for the silences and stories we can't tell—not fully, not clearly, not yet; returning, again and again, to the river of story accepting what you can never fully, never unquestionably *know*" (111). This process of re(turning) resonates with Muñoz's usage of a future-looking politics, but also serves to ground my use of disidentification, the prominent silences regarding race and class in my own story as a white, middle class individual highlighting those stories I cannot tell. It is with this key distinction that I proceed in interrogating the multiple silences surrounding hegemonic femininity.

A disidentificatory lens is inherently queer, and although I am choosing to re-examine my childhood performance as an "earlier iteration of my queer work," I hesitate on making my queerness/non-binary identification ahistorical. Existing within Muñoz's intentional distancing from "nature/nurture" discussions as a key part of the practice of disidentification, I am keen to avoid saying, "I was always this way" or pointing to these experiences as directly shaping my current embodiment of femininity. As I will be considering the site of *Pretty Pretty Princess* as a moment of feminine performance, I am more concerned with my identification with mass-marketed femininity and its implications in my specific gender journey. I am not here to analyze my childhood self to discover the origin of my identity. Instead, I want to consider my identity as having a history that is chronicled through a long "coming into" femininity and carefully dissect how that femininity has been co-constructed with my racial and class identities.

On its own, *Pretty Pretty Princess* is a relatively simple board game, requiring players to collect four different pieces of plastic jewelry in one of four player-specific colors and a singular crown to win. Play begins by assembling the board game, which "will go together only one way," according to Hasbro's official instruction booklet, removing the double-sided spinner/mirror lid of the circular jewelry box, and placing the open box with jewelry in the center of the game board (1). In addition to four jewelry collection spaces (ring, earring, bracelet, necklace) one can land on, there are also spaces which require the player to "put one [piece of jewelry] back" or pick up the black ring (1). Similar to the "Old Maid" in the card game of the same name, the black ring prevents a player from winning and can only be removed by landing on the "put one back" space or another player being forced to take it from the first player after landing on the "black ring" space. Two spaces on the game board facilitate interaction between players: the special jewelry collection spaces of "crown" and "take any piece," both of which allow the player to take the non-color specific victory piece of the crown from another player. Once a player has constructed the complete princess look, Hasbro directs them to "turn over the spinner and look at the Pretty Pretty Princess you see in the mirror," utilizing the mirror on the lid which was previously hidden so the spinner could be used (2). Although I think the dynamics of the game allowed the young DMAB child a certain amount of feminine-coded dress up play, I also want to consider how the game delineates the "correct" femininity that formed much of my early feminine aspirations.

By virtue of its design, the game requires a competitive race to the feminine ideal of the princess. Although taking to task a board game for requiring and producing a winner is a larger undertaking, the coupling of the feminine coded activity of dressing up and competition frames femininity as a race to the top where only one can win and have the most correct aesthetic (Pretty Pretty). Femininity becomes defined by the acquisition of material items imbued with meaning in the context of the board game, articulating a pervasive ideology tying femininity to consumption and artificiality. Virtually devoid of strategy, the game constructs victory as a linear path to idealized femininity through artificial construction—it doesn't get much more fake than cheap plastic jewelry—and a win which is capped off by looking at and admiring one's surface transformation. The correct feminine aesthetic and its material foundation do not stop and end with the "Pretty Pretty."

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"I have everything else you need. Just get a good foundation." I'll never forget the first time I bought Maybelline Dream Matte Mousse, the same day of my "pretty" drag moment. On the phone with my Fraternity Brother/future drag mother, his voice was distracted, focused on painting her own face: "Gurl, go to the Maybelline section and get Dream *Matte* Mousse in a shade darker than your skin tone. Make sure it's the matte one, you have oily skin like me. And get some face sponges. The triangular ones." Rushing around inside Wal-Mart before my first "performance" —a trio number on campus at our Fraternity's drag show—I turned down one of the store's three cosmetic aisles, searching for the brand whose trademark question didn't bear asking for me. I certainly wasn't "born with it." Feeling like an alien in the cosmetic aisle of a small college town Wal-Mart, I was acutely aware of the middle-aged white woman half-glaring/half-confused as I scanned the shelves. My lack of familiarity and the tense air hanging between glaring white light dragged the moment out, until I had my best guess at a shade of mousse and a pack of sponges in my hands. Rushing through the check out and back to my Brother's two-bedroom apartment packed full of drag queens, I withheld my story, remarking only on how much the makeup cost. Punctuating her sage advice with a knowing chortle, Mother remarked simply, "Phish, it's expensive to be a lady."

The connection between material goods and femininity is one that I have found myself intimately acquainted with since. Even as my education encourages me to question my need to spend lavishly on various feminine accoutrements, I sit here typing with freshly gel-polished acrylic nails, a noted hindrance to my clicking on the keyboard. Although I am firmly within the mindset that embodying femininity through hair, makeup, nails, and other ephemera is not mutually exclusive to a complex and empowering understanding of one's gender, these trappings necessitate a conversation regarding the "correct," passive consumption (and who is allowed to consume) as they are entangled with hegemonic femininity, a discourse that also pervades the putting on of "Pretty Pretty" in *Pretty Pretty Princess*.

Recognizing the tension between finding power within a material femininity and being forced to fit within the confines of hegemonic femininity, binaristic thinking encourages the delineation between a "good" or "bad" femininity. Remaining grounded in a queer perspective begs the more pressing question of how that material femininity is understood, as opposed to a limiting moralistic judgment. In "The Boys Who would be Princesses: Playing with Gender Identity Intertexts in Disney Princess Transmedia," Karen Wohlwend focuses her sights on the Disney Princess brand as it relates to childhood play. She is concerned with how the media produced under the Disney Princess brand "circulate[s] a dense set of expectations for children as viewers, consumers, producers, and players" through gendered messaging (594). Wohlwend's consideration of children as having a multiplicity of interactions with gendered media has specific implications for gender variant children and those who are otherwise barred from this pinnacle of femininity. Turning attention first to her articulation of the "dense set of expectations," she describes the Disney Princess as "always-beautiful," with a brand identity that "plays up the glitter and glamour of the princess role and reduces the differences across the heroines to colour variations," ultimately creating “a distilled hyper-feminine persona, a set of narrow beauty standards for young girls, and passive roles in damsel in distress storylines” (596). Wohlwend’s understanding of the Disney princess is easily read onto *Pretty Pretty Princess*, given the relative dominance of Disney in the field of the princess and the unsurprising Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty versions of the game. (As a purist, I’ll try my best to ignore the *Disney Dazzling Princess* game, an attempt to recapture the original *Pretty Pretty Princess*).

Applying Wohlwend’s description to princesses of the *Pretty Pretty* variety, the most striking comparison is her issue with color variation, which creates a false sense of individuality among otherwise carbon copy princesses (and princess narratives). Although the board game offers players a choice of four colors, each color has identical jewelry, slightly variant plastic representations of the narrow hyperfemininity Wohlwend takes issue with. This false individualism within the game reaches its apex with the plastic crown, a bastion of strictly designated, ideal femininity that determines a player’s ultimate eligibility as princess; the veritable “prize” of looking at one’s beauty in the mirrored lid underscores the passivity Wohlwend notes. In fact the dual-sided mirror/spinner provides a clear delineation between activity and passivity, neither able to exist at the same time, one always face down. As the activity of using the spinner dictates movement around the game board, the victor’s royal gaze into the mirror removes the possibility of continued activity, the game’s end realized in a passive gesture of appearing. The only purpose of activity within the game is the ultimate construction of a feminine look, aligned with Wohlwend’s understanding of the narrow princess ideal.

In considering the passive, material princess figure of the game, it is also important to complicate her image by considering what she is not. The black ring is a glaring indicator of “not princess,” but why? Dealing with princesses and the uses of color, Francisco Vas Da Silva’s essay, “Red as Blood, White as Snow, Black as Crow: Chromatic Symbolism of

Womanhood in Fairy Tales" provides a useful framework for observing the meaning attributed to colors within such spaces. For Silva, colors act as "convenient semiotic markers," creating meaning in such mundane sites as traffic lights and gendered baby blankets (241). Although a division of colors figures heavily into most games, the constant iteration of the matching set of "your color" jewelry as needed for victory and the bolded warning of "but not the black ring" present in the official Hasbro instructions affirms that *Pretty Pretty Princess* has a particular investment in color as it relates to ideal femininity (2). In his analysis of a pre-Disney, Grimm Snow White, Silva establishes white as representing "untainted sheen…for luminous heaven as much as for purity" and open to being "tainted" (245), black oppositely situated with death and the otherworld or a dead bird throughout the Grimm canon (246). Dwelling in his reading of Snow White, her elevation in death from a coffin in the dark earth to a shining coffin lifted to the heavens creates a clear division between black/dark as debasement and white/light as higher order (247). The black ring as a barrier to victorious femininity functions similarly.

Returning to my conversation about a particularly raced and classed hegemonic femininity, the symbol of the black ring and its color are infused with the sort of cultural meaning Silva finds in traffic signals and swaddled newborns. An acceptance of black as a "debased" color cannot be removed from understandings of white/black race relations in the U.S., especially as they factor into what is considered desirable femininity. Marked as a deviation from appropriate femininity within the space of *Pretty Pretty Princess* through its coloring, the choice to make the ring black—rather than say, a clear ring—is a particular commentary about the "wrong color," rather than a lack of color. In Richard King, Mary Bloodsworth-Lugo, and Carmen Lugo-Lugo's "Animated Representations of Blackness," they critique Disney's *The Princess and the Frog* for its representation of the franchise's first Black princess. Their critique lies in Tiana's existence throughout the majority of the movie as a frog, adding to a racist proximity between Black people and animals (396). King et al. additionally take issue with the primary setting of the film as the bayou, particularly the main characters' movement from frogs in the wild to people in civilization thereby reinforcing nature/civilization and animal/human binaries (397). Tiana becomes situated in a similar earthly debasement as what Silva describes, the Black princess perhaps able to be a princess in the Disney canon, but markedly separated from the realms of white princesses. The black ring as a tarnished or less sparkly version of the other rings also speaks to the classist discourse regarding civilized femininity as it is partially dissociated from Blackness—and more broadly any non-white identity—and defined by luminous, visual appeal.

As a white, middle-class child, these considerations were not immediately on my mind, yet my adoration of the black ring was counter to the game rules and the ideologies that shunned the deviant piece of jewelry. Although I can't deny the allure of a perfectly color-matched set of pastel jewelry, the black ring held a certain allure, and I found myself casually slipping it on in between games, captivated by something I could not name. The black ring, a wrench in the color monolith of hegemonic princess femininity, became an accessory to a child who already jarred expectations. A ring that suggests "not quite right" was the perfect companion to a boy-child aspiring to femininity.

Discussing queer children, Sedgwick notes their "ability to attach intently to a few cultural objects…objects whose meaning seemed mysterious, excessive or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us" (3). Sedgwick also notes how, as children, "we needed for there to be sites where meanings didn't line up tidily with each other" (3). My attachment to the black ring and *Pretty Pretty Princess* follows a similar pattern. These objects spoke to a young me, resonating with hidden desire and the interaction of a feminine-coded text by someone it was not meant for. At these sites of failed interpellation with the dominant logics, the push back against fixed meaning gives way to a more fluid space. In the process of attempting to "line up," I pushed back against the cisgender white girl-child princess fantasy through my inability to fit the prescribed mold, while simultaneously attempting to articulate how my embodiment of that femininity might look. Avoiding a discussion of my childhood performance as a conscious and transgressive action taken against heteronormative, white-centered logics of ideal femininity, I do believe that such a performance informs/is informed by a later counterpublic performance in the role of Rosie, my drag queen identity. Rosie, after all, looks good in black.

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The dim light of the dressing room reflected off Rosie's gaudy silver ring, my eyes fixated on the figure in the mirror. I peaked at her through a mess of tousled dark brown hair, my drag mother expertly pinning a two-wig Long Island housewife to my head. "Always use the jumbo bobby pins for big hair or it won't stay in," she advised, talking through golden pins held in her mouth as the one in her hand ripped through my hair. I'd learned long ago beauty was expensive. Sitting in the upstairs of our local club on "Gay Night" clad in a turquoise bathing suit, tight fur jacket, and stoned purple pumps, I learned beauty was also pain. Satisfied with her pin job, my drag mother urged me to my feet, stepping back to take in how the hip and butt pads she made for me fared under layers of pantyhose and a girdle. "I did you right by those pads, gurl. Your waist is snatched!" Turning me to face the smudged mirror and look at my full body in drag, she proudly remarked, "*That* is a drag queen."

Although the performance in the gay club space seems a far cry from my performance for the *Pretty Pretty Princess* mirror, the constructions of femininity in both moments resemble each other more closely than one might expect. The punctuation of my drag mother's comments about my drag body alluded to a particular femininity I represented. Though she (and I, by extension) maintain that drag is an art form with many different stylings, it is more than common that circles of drag queens within a given geographic location hold to a limited range of styles/ways of doing drag, and these styles have particular metrics of good/bad drag. In the same way that princess femininity becomes narrowly defined and learned by young girls, so too is drag femininity learned by drag queens.

In "Corsets, Headpieces, and Tape: An Ethnography of Gendered Performance," Rachel Friedman and Adam Jones address the co-construction of drag identity in drag queen communities and the politics of group membership. Observing in part of their study an amateur drag contest, Friedman and Jones describe "an environment where the norms of being a drag queen are learned through watching, observing, and then imitating others" (87). This acquisition of drag knowledge through modeling particular behavior is similar to the regurgitation of the princess identity outlined for players in *Pretty Pretty Princess*, both requiring repeated and realized sets of actions. Friedman and Jones speak to "a certain degree of conforming in both behavior and attitude…an importance placed upon the perception of them to be more similar to one another" (87). Although I do think that the creation of personal trademark styles is important in the drag scene, the idea of group membership as defined through an individualism built around other members' behaviors is critical to a larger logic of gender.

Though I believe drag has the potential to upset and play with gender in nuanced and critical ways, I would be remiss if I subscribed to a utopian idea of drag and failed to mention its reification of feminine norms and gendered binaries. The co-construction of drag identity as linked to fixed notions of acceptable drag creates understandings of appropriate femininity while boxing out deviations; it's not so simple as a black ring clearly delineating the uncrossable line between acceptable and unacceptable femininity. Instead, poorly blended makeup, improperly styled hair, disproportionate "hog bodies" (to quote Adore Delano from *RuPaul's Drag Race*) or masculine body shapes, and the inability to walk in heels can potentially bar a queen from the properly feminized ideal.

Although these “failures” are attributed to a lack of skill, I see them as similarly situated to the black ring, as both suggest a question of access. Though a queen can be taught the “tricks of the trade,” her social location determines her access to such a mentor, ability to procure quality resources, and her perception by other queens. Like the player who doesn’t fit into *Pretty Pretty Princess*’ white, “civilized” femininity when donning the black ring, a drag queen not meeting the appropriate image pre-drag might be at a consistent disadvantage with and distance from performing ideal drag femininity.

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“Ladies and gentleman, I’d like to welcome your next entertainer to the stage. She’s my sister, and he’s my Fraternity Brother: Rosie D. Riveter.” Just the tail end of an introduction with consistent misgendering, I put on a smile as the Mistress of Ceremonies at my Fraternity’s annual drag show ushers me on stage. I chuckle to myself, because I know her slippage between he and she is meant to mess with the audience, a move that might be appropriate for other performers, but not me. I know she would switch pronouns if I told her, a kind and compassionate queen who I’m lucky to call my Brother, but I remain silent. I posted a status on Facebook a week before the show detailing my use of “they/them,” hoping to avoid these sorts of slip-ups. “Maybe she missed the Facebook post,” I tell myself walking out on stage to the introduction of Britney Spears’ “Toxic.” Clad in my “Rosie the Riveter” denim jumpsuit with glossy red belt and shoes, I hit my mark and bask in the applause as the vocals come in. Slowly removing the red bandana tied around my face, I expose my beard, filled in dark and twinkling with silver glitter. Time stops for a second before I hear the uproar of screams and cheers, the crowd drinking in the bearded queen before them. “Maybe *they* don’t know what I am, either.”

And suddenly, I’m transported back to the little boy layering on cheap plastic jewelry, gazing at someone who is a princess for a moment. I can almost see the audience on the other side of the plastic mirrored lid, the boy princess who's wearing one purple and one black ring just as entertaining and as shocking as the queen with her "natural" beard. In both of these moments, I understand my transgression, my grasp at femininity as allowable in the moment of performance. In each of these moments, the rubric for femininity is laid out before me. In the world of young girls and princesses, I'm a boy playing with a "girl's toy," trying on a femininity that seems just a step away. "I wish I was a girl," I hear myself begging, as I try to understand why standing up to "pee" and "looking just like my dad" stop me from getting to be a princess in any other moment but this. I understand what is not mine. In drag, I relish in the femininity, the beauty and the excess. Yet at the end of the night, I wash it off like the other girls, rejoining the world as the boy that I'm told I am, the dissonant underneath that made the whole thing enjoyable for the crowd. And I realize that moving around the game board or dancing on the stage, I only got to be what wasn't mine for a fleeting moment.

After much confusion, I made the decision to wash off the makeup, but to never stop wearing it. I decided I would keep the cheap plastic jewelry close to my self, pressing invisible indentations into who I would be. I decided to articulate my own image. Pulling from those parts I liked, wading in those parts that made me uncomfortable, and diving into murky waters of an unknown space outside of (un)comfortable sex/gender binaries, I found a new femininity. I am struck by the necessity to consider how I, as a DMAB person, had to sift through the rubble of a broken femininity. For many others, the jewelry I engaged with and the wigs I pinned on may be markers of hegemonic femininity, but by re-purposing these badges of a toxic femininity, I believe there is a possibility for a new understanding of the barriers to femininity that are erected in service to cultural logics about gender, sex, race, and class.

Understanding my engagement with a 90s pop culture artifact and tracing it to the subcultural phenomenon of drag, their similarities delineate complex, but wide-reaching restrictions on femininity. By revealing these logics of femininity off of which the role of the “pretty pretty” princess and drag queen function, a re-reading of my queer performances of identity allows me to articulate a performance and embodiment of femininity which is cognizant of the silences around the construction of gender. Navigating these silences, the minoritarian subject—taken broadly—can construct particular sites of disidentification that resist neatly meshing with narrow expectations of gender as it is raced, classed, and placed within a cissentialist paradigm. I find these expectations in revisiting the *Pretty Pretty Princess* instruction booklet or the insidious, unspoken rules of drag. In both of these spaces, these guidelines play the arbiter in one’s access to femininity, each demonstrating the rules we must play by to win. Knowing these regurgitated rules can lend itself to victory in grasping at femininity. Yet, for those of us for whom these rules do not line up, we begin to question, to envision and re-create our new femininities, new understandings of ourselves. In this project of questioning and re-fashioning, I remember the little boy who played princess and the college freshman who bought his first jar of Maybelline Dream Matte Mousse. They’re both there every time I dab foundation onto my face, every time I put on a pair of wedges. They—and maybe more importantly, we—are there at the places that don’t “line up,” polishing plastic crowns of a new design.

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