

# Raising (Razing?) Princess: Autoethnographic Reflections On Motherhood and The Princess Culture

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We're already about five minutes late, and as I drive around the sprawling upscale outdoor mall in the rain, I mutter under my breath, "Pretty and Pampered...Pretty and Pampered...Precious and Privileged...Pretentious and Patriarchal...damn it, where are you?" Finally, I spot the pink flowery sign through the mist on my third loop around the Chili's restaurant: "Pretty and Pampered: A Spa for Girls." "Here it is!" I announce with relief, and Lucy begins kicking her patent leathered feet on the back of my seat in excitement. "Yeah! We found it!" she exclaims. We unbuckle and she climbs out of the Subaru quickly, rather than in her typical dawdling fashion. I grab her hand while balancing the pink beribboned birthday present and my huge "mom purse" on the other arm. We run through the wet parking lot to the location of her school friend's fourth birthday party.

I open the door and gaze upon a pink and glittery haze. We step into a gift shop, filled with princess wands, kids hair products and makeup, and other artifacts of modern girlhood. A middle-aged woman at the cash register wearing a hell of a lot of makeup for 10 a.m. on a Saturday morning looks up and smiles as she exclaims, "Welcome to Pretty and Pampered!"

"Jordan's birthday party?" I ask, as an uncharacteristically shy Lucy clings more tightly to my hand and steps behind me.

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“Oh yes, right back here,” she exclaims, as she lifts the gift I am precariously holding off of my arm and leaves her post to walk us back to the party area.

“Lucy’s here!” a little girl’s voice exclaims, and Lucy beams and starts to jump up and down while still attached to my hand. At barely three, she is the youngest kid in her Montessori preschool class. She longs to be accepted by the four year olds, but often comes home with sad reports of how Jordan or Alicia or Emma didn’t let her play with them because she’s only three. Today, though, she bounces and dances around me with excitement as she sees her classmates. Eight little girls, ages 5 and under, already wearing an assortment of long pink, purple, or blue princess dresses, are sitting primly in high director’s chairs in a semi-circle. The party is almost exclusively made up of white girls, with the exception of Hannah whose family is Filipino. Aside from Emma, who called out to Lucy as we entered, the girls are remarkably quiet. Typically, at school, there’s a lot more noise from this bunch.

“Jenna, can you get this little girl changed into her dress?” the middle-aged woman calls out enthusiastically.

A teenager in jeans and a black t-shirt with the pink and purple “Pretty and Pampered” logo emblazoned on the front steps away from the group and says, “Sure.” She offers Lucy her hand.

My daughter looks at me for reassurance before unsticking herself from my side. “Go ahead, sweetie, I’ll be right behind you,” I say encouragingly. “Let me take your coat.”

Lucy slips out of her coat and then skips along holding Jenna’s hand and they disappear behind a long purple velvet curtain that screens the dressing room. Although I am just on the other side of the curtain, I am surprised to find myself uneasy at my lack of involvement in this process of wardrobe selection.

“Okay! Choose the dress you like the best and I’ll help you put it on!” I hear Jenna’s sing-song voice ask from behind the curtain.

“I want THIS ONE!” Lucy exclaims.

“How about one of these?” Jenna chirps enthusiastically, “They are more like princesses.”

“NO! THIS one,” my strong-willed girl asserts.

“Well, okay, that will look beautiful,” Jenna concedes.

In a few moments, Lucy emerges from behind the velvet curtain wearing a pale pink satin ballerina leotard with a short tutu instead of a long flowing princess gown. This is where my mother demons, the ones that sound a lot like the voice of MY mother, start to appear. On the one hand, I am somewhat pleased that she doesn’t look like Cinderella. At the same time, I want to scold, “Lucy! Why did you pick a ballerina costume?” She is doing it wrong! Right here in front of the other mothers.

Instead, I say, “oooooooooh, cute!” With her head held high, Lucy slowly and carefully walks her tutu-clad self over to join the party.

“Lucy! That’s a ballerina costume!” shouts Emma.

“No, it’s a ballerina princess costume,” Lucy answers regally. It is then that I notice with a mixture of glee and shame that Lucy has an octopus temporary tattoo covering most of her forearm. Tattoos and tutus—a gritty ballerina princess.

As I join the other moms off to the side, Jenna hoists Lucy up on the empty chair next to Emma, who is busy inspecting her pink fingernails as she holds them up to dry. With Lucy, there are now nine little princesses sitting quietly and properly, as Jenna and two other teenage girls wearing matching *Pretty* and *Precious* t-shirts move around the circle to beautify them. Jordan, the four year old birthday girl, already has her long curly hair pulled up into a fancy style, and her makeup and nails are done. The other princesses are in various stages of completion. The employees have this down to a science, as they make their way around the circle with no one spending more than three minutes on a hairdo, the application of glittery makeup, or nail polishing. This is a veritable princess assembly

line. I'm pretty sure Henry Ford never could have foreseen a factory quite like this.

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“But little girls have always loved princesses,” my mother exclaims. “My generation grew up with Snow White and Cinderella.” This is not an uncommon reaction, but it is patently false. As Forman-Brunell and Eaton argue, the dominance of the current princess culture is an historically contemporary phenomenon. Yes, the princess has been around as an occasional part of girls' lives for the past two hundred years, but not as the constant presence that marks her current status in the culture. The princess figure has changed over time, and has “often absorbed contradictory conceptions of girlhood that vied for dominance,” and is not as “natural and timeless” (339) as many (including my mother) claim. Part of this framing of our collective understanding of princesses, Do Rozario argues, is due to nostalgia (37). In fact, despite Disney's efforts to imbue the princesses with a sense of timelessness, each princess created reflects different social attitudes and conditions particular to her era.

The story of how we have landed at this particular point in the princess culture goes something like this: Once upon a time, long ago in the year 2000, a man by the name of Andy Mooney left Nike for a spot in Marketing at Disney. One of his first actions was to attend a Disney on Ice show, where he was aghast to see hundreds of little girls in the audience wearing homemade princess costumes. He saw an opportunity to make money – not by creating something brand new, but simply by repackaging the old (Orenstein 13). Fifteen years ago, Mooney grouped 8 female characters, some of whom weren't even technically princesses in their stories, and created a phenomenon that has become known as the Disney Princesses, or sometimes simply THE princesses. With no new movies, this manipulation and repackaging of old characters by 2009 had become a better than \$4 BILLION dollar industry (Orenstein 14). And Disney did not stop there, as evidenced by a princess bridal line (Setoodeh) and even

a Disney Baby line marketed directly to new mothers in maternity wards by offering free newborn clothing to infant princesses (Barnes). Because of Andy Mooney, today's girls are growing up with an entirely different experience of princesses than did anyone who is currently over the age of about sixteen. And these figures precede *Frozen*, the film which introduced Disney's newest princesses and that is responsible for better than \$1 billion in retail revenue in 2014 alone (Applebaum).

As the mother of Lucy, a now eight-year-old girl who has spent the past five years being enthralled with all things princess, I have become alternately frustrated, fascinated, bored, concerned, and intrigued by what has been termed "the princess culture." As academics do, I turned to the literature. Or at least, I tried. I looked for scholarly work about the princess culture and how it impacts children, and I came up short. I found plenty of work about Disney in general (e.g. the 1995 edited volume by Bell, Haas, and Sells), or analyses of individual princess texts (e.g. Downey; O'Brien; Henke, Umble, and Smith), and a bit about the historical place of the princess in our culture (Do Rozario; Forman-Brunell and Eaton). The phenomenon I concern myself with here is unique in that it is a subset of Disney and broader than any one princess text. Girls today generally experience the princesses as a package, yet our scholarship has been slower to examine it from that perspective. There are plenty of popular references to the princess culture, most notably Orenstein's *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*, but not much of a scholarly treatment of this recent phenomenon. The popular literature either gravely sounds the alarm about issues such as gender stereotypes (Orenstein), body image (Orenstein), or consumerism (Linn; Orenstein; Schor). Missing is the more nuanced approach that examines the way that children and their parents experience the princess culture that our scholarship might be able to address.

Thus, I set out to explore the contours of the princess culture through autoethnographic reflections on my reluctance to mother a princess. As a

qualitative method that privileges writing as a way of knowing, autoethnography has cultivated insights about my unease that I had not previously voiced. As an accidental ethnographer (Poulos) of sorts, my habit of attending to signs, clues, and the deepest urgings of my maternal heart also brings up anxieties. Through the practice of narrative construction as a means of inquiry (e.g. Ellis; Goodall; Poulos), this paper delves into how my daughter's identity (and to a lesser extent, mine) is intertwined with the princess culture, writ large.

To do this, I turned to scholars who examine media autoethnographically. Stern, for example, examines how her own identity as a woman and a feminist media scholar can be viewed as intertwined with the characters in the shows that she was most interested in at the time. She concludes that these characters helped to shape her own romantic and consumer desires (419). This, of course, represents my primary concerns about my daughter's obsession with princesses: How might they shape her ideas about what it means to be female in this world?

In Manning's audience ethnography of how viewers identify with Grey's Anatomy, he suggests that viewers often engage in what he calls symbolic boasting (142), in that they see themselves identifying with the characters' positive characteristics and disavowing characters' negative qualities. It is not so much that viewers see themselves as just like a character, but that they see positive qualities in a character that they aspire to. Further, in Manning's 2012 autoethnographic account of *Mad Men*, he argues that symbolic boasting allows viewers to place themselves inside a media text, while also maintaining their distinctiveness from the text. Indeed, he argues, perhaps this is the more important aspect of media effects (or affects, as he playfully suggests) for scholars to concern themselves with. Rather than worrying about the ways that media might be influencing our behaviors, he suggests that scholars focus more on how media texts can make viewers think about our own lives (96). Through

audience autoethnography, he urges us to explore this intertwining of identities.

Here is where my own positionality as the mother of the primary person consuming the princess culture complicates matters. Three or four year old girls—possibly more media savvy than they are often given credit for being—still do not have the skills to think deeply about their own identities vis-à-vis the media texts they consume. As Lucy’s mother, I do have these capabilities; but I am not the primary audience of princess texts. In his 2006 book, Jenkins discusses his use of the term “Aca/Fan” to refer to media scholars who read texts as both academics and as fans (4). Leaning on this notion, with thanks to Jenkins, perhaps I am best positioned as an Aca/Mom in this story. I am not always a fan of the princess media myself; indeed, I have often been the opposite. As an academic mother, I can never fully leave my critical sensibilities at the office when I am engaging in mothering work. It is rarely possible to simply be swept away with Lucy in the pure enjoyment of a princess story or film or game as an Aca/Mom. And even when I truly enjoy viewing a film or reading a story with my daughter, my fan response is filtered through both academic and parental lenses. Thus, my autoethnographic work is not solely of my experience with texts: but of watching someone else interact with texts and then observing my own reactions.

It’s not about my identity. Or is it?

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As my daughter sits still for her turn with the bobby pins, hairspray, and makeup, I am struck by the ridiculousness of a three year old getting made up like this. My husband, Nathan, was against allowing Lucy to attend this party, worried about her growing obsession with princesses whose beauty alone seems to lead to happily ever after. But Lucy was so excited to get the invitation along with all of the other girls in the class, and I didn’t have the heart to say no. I notice now that she is sitting on her salon chair surrounded by her tutu and an air of regal self-importance, but

without a smile. Is she even having fun? I then notice that none of the little girls are acting like their typical giggly selves. These girls are much more lively and chatty when I see them at drop off or pick up time each day. No one looks sad, really, but somber and perhaps nervous as they wait for an employee to perform princess work upon them. They are taking this seriously—very seriously—as if becoming a princess is important work. When it is her turn to have her curly hair pinned up and sprayed, Lucy squeezes her eyes shut and winces but does not complain. She scrutinizes her reflection in the hand-held mirror held up by the princess factory employee. “Do you LOVE it?” the worker enthuses. Lucy nods somberly. “Good!” the worker chirps, moving along to princessify the next girl in the circle.

Two more girls arrive late and are quickly ushered behind the purple curtain to be fitted with princess gowns. Rakhee and Ipsita were both born in India, and their mothers have carpooled to the party. Along with Hannah, these two disrupt the sea of whiteness all around us. With a bit more racial diversity in the room, the party somehow seems a little less creepy. But only a little. Even with the addition of a few princess of color, the main Disney princesses are overwhelmingly white. Tiana, Jasmine, and Mulan sometimes lurk in the background, but they are rarely the centerpiece of Disney’s marketing of the princess line. And even beyond Disney, the princess icon is rarely depicted as anything but white.

Gesturing to the three teenaged girls who are beautifying our daughters, Emma’s mom asks me, “How much would you have loved THIS job when you were a teenager?”

“Probably more than telemarketing,” I truthfully replied. Emma’s mom is loving the experience. I glance around furtively at the other moms, trying to make meaningful feminist eye contact, but I can’t figure out if anyone shares my ambivalence.

I long to find a safe mom to be snarky with, but don’t want to stand out uncomfortably in this crowd. Every time I have complained about the



prevalence of the princess culture, even among other progressive moms, I have faced a chorus of, “What’s the big deal?” and “Let her have fun!” Best not to chance it here, especially because we’re new to the class. And by “we,” I guess I mean that Lucy is new. Even Alicia’s mom, who I had previously pegged as a kindred spirit, is smiling and taking pictures.

So I keep “ooohing” and “ahhing” over our adorable daughters and snap more pictures like everybody else. I mean, she IS adorable. No denying that.

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Goodier explored the dual identities of academic mothers, comparing these women to “double agents,” (49) but focused more on how the mothering self is revealed or hidden in the professoring self. The story of how the academic self, with her critical feminist sensibilities, is expressed or repressed in motherhood is not as often told. One notable exception is Kinser’s work that examines her struggles to integrate her feminist, academic, and mothering identities. She argues, “raising children with knowledge that most of the mothers around me, that most of those who parent my son’s friends and peers don’t have is in many ways awful, dreadful” (384). And worse, “raising my children to hold that same knowledge, surrounded by children who do not, has proven at times, for my kids, dreadful” (384). Focusing more squarely on the impact of feminism than academia on mothering, O’Reilly points out the catch-22 that our children need feminism to “ready them for survival in a patriarchal world” but also that “resistance to patriarchy is indeed dangerous to our feminist daughters” (29). The approach to parenting that most resonates is Leavy—a feminist academic mother who enjoys makeup, clothing, and consuming the very media she critiques—who writes of the difficulty of parenting a pre-teen daughter (32). She inspires me to ask: Who am I, a former cheerleader and sorority president, to squelch my daughter’s pleasure in popular “girly” things?

As Susan Linn argues in her book, *The Case for Make Believe*, the problem with linking consumption and make believe—as Disney has successfully done with the princesses—is that it constrains imagination (34-39). The princesses cannot work as doctors or breastfeed babies or go on new adventures because their stories do not allow for these acts. There was controversy when Mooney first suggested that they lift the princesses out of their stories because there was a concern about each princess remaining faithful to her character. So, if you notice the packaged group of Disney Princesses, none are making eye contact with one another (Orenstein 13). They cannot; they are from separate stories. So although they are grouped together, strangely, they can't interact. They can't be friends. Kind of like supermodels on the runway, staring off into the distance.

The more solidly the notion of “princess” is tied to particular stories and images, Linn argues, the more difficult it is for kids to imagine alternative realities. And even worse, when kids only know the princesses as icons outside of their stories, they are nothing more than their hairstyles and dresses. As far as three-year-old Lucy knows, to be “Belle” is not to be brave, smart, and a voracious reader – because she hasn't seen the movie. No, to be Belle is to wear an off-the-shoulder yellow dress. If you don't have the dress, you can't be Belle.

Ever since Lucy was a baby, she has been called “princess” by grocery store cashiers, her aunts, and even her pediatrician (as in, “Let me look inside your ears, princess”). This is all before she even knew what a princess WAS, except to know that she was one. We tried to resist—we purposely did not purchase baby clothing that said “princess” on it, which wasn't always easy. We went for a more gender-neutral “Clifford the Big Red Dog” lunchbox, a yellow bedroom, and princess-free toys and décor. We did not give her princess movies to watch. And still, the princesses somehow climbed in through the windows or under the doors of our home and lives. They are sneaky, like cockroaches. They came in the form of

gifts I couldn't bring myself to confiscate, they elbowed their way into the play of her school friends, and they even have found their way into media that I trusted, such as the PBS Kids cartoons.

And, of course, they came in the form of birthday party invitations. I could have chosen to not let her attend Jordan's party. But it seemed mean to exclude her from a social event she was excited about because of my hang-ups with the princesses.

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"Okay princesses, it's time for your coronation!" one employee says excitedly, but the girls are too busy being careful with their fingernails and dresses to register that a vague command has been uttered.

Realizing this, the princess party leader takes different tack, "OKAY! Everyone come over here and line up!" Now we're getting somewhere. Lining up is something these preschoolers understand and they jump to attention. "Okay, birthday girl, you are first!" bellows the party leader, who has now obtained a handheld microphone, and Jordan struts to the front to take the coveted spot of line leader. The rest of the girls jostle and elbow for places in line after her. Lucy is near the end, in deference to the older girls, a role not uncommon for actual princesses. One at a time, each girl is helped up onto the stage behind the curtain and handed a scepter.

When it is Lucy's turn, I feel the acid churn in the pit of my stomach. "Please don't trip, please don't trip," I obsess internally, my mind flashing to some of the many high profile times I had done exactly that. Oh, God, am I a stage mother already? I hate to think that I'm living vicariously at the princess factory.

The emcee enthusiastically shouts, "Meet Princess Lucy!" as Lucy emerges cautiously from behind the curtain and looks around, bewildered. "Her princess rule is that everyone must eat ice cream!" One of the employees hands her a scepter and points her toward a pink feather boa that is stretched across the end of the stage. She shuffles down the catwalk in that direction and ducks underneath, as instructed. "Her favorite thing to

do as a princess is to get dressed up!” Another employee grabs Lucy’s arm and pulls her to one side to place a silver tiara with fuzzy pink feathers on her glittery head. “And her princess pet is a lion.” Finally reaching the end of the catwalk to the half-hearted applause and hoots of the three employees, she jumps off to sit beside her princessy friends. Not a single wave with hand or scepter.

Where did my bold, limelight-loving girl go? And what is she learning from this experience? That imagination and dressing up are a spectacle for others’ viewing pleasure and not something to have fun with for herself? I hope that is not one of those memorable messages she will internalize.

“Now it’s time for the princess dance party!” booms the microphone.

“Great,” I’m thinking, wondering if we are about to be treated to a techno remix of “Someday my Prince Will Come.” The music starts, and...huh? The Hokey Pokey? For the first time during the party, the girls lighten up and smile as they put their nail polished hands in and out and shake them all about. As they turn themselves around in their poofy dresses, the princess birthday party experience suddenly seems more innocuous. And if that wasn’t enough to make the point, the princesses were then instructed on the “Chicken Dance.” I was expecting the Macarena or the Electric Slide to follow, but instead, the employees attempt to gather the girls for the souvenir group photo that comes with the “perfect princess” party package.

All the perfect princesses line up to smile prettily. All the princesses, that is, except one. With a chubby little hand on either side of her face, she smooshes her cheeks together and turns toward me with a sly grin, ignoring numerous pleas from the photographer to cooperate with the perfect picture.

“Okay! Time for everyone to take off your costumes and put your clothes back on!” an employee yells, her happiest sounding voice coming off a bit more on edge than before. Lucy sometimes still needs help with

dressing and undressing, so I trail behind the gaggle of older princesses and hover near the purple curtain.

Suddenly, the woman from the front counter brushes by me, frowning and hissing at an employee to “Go back there and tell her to hurry up, this other party has been waiting and this is unacceptable.”

Please step off to your left. The princess party assembly line must not be delayed.

As I peer behind the curtain to where 10 little girls are shedding their princess gowns and one is shedding her ballet costume, I finally begin to recognize them. I feel relieved as they pose and tickle each other and laugh at fart noises. These are the girls who call me “Lucy’s mom” every evening at school pick-up time. One by one, they burst out from behind the purple curtain and drop their poufy dresses in a pile on the floor. As the girls dance, march, bounce, and skip out from behind the curtain, each one adds her gown to the growing mound of abandoned pouf and takes her place in the unimaginatively named and neutrally decorated “Cake Room #1.”

I peek into Cake Room #1 and spy a box labeled “The Cake Gallery.” THIS discovery, that the cake is from the bakery my family adores above all others, makes allowing Lucy to be immersed in princess culture at this party completely worth it. As Jordan’s mother cuts the cake and two employees pass it out on pink princess plates, I worry that there will not be enough left for the moms. But after all the still-glittery and beautifully-coiffed former princesses have been served, nearly half the adorable white cake with pink polka dots is left. As I strike up a conversation with another mom in the hallway to avoid looking too eager, I am distracted by thoughts of buttercream frosting.

Imagine my chagrin as I watch Jordan’s mom retrieve the white cardboard box from the corner. None of the other moms seem to be paying attention as the remaining fluffy white pink polka dotted frosting disappears into the box. I glance surreptitiously around at the other moms

and not a single one lets on that she has noticed the cake. Even Jordan's mom does not eat cake, though I am pretty sure she will later. Probably after Jordan goes to bed. She'll sneak into the kitchen and slice off a sliver ever so carefully so that it's not even obvious that a piece has been taken. Then she'll eat it with her hands to avoid creating the evidence of a dirty plate and fork. Here at the party, the myth that women don't eat is preserved. Meanwhile, back in Cake Room #1, Lucy is enjoying her treat. Although most of the other girls seem to be using their forks, Lucy is busy scooping frosting off with her fingers and then licking it off, bit by bit. I am both appalled by her manners and delighted that she still gets to openly enjoy birthday cake. At least there's that.

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"I don't want chubby cheeks! I want regular cheeks!" Lucy whines one night at bedtime, a few months later. Standing in front of the mirror in her dress-up corner, she pushes her cheeks inward with the heels of her hands. Then, she walks over to her dresser and picks out some barrettes.

"What are you doing, honey?" I ask.

"I need something to push my cheeks in," she announces, and then proceeds to poke her cheeks with the barrettes.

"Lucy, no!" I exclaim. "You could really hurt your cheeks that way!"

"Well, I am trying to make my cheeks NOT CHUBBY!" she yells.

"Honey, that won't make your cheeks less chubby. It will only make them owie." I pry the barrettes from her hands and lead her over to her bed. She struggles a bit and then finally relaxes as I pull her into my lap and put my arms around her, saying, "Lots of people would love to have cheeks just like yours. They help your smile be prettier!"

"But Emma doesn't have chubby cheeks, and she's the prettiest girl in the class," Lucy cries. "I want cheeks like Emma!"

"Sweetheart, we all need to be happy and proud of our bodies the way God made us," I tell her, realizing how I, myself, don't really buy this. I snuggle her close as she thinks about this for a moment.

“Does it hurt God’s feelings if we don’t like our bodies, since God made us?” she asks anxiously.

Oh jeez. By introducing trite theology into this conversation, I might be making it worse. Now she’ll feel bad about her body AND guilty about it.

“Honey, I think God understands when we feel bad. I don’t think God has hurt feelings. But God does love you the way you are, and God wants you to love yourself that way, too. And so do I,” I explain. It sounds somewhat convincing.

If only I could convince myself.

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“Watch the snacks,” her pediatrician casually mentions during Lucy’s annual checkup. “Her BMI is technically right on the border between healthy and overweight, in the ‘at risk for overweight’ category,” she continues. I was glad that Lucy was distracted and not hearing this conversation. At least I don’t think she heard.

To her credit, Dr. Novak was purposely trying to say this to me and not to Lucy. But as a mother with a far too high BMI to be considered “healthy,” and as the person who largely controls what Lucy eats, I feel ashamed. Food, especially the food that Lucy consumes, is a bit of an obsession of mine. I worry I’m being too strict and controlling, and then I worry I’m being too relaxed. I want Lucy to get joy and pleasure out of food and from her body, and not to constantly worry that she’s too fat or that her cheeks are too chubby. I want her to keep enjoying frosting and not feel that she has to pretend to be uninterested in birthday cake. But I do not want her to struggle with her weight as I have.

Funny, I don’t notice Nathan spending too much time worrying about any of this at all.

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A few months later, I sit slumped in my office chair, staring at the last line of my email from the Dean:

I don't think that you make a sufficient case for the College spending the proposed funds to support your travel to Disney World.

This is the same Dean who last week said, "Yes, I think we can do this. I'm persuaded by your argument that if you were studying family systems in Nepal, you would apply for extra sabbatical funding to cover your travel there. You want to study princesses, so where else would you go besides Disney? I need to look into how we can support at least some of it. I doubt you can use college funds to purchase tickets to the parks, but we can probably fund your airfare and hotel. I'll get back to you next week."

I knew I probably would not receive the funding. Yes, I have decided to study princesses and princess culture for my sabbatical project. But a college funded trip to Disney World? It seems shady. And adding that my daughter would have to go with me in order to allow me access to "princess places" was probably pushing it. Still, his curt refusal stung, coming only a few days after he had seemed enthusiastically supportive. Nathan and I decided to pull money out of savings and take the trip anyway.

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It is still dark outside as Lucy and I slide into the backseat of our friend Chad's car for a ride to the airport. Lucy holds up sparkly fingers and says, "I hope my nail polish stays on long enough for the princesses to see." Chad catches my eye in the rear view mirror, and looks at me with raised eyebrows as he and Nathan share a chuckle in the front seat. The morning of our flight is icy and cold in Omaha, and we are happy to leave our coats in the car and scurry into the terminal in t-shirts to begin our Disneyworld adventure. Nathan and I decided to pull money out of savings and take the trip anyway, and my parents jumped at the chance to meet us there so they would not miss Lucy's first Disney experience.

After we arrive in Orlando and locate ground transportation, a greying 50-something man checking our tickets exclaims, "Hello Princess!"



Are you going to Disneyworld?” Shyly, Lucy whispers yes. “You have a wonderful time!” he enthuses, as he points to the proper line for the bus to the French Quarter resort. In the two minutes it takes for us to reach the front of that line, our bus arrives.

This time, a blonde female 30-something employee says, “French Quarter?”

“Yep,” I answer.

“Right through this door,” she gestures. Then adds, “Have fun, Princess!” to Lucy. This time, Lucy flashes a broad smile and waves goodbye.

We drop the luggage at the cargo area, and board the bus. There is no driver sitting in the seat to shout “welcome Princess” as we climb up the steep stairs. I am not sorry about Lucy missing out on that greeting.

During what seems like an unbearably long drive from the airport to the resort, Lucy whines, “When will we get there?” At least half a dozen times. As I dole out the last precious snack I had packed in my carry-on bag, the driver announces, “Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to the French Quarter Resort!” We eagerly look out our windows to see lush Spanish moss-draped trees and multicolored New Orleans-style buildings appearing on either side of the road.

After we grab our luggage, we enter the reception area and encounter a man dressed as a Mardi Gras jester. He bends down to Lucy and says, “Hi there, Princess! Welcome to the French Quarter Resort,” while placing a strand of shiny green beads around her neck.

“Thank you!” she answers him. Then she bounces with excitement toward the registration desk. “Everyone keeps calling me Princess! I think it’s because I look so pretty!” Nathan and I exchange a look.

“Yeah, honey, isn’t that neat?” I muster.

“But pretty isn’t the most important,” Nathan reminds her.

“I know, I know,” she sighs with exasperation. “Smart and kind and brave are important,” she drones while rolling her eyes. Clearly, she’s memorized the message. But has she internalized it?

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More quickly than Lucy has ever moved before or since, we drop our luggage in our room and are back on another bus to the Magic Kingdom, where we will meet my parents in a few hours. As the bus approaches the park and the driver announces our arrival, I feel goosebumps crawl up my arms. Lucy climbs up on Nathan’s lap to get a better view out the window, squealing, “I want to see! I want to see!” We step off the bus and walk with the crowd toward the main gate security line. So many lines.

We walk to look at the Mickey Mouse flower bed and hear the sounds of parade music. “There’s Tiana!” Lucy exclaims and starts clambering for me to pick her up.

“Um, Nathan, can you pick her up?” I asked. He looked at me quizzically, so I remind him, “Because, you know, no lifting more than 20 pounds.” We saw a + sign on the home pregnancy test the morning before our trip, but are keeping the news to ourselves for now.

“Ooooooh, yes, of course, come here, honey,” he says as he hoists Lucy up on his shoulders. No need to worry that she would ask what we are talking about. She is completely enraptured. “Tiana waved at me! She saw me!” Lucy squeals with wide-eyed excitement.

“Where are these tears coming from?” I wonder, as I furtively wiped the corners of my eyes with my fingers. It could be hormones. But I think Orenstein (24) would call this “wondrous innocence,” a term coined by Cross to explain the joy parents seek from the reactions of their children to the things we buy. Having an academic term for these tears makes me feel a little less silly, as if a citation allows me to remain a critic instead of only a consumer.

Nathan and I have some time to ourselves one day, as my parents entertain Lucy on their own. I drag him to Cinderella’s castle for

uninterrupted observations of the goings on around the Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique. Four year olds in high heels. At an amusement park. Yikes. I can tell the difference between the disheveled “do it yourself” princesses wearing tennis shoes with their Halloween costumes from home and the Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique customers, who uniformly sport glittery makeup, carbon copy hairstyles, and fancier dresses. But mostly, it is the Miss America style Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique sash that set them apart. The Magic Kingdom has become a place to put yourself on display instead of a place to be carefree and play and enjoy, at least for these girls. They do not look all that different from contestants on *Toddlers and Tiaras*, frankly, as they walk regally about the park, waiting for people to notice them.

As I raise my camera to my eye to take a photo of the Boutique in the interior of the castle, an employee rushes over with raised hands, yelling, “Sorry, ma’am, no photos! Do you have an appointment?”

“Uh, no, I just wanted to have a look before I bring my daughter back later,” I lie.

“Well, you can definitely bring your camera back then,” she says, as she ushers me out into the crowded vestibule.

I rejoin Nathan on a bench outside the entrance to the top secret castle. One mom drags a scowling Princess Belle of about five or six years of age by the wrist and forces her to sit on a bench near us as she bends over her, hissing, “Now you listen to me. Daddy and I paid a lot of money for you to get your princess makeover. So you will stop this sass and cooperate for pictures with your sister when she’s done or you will go to bed without swimming tonight. Do. You. Understand?” Compared to the more carefree atmosphere just a few hundred yards away in Fantasyland, this area is a no-nonsense zone.

In her work on *Toddlers and Tiaras*, Orenstein (76) raises the question of whether there isn’t a little bit of stage mother in all of us. Most of us look at toddler beauty pageants and see them as extreme, but where is the

line? The little girls who I saw getting made over were mostly ages two to maybe seven or eight. It's possible that some of those older girls have heard about the Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique from peers and requested the experience, but my guess is that most little girls are introduced to it by the adult women in their lives. What are mothers getting out of their daughters being princesses?

Though as an Aca/Mom, participation in that particular part of the princess culture seems a bridge too far, I was willing to take Lucy to breakfast with the princesses. Seeing the pure joy on Lucy's face as she posed for photos with Ariel and Belle and Cinderella and Snow White made me forget my objections for a blessed moment. Getting caught up in the experience as a fan and forgetting my feminist critique felt, well . . . magical.

\* \* \*

We're all pretty quiet during our last breakfast of Mickey Mouse waffles and sausage. After breakfast, my parents take Lucy to the resort playground to allow Nathan and I time to finish packing up. But when Lucy sees me approaching with our carry on backpacks, she cries, "Noooooooooooo!"

"C'mon Lucy," my dad says. "It's time to go get on the bus."

"I don't WANT to leave! I want to stay!" She yells loudly from the top of the play structure. "Just one more day!"

"Sorry, honey, but we need to go. Daddy's waiting for us on the bus with our suitcases," I reply sympathetically.

"I won't!" she screams, as she scrambles down the slide and then crawls underneath it in an attempt to hide.

"Do not make me crawl under and get you or you will be in big trouble," I hiss. Louder crying is her only response. "If you come out right now, you can have a treat when we get to the airport," I plead.

"I DON'T WANT A TREAT AT THE AIRPORT," she screams back. My sympathy reserves are officially dried up now as I ponder

having to get down on my hands and knees to drag her out from under the slide. She is not an easy target for an overweight, 40-year old, slightly pregnant woman. As she writhes and screams, I managed to drag her out by the legs. People are looking. God, they probably think I'm kidnapping her. I manage to get my arms around her and lift her up on one hip as she screams. No lifting more than 20 pounds, I know – but I don't have a choice. As I tote my sobbing child to the bus, I regret every second of this research/vacation. Nathan sees us through the window and gets off the bus to help, and by the time he takes Lucy into his own arms she has given up the fight and cries more quietly now into his shoulder.

“I can't really blame her,” he says.

Exhausted, I exchange quick goodbyes with my parents and board the bus, still fuming. Lucy waves out the window to her grandparents, who smile and blow more kisses than I feel she deserves. I sit by myself and breathe deeply, as Nathan speaks softly with Lucy about how sad it is to be leaving. He can be nicer to her right now than I can. As the bus pulls away and a recorded official Disney message plays over the loudspeaker, my head swims. I was supposedly here as a part of my sabbatical project, and I am wondering what I have learned.

I guess I needed more time here, too.

\* \* \*

When does a study of the princess culture end? Certainly not at the end of my sabbatical semester, as planned. It turns out that getting pregnant at the beginning was not the best idea, productivity-wise. All that time to write turned into time to be sick, take naps, and sort through old baby things. Life has continued, new princesses keep coming, baby Clara was born, Lucy expanded her interests, and Clara developed interests of her own. Any ending of an article about the princess culture risks missing THE NEXT BIG THING.

I sit in the darkened theater, wiping tears from the corners of my eyes. With Lucy by my side, and toddler Clara in my lap, we watch and listen

for the first time as Elsa stops hiding and instead embraces her power, belting out “Let it Go!”

Admittedly, tears during a Disney movie are not uncommon for me. I can be manipulated to shed one or two when a parent dies or during the “happily ever after.” But these are not typical Disney movie tears. They are tears about a princess becoming empowered and fighting the patriarchy. As I sit here, I realize that this song could become an anthem for gay people stepping out of the closet, or people with anxiety overcoming fears, or for anyone bravely being themselves in the face of judgment. Maybe even for Aca/Moms.

\* \* \*

Disney, you have changed your trope. Sure, you’ve been tinkering with the princess genre for some time. As Do Rozario argues, the princesses of the late 80s and early 90s (Ariel, Pocahontas, and Jasmine) were already becoming more proactive and autonomous than Snow White, Cinderella and Aurora (57). More recently, Tiana is intelligent and a hard worker with dreams of opening a restaurant, and Merida is independent and refuses to be forced to marry. But *Frozen*, while not beyond critique, truly feels like a game changer with its plot revolving less around romance and more about sisterly love – not to mention its warning about the folly of love at first sight.

Clara, who is more than five years younger than Lucy, is now becoming sucked into the princess culture. But it’s a different world. For Clara, princesses are adventurous and devoted sisters, not simply beauties who marry to find happiness. Yes, they have glamorous dresses and hairstyles—at least some of the time—but they are smart and funny and flawed and their relationships with men are not primary to their identities. As my daughters dress in their Elsa and Anna Halloween costumes and reenact scenes from the movie, they focus on bravery and devotion

between sisters. After more than five years mucking around as a mother in the princess culture, Disney has won me over. At least a little.

\* \* \*

But...

What about the chubby cheeks? That concern is coming from somewhere, and it is not *Vogue* or *Cosmo*. The cultural dominance of beautiful princesses is not going anywhere, and perhaps encouraging creative play and continuing to consume the films with empowering storylines that include brave princess heroines is going to be more effective in the long run than trying to drag my children away kicking and screaming. I remain concerned about my daughters' focus on appearance, and yet I know that is the world they live in and will continue to live in as they get older. I can't protect them from this completely, but can I strengthen them enough to navigate it? That's probably going to take more than repeating, "pretty isn't the most important."

In 1984, Radway contended that women reading romance novels did so for escapism and also with active resistance. She encouraged feminist scholars not to dismiss these texts out of hand. A decade later, Jenkins argued similarly that fans are "textual poachers" (24) who create their fan cultures to suit their own desires and purposes, rather than simply and uncritically swallowing media content. More recently, Manning's work that argues viewers are capable of drawing on the positive and dismissing the negative to shape their own identities vis-à-vis television characters is similarly reassuring. More pertinent to children, Wohlwend argues that while artifacts created for children (whether media texts or things like toys or clothing) carry "anticipated identities" (59), their influence is not unidirectional. Children, in play, are capable of improvising with character and plot and use princess stories in more creative and transformative ways than we parents may presume possible. It seems that even children are capable of both creating their own desires and of resisting intended meanings.

When Lucy reports that she and her friends at school play “Mermaid to the Rescue” or “Princess Superheroes,” she is articulating how they are actively resisting the dominant narrative, “textual poaching” if you will, in favor of creating identities that are more in keeping with the way *they* want to view the princesses—as strong and brave young women. A recent “vampire princess” Halloween costume included a tiara and fangs—not quite what Disney had in mind.

And counter to Linn’s concerns about the princess culture thwarting imagination, Lucy and her friends exercise unlimited creativity in their princess play, mixing mermaids, vampires, superheroes, fairies, wizards, and all manner of talking animals into their games and stories. And sometimes, they decide to ditch the prince, skip the ball, and dance with each other – demonstrating Forman-Brunell and Eaton’s argument that girls are “able to maneuver between gendered expectations and more daring identities” (340).

This active audience perspective also implies that Disney marketing genius (or evil, depending on your vantage point) is not the only creator of the princess culture. There is something going on in child culture, and in parent culture, that has made us partners with Disney in the rise of the princesses. The recent success of *Frozen* seems to suggest that Disney has stumbled upon a new consumer-driven feminist version of the princess narrative that is pleasing to a wider audience of parents and children. Will Elsa and Anna be absorbed and become subsumed by the group? Or will they transform it?

I was not sorry to learn, during the course of my sabbatical research, that *Pretty and Precious* has closed its doors. Though I now feel more prepared to mother Clara through her own negotiations with the princess culture, and I am confident that she will not emerge from her first big foray into popular culture uncritically swooning for her prince, I am glad that she will be skipping the princess factory. As I continue to navigate parenting



as an Aca/Mom, I do so in a way that is slightly more relaxed. As a feminist mother engaging popular media with my daughters, I embrace the hope Manning expresses, that we can use these texts to better understand our own journeys (96). Rather than futilely attempting to shut out the princess culture, I have embraced my role of engaging it seriously, and encouraging Lucy and Clara to question some of its messages.

\* \* \*

“Finish brushing your hair, girls, it’s almost time for the party,” I call from the bathroom as I apply lipstick before my niece’s princess birthday party. Three-year old Clara, dressed as Anna, appears in the doorway.

“What are you doing, Mama? Just putting on lipstick?” she asks.

“Yep, but I’m all done,” I answer. “Should we do your braids?”

“Nah, I don’t want braids today,” she insists. “But can I have some of your lipstick? Pleeeeease?”

“No, honey, you look pretty the way you are. You don’t need lipstick,” I reply. I’m glad that Clara is not nearly as strong-willed as her sister and is thus more likely to accept my “no” without a scene.

“So do you, Mama, you don’t need lipstick either!” she chirps.

This stops me for a second.

“Thanks, Sweetie,” I reply. “That makes me feel good to hear.”

Later, as my own little princesses jump in a birthday party bounce house and sweat in their sparkly gowns; and then even later as they exchange gowns for bathing suits to unselfconsciously run squealing through the sprinkler – well, the princess culture seems innocuous once more. At least for this afternoon.

And at this party, we all enjoy our cake.

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