

**The Boys who would be Princesses:  
Playing with Gender Identity Intertexts in Disney Princess  
Transmedia**

**Karen E. Wohlwend  
Indiana University, Bloomington**

**Pre-print of Manuscript Published in  
Gender and Education**

Using data from a three-year ethnographic study of literacy play in U.S. early childhood classrooms, I examine two kindergarten boys' classroom play with their favorite Disney Princess transmedia to see how they negotiated gendered identity layers clustered in the franchise's commercially-given storylines and consumer expectations. This analysis contributes necessarily syncretic methods of analysis that enable critical examination of the complexity in children's play interactions with popular media artifacts as collaborative negotiations of identity and gender. Mediated discourse analysis of action and multimodality in boys' Snow White princess play makes visible the ways children pivoted and anchored their performances of available identities as they negotiated, played, and blurred gender boundaries among identity intertexts.

Early childhood literacy is situated in an increasingly commercialized and globalized textual landscape (Carrington, 2005) that includes popular media in television programs, films, video games, and websites as well as franchises with dolls, toys, collectibles, apparel, beauty products, food, school supplies, and other everyday consumer goods. Although few things could appear more innocuous than fluffy Cinderella slipper socks or a Little Mermaid seashell nightlight, the global marketing of children's media produces an immersive stream of *transmedia* in billion dollar media franchises that flow into all aspects of children's lives.

We do not often enough realize that commercial marketing is the best financed source of media production in our world, and that it is often at the cutting edge of semiotic innovation, where we ordinarily expect to find only the arts (the least well-financed, if otherwise the freest)...Transmedia franchises place co-branded content, and with it their ideological messages and inducements to consumption, throughout our virtual and spatial environment, where our individual traversals will encounter it again and again. (Lemke, 2009, p. 292)

Children's extensive and immersive engagements with commercial transmedia have sparked controversy over the identity-shaping potential of gender stereotypes in popular media, in particular, *Disney Princesses*, the lead characters in Disney animated films such as Snow White, Cinderella, and recently Tiana in *The Princess and the Frog* and Rapunzel in *Tangled*. With \$4 billion in annual global retail sales, the Disney Princess brand is a highly successful "lifestyle" franchise (Disney Consumer Products, 2011) that targets to 3- to 5-year-old girls as its primary market. Transmedia bring princess narratives to life, allowing children to live in character from breakfast to bedtime. Young children's engagement with princess transmedia has prompted high levels of public debate, evidenced in a flurry of tweets, blog posts, and Youtube viewings generated by

recent mass market books, *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis & deSimone, 2010) and *Cinderella Ate My Daughter: Dispatches from the Front Lines of the New Girlie-Girl Culture* (Orenstein, 2011).

The Disney Princess franchise includes ten Walt Disney Studios films: *Snow White* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995), *Mulan* (1998), *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), and *Tangled* (2010)<sup>1</sup>. The princesses in these films blur the line between girls (Snow White, Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*, Mulan) and women (Pocahontas, Sleeping Beauty) with individual variations in personality traits that range from demure (Snow White, Sleeping Beauty) to curious (Ariel) to plucky (Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*, Mulan, Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog*). Across films, the princess characters are kind and helpful to others as they overcome obstacles in their quests for good families and happily ever afters, but through storylines with consistently problematic representations of gender, class, and race (Davis, 2006; do Rozario, 2004; Giroux, 1999; Haas, Bell, & Sell, 1995, Walkerdine, 1984). For example, even films with ostensibly agentic heroines, such as Ariel, Pocahontas, Belle, and Tiana who save their heroes or Mulan who saves her country, accomplish these feats through self-sacrifice and deference to a male hero (Lacroix, 2005).

I argue that Disney Princess transmedia are identity texts that circulates a dense set of expectations for children as viewers, consumers, producers, and players, producing

---

<sup>1</sup> At the time of the classroom study, the films *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled* were not yet released. Tiana was added to the Disney Princess brand in March, 2010 and Rapunzel was added in October, 2011.

a need for nuanced understanding of the complex ways that young children take up, replay, or revise the gendered messages designed into their favorite media. For example, commercial production histories embed *anticipated identities* for doll players and child consumers into Disney Princess dolls through decisions about color, fabrics, and doll body materials as well as film storylines and marketing practices (Wohlwend, 2009). Each Disney Princess identity text is situated in particular activity contexts: 1) princess characters in fantasy worlds in media narratives, 2) body images in media production processes 3) consumer expectations in brand identity marketing, 4) social histories in peer culture, 5) curricular expectations in school culture, 6) negotiated play narratives in collectively-imagined contexts, and 7) situated identities and power relations in the social worlds imagined in media and educational discourses.

This article contributes a way of examining children's play with transmedia as intertextual activity (Kinder, 1991) that must be read across products, as each toy, t-shirt, or toothbrush links to every other product in the franchise through a thick rope of interrelated storylines, commercials, films, books, and video games. This means that even a play interaction with an individual product cannot be analyzed as an isolated literacy event or act of consumption but must be situated in its current sociocultural context and also investigated for its connections to market histories and trajectories across diverse products in a global network. In the current case, I argue that as two boys played with Disney Princess transmedia, they made visible and negotiated multiple identity layers clustered in the franchise's transmedia. Their play was productive and collaborative, but also transformative as children transgressed commercially-given storylines and consumer expectations in their favorite princess films. This article also contributes necessarily

syncretic methods of analysis that enable critical examination of the complexity in children's play interactions with popular media artifacts as negotiations of identity and collaborative textual productions. Mediated discourse analysis of action and multimodality in children's doll play makes visible the ways children pivoted and anchored their performances of available identities as they negotiated, played, and blurred the boundaries among gendered identity intertexts.

Intertexts in transmedia become visible and open to transformation during children's play negotiations when roles are contested or confusing, causing players stop to question, clarify, or revise the meaning of a particular prop or action. In this article, I look closely at children's play negotiations in one kindergarten classroom where two six-year-old boys, Daniel and Anthony<sup>2</sup>, frequently pretended to be Disney Princesses such as Snow White or Cinderella. This sometimes required additional work to convince other children to play along. During princess play, the boys moved among identity layers in intertexts 1) to pivot to fantasy play worlds where they could enact Disney Princess and fan identities, 2) to anchor their own improvisations of shared meanings and identities in their co-constructed play narratives with other children, and 3) to negotiate power relations in transgressive media play.

Following theorization and deconstruction of Disney Princess transmedia as identity intertexts, a mediated discourse analysis—an action-oriented multimodal approach— identifies several intertextual layers in one boy's Cinderella drawing and then tracks several layers in a typical instance of negotiation as the boys played princesses in

---

<sup>2</sup> All names for the children and the teacher are pseudonyms.

ways that anchored and pivoted their play narratives in ways that transgressed and blurred gender boundaries.

## Negotiating Identity Intertexts in Disney Princess Transmedia

### Princess Dolls as Gender Intertexts

My use of *intertext* recognizes more than verbal scripts in film narratives, advertising messages, and corporate marketing strategies; it also includes nonverbal modes in product material designs and intended and actual uses. Transmedia products evoke a theory for their use and identities for their users: “a conception of the tasks to which they are put, and a conception of the person(s) who will use them and the object(s) of them” (Holland, et al., 1998, p. 62). Disney Princess media products circulate identity expectations for “girly girls” identities in an emphasized femininity discourse (Blaise, 2005) exemplified in princess characters in the animated fairy tales, beauty ideals drawn into the princess feminine body images through media production processes, and preschool consumers’ relationships with a Disney Princess brand identity created and distributed through marketing practices. Toys—dolls in particular—are artifacts designed to emphatically signal their anticipated uses so that children can easily use them for play (Brougère, 2006). Dolls provoke performances of particular identity texts for pretend characters (baby, mother, princess, cool girls) and for children who are the doll players (preschoolers, girls) (Carrington, 2003).

The 10 princess characters in the Disney Princess films provide the foundational personalities for the franchise’s *brand identity*, merged into one persona, producing its primary identity text. Marketers develop a “brand as person” to establish an emotional bond with target consumers, giving users an imagined person rather than a functional

product to interact with (Aaker, 1996). This marketing strategy constructs a brand personality but also a brand-consumer relationship. Brand personality communicates particular attributes that a user might want to see in herself while the brand-consumer relationship positions the product as a potential interactant: making "...Levi Strauss a rugged outdoor companion; Mercedes-Benz an upscale, admired person; ... and Hallmark a warm, emotional relative" (Aaker, 1996, p. 84). The *Disney Princess* brand identity combines the ten heroines, creating a brand persona that is a friendly, always-beautiful, self-sacrificing ingénue who never loses sight of her goal: to attract the hero. The overarching brand identity plays up the glitter and glamour of the princess role and reduces the differences across the heroines to color variations in their hair and dress styles (Wohlwend, 2009). What remains is a distilled hyper-feminine persona, a set of narrow beauty ideals for young girls, and passive roles in damsel in distress storylines (Giroux, 1999; Haas, Bell, & Sell, 1995). The brand-consumer relationship offers a lovely loving friend and role model that positions young girls as adoring fans and wannabes. The combination of identity brand and franchised products form identity kits that make the figured world of Disney Princesses tangible and highly available through licensed toys and household goods marketed to the market demographic of preschool girls. These branding practices target girls as the appropriate consumers and fans for Disney Princess franchise, advertising that contributed to expectations for female consumers among the children in this kindergarten.

Disney Princesses are not just scripted models of uber-femininity, they're "drawn that way" (as Jessica Rabbit, the animated femme fatale, notes in Disney's *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*). Using the artistic phenomenon of pentimento as a metaphor and analytic

tool, Bell (1995) peeled away layers in the images of animated characters in Disney Princess films to look closely at mid-twentieth century Disney studio production processes. Pentimento is the tendency for oil paint to turn transparent over time which reveals stacked images as the surface paint layers become translucent and older versions show through, allowing an artist's revisions to become visible as oil paintings age. The early Disney animated films were constituted from hundreds of thousands of individual "cels," celluloid paintings based on the anatomy and minute physical actions of live-action models that produced the frames in an animated film. Bell points out, "Disney animation is not an innocent art form: nothing accidental or serendipitous occurs because each second of action on screen is rendered in twenty-four different still paintings" (p. 108). The frame by frame micro-changes that allowed princesses to glide across the screen were modeled on the upright carriage and controlled movement of professional dancers live-action models, capturing the "artful artificiality of classical ballet" (p. 111). Thus, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and Snow White moved like their models, with the strength, discipline, and erect posture of ballerinas en pointe. The pentimentos in these animated images produce contradictions: although the princess characters voice scripts for passive victims, their bodies and on-screen movements communicate control and strength associated with notions of "natural grace" and "high culture" in ballet. In contrast, pentimentos in images of more recent heroines such as Ariel and Belle pit innocence against sexuality. Drawn as petite girls with wide-eyed, heart-shaped faces, these characters signal childhood vulnerability while enacting follies-like spectacles of dancing sea life in *The Little Mermaid* or household furniture and dishes in *Beauty and the Beast*.

In Disney's recent films, visual modes in the production of body image remain problematic: the elision of race through the use of the mode of color in the identity construction of the first African-American princess in the film *The Princess and the Frog* is cited in a special issue on Disney's latest animated representation of blackness in the *Journal of African American Studies*:

The representation of "Disney's Black princess" is indeed interesting, as Tiana begins the story as anything but a princess. The story begins with her as a child who is the daughter of a seamstress and a day laborer, and when she grows up she works as a waitress. Tiana also spends most of her time in the film as a frog (upon kissing Prince Naveen of Maldonia). This state of affairs leads us to ask: What does it mean for Disney's "first Black princess" to spend so little time as a princess and so much time as a frog in this "groundbreaking" film? In what ways does the representation of Tiana-as green allow for an elision of race, specifically blackness? (King, Bloodsworth-Lugo, & Lugo-Lugo, 2010, p. 396)

Disney's media production and marketing practices reflect market research that analyzes children's preferences according to market segments stratified by age and gender categories: preschool girls' versus preschool boys' preferences. This gender division resonates with "the boy problem", a prominent educational belief that boys are particularly disadvantaged by overly-feminized curriculum in their early schooling (Martino, 2004). For example, some literacy scholars (Fletcher, 2006; Newkirk, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002) argue for expanding writing curricula to include action-packed popular culture genres and forms thought to appeal to many boys (e.g., horror, science fiction, sports, comic books, video games). However, Davies and Saltmarsh (2007) point out that the assumption that curricula are gender specific depends upon beliefs that girls' presupposed play choices and writing topics (e.g., doll play, home and family) are more acceptable to teachers and already align well with school curricula while special efforts

are needed to overcome (female) teachers' attributed reluctance to meet boys' needs for adventure (e.g., through rough-and-tumble play, violent video games).

Thus, when children bring Disney Princess transmedia to school, additional identity layers become relevant: curricular expectations for storytelling and student dispositions set by school policy and the social histories of who plays with whom constructed in peer culture. Peer culture is the “stable set of activities or routines, artifacts, values, and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers” (Corsaro, 2003, p. 37). When transmedia permeate curricula, their “potent fictions” (Hilton, 1996) are made available to children as literacy resources in their classroom play and writing—and as cultural capital to wield in their power relations with other children (Dyson, 2003; Marsh, 2002). Young children strategically play in and out of these gendered identity texts in ways that affect their status as students in school culture but also their affiliations in peer culture (Wohlwend, 2011; Dyson, 2003; Marsh, 2002). Thus, when Disney Princesses come to school, identity texts in transmedia mingle with identity texts in classroom cultures; all these identities are situated in and legitimated by discourses that also interact (e.g., “boy [reluctant] writer” in creative expression discourse [Ivanič, 2004] and one version of hegemonic masculinity [Connell, 2005]). Table 1 summarizes the layers in identity intertexts that are made visible and available in children's classroom play and storytelling with Disney Princess transmedia.

Table 1. Layers of Identity Texts in Disney Princess Play at School

<b>Identity Texts</b>	<b>Mediated Activity &amp; Contexts</b>
<i>Princess characters</i>	Storytelling in commercial film narratives and fantasy worlds
<i>Body images</i>	Drawing and coloring processes in media production processes
<i>Brand identity and consumer relationship</i>	Marketing strategies in media franchises
<i>Children's friendships and social histories</i>	Group-building in peer cultures
<i>Student and curricular expectations</i>	Literacy teaching and learning in school culture
<i>Negotiated play roles</i>	Children's storytelling in play narratives in collectively-imagined contexts
<i>Situated identities</i>	Positioning through power relations among identities in discourses of childhood, media, and schooling

### **Collaborative Negotiation of Identity Texts**

Collaborative performances of play worlds and identity texts produce the need to negotiate who can play which roles and how familiar elements will be enacted. Pretend play is a collaborative textual co-production that *depends upon* player negotiations and improvisations as children work to maintain collective pretense upheld by the shared meanings constructed within the unfolding action of the play narrative (Corsaro, 2003; Farver, 1992). Within pretend play, children must coordinate their portrayals of media roles and character actions, making it necessary at times to stop playing to work out who is being which who-doing-what within the context of the pretense (Sawyer, 1997). When young children pretend to be their favorite media characters, whether princesses or superheroes, their play brings together each child's understanding of well-known

gendered expectations for the character's traits and actions within a narrative circulated through global media networks.

As children play, they reimagine the meanings of here-and-now objects in the classroom, pivoting to a play world and expanding the universe of possible identities that players can access (Vygotsky, 1935/1976). The pivoting facility of play derives in part from players' shared understandings of an artifact's prior and potential meanings, social practices, and cultural contexts (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010). Players can use artifacts not only as pivots but also as anchors for prior negotiated meanings to support and stabilize their performances of identity (Holland & Leander, 2004; Wohlwend 2009). In the current case, this fluidity/stability tension allowed boys to trouble gender (Butler, 1990) by allowing them to access, improvise on, and stabilize princess play identities, blurring and disrupting heteronormative gender identities and transgressing other children's expectations for performances that aligned with fixed binary gender categories. By playing princesses, the boys appropriated multiple, often contradictory, identity texts, that triggered renegotiations of gender among children (Davies, 2003).

## **Methods**

To understand how children played among the identity layers in transmedia intertexts and renegotiated their shared gender expectations, I used mediated discourse analysis (Scollon, 2001; Scollon & Scollon, 2004) that blends Vygotskian (1935/1978) mediated activity and Bourdieauian (1977) social practice. Mediated discourse analysis uses ethnographic methods to track the ways that people use artifacts to mediate their worlds, examining how mediated actions (Wertsch, 1991), artifacts, and discourses

interact to produce the shared meanings, social practices, and situated identities that make up valued ways of belonging.

Consistent with mediated discourse analysis procedures, I conducted a purposive search for play-based literacy classrooms, or rich “sites of engagement” (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 28), with plentiful opportunities for literacy play with a variety of popular media toys. During three school years, I observed, photographed, and analyzed the physical environment and play activity in eight classrooms in three schools that were recommended by knowledgeable informants (principals, professors, teacher mentors). After identifying one of these classrooms as a rich site for studying play, I visited for 24 sessions during the following school year. At end of the year, there were 21 (12 boys and 9 girls) 5- and 6-year-old children, 1 teacher, and 1 teaching paraprofessional in the classroom, located in a public elementary school in a US Midwestern university community.

Close analysis of video data located nexus of literacy play practices where children used toys or classroom materials in ways that affected their shared meaning-making and their social positioning in the classroom. In keeping with the research focus on collaborative understandings of play texts and contexts, I coded the children’s activity at the level of a *collective meaning-making event*, that is, the group activity using play practices with artifacts to produce shared meanings within a given center location from the moment the first child arrived and picked up materials to the moment the last child left. To look closely at children’s interaction with popular media, I located collective events where children’s use of transmedia (e.g., Disney Princess dolls, drawings, songs,

scripts) prompted renegotiations of the original text or children's relational identities: author/audience, expert/novice, boy/girl, among other identities.

To track the use of transmedia as identity pivots, I conducted microanalyses, using an interactional approach<sup>3</sup> to multimodality (Norris, 2004) that is implicit in mediated discourse analysis and its focus on action, artifacts-in-use, contexts, and histories of social and material practices. Multimodal analysis of video data makes visible the ways that players collaborate to pivot from one frame to another (e.g., from classroom learning to pretense) through keying, a set of premises and signs that make all participants consciously aware of the recontextualization, or change in context (Bauman & Briggs, 1990). Keying through modes signaled pivots to play frames through changes in speech, gaze, object handling, posture, gesture, among others that indicated a shift in context from classroom reality to play frames or vice versa (Bauman & Briggs, 1990; Goffman, 1974). For example, children could key a shift to pretense and begin a play frame by picking up a toy (mediated action), speaking in a higher pitch (speech), and looking directly at the object (gaze).

Analysis of modal interaction enabled linking children's drawings and artifacts to Disney's histories of commercially-produced multimedia artifacts. For example, children's use of color and shape in their princess drawings linked to the modes of image, posture, and movement used by animators and models in making Disney Princess films.

---

<sup>3</sup> Jewitt (2006) draws a distinction between a social semiotic approach to multimodality (Kress, 1996) that examines textual representations for modes as semiotic resources governed by cultural grammars and an interactional approach to multimodality (Scollon & Scollon, 2004) that examine activity in context for modes as sensory aspects of the environment that interact in ways that foreground certain modes and background others in ways that shape the situated meaning of the event.

To situate the children's character drawings in the context of media production, I consulted cultural studies of media (Dines & Haas, 2011; Bell, & Sell, 1995; Giroux, 1999; Lacroix, 2006) that deconstructed Disney Princess film images according to commercial drawing and coloring practices and the embodied practices of models and artists in Disney corporate production processes. In this case, examination of the mode of image in children's drawings revealed uses of color and body shapes in commercial animation fossilized into screen conventions that foregrounded animators' design decisions but backgrounded the labor of women who colored each celluloid frame in the film (Bell, 1995).

The microanalysis transcripts are formatted as tables that provide columns for prominent modes, actions, artifacts, and identity text layers that include discourses and relational identities as well as changes in shared meanings and social participation. A look across a row reveals how a mediated action links with talk in relation to other prominent modes as well as identity text layers and legitimating discourses. For example, the modes that children used in keying signal pivots to play frames or in positioning that affected children's relational identities. This interactional approach to modal analysis enabled examinations of children's use of particular modes during their play negotiations about text meanings and character and player roles to see how they pulled combined modes such as music, gesture, movement, and proximity to foreground particular relational identities situated in discourses of femininity, masculinity, consumerism, learner agency, and creative expression.

In the following section, I examine examples from children's play among the layers of identity texts to see how children used them to pivot and anchor their improvised identity

texts in shared play narratives and negotiate power relations among identity texts in Disney Princess popular media. Mediated discourse analysis shows how Anthony and Daniel used dolls as pivots in and out of the Snow White play world as well as anchors for their own textual layers in improvised characters and play narratives. It also shows how their pivots and anchors engaged identity texts in layers of film narratives, play narratives, brand-consumer relationships, and player expectations in gender discourses.

The next section shows how Anthony traced the identity texts in the layer of body image and added his own layer, in this case, in a drawing of Cinderella.

### **Tracing and Adding Layers to Identity Intertexts: Drawing Cinderella**

Contrary to the “boy problem” perspective, Anthony and Daniel chose to draw princesses—lots of princesses. And their princesses were not mere copies. Anthony’s drawings added new layers—tracings and retracings that reproduced but also improvised—on Disney’s designs and the remnants of meanings left by the original models’ and animators’ actions as well as his own invented narratives. These drawings and animations had a joking quality that acknowledged and resisted the wide-eyed innocence in the Disney heroines and instead emphasized their seductive appeal. Anthony’s Cinderella (in Figure 1) meshed these contradictory elements from Disney’s images of villains and heroines: her cleavage and full lips contrast with her hair bow and dress with long sleeves and loose-fitting triangular flare. He twisted *Cinderella’s* princess character and body image layers by incorporating film conventions (cleavage, low-cut gowns) associated with Disney villainous femme fatales with iconic princess features (Ariel’s and Pocohontas’ long, flowing hair, Snow White’s hair bow) to create comical

parodies that entertained his peers as he read from the author's chair. Anthony's combinations emphasize slippages among layers in Disney animated characters.

According to Bell (1995), the discrepancies in multi-layered images like Anthony's Cinderella and the slippages among identity text layers invite multiple readings which open spaces for agentic interpretations. "...Disney artists constructed their perfect girls on the bodies of real women; bodies that produce cracks in the animated perfection and offer sites of physicality and performance that resist the psychology of men and idealizations of women" (p. 121). Anthony's exaggerated drawings can be read in conflicting ways as a reproduction but also a critique of gender stereotypes; his improvised princess enactments as imitation but also distortion of the popular princess storylines that circulate an emphasized femininity discourse. Such princess textual productions can be interpreted as a transgression of a hegemonic masculinity in which boys do not play princesses (Blaise, 2005) but also as an expression of this masculinity in which overacting and parody makes clear that a boy is only playing a girl to differentiate his play identity from other lived identities (Dutro, 2002). It is important to note that Anthony created opportunities that allowed him to transgress heterosexual norms and to access and perform hyper-feminine roles. Anthony's drawings and animations appropriated the layered, sometimes contradictory, identity texts for familiar female characters designed and anticipated by Disney production teams. He transformed princess characters by emphasizing or exaggerating specific features as in his Cinderella drawing or by adding his own twists to characters: an ancient Sleeping Beauty, witchlike princess clones who do spells and chants, a mermaid Ariel who dives off rooftops, a super-

powered “scary” fairy godmother for Cinderella (Wohlwend, 2012) or Snow White ninjas in the following play excerpt.



Figure 1. Anthony's Cinderella

## Identity Intertexts as Pivots and Anchors: Playing Snow White

Anthony is almost totally obscured by the two-story white plastic dollhouse with a pink roof. All that is visible is his tousled brown hair, large brown eyes, and freckled nose that is crinkled in a frown of concentration. He straightens the satin gown on the blonde Sleeping Beauty princess doll and perches it next to a small metal hand mirror, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?"

Three children in succession join the play scenario, each taking up a tiny nude baby doll with a perpetual crouch that permits it to be placed in the dollhouse stroller or highchair. In the children's shared play narratives, the "bad baby" doll misbehaves: whines, tosses furniture around the dollhouse, hits other dolls, etc.

Austin looks at Anthony's princess doll and asks, "Do you like to be the lady?" Daniel nods, "She's the bad guy. I'm Snow White," holding up a tiny plastic woman in a molded sweater and matching slacks. Austin picks up the mirror and places the baby on the mirror-turned-magic-carpet, intoning Superman's "Up, up, and away!" He returns a few minutes later to engage in "bad baby" mayhem as Snow White tidies up after him.

After Austin moves on to another group, Elinor approaches the dollhouse, and momentarily picks up a different doll—this one with cropped red hair, red gingham shirt, and denim overalls. Most children read this doll as male but Daniel and Anthony argued on several occasions that it "can be anything we want it to be". Elinor wants Anthony's princess doll but when she learns that the princess doll is a "bad guy" character, she accepts Daniel's counter-offer of the "bad baby" and dives the baby doll off the dollhouse roof a few times before leaving.

Daniel suggests to Anthony, "How 'bout we both were fighting?" and they shake and flip their dolls in the air, punctuating their moves with sound effects, "Psssshta!" and "Heeya!" Suddenly, Anthony drops Snow White to the floor and Anthony crawls away with both dolls, with Daniel trailing along and calling out "Snow White! Snow White! Snow White!"

The boys' noisy play attracts another player, Gabe, who also picks up the "bad baby" doll and immediately storms the front of the dollhouse, bashing the doll against the windows. The evil queen and Snow White join forces to fight the bad baby. The dolls' flips and crashes are accompanied by their animators' giggles and sound effects.

In this play episode, Anthony animated a Sleeping Beauty princess doll as the "bad guy", a stand-in for the evil queen in the Snow White narrative, while Daniel animated the plastic dollhouse mother as Snow White. Austin, Elinor, and Gabe each negotiated entry to the play narrative as they took up the miniature baby doll and its character as the "bad baby". In Table 2, both Anthony and Elinor recognized the princess doll as Sleeping Beauty. However, Anthony had appropriated the Sleeping Beauty doll and pivoted its

associated media narrative from one princess-in-a-coma story to another. Further, Anthony switched the character identity text assigned to the doll in an unexpected twist, that is, he changed the comatose Aurora--not to the poisoned and still comatose Snow White, but--to the more powerful Evil Queen (as Daniel explained in Turn 3). The conflicting interpretations of the doll's original identity text and Anthony's improvised character produced the need to drop the pretense momentarily and negotiate roles outside the play frame (Turn 2). Daniel shifted his gaze and altered his voice to key his explanation as not-play and negotiations continued outside the play frame (Turns 2 to 5). The children's play positions were emphasized by other modes such as movement (Turns 2, 3, 4), toy manipulation (Turns 3, 5, & 6), and proximity (Turn 2).

Table 2. Modes and Layers in Negotiation in Snow White

Turn	Action	Identity Artifact	Talk	Foregrounded Modes	Identity Text Layer	Effect on Shared Meaning-Making	Effect on Participation
1	Daniel and Anthony crouch beside table Daniel holds up mother doll above head and stands up at same time	Mother doll	Daniel: I'm Snow White	<p><u>Speech:</u> Raised pitch as pivot to character voice (present tense)</p> <p><u>Gaze:</u> Directed at doll</p> <p><u>Toy Manipulation</u> Holding up doll foregrounds doll</p>	<p><u>Brand Identity:</u> Transgresses marketing gender target, boy takes up Disney Princess character identity</p> <p><u>Film Narrative:</u> Suggests Snow White storyline</p> <p><u>Identity/Discourse:</u> <i>DP Fan/Emphasized Femininity:</i> Female role as DP doll player and fan</p>	Begin Snow White play narrative with Daniel as lead	<p>In frame bid to begin play with Anthony</p> <p>Assigns role to himself</p> <p>Boy as appropriate player</p>
2	Elinor walking to opposite side of table	Princess doll	Elinor: I'm going to be Sleeping Beauty.	<p><u>Speech:</u> Proposition (future tense)</p> <p><u>Movement/ Proximity:</u> Position facing other players indicates intent to join play group and take doll</p>	<p><u>Brand Identity:</u> Follows marketing gender target, takes up Disney Princess character identity</p> <p><u>Film Narrative:</u> Suggests Sleeping Beauty character (and implicit storyline)</p> <p><u>Identity/Discourse:</u> <i>DP Fan/Emphasized Femininity:</i> Girl as appropriate DP player</p>	Begin Sleeping Beauty play narrative with Elinor as lead	<p>Out of frame play bid to play with Anthony and Daniel</p> <p>Implicit rejection of Anthony's role &amp; demand for Anthony's doll</p>

Turn	Action	Identity Artifact	Talk	Foregrounded Modes	Identity Text Layer	Effect on Shared Meaning-Making	Effect on Participation
3	Daniel lowers doll and faces Elinor; reaches across Anthony to point to his Sleeping Beauty princess doll	Princess doll	Daniel: The baby, the baby is Snow White's baby. Because he wanted to be, he wanted to be him, her, her, her master. She's [Sleeping Beauty doll] the bad guy	<p><u>Speech:</u> Drop in pitch to speaking voice pivots out of play frame and opens negotiating space</p> <p><u>Movement/ Posture:</u> Reach pulls Anthony into conversation; indicates bond</p> <p><u>Gaze</u> Directed at Elinor</p>	<p><u>Play Narratives</u> Enforces role in shared play narrative previously negotiated</p> <p><u>Film Narrative:</u> Improvises new characters for princess doll;</p> <p>Shifts to alternate storyline;</p> <p>Adds new character</p>	<p>Establishes Snow White play is in progress</p> <p>Clarifies the improvisations to characters for each doll</p> <p>Changes relationships between DP characters</p>	<p>Out of frame negotiation: explanation</p> <p>Closes group; limits role of newcomer</p> <p>Rejects Elinor's implicit demand for Anthony's doll, Offers baby doll</p>
4	Anthony stands up, holding out princess doll, away from Daniel	Princess doll	Anthony: But she couldn't. She was the bad guy.	<p><u>Speech:</u> Drop in pitch signals return to speaking voice for out-of frame negotiating.</p> <p><u>Movement/ Posture:</u> Stands up to negotiate, Leans away from Daniel to keep doll out of reach</p> <p><u>Gaze:</u> at Elinor</p>	<p><u>Film Narrative:</u> Elaborates rationale for action for improvised character</p> <p><u>Play Narrative</u> Shares narrative previously negotiated</p>	<p>Affirms character improvisation: Sleeping Beauty as villain</p>	<p>Out of frame negotiation: explanation</p> <p>Affirms play narrative as established;</p> <p>Doll as Anthony's only</p>

Turn	Action	Identity Artifact	Talk	Foregrounded Modes	Identity Text Layer	Effect on Shared Meaning-Making	Effect on Participation
5	Elinor picks up the bad baby doll.	Baby doll	Elinor: I wanted to be her [Sleeping Beauty] but since you made her a bad guy, I don't want to be her.	<p><u>Manipulation of Toy:</u> Picking up doll indicates intention to play role</p> <p><u>Speech:</u> Out of frame negotiation</p> <p><u>Gaze:</u> Directed at Daniel</p>	<p><u>Brand Identity:</u> Follows marketing gender target, take up Disney Princess character identity</p> <p><u>Film Narrative:</u> Upholds original Sleeping Beauty character/storyline</p> <p><u>Identity/Discourse:</u> <i>DP Fan/ Emphasized Femininity:</i> Desires DP doll</p>	<p>Upholds Sleeping Beauty character text;</p> <p>Verbally rejects boys' improvisation of bad guy princess but signals intention to play baby role by picking up the doll.</p>	<p>Out of frame negotiation: Acceptance of doll as Anthony's</p> <p>Implicit, embodied bid to join play in baby role</p>
6	Elinor places baby dollhouse roof, Daniel watches her	Baby doll	Daniel: You like the baby too?	<p><u>Speech:</u> Out of frame comment</p> <p><u>Gaze:</u> Directed at Elinor as she looks at baby doll</p> <p><u>Manipulation of Toy:</u> Placing doll indicates play resumes, Doll on roof as bad baby action</p>	<p><u>Film Narrative:</u> Accepts revision of additional character for Snow White storyline</p> <p><u>Play Narrative:</u> Tacit understanding of the "bad baby" character and play-appropriate actions</p>	<p>Inserts bad baby character into narrative Snow White</p> <p>Initiates play action with embodied bad baby action</p>	<p>Implicit verbal acceptance of Elinor as player</p>

Children used the dolls to fix their shared, previously negotiated meanings for dolls to stabilize play and carry over character innovations from day to day, making the dolls meaning holders for children's remembered play narratives. At times they upheld the commercially-given character and narrative (Turn 2 & 5). Over repeated play periods, children developed their own co-constructed and durable personas for particular dolls so that Austin (Turn 2-1), Elinor (Turn 6), and then Gabe were able to pick up the baby doll, immediately recognize its "bad baby" character, and perform the expected rough-and-tumble play actions without an explicit explanation from other players or disruption to the play frame.

Anthony's and Daniel's improvisations on the commercially-given fairy tale narrative enabled more active—sometimes combative—princess characters and made the play more appealing to other children. At times, other children questioned the boys' willingness to act out female roles. However, through play episodes like this one, the princess players were able to recruit other children to transcend given identity texts in toys by nimbly negotiating play meanings and generating attractive play narratives. This produced the complex task of simultaneously maintaining an invented storyline and the relationships among character roles while maintaining social relationships between players. Austin was puzzled, but not by the story action or the queen's dialogue, "Mirror, mirror, on the wall," that occurred within the play frame. Instead, he could not make sense of an incongruity with the brand identity: a *boy* choosing to take up a female role in a Disney Princess story marketed to girls.<sup>4</sup> His question in Turn 2-1 "Do you like to be

---

<sup>4</sup> Anthony and Daniel's practice of assigning a female identity to a male doll or their portrayal of female roles prompted frequent out-of-play-frame negotiations with similar questions, "Are you guys *girls*?" and assertions, "I call it a boy". (See also Wohlwend, 2012).

the lady?” signals a slip between the brand identity layer and the boys proposed play narrative. Similarly, Elinor’s desire to play Sleeping Beauty and her eventual acceptance of the improvised Snow White play narrative involved negotiating the commercially given narrative and the boys’ play narrative (Turns 1 to 6). She was deterred from taking the doll by Anthony’s assignment of an alternative identity for the princess doll, demonstrating her desire as a Disney Princess fan to stick to the familiar storyline. While in the context of a play frame, the powerful role of the queen might be appealing, she identified with the princess character in the layer of film narrative layer and brand identity (Turns 1, 2, 5), supported by complementary texts in the layers of discourse and peer culture history in the classroom context that reinforce the message that the Sleeping Beauty doll is a toy that is strictly for girls.

### **Troubling Popular Media Identity Texts through Play**

Anthony and Daniel drew upon Disney Princess identity texts strategically to import ready-made fantasy worlds, imaginary places complete with attractive characters and memorable language but also restrictive gender discourses. By lifting layers and modal bits from Disney Princess films, the boys could pivot to well-known fantasy worlds that other children recognized and that could be easily imported into the place of the classroom. These intertexts carried traces of Disney Princess corporate media, design, marketing, and production practices. But children also left traces of their own practices in the layers they produced. As they played with the same toys or drew the same characters day after day, the dolls and drawings anchored the memories of previously improvised storylines as well as peer group histories of who played with whom. Along the way,

Anthony and Daniel improvised on Disney Princess character identity texts by blending Disney storylines with plot elements and character actions from other Disney Princess films or popular television animated series such as Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Children's improvised narratives incorporated and remixed media elements in inventive ways such as Austin's bad baby flight that mixed Superman's "Up, up, and away!" line of script with the magic carpet from Aladdin. The resulting play scenarios were often wild fantasy episodes with pizza-flinging princesses, karate fighting queens, sky-diving mermaids, or demented fairy godmothers.

Children used layers of media to accomplish social work in the classroom in complicated ways, to restrict peers but also to create spaces for accessing, improvising, and animating otherwise unreachable identities. Through play, children created their own versions of figured worlds where plots unfolded "as if" boys could be princesses, stretching gender identity expectations for characters and players within imagined worlds that laminated histories of identities, practices, and experiences onto lived classroom spaces (Holland et al., 1998). In this way, Anthony and Daniel appropriated identity layers in intertexts to make "gender trouble" (Butler, 1990); their troubling of Disney Princess media blurred binary gender expectations in ways that caused children to stop playing to negotiate and elaborate the pretend identities of players in order to sustain their shared play frame. Play offered a forum for negotiations that engaged peers in gender-troubling projects through familiar play structures that made the social and co-constructed nature of gender explicit.

However, the data also show that children at play can appropriate media identity texts as a way to police social boundaries and reproduce inequitable power relations,

exacerbated by popular media stereotypes and their associated discourses. In this case, the situated activity of boys taking up feminine identities and playing princesses evoked reactions from peers that reinscribed dominant discourses that construct gender as fixed and separate categories. This kind of gender boundary work is reinforced and legitimated by institutional discourses and literacy practices circulating in classrooms where girls are constructed as passive students who compliantly read and write about school-sanctioned topics and boys are constructed as active learners who need play and resist literacy (Nichols, 2002; Davies & Saltmarsh, 2007).

Negotiations were a staple of media play in this kindergarten; children expected other players to clarify who they were pretending to be and what they were pretending to do but also to make changes that would keep everyone participating and keep the play scenario going. These negotiations made play worlds malleable, allowing Anthony and Daniel to disrupt peer expectations sedimented in classroom histories of girls as doll players as well as Disney's marketing expectations for girls as princess media consumers. The boys used the context-shifting power of play to appropriate and exploit the contradictions among identity texts. The need to negotiate and maintain shared meanings prompted by boys playing hyper-feminine Disney Princess identity texts made gender constraints more visible and available for critique. Play enabled improvisations by recontextualizing the here-and-now reality of the classroom and reframing commercial media texts into an "as if" world for imagining otherwise and playing out different power relations. This is a facility for productive critique that play uniquely provides: "play frames not only alter the performative force of utterances but provide settings in which speech and society can be questioned and transformed" (Bauman & Briggs, 1990, p. 63).

The juxtaposition of conflicting interpretations of popular media and children's previous play histories created slippages among identity text layers that triggered negotiation and places ripe for interrogation, while their shared goal of keeping play narratives going provided a compelling reason to work out differences.

The notion of identity intertexts raises questions and possibilities for engaging popular transmedia with children at school: How will school cultures interact with popular media and what should be the teacher's role? When we expect young children to deconstruct and critique their favorite transmedia, we overlook their deep attachment to underlying identity texts and may only provoke perfunctory teacher-pleasing responses. How will play with transmedia texts interact with peer cultures in classrooms? We need to thoughtfully consider peer culture issues and develop productive ways of helping young children deal with issues of conflict, peer exclusion, and discursive boundary work as they negotiate gendered identity texts (Boldt, 1996). The notion of layers of identity texts examined here is a heuristic that inadequately represents the complexity and fluidity of children's play with overlapping texts in lived spaces which prompts a further question: How many more layers might be at work in these playful and productive moments of negotiation around popular media?

### References

- Aaker, D. A. (1996). *Building strong brands*. New York: The Free Press.
- Bauman, R., & Briggs, C. L. (1990). Poetics and performance as critical perspective on language and social life. *Annual Reviews of Anthropology*, 19, 59-88.
- Bell, E. (1995). Somatexts at the Disney Shop: Constructing the pentimentos of women's animated bodies. In L. Haas, E. Bell & L. Sell (Eds.), *From mouse to mermaid: The politics of film, gender, and culture* (pp. 107-124). Bloomington: Indiana University.

- Blaise, M. (2005). *Playing it straight: Uncovering gender discourses in the early childhood classroom*. New York: Routledge.
- Boldt, G. M. (1996). Sexist and heterosexist responses to gender bending in an elementary classroom. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 26(2), 113-131.
- Brougère, G. (2006). Toy houses: a socio-anthropological approach to analysing objects. *Visual Communication*, 5(1), 5-24.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Femininism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Carrington, V. (2003). 'I'm in a bad mood. Let's go shopping': Interactive dolls, consumer culture and a 'glocalized' model of literacy. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 3(1), 83-98.
- Carrington, V. (2005). New textual landscapes, information, and early literacy. In J. Marsh (Ed.), *Popular culture, new media and digital literacy in early childhood* (pp. 13-27). New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society*, 19(6), 829-859.
- Corsaro, W. A. (2003). *We're friends right? Inside kids' culture*. Washington, DC: Joseph Henry Press.
- Davies, B., & Saltmarsh, S. (2007). Gender economies: Literacy and the gendered production of neo-liberal subjectivities. *Gender and Education*, 19(1), 1-20.
- Davis, A. M. (2006). *Good girls and wicked witches: Women in Disney's feature animation*. Eastleigh, UK: John Libby.
- Disney Consumer Products. (2011) *Disney Princess*. Retrieved July 28, 2011 from [https://www.disneyconsumerproducts.com/Home/display.jsp?contentId=dcp\\_home\\_ourfranchises\\_disney\\_princess\\_us&forPrint=false&language=en&preview=false&imageShow=0&pressRoom=US&translationOf=nul&region=0](https://www.disneyconsumerproducts.com/Home/display.jsp?contentId=dcp_home_ourfranchises_disney_princess_us&forPrint=false&language=en&preview=false&imageShow=0&pressRoom=US&translationOf=nul&region=0)
- Dines, G., & Humez, J. M. (Eds.). (2011). *Gender, race, and class in media: A critical reader*. London: Sage.
- Dyson, A. H. (2003). *The brothers and sisters learn to write: Popular literacies in childhood and school cultures*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Farver, J. A. M. (1992). Communicating shared meaning in social pretend play. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 7, 501-516.

- Fletcher, R. (2006). *Boy writers: Reclaiming their voices*. Portland: Stenhouse.
- Giroux, H. A. (1999). *The mouse that roared*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Haas, L., Bell, E., & Sell, L. (Eds.). (1995). *From mouse to mermaid: The politics of film, gender, and culture*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Hilton, M. (1996). Manufacturing make-believe: Notes on the toy and media industry for children. In M. Hilton (Ed.), *Potent fictions: Children's literacy and the challenge of popular culture* (pp. 19-46). London: Routledge.
- Holland, D., Lachicotte, W., Skinner, D., & Cain, C. (1998). *Identity and agency in cultural worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Holland, D., & Leander, K. M. (2004). Ethnographic studies of positioning and subjectivity: An introduction. *Ethos*, 32(2), 127-139.
- Kilodavis, C., & DeSimone, S. (2010). *My princess boy*. New York: Aladdin.
- King, C. R., Bloodsworth-Lugo, M. K., & Lugo-Lugo, C. R. (2010). Animated representations of blackness. *Journal of African American Studies*, 14(4), 395-397.
- Lacroix, C. (2004). Images of animated others: The Orientalization of Disney's cartoon heroines from *The Little Mermaid* to *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. *Popular Communication*, 2(4), 213-229.
- Lemke, J. (2009). Multimodal genres and transmedia traversals: Social semiotics and the political economy of the sign. *Semiotica*, 173(1), 283-297.
- Marsh, J. (2002). Batman and Batwoman go to school: Popular culture in the literacy curriculum. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, [electronic journal].
- Martino, W. (2004). "The boy problem": Boys, schooling, and masculinity. In R. P. Transit (Ed.), *Disciplining the child via the discourse of the professions* (pp. 19-33). Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.
- Nichols, S. (2002). Parents' construction of their children as gendered, literate subjects: A critical discourse analysis. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 2(2), 123-144.
- Norris, S. (2004). *Analyzing multimodal interaction: A methodological framework*. London: Routledge.

- Orenstein, P. (2011). *Cinderella ate my daughter: Dispatches from the front lines of the new girlie-girl culture* New York: Harper.
- Pahl, K., & Rowsell, J. (2010). *Artifactual literacies: Every object tells a story*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Sawyer, R. K. (1997). *Pretend play as improvisation: Conversation in the preschool classroom*. Norwood, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Scollon, R. (2001). *Mediated discourse: The nexus of practice*. London: Routledge.
- Scollon, R., & Scollon, S. W. (2004). *Nexus Analysis: Discourse and the Emerging Internet*. New York: Routledge.
- Vygotsky, L. (1935/1978). *Mind in society* (A. Luria, M. Lopez-Morillas & M. Cole, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Walkerdine, V. (1984). Some day my prince will come. In A. McRobbie & M. Nava (Eds.), *Gender and generation* (pp. 162-184). London: Macmillan.
- Wohlwend, K. E. (2009). Damsels in discourse: Girls consuming and producing gendered identity texts through Disney Princess play. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 44(1), 57-83. doi: DOI: 10.1598/RRQ.44.1.3
- Wohlwend, K. E. (2011). *Playing their way into literacies: Reading, writing, and belonging in the early childhood classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Wohlwend, K. E. (2012). "Are you guys girls?": Boys, identity texts, and Disney Princess play. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 12(3), 3-23.