FROM SNOW WHITE TO BRAVE:
THE EVOLUTION OF THE DISNEY PRINCESS

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This paper traces the evolution of the Disney Princess and critically evaluates the role of the Disney Princess icon in American history using a feminist perspective. The term Disney Princess refers to Disney’s ten animated female heroines who were either born royal or marry princes before the end of the film; collectively these princesses became iconic through the creation of the enormous Disney Princess marketing franchise in 2001. Since *Snow White* in 1937 and culminating with the 2012 film *Brave*, the Disney Princesses have undergone subtle developments in appearance, attitude, relationships, and cultural heritage that have expanded the function of the Disney Princess as a contemporary role model. By organizing Disney Princess films into three classifications based on time period of film production, this paper evaluates the historical successes and shortcomings of the Disney Princess.
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Introduction: What Is a Disney Princess?

A major portion of Disney’s popularity since the turn of the twenty-first century has been generated through the creation of the Disney Princess marketing franchise in 2001. As of 2011 this franchise had become the largest on the planet for girls between two and six.¹ The Disney Princess line is derived from ten of Disney’s films that feature animated female heroines who are either born princesses or marry into royal families by the end of the film. A “Disney Princess” is one of these characters, and the franchise itself profits from portraying these Disney Princesses, either alone or grouped with other princesses, on children’s merchandise such as backpacks, clothing, and lunchboxes.

Many scholars criticize Disney Princess films and marketing techniques, expressing particular concern for Disney’s portrayal of women’s roles. With a mother’s perspective Peggy Orenstein critiques the pervasiveness of the hegemonic values reflected by the Disney Princess franchise in her book, Cinderella Ate My Daughter. She emphasizes that her four-year-old daughter had only been exposed to Disney Princesses through her friends at preschool, yet one day surprised her mother by knowing all the princesses’ names and dress colors. Orenstein’s anecdote and analysis emphasize the role Disney Princesses have in young children’s dramatic play, and she goes on to explore the negative effects that Disney Princess marketing can have on young girls. She cites, for example, that Disney Princesses never interact with one another; they are never depicted making eye contact with the other princesses, instead looking off into the distance. Peggy Orenstein finds this a crucial flaw in Disney Princess marketing, which targets young girls in preschool and elementary school. “There is only one princess in the Disney tales,

one girl who gets to be exalted…Navigating the new world of friendship is what preschool is all about, yet the Disney Princesses, you will recall, won’t even look at one another.”

The same princesses rarely have positive female human companions to call their friends. Orenstein argues that these qualities affect children’s play by validating the notion that only one princess, one leading and successful female, can fit into any particular fairy-tale narrative.

Peggy Orenstein’s research is also valuable in expressing the pervasiveness of Disney Princess marketing for young audiences. In 2009 sales of Disney Princess merchandise reached $4 billion. More than 26,000 Disney Princess items are on the market, and the “Princess” line has now become the “fastest-growing brand the company has ever created.” Disney bases its strong marketing strategy on the power of a mother’s nostalgia for Disney Princesses, and her aptness to inspire the same Princess love in her own daughters, a trend that Orenstein refers to as “the power of [Disney’s] legacy among mothers.” Andy Mooney, who developed the Disney Princess marketing line, revealed the secret to his successful franchise: “We simply gave the girls what they wanted.”

Peggy Orenstein questions whether it is the girls themselves who want to be princesses, suggesting that instead Disney has carved out a societal role for young girls through its portrayals of Disney Princesses. Following Orenstein’s critique, this paper analyzes the films and princesses themselves, specifically concerning the development of the Disney Princesses’ portrayals, as the Disney Princess is an important and influential icon for preschool-aged girls.

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2 Ibid., 23.
3 Ibid., 14-15.
While Orenstein presents many valid critiques about the marketing techniques of the Disney Princess franchise, her analysis expresses a need to revisit the original films themselves. If Disney Princess marketing is not teaching girls positive social skills, perhaps it is due in part to the shortcomings of the source material. Disney’s representation of Disney Princesses in animated films is important in children’s media because of Disney’s magnitude as a children’s entertainment corporation. The evolution of Disney Princesses since Snow White (1937) is significant, particularly in relation to women’s physical appearance, relationships with males, and ethnic diversity. Although Disney’s portrayal of women has evolved subtly to take on a more superficially feminist perspective, destructive messages about the role of women remain central to the Disney Princess icon.

For clarity in analyzing this evolution, it is helpful to group Disney Princess films chronologically. Therefore, the first chapter will analyze the films that I call the “Early Films,” which refers to Disney Princess films produced between 1937 and 1959. The first three Disney Princess films are Snow White (1937), Cinderella (1950), and Sleeping Beauty (1959). Given their production during an era in which ideals of domesticity and the housewife defined gender roles, these films reflect what may today be considered “old-fashioned” notions of femininity. These princesses’ life’s work is focused in the domestic sphere, and they are constantly being dominated by a more powerful figure—an evil stepmother, a prince, and even inanimate objects or traditional customs. Their dream is for a prince to rescue and marry them, and marriage is a fulfilling and satisfactory end to each of their stories.
Between 1959 and 1989 Disney stopped producing Disney Princess films. Animated productions during this time instead focused on male, mostly nonhuman, protagonists, in films such as *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* (1961), *The Jungle Book* (1967), *Robin Hood* (1973), and *Oliver and Company* (1988). In the second chapter, I refer to the second group of Disney Princess films as the “Middle Films.” This category includes *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Aladdin* (1991), *Beauty and the Beast* (1992), and *Pocahontas* (1995). These princesses are less domestic, but more independent and adventurous than those of the Early Films. They had dreams more rooted in adventure and escape than in finding true love; ultimately, however, each princess nobly sacrifices her dreams of independence for a life of love. Almost every princess depicted in the “Middle Films” finds herself married and her dreams subdued by the end of the story. The “Middle Films” as a group are more culturally diverse, depicting Native American culture in *Pocahontas* and the fictional Muslim city Agrabah in *Aladdin*; race is a crucial difference in the “Middle Films,” as earlier princesses were exclusively white and pale.

The third chapter focuses on the era of animated features that I call the “Contemporary Films,” which began in 2009 with *The Princess and the Frog*, followed by *Tangled* (2010) and *Brave* (2012). Princesses in these films dream of adventure and reverse gender roles by saving both themselves and their male peers from threatening situations, while men in these films appear more foolish and less desirable than earlier princes. In *The Princess and the Frog*, Tiana is the first African American Disney Princess, while *Brave*’s Princess Merida rejects arranged marriage and is the first Disney Princess to reach the end of her film without a romantic relationship.
The Disney Princess films have often situated females in extremely traditional and limited gender roles, which are not representative of the time period that they were meant to portray. In her book *Good Girls and Wicked Witches*, Amy M. Davis writes, “In their representations of femininity, Disney films reflected the attitudes of the wider society from which they emerged, and that their enduring popularity is evidence that the depictions they contain would continue to resonate as the films were re-released in later decades.”

Disney Princesses reflect the patriarchal values of American society in spite of the women’s movements that were contemporary with the release of each Disney film, suggesting that the greater society ignored women’s social and political progress. The continued release of films that depict 1930s values about women’s domesticity and inferiority is problematic in its perpetuation of traditional gendered expectations on young children, who have been taught to view the princesses as role models and their lifestyles as acceptable aspirations.

Not only are these values the undercurrent of Disney Princess films, but also they are explicitly encouraged as a part of Disney Princess marketing. As part of the official Disney Princess website, Disney has released its *I Am a Princess* video, a montage of video clips of girls from many different cultural backgrounds, all exploring what it means to be a princess, narrated by a girl describing the behavior of a princess. The girls in the video are shown helping the elderly, surfing, doing archery, giving presentations in school, and embracing friends and family. Although the short video responds to accusations that Disney Princess films promote racism and fail to empower women, it continues to emphasize the value of self-sacrifice as a princess. “I am kind even when others are not so generous…I think standing up for myself is important. I think standing

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Many of the qualities represented in the video are powerful in teaching children how to behave as productive and compassionate members of society; however, they reinforce the traditional notion that a girl should maintain these virtues even when confronted with someone who may not respect her. Several Disney Princesses (such as Snow White and Belle) are so apt to be kind, generous, and trusting that they allow themselves to fall victim to antagonists (such as the Evil Queen and the Beast) in the film. While the I Am a Princess video shows young girls (and boys) some of the qualities they should uphold, as in earlier Disney Princess films, it neglects to teach children the importance of more empowering values such as self-defense and vigilance.

The generosity of modern “princesses,” as expressed in this video, is the same extreme generosity of Early and Middle Princesses. In the name of keeping a promise, Belle remained with an abusive prince. Against better judgment, Snow White was kind and obedient when her disguised stepmother offered her a poisoned apple. Not unlike Cinderella and Snow White, Rapunzel allowed herself to be trapped in a tower by the woman who kidnapped her, and was plagued with guilt for disobedience when she finally escaped. Apart from the virtue of bravery (“I am brave even when I am scared”), Disney Princess marketing does not address the importance of self-reliance or self-defense.

Disney Princesses also fail to embrace the diversity of contemporary American society through constructing heterosexuality as the norm. In her book Barbie’s Queer Accessories, Erica Rand analyzes the manner in which Mattel’s Barbie doll, like Disney’s princesses, privileges heterosexuality by portraying it exclusively while excluding other sexualities from Barbie dolls. Rand writes that once Barbie finds Ken, a male date, her

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6 Ibid.
“activities become virtually unlimited.” Similarly each Disney Princess before 2012 seemed to only be able to attain complete happiness once she had married her prince. Both Mattel and Disney, whose products have passed the test of time and proven their popularity among young audiences, continue to inscribe heterosexuality onto their characters as the norm.

In her article “Images of Animated Others,” Celeste Lacroix criticizes Disney’s portrayal of sexuality, as well as gender and race in the princess films, and suggests that Disney’s apparent innocence is exactly what creates the need for greater scrutiny of Disney films. When critically considered, the characters of the Disney Princesses convey destructive messages about race, sexuality, romance, and the role of women. A more careful consideration of Disney Princess films and marketing may inspire parents and caretakers to begin a discourse with their children about the real-life issues that are presented (yet not problematized) in these films, such as racial stereotyping, male supremacy, and domestic violence.

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Chapter 1: The Fairest One of All

The world wars were fundamental in reshaping America’s expectations for its women. June Hannam writes, “The First World War had raised expectations that women’s ‘traditional’ social roles could change, but once the conflict was over there was a desire to get back to ‘normal’ as quickly as possible.” During World War I it had become clear that women and men could work together to achieve wartime victory, and yet following the war women returned to their places in the home while soldiers returned from overseas to reclaim their jobs. The postwar women’s movement lacked strength and organization, allowing America to dwindle into a feminist void until the 1960s. During World War II, women’s efforts in America also strengthened the nation, as they participated extensively as workers in munitions factories, as members of the armed forces, and as “activists in the resistance.”

In her book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir eloquently summarizes feminism’s critiques of American society, showing the ways that society limits women. Although de Beauvoir did not consider herself a feminist, having developed an international reputation as an existentialist philosopher prior to this work, her ideas helped form the foundation of American feminism. She argued that women are unable to develop a “clear identity of their own” because “they were always viewed as ‘the other’ in relation to men.” She criticized the subordination and sexualization of women in American society: “The male sees her essentially as a sexed being…She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the

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8 Ibid., 109.
inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other.”¹¹ These dichotomies were polarized and dramatized by Disney’s portrayals of princesses in the early years. Each of the three early films emphasizes that the female’s role is cleaning and cooking for the household. The princesses’ dream is to marry a charming prince; all other goals fade away once this prince has been found. A testament to Disney’s progressiveness, the princess figure becomes slightly more empowered in the transition from Snow White to Aurora.

Like each princess movie following it, Snow White was popularly received and critically acclaimed, sparking new interest in the princess ideal at a time that Americans were economically devastated by the Great Depression. Although Disney would not produce another princess film for over a decade, these movies portrayed the essence of traditional gender roles, emphasizing the importance of women’s domesticity, beauty, and subordination to the men in their lives.

The Early Disney Princess films depict almost identical progressions from singing about finding a Prince Charming, to being rescued by the prince by the end of the film. The early films emphasize the leading female’s helplessness and fear without a man to protect her, and in this way are teaching young girls that it is natural to feel incomplete when one is not paired with a man. In the 1930s, ‘40s, and ‘50s, during which the early films were produced, society placed great value on the importance of lasting marriages to solidify a woman’s identity and future. As women returned to the domestic sphere after veterans returned from World War II, their dependence on their husbands was reinforced but not without an emerging criticism of this trend by feminist groups. Disney Princess

films ignore women’s work outside the home and their increasing independence until the 
Middle Films of the late 1980’s and early 1990’s.

_Snow White: Someday My Prince Will Come_

Snow White’s (1937) life is one of domesticity. As a prisoner of her stepmother, 
she works to clean and take care of the home; although she is able to escape this evil 
queen who plans to murder her (purely on the basis of being “the fairest one of all”\textsuperscript{12}),
she again finds contentment cooking and cleaning for the seven dwarfs, who appear to 
have had no hygienic or domestic habits prior to Snow White’s moving into the house. 
Although the dwarfs’ dependence on Snow White is portrayed as comedic, their story 
suggests to young girls that a woman’s role is to constantly work around the house and 
show maternal care toward everyone, including a house full of unfamiliar men. Women’s 
traditional role as maternal is a generalization that limits every woman to a 
characterization based on her biological capacity for motherhood; however, in Snow 
White’s society this association was not commonly questioned.

The emphasis on women’s domesticity in _Snow White_ more than in any other 
movie is understandable; the film is the only one that was produced before American 
women as a group broke through the domestic sphere during World War II, when all 
eligible men were fighting the war in Europe. Women’s labor in munitions factories was 
crucial during this period, yet following the return of veterans, most women lost their 
jobs and returned to domestic work in the home. Although the depiction of traditional 
gender roles is consistent with the overwhelming attitudes of the time period in which the 
film was created, its depiction of dichotomized gender roles enforces the notion that those 

\textsuperscript{12} _Snow White_, DVD, directed by William Cottrell and David Hand (2001; Burbank, CA: Walt 
Disney Studios).
roles could not be challenged for another generation. Even in the next generation of films, Disney continued to perpetuate such rigid gendered stereotypes.

Snow White’s opening musical number sets the tone for how the rest of the film will portray her relationship with males: “I’m wishing, for the one I love, to find me, today.” \(^{13}\) She has no greater wish than to be found by her prince; however, she merely wishes that he will find her, rather than actively seeking him. Throughout the film Snow White is unable to protect herself or make her own decisions, fleeing the evil queen only when the Huntsman frightens her into doing so. Rather than run away from the enchanted trees in the forest that attempt to stop her, Snow White becomes overwhelmed and collapses in the middle of the trees, sobbing. Friendly animals emerge from the now-calmed trees to suggest that she seek out the dwarfs’ home. Although Snow White appears to assert herself with the dwarfs in insisting that they wash their hands for supper, she also subordinates herself to them in cleaning their home in return for a place to stay.

While the dwarfs and the prince both appear to have affection for Snow White, her relationship with males throughout the movie is always one in which she is the inferior individual to be protected; there is no significant development of her romantic relationship with the prince, although she is acquainted with him throughout the film.

Amy Davis notes the dichotomy drawn between the kind, fair, and feminine Snow White and her darker-colored and evil stepmother. *Snow White* reinforces the importance of women’s adherence to traditional gender roles in showing the defeat of the Evil Queen by her stepdaughter, who upholds the paradigms of absolute femininity even in her name. Davis argues, “Once evil has been suppressed and the more ‘feminine’ woman rewarded with love and happiness, the world is shown as having been righted and the film can end

\(^{13}\) Ibid.
on a happy note." As a role model, Snow White emphasizes the importance of displaying femininity to achieve happiness.

_Cinderella: Leave the Sewing to the Women!_

Like Snow White, Cinderella (1950) is a prisoner of her dead father’s second wife; in this plotline Cinderella’s evil stepsisters also spend their days torturing Cinderella. While Cinderella’s role is one of domestic service, the stepmother and stepsisters take on the only other acceptable role for females in the film, as luxurious mistresses whose female role is to spend Cinderella’s father’s money. Women’s subordination is a consistent theme throughout the film, as each of the “eligible maidens” in the kingdom is obligated to attend the prince’s ball, where each is put on display for the prince in hope that he will choose one of them to marry. Every girl in the kingdom appears to agree that nothing would be better than marriage to the prince who, although not unkind to Cinderella, is portrayed to have a flat personality, his only intention being to find the girl he would like to marry. In the first scene of the film, Cinderella is awoken by the chimes of the town clock, grumbling “even he orders me around!” The masculinization of the asexual clock is crucial in reinforcing gender roles: a male orders, a female obeys.

Like Snow White, Cinderella sings about her dreams to escape the tyranny of her stepmother and stepsisters; unlike Snow White, with a push from her fairy godmother Cinderella defies her stepmother and attends the prince’s ball. She does not do this with the explicit intention of seeking out the prince, but rather as a demonstration of her status.

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15 Cinderella, Blu-ray, directed by William Cottrell and David Hand (2012; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios).
16 Ibid.
as an “eligible maiden.” Cinderella works diligently, albeit doing housework, throughout the day as a means to convince her stepmother to allow her to go to the ball, and perhaps in a sense earns access to her dream.

The ball was arranged for the prince to “show interest in one [maiden].” The importance of marriage is depicted as equal for both sexes in this film, whereas Snow White’s need for marriage was based on her own desire for love, and her prince’s ideas about marriage were neither expressed to the audience nor did they seem particularly important to Snow White. The relationship between prince and princess-to-be in Cinderella is slightly more dynamic than it had been in Snow White; however, their primary interaction takes place through the silence of dancing with one another, suggesting to young girls the prevalence in relationships of physicality over conversation or personal compatibility.

Cinderella’s rush home at midnight, when she loses her glass slipper on the castle steps, cuts their night short. Thereafter, the importance of Cinderella’s shoe is equated with her importance as object of the prince’s love; her identity is reduced to a shoe size. This process is dehumanizing and degrading, as it suggests that the prince would not be able to identify her by any indication other than whether the shoe fits. One must ask, then, how he knows that she is the girl he is meant to be with for the rest of his life, after only one dance, if he would not even be able to choose her out of a crowd. Although Cinderella demonstrates feminist progress in the thirteen years since the first Disney Princess movie, the romantic relationship is again reduced to physicality and dependence, and Cinderella’s only meaningful relationships, the ones through which she is able to

\[17\] Ibid.  
\[18\] Ibid.
express herself and assert her ideas, appear to exist with her pets—mice, birds, and Bruno, her pet dog. In their quantitative analysis of Disney Princess films, Dawn Elizabeth England, Lara Descartes, and Melissa A. Collier-Meek explore the feminist progression of princess’s traits. In their discussion of the first three Disney Princess films, they write, “The women were more assertive with animals and children, and far less with other people. This suggests a fairly submissive and limited way of being assertive, as if they could not assert themselves with other adults, but only when they were mothering, or with those who had less power.”19 Through their inability to assert themselves with other adults, Disney’s princesses accept their limited status in a patriarchal society that subordinates women.

*Sleeping Beauty*: Once Upon a Dream

Nine years later, *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) also reinforced traditional gender roles. Aurora is not as consumed by domestic work as her predecessors, yet her dreams also revolve around meeting a prince who transform her world into a fairy tale. Coincidentally, when she meets Prince Philip he need only mention that “we’ve met before…once upon a dream,” and she offers no resistance when this stranger dances with her deep in the forest.20 Her fairy godmothers spoof the emphasis on women’s domestic work when they attempt to throw Aurora a birthday party without magic; Merryweather argues, “You can’t sew. And she’s never cooked,” objections at which the other fairies scoff, “Oh, it’s simple. All you do is follow the book.”21 While the fairy godmothers offer a refreshing separation between females and domesticity, their notion that baking cakes

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21 Ibid.
and sewing dresses are simple tasks is disproven, and they must resort to magic so that their efforts create “a dress a princess can be proud of.” While in one breath the fairies are challenging gender roles, as they are working in the house Merryweather begins to cry at the prospect that Aurora will be leaving them upon finding out that she is a princess. The fairies, usually portrayed as emotionally controlled, cannot seem to help the overflow of maternal instinct as they reminisce about Aurora as a baby.

Sleeping Beauty’s Aurora also has close relationships with all the animals in the forest, describing to them her dream about meeting a prince, but as “he takes [her] into his arms, and then I wake up.” She meets the prince only once, and at first is surprised that a stranger has caught her dancing through the clearing, but quickly submits to his friendship when he reminds her that “We’ve met before…once upon a dream.” Disney again plays on women’s need to be accepted and loved by men, and the naïve Aurora allows a stranger to dance with her. Disney consistently emphasizes the importance of women’s politeness, sometimes at the risk of their own safety. In a vein reiterated by the contemporary “I Am a Princess” video, Sleeping Beauty deals with the notion that a girl should be kind even when others may not be so kind; with Aurora and the princesses as many girls’ role models, scenes such as that in the forest in Sleeping Beauty don’t educate children about the potential dangers of being overfriendly with those who may be unfamiliar to them. In her article “Betrayed by the Angel: What Happens When Violence Knocks and Politeness Answers?” Debra Anne Davis criticizes the cultural emphasis placed on females’ politeness, attributing in part her ingrained manners to some of the abuses she has experienced, both as a child and in her adulthood. As society often

\[\text{22 Ibid.}\]
\[\text{23 Ibid.}\]
\[\text{24 Ibid.}\]
stresses the importance of politeness and selflessness, Davis argues that these lessons can lead to dangerous consequences later in life.25 *Sleeping Beauty* and other Disney Princess films and marketing reinforce these values irresponsibly, without accurately showing when to use manners and when to use caution.

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Chapter 2: I Am Not a Prize to Be Won

Disney’s Middle Films were released between 1989 and 1998. Breaking the three-decade lull in Disney Princess films, these productions incorporate more contemporary attitudes about gender roles while daring to portray the princesses as more sexualized icons. These princesses (Ariel, Belle, Jasmine, and Pocahontas) shift away from the traditional royal attire—the floor-length ballgown—and many bare midriffs, shoulders, and legs throughout the films. Princesses of the Middle Films are less helpless than their predecessors, and are in part in control of their own destiny; however, in each film the budding of a romantic relationship between prince and princess is crucial to the plotline and to the princesses’ abilities to achieve their dreams. Princesses of the late 1980’s and 1990’s are typically more independent of their fathers and beaus than previous princesses, and they also do very little in the way of domestic chores.

During the Middle Films, Disney Princesses become more ethnically diverse, although Disney’s portrayals of diversity are not without stereotypes. The princesses of these films are culturally French, Arabic, and Native American. The races of these princesses significantly affect Disney’s representations of them, and Disney has undergone a great deal of criticism for disrespectful cultural depictions; Disney has even been forced to revise racial aspects of its 1992 film Aladdin for home release. Princesses of the Middle Films exhibit varying degrees of sexuality, adventurousness, and independence based on the color of their skin. Their race also consistently affects their options in choosing a husband.
The Little Mermaid: Part of Your World

The Little Mermaid was released in 1989 after the Walt Disney Company took a thirty-year break from producing princess films. Princess Ariel the mermaid marks a significant transition in Disney’s portrayal of princesses, exhibiting more independent thought and rebellious spirit than Cinderella, Aurora, or Snow White would have dared. Her costuming, similarly, is more risqué and revealing than the ball gowns and elbow-length gloves of earlier princesses; until she is transformed into a human Ariel flashes around the ocean in no more than a seashell bikini top, long hair floating behind her. As Amy Davis notes, unlike Ariel’s predecessors, the first cinematic shot of the mermaid shows her by herself on an adventure, whereas previously the Disney Princesses had been first (and primarily) shown in their homes or within the grounds of their homes.26 From the film’s outset, Disney makes it clear that The Little Mermaid will reflect, at least in part, some of the advances made in the American feminist movement since the 1970’s.

Although in the Early Films, the princesses’ biological parents were overwhelmingly absent during their childhoods, Ariel’s father is the most domineering presence in her life. King Triton is the most powerful man in the mer-kingdom, and fruitlessly exerts his power over his youngest daughter Ariel. Throughout the film Ariel’s individual agency is consistently undermined and threatened; her father’s oppressive parenting compels Ariel to take on the adventures of the human world. King Triton sends the crab Sebastian to spy on Ariel, and he reports that she is swimming to the surface to see the humans, and that she has a collection of human artifacts hidden in the kingdom. King Triton storms into Ariel’s underwater grotto to find Ariel admiring and conversing with a statue of Prince Eric. Triton furiously destroys her treasures, yelling at her about

26 Davis, Good Girls and Wicked Witches: Women in Disney’s Feature Animation,178.
the dangers of humans. Triton’s treatment of his daughter in this scene (“I expect those rules to be obeyed!”) introduces several of the most important themes within the film: patriarchal threatening of women’s agency, love for appearances, and interracial evils.

Whereas earlier princesses allowed themselves to be subjugated and even enslaved by their stepmothers, Ariel’s ability to see herself as an individual outside of her father’s control emphasizes her recognition of herself as an adult and a sexual being. When arguing with her father, she cries, “I’m 16! I’m not a child!” Clearly Ariel expects to be treated as an adult, and when her father won’t appease her, she turns to the voodoo-like powers of Ursula the sea witch. Ursula serves as King Triton’s foil, the unquestionable villain, who is constantly plotting to usurp Triton’s power and take the throne herself.

Like Maleficent before her, Ursula’s skin and hair are much darker than those of the protagonists, subliminally engaging viewers’ ideas about racial stereotypes. The binaries associating darker with evil may seem to be disappearing in contemporary American society; however, continual associations between skin color and degree of “good-ness” are dangerous and yet prevalent in many Disney Princess films. While the rest of the “good” mer-people and humans have light skin, Ursula and her pet eels, Flotsam and Jetsam, are all notably darker than anyone else in the film. It is worthwhile to note that the eels’ names are synonymous with “wreckage,” “refuse,” and “debris,” reinforcing the perceived worthlessness of Ursula’s darker-skinned sycophants. In his article “Are Disney Movies Good for Your Kids?” Henry Giroux argues that Disney

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28 Ibid., 177.
29 The Little Mermaid.
movies misrepresent social relations, specifically citing gender and racial relations. Throughout his essay he shows how Disney films teach children that the laws of nature dictate social problems, and that some people are innately inferior to others. “These films produce a host of representations and codes in which children are taught that cultural differences that do not bear the imprint of white, middle class ethnicity are deviant, inferior, ignorant, and a threat to be overcome. There is nothing innocent in what kids learn about race as portrayed in the ‘magical world’ of Disney.”

Villains are darker, typically with black hair, skin, or clothing, than protagonists in almost every Disney Prince film, especially in Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, Aladdin, and Tangled, in addition to The Little Mermaid.

In combination with her portrayal as evil, Ursula is clearly the symbol of matriarchal power in contrast with King Triton’s patriarchal influence. Giroux notes the “deeply antidemocratic social relations” throughout Disney films, criticizing that men are constantly in leadership positions over women. Triton’s ultimate defeat of Ursula is the metaphoric triumph of patriarchal over matriarchal systems, a theme that is intensified through Ariel’s experiences in the human world.

When Ariel meets with Ursula, the sea witch urges Ariel to give up her voice in exchange for a human body, so that she can (possibly) convince Prince Eric to fall in love with her. To Ariel’s concerns about losing her voice, Ursula assures her, “The men up there don’t like a lot of blather; they think a girl that gossips is a bore!” Ariel’s decision to change her beautiful voice for a pair of legs effectively undoes the film’s earlier

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31 Ibid., 63.
32 The Little Mermaid.
characterizations of Ariel as independent, strong, and intelligent. The implications of Ariel’s using her legs or body as a whole, rather than her voice, to make Eric fall in love with her, cannot be lost on an older audience. Her silence in the human world, in which the only women portrayed are those who are serving the prince, says it all. According to Davis, “Such a performance points out that there are elements in both the human and the ‘mer’ worlds which trivialize the importance of a woman’s voice, and that such attitudes can be used and played upon by the woman who is willing to make the temporary sacrifice of her voice.”

The lesson that girls take away from this is not only that Ariel was willing to sacrifice her voice and still able to make a prince kiss her in only three days’ time, but also that the same prince was unable to recognize her as the girl he was in love with, until she had regained her voice.

*Beauty and the Beast: For Who Could Ever Learn to Love a Beast?*

In the 1991 film *Beauty and the Beast*, the heroine Belle is initially portrayed as an independent and intelligent young woman. Belle appears to make her own decisions, typically supported by her father who is less domineering than previous princesses’ fathers; his authority as a father is continuously undermined as the villagers accuse him of insanity and rally to institute him in the local asylum. Belle loves to read, but is also the most beautiful girl in the town. These two qualities are portrayed as oppositional throughout the movie: lines from the opening song proclaim, “It’s a pity and a sin, she doesn’t quite fit in. She really is a funny girl, a beauty but a funny girl.”

Disney’s promising protagonist is also strong and confident in her refusal of the advances of the arrogant and attractive Gaston, who wants to marry her because she is

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“the most beautiful girl in town. That makes her the best. And don’t I deserve the best?”

Gaston is hyper-masculinized and described as “burly” and “brawny.” Belle boldly rejects his proposal to be his “little wife massaging [his] feet.” Gaston’s character represents the epitome of patriarchal subordination of women, while Belle is the strong and intelligent feminist figure. Although these roles suggest a successful feminist vision at the outset of the film, Belle’s relationship with the beast undermines her supposed self-reliant identity.

Like Orenstein, Henry A. Giroux analyzes Disney films from a parent’s perspective. In his essay “Are Disney Movies Good for Your Kids?” Giroux admits that his own children have been allowed to view Disney films, but criticizes Disney’s allegiance to consumerism and the films’ portrayals of females, racial stereotyping, and “deeply antidemocratic social relations.” In this essay Giroux questions the integrity of the feminist overtones of Belle’s character and actions toward Gaston. He argues that, although Belle rejects the “macho sensibilities of Gaston” in favor of the “reformed sexism of the Beast,” Belle’s value as an individual is distorted throughout the film. “Belle is less the focus of the film than a prop or ‘mechanism for solving the Beast’s dilemma.’” While the Beast’s romance with Belle is ultimately used as a way to escape his curse, Belle’s independent persona is also lost as she becomes prisoner to the Beast and falls in love with him. The once pseudo-feminist princess falls victim to the Beast’s emotionally and physically abusive tactics, and yet finds contentment, even love, with him.

35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Giroux, “Are Disney Movies Good for Your Kids?” 62.
39 Ibid., 59.
Belle first meets the Beast while he is mercilessly holding her father prisoner in a cold and dark dungeon; he is quickly becoming ill from the conditions. The Beast terrifies both Belle and her father, slamming through the door and screaming at them. When he agrees to exchange her father for Belle as his prisoner, the Beast literally throws her father out of the castle and into the cold. He only offers Belle a warm room when prompted by his servants, and yells at her that she “will join [him] for dinner.”\textsuperscript{40} When she refuses, he forces her to stay in her room and cries, “Go ahead and starve!”\textsuperscript{41} According to Dr. Carolyn Newberger, “This is a movie that is saying to our children, overlook the abuse, overlook the violence, there’s a tender prince lurking within, and it’s your job to kiss that prince and bring it out, or to kiss that beast and bring it out. That’s a dangerous message.”\textsuperscript{42}

In the documentary \textit{Mickey Mouse Monopoly}, Dr. Gail Dines argues that the “strong and powerful” Belle represents only “pseudo feminism,”\textsuperscript{43} especially because she is only strong and powerful because of the books that she reads. Coincidentally her love for reading, coupled with her disdain for the “provincial”\textsuperscript{44} town in which she lives, are the first traits that we learn about Belle. She also only appears to read books with plotlines that are appropriate for her gender. She describes her favorite book, the one she “couldn’t put…down,” as having “far-off places, daring swordfights, magic spells, a prince in disguise!”\textsuperscript{45} Despite the irony that she seems to be reading the story of her life at the beginning of the movie, the topics that she enjoys reading are the light and

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Beauty and the Beast}.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Mickey Mouse Monopoly}, DVD, directed by Miguel Picker (2002; Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation.
\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Beauty and the Beast}.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
romantic genres that women stereotypically enjoy. In this way she is not so intelligent as to disrupt gender roles, but her enjoyment of reading is still alarming to the rest of the village. Although Belle exudes independence and intelligence before meeting her prince charming, once she finds that “something in him that [she] simply didn’t see,” she forfeits her strong values and rational mind to become an overly nurturing and self-sacrificing bride.\textsuperscript{46} The beginning of Belle’s relationship with the Beast is not so romantic as the stories she enjoys reading. Gail Dines comments on the abuse that Belle endured before falling in love with the Beast: “Ultimately in \textit{Beauty and the Beast} she marries a batterer.”\textsuperscript{47}

Belle’s relationship with the Beast has impractical implications for impressionable young girls who look to Disney Princesses as role models. While the tale of a smart and kind young woman who changes a beast into a prince achieves a level of romance typical of Disney, it also teaches girls to forgive the unforgiveable. Although Belle comes out of an initially abusive relationship with a “happily ever after” romance, she does so while endorsing the problematic lessons of self-sacrifice and forgiving abuse.

In the documentary \textit{Mickey Mouse Monopoly}, several young girls are interviewed about \textit{Beauty and the Beast} after viewing the film. The girls were asked what they would tell Belle about the Beast if they were her friends, and both responded in ways that Disney condones through the relationship between Belle and the Beast. One of the girls responded that she would be happy for Belle “because she found someone that she likes,” but “I would also feel bad for her because she gets yelled at a lot.” Another would tell Belle to “keep on being nice and sweet like you are, and that would probably change him.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Mickey Mouse Monopoly}. 
And in the movie, it does.” Throughout the film Belle is resistant to the Beast’s abuse, yelling back at him and sneaking out of her room for dinner. While her actions teach girls to defend themselves to some degree, she ultimately “changes” the Beast and forgives his abusive behaviors, without him ever apologizing.

Many psychologists have diagnosed Belle with Stockholm syndrome, a syndrome associated with falling in love with one’s captor. Celia Jamesen quotes several contemporary descriptions of Stockholm syndrome, used to describe the phenomenon in modern-day abductions. “Newspaper articles about these cases refer to an ‘intense bonding with one’s captors’” and victims of abduction may be “‘mesmerised into sympathizing and even identifying with a charismatic monster.’” The victims in these situations cope with their situations of extreme fear by developing “what appears to be love for and attachment to the hostage-taker, and sympathy for the hostage-taker’s cause, which is sometimes referred to as ‘identification with the aggressor.’” Although within the film Belle’s relationship with the Beast seems to transform from abusive to loving, its initial phases have dangerous implications. Despite the harsh ways that he treated her, Belle chooses to rescue the Beast after he saves her life, and to nurse his wounds and bring him back to health. At its worst their romance originated from a form of Stockholm syndrome, but even at its best the relationship shouldn’t be conveyed to impressionable children as one through which they should suffer. This aspect of the film reflects the values of self-sacrifice and forgiveness extolled in Disney’s modern marketing film, I Am a Princess. In the proscribed formula for a princess, Belle is “brave even when [she] is

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48 Ibid.

scared.” She is not, however, brave enough to leave the situation; only to continue trying to change it.

Entitling the fairy tale with not names, but physical descriptions of the two protagonists, manifests the overarching theme of the relationship between inner and outer beauty. The Beast, who is given no signifier other than “Beast,” which even Belle uses to address him, is turned so because he was “repulsed” by the “haggard appearance” of an “old beggar woman.” The woman warns him “not to be deceived by appearances, for beauty is within.”

The beauty and beast dichotomy draws on a traditional binary within society, between the privileged norm and the marginalized “other.” The term “beast” has been closely associated with blackness; according to the scientific racism used to justify slavery and the following Jim Crow period, black people were thought to be less human and more animalistic than white individuals. Scholarship of the time treated African Americans as closer to animals than to white humans; slave doctors, for example, wrote about slaves’ “breeding conditions,” and employed other terms more closely associated with the study of animals than of humans.

Scientific racism justified not only slavery and a system of second-class citizenship for African Americans, but also the brutal murder of African Americans by white mobs. Black men were often lynched for the mere suspicion of having raped a white woman. Through laws and fear tactics enacted by white mob mentality, black Americans were unable to defend themselves from these accusations or to seek legal

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50 I Am a Princess.
51 Beauty and the Beast.
52 Ibid.
asylum as protection from these crimes. Black men accused of raping white women were often tried by all-white juries, quickly found guilty, and sentenced to death. Nell Irvin Painter explains that this “casual deadly sentencing amounted to what was called a ‘legal lynching.’” Still many black men were taken from their homes in the middle of the night and brutally lynched by a white mob; crimes such as this also had a sense of legality, as there were rarely consequences for the white mob members. These phenomena share many parallels with the scene in which Maurice returns from the Beast’s castle “raving like a lunatic” about the Beast and Belle.

Though at first the villagers, led by Gaston, accuse Maurice of insanity and attempt to bring him to the asylum, Belle confirms his story about the Beast and legitimizes her father’s sanity. Defending the Beast against the villagers’ curiosity, Belle assures them, “He’d never hurt anyone.” The jealous Gaston retorts, “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you have feelings for this monster.” Belle replies that the Beast is no monster, “Gaston, you are!” Just as Belle’s relationship with the Beast ignites a violent reaction from Gaston, accusations of romance or sexuality between the races (specifically between black men and white women) were historically a major contributor to the lynching of black men. That Belle chose an animalistic suitor over himself personally offends Gaston, and is reminiscent of one of the typical causes for mob violence in the Jim Crow South. Breaking into “The Mob Song,” Gaston incites panic in the villagers and organizes them into a mob to siege the Beast’s castle and murder him. “The beast will make off with your children, he’ll come after them in the night…We’re not safe until

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55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
he’s head is mounted on my wall. I say we kill the Beast!”58 Beauty and the Beast’s “mob scene” is poignantly reminiscent of mob violence in the early twentieth century United States.

*Aladdin:* Sometimes, You Just Feel So Trapped

Unlike previous Disney Princess films, *Aladdin* (1992) is mainly a film about its title character, who is in love with Princess Jasmine. Although Jasmine is not a secondary character, her purpose is to help Aladdin the “street rat”59 discover his own self-worth. For young audiences Jasmine’s story also reveals that while being a princess can be a dream, it can also be an “obstacle”60 to overcome; throughout the film Jasmine defies the men who treat her and discuss her as if she is “a prize to be won.”61

When Jasmine is first introduced, she has just rejected “another suitor for the princess,” apparently one in a line of many hopeful princes.62 Her father tries to convince her to choose a suitor, as “the law says, you must be married to a prince by your next birthday.”63 Jasmine rejects the law, mentioning that she’s never been outside the palace walls and that she doesn’t want to be pressured into marriage. “Maybe I don’t want to be a princess anymore!”64 Such a sentiment had not been expressed previously in the princess films; in those preceding *Aladdin*, the tiara and prince had always been a goal or a dream come true, never a burden. The only exception may be Aurora, who, upon learning that she was a princess, cried because she believed she was no longer able to marry the stranger with whom she fell in love in the woods.

58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
61 *Aladdin*.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
In many ways, Aladdin is the stereotypical Disney Princess of this film. He has much more in common with previous princesses than does Jasmine: the rags to riches story, the kindness despite difficult circumstances, falling in love with a royal individual without knowing of their status. In the beginning of the film he is revealed as “the diamond in the rough,” the only one who is worthy of entering the Cave of Wonders and discovering the golden lamp, home to Genie. Jasmine’s role in the film is not only to save Aladdin from dire situations, but also to aide him in the self-realization that no matter how he dresses, at heart he is a prince, not a street rat.

*Aladdin* is significant in that its protagonists are not white Europeans, but instead live in Agrabah, Disney’s fictional Muslim city that is rich with destructive stereotypes. Of the five Disney Princess films to follow Aladdin, only two more will showcase predominantly white characters; this is significant in contrast with the five for five Caucasian princess films prior to 1991. Although this marks the beginning of Disney’s adventures into portraying non-white cultures, it is simultaneously the beginning of Disney’s offensive and racist depictions of different cultures. Developed during the Gulf War of 1991, *Aladdin* perpetuates stereotypes that Arabs are either violent and power-hungry or impoverished and barefoot, and that Muslim females are hypersexualized through custom and attire.

Depictions of Muslim culture in *Aladdin* are consistently stereotypical and violent. Most telling are the lyrics in the opening song “Arabian Nights,” that Disney was forced to change after pressure from the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee in 1993. The offensive song lyrics read: “Where they cut off your ear/ if they don’t like your face/ it’s barbaric, but hey, it’s home.” For the home version of the movie (October

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65 Ibid.
Disney agreed to change the first two lines, which now read: “Where it’s flat and immense/ and the heat is intense.” Unfortunately, many more racist depictions of Arabic culture, including “It’s barbaric, but hey, it’s home,” remain sprinkled throughout the film. A 1993 editorial in the New York Times titled “It’s Racist, But Hey, It’s Disney,” responded: “To characterize an entire region with this sort of tongue-in-cheek bigotry, especially in a movie aimed at children, borders on barbaric.”

Aladdin is more explicitly violent than other Disney Princess films, in which only one antagonist typically displays violent behavior, and even then death is usually euphemized as eternal sleep that can be ended by true love’s kiss. In Aladdin Jasmine is threatened with having her hand cut off for feeding hungry children. Jafar tells her that Aladdin has been beheaded, a sentence ordered by the Sultan; this beheading is mentioned no less than three times throughout the film, and Jafar shows the motion of his finger slicing a throat, for children who may be unsure what it means to be beheaded. No white society in a Disney film is ever portrayed as engaging in capital punishment, yet in all Disney’s portrayals of nonwhite ethnicities during this time period, including Aladdin, Pocahontas, and Mulan, death is a penalty of the law. Jafar attempts to kill Aladdin in many other ways throughout the film—stabbing, drowning, being eaten by a giant serpent. From the opening song of the film, the violence in this movie is attributed to its cultural setting.

The characters in Aladdin exhibit stereotypically darker features; characters’ darkness is a product of their benevolence in the film. The darkest characters are the guards who are constantly after Aladdin to imprison him. With thick accents and facial hair, adorned in large turbans and carrying menacing swords, their physical markings

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66 Ibid.
show them to be the most evil of all the characters. On the other hand, the human characters with whiter features are the protagonists—Aladdin, Jasmine, and the Sultan. They have no distinguishable accent, and their skin is much lighter than that of other characters’. Henry Giroux writes that Disney modeled Aladdin after Tom Cruise, showing every intention of Anglicizing their protagonist. He argues that while the supporting characters are “grotesque” and “hairy,” we are supposed to like Aladdin because he resembles an American in appearance and accent. 67

Like Aladdin, Jasmine has white skin and features, though her skin is darker than earlier pale European princesses. Her costuming is stereotypical and inaccurate, yet draws attention to her status as exotic; since she is from Agrabah we accept that her bare midriff and exposed cleavage would be acceptable there, but it is never so for white princesses, excluding Ariel’s costume as a mermaid, which is passable as a bathing suit but not something she wears while in Prince Eric’s civilized, human society.

Jasmine is sexualized not only through her cost, but also through her actions. Unlike white princesses Jasmine is aware of her sexuality and uses it to her advantage. In the final scene she begins to seduce Jafar, distracting him from Aladdin’s attempts to free her. Throughout the film Jafar plots to marry Jasmine and become the sultan himself. This scene is the culmination of these efforts, and shows that Jasmine is aware of Jafar’s plans and able to use his weakness to her advantage. Other princesses, such as Ariel and Snow White, fell easily into villains’ traps and were unable to defend themselves. Jasmine’s ability to work with Aladdin to defeat Jafar shows a progression in the independence of Disney Princesses.

Pocahontas: Savages, Savages, Barely Even Human

Pocahontas (1995) retells the historical narrative about the encounter between the Algonquin nation and English settlers in the seventeenth century. Unfortunately the film is deceivingly inaccurate in portraying this history. In their 1996 article “Redesigning Pocahontas,” Gary Edgerton and Kathy Merlock Jackson address both perspectives in the debate over the importance of historical accuracy in portraying Pocahontas. Before the film’s release, Disney’s publicists made the statement that filmmakers had “tried to treat Pocahontas with the respect she deserved and present a balanced and informed view of the Native American culture.”68 To help ensure that their portrayals of the Algonquin were appropriate and accurate, Disney’s producers met with members of the Algonquin nation during the production process. The then Native American consultant Shirley “Little Dove” Custalow McGowan, said that she at first felt honored that Disney had asked her. “But I wasn’t at the studio two hours before I began to make clear my objections to what they were doing…they had said that the film would be historically accurate. I son found out that it wasn’t to be…I wish my name wasn’t on it. I wish Pocahontas’s name wasn’t on it.”69

While Disney’s portrayals of Pocahontas and the Algonquin nation are riddled with imperfections, Pocahontas shows that Disney has improved Native American depictions since its earlier portrayal of Native Americans in Peter Pan (1953). In their book Deconstructing Disney, Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan describe the “Red Men” of Never-Never Land as “monosyllabic, grotesquely bright red, misshapen, savage

69 Ibid., 93.
‘injuns,’” who become “a tribe of bronzed, articulate civilized, beautiful people” in *Pocahontas*. According to Byrne and McQuillan, the openness to Native American culture that is displayed in *Pocahontas* emphasizes “‘positive representation,’ which recognizes Native American life as a culture.”

The Algonquin portrayed in *Pocahontas* teach powerful lessons about the importance of tolerance and respect for other cultures. They are respectful of nature and strive toward environmental preservation, cringing at the Europeans’ methods of clearing land and digging for gold. Before the film was released, a Disney producer emphasized Disney’s attempts to “tap into the spirituality of the Native Americans, especially in the way they relate to nature.” They are portrayed as much less violent than the English settlers, who immediately are ordered to shoot any Native American they meet. When two Algonquin scouts are sent to find out if the white settlers pose a threat to their village, they are spotted, with lethal consequences. Radcliffe, the governor of Jamestown, sees one of the men peek his head out of the bushes, and he immediately cries, “Savages! It’s an ambush! Arm yourselves!” Then, “Shoot!” Disney is willing to portray the white settlers as the antagonists in this film, emphasizing their desire to overtake Algonquin land and build an English colony in its place. In the climax of the film both societies declare war on one another, and while the English anticipate the battle, the Algonquin nation prepares solemnly, having been forced to violence as a result of Kocoum’s murder. *Pocahontas* consistently depicts white settlers provoking Native American

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70 Eleanor Bryne & Martin McQuillan, *Deconstructing Disney* (Sterling, Virginia: Pluto Press, 1999), 106.
71 Ibid., 109.
72 Edgerton & Jackson, “Redesigning Pocahontas,” 91.
73 *Pocahontas*, Blu-ray, directed by Eric Goldberg (2012; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios).
violence, and emphasizes the settlers’ exclusive desires for wealth and glory through conquest of the New World.

Although *Pocahontas* exhibits Disney’s ability to portray a nonwhite culture respectfully and to an extent, accurately, it also distorts the centuries-old historical anecdote of a young Pocahontas who was abducted by the English and forced to assimilate into Western culture. In 1607 when Pocahontas met John Smith, she was 12 and he was 27. Historically there was no romance between the two, though she is said to have saved his life by protecting him with her own body when Chief Powhatan, her father, raised his war club to kill Smith. Far from the happy romance and cultural understanding that the fictional Pocahontas experienced when she met John Smith, the real Pocahontas was kidnapped by the English and kept from her family for a year. She ultimately converted to Christianity and married John Rolfe in England, where she became Lady Rebecca Rolfe and died shortly after of tuberculosis, at the age of twenty-one.\(^74\)

Edgerton and Jackson write that the main goal of *Pocahontas* was to redeem Disney’s reputation after the poor reception of earlier animated films that had stereotypically portrayed nonwhite cultures, such as *Aladdin* and *The Lion King*. For this reason Disney consulted Native Americans in the production of the film, and also cast Native Americans “to provide the voices and characterizations for the main American Indian roles.”\(^75\) Simultaneously, however, Disney hoped that *Pocahontas* would be a huge box office hit; it is for this reason that Edgerton and Jackson argue, “The filmmakers at Disney never really intended *Pocahontas* to be historically accurate; it’s a

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\(^74\) Ibid., 94.
\(^75\) Edgerton & Jackson, “Redesigning Pocahontas,” 91.
romantic fantasy." Pocahontas’ relationship with John Smith is problematic from a historical standpoint, but suggests more gender equity within the relationship. She is strong in her criticism of the Western way of life, and in her defense of her own culture: “You think I’m an ignorant savage…still I cannot see if the savage one is me.” She contributes to John Smith’s understanding of the Algonquin, and is instrumental in mediating between the warring societies. Ultimately she refuses to leave what she has always held important, her family and her people, for a romance with Smith.

Unlike other Disney Princess films, Pocahontas does not end in implied marriage for the princess. Although Pocahontas saves John Smith’s life when her father tries to execute him, she ultimately decides that she must stay with her people; in the final scene Pocahontas is standing by the water, watching John Smith’s ship sail back to England. In her article “Images of Animated Others,” Celeste Lacroix emphasizes Disney’s racial undertones in not allowing interracial couples to marry. “Perhaps it is no coincidence that the…biracial couple…[does not] walk off into the fairytale sunset as husband and wife.” Lacroix adds that, as of 1995 when Pocahontas was released, Disney’s only other biracial couple was Esmeralda and Phoebus in The Hunchback of Notre Dame; by the end of the film there is no indication that they will be married. Both Pocahontas and Esmeralda occupy a liminal status in comparison with their white beaus. They are both darker-skinned and their bodies are portrayed as exotic: more developed, wearing less clothing, and depicted as more active and close to nature than white protagonists.

Ibid., 94.

Pocahontas wears a short and tight sheath, which almost appears to have been ripped and only hangs off one of her shoulders. She goes barefoot throughout the film, and allows her long hair to fall around her face and shoulders. Lacroix suggests that a combination of females’ sexualizations and their interracial romances become barriers to a Disney-sanctioned marriage by the end of the film. In the Contemporary Films Disney makes progress toward resolving racial issues and in its treatment of interracial marriage.
Chapter 3: When Will My Life Begin?

The contemporary Disney Princess films depict a more conscious break from Disney’s tradition of sexism, though still problematically portray gender and race relationships. Between 2009 and 2012 Disney released three new films, starring the first-ever African American Disney Princess in the 2009 *The Princess and the Frog*. The three most recent princesses appear to be more independent and self-reliant than those preceding them, and reject romantic advances by would-be Prince Charmings more readily than ever before. *Brave’s* Princess Merida (2012) becomes the first Disney Princess to have rejected marriage by the end of her film.

*The Princess and the Frog*: Look Out Boys, I’m Coming Through!

*The Princess and the Frog* (2009) depicts 1920’s New Orleans, Louisiana, and stars the first African American Disney princess. Princess Tiana and her white friend Lottie are children when the film opens, and Tiana’s mother (“the best seamstress in town!”) is reading them the classic story of the princess and the frog. The girls’ reactions to the story’s end set them up as foils to each other throughout the rest of the film. Once the frog turns into a prince, Tiana scowls and shakes her head. “There is no way in this whole wide world I would ever ever ever and I mean never, kiss a frog! Yuck!” Looking love struck and falling over her child-sized pink ball gown, the blonde, blue-eyed Lottie responds that she “would kiss a frog. I would kiss one hundred frogs if I could marry a prince and be a princess.” Less than three minutes into the film, Disney has already set up the wealthy white girl as the stereotypical Disney princess, and her

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80 Ibid.
81 Ibid.
African American friend is a nonromantic and more plainly dressed child. While Tiana is a more appropriate role model for young girls, she clearly breaks the Disney Princess mold, and girls are automatically more inclined to empathize with the starry-eyed white child in the frilly dress.

Throughout the film Tiana and Lottie juxtapose one another; through Lottie’s leisurely and carefree lifestyle, in comparison with Tiana’s life of reliance on hard work instead of dreaming, Disney hints at the power of white privilege in historic New Orleans. The film would have been more impressive in bridging the racial gap of Disney Princess films had it been set in New Orleans within the last few decades. In their 2010 article Moon Charonia and Wendy Simmonds describe the opening scene as “reminiscent of antebellum America:…[Tiana’s] white friend appears oblivious to the power dynamics which allow her—but not her friend—both fancy dresses and a belief in fairy tales.” In the next scene Tiana is wishing on a shooting star, when her parents teach her the most important lesson of the film: “That old star can only take you part of the way. You’ve gotta help it out with some hard work of your own, and then you can do anything you set your mind to.” Tiana works hard for the rest of her life, juggling two waitressing jobs and saving all her money in hopes of opening her own restaurant someday. It is no secret that her family is working-class while Lottie’s is wealthy. Tiana’s mother, “the finest seamstress in New Orleans,” works hard as a Mammy figure. She not only sews dozens of dresses for Lottie, who as child and adult never hears the word “no” from her father, but Tiana’s mother also seems to be nannying for Lottie until her father gets home.

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83 The Princess and the Frog.
84 Ibid.
reading Tiana and Lottie stories while she is putting the finishing touches on Lottie’s dress.

It is ironic that Tiana’s mother should occupy this societal space, when Tiana’s original persona had to be changed so that it was not too reminiscent of the mammy of the early twentieth century. An MSNBC article published in 2007 quotes John Lasseter, chief creative director for Disney and Pixar Animation Studios, noting that the then-titled *The Frog Princess* is “a musical scored by composer Randy Newman,…‘an American fairy tale’ starring a girl named Maddy who lives in the French Quarter in New Orleans.” Maddy’s profession was originally set to be a chambermaid to a wealthy white woman, but during the production process Disney underwent severe backlash for this decision. In her article about the reproduction of whiteness in the film, Sarita McCoy Gregory writes that Disney was extremely sensitive in the process of developing its first African American princess, and was therefore careful to avoid accusations of racism. “Disney’s producers stressed that the filmmakers…should ‘get it right.’ After early meetings with Oprah Winfrey [voice actor as Tiana’s working-class mother] and focus groups with African-American viewers,” Disney changed several elements of the protagonist’s identity. Critics claimed that Maddy’s career as a chambermaid, paired with her name that is phonetically similar to “Mammy,” too closely resembled the controversial image of black women as mammy figures in the post-Reconstruction era.\(^85\) Therefore Maddy became Tiana, and the chambermaid is not a servant to but the best friend of her white

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peer; in the film Tiana is an aspiring restaurateur who believes that “dreams do come true in New Orleans,” as long as she works hard to succeed.  

During the early twentieth century in the segregated southern United States, the mammy figure significantly transcended the racial boundary. Like Maddy’s original role in The Frog Princess, black mammies worked in white homes, as both a maid and a nanny to white children. In her book Making Whiteness, Grace Elizabeth Hale notes, “images of integrated domesticity were central to [the] fiction of continuity as African American servants, symbolized and idealized most frequently as mammy, replaced slaves.” The mammy figure was constructed as a symbol of continuing white superiority, and often represented black women’s inability to enjoy the childhoods of their own children while they were simultaneously raising white children who would grow up to subjugate their mammies. Hiring a mammy liberated white women from domestic work, allowing them to join the workforce, but it also imprisoned mammies in a new form of domestic servitude that picked up where slavery had ended. “The mammy figure revealed, perhaps more than any other construction of the culture of segregation, a desperate symbolic as well as physical dependence on the very people whose full humanity white southerners denied and the centrality of blackness to the making of whiteness.” To avoid the resurfacing of the racial and gender contradictions inherent in the mammy figure, Disney had Tiana become a waitress and her mother a seamstress; both of these professions still involved serving white families, and yet were historically appropriate in a portrayal of 1920’s New Orleans.

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86 The Princess and the Frog.
88 Ibid., 113.
The intersection of Tiana’s race, gender, and class often becomes the barrier that prevents her from following her dreams. In order to win over her Prince Naveen, who is coming to New Orleans for Mardi Gras, Lottie hosts a Mardi Gras ball and pays Tiana to make “about five hundred of [her] man-catching beignets” for Lottie’s ball. This is not the only instance in the movie in which the nature of Tiana and Lottie’s friendship must be questioned; Tiana consistently takes the role of server while Lottie enjoys the privileged role of being served by her friend. Tiana does not simply prepare the beignets and leave them at the ball. Rather, she appears to be serving them during the party, enabling her to meet with the men who had agreed to sell her the building for her new restaurant (which she was able to pay for with Lottie’s beignet money). The men tell her that she has been outbid, but let her know that it is all for the best. “A little woman of your [pauses] background would have had her hands full trying to run a big business like that. You’re better off without it.” The landlords’ paternalistic attitude toward Tiana resembles Northern whites’ condescension toward black individuals following emancipation.

Tiana only overcomes such barriers once she has married Prince Naveen, who, aside from being a prince, has much lighter skin than Tiana’s and is not African American at all. Prince Naveen of Maldonia is from the royal line of a fictional country, the name of which is derived from Maldives and Macedonia. Based on the demographic makeup of these countries, it is safe to assume that Prince Naveen may be either Indo-Aryan or Southern Slavic, not African American. Naveen’s skin is much lighter than Tiana’s, suggesting that her upward mobility after marriage comes not only from

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89 The Princess and the Frog.

90 Ibid.
marrying a prince, but also from marrying “whiter” than herself. While it also cannot be
discounted that Tiana worked tirelessly to achieve her dream of owning a restaurant, it is
obvious through her interactions with the landlords that even hard work was not enough
to pull her out of her position of inferiority as a black woman in the antebellum South.

Tiana’s marriage to a nonblack prince is monumental in creating the first
interracial union for a Disney Princess. Although Pocahontas has a romantic relationship
with the white John Smith, in *Pocahontas* the relationship ends when Smith sails back to
England; no other interracial couple is married within their film, although a wedding may
be foreshadowed for the future, as in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. A possible
exception to this universality may be *The Little Mermaid*: Ariel is a mer-person, while
Prince Eric is a human, though whether this constitutes as interracial seems vague,
especially because Ariel is turned into a human prior to marrying Prince Eric.

Tiana and Naveen’s relationship also develops over a longer period of time than
that of most of the earlier princesses’ relationships; no earlier princess took more than 1-2
days to fall in love. Through her relationship with Naveen, Tiana proves herself to be
self-reliant and independent, rejecting his pompous attitude and cleverly responding to
his romantic advances.

The secondary characters in *The Princess and the Frog*, particularly those who
Tiana and Naveen meet on their journey through the bayou, are overtly stereotypical.
They speak with either deep Southern accents or with stereotypical African American
dialects. Each character seems to have an assigned race based simply on the way that he
or she speaks and his or her appearance. The antagonist in the film is a voodoo sorcerer;
voodoo is derived from sets of African spiritualities, and is a popular stereotype of New
Orleans culture. These types of generalizations reinforce racism and stereotypes that create hierarchies and oppression.

_Tangled: Frying Pans…Who Knew, Right?_

Disney completely rewrites the Grimm fairytale _Rapunzel_ for the 2010 film _Tangled_. Mother Gothel, who uses Rapunzel’s hair to keep herself forever young, abducts Rapunzel from her parents, the king and queen. Secluded in her tower, Rapunzel returns to the domesticity reminiscent of princesses of the Early Films. In the trademark song for the film, Rapunzel sings about her daily schedule. She wakes up at 7:00 AM, “start on the chores and sweep till the floor’s all clean.”\(^9\) She is in charge of keeping house while her “mother” is away for the day, and in this way is not far from the servants’ positions of Cinderella and Snow White during the 1950’s. After cleaning, Rapunzel reads, paints, knits, cooks, sews, bakes, and does ballet. None of her daily activities threaten gender roles. However, she expresses dissatisfaction with her isolated lifestyle.

Like Belle in _Beauty and the Beast_, Rapunzel undergoes severe abuse by her captor. In this case, however, her mother figure is the abuser, and the abuse is parodied. Rapunzel ultimately rejects her abuser and gains her independence in an opposite technique from Belle’s. Mother Gothel’s condescending attitude is portrayed humorously in the opening of the film; she makes jokes at Rapunzel’s expense and speaks clever insults under her breath. In the song “Mother Knows Best,” Gothel enumerates the reasons that Rapunzel cannot leave the tower: she is naïve, ditsy, clumsy, and “I believe,

\(^9\) _Tangled_, DVD, directed by Byron Howard and Nathan Greno (2010; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios).
you’re getting kind of chubby. I’m just saying ‘cause I love you.”

Inclusion of this line in Gothel’s song reminds culturally aware audiences that while we have now seen a Native American princess and an African American princess, we have still not met a Disney Princess who is fuller figured.

Disney Princesses are not alone in promoting the idea that skinny is the only acceptable body type. For decades Mattel’s Barbie dolls, who are designed to appear older than the children who play with them and thus to function as role models, have perpetuated anatomically impossible figures. Their tiny waists, large breasts, and feet molded to fit into high heels, are impossible standards for any human being to achieve naturally. Disney’s portrayal of its consistently beautiful and slim princesses is no better than that of a Barbie doll. When constantly bombarded with images of skinny, beautiful, and typically light-skinned women, a young girl’s budding self-confidence can lose momentum if she is unable to identify with a role model designed to look the way she does.

When viewing Belle and Rapunzel’s captive situations as parallels, it is clear that twenty years after Beauty and the Beast Disney is sending a different message about subordinating relationships. Although Rapunzel once had loved Mother Gothel despite her biting remarks about Rapunzel’s inability to handle herself outside the tower, once Rapunzel learns that she is the “Lost Princess,” she is able to separate logic from nostalgia and leave Gothel. Princesses of the Contemporary Films are more able to separate their emotions from themselves, defying the traditional stereotype of women as emotional. Whereas earlier princesses had excessively romantic fantasies and were quick

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92 Ibid.
93 Rand, Barbie’s Queer Accessories, 142.
94 Tangled.
to fall in love or to be fooled by empty promises (see: Snow White, Ariel), both Rapunzel and Tiana are more skeptical about love and less inclined to allow their emotions to take over. Rapunzel shows courage and cleverness in convincing Flynn Ryder to take her to see the hanging lanterns, and throughout their adventure she proves herself more capable than he is, figuring their way out of dangerous situations. Similarly Tiana of *The Princess and the Frog* adapts more quickly to her new body as a frog, and is able to save Prince Naveen from several near-death experiences. These films are clearly portraying a new type of princess—one who can save instead of being saved, one who is smart and resourceful though still slim and beautiful, and one who values herself over her romantic relationships.

Rapunzel’s relationship with Ryder, however, is not without its flaws. Just as Cinderella’s prince allowed her to escape a life of enslavement to her stepmother, Ryder’s stumbling upon Rapunzel’s tower is still the catalyst that inspires Rapunzel to leave the tower and chase her dreams of seeing the floating lights. Once she has escaped, Rapunzel struggles with feelings of guilt for disobeying Gothel, and excitement at the prospect of freedom. Ryder dismisses this barrage of emotions, viewing the over-animated Rapunzel as an annoyance that he wanted to scare away. As Rapunzel saves them from ruffians, guards, and drowning, all through using either her hair or a frying pan, the pair begins to fall in love. Like Tiana and Naveen’s relationship, this development takes more than the one-meeting quota for earlier princesses, but still is unrealistic in developing into a self-sacrificing romance over the course of two days.

When Mother Gothel tracks Rapunzel down and tries to convince her to come back to the tower, Rapunzel is reluctant. Rather than citing her newfound freedom and
Rapunzel’s unlikely ability to protect herself against all the dangers of the outside world, Rapunzel tells Gothel that she “met someone.”\textsuperscript{95} She can’t end her journey because “I think he likes me.”\textsuperscript{96} In this scene the no-nonsense princess with a promising self-reliance falls back into the typical Disney Princess archetype. Her choice is no longer to be independent and free of Gothel’s domineering imprisonment, but it is to shift her dependence from one on Gothel to a dependence on her Prince Charming. Rapunzel’s character is less problematic than that of princesses who had come before her, but her reliance on a man to give her the courage to leave her parent’s house prevents her from ever attaining true independence, for which she had hoped in the beginning of the film.

*Tangled* parodies gender roles by allowing Rapunzel to take the role of hero and Ryder to be the helpless victim (this only holds true in individual life-threatening situations; overall Ryder is still Rapunzel’s savior, as he grants her the agency on multiple occasions to leave the destructive situation with Gothel). Toward the end of the film, Ryder even dies and Rapunzel is able to bring him back by crying on him; the magical healing powers of her hair have transferred to her tears. Critics who were hoping to view Rapunzel as a feminist princess, however, are still waiting for their Princess Charming. Rapunzel’s reliance on a frying pan to protect herself and Ryder becomes a joke throughout the movie—after using the pan to knock out several guards, Ryder comments, “I’ve got to get me one of these!”\textsuperscript{97} As a symbol of domesticity, Rapunzel’s frying pan suggests that she is incapable of using a more powerful weapon, and causes her assaults to be not only dangerous but also to some extent, cute and feminine, thus undermining her role as a powerful female.

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid.
In her essay “Feminism and Fairy Tales,” Karen E. Rowe identifies this phenomenon as typical in fairy tales, and argues that it is only through adopting an exaggerated sense of femininity that the heroine is able to marry the prince and live happily ever after. “Because the heroine adopts conventional female virtues, that is patience, sacrifice, and dependency, and because she submits to patriarchal needs, she consequently receives both the prince and a guarantee of social and financial security through marriage.”^98 Although in the beginning of the film, Rapunzel is portrayed as curious and forward-thinking, and is eager to leave her tower and pursue independence from a domineering mother, “status and fortune never result from the female’s self-exertion but from passive assimilation into her husband’s sphere.”^99 Rowe’s theory holds true in Tangled, as in earlier Disney Princess films; although there is a gender reversal in which Rapunzel, rather than Ryder, is the hero in many dangerous situations throughout their adventure, her tendency toward dependence on him as she falls in love deflects the empowerment she assumes by defying her mother and knocking out villains with a frying pan.

This reversal of gender roles culminates in the closing lines of the movie, in which Ryder asserts that “Beloved by all, she led the kingdom with all the grace and wisdom as her parents did before her.”^100 Whereas Princess Jasmine had to ultimately yield her power to her husband Aladdin, who became the sultan, and Princess Ariel chose to forfeit her royal power in favor of love, Princess Rapunzel inherits the throne directly from her parents, and rules as they had. The inclusion of this line at the end of the film

^99 Ibid.
^100 Tangled.
represents a leap from exclusively patriarchal power to the possibility for matriarchal power structures in Disney films.

*Brave*: A Bow, Fergus? She’s a Lady!

In 2012 Disney-Pixar debuted *Brave*, the first Pixar film with a female protagonist. However, the brave Princess Merida also represents a milestone for Disney Princess films: she is the only princess to remain unattached romantically by the end of the film. She resists her parents’ attempt to choose a suitor for her through an archery competition, and dares to break tradition by competing herself. Princess Merida’s rejection of femininity and refusal of tradition horrify her mother, Queen Elinor, who religiously upholds traditional gender roles. The movie ends with a break in tradition: Princess Merida is brave enough to stand before the lords assembled, imploring them to let “our young people decide for themselves who they will love.”

This film is unique in its message—that marriage and romance are no longer necessary for princesses to be successful, powerful, and happy. However, through *Brave*’s emphasis on the mother-daughter relationship, attempts to subvert gender roles begin to reinforce traditional dichotomies. In order for subversion to be effective, both the subvertor and the audience must come to an agreement that the idea being subverted actually exists, albeit problematically. *Brave*’s focus on subverting traditional gender roles ultimately makes these ideas increasingly more prevalent in the film. Princess Merida is accustomed to Queen Elinor’s rigid ideas about gender roles: “A princess shouldn’t leave her weapons on the table…A princess should not have weaponry, in my opinion.” While in the end Princess Merida proves that these limiting ideals can be

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102 Ibid.
overcome and generational ideological gaps can be bridged, she reinforces the
assumption that gender stereotypes are a constricting force to women seeking
independence. This film portrays a girl who chooses not to marry as the exception, not as
the norm.

Princess Merida’s refusal to marry in the film could indicate a shift in thematic
elements of Disney Princess films. Rather than focusing on a romantic love between
prince and princess, *Brave* depicts a relationship that is more relevant to its target
preschool-aged audience—the bond between mother and daughter. The film portrays
Merida to be imperfect: she is hurtful and defiant toward her mother, who is
simultaneously too rooted in tradition to accept her daughter’s rejection of hyper-
femininity. In the end, *Brave* teaches young viewers about the importance of family love
above other relationships, and emphasizes the healing powers of forgiveness and
empathy. Although the mother represents adherence to tradition and Merida’s
interactions with the lords of the kingdom emphasizes that she is somehow abnormal in
choosing not to marry, the princes of her generation resoundingly support her proposal to
abolish arranged marriage. Whereas Aurora relished her arranged marriage that mandated
her to wed the handsome stranger she met in the forest, Merida is uninterested in being
forced into a commitment that she has not chosen for herself.

Merida’s father, King Fergus, supports his daughter despite his wife’s frustration
at Merida’s unfeminine pastimes and attitude. He encourages her to practice her archery,
and minimizes his wife’s concern about Merida’s disinterest in typically feminine
concerns, such as her appearance or marriage. The queen’s ultimate transition to her
husband’s more laissez-faire parenting style is symbolic of the importance that parents
accept their children even when they may not conform exactly to the gender stereotypes that their parents are expecting. When Queen Elinor accepts Merida’s decision not to accept an arranged marriage, their relationship flourishes. Simultaneously Merida is respectful of her mother and their ability to communicate about their differences benefits their relationship. This plotline, unique to Disney Princess films, depicts a female exercising a great deal of agency over her future, and encourages audiences to forge their own paths, while still respecting their parents with whom they may disagree.
Conclusion: I Am a Princess

Since *Snow White* in 1937, Disney Princesses have increasingly become more independent, more diverse, and more realistic. Although the iconic Disney Princess films often convey problematic morals, they are also popular for the valuable ideals they teach. In the *I Am a Princess* video, Disney expresses the importance of loyalty, generosity, kindness, bravery, and honesty. While upholding patriarchal values and enforcing slimness, whiteness, and heterosexuality as norms, Disney Princesses can be morally relevant if their weaknesses are disregarded.

Because of the profound impact its films have on young audiences, Disney should be developing princesses with whom anyone can relate, and from which any person can understand him or herself in a positive way. However, although Disney presents itself as a protector of innocence and a company that creates nostalgia to ensure popularity, the corporation cannot be held morally responsible for creating ethical films. Therefore parents and caretakers of young children must face the question of how they will present Disney Princesses to their children. (According to Peggy Orenstein, it is almost impossible for children to escape Disney Princesses, even when parents themselves refuse to purchase the merchandise.103) Having an awareness of Disney’s shortcomings in its portrayals of the princesses is an important tool for parents to open a dialogue with their children, discussing in which ways children should and shouldn’t aspire to be like the Disney Princesses.

Emulation of Disney Princesses can be especially damaging to children who do immediately fulfill the qualifications that Disney has historically required for its princesses. Typically Disney has excluded from its Disney Princess category anyone who

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is not a young, thin, white, beautiful, heterosexual female, thus reinforcing societal values placed on attributes that signify beauty. In her essay “Seeing White,” Dorothy L. Hurley analyzes studies of American children who have watched Disney’s Cinderella and Mufaro’s Beautiful Daughters, another Cinderella-type tale with a black princess. The study found that regardless of the children’s skin color, they “almost invariably drew White characters.”\textsuperscript{104} Hurley writes, “The implications that most if not all children, including children of color, see ‘White’ as good, living happily ever after, and pretty, are disturbing.”\textsuperscript{105} She argues that this system, which contributes to internalized racism, is “reinforced to a large extent by the culture industry (Zipes, 1997), and in particular through such devices as that of the Disneyfied princess.”\textsuperscript{106} Hurley wrote her article prior to the debut of the first African American princess in The Princess and the Frog (2009). Ultimately, however, her argument extends to anyone who is ostracized by the specific attributes required for Disney Princess status. The Disney Princess icon can help to teach children certain values, but it can also cause children to value their own attributes less, should they be something other than the white, heterosexual, beautiful norm of Disney Princesses. This is a criticism that Disney has begun to address through its contemporary Disney Princess films, but Disney will have to do more than introduce several diverse Disney Princess to compensate for fifty years of reinforcing cultural hegemony.

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 223.
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