Power at Play:

Gender Discourses in Media-Based Pretend Play in the Early Childhood Education Classroom

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ABSTRACT

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Tifanie Valade

North American children are growing up in a media-saturated landscape. Since the deregulation of children's television in the 1980s in the United States, an explosion of intertextual transmedia franchises has resulted in Canadian children being surrounded by not only film and television texts, but also by media-based toys and merchandise. Market segmentation means these toys and related items are highly gendered, with themes that include femininity, passivity, appearance and friendship for girls, and hegemonic masculine ideals including dominance, aggression, militarism and competitiveness for boys. This investigation undertakes an observation of children at a daycare and a preschool, in Montreal, engaged in pretend play utilizing media-based toys and dress-up costumes to understand what types of gender discourses circulate through play with these items. Results indicate that the gendered themes evident in the media-based toys and narratives are taken up by the children and become part of their everyday play worlds, exacerbating gender policing among peers. However, aspects of gender discourses are also contested as some children take pleasure in subverting gender norms, or turning submissive roles into more agentic positions in play. The production history and content of some of the media-based franchises are also examined, as well as pedagogical approaches that may prevent critiques of hegemonic gender discourses in the early childhood education environment.

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Thank you to the children who participated in this study, as well as their parents, educators, and the ECE centre owners who so kindly allowed me to spend time in their classrooms. Thank you to my children, whose experiences inspired this project - you continue to motivate me with your intelligence, your kindness, and your dedication to defending others. Thank you also to my husband, for walking with me on this path and sharing the load. Also, thanks to my extended family, for helping when and where it was needed, and to "the mamas" for supporting this project from afar.

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Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to both of my grandmothers: Mémé who was a feminist before the term feminism was coined, and left a legacy of strong, vibrant women in her stead; and Nana, who has inspired several generations with her intellect, her kindness and her keen interest in our academic projects. I can only hope to reach the age of 99 with as much grace and fortitude as she has.

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Prologue: Princess Ambitions

This project has its roots in 2006, the year my daughter turned four and graduated from pre-school. At the graduation ceremony, the children were asked to stand up and state what they would like to be when they grew up. I was quite taken aback when each girl in the class stood up, one after the other, and said that they would like to be a princess, except for one, more assertive young lady, who insisted she did not want to be a princess, because she was "going to be a QUEEN!"

That same year my daughter became enamoured with princess paraphernalia, and spent hours clomping around our home in plastic, child-sized glass slippers, as well as playing with Disney Princess dolls and accessories. As a mother and a feminist, I was captivated by my own childhood memories of the pleasure of engaging with Disney films, as well as concerned about this return to fairy tale notions of femininity. I discovered that a particular postfeminist moment in young girls' popular culture had been concretized by the launch of the now multi-billion-dollar Disney Princess licensing brand. The female protagonists from the first and second generations of Disney films had been amalgamated into one shiny, bejeweled, highly effective marketing package. This repackaging offered a type of nostalgic pleasure through a homogenization of girlhood and innocence. At the same time, however, it perpetuated a problematic white, middleclass worldview, promulgated sexism, normalized historical inaccuracies and appropriated cultures (Valade, 2012). Although I was troubled by these issues, I also noted that my daughter may have been identifying with the princesses as strong female leads due to the limited sources of empowerment available to girls in a largely sexist children's media landscape. My concerns were echoed at that time by the publication of popular journalistic accounts such as *Cinderella Ate My Daughter* by Peggy Orenstein (2011) and *Princess Recovery* by Jennifer Hartstein (2012).

Six years later, when my son turned five, he too went through a period of princess obsession. By this time, the Disney Princess brand had expanded to include a third generation of princesses from newer films such as *The Princess and the Frog, Tangled*, and the newly-released *Brave*. He begged me for weeks to buy him a bow and arrow so that he could practice archery like Merida, the young, feisty, Scottish protagonist of *Brave*. I can still picture the pure joy he

exuded as he spent an entire summer's vacation in PEI skipping down the red dirt road with a blue sparkly scarf tied around his shoulder, his new plastic bow and suction-cup tipped arrows clutched firmly in hand. A few weeks later he implored me to purchase a horse, which apparently he felt was needed to embody the full Merida experience. When I pointed out that we lived in the suburbs and there was no room for a horse, he insisted that we could keep it in the garage and the neighbours would never know. This was one of several disappointments to come.

One night a few months later, he ended up crying himself to sleep when I broke the news that despite his repeated pleas, there was no way I could instantly make his hair long and blonde, or imbue it with magical healing properties like Rapunzel from the film *Tangled*. On a visit to Disneyworld later that year he asked to go to the theme park dressed as Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*, but I did not acquiesce to this request because I was uncertain of how safe a space the park would be for gender fluidity. In hindsight, this overprotectiveness was perhaps a failed moment in feminist mothering. In general, however, as opposed to my skepticism surrounding my daughter's princess play, I actively encouraged my son's engagement with the Disney texts and their related toys, perhaps because an identification with traditionally female roles meant eschewing the hegemonic masculinities embedded in media and toys aimed at boys. This did not last long however.

Fast forward several years, and my son has largely abandoned his interest in princess play, however, his love of film and television-scripted characters has continued to grow. This was evident one recent Christmas morning as I found myself the unwilling interloper in a light saber dual between my son and several of my nephews. As I tried to escape unintentional injury at the hands of the cylindrical plastic swords, and avoid the din of the electronic "whooshing" sound effects, I noticed a plethora of Darth Vader piggy banks, R2D2 key chains and other assorted Star Wars merchandise piled among all of the children's recently opened gifts. Despite the protagonist of the newly released *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* film being a young woman, Rey, all signs of gender diversity in the merchandise had been erased. This was clearly a world populated by men, machines, and the occasional Wookie. Also despite most of the children having seen the new film, the living room battle, from what I could tell, was being played out among "good *guys*" and "bad *guys*" – closely echoing the themes from the first three Star Wars films, which hinge on militaristic space battles and hierarchies of male dominance. For my son this would be only the tip of the iceberg of a renewed interest in hypermasculinity, militarism,

guns, and war play. As a mother and a scholar, this reignited my interest in how media-based themes and their related toys might impact children's conceptions of gender.

Children's Media-Based Toys

While media-scripted toys for girls tend to focus on friendship, appearance, domesticity and hyper-femininity, media-scripted toys for boys are often infused with notions of hegemonic masculinity. In addition, boys' toys encompass the worlds of monsters, dinosaurs and machinic ascendency, excluding the aesthetics and emotionality of what Emily Kane terms the "iconic feminine" (2006, p. 159), thereby marking traditionally feminine aspects of culture as off-limits to boys. This makes the gendered divide of toys and play particularly concerning in terms of reproducing heteronormative, reductionist notions of sex and gender. How exactly children engage with these paratexts, and their underlying media-based storylines has not been adequately studied, however, to know whether this reproduction is in fact taking place.

Consumption of media-based toys and texts does not occur in a vacuum, as both parents and children are influenced by familial and peer relationships, social institutions they belong to such as schools and religious groups, as well as by their social location in terms of gender, class, race, ability, and sexuality. In her ethnography on children and consumption, Allison Pugh (2009) notes that peers are especially influential, creating what she calls "economies of dignity" where children vie for esteem and attention, as well as a sense of group belonging. Insider or outside status is often determined based on a display of particular consumer goods or knowledge of media-based texts. In addition, parents, who often play the roles of curators of their children's media and toy landscapes, are subject to their own nostalgic and affective motivations for steering children toward or away from particular media franchises. North American media and toy producers have become proficient at tapping into this nostalgic aspect of consumption by recycling and/or rebooting popular franchises at regular (often generational) intervals. Derek Johnson, referencing the 2007 re-launch of the Transformers brand in the United States notes: "the recent nostalgic revitalization of *Transformers* … drew upon the specific patterns of social reproduction in that context to manage the franchise as an ongoing, generational (and gendered) process of cultural reproduction" (2013b, p. 190).

With this in mind, Andrew Rees-Chappell argues that the cultural forms made available to children by adults, including parents, educators, and those working in the culture industries, "inform children's embodiment within material and symbolic cultural practices." This creates a

discursive space he terms the "colonized imaginary" (2008, p. 22). For middle-class children in North America this "colonized imaginary" may be shaped by the commodification of children's entertainment though the licensing of characters from films, television, books and video games, which has become a major part of children's media landscape. This duality of colonization and commodification may then be enacted through fantasy play, either with the related toys, or with symbolic objects that may be used to embody particular characters and/or advance the narrative. What effects this potential colonization and commodification might have, particularly in terms of children's understanding of gender roles, remains to be seen. How precisely are media-based themes explored through fantasy play? Do children take-up the often stereotypical gender roles embedded in children's media and toy franchises, or rework them, thereby expanding their understandings of gender? What other factors (familial relationships, peer culture, classroom structure, media exposure, fan culture, etc.) might play into children's enactment of media-based plots or characters? What cultural-historical function do media-based themes serve in terms of the reproduction of hegemonic gender discourses, particularly in light of inter-generational marketing strategies? These are some of the questions this inquiry seeks to answer.

Pink and Blue Transmedia Supersystems

Although the commodification of children's popular culture dates back to the advent of character licensing at the turn of the century, it was concretized during the 1980s with the deregulation of children's television which resulted in the introduction of program-length commercials (PLCs) in the United States. Although Canada's regulations remained more stringent, particularly in Quebec, many of the PLCs were aired in Canada via specialty cable networks (Bredin, Henderson, & Matheson, 2012), or could be picked over the air via antenna from American stations situated close to the Canadian border. These 30-minute animated serials were funded by toy companies or licensees and designed with the sole purpose of selling associated lines of toys (Kline, 1993). Tom Engelhardt (1986) notes that this new approach to children's television which involved market research, the concoction of a saleable "image," and oftentimes the production and sale of merchandise prior to the airing of the television show, became the go-to development formula for children's entertainment. This strategy was largely successful as numerous PLCs introduced during this period such as *Transformers*, *My Little Pony* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* have become successful franchises that have remained in circulation.

The original PLCs and their associated toy lines were highly gendered with themes of femininity, passivity, appearance and friendship for girls, and hegemonic masculine ideals including dominance, aggression, militarism and competitiveness for boys (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1990; Kline, 1993; Seiter, 1995). Stephen Kline (1993) argues that this was intentional as marketers strove to segment potential audiences by age and gender in order to increase profitability. In addition, Kline notes that the proliferation of PLCs undercut production values, which led to empty fantasy narratives based loosely in myth or folklore that lacked the psychological depth of traditional drama, or the educational value of classic literature. Elizabeth Sweet (2013), who examined toy advertising in the United States from 1905-1995, suggests that this gendering was a departure from largely gender-neutral toy production and marketing in the 1970s, and a return to earlier stereotyped gender roles but with further exaggerated, fantasy-based depictions of femininity and masculinity. Marsha Kinder echoes this notion, noting that during the 1980s toys were promoted as "objects of identification" within an advertising discourse, and that children were being constructed as commodified gendered subjects through their consumption of these objects (1991, p. 51).

Since the 1980s, a series of mergers and acquisitions among major U.S. media conglomerates as well as among American toy producers and retailers, has led to an intensification of cross-promotion and media concentration (Hardy, 2010). Sweet theorizes that this may also have had a homogenizing effect on children's media and toy offerings, as smaller companies increasingly failed to compete with large conglomerates and lost market share. A trip to a local big-box toy retailer will support this notion. Despite increased media content aimed at children due to new players in the market such as Netflix, many programs and their associated merchandise are based off a few megabrands that belong to media conglomerates such as Disney and Viacom. Kinder terms this mass merchandising an intertextual commercial transmedia supersystem and describes it as:

> … [a] network [that] must cut across several modes of image production; must appeal to diverse generations, classes, and ethnic subcultures … must foster "collectability" through a proliferation of related products; and must undergo a sudden increase in commodification, the success of which reflexively becomes a "media event" that dramatically accelerates the growth curve of the system's commercial success. (1991, p. 123)

David Buckingham and Julian Sefton-Green, analyzing the Pokémon phenomenon, note that children's relationship to these transmedia supersystems can be examined via structuration theory – or the tension between producers' objective of maximizing profits and the agency of individual consumers to resist manipulation. However, he cautions that brands such as Pokémon are not designed to be passively consumed, but rather to "generate activity and social interaction" and that their success depends upon the latter, making the structure vs. agency debate an oversimplification (2003, p. 389). This poses a problem for media effects theorists, accustomed to isolating a single aspect of children's media and examining the results of children's exposure, such as the effects of violent television programming on children's behaviour. How does one go about investigating a multilayered, multi-modal, gendered media and merchandise intertextual supersystem which calls not for passive consumption, but for active participation? How does one observe children's construction of gendered subjectivities through the exposure to, reproduction of, and perhaps even resistance to, dominant discourses transmitted through children's media-based consumer culture? I will argue that children's pretend or fantasy play scenarios offer a location in which these issues converge. First, I will examine previous academic offerings in this area.

Playing with Disciplinarity

Previous studies in the media effects tradition have largely examined children's relationship to television (for an overview see Pecora, Murray, & Wartella, 2007), although some have included aspects of gender discourses (Berry & Asamen, 1993; Lemish, 2010), and/or aspects of toys and play (Goldstein, Buckingham, & Brougère, 2004; Singer & Singer, 2008). Others have focused on textual or functional analyses of transmedia supersystems such as Batman (Meehan, 2004; Roman & McAllister, 2012), Bratz (McAllister, 2007; Valdivia, 2009), Disney Princesses (Do Rozario, 2004; England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek, 2011), Lego (Johnson, 2013a) and Pokémon (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 2003), without analysing how children encounter these systems through play. There also exists a large volume of research on pretend play, however, it has generally remained in the area of psychological or developmental inquiry (for an overview see Fein, 1981; Rubin, Fein, & Vandenberg, 1983). These studies have emphasized the role of pretense in cognitive development, behaviour, language acquisition and creativity, rather than as a locus of cultural reproduction. The topic of children and gender has also been heavily examined from a developmental standpoint (for an overview see Miller, Martin

Trautner, & Ruble, 2006), with a focus on individual cognition/behaviour, rather than as an aspect of identity constituted through a social process of enculturation.

Part of the difficulties in examining media, play and gender, may be tied to disciplinary insularity. Some scholars have succeeded in traversing this intellectual and methodological divide, however, with encouraging results. Karen Wohlwend's examination of children's play with Disney Princess themes and products in a kindergarten classroom is one example. She notes that Disney Princess dolls and their associated play 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" (2012, p. 594). Maya Gotz et al. also take up a similar investigation, although they utilize daydreams rather than pretense as their source of data - remarking that children use media content to: "symbolize and make sense of their own experiences", as a jumping off point for telling stories – sometimes following the media-based storyline closely and sometimes deviating from it, as well as to communicate and identify with their peer groups (2005, p. 109). In their study, they note that highly gendered media-based themes do in fact pervade children's daydreams: harmony and appearance for girls, and aggression and dominance for boys. In an examination of children's play with character-scripted toys, Sandra Chang-Kredl and Nina Howe echo these findings, suggesting that media-based toys produce imitative rather than transformative pretense. They propose that: "a deeper understanding of the mechanisms and dynamics of both pretend play and children's consumer culture would contribute to a better understanding of children's experiences within their media-filled worlds" (2010, p. 97).

This feminist media studies research seeks therefore to continue the work of the scholars noted above to contribute to precisely such an understanding. Through observation of pretend play, and analysis of source texts, this project will examine how children incorporate transmedia materials into their everyday social worlds, and how gender discourses circulate through the inclusion of these texts in play.

Chapter 2
Methodology

The Meaning and Use of Pretend Play

There are numerous types of play which involve children's media-based franchises – notably video games, games with rules (such as trading cards), construction play (such as licensed Lego sets) and pretend play. In this inquiry I focused solely on pretend or fantasy play because it offers a particularly rich landscape to examine the enactment of, or resistance to, gendered discourses typified by media-based narratives. If discourse refers to "a theoretical grid of power and knowledge, in which knowledge and power are integrated with each other and impossible to separate" (Foucault qtd. in Blaise, 2005, p. 16), then dominant gender discourses are those that seek to normalize and naturalize patriarchal, heteronormative conceptions of gender and sexuality. These discourses serve to maintain power inequities and marginalize particular groups in society. From a poststructuralist feminist standpoint, this power is constituted and maintained through language in action.

Language, particularly as it relates to symbolization, is also central to pretend play, or simulative engagement that "transforms the here and now" in the mind of the child (Garvey, 1990). Jean Piaget (1962) views play largely as a process of assimilation of new concepts into a child's existing mental schemas and as a way of mastering activities. Lev Vygotsky (1977), however, and later Alexei Leont'ev, conceive of pretend play as a form of illusory realization of unrealizable desires and the "leading activity of the preschool period" through which semiotic mediation is developed (Duncan & Tarulli, 2003, p. 273). Daniel El'Konin (1971) suggests that the development of symbolization is tied to the development of speech, and allows children to both substitute one object for another, as well as to take-on adult roles during imaginative play. Eventually, according to Vygotsky, the child is able to engage in decontextualization and "learns to act in a cognitive, rather than externally visible realm, relying on internal tendencies and motives, and not on incentives supplied by external things" (qtd. in Duncan & Tarulli, 2003, p. 274).

Vygotsky also stresses the importance of rules, notably that conventions related to roles and everyday actions, which to adults are generally implicit, are made explicit in play. Leont'ev elaborates on this process: "children enter actively into the world of human relations and appropriate for themselves – at first in a concrete and overtly active way – the societal human

functions, as well as the societally elaborated norms and rules of behaviour" (qtd. in Duncan & Tarulli, 2003, p. 276). These rules eventually become internalized and form part of the child's nexus of self-regulation. Because they are often verbalized and negotiated during fantasy play, however, this offers an opportunity to examine dominant discourses and provides an exteriorization of otherwise naturalized phenomenon such as gender roles. Bronwyn Davies' research with pre-school and primary school children is relevant here, as she notes that to enforce the gender binary children take-up gender-stereotypical behaviours and then engage in "gender category maintenance work" to coerce others to do the same in an effort to affirm their gender identity (discussed in Francis, 1998, p. 10). Numerous studies discuss this type of gender "borderwork" during pretense (Blaise, 2005; Francis, 1998; Thorne, 1993; Wohlwend, 2012).

Herron and Sutton-Smith also suggest, based on the work of George Mead, that socio-dramatic play is fundamental to the development of the conception of identity, as the child must "get outside himself and apprehend himself from some other perspective" (1971, p. 10). Drawing on the writings of Robert Merton, they note that role-play serves an anticipatory socialization function, or prepares the child to take on adult roles. Herron and Sutton-Smith also posit that fantasy play, as well as toys, perform a cultural-historical function of maintaining a society's myths by reproducing important historical figures and archetypes. This coincides with Leont'ev's concept of appropriation, or "the process through which the individual actively recreates or reconstructs cultural products of earlier generations of his or her society, including, for instance, tools, symbols, and other artifacts, practices and ideas" (Duncan & Tarulli, 2003, p. 279). Vygotsky also refers to these tools, symbols, practices and ideas as "mediational means." In this view, children are not "passive dupes" of culture but rather active agents of its continual reworking, part of which occurs through play.

These mediational means may also be toys such as dolls, cars, or action figures, utilized as "toy replicas" which aid in the development of roles and narrativisation. This involves "endow[ing] small props with the qualities of live participants capable of initiating actions and speech" and creating narrative worlds that demonstrate relationships between the props (S. Rubin & Wolf, 1979, p. 21). This allows the child to enact the roles of both actor and narrator or director of the pretend play scene. Dan Fleming argues that mass-produced licensed toys, such as Star Wars action figures, come with a narrative already attached to the object. He notes that political and socio-historical themes are embedded in media-based toys, suggesting that this

confines imaginative play, while at the same time proposing that the proliferation of characters supports "a spiral of endless disruption and restabilisation" with the addition of each new toy to a child's collection (1996, p. 108). Kline disagrees, purporting that this narrativisation necessarily results in imitative rather than creative play opportunities, and that in fact, within a transmedia supersystem, involves the child in a form of "work" for the toy manufacture as they continue to advertise the media source to themselves (and, one would surmise, to their peers) through play (1989, p. 315).

Wohlwend notes that just because an action or appropriation occurs during pretend play, and that the child is aware that the activity is fictional, does not mean that it doesn't impact the child outside the play frame (2011). Numerous "literacies" are at work in fantasy play, including social and cultural literacies as noted above, and these "teach" the child about their role in society, as well as their role among their peers. These literacies are also affected by the child's positionality in terms of gender, race, class, ability and other markers of social difference. Knowledge of children's popular cultural texts also varies depending on children's access to media and may create peer hierarchies based on the cultural capital this knowledge (as well as the possession of related consumer products) entails such as the "economies of dignity" previously mentioned. The advertising function noted by Kline is then doubly important and an interesting area for inquiry, particularly in terms of gender roles.

Field Observation Locations and Participant Selection

This project investigated children's interactions with popular cultural narratives via observation of pretend play among four-year-olds in a local daycare and a pre-school. Participants were selected from the greater Montreal area, and were mainly English speakers, although some had other languages as their mother tongue (French, Japanese, Tagalog, and Korean). Field research was conducted through naturalistic observation over a period of seven weeks, which resulted in 24 hours of observation at the daycare and 20 hours at the preschool. Field notes regarding speech, movements, and interactions were recorded on site by hand, and then transcribed using word-processing software.

As a parent of children in an anglophone milieu, I specifically sought out English-speaking institutions in order to find out whether observations of my own children's experiences with popular culture and pretend play could be generalized to a larger local population. In addition, as English-speakers living among a larger French-speaking majority, anglophones in

Quebec have easy exposure to English (largely American) media in their original format, and as a result likely consume transmedia in English more than their francophone counterparts. How this linguistic dualism impacts the integration of media franchises into Quebec children's life worlds is beyond the scope of this study, but would make an interesting point for future investigation. Locations were sourced through an extended personal network of fellow parents.

The first field research location was a medium-sized privately owned, government-licensed daycare and the participants were the oldest attendees, the pre-kindergarten group. The group consisted of 21 children, approximately 50% of which were European-Canadian, with the balance hailing from a mix of African-Canadian, Asian and Latin-American backgrounds. All students participated in the study except one, however occasionally children from other classrooms were mixed with the pre-kindergarten group. Most of these were excluded save one, Jeffrey, who joined the group on a regular basis (all names are pseudonyms). This location was chosen as it has a relatively diverse English-speaking clientele from a variety of middle-income levels. Although the centre is private and non-subsidized, parents whose children attend are eligible for advance repayments of child-care tax credits from the provincial government, making it affordable to a wider range of families. It's located in a suburb on the Western part of the island Montreal. Observations took place in the late afternoon when organized activities were completed for the day and the children were engaged in free play. Educators at the daycare varied as staff were moved from one classroom to another based on staffing needs at the end of the day, with a core group of approximately three recurring educators: Cara, Sofia, and Christina. Toys and activities were self-selected with minimal direction or intervention from the educators, except to manage overcrowding in popular areas of the classroom such as the kitchen corner.

The large, open classroom was divided into sections using bookshelves and other furniture. There were three popular play areas including the kitchen corner which had wooden imitation appliances and storage shelves; the centre semi-circle tables used for Lego, action-figure/castle play, small doll play and colouring; and the car corner with foam "road" play mats. In addition there was a reading area, and a larger open floor area used for assembling wooden blocks and train tracks. Toys consisted of a mix of character-based items such as Disney Princess figures, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle and superhero figures and My Little Pony horses, and generic items such as baby dolls, kitchen accessories, wooden blocks and train tracks, cars, snap-together beads, craft supplies, and an assortment of die-cast vehicles.

Children often played in the same areas during the free play period with certain affinity groups forming based on friendships or play interests. I would observe in a given area of the classroom (i.e. the kitchen corner, the colouring table, etc.) recording play events until the scenario naturally wound down and the players lost interest, or one or more of the players left the area, thereby generally ending the scenario. These events lasted anywhere from one to approximately fifteen minutes. Although it would be impossible to record everything happening in a single area with only one researcher, I endeavoured to record as many significant conversations and actions related to each play scenario as possible. This also means, however, that I did not record play occurring simultaneously in other areas of the classroom. This resulted in a somewhat curated sampling of play happening at different times, involving different participants, which gave an overview of free play as it happened. Occasionally photographs were taken of the classroom, or of toys during play, however not of the participants themselves for privacy reasons. As the research took place close to the Christmas holidays, I also collected copies of the Christmas toy "wish lists" made by the children with the help of the educators.

The second field observation location, a preschool, was a small, secular, privately-run facility that rented space in a church, and welcomed three- and four-year-olds for a half-day program. Participants were from the four-year old group that met three times a week. As preschools are not government regulated, it did not maintain any licensing. The owners/educators, Karen and Lisa had been running the group for 5 years since the previous owner retired. Although not formally certified as early childhood educators, both had numerous years of experience working in the domain. Although it was also located in a suburb to the West of Montreal, the centre catered to higher-income families, generally with one stay at home parent, due to its higher cost and half-day, part-time schedule. There were 14 students in the preschool, with 13 participating in the study. The population was 75% European-Canadian with the balance being a mix of Asian and Latin-American students. This location was chosen as a comparison point with the daycare, as it intentionally eschewed media-based toys and activities with a focus on a developmental or more "traditional" approach to early childhood education (Preschool, Interview, Nov. 29, 2017).

Due to this focus in the preschool there was an emphasis on school readiness and on educational theming even during free play. Educator intervention was frequent, and toys for use during free play were preselected by either Karen or Lisa. The centre was split into two rooms,

with the first containing a large open area used for circle/story time, and a pretend play kitchen area which was changed into different types of imaginary locales depending on the monthly theme (dinosaur museum, Santa's workshop). The second room contained a table for crafts, a reading corner, and a free play area. The toys and equipment were inherited from the previous owner of the preschool or acquired through donations, and were mainly generic items such as plastic dinosaurs, dollhouses with small dolls, cars, plastic kitchen furniture, a workbench, plastic blocks, etc. There were some older media-based items such as a Dora the Explorer dollhouse with the associated small dolls, and a set of Fisher Price Rescue Heroes buildings, vehicles and figures, based on the television show of the same name from the early 2000s.

Observations at the preschool took place shortly before the end of the morning sessions, when educational activities had ended and the children were engaged in free play. Toys and activities were self-selected, however, play areas were staged by the educators based on the current educational or seasonal theme (dinosaurs, Christmas, etc.) and only a small selection of toys were offered for the children to choose from. Free-play time was often compressed by organized activities such as crafts. Some free play sessions took place outdoors, in a gated yard where there were small play structures such as slides and teeter-totters.

In the last weeks of observation at the daycare, I brought in a selection of generic and character-based dress-up costumes for the children to play with. The original impetus behind this idea was to compare how the children employed the generic versus the media-based costumes in their play scenarios, however this comparison became moot as the costumes created so much excitement and chaos in the classroom that observation became difficult. Some interesting behaviours and events were still recorded, however, and add to the richness of the ensuing analysis. At the preschool only the media-based costumes were brought in on a single day due to time constraints caused by activities related to the Christmas holidays. The preschool already had some generic items used for dress-up in their kitchen corner.

Theming the Data

Key events were selected for analysis by locating instances where media-based characters, toys, narratives, events, or themes were present during pretend play. These were differentiated from real-life scenarios involving everyday events due to their fantastical, or fictional nature. They mainly consisted of narratives involving super-heroes, princesses, monsters, wild animals, or anthropomorphized everyday objects such as cars. When media is

defined broadly to include television, films, books, magazines, music, websites, streaming videos such as YouTube, and advertisements, it's possible to draw inferences between these play scenarios and media-based sources. When play involves branded character toys such as Spider-Man or Disney Princess figures, these links become explicit. Of course, it is also possible these fantastical pretend play scenarios are based on narratives gleaned from peers, or adults with whom the child interacts. In this case it is a type of second-hand, socially constructed media-based knowledge. Some scenarios were ambiguous, such as a general discussion of kings and queens that occurred among a few children at the preschool, however as it is unlikely that the children have encountered royalty in their everyday lives, media is a likely influence on these "taken for granted" understandings of pretend-play narratives.

Non-media-based scenarios generally involved pretending to inhabit family roles, food preparation in the kitchen corner, pretending to be domestic animals such as a dogs, or taking on real-life career roles such as construction workers, doctors, chefs, hairdressers, and paleontologists. In the preschool, play was heavily themed on the non-fiction educational materials presented by the educators during story time. The educators also reinforced the non-fantastical aspects of play by providing real-world materials to enhance the themed play scenarios such as a cash register, cameras, and by turning the sand table into a paleontological dig site. Although some of the children's play narratives may have been media-based, this was much harder to discern and I was unable to pinpoint very many media influences. Nevertheless the observations at the preschool provided an interesting counterpoint to the media-based play in the daycare, particularly with regards to the preschool's selection of older media-based toys that were now distanced from their original television-based narratives.

Analysis

A pattern-based or thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013) was performed to draw out major recurring themes within the media-based play scenarios, and this resulted in princesses/royalty/My Little Pony and superheroes/Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles being identified as major themes. Subthemes or categories were then developed by examining the data closely and grouping relevant events. An examination of the transmedia supersystems (or franchises) relevant to the major themes was also performed. Ien Ang suggests that one aim of cultural studies is to "arrive at a more historicized and contextualized insight into the ways in which 'audience activity' is articulated within and by a complex set of social, political, economic

and cultural forces" (1996, 42). In order to achieve this end, this analysis draws from critical discourse analysis, as well as feminist poststructuralism and mediated discourse analysis.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) views "language as social practice" (Wodak & Meyer, 2001, p. 5). Paul Gee suggests that there are several "tools of inquiry" in CDA, notably: situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, and discourses (discussed in Rogers, 2011). Situated meanings are the historical and cultural context of language use that lead to shared understandings, while social languages are variations in connotation based on the speaker's social identity. Figured worlds are the types of schemas people create to simplify communication without having to consciously think about each concept they employ. Finally, Discourses are what James Paul Gee suggests individuals use to enact belonging to a specific group. They involve not only language, but actions, interactions, beliefs, values and the use of objects and tools. He differentiates big "D" Discourses from small "d" discourses in the following manner:

> I use this term because such groups continue through time – for the most part, they were here before we arrived on earth and will be here after we leave – and we can see them as communicating (discoursing) with each other through time and history, using us as their temporary mouthpieces. I use the term "discourse" with a little "d", to mean language in use or stretches of oral or written language in use ("text"). (2011, p. 36)

Gee (2011) expands on this notion to suggest that there are seven building tasks of language that construct our realities: significance, activities/practices, identities, relationships, politics/distribution of social goods, connections and sign systems/knowledges.

Feminist poststructuralist scholars agree with critical discourse analysts that discourse both reflects and constructs reality through "'a specific kind of production with definite relations to the social and material world'" (Venn, qtd. in Gavey, 1989, p. 462). Knowledge is thought never to be neutral, but to be connected to power structures, with those in power striving to control what counts as "truth" or "common sense" to maintain their material advantages (Gavey, 1989). What differentiates feminist poststructuralism is that it seeks to disrupt or displace dominant knowledges by examining how language and discourse facilitate, or allow resistance to, oppressive gender relations. It accomplishes this through the examination of subject positions available to individuals in specific historical, social, and cultural environments. As opposed to the rational individual of enlightenment thought, poststructuralists believe that subjectivity is constructed through conflict by competing discourses that are "multiple, possibly contradictory,

and unstable" (Gavey, 1989, p. 470). Media-based characters and narratives are part of these competing discourses, aimed squarely at children through the distribution networks of large media conglomerates such as Disney, Comcast, and Viacom, as well as through transmedia such as toys, books, clothing, housewares and theme park experiences.

Finally, mediated discourse analysis (MDA) seeks to examine the relationship between action and the material means which mediate all social action (Wertsch, 1998). Ron Scollon suggests that social practices linked to other practices, both discursive and non-discursive, over time, can be termed a nexus of practice, and that this nexus of practice is what produces social identities. He argues that "it is through the construction of mediational means within the habitus of the social actor that the sociocultural and sociopolitical history are embedded in day-to-day practice" (2001, p. 14). This occurs via a dialectical relationship between materiality and internal psychological processes. Although I did not conduct a microethnographic turn-by-turn analysis of the children's interactions, as some practitioners of MDA have done, the theories behind MDA meld well with CDA and feminist poststructuralism, particularly as it relates to the examination of play with media-based toys, costumes, and the potential effects of other transmedia in the classroom.

This investigation therefore moves from the micro level of children's interactions in their early childhood education centres to the macro level of social discourses. It discerns how gender filters through media-based narratives aimed at children, as well as their related toys and cultural artifacts. As discourses are co-produced between individuals and institutions (Jager & Maier, 2009), it also looks at how children engage with these discourses and perhaps resist dominant themes or subvert them during play.

Chapter 3

Princess and My Little Pony Play:

Anticipated Identities, Progressive Princesses, and Sparkle Power

Princess Play and Anticipated Identities

It was mid-afternoon in the daycare classroom, and the children's excitement was palpable as they sifted through a bag of dress-up costumes I'd brought 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. Negotiation 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 in a sing-song voice> On est les plus belles! On est les plus belles! (*We're the prettiest! We're the prettiest!*)

Charlotte: <Wearing fairy dress and long red gloves, silver rose, and the wand, plays with Charlie as the knight. The boys begin to chase her and pretend to grab her wand>

Abigail: <Skips around wearing pink dress, purple wings, holding three roses. She sings and swings the roses around>

Lauren: I love this! <Swings/swishes dress around>

Lauren: <Lays on her back and plays with the hoop of the skirt with her feet, bending it>

(Daycare, Day 13, Dec. 11, 2017)

Whether as images on their clothing, on the classroom walls, or on the covers of books in the book corner, princesses were ever-present in this daycare classroom. It's perhaps not surprising then that the dresses, despite being generic, caused such a fuss. Although manufactured by other companies, they maintained markers of fantasy archetypes portrayed in the Disney Princess and Disney Fairies brands such as colour, style, and fabric type. Wohlwend notes that "commercially produced toys are artifacts with anticipated identities: identities that have been projected for consumers and that are sedimented by manufacturers' design practices and distribution processes." She adds that: "… [media-based] toys inspire children to replay remembered plots … providing explicit narratives that shape children's play; on another level, the film scripts and characterizations convey more subtle narratives about identity and status that relate to global markets and societal beliefs about gender and childhood" (2012, p. 59).

Here the girls appeared to subscribe to these anticipated identities, expressing how the dresses designated them as princesses and fairies, and that this made them "pretty", or, in fact, "the prettiest." As opposed to other days where the girls confined themselves to specific play areas, in this instance they skipped and ran around the entire room, taking all available space, their joy in the pretense evident from their expressions and body language. These were pleasurable, agentic subject positions interpellated by the fairy tale princess trope, an ideology based on romantic notions of heteronormative sexual attractiveness. The appropriateness and gendered nature of these subject positions was further reinforced by the educator's reaction: "Girls! You look *beautiful*!", strong gendered praise from an adult woman in a position of authority/surveillance over them.

According to Judith Butler, gendered acts such as this princess-themed dress-up play, are not based in biological imperatives, but are performative, based on socially acceptable ideals regarding feminine behaviour and appearance, with the body acting as: "a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality" (1999, p. 173). Butler suggests that gender is not: "a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (1999, p. 179) . She notes that societies punish individuals who deviate from gender norms or "fail to do their gender right", thereby obfuscating the "tacit collective agreement" to sustain gender binaries and imbuing them with a sense of inevitability

and naturalness (1999, p. 178). In addition, children are governed by what Butler terms the heterosexual matrix, or a:

> …hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality. (1999, p. 194)

The gendered performances observed above, and throughout this investigation, were multilayered, however, due to the fact that they occurred not in everyday gender enactment, but during pretend play in a classroom setting involving peers and educators. The actions of the children brought the psychological complexities of pretend play discussed in chapter two, into semiotic mediation with hegemonic cultural norms as promulgated by media-based franchises. For the girls, this often resulted in a focus on emphasized femininity (Connell, 1987) or hegemonic femininity (Schippers, 2007), which are defined around subordination to male interests in relation to hegemonic masculinity. This occurred through play revolving around appearance and/or the enactment of romantic fairy tale tropes. The latter has likely been influenced by Disney's co-option of the fairy tale genre in North American popular culture (Giroux & Pollock, 2010; Wasko, 2001; Zipes, 1997), exemplified by the commercial success of the Disney Princess brand. Bridget Whelan suggests that: "Because of Disney's impressive ability to market and distribute their product so widely and visibly … it is their version of the princess narrative which has wormed its way into the psyche of the American public" (2012, p. 26).

Disney's Hold on the Fairy Tale Princess

The original texts on which Disney based its films, however, come from a long history of folk and fairy tales. Jack Zipes proposes that fairy tales which evolved from oral traditions, originally intended for adults, were transformed through literary and cinematic adaptations into a socializing force for children. He argues they were institutionalized according to six principles:

> (1) The social function of the fairy tale must be didactic and teach a lesson that corroborates the code of civility as it was being developed at that time; (2) it must be short so that children can remember and memorize it and both adults and children can repeat it orally; … (3) it must pass the censorship of adults so that it can be easily circulated; (4) it must address social issues such as obligation, sex roles, class differences,

> power, and decorum so that it will appeal to adults, especially those who publish and publicize the tales; (5) it must be suitable to be used with children in a schooling situation; and (6) it must reinforce a notion of power within the children of the upper classes and suggest ways for them to maintain power. (Zipes, 1994, p. 33)

Zipes accuses Disney of co-opting the most popular fairy tales through the "trickery" of animation technologies which "deprives the audience of the ability to visualize their own characters, roles, and desires … [and] offsets the deprivation with the pleasure of scopophilia and inundates the viewer with delightful images, humorous figures, and erotic signs" (1997, p. 37). Zipes also argues that since the inception of the culture industry, as defined by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, fairy tales have become part of an enculturation and commodification process which has "no other purpose than to capture and play upon – in order to profit from – our desire for pleasure and happiness" (Zipes, 1997, p. 6). This leads the culture industry to create "stars" for the public to emulate, and whose lifestyle they can attempt to ascribe to through the marketplace. It appears that Disney has successfully generated such a star system exclusively for pre-schoolers through the Disney Princess and Disney Fairies brands. In addition, the protagonists from the recent Disney box-office hit, *Frozen*, Anna and Elsa, have been turned into a separate princess-themed brand. Despite having rejected being called a princess by a classmate on earlier occasion, Jacqueline, at the preschool, revelled in this perceived star-power of a Disney Princess persona. After donning a Disney-branded princess dress, she strutted, hand on hip, across the room, lifting her chin, and repeating in a confident voice: "Un-hunh, un-hunh" to an imagined audience's approval (Preschool, Day 13, Dec. 19, 2017).

Dorothy Hurley elaborates on this concept, noting that the images depicted in Disney's films, and it could be argued, all of the related merchandise, are not neutral: "Not only does the Disney version provide visual images for the fairy tale it is depicting, these images and the relative value of group membership associated with the images are then translated into beliefs children hold about status in particular group membership, in relation to notions of good, bad, pretty, and ugly as reflected in the films" (2005, p. 222). Although Hurley is referring mainly to race, this was reflected in the daycare classroom in terms of gender, as the children, and sometimes the educators, created what Allison Pugh (2009) refers to as "economies of dignity" based on knowledge of media-based texts, and adherence to their gendered scripts. This resulted in a disciplinary regime executed through the encouragement and praise or, alternately, via the

admonishment and mocking, of peers and educators. This is what Barrie Thorne (1993) refers to as gender "borderwork", and Mindy Blaise notes that as a result, in the classroom "the gendered social order is maintained by the children *themselves* as they take an active part in the gendering process" (2005, p. 21)

This borderwork became obvious on the days I brought in the non-generic, character-branded costumes. An Anna dress from the film *Frozen* caused consternation, with several girls, and one boy arguing over who got to wear it. The educators forced the children to take turns, and the boy, Leo, waited patiently for his opportunity. As soon as he put on the dress, however, the rest of the boys excluded him from the spot they were playing in. He ended up being invited by Sofia, one of the educators, to help her tidy up the kitchen area instead. While the educators had exclaimed happily over most of the children's choices of dress-up outfits, and enjoyed "naming" the characters, one of the educators quietly mocked Leo by pointing out to me when we were out of earshot that "Leo likes to wear dresses" and laughing uncomfortably at the prospect (Daycare, Day 16, Dec. 18, 2017). Sofia, on the other hand, praised his choice of costume, and yet reinforced a submissive, domestic role and classroom gender hierarchies by inviting him to clean instead of addressing the reaction of the other boys. This scenario repeated itself on my following visit, however, this time it was the girls 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 his defense (Daycare, Day 17, Dec. 20, 2017). This speaks 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).

Much of the time this gender borderwork was subtle, however. For instance, in the first play scenario described above, one of the girls handed Cara, an educator, a set of gold armbands instead of putting them on, as if to denote that these were not for girls, but marked as "other" because they were related to superheroes. In another instance, Kevin handed Ryan a My Little Pony doll, and Ryan angrily threw it back in the toy bin with a pouty expression because he wanted one of the "boy" themed figures (Daycare Day 5, Nov. 15, 2017). On another afternoon, when Ryan was playing with a princess figure, Thomas handed him a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle (TNMT) figure, and Ryan immediately placed the princess figure back in the toy bin in order to secure access to Thomas and the other boys' action figure play scenario (Daycare, Day

1, Nov. 7, 2017). Gender borderwork also often involved gaze, tone of voice, sound, or lack of sound (intentional silence) and/or bodily hexis, or ways of moving and being in the world that carry an "incorporated history" (Bourdieu's concept, as explained by Thompson, 1991, p. 13). This made recording the children's reactions more difficult, and pointed to the benefit of studies conducted with video recording which can be played back repeatedly to catch these subtle cues.

Gender policing also occurred during non-media related play, when children stepped outside hegemonic gender norms. For instance, when Ryan played a caring father role in the kitchen corner at the daycare with a baby doll, his best friend Thomas attempted to disrupt the scenario by the use of simulated aggression and rough and tumble play (Daycare, Day 2, Nov. 8, 2017). At the preschool, a boy wearing beaded Mardi-Gras necklaces was labelled a "girl" by one of his peers (Preschool, Day 1, Nov. 7, 2017). Children also frequently played with toys they considered to be for the opposite gender only once their peers has cleared the area, such as Michael, at the preschool, waiting for the girls to have left the room before playing with the Dora dollhouse (Preschool, Day 6, Nov. 28, 2017), or Charlie abandoning a My Little Pony scenario as soon as one of the girls took an interest in the toys (Daycare, Day 10, Dec. 5, 2017). Another borderwork tactic was children preventing peers from playing with toys they felt were mismatched with their gender, such as Michael excluding Florence during a building scenario (Preschool, Day 12, Dec. 14, 2017). In other cases, however, this type of borderwork was absent, such as when, at the preschool, Frederic donned a cotton floral dress, and two girls accepted him immediately into their play scenario by addressing him as "Madame" ("Mrs." in French) (Preschool, Day 4, Nov. 14, 2017), or when Charlie and Charlotte played with fairy dolls together (Daycare, Day 2, Nov. 8, 2017).

Princess Superfriends

Fairy tale roles also played out at the daycare through the use of a large grey plastic Fisher-Price castle. The castle was mixed with a selection of Disney Princess figures, superheroes, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, and other small figures such as Littlest Pet Shop animals, dragons, cloth/wooden dolls, and assorted character-based fast-food chain giveaway toys. The Disney Princesses, a small white-haired fairy, a My Little Pony Equestria doll, and the Littlest Pet Shops were clear favourites among the girls, while the boys preferred the superheroes and the TMNTs. The princesses, however, were the only ones of all the castle-related toys that were not poseable, having been molded into fixed positions from their associated film narratives

without any moveable limbs. Figure 1 also demonstrates how the princesses were frequently grouped, as if speaking to each other, while the prince, or sometimes the superheroes, were kept both physically, and narratively, outside this circle of female relationships. The available princesses included the original Disney Princess brand line up of 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*, but excluded Pocahontas as well as additions 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*. Elsa and Anna appeared on the classroom wall, however, as well as in some magnetic paper doll scenes used in a different area during free play.

By regrouping and rebranding the individual princesses under a single banner in 2001, Disney succeeded in pulling off a synergistic marketing coup of immense proportions, building a brand that today is worth more than five and half billion dollars (Suddath, 2017). It also, through this convergence, changed the social aspect of the characters themselves. It brought into contact princesses that never met within their film narratives, through various recompiled DVDs with titles such as *Princess Party* (2004), *Princess Stories* (Zev, 2004) and *Princess Enchanted Tales* (D. Block, 2009), as well as through a plethora of licensed goods. The collective nature of the brand was brought home by Jacqueline at the preschool who, while donning an Ariel dress, exclaimed proudly: "I'm *PRINCESSES!*" (Preschool, Day 13, Dec. 19, 2017). In this case she felt she embodied more than one (perhaps all) of the Disney Princesses simply by virtue of wearing a Disney-branded costume.

The grouping of multiple princesses into a unified whole involved an emphasis on friendship and communal social interaction. This was promoted through the sale of sets that included multiple dolls packaged together, as well as through images and text on clothing, books, CDs or other merchandise that referred directly to friendship. A cursory search online turns up a musical book geared towards toddlers 18 months and up entitled *Disney Princess Friendship Songs* (2010), a children's friendship-themed bedding set available on Amazon.com ("Disney Princess Friendship Adventures 5 Piece Twin Bed In A Bag," n.d.), and Disney branded wall stickers that include words like "friendship, trust, and loyalty" (QVC.com, n.d.) . In the mid-2000s my own daughter owned a Fisher Price Spin N' Surprise Disney Princess castle that housed Snow White, Aurora, and Cinderella, who were purported to be living together

Figure 1 Plastic castle with princesses set up by a child at the daycare.

harmoniously as friends. The resulting pretend play scenarios she engaged in always involved multiple princess dolls from different films interacting around and in the castle.

The pretend play at the daycare echoed this trend, with girls involving either multiple princess figures in their play, and/or multiple other girls to physically embody princesses. This sociality and focus on appearance, friendship and harmony reiterated the gendered nature of the brand, particularly in opposition to superhero play. Groups of princesses engaged in domestic activities together, and were used to enact familial or romantic roles, while superheroes supported each other in physically vanquishing villains through the staging of mock battles. Fleming suggests that this is because male identity is placed at the centre of the system of semiotic mediation provided by narrativized toys, and relies on the "othering" of women, or a

"crucial form of difference in relation to which male identity defines itself" (1996, p. 161). The princess roles were not always passive, however, as demonstrated in the following section.

Progressive Princesses

The social nature of the princess play sometimes seemed to echo an overt assertiveness, a type of bossiness that appeared to draw from real-life motherhood or heterosexual romantic roles, or perhaps from the more feminist narratives of the later Disney princess films such as *Tangled*, *Brave* and *Frozen*. In the excerpt below, Abigail, a child 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 also had a prince or woodsman in her hand:

> Abigail: <lays the prince on the ground, then 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>
>
> Tifanie (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!

Tifanie (researcher): That's a lot of princesses! There are a lot of princesses in that bin!

Abigail: <nodding> There's ALL of them!

(Daycare, Day 7, Nov. 28, 2017)

The princesses in this scenario engaged in communal life while simultaneously either instructing the resigned prince about what he would be doing (getting married) or ignoring his request to join in their activities. After I interrupted her play, Abigail interestingly named them as "two sisters", which was perhaps a nod to Disney's *Frozen*, whose plot revolves around a sisterly bond, or perhaps simply an extension of familial pretend play narratives. Notable, also, was the rapid switching from interior domesticity (Cinderella pouring the milk) to "getting out(side)" and asking to "see the manager." These were all agentic positions on the part of the princesses, despite their apparent preparations for a traditional fairy tale marriage.

Interestingly, a few of the boys also adopted similar assertive roles when voicing the princess figures, which proved different from their mostly physical confrontations when utilizing the superhero or TMNT figures. Joshua, as Snow White, forced the Gaston figure out of the castle (Daycare, Day 10, Dec. 5, 2017). Jeffrey, voicing Cinderella, refused to let Spider-Man inside, controlling the domestic space and the activities performed there. He also both referred to himself as "the mommy", and attempted to order the other princesses to get inside the castle so they wouldn't ruin their dresses in the (pretend) rain (Daycare Day 12, Dec. 7, 2017). These were countered by play scenarios where the princesses or their stand-ins (a Wendy figure from Disney's Peter Pan, and the small white-haired fairy doll) were partnered with dominant princes or superheroes in typical romantic scenes, or voiced as damsels in distress requiring rescuing by a male figure (Daycare, Day 4, Dec. Nov. 14, 2017; Daycare, Day 12, Dec. 7, 2017).

This multiplicity of play scenarios, which house competing gendered discourses may be considered emblematic of the narratives of the third generation of Disney princess films (Wilde, 2014). Disney's first generation of fairy tale films, released from 1937-1959, such as *Snow White* and *Cinderella*, were characterized by passive female protagonists tasked with largely domestic roles and damsel in distress romantic tropes (Bell, 1995). The second generation, released from 1989-2009, beginning with *The Little Mermaid,* and culminating in *The Princess and the Frog,* involved a switch to more active roles for the princesses, notably in advocating for themselves and demonstrating bravery, however, the final rescues were still performed mainly by the male characters, and the narratives were resolved via heteronormative romantic endings (England et

al., 2011). Although in this second generation of films "heroism, egalitarianism, and autonomy are slipped into the conventions of Disney princesshood" (Do Rozario, 2004, p. 47), these aspects do not become embedded until the third generation of films. Dating from 2010 to today, these include *Tangled*, *Brave*, and unofficially – as their protagonists haven't formally been inducted into the Disney Princess brand, but are often merchandised together – *Frozen* and *Moana*.

Sarah Wilde (2014), examining the promotional posters and trailers for the third generation of films (with the exception of *Moana,* which hadn't been released at the time of writing) suggests that the protagonists are feminist princesses who are dominant, independent, and empowered to take control of their own destinies. Whelan posits that this was a direct consequence of the poor box office showing of *The Princess and the Frog* in 2009, which grossed only $104 million domestically, and sent Disney scrambling to re-vamp *Tangled*, as "movies for girls – i.e. princess movies – were no longer deemed marketably salient" (2012, p. 31). According to Whelan, Disney may have been a victim of its own success in utilizing the Disney Princess brand to link princesses to all things pink, frilly, and feminine.

Due to this fact, *Tangled* was rewritten to include both a male and female protagonist, Rapunzel and her love interest, Flynn Rider, who narrates the beginning and end of the film. *Tangled's* heroine utilizes feminist humour and pokes fun at fairy tale tropes, as she's "clearly a non-traditional princess trapped in a traditional setting, and she aches to escape" (Whelan, 2012, p. 31). The following film, *Brave*, involved Disney (Pixar)'s youngest, most rebellious princess, Merida, who repudiates duty, passivity, politeness, and an arranged marriage in favour of adventure. Both the dialogue and her appearance mark her, as the title suggests, as brave, assertive, and, it could be argued, unfeminine, or as Wilde (2014) proposes, both masculine and feminine. Finally, *Frozen*, Disney's highest-ever grossing animated film*,* a take on the Grimm brother's Snow Queen fairy tale, promotes an unlikely heroine, the tom-boyish, independent princess Anna, who saves her frozen kingdom and, in the end, her sister's life. She drives the narrative via her courage, perseverance, and sacrifice.

Whelan describes this shift in female characterizations:

> The progressive princess is a princess who "rejects stereotypical behaviour" from the past, behaviour that was perpetuated by the first and second wave Disney princesses … [the new princesses] exchange negative, traditionally feminine characteristics (i.e.

> passivity) for more positive, traditionally masculine traits, such as assertiveness and rebelliousness. However, they retain those traditionally feminine characteristics which are still considered positive by contemporary feminists (i.e. compassion). The resulting character is not a "hero in drag" but a new kind of heroine, and for the princess narrative specifically, a new kind of princess: the progressive princess. (Whelan, 2012, p. 29)

Wilde argues, however, that in the marketing of the films, Disney "repackaged" the newer princesses to both highlight and conceal their autonomy via the artwork on the posters and the editing of the trailers. This could be evidence of the media conglomerate's uneasy navigation of a postfeminist landscape, and desire to maintain the lucrative feminization of the Disney Princess brand, while also encouraging a wider viewing of its princess films. This shift could also explain boys' fascination with the second and third generation of princesses. My young son's interest in wearing a Belle dress, and his desire to not just emulate, but embody Merida and Rapunzel through dress-up, is likely due to the fact that these princesses have both masculine and feminine qualities, making them more attractive to boys, and less threatening to the gendered social order.

The second and third wave of princesses are also, as opposed to the earlier films, active heroines in their own stories. Bruno Bettelheim, discussing the function that fairy tales play in children's emotional maturation, argues that identification with a hero is what allows children to work through their anxieties as "the child imagines that he suffers with the hero in his trials and tribulations" (2010, p. 9). Giving the modern princesses the ability to partake in the action and overcome obstacles as male heroes have traditionally done, and allowing them to rebel against princess tropes, may actually have successfully achieved Disney's aim of widening its audience, not only in viewership, but also in play. In fact, when I asked my son, at age 5, why he preferred female over male characters, he responded: "because the girls are prettier and get to do more stuff" (Valade, 2012, p. 7), an apt reading of the later Disney princess films. These changes appear to have influenced play narratives, as evidenced at the daycare, as the princesses were less passive and more agentic. Although ambivalence remains, as the girls in particular continued to play out heteronormative romantic tropes. Through these textual changes Disney has also likely broadened their market for the consumption of paratexts and branded merchandise to young boys, as Leo's donning of the Anna dress would suggest, although this would require further study to confirm.

Consumerism and the Disney Princess Brand

One final interesting observation concerning princess play occurred in the daycare on Day 14, when three girls put on generic princess costumes:

> Sofia (educator): <tells Zoe and Leia their turn is up with the dresses, Beatrice puts on blue dress and Jada puts on pink dress. Beatrice adds flower crown, purse, wand>
>
> Sofia (educator): PRETTY ladies!!
>
> Beatrice: I wanna go shopping.
>
> Jada: <to Sofia> We're going shopping!
>
> Christina (educator): I like the flowers, the [plastic, long stemmed, pink] rose, it's like Beauty and the Beast!
>
> Sofia (educator): Oh yes!
>
> Jada: <to Beatrice> Can you hold my wand, mommy? Wait mommy, my crown. <She adjusts her tiara>
>
> Beatrice: Let's go!
>
> Beatrice, Jada and Lauren: <go over to the pony play table, pick up ponies, bring them over to Sofia and Christina>
>
> Girls: We bought ponies!
>
> Beatrice, Jada, and Lauren: <go to kitchen, put play food in silver purse, come back to Christina>
>
> Girls: We bought food!
>
> Jada: Do you want to go home now?
>
> Beatrice: Ok, let's go!
>
> Beatrice, Jada and Lauren: <walk around the room>
>
> Jada: <swinging the purse, in a sing-song voice> I have two-oo dollars! <They continue walking all around the room>
>
> Beatrice: We're princesses, not mommies. (Daycare, Day 14, Dec. 13, 2017)

This interaction is interesting because this was one of only two times during my observations at both centres that any of the children pretended to shop, despite engaging in numerous "family" play scenarios in the kitchen corner. Both of these shopping scenarios involved girls wearing princess dresses, either generic as in the excerpt above, or Disney-branded (Daycare, Day 16, Dec. 18, 2017). Also interesting is that the first thing the girls chose

to “purchase” in this interaction was a My Little Pony, as well as Beatrice’s insistence that they were princesses, not “mommies”, despite shopping being an activity normally associated with the domestic duties of motherhood. This could suggest an association between princesses and consumerism, which would not relate back to the original fairy tales, but rather to the successful branding and selling of princess-related paraphernalia by Disney and other corporations.

Figure 2 Princess-themed merchandise at a Montreal-area Toys R Us store in 2016.

In order to be a princess on Disney’s terms, this involves buying all the accoutrements of princess life or at least, this is what a trip to a big-box toy retailer would suggest with aisles upon aisles of princess-themed items. Immersive experiences such as Disney’s Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutiques that offer girls princess makeovers, and the corporation’s theme park rides and attractions round out the “participatory performance” of princess-ness, as acquirable through the marketplace (Bennett & Schweitzer, 2014). The “purchase” of a My Little Pony may also indicate pleasure taken in the accumulation of collectible PLC-based toys. Daniel Thomas Cook would suggest this is part of the “commercial enculturation” of childhood, or the process of learning how to consume by “entering into social relationships with and through goods and their

associations" (2010, p. 70). The girls also played with the My Little Ponies on their own, however, as discussed below, which perhaps simply bled into their princess play.

As Pretty as a My Little Pony

Play with My Little Ponies, small plastic anthropomorphic horses based on several generations of animated television serials such as the recent *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* and the associated film: *My Little Pony: The Movie,* involved similar themes to the princess play. It was generally engaged in at the daycare only by girls, usually in pairs, and focused on appearance, friendship, and familial hierarchies. Play involved long periods of setting/lining up numerous ponies, as well as brushing their manes to get them "ready" for whatever imaginary activities were to take place. This was a social activity and involved much discussion about the appearance or "prettiness" of the various ponies, as well as general social exchanges between the girls doing the grooming. The emphasis on appearance reflected the fact that the television-based character names reflect stereotypically feminine characteristics such as nature, sparkle/luminosity, emotionality, and the colour pink:

<Beatrice and Leia with a bin of large and small My Little Ponies>

Leia: Her name is Cute.

Beatrice: Her name is Applejack! Her name is Pinkie Pie.

<Leia and Beatrice brush the ponies' hair>

Beatrice: I like to play ponies. [More than Lego, looking at Madeleine playing Lego]

Leia: <nodding> Legos you just have to build stuff. [Said in a negative tone]

Leia: <brushing> This [the brushing] is very important!

Leia: I'm a big sister 'cause I have a little sister, and I'm the boss of my little baby, my mom said.

Beatrice: I'm the boss of my brother.

Leia: I have a dad but he's in a different house, he went in a house with my uncle, and we miss him a lot.

Leia: Now you can do this one!

Beatrice: No deal.

Leia: She's too messy.

Beatrice: I want to do the blue one.

Leia: I'm doing the blue one … My pony, does she look pretty?

Beatrice: But my pony looks pretty too.

Beatrice: <puts a crown and a purse on the larger pony>

Beatrice: We have to brush all the ponies' hair, and that is a lot!

Leia: That will be a lot of work, and it's very important.

Leia: I'm the mom of Pinkie Pie.

Beatrice: Apple Jack is really funny. [Referring to the comedic character on the television show]

Leia: And Pinkie Pie is really cute.

Beatrice: <searches in the bin for the "bad" pony. Pulls out an old, dirty, dishevelled white imitation My Little Pony>

Beatrice: It's this one [the "bad" pony].

Leia: <talking about her pony> She's really pretty. <Touches the pony's multicoloured hair> She's very sparkly.

Leia: She's ready! She's all pretty.

(Daycare, Day 6, Nov. 16, 2017)

One of the gendered discourses circulating in this excerpt was that of work, in particular what could be considered women's caretaking work or the labour involved in maintaining a desirable appearance, which Leia repeatedly referred to as "very important." The two girls also contrasted the "work" of preparing the ponies to the "work" of building with Lego blocks, likely viewed as gendered since the Lego was used primarily by the boys. In this case, however, the Lego was being played with by Madeleine, and the girls were marking her as "other", outside their friend group, which revolved in this instance around the emphasized femininity and social aspects of the pony play. Interestingly, however, the week prior, Leia had been "hammering" with a plastic pony brush, pretending to build something out of a pink theatre playset for the ponies, while Madeleine pretended to hand her supplies. Building was not then consistently viewed as a male or undesirable activity, or perhaps it was only acceptable when it related to the ponies, who were considered feminized.

In her examination of the original 1980s *My Little Pony* television show, Ellen Seiter (1995) states that the series was part of a shift in children's television during this period, which for the first time offered animated serials directed specifically at young girls. As this coincided with the deregulation of children's television, it was a form of market segmentation designed to

sell an increasing number of associated toy lines. Seiter suggests, however, that this doesn't denigrate the fact that girls now had television shows made specifically for them, and were no longer forced to "cross-over" to boys shows. She notes several interesting themes within the first *My Little Pony* series including the glorification of "work behind the scenes" (1995, p. 160), which could be read as women's work, as well as a focus on emotion, friendship, and an "unambiguous, segregated world of the feminine" (1995, p. 167). She also observed an emphasis on appearance in girls' play patterns with the associated toys: "Girls play with ponies often involves doing to the ponies what mothers' have done to them, washing hair, combing and brushing it, fixing it with ribbons and barrettes" (1995, p. 169).

Although the newer series, *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, has shifted in a similar fashion to the third wave of Disney Princess films, moving toward gender-challenging narratives and characterizations (Valiente & Rasmusson, 2015), the boys in the daycare showed limited

Figure 3 Mixed My Little Pony toys in use at the daycare.

interest in the ponies. This may have been due to the short length of the observations in which I may have missed boys playing with ponies on days I was not in attendance, or perhaps the fact that the brand, and the social "women's work" aspect of the play scenarios remained too feminized too allow boys entry within the peer relationships in the classroom. At one point Kevin joined the girls who were grooming ponies and I asked him if he knew their names – he answered: "They don't have names, they're just ponies", suggesting that he was unfamiliar with the My Little Pony brand and backstory. This may be because of negative associations between feminized media and boys which has kept him from exploring the franchise.

Pushback against adult male enjoyment of the newer *My Little Pony* television series would seem to confirm that the My Little Pony brand is associated in the public imaginary with hyperfemininity, and is therefore "off limits" to boys and men. Venetia Robertson notes that male fans, known as Bronies, have been both praised for subverting gender norms and heavily denigrated. Robertson suggests that "inherent in these hostile reactions is an assumption that there is something sick, wrong, or 'creepy' about the way that Bronies subvert expectations surrounding gender, age, and the consumption of media" (2014, p. 27). Since numerous television shows draw fans of differing ages, the more objectionable aspect is likely the threat to hegemonic gender norms due to men identifying with a media product targeted towards young girls. Critiques of Brony fandom that utilize language such as "disturbing", "creepy", "pathetic sissies", "schoolgirls", and "paedophiles" (Jones, 2015) create discourses that link male enjoyment of feminine aesthetics not only with a subordinate, devalued, femininity, but also with pathology and deviance. This serves to reinforce the notion of gender dichotomies as a static naturalized phenomenon, rather than a fluid, discursively constructed categorization. At the same time, however, the rapid expansion of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* fandom among boys and men during the series' run has offered space for the subversion of hegemonic gender discourses through fan art, message boards, mash-up videos, conventions, and other social and creative exploits (Robertson, 2014).

All That Glitters…

Another interesting thread that circulated through both my observations of pony play and princess play is that of female attractiveness and power through sparkle or luminosity. The protagonist of the newer pony series, *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* is Twilight Sparkle, who lives in the town of Ponyville in the land of Equestria, ruled by unicorn/pegasus hybrids

Princess Celestia and Princess Luna. Magic, sparkle, and luminosity are prominent aspects of the show, used to denote female power, emotion, and friendship. Sparkle is therefore utilized extensively in the associated toy lines, in the ponies' manes, sometimes in the plastic of their bodies, and in packaging and accessories. The same applies to the Disney Princess brand, where sparkly fabrics and images, jewels, and the notion of magic – including "magic" sounds playable from certain toys and talking books, emphasize sparkle as "[a] primary signifier of youthful femininity" (Kearney, 2015, p. 1) In fact, Mary Celeste Kearney notes that: "virtually every female-centred product distributed by the Walt Disney Company in the last decade is resplendent with sparkle" (2015, p. 2).

Kearney suggests this emphasis on sparkle and luminosity is an aspect of postfeminism which she terms "a contradictory perspective on contemporary gender relations that takes feminist achievements for granted while repudiating feminism as a critical lens and social movement" (2015, p. 3). This repudiation involves the "postfeminist masquerade", a term coined by Angela McRobbie, that refers to "a technology of self and form of spectacular display" which encourages young women to "prioritise consumption for the sake of sexual intelligibility and in the name of heterosexual desire" (qtd. in Kearney, p. 3). Postfeminist discourse suggests that women engage in this physical self-policing and buy into hyper-femininity through consumerism out of their own free will and desire for pleasure, rather than in compliance to patriarchal gender norms. Kearney argues that for young girls, sparkle has become a signifier of this spectacularization of girlhood (2015, p. 4).

Luminosity was a frequent cause of hierarchization of toys and dress up costumes, with the more sequined, shinier, more feminized items being highly prized by the girls, as well as a few of the boys. This played out in various ways – through negotiations over who got to wear the princess and female superhero costumes, as well as accessories such as wands and tiaras, in addition to arguments over a generic silver sequined purse. Sometimes I was even drawn into these arguments by the children, and had to act as the arbiter of turn-taking. With the My Little Pony toys, those with sparkly manes were considered more desirable, which also sometimes resulted in negotiations over who could utilize which ponies.

Sparkle was also employed to denote magic powers for feminized characters. An example of this was Madeleine, at the daycare, putting a shiny crown on a My Little Pony, and expressly saying "it's my power" (Daycare, Day 3, Nov. 9, 2017) as it allowed the pony to fly.

Another was Camille, wearing the Anna dress, using a star-shaped jewel to pretend to "shoot" magic powers or spells at the other children, as she made magic "sounds" (Daycare, day 17, Dec. 20, 2017). The girls also imitated the transformation of the title character in Disney's *Cinderella* through the use of magic "sounds." This use of "powers" by the girls appeared to disrupt hegemonic gender tropes within play scenarios, leading the boys to attempt to confiscate the sparkly sources of "power." When Charlotte used the princess wand against Charlie, dressed as a knight, the boys began to chase her and pretended to grab the wand from her (Daycare, Day 13, Dec. 11, 2017). A similar scene occurred when Jada and a few other girls used shiny gold Wonder Woman wrist cuffs to "shoot" magic powers towards one of the boys, and he first ripped the cuff off, stating "you have no more powers" and then attempted to wrestle Jada to the floor to wrest 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 physical confrontation, even if it occurred within a pretend play scenario. The power of sparkle appeared to put the girls on a somewhat level playing field with boys' traditional superhero "powers" and physical dominance, threatening the displays of hegemonic masculinity which accompanied superhero play, which will be outlined in the next chapter.

Kearney suggests that queering the analysis of the uses of sparkle in play may reveal polysemic readings or creative negotiations of the trope. She argues that:

> The dress-up games of children are rich sites for encouraging young girls' investments in a critical, camp perspective on self-presentation, since it is within such collective cultural practices that they begin navigating their socialization as both gendered and performative beings. (2015, p. 8)

Although the girls appeared to take the sparkly costumes and objects, and the pretend "magic" associated with them, as feminized narrative mainstays, there is perhaps an aspect of camp to princess play. Disney's versions of fairy tales, which utilize the tropes of Hollywood musicals, certainly lend themselves to this type of performance. In addition, the girls were performing emphasized femininity on top of their own everyday gender performances, a type of exaggeration within the rules of play to mark their "princessness." If we return to the first pretend play instance described in this chapter, however, where the girls donned generic dress-up costumes for the first time, it was clear there was also a lot of elation in their pretense, one related to the pleasure inherent in the use of the sparkly dresses and their associated anticipated

identities This may lean more towards Kearney's suggestion that affect is an important part of pretend play, rather than camp, at least in preschool aged children who may not yet fully comprehend irony and social critique. How children's affective responses function in supporting or resisting hegemonic discourses embedded in media-based toys would be an interesting domain for further investigation.

What then, can we make of the children's engagement in princess and My Little Pony pretend play? If knowledge is constructed through "a specific kind of production with definite relations to the social and material world" (Venn, 1984, p. 150, qtd. Gavey, 1989), I would posit that their play demonstrated how power circulates through commercial media franchises aimed at children, creating gendered anticipated identities that children take up and perform, as suggested by Wohlwend. Kinder would concur, believing that "[television and video games] position young spectators to combine passive and interactive modes of response as they identify the sliding signifiers that move fluidly across various forms of image production and cultural boundaries, but without challenging the rigid gender differentiation on which the patriarchal order is based" (1991, p. 3) The two intertextual transmedia supersystems discussed here, the Disney Princess brand and My Little Pony, appear to reinforce hegemonic gender discourses, particularly emphasized femininity. They also draw on McRobbie's postfeminist masquerade which highlights the spectacularization of the female body, creating ambiguous subject positions that involve perceived power on the part of the player, as well as pleasure in the embodiment of hyperfeminized roles.

There are hints of changes, however, in the shifts of the brands' source text narratives towards more egalitarian character portrayals, which can be seen through some boys' identifications with the traditionally feminized play scenarios, as well as in the girls' adoption of assertive, agentic positions in play. Did the girls involve themselves in boys' pretend play scenarios in an equally agentic way? What roles did boys take up? What media-based characters and narratives did they utilize? An examination of the major themes that were observed in the boys' interactions may offer some answers to these questions.

Chapter 4

Superhero Play:

Negotiating Space, Narrativized Pleasures, and Resistance

Claiming Space

It was a Tuesday afternoon in the daycare classroom on my first day of observation, and the children had pulled out one of their favourite toys, a large grey plastic Fisher-Price castle. Gabriel, a gregarious, talkative boy, sang a line from the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (TMNT) theme song: "Turtle power! Turtle in a half shell!" repeatedly while he and Thomas played with TMNT action figures. A larger group of boys gathered around the castle, jockeying for play space, and pulled from the small toy bin two more TMNT figures as well as Spider Man, Green Lantern, Red Lantern (referred to as "red figure" below as the children never called it by name), along with some wooden/cloth prince and king dolls. Although Ryan at first had selected a Disney Princess figure, he returned it to the bin when Thomas handed him a TMNT figure (<> represents action).

<Boys make the figures flip, do summer saults, kick other figures across the table>

Ryan: <as TMNT> "Help me!"

Kevin: <has Spider-Man ride a generic My Little Pony>

Thomas: <uses red figure to kick TMNTs>

Ryan: <drags castle over to them, makes figures fly, climb on castle>

Thomas: <does karate style kicks in the air with his own legs, repeats>

Thomas: <has red figure attack Ryan' and Kevin's figures in the castle>

Ryan and Kevin: <have figures fly and fall down the turret of the castle>

Logan: <joins in with female Avatar figure, in other hand has plastic birthday cake and a green monster>

Ryan: <moves castle away from Logan> Just get away!

<All the wooden/cloth figures get put in turret, then rescued by super hero figures. Wooden prince figure with cape is taken up as a superhero by Ryan>

[Lots of movement, battling, little dialogue]

Kevin: <has figures fight> <looks at me> [for approval/disapproval of fighting?]

Ryan: <pulls Hulk figure out of bin excitedly> Hulk SMASH! <uses it to smash figures on side of castle> (Daycare, Day 1, Nov. 7, 2017)

This was a scene that would be repeated numerous times during my observations at the daycare. Although the girls played with the plastic castle, too, they selected the princess and animal figures from the mixed toy bin, and only occasionally selected a superhero as a love interest for the princesses. They also contained their play to the interior and direct exterior of the castle, as well as the space in between the castle and the green plastic toy bin which was usually placed on the table. The boys, however, claimed the entire space, both with their bodies as they competed for access to the castle, and by flinging the figures above the castle, across the table and onto the floor in mock battle scenes. In addition, Thomas re-enacted martial arts moves by kicking his legs in the air sideways, claiming classroom space and using his body to engage in the action hero narrative. These scenarios also sometimes involved violent displacement of princess figures by intentionally knocking them off the castle using male figures (Daycare Day 3, Nov. 9, 2017).

The boys' monopolization of space can be read as part of their common sense understanding of appropriate gender practice. This claiming of space would be repeated when I brought in the dress-up costumes. Although the girls use of space expanded when they donned the princess dresses, the boys use of space was simply emphasized. As they already engaged in rough and tumble play on a regular basis, the costumes simply encouraged them to run, jump, wrestle, and stage mock battles all through the room, much to the consternation of the educators (Daycare, Day 13, Dec. 11, 2017; Daycare, Day 14, Dec. 13, 2017). Since all the children had equal access to outdoor, active play during the day, this difference in use of space may also speak to gendered expectations in the classroom, where "children are often rewarded, either implicitly or explicitly, for sex-appropriate behaviours and discouraged or punished for inappropriate ones" (Blaise, 2005, p. 10). Rambunctiousness among the boys, although not condoned, was more tolerated than among the girls, with one girl in particular, Lauren, frequently being chastised for her inability to sit still

There were several discourses at work in both this claiming of space and the related superhero/action figure play, the most notable being hegemonic masculinity. R. W. Connell defines this as:

> …the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. (1995, p. 77)

Hegemonic masculinity is also a component of Butler's heterosexual matrix, as under hegemony masculinity is necessarily heterosexual with "a key form of subordinated masculinity being homosexual." This is enacted through "both direct interactions and a kind of ideological warfare" (Connell, 1987, p. 186). Connell goes on to argue that "gayness, in patriarchal ideology, is the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity … Hence, from the point of view of hegemonic masculinity, gayness is easily assimilated to femininity" (1995, p. 78). The devaluing of the feminine therefore negatively impacts not only women, but also men and boys who deviate from hegemonic masculinity.

Connell suggests that despite the small number of men who subscribe to a hegemonic masculine ideal, "the majority of men gain from its hegemony, since they benefit from the patriarchal dividend, the advantage men in general gain from the overall subordination of women" (1995, p. 79). In media aimed at children, and particularly at boys, tropes of hegemonic masculinity abound, and these include domination of women and subordinate males (which is intertwined with sexual orientation as noted above, but also with race, class, and ability) via physical prowess, aggression, authoritarianism, technological violence, humiliation, and the devaluing of the feminine. Isobel Urquhart suggests that boys bring these media representations into their social interactions and discussions with peers, creating a "public discourse that amplifie[s] social idealizations of manhood" (1996, p. 155).

In the play scenario above, which was typical of action figure play at the daycare, hegemonic masculine norms were on display such as physical strength, aggression, and dominance. These were combined with superpowers such as the ability to fly, and martial arts moves most likely based on the TMNT canon. In addition, there were generic fairy tale hero tropes such as a saviour on a horse, and the rescue of the dolls from the turret. This butted up against peer conflict including a desire by Ryan to control the play space and exclude Logan from having access to the castle, as well as Ryan's concern with adult attitudes towards violence in play. These play patterns also reflect the different themes embedded in gendered PLCs - notably that of emotionality and pacifism for girls, and physical or technological dominance for boys.

Seiter, writing about the original PLCs in the 1980s, noted that animated television serials aimed at girls generally eschew physical violence in lieu of relational problems where "threat is founded on feeling" and "emotional insight turns out to be the most powerful force in the world,

and all the heroines possess it to a superior degree and in abundant quantities" (1995, p. 161). While girls' 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). More recent scholarship on the content of children's television speaks to the endurance of these types of gendered narratives (see Gotz & Lemish, 2012 for an overview).

Toy licensors exploit these differences, particularly in the realm of action figures aimed at boys, where play based on violence, or "clash", encourage the promotion of a multiplicity of figures and weaponized accessories, enhancing the masculinist aspects of the narrative (Roman & McAllister, 2012). Mary Hilton concurs, noting the physical differences in narrativized toys based on gender:

> [Girls toys] seem to pin girls into a static consumerist fantasy which openly declares that the Western female body is an object of sexual and sensual gratification, ready to be stroked and adorned within an enhancing milieu of soft yet sparkling material fabrics. The male body and its associated play activities are, by contrast, active and destructive. The boys' toys speak of endless physical attack on the body: bombing, punching, flattening, kicking … The bodies of heroes are also stereotyped: hard and lean, with plastic articulations which form aggressive postures. Masculinity is here being constructed out of a constant story of bodily and technological conflict. (1996, pp. 21–22)

These features were evident in the toys the boys selected when playing with the castle. The main focus of the play scenario noted above, and numerous other pretend play instances were the TMNTs, Spider-Man, Green Lantern, The Hulk, and the red figure (they grafted a generic superhero/villain role onto this figure based on its appearance, and it was later used as a stand-in for The Flash). Just as the Disney Princess figures and the dress-up costumes offered particular subject positions to the girls, and the occasional boy, to take up in pretend play, the TMNT, Spider-Man and other superhero figures were inculcated with anticipated identities (Wohlwend, 2009) through their marketing as part of transmedia supersystems. Matt Briggs notes: "the products of our commercial media culture are rich in meaning potential precisely because they are drawn into semiosis across a range of textual sites and practices" particularly through "the intimacies of children's "mediated play"" (2007, p. 505). Of the toys available in

the daycare classroom, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles seemed to be particularly attractive to the boys in terms of staging fight scenes, with their embedded martial arts action-hero storylines.

Heroes in a Half-Shell

Growing up during the late 1980s, I can recall numerous afternoons spent watching *TMNT* cartoons with my brothers on television, broadcast from channels just across the US border and received, often with poor reception, via our over-the-air antenna. As the youngest of three children, and the only girl, my viewing choices were generally dictated by my older brothers and so I became intimately acquainted with *TMNT, G.I. Joe, Transformers*, and other PLCs of that era aimed primarily at boys. Stephen Kline, writing in 1993, reminds us that the success of PLCs and their related merchandise rapidly became normalized due to the changing regulatory and cultural environment:

> Parents today seem largely unconcerned with the over-commercialization of television and the increased pressure put on children by toy advertising … After ten years of reiteration these promotional formula and rationales have become culturally accepted and naturalized. Our cultural amnesia makes it appear as if television programming has always been like this – as if children have always needed the right action toys to play with their friends, the right hero on their pillowcase. (1993, p. 274)

For Canadian or American adults like myself, who were too young to recall television prior to the 1980s, there *was* nothing else. We were born into a culture that had already adopted these transmedia supersystems as the ultimate formula for the production of children's television. It was unsurprising then, to find TMNT figures in the daycare's toys, likely donated over the years by parents, or recouped from a garage sale or giveaway pile. Such items may have been looked upon nostalgically by the educators or daycare owner who added them to the classroom. Derek Johnson, discussing the Transformers franchise, launched during the same era as TMNT, notes that marketing efforts aimed at recycling children's media are "attuned to the specific generational and social reproduction patterns of contemporary American culture, focusing on relationships between parents and children as a nexus of affective exchange and franchising nostalgia" (2013b, p. 189). Although not specifically accounting for physically recycled or re-used items such as the ones in this classroom, Johnson would likely recognize that they play an important role in continuing the genealogy of a franchise.

TMNT was based on a series of comics created in 1983 by Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird, who while goofing around one evening, drew anthropomorphic turtles with masks and martial arts weapons (Lewis, 1991). They named the characters after renaissance artists as a gimmick, and then came up with a backstory that parodied the narrative of the *Daredevil* comics (Gonzales, 2015). It included abandoned baby turtles being transformed by radioactive ooze into giant, human-turtle hybrids trained in martial arts by their sensei Splinter, a giant mutant rat. From their underground compound in the New York sewer system, the Turtles fought the Foot Clan, an army of ninjas set loose by The Shredder, Splinter's arch enemy. They were aided by a reporter, April O'Neil, the only female character in the series, and a young human vigilante, Casey Jones. In the first animated version that aired from 1988-1996, additional details such as an affinity for pizza, Southern Californian surfer language ("cowabunga dude!"), and comedic storylines, were added to make the narrative more palatable to a younger audience. In addition, the turtles' uniformly red masks were colour-coded so that children could tell them apart (also,

Figure 4 Contents of mixed toy bin at the daycare containing action figures, princesses and assorted small animals and character-based toys.

presumably, to aid in the collectability of the toys): blue for Leonardo, red for Raphael, purple for Donatello, and orange for Michelangelo (Lammle, 2015).

Launched at a time when the Kung Fu film aesthetic and Japanese culture were popular in the American imaginary (Fleming, 1996) with successful films such as *The Karate Kid* leading the way, the success of the brand was immediate and long-lasting. Kinder reports that by 1990 there were fourty-four Playmates action figures, not to mention thousands of licensed merchandise products on the market (1991). Over the run of the first animated series, over 400 different models of action figures would be produced and $1.1 billion worth of toys sold (Lammle, 2015). During the same period, three feature-length films were released. This would be followed by a rebooted TV series and a computer-animated film. In 2009, the rights to TMNT were sold to Viacom which owns the children's network Nickelodeon, and it would launch a new television series followed by two live-action films. The most recent films were criticized for their violent content and overt sexism ("Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles is Worse Than You Thought", 2014), and yet the 2014 film alone grossed nearly half a billion dollars worldwide ("Box Office History" n.d.).

After the success of the 2012 television series which brought in $475 million in global retail sales of toys and merchandise in its first year alone, Viacom created a separate one-hour TV special aimed squarely at preschoolers, *Half-Shell Heroes,* which saw younger versions of the Turtles flung back in time to meet a staple of preschool curriculum – dinosaurs. Within a year, the related toys became a leading seller in the pre-school action figure category (Langsworthy, 2016). In 2018 Viacom announced that it would be rebooting the franchise yet again with a new animated series, *Rise of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, and new toys and merchandise. According to Johnson, this type of long-lived franchise requires: "a perpetual production cycle that accounts for moments of reorganization, management, experimentation, and also decline in and across multiple global contexts" (2013b, p. 154) as well as "the necessity of solidifying franchise formulas by establishing key character types and dramatic dynamics" (2013b, p. 164).

According to George H. Lewis (1991), the dramatic dynamics of TMNT are based in the American monomyth, one that involves a harmonious life threated by evil and the emergence of a selfless hero, often spurred to action by threats to an "innocent" woman. The hero at first fails when the evil force exploits a flaw in him, then the hero reaches out to natural or supernatural

forces to overcome this flaw and triumph. He notes that the four turtles are actually a composite character: “four facets of a complete and fully-realized super-individual” (1991, p. 35) that function as a team which is a “… uniquely American wrinkle on the superhero” (1991, p. 36). Within the team each character plays a distinct role utilizing their specific skills. Lewis adds, however, that the *TMNT* version of the monomyth is a type of bricolage of folk myths and popular culture, often involving intentional cultural inversions:

> This type of satire—the mocking of icons of adult culture (Fiske 1989), or the bricolagic rearranging of them to create bizarre, "absurd" messages (Clark 1990) is often seen in the cultural material of adolescents and pre-adolescents, from Mad magazine through the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles in both their original, teen-oriented comic book version and in the cartoon and video versions designed for the younger audience. (1991, p. 38)

Seiter suggests that this is part of the appeal of children’s franchises in that they engage in “the subversion of parental values of discipline, seriousness, intellectual achievement, respect for authority, and complexity by celebrating rebellion, disruption, simplicity, freedom, and energy” (1995, p. 11).

With such a longstanding, widely distributed media-based franchise, it’s difficult to know, however, just how today’s children may have come into contact with the characters and narratives, or in which iteration. Briggs warns: “in such a field of intertextuality it is meaningless to try and identify the ‘primary’ text, for this is not how children encounter them” (2007, p. 513). Kinder (1991) concurs, noting that there are innumerable ways to “enter” a transmedia network. The children’s play, however, focused on the overarching themes of the franchise: confronting danger, teamwork/friendship, and triumph over evil. Here Logan played with Spider-Man, the small white-haired fairy (who, being an older cast-off and devoid of any media-based narrative, appeared to be a “safe” female toy for the boys to utilize), the red figure, The Hulk, and a TMNT figure:

> Logan: <Brings over bin of dollhouse furniture.> <Sits fairy on a yellow chair.> <Puts red figure and Hulk in small blue recycling bin.> They’re in the garbage!
>
> Logan: <Stops, watches girls colouring at the same table.> In the garbage… there’s a shadow there!
>
> Logan: <as Spider-Man> It’s not a shadow, it’s a turtle!

Logan: <as Red figure and Hulk> I'm scared, I'm gonna go in the garbage! <Spider-Man jumps on TMNT's back, hard, repeatedly> (Daycare, Day 2, Nov. 8, 2017)

This short excerpt demonstrates a frequent narrative of superhero/action-hero television serials aimed at boys, including those of the TMNT canon, that of lurking danger and rescue via physical confrontation (here Spider-Man "beats up" the TMNT who's threatening the red figure and The Hulk). The TMNT, and numerous other characters were often swapped between being "good guys" and "bad guys" depending on what other figures were at the child's disposal, likely due to the fact that there was a shortage of villains in the mixed toy bin. The only superhero who was never a villain was Spider-Man, likely due to his being endowed with higher cultural capital among the children, which will be discussed shortly. Other discourses at work here are of both hegemonic masculinity – men as strong, threatening and violent, which contrasts with fear on the part of the "victims", stand-ins for the damsel in distress trope. Also relevant is the fact that just prior to this dialogue, Kevin had come and taken Spider-Man out of Logan's hands, and then returned it to him shortly thereafter. Logan may have been "punishing" the TMNT figure using Spider-Man to express his anger at Kevin. Finally, it shows the type of bricolage work or pastiche that the children often employed in mixing characters and narratives, although this was generally limited within specific gendered domains, such as mixing a variety of action figures in hero narratives, or princesses and animal figures in fairy tale narratives.

On my following visit Logan also referred to the TMNT figure as a "ninja monster" (Daycare, Day 3, Nov. 9, 2017). Being that the turtles are mutants, this is not an inaccurate description, however it was more likely that he was once again positioning the TMNT as the "bad" monster in relation to the "good" Spider-Man figure. Another term he utilized was "strong-eyes turtle" instead of calling the TMNT by its name, which suggested he had limited familiarity with the backstory (Daycare, Day 11, Dec. 6, 2017). His language, however, such as "hi-ya!" and "take that!" and the sound effects he made, suggested familiarity with cartoon-style fight scenes and the martial arts focus of the brand. (Daycare, Day 4, Nov. 14, 2017, Daycare, Day 15, Dec. 14, 2017). Kevin also utilized the TMNT figures as foils for Spider-Man in mock battles (Daycare, Day 4, Nov. 14, 2017). Thomas appeared to be the most familiar with the TMNT canon, as he knew the theme song, and physically imitated their martial-arts moves. Gabriel's singing of the *TMNT* theme song also indicated the importance of brand knowledge as

cultural capital in the classroom. In fact, on another day Thomas and Gabriel got into an argument over the "correct" lyrics of the *TMNT* song (Daycare, Day 3, Nov. 9, 2017).

"Reach Out and Crush Somebody"

Kinder notes that part of the pleasure boys take in the TMNT brand appears to be in its "authorization" to "engage in the socially disapproved behaviour of fighting" (1991, p. 124). This was supported by advertising - a TMNT toy ad airing on Canadian television in 1990 had Raphael instructing the audience to: "reach out and crush somebody" (Kline, 1993, p. 272). At the height of Turtlemania in 1990, Nancy Carlsson-Paige and Diane E. Levin spoke with early childhood educators who were concerned about the popularity of Turtle-related media and toys; 89% of those surveyed felt that the TMNT franchise had a negative impact on children's play. They noted: "Many teachers saw the play as simply imitating the violent aspects of the Turtles' behavior over and over with little other content" (1991, p. 15). There were concerns about the prescriptive nature of the toys (or what I've referred to as their anticipated identities), and the reliance on violence as a means of solving problems which resulted in increased aggression and less pro-social behaviour in the classroom. Teachers also remarked that the boys acted "macho" and that girls were generally excluded from the boys' TMNT play. When they did participate they played the role of April as a damsel-in-distress trope (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1991).

In reviewing my field notes, however, it became clear that I failed to capture a lot of what was happening in the boys' TMNT play scenarios because the action was mostly physical, as opposed to the girls' princess play, which was more verbal. There were likely parts of the narrative that were unavailable to me as they may have been occurring internally, behind the high-kicks and punches. My lack of familiarity with the newer iterations of the franchise may also have impacted my ability to record what was going on. As Fleming notes "... a more inviting narrative knowledge with a subtlety of 'history' and characterisation adds depth to what is superficially only an acting out of aggression for its own sake" (1996, p. 129). This may also explain the teachers' characterization of TMNT play as having "little other content." Or it could be, as Kline suggests, that the narratives on which the toys are based are somewhat "empty", lacking the psychological depth of traditional folk tales and myth, resulting in more superficial play (Kline, 1993).

The teachers in the 1990 survey also expressed concern about children understanding the limits of TMNT play by confusing fantasy and reality, about a glorification of fighting, and

about potential injuries as a result (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1991). The concerns of the educators surrounding boys' active or aggressive play at the daycare echoed these sentiments. This resulted in more frequent interventions and admonishments of the boys, and at one point in fact put an end to the dress-up play as they considered the boys' actions too "wild" (Daycare, Day 13, Dec. 11, 2017). Educators utilized language like "not too rough" (Daycare, Day 5, Nov. 15, 2017). This policing, although understandable from a safety point of view, seemed to simply serve to reinforce gender dichotomies as the children then expected the boys to be "rough" rather than gentle, and to be disciplined more often. The girls would sometimes imitate the teachers by telling the boys to "calm down", thereby engaging in this disciplinary regime (Daycare, Day 9, Nov. 30, 2017) and further reinforcing gender dichotomies. It was also unclear that there was every any true aggressive intent in the boys' behaviour, since it occurred within pretend play, although the educators seemed to be mostly concerned about accidental injuries in the confined space of the classroom rather than intentional harm.

Although the girls at the daycare were excluded from most of the TMNT and superhero play, at the preschool an instance of pretend play at the outdoor sand table demonstrated that girls were just as capable of boys of utilizing violent hero narratives. In this case the toys involved were plastic safari animals and William, Alice, Michael and Noemi were crowded around the raised table:

Alice: Noemi! That's the sister, that's the mom, that's the baby.

William: <moves lion around, digging and making it stomp> Where's my baby come?

Alice: <smacks William's lion on the head with the zebra> Arrr Ah!

Alice: <to Michael, holding baby lion> Come on my tail, you'll be safe.

William: <moves lion up in the air, then smashes it down in the sand>

Michael: <puts sand through a funnel, William does the same with a larger funnel>

Alice: <smashes a zebra on a lion>

Alice: <to Noemi> No, don't kill that one, kill the dad – he's a bad guy!

Alice: <smashes the zebra on the lion> No truck for you. You're dead!

Noemi: <buries the tiger> Daddy! Come!

Michael: <places the big flat rock on top of the sand>

Michael: <to me> He's silly. <Makes baby lion bounce around> Da, da, da, da, da, da.

> Alice: Pretend he [daddy lion] eats this. Now you're dead. Pretend you guys are the bad guys, and we're the good guys. Little kid, stay in your bedroom. <As zebra> I'm gonna take care of the bad guys.
>
> Alice: <smashes zebra on lion> You're dead, you're dead, you're dead.
>
> (Preschool, Day 8, Nov. 30, 2017).

Here Alice appeared to be melding a family/superhero role, violently dispatching the "bad" father lion with the "good" zebra. The fact that Alice initiated the scenario and the other children played along suggests that perhaps non-media-scripted toys allowed more freedom for girls to adopt non-hegemonic gender roles, and resulted in less gender borderwork on the part of the other children.

Inside Logan's Spiderverse

Aside from the TMNT, the other most popular toy among the boys was the Spider-Man figure, as it was a frequent site of disputes over the right to utilize it, and even caused concern among the educators as Logan became extremely attached to it. His interactions provide a type of case study of how children explore media-based texts "from inside the experience rather than holding them up as objects for scrutiny" (Palmer, 1986, p. 113). Logan was an energetic, intense, affectionate child, with a dark complexion and spiky black hair. I would often find him wandering aimlessly around the classroom with Spider-Man clutched firmly in his hand and sometimes the red figure (that he named "The Flash", after the DC superhero), in the other hand. (When I returned to the classroom several months after my observations, the children informed me that the Spider-Man figure had gotten broken, much to Logan's dismay). The figure was a 5-inch, articulated red and blue stocky version of Spider-Man with extra-large feet which appeared designed to fit squarely in a younger child's hand. In the children's pretend play scenarios Spider-Man interacted with the TMNTs, some of the other action figures, the white-haired fairy, and, occasionally, Disney Princesses.

In his analysis of action figures, Jason Bainbridge suggests that this is a frequent occurrence in media-based toy play:

> … more often children's play will be made up of different toys from different lines, combining pieces of narrative to create something new. Arguably, then, the 'action' of the action figure moves from the action of consumption towards a (nascent) action of

> prosumption (where consumption fuels production), wherein children use the figures and their narratives as resources for their own creativity and exploration. (2010, p. 835)

Although this process was at work in all of the children's classroom play – for instance the girls often mixed Disney Princesses with Littlest Pet Shops and other figures from the toy bin, the latter were more often utilized as accessories or add-ons rather than characters that drove the narrative. The Spider-Man figure was "alone" in terms of material referents from its fictional universe, therefore it required creativity on the part of the players to adapt other items to the narrative. Since superheroes are often scripted in teams, this likely facilitated the inclusion of the other superhero figures. As with all the children's superhero play, however, the scripts appeared somewhat limited to danger/rescue plots which generally involved figures hitting, kicking, punching, and stomping on each other.

This was evidenced when Charlie and Charlotte were playing out a family scenario with small dolls and Charlie added in superheroes:

> <Charlotte and Charlie play with small generic dolls>
>
> Charlotte: <makes blond-haired doll push baby in baby carriage> Merci cheval. Tout le monde peut jouer, un pour chacun. *(Thank you horse. Everyone can play, there is one for each of us.)*
>
> Charlie: <makes baby tumble in the air> Ahhhh! <Puts small plastic cake on table> Gateau! *(Cake!)*
>
> Charlotte: On va faire une grosse journée. C'est l'Halloween, c'est la fête! *(We're going to have a big day. It's Halloween, it's a party!)*
>
> <They each take a fairy doll>
>
> Charlie: <makes the baby move around, chases it with the blond-haired doll. They use a bin tipped over as a house> J'essaye d'aider mon bébé! *(I'm trying to help my baby!)*
>
> Charlotte: Je suis la soeur, n'oublie pas! (*Don't forget, I'm the sister!)*
>
> Charlie: <tries to attach a basket to a My Little Pony's foot, puts baby on pony to ride it>
>
> Charlotte: Bébé, reste avec papa! *(Baby, stay with daddy!)*
>
> Charlie: <grabs Hulk and Green Lantern, starts to smash them into things on the table, has one kick the other far away> Ouch! Dans la poubelle! *(Ouch! Go in the garbage!)*
>
> (Daycare, Day 2, Nov. 8, 2017)

Charlie appears to add the superheroes as both potential rescuer of the baby in distress, and a villain, but they can only advance the narrative through violence. The Hulk figure was frequently used by all the boys to smash and destroy, and was rarely given any dialogue. The Hulk was not as popular, however, as Spider-Man.

As noted above, Logan was the child who most frequently played with Spider-Man, and in fact one of the educators accused him of being "obsessed" with the toy. This obsession was demonstrated on an affective and physical level. He would sometimes get so excited when playing that he would clench the figure extremely tightly until his body would shudder (Daycare, Day 9, Nov. 30, 2017), and at other times he would hug the figure tenderly right before throwing it back into a staged battle (Daycare, Day 11, Dec. 6, 2017). Having poorer verbal skills than some of his peers, when other children gained possession of the figure he would stop playing completely and hover over them, expressing his anxiety and displeasure by making whining sounds (Daycare, Day 11, Dec. 6, 2017; Daycare, Day 17, Dec. 20, 2017). When I attempted to ask him questions about his play scenarios, he would often respond with one word: "Spider-Man", even if it was nonsensical in terms of the question asked. It was unclear whether this was

Figure 5 Spider-Man figure at the daycare.

simply because he was unable to comprehend my questions, or whether he felt this should convey some meaning to me that I simply was not grasping. Logan's intense focus on this single toy culminated one afternoon in Sofia, one of the educators, forbidding him from playing with it, worried that he was "not going to learn" from such repetitive play (Daycare, Day 7, Nov. 28, 2017). This resulted in a very distraught Logan crying in a corner of the classroom.

What drove Logan's obsession with Spider-Man? The answer may lie in the overwhelming popularity of the Spider-Man franchise. Launched as a comic book character in 1962 by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, Spider-Man became an immediate success, and is now the most recognized character of the Marvel universe (Sanderson, 1996). This is borne out by the character's annual transmedia licensing sales which sit at an astonishing $1.3 billion, more than doubling the retail sales of competing franchises such as Batman (A. Ben Block, 2014). Styled as an everyman hero, Spider-Man began as Peter Parker, a teenager bitten by a radioactive spider on a school field trip, endowing him with special abilities such as superhuman strength and the ability to climb walls and cling to ceilings. A science whiz, Parker created gadgets allowing him to shoot sticky "webbing" from his wrists, as well as a red and blue spider-themed costume which covered him head to toe, nicknaming himself Spider-Man. Set in a crime-riddled version of New York city, Parker faced the difficulties of managing his regular life while fighting crime and supervillains.

The Spider-Man backstory fits the earlier-referenced American monomyth, with Parker living a peaceful life with his working-class adoptive aunt and uncle, until he accidentally becomes "The Spider-Man", and his uncle is killed due to his reluctance to help dispatch a common thief. Parker's guilt then drives him to save others from harm (Sanderson, 1996). The very human, relatable, dilemmas Spider-Man finds himself in are what have led to the franchise's success: "A character who just can't seem to catch a break yet always does the right thing regardless proved to be a winning formula, and that coupled with a fast-moving, dynamic power set spoke to the kind of hero that audiences wanted to see." (Mae, 2018). In addition to comics, this led to multiple television series and numerous films, including three rebooted film series' since 2002. The most recent of these, *Spider-Man: Homecoming,* a live-action film*,* and *Spider-Man: Into the Spiderverse*, an animated version, feature younger, more diverse casts, the latter having replaced Peter Parker with an Afro-Latino teenager, Miles Morales. It's a new world where "anyone can wear the mask" (Mae, 2018).

As a Filipino-Canadian child, it's possible Logan identified with this open-endedness in terms of the character's ethnicity. Since particularly in toy form, Spider-Man is rarely seen without his mask, it may be easier for a child of colour to imagine themselves taking on the role compared to other superheroes such as Superman, Batman, and most of the members of the Avengers who are generally portrayed as White adult males. In addition, Spider-Man is depicted as young, often innocent or inept, particularly in social situations, and still living at home with a mother-figure, his aunt May. Peter Sanderson (1996) also points to the notion that although Peter Parker is shy and unremarkable, Spider-Man is outgoing, witty, and fun. This may empower children like Logan who are awkward in their social interactions due to linguistic or other difficulties.

Logan's attachment to the toy Spider-Man also made it appear almost as a transitional object or one that aids young children in the "perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated" by allowing them to transfer their anxieties about their separation from their primary caregiver to an object (Winnicott, 1970, p. 3). Numerous children who attend daycares carry with them transitional objects, however they are often blankets, soothers, or stuffed animals. The fact that Logan chose a narrativized toy on which to focus both his affection and anxiety may suggest that the ability to direct the "known" narrative offered a sense of mastery and control. Or perhaps it is simply a testament to the power of reliving the pleasure taken in viewing the original filmic or televised text – as playing with the Spider-Man toy appeared to bring Logan a great deal of enjoyment. Henry Giroux and Roger I. Simon note: "the formation of identities takes place through attachments and investments which are as much a question of affect and pleasure as they are of ideology and rationality" (1989, p. 4).

Steven Popper suggests that the general characteristics of superheroes are particularly appealing to young children: "Some of these characteristics might have to do with appearance (such as Spider-Man's mask or Batman's cape), some might be to do with the magical powers or devices that such characters commonly use … and some might be to do with the *nature of the characters* themselves" (2013, p. 13). He suggests that the two overarching themes of superhero narratives: "'being on the side of good rather than the side of evil' and 'ensuring a good outcome for others'" (2013, p. 14) are enticing to young children who still view notions of good and evil in concrete terms. Superhero play is also viewed as a "fantasy of competence" in which danger is overcome through the hero's skillful acts, or a method of being "delivered from the anxieties of

reality, but in a way that also includes and contains that reality" (Urquhart, 1996, pp. 160–161). It allows children agentic, confident roles from which to explore their "possibilities of self", negotiating subject positions within a safe, fantastical space. Within the highly gendered superhero realm, however, these possibilities of the self, do not appear to be entirely the same for both boys and girls.

Supergirl's Postfeminist Masquerade

This was evidenced one afternoon at the daycare when I discovered several girls in the kitchen corner, seated in rows on chairs, with others in front of them on the floor, styling each other's hair. I inquired as to what they were playing and this exchange ensued:

Leia and Beatrice: <brushing Charlotte's hair>

Tifanie (researcher): Are you guys fixing Charlotte's hair?

Leia: Yes, we're fixing her hair 'cause we're pretending that she's Supergirl.

Leia: We're pretending we're superheroes and we're going on vacation! We gotta fix her makeup. She has earrings! <pretending to put earrings on Charlotte>

Beatrice: I already put them.

Leia: She's a boy.

Charlotte: Noooo, I'm a girl.

<The girls fuss with Charlotte's hair>

Beatrice: I will get some water [for the brush]… that will be pretty!

Leia: Charlotte! My goodness! [Indicating that she looks very pretty]

Beatrice: <takes plastic stethoscope and runs it over Charlotte's head> I'm gonna check her head, her head is sick!

Leia: Now we gotta redo her hair!

<Leia leaves, then comes back>

Beatrice: Ok, I think we're done. I think it's my turn. (Daycare, Day 5, Nov. 15, 2017)

Clearly the girls' version of pretending to be superheroes was vastly different from the boys'. Here they focused uniquely on improving their appearance, and they discussed "going on vacation" which could be drawn from real life, however, it is also a common trope in transmedia aimed at girls such as Barbie toys/videos and the Lego Friends brand. There were no battles between good and evil, no active, physical play, and no notions of power or domination. This play scenario may have been related to the educators' regular practice of "fixing" the girls' hair

into pony tails in the classroom as a pleasurable affective activity. However, it may also be indicative of how female superheroes are portrayed across transmedia supersystems. Although male superheroes are ubiquitous in television and film, as the current popularity of Marvel and DC live-action films attests, female superheroes are more likely to play supporting roles than primary ones, and are often subsequently ignored or minimized in the resulting transmedia such as video games and merchandise (Cocca, 2016; Mortimer, 2015; Roman & McAllister, 2012).

This was further hinted at when I brought in the branded dress-up costumes. Although the boys immediately recognized each character's attire, the girls spent time discussing which "parts" of each female costume went with each character, suggesting that they were not as familiar with the aesthetics of the female roles (Daycare, Day 17, Dec. 20, 2017). Kaysee Baker and Arthur A. Raney suggest that although in recent years female superheroes have generally been portrayed in a more egalitarian light, it is not necessarily a sign of the dismantling of gender binaries:

> True, females are indeed being portrayed in less gender-role specific ways *in some respects*, according to traditional definitions of femininity. However, to achieve this, they are seemingly being portrayed more like males *in certain areas*, while at the same time maintaining some key feminine characteristics such as beauty and emotionality. (2007, p. 37)

If this is reminiscent of the evolution of the Disney princesses (Whelan's "progressive princess"), perhaps it's not coincidental. McRobbie suggests that this is an explicit function of the postfeminist masquerade, as women negotiate entry into formerly masculine domains:

> The masquerade functions to re-assure male structures of power by defusing the presence and the aggressive and competitive actions of women as they come to inhabit positions of authority. It re-stabilises gender relations and the heterosexual matrix as defined by Butler by interpellating women repeatedly and ritualistically into the knowing and self-reflexive terms of highly-stylised femininity. (2009, pp. 68–69)

In the early childhood education classroom these negotiations were a daily occurrence, as children attempted to position themselves within the heterosexual matrix in order to gain acceptance from educators and peers. Despite being engaged in a ritual related to emphasized femininity, Leia states that Charlotte is a boy, as if trying to reconcile in her own mind how a powerful female superhero fits into this schema. Charlotte vehemently rejects this classification,

desiring to “play it straight” and protect her position as a desirable female within the heterosexual matrix. (Blaise, 2005).

The mention of Supergirl by name is also likely not accidental. Created in 1958 by Otto Binder and Dick Sprang, Supergirl is Superman’s cousin: “a brave and heroic teenage girl who, while as brave and powerful as her cousin, lived a life of loneliness and isolation” (Buxton, 2015). The character endured numerous incarnations in comics over the years, and after a long absence from film and television, was rebooted in 2015 in an eponymous live-action television series which originally aired on CBS (now moved to The CW network), as well as in an animated web series titled *DC Super Hero Girls*. The latter, a PLC explicitly devised by Warner Bros. to sell a line of dolls produced by Mattel and other associated merchandise, also includes Batgirl, Bumblebee, Harley Quinn, Katana, Poison Ivy, and Wonder Woman. The summer prior to my observations at the daycare the long-awaited live action superhero film, *Wonder Woman* was also released, re-igniting the public’s interest in DC’s cast of female characters. The fact that

Figure 6 DC Superhero Girls dolls and toys on display at a Montreal-area Toys R Us store in 2016.

female superheroes are finally widely available in toy form created excitement, including praise from feminist bloggers (Arreola, 2015; Izetta, n.d.), however, there have also been critiques, notably of the depiction of race in the webisodes and the toy line (R. J. Jones, 2016).

Although there is not enough space here for a full analysis, a quick overview supports the notion that there is room for improvement. Notably, the fact that the figures were produced as both fashion dolls and action figures, with the former having silk, Barbie-esque brushable hair and interchangeable outfits, reinforces the spectre of the postfeminist masquerade. This is not to suggest that children wouldn't take up the dolls in a variety of ways, as Erica Rand proposes is often the case with Barbie (1995). However, on the surface, the disproportionate body designs of the fashion dolls which appear to mimic Mattel's earlier Disney Princess designs are problematic. Having lost their lucrative $500 million license for the Disney Princess doll line to Hasbro at the end of 2015 (Suddath, 2017), Mattel was clearly searching for a replacement income stream and simply recycled a previously successful doll formula with minor modifications. As Carolyn Cocca proposes, these seemingly tangential economic details are actually important, as they speak to "how it is that superhero characters make money, and how companies assume they make money. Representations of female superheroes are affected by the ways they are produced for maximum relevance, and therefore maximum profit…" (2016, p. 2).

Even as action figures, the toys differ wildly from the equivalent boys' versions. *DC Superhero Girls* action figures come with few to no weapons, feminine clothing, and are packaged in bright, attractive colours with text emphasizing their ability to be "super friends". This can be contrasted with *Batman: The Brave and the Bold* figures that were sold during the animated series' run from 2008-2011 such as "Battle Saw Batman, Taser Batman, Shock Suit Batman, Spine Buster Batman" that came complete with an array of weapons and an angry, grimacing version of Batman on the package. Zachary Roman and Matthew McAllister suggest that these types of figures "crystalize specific forms of character violence and masculinity" (2012, p. 6),arguing that: "the disemboweling effects of such weapons are not shown in the television program, but these products seem to encourage such imaginings given that the toys are promoted by the weaponry or even the possible results" (2012, p. 8). A parent would be hard pressed to find female super-hero action figures with such grizzly overtones, a testament to the continued gender divide of superhero narratives, and a reflection of what is considered appropriate play for girls.

The character of Supergirl, as depicted in the live-action television show, and to a lesser degree in the animated webisodes, is nevertheless a strong, intelligent, and fearless hero. In her live-action incarnation, portrayed by Melissa Benoist, she comes to the rescue of the residents of National City every week in violent battles against aliens and metahumans which involve hand to hand combat, the use of her superpowers, as well as various technological defensive weapons. Her physique is lean and muscular, and although her beauty and femininity is played down through its omission from the narrative, it is clearly present via the aesthetics of the highly attractive actress' consistently impeccable hair and makeup, and the tightness and femininity of her superhero attire. In this regard she fits in with other modern female heroes such as Marvel's Black Widow, DC's Wonder Woman, and Rey, the female Jedi from *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. McRobbie suggests that this is simply another facet of the postfeminist masquerade, the "phallic girl", which allows for a mimicry of hegemonic masculinity through aggressive, unfeminine behaviour: "The phallic girl gives the impression of having won equality with men by becoming like her male counterparts. But in this adoption of the phallus, there is no critique of masculine hegemony" (2009, p. 83).

While McRobbie links this notion to the "ladette" in UK popular culture, a stereotype of a hypersexualized, hedonistic, aggressive young woman, I believe it could equally be applied to the mostly chaste, masculinized behaviour of the female superheroes. She notes that it is a more active, assertive version of the masquerade but one which "can be understood as a kind of strategic endowment to young women, a means of attributing to them degrees of capacity but with strict conditions which ultimately ensure gender re-stabilisation" (2009, p. 84). In many modern female superhero narratives this is partially accomplished through the emphasis on unrequited or ill-fated heteronormative romantic love, thereby repudiating lesbianism and hypersexuality while protecting the moral integrity of the character. At the same time, series' such as *Supergirl* utilize overtly feminist narratives and dialogue (in *Supergirl* these are often articulated by the character of Cat Grant, played by none other than Calista Flockhart of *Ally McBeal* fame), and include recurring LGBTQ+ characters, all of which speak to shifting gender discourses. Cocca (2016) argues that these shifts have occurred due to fan responses to previous overtly sexist depictions of female superheroes which has resulted in a "push and pull" between producers and consumers, facilitated by the advent of the internet and social media.

The Most Powerful Girl

The girls' emphasis on appearance somewhat dissipated when faced with the branded superhero costumes. Amidst the chaos wrought by the children's excitement over the dress-up costumes, the girls engaged in more active play by donning Wonder Woman capes or Batgirl utility belts. They pretended to "fly" around the classroom, using magic "powers", and challenging the boys' embodiment of superhero roles and their occupation of classroom space. This was evidenced in the play scenario described at the end of Chapter 3 where Jada and Beatrice confronted the boys with the "power" of their Wonder Woman wrist cuffs. In her examination of girls and superhero play in a primary school classroom, Jackie Marsh found that when offered materials which allowed them to embody female superheroes, girls did transgress hegemonic gender norms and take up agentic, powerful positions within pretend play scenarios. However, she also noted that these positions were often resisted by the boys, who "preferred to direct the girls into passive roles, which did not allow them to have any control over the direction and nature of the play" (2000, p. 218). This type of negation was part of the constant negotiation over the "rules" governing pretend play scenarios, both at the daycare and the preschool, during my observations.

Several months after my observation period finished, I had the opportunity to return to the daycare and spend an enjoyable few hours visiting with the children. It was at this point that I was informed of the loss of the Spider-Man toy. I happened to notice Maria, one of the girls who often played alone, at the castle table. In the past I had recorded her playing out romantic tropes using the Disney Princesses and Spider-Man, but today, perhaps because of Spider-Man's untimely demise, she'd chosen a female Avatar figure to accompany the princesses and the tone of the narrative had changed dramatically:

> Logan: <plays with Hulk, TMNT, is looking for The Flash (red figure)>
>
> Ryan: <plays with TMNT>
>
> Maria: <Playing with Disney princesses in the castle and the Avatar action figure. Uses Avatar figure to fight the TMNT and Hulk> I will kill you boys, *I'm the most powerful girl*.
>
> Gabriel: I can help you fight them.
>
> Maria: <as Avatar figure> I don't NEED help!

[Maria's voice and body language change along with use of figure (sassy head bobbing, plus deeper, more gruff voice)]

Maria: <Moves the Avatar figure in the same way the boys move the TMNT - kicking, flipping and jumping on the other figures>

Maria: <takes Maleficent the evil witch from Sleeping Beauty, makes evil laugh> Mouhahaha. [However the witch does not "attack" the same way the Avatar figure does.] (Daycare, Day 18, March 23, 2018)

When I questioned Maria, she stated she knew that the Avatar figure was from a film, but had never seen the film. This same figure had also been used by the boys on different occasions as a superhero or a villain, although they too did not seem to know its original narrative. This was the only time I witnessed a girl using an action figure in this way, perhaps because there were no female superhero action figures, and the princess figures were unable to bend or kick due to being fixed statuettes. The open-endedness of the Avatar figure due to its disassociation from its filmic narrative also appeared to contribute to the variety of roles for which it was employed. Davies notes that for young girls in the classroom:

> … 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 … competent membership of the category girl does not necessarily foreclose the possibility of taking up action that is defined as inappropriate for a girl. She can "eclipse power with power", and emerge, momentarily, as someone able to move beyond the boundaries laid down in the terms of her subjection. (2003, p. 161)

This demonstrates the possibility for disruptive or resistant play within action hero or superhero narratives, when children "move in ways not anticipated by the discourses through which they were (and are) subjected" (Davies, 2003, p. 162).

If play with Disney Princesses and My Little Ponies appeared to be related to the postfeminist masquerade which was intertwined with emphasized femininity, then superhero play was a locus of hegemonic masculinity, as the boys claimed physical space and played out themes of aggression and dominance. The girls, conversely, used superhero play as both a site of the reproduction of femininity and an opportunity to take on agentic roles similar to those occupied by the boys. However, the children's attraction to superhero play is more complex than this summary implies, involving fantastical spaces from which to examine "possibilities of the

self'. Particularly in Logan's case, these possibilities were intertwined with affect, desire, and potentially, separation anxiety brought on by the daycare environment. As Anne Haas Dyson notes, this demonstrates how children utilize commercial culture to make sense of social experiences, and imbue their acts with social meaning based on the reactions of their peers to the narratives, activities, and roles they take on (1997).

Chapter 5

Conclusion

"Through rituals, performances, and play, societies perpetuate themselves and choose cultural moments to be remembered and forgotten … these imagined moments become sites for communities to work through their past; reinscribe present values, norms, and beliefs; and perhaps envision their future"

- Drew Chappell, Children Under Construction

While the previous chapters suggest links between media-based narratives, toys, pretend play, and the circulation of gender discourses, a closer look at some of the overlapping fields and their interactional processes is perhaps warranted. The main areas of interest which arose out of my observations at the daycare and the preschool were how gender discourses circulate through the production and transmission of transmedia supersystems aimed at children, and the integration of these texts in pretend play. In addition, it became evident that the structure of the early childhood education classroom was important as a site of socialization into gendered subjectivities. Briggs suggests that examining these "complex systems of meaning potential … mobilised across a range of texts through a nexus of play, childcare, parenting and pedagogical practice" requires an ecological conception of analysis. This involves exploring not only the source texts, but also the "complex and concrete contexts in which meanings are engaged" in everyday practice (2007, p. 505). This exploration was more daunting than I predicted, particularly for a sole researcher, due to the complexities involved in capturing multiple interactions in a busy classroom. In addition, it became clear that it was next to impossible to grasp all of the personal and cultural histories that enveloped them. This is, notably, one reason authors such as Briggs engage in autoethnographic accounts with their own children as they have more access to the emotional, material, and historical background. These difficulties also complicate the theorizing of how power circulates within these sites, although some tentative conclusions can still be drawn.

Power is often thought to be exercised in a top-down fashion by large media corporations with regards to the products they sell to consumers. Media conglomerates such as Disney and Viacom, through their virtual oligopolies and extensive global reach, certainly "circulate cultural commodities that can influence the way that people make sense of the world, while also placing

limits on the range of available perspectives" (Birkinbine, Gomez, & Wasko, 2017, p. 6). This is then exacerbated by the extension of these cultural commodities into commercial transmedia supersystems which colonize various spheres of North American children's everyday lives. These spheres include homes, schools, and leisure activities, through the presence not only of media such as television and film, but also advertising, and licensed goods. In my observations it became clear that this influence is neither straightforward nor easily qualified, however, as children take up the narratives in interesting and diverse ways. "Common sense" understandings of the world are then co-created with both peers and adults within existing social structures and institutions. Power therefore operates in a more relational, dispersed fashion. Just like Logan's lurking shadow in the garbage can, however, the spectre of hegemonic gender discourses was a constant presence, and regulated both the children's play and their potential subjectivities.

The nature of the production and consumption of media and toys aimed at children is likely partially to blame for the tenaciousness of these hegemonic gender discourses. Producers draw from what they view as gender-segregated play, to then sell children's own fantasies back to them pre-packaged in gender-coded ways. This often involves a reterritorialization of children's imaginary worlds. For instance, the genesis of the My Little Pony brand in the 1980s was so-called "blue sky" research that asked young girls what they imagined in their daydreams (Ladensohn Stern & Schoenhaus, 1990, p. 117). Similarly, the Disney Princess brand began when the corporation's chairman of consumer goods noticed young girls dressing-up as princesses to attend Disney on Ice shows (Setoodeh, 2007). This gave him the idea of packaging the princesses together into one mega-brand. Producers also rely on developmental theory which suggests boys and girl prefer gender-segregated play, and have "naturally" differing interests. This is then compounded by what Dafna Lemish terms "the truism that has become the industry's working axiom: Although girls will watch boys' shows, boys will not watch girls' shows" (2011, p. 360).

One impact of producers' reliance on this belief, which is itself a function of hegemonic gender norms, is that there are twice as many male as female characters in children's television, and when girls do appear they are overwhelmingly young, thin, attractive, wealthy and White (Lemish, 2011). Lemish argues that this is particularly damaging for girls of colour who "learn to see themselves through the White masculine perspective that represents and speaks for them" (2011, p. 360). This, along with the "sparklefication" and spectacularization of girlhood, may

help to explain the daycare girls' fascination with appearance in play. Interestingly, however, despite most of the protagonists of the Disney Princess brand being White, the girls at the daycare who embodied them were from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, including Black, Asian, and Latina, and did not seem to associate themselves with a particular princess' appearance. Although the emphasized femininity of the brand is still problematic, there did seem to be space within their fantasy play to move beyond a White, Euro-centric aesthetic, as long as the trappings of "princessdom" (fancy dresses, tiaras, purses, mannerisms, etc.) were respected.

The same was true of gender transgressions. Although the children initially objected to Leo's donning a princess dress, he was then able to integrate himself into Lauren's play scenario by adopting a "princess" bodily hexis, and skipping around the room with her (Daycare, Day 17, Dec. 20, 2017). It is therefore possible that in certain instances the fictional genres embedded in the anticipated identities of the media-based characters trump race and/or gender discourses during play. Valerie Walkerdine, referring to children's literature, suggests that this is because: "… fiction is not a mere set of images, but an ensemble of textual devices for engaging the reader in the fantasy. Because the fantasies created in the text play upon wishes already present in the lives of young children, the resolutions offered will relate to their own wishes or desires" (1984b, pp. 168–169). In pretend play, children actuate those desires and bring them into the here and now, sometimes coming into conflict with their own social location and peer positioning within the classroom.

Lemish proposes that the notion that girls will take-up boys' media and toys, but not the reverse, may also be a reflection of feminist-led social change which has increasingly allowed girls and women to adopt male perspectives and values without negative ramifications. She goes on to note that "perhaps the trend of girls' interests in boys' genres represents their growing sensitivity to the advantageous positions that boys hold in societies around the world and the higher value associated with their tastes and interests" (2011, p. 361). This suggests that the girls' agentic positions in play were not necessarily a feature of a humanist, rational, individualized agency, but rather of a positioning within a liberal feminist discourse which situates them as being on even footing with the boys. This was tempered, however, with the postfeminist masquerade which required them to remain focused on femininity and appearance, even when they took up powerful roles such as superheroes. It's also notable that the girls never

fully engaged in superhero play, either with the castle or the costumes, until there were female, media-branded superhero costumes on offer.

If the girls found themselves identifying with these somewhat contradictory subject positions, then what was occurring with the boys? In their frequent Ninja Turtle and superhero play there certainly appeared to be repeated displays of hegemonic masculinity, notably brute force and domination of "bad guys". Chris Richards (2014), drawing on Brian Sutton-Smith and Diana Kelly-Byrne's analysis of boys' rough and tumble play, suggests that perhaps these pseudo-violent scenarios are actually a method of communicating shared vulnerabilities and desires without transgressing normative gender expectations. Urquhart (1996) concurs, suggesting that children simply make use of available gendered narratives to work out underlying anxieties. The boys did not uniquely engage in aggressive play, however, as they also occasionally mixed in other scenarios. For instance, Kevin and Logan sometimes had Spider-Man engaging in domestic activities such as celebrating a birthday, eating food in the castle kitchen, and going to the bathroom (Daycare, Day 7, Nov. 28, 2017; Daycare Day 15, Dec. 14, 2017). This resembled nurturing doll or family play, rather than their regular action-hero narratives. In addition, in the kitchen corner, numerous boys regularly engaged in what could be considered feminized domestic activities such as cooking, playing family, caring for baby dolls, or being cared for as "pets" by the girls.

Modern superhero narratives often take up this contradiction in boys' inner worlds, as David Gauntlett notes in his assessment of the 2001-2007 *Spider-Man* films featuring Tobey Maguire: "Maguire presents a humane and multilayered representation of contemporary masculinity. He is sensitive and emotional; he is appealing but not a little geeky; he tries hard and does not always succeed" (2008, p. 79). This theme carries through other recent superhero films such as Marvel's *Captain America, Iron Man, and Avengers* series' where the mainly male protagonists struggle to do the "right" thing by being the "right" kind of man - one who is not only powerful but sensitive and conscientious, the "progressive superhero". Even the Ninja Turtles, despite the overt sexism of the newer films, are in some ways sensitive and vulnerable as they care deeply for, and are often foiled by, their attachment to their master, Splinter, and their friends.

If the postfeminist masquerade is one in which "girls and women living in neo-liberal societies are to balance masculine qualities of phallic power with renewed pressures around

hypersexualized visual display and performances of normative femininity" (Gonick, Renold, Ringrose, & Weems, 2009, p. 3), then could this shift in portrayals of men be termed a postmasculinist masquerade? One in which men and boys are required to balance feminine qualities of emotionality and caring with renewed pressures around hypermasculine bodily displays and performances of strength and domination? This would also involve a repudiation of feminism as relevant to men, since gender equality for women is assumed to have been "achieved" and an examination of their own privilege and power is no longer necessary. McRobbie (2009), drawing on Butler, terms this a "double entanglement", or the co-existence of neo-conservatism in certain areas of gender discourses with increased liberalisation in others. In children's popular media it would appear then that this double entanglement is embodied by the "progressive princess" and the "progressive superhero". These notions were reinforced by the educators' reactions to the children's play such as encouraging the boys to be gentle, and praising the girls' attractiveness when they wore princess attire.

In addition to the educators' conduct, the structure of early childhood education classrooms is also of importance. In the centres I visited, the classrooms relied on a hierarchical power structure, one in which the educators were viewed as the repositories of knowledge that must be imparted to the children in preparation for formal schooling. In addition, educators were tasked with surveilling children to note their development and assure discipline and safety in the classroom. This was carried out in a caring environment where interpersonal relationships were nurtured, however, Walkerdine suggests that the practice of developmental psychology upon which modern early childhood pedagogy is based is a normalizing one, in which observation and surveillance are utilized in the *production* of children: "we are not so much faced with an 'ideology of childhood' which distorts what children are 'really like', so much as a 'truth' which regulates what 'should be'" (1986, p. 58, see also Walkerdine, 1984a). She goes on to suggest that from the time women were first permitted to become teachers in public education, they have been positioned as mother-substitutes, caregivers, and guardians of the moral order based on their gender. In today's early childhood education settings this discourse of motherhood/caring is omnipresent as the staff are overwhelmingly female. In Quebec alone, 95% of daycare workers are women (Beeman, 2004). Although at the daycare where I conducted my observations one of the main daytime educators was male, all of the educators present during my visits were women, including the owner of the daycare. Both educators at the preschool were also women.

Early childhood education guidelines suggest that establishing an understanding of gender binaries is "crucial to a child's development of a 'healthy' gendered identity that is directly tied to a corresponding physical body and that the blurring of these categories will lead to gender confusion" (Howard, 2010, p. 110). These edicts, based in notions of gender as a biological construct, are concretized through instruments such as the *American Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R)* that recommends that gender-specific dress-up items be provided in the classroom in order to aid children in establishing an "appropriate" gender identity. Other early childhood education guidelines such as the developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) promulgated by the U.S. National Association for Teaching Young Children (NAEYC) simply do not address gender.

In Quebec, the *Educational Program for Childcare Services* relegates gender to an issue of individuality and personal development and states:

> [The educator] also has a role to play in the **development of the child's personal and gender identity**. He or she helps children to know that they are boys or girls and to be proud of it. The educator or home childcare provider places equal value on both genders and takes advantage of a sexist action or remark made by children to have them reflect on the question and to **adhere to the values of equality embraced by Québec society.** (Forest, Lanthier, Nelissen, & Roy, 2007, p. 25, emphasis in original)

Although on the surface this guideline appears to address power imbalances related to gender, Nora Alloway argues 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" (1995, p. 54). In addition, Alloway suggests that the current focus on child-centered pedagogy weakens the teacher's 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" (1995, p. 62). This was echoed by one of the educators at the preschool, who, when discussing the children's gendered play patterns suggested "they're going to do what they're going to do anyway" (Interview, Preschool, Nov. 29, 2017).

Blaise (2005) agrees, concluding that early childhood educators currently have little impetus to include critical approaches in their teaching. In addition, educators face pressure from parents, as Weedon argues that:

> …the overriding concern of most parents is with 'normality', the normality necessary for future success in the two privileged sites of adult life, the family and work. This concern with socially defined normality will lead most parents to accept dominant definitions of the necessity and meaning of gender difference. (1997, p. 73)

Rebecca Howard (2010) suggests that modern early childhood education classrooms are often dedicated to cultural diversity and inclusiveness, which should, in theory, also extend to an awareness of sexism and gender diversity. This does not always appear to be the case.

During this project I found that in the daycare there were limited efforts to examine gender discourses and the ways in which power circulated through them. Since my observations were during the free play period, children's choice of activities or play narratives were never questioned, unless it was to contain "wild" play, or to address issues of taking turns with the most coveted play things. When gender lines were crossed, notably by Leo in choosing princess dresses, some educators made attempts to quash the other children's gender borderwork under the guise of "freedom to choose", and "equality of opportunity" rather than addressing the underlying hegemonic gender discourses and homophobia. At the preschool, there were more concerted efforts to create a gender-neutral play environment which resulted in less borderwork, however there were still few direct efforts to address gender discourses. One of the educators noted that she often took photographs of the children playing to send to parents at the end of the day, but that she would refrain from sending an image of cross-gender play such as a boy dressing in feminized clothing, if she felt that the practice would be unacceptable to the parent(s) in question (Preschool, Interview, Nov. 29, 2017). This speaks to the pressure exerted by parents noted above.

Becky Francis suggests that "because pro-equal opportunities discourse do not challenge the fundamental construction of gender as relational, they can only moderate, rather than challenge, discriminatory constructions" (1998, p. 147). James Sears (1999) adds that even when cross-gender play is tolerated, rather than encouraged or normalized, it's often dismissed as transitory, leading the child to understand that when they're older it will be unacceptable, and raising questions about homophobic discourses in the classroom. Blaise suggests what is required is a move away from developmental psychology, to 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" (2005, p. 3). This is imperative if teachers are going to be able to offer children a variety of subject positions to inhabit in the classroom, beyond the hegemonic ones currently on offer, as well as to address the damaging effects gender discourses can entail. In her fascinating look at young boys' relationships in an early childhood education classroom, Judy Y. Chu noted an immense shift between the time the boys in her study entered their pre-kindergarten classroom and approximately six months into the school year. Although they began as attentive, empathetic, and forthright in their relationships, as the school year went on "boys' relational capabilities became less apparent as they became more focused on gaining other people's approval and acceptance and, to that end, learned to align their behaviours with group and cultural norms" (2014, p. 36).

This also speaks to the importance of peer groups. As was demonstrated in the earlier chapters, one important aspect of media-based play is its shared knowledge bases and narratives. These function not only as shared imaginaries, but also as cultural capital that aids in forming communities of practice where children feel a sense of belonging as they engage in the pleasurable social activity of inhabiting pretend worlds. Within children's commercialized media worlds, however, these communities of practice not only draw from gendered texts, but also rely on "economies of dignity", which "transform particular goods and experiences into a form of scrip, tokens of value suddenly fraught with meaning" (Pugh, 2009, p. 7). These tokens can be material objects, such as the Spider-Man toy at the daycare which caused constant disagreements over its possession, or something more ephemeral such as the knowledge of My Little Pony narratives and characters necessary to engage in pony play with other children. Pugh notes that this results in children engaging in "facework", or a type of impression management to gain standing amongst their peers. This "facework" aids in explaining the shift Chu depicts above from authenticity to a performed, or inauthentic self, in attempting to be "one of the boys".

Although there were moments of resistance, the immense pressure exercised by peer affiliations reduced the potential for resistant readings of the texts, even within the purportedly "free" worlds of fantasy play. Davies suggests that this is not surprising, as "children cannot both be required to position themselves as identifiably male or female and at the same time be deprived of the means of signifying maleness and femaleness" (2003, p. xi) However, if "the polarised social structure, created through a multitude of different discursive practices, is something individuals can attempt to change through a refusal of certain discursive practices or

elements of those practices" (Davies, 2003, p. 13), then some children such as Leo and Maria, seemed to be adept at finding the cracks and fissures that allowed for these refusals or subversions. Further study would be required to understand just how or why these particular children came to resist dominant discourses and what types of social practices supported their efforts. Such an examination cannot occur in isolation, however, as the topics noted here speak to the intertwining of a multitude of fields and practices in the constitution of gendered subjectivities.

Epilogue: Of Wands, Swords, and Ninja Turtles

The same year that my daughter graduated from preschool, and her classmates declared their future royal ambitions, we took a family vacation to Walt Disney World. At a "character dinner" at one of the park's restaurants, a cast member dressed as a Disney princess came around to each of the tables to distribute a glittery plastic wand to each girl, and a shiny faux-metallic sword to each boy. My daughter was disappointed when she was handed a wand, and expressed her displeasure by glaring at the passing princesses for the rest of the meal. As we were leaving, I suggested she ask the young woman dressed as Belle, who was standing at the hostess' desk, if she could trade her wand for a sword. I watched my daughter approach the desk tentatively, and saw the confusion on Belle's face as she considered the request. There was a moment of hesitation, and then some whispered negotiations, and finally she acquiesced to the small but mighty blonde, curly-haired, requestor facing her. Immediately, my daughter's entire demeanor changed as she grasped the plastic sword and held it high, clearly enjoying the feeling of empowerment it brought. I wonder now, 13 years later, whether they still distribute the same gender-specific toys, and if so, do they now offer a choice of items due to requests like my daughter's?

As my children have grown, their interest in princesses has faded, however, the questions that their original fascination provoked remain. In addition, as they entered formal schooling, and as my daughter became a teenager, now in her first year of college, the issues they face with regards to media and gender have multiplied and became more complex. My daughter is now dealing with navigating the world of social media as a gender-fluid, feminist young adult and has faced the social costs that are sometimes associated with such a subject position. My son, for his part, is still fascinated with Star Wars, and recently discovered my husband's old TMNT roll playing game player's handbooks. This led to my dining room being filled with a gaggle of mostly male pre-teens engaged in hours-long role play scenarios, a different but equally interesting form of fantasy play. He too, however, has faced criticism from peers for his often gender non-conforming popular cultural and fashion interests, particularly as it relates to femininity for boys. This speaks to the ongoing need for earlier and better intervention in breaking down gender binaries and interrogating their related power structures. I can only hope

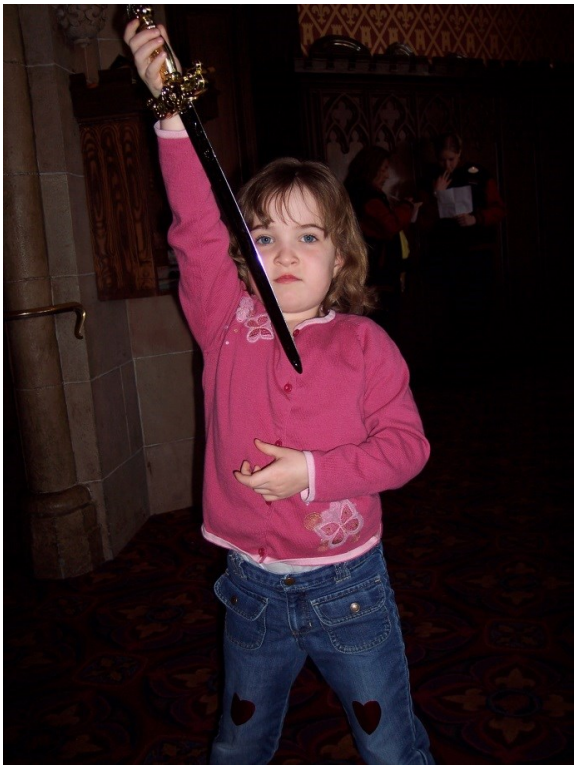

Figure 7 My daughter with her sword at Walt Disney World in 2006.

that ongoing discussions like the one herein help us to deconstruct, and perhaps one day eliminate, restrictive hegemonic gender discourses, and allow every child the freedom to take up the subject position of their choosing, whether that involves a wand or a sword, princesses or ponies, Ninja Turtles or superheroes.

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