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Happily (n)ever after: the cruel optimism of Disney’s romantic ideal

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ABSTRACT
Drawing on Ahmed’s articulation of the performativity of affect, we analyze how Disney love, as it is constructed in Disney Princess films, acts pedagogically as a “happy object” that orients the happiness of women toward the acquisition of love. We assert that the happiness we derive from loving Disney is a form of what Berlant calls “cruel optimism,” in which we become attached to fantasies of happiness and fulfillment that are unsustainable and detrimental. The cruel optimism we learn from Disney Princess films manifests as an incitement to pursue an impossible ideal of romantic love, or what Heise calls a bridal fiction, that reinforces the supremacy of a white heteropatriarchal family ideal and keeps us attached to “compromised conditions of possibility” that limit female agency and impede social progress.

Instantaneous and enchanting love, expressed in “I’m Wishing,” the opening tune featured in Walt Disney’s Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937) and the first song of Disney’s animated feature film canon, is a major theme across many of Disney’s films, particularly the popular princess films Cinderella (1950), Sleeping Beauty (1959), The Little Mermaid (1989), Beauty and the Beast (1990), Aladdin (1992), Pocahontas (1995), Mulan (1998), Princess and the Frog (2009), Tangled (2010), and Frozen (2013). While the princesses have evolved over time in appearance and actions in response to shifting gender standards (Cassandra Stover 2013), romantic heterosexual love and the promise of marriage have remained consistent and prominent themes. The popularity of these films has soared since the early 2000s when the creation of the Disney Princess Franchise spawned a wide range of commodities, including dolls, sing-along videos, apparel, home décor, toys, and many other products featuring the 11 princesses, including Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora, Ariel, Belle, Jasmine, Pocahontas, Mulan, Tiana, Rapunzel, and Merida. Elsa and Anna from the wildly popular 2012 film Frozen as well as Polynesian princess Moana from the eponymous 2016 film are expected to be the newest members. The lucrative franchise allows Disney’s version of romantic love to reach millions of young girls, teens, and women every year. While this “Princess Play” may seem like harmless fun, princess narratives carry not-so-implicit pedagogical messages about how girls should relate to the world and to boys and men, orienting the happiness of women...
toward the acquisition of love. As Henry Giroux and Grace Pollock (2010) argue in their influential work, Disney is a “teaching machine” that “exerts influence over consumers but also wages an aggressive campaign to peddle its political and cultural influence” (xiv). The Walt Disney Company generates over $52 billion dollars per year (Roger Iger 2015) from films, theme parks, and branded merchandise, making it one of the most influential contributors to the global landscape of popular culture, where “meanings, values, and tastes that set the norms that offer up and legitimate particular subject positions” are regulated (Henry Giroux 1999, 2). Thus, Disney has profound potential to teach us particular ways of understanding the world, our selves, and others.

This project contributes to ongoing conversations among scholars attempting to understand how public pedagogies teach us particular subjectivities, as it explores the connections between affect, consumption, and pedagogy, and how these work together to teach us how to act and be in the world. In this article, we examine one of the many ways that Disney operates pedagogically by exploring what Disney Princess films teach us about love and happiness. Through an analysis of the ways in which Disney Princess films represent love, we examine how feminine subjectivities are constructed through Disney’s ideal of “true” romantic love, which provides life’s magical meaning, requires suffering and transformation, and is inevitable. This romantic ideal, coupled with our enduring emotional attachments to that ideal, reproduces traditional gender roles and heteronormative relationship standards that are grounded in ideologies of white middle-class American heterosexual domesticity and child rearing (Sean Griffin 2000). In particular, the promise of romantic love as the primary means to happiness perpetuates gender norms that reinforce the supremacy of a heteropatriarchal family ideal. Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s (2010) articulation of the performativity of affect, we consider how Disney love acts as a “happy object” that reproduces heteropatriarchal privilege. We assert that the happiness we derive from loving Disney is a form of “cruel optimism,” Lauren Berlant’s (2011, 24) term for our investments in “compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered to be impossible, sheer fantasy.” The cruel optimism we learn from Disney Princess films manifests as an incitement to pursue a dark fantasy, a happily (n)ever after, which limits female agency through “bridal fictions” (Franka Heise 2012) that validate heteropatriarchal social structures.

**Theorizing Disney love as a happy object**

The ideal of romantic love depicted across the Disney Princess films reflects a widespread American cultural obsession toward love as the ultimate source of happiness. In contemporary Western culture, happiness is “universally considered to be one of the highest human goods, if not the highest” (Mohsen Joshanloo and Dan Weijers 2014, 718). While an individualistic imperative of personal happiness characterizes American culture, in other cultures across the worlds, happiness is not prized as an ultimate human goal. Experiences of happiness around the world are highly subjective and linked to complex factors such as the nature of people’s employment, minority and gender rights, age, income, education, and health (Carol Graham 2009). However, in American popular culture, happiness is inextricably linked to the acquisition of love. Writing in 1953, sociologist Milton Kurland observed that Americans, in contrast with most other cultures, assume that “supreme happiness is to be found in love, that love is all that matters” (72). The American ideal of love, as Kurland (1953, 72) notes, emphasizes “sexual attraction, physical beauty, and emotional
response” and tends to “dominate the imagination of the individual” from the adolescent years on into adulthood.

The dominance of happiness in the imaginations of American consumers is reflected in the enduring legacy of Walt Disney himself, who made happiness an integral part of Disney’s marketing and branding when he declared Disneyland “the Happiest Place on Earth.” While the Walt Disney Company cannot lay claim to the “Happily Ever After” theme, which has characterized fairy tale romances for hundreds of years, Disney has arguably been the most influential and successful producer of the genre since the twentieth century. In Disney Princess films, in particular, the resolution of the story is the promise of a Happily Ever After, which is achieved through the acquisition of love, so that “true” happiness becomes a function of romantic love.

Disney’s marketing of happiness illustrates how emotions are the socially constructed products of complex cultural, relational, situational, and biological influences. This perspective is central to what Patricia Clough (2007) has called the affective turn in the humanities and social sciences. Affect theory involves the theorization of feelings, the cultural politics of emotions, and the ways in which culture, politics, and emotions intersect and circulate within the materiality of things and bodies. The primary texts we rely on for our analysis, Sara Ahmed’s The Promise of Happiness (2010) and Lauren Berlant’s Cruel Optimism (2011), each take up affect theory in ways that inform our understanding of how the feelings of love and happiness we associate with Disney Princess films bind us to particular representations of femininity. Both Ahmed and Berlant bring affect to the analysis of how technologies of power and knowledge develop within particular historical frameworks. Ahmed (2010, 21) highlights how happiness, in particular, attaches us to certain objects: “To be made happy by this or that is to recognize that happiness starts from somewhere other than the subject who may use the word to describe a situation.” The promise of happiness—the expectation that obtaining a certain object will bring us emotional fulfillment—attaches us to certain ideals, such as heterosexual intimacy and marriage. As is the case with Disney Princess films, happy objects point us toward “the good life,” what we should desire and strive for.

Where Ahmed explores what happiness does—how our conception of happiness creates attachments to happy objects that embody the good life—Berlant (2011) focuses on the attachments themselves. Instead of examining the emotions we experience in relation to optimistic attachments, which are subjective, varied, and specific to the contexts in which they emerge, Berlant (2011, 13) focuses on the optimistic attachment as a “structure of relationality.” She explores the “conditions under which certain attachments to what counts as life come to make sense or no longer make sense, yet remain powerful as they work against the flourishing of particular and collective beings” (13). Both texts take up the politics of affect to critique our conceptions of what constitutes a good life, yet each brings something unique to the analysis. While Ahmed offers insight into the ways that Disney Princess films direct women toward Disney’s romantic ideal as an embodiment of the good life, Berlant helps us explain why women want and need the hope of “true love” even when our attachment to that impossible ideal is detrimental to us.

While we share Ahmed and Berlant’s concern for the politics of affect, we extend that lens to consider more carefully the economics of affect. Drawing on our previous work on consumer culture (Jennifer Sandlin 2010; Jennifer Sandlin, Jake Burdick, and Trevor Norris 2012; Jennifer Sandlin and Jamie Callahan 2009; Jennifer Sandlin and Julie Garlen Maudlin 2013; Jennifer Sandlin and Jennifer Milam 2008; Robin Wright and Jennifer Sandlin 2017), we
explore Disney as a corporate example of what Sara Ahmed (2004) describes as an “affective economy,” in which emotions are mechanisms that mediate relationships between consumers and corporations, between individuals, and between bodies and spaces. We posit that Disney’s ever-expanding repertoire of goods, services, and experiences constitute a “big” curriculum (William Schubert 2006) and a corporate public pedagogy (Jennifer Sandlin and Julie Garlen 2017; Jennifer Sandlin, Jennie Stearns, Julie Garlen Maudlin, and Jake Burdick 2011) from and through which we, educators and students, particularly young children, are learning. We see that curriculum and pedagogy as part of a larger “Disney milieu,” a cultural context in which corporate ideologies, exemplified by but certainly not exclusive to the Walt Disney Company, drive consumer identifications with “family” values, including particular ideologies of marriage, patriotism, and, as we illustrate here, love. Disney’s corporate success makes possible a global cultural ubiquity that is unparalleled in popular culture and yet largely unproblematicized because of our attachments to the seductive narratives such as love, hope, happiness, and pleasure that circulate within the Disney curriculum (Jennifer Sandlin and Julie Garlen 2016). Our consumer identifications with the Walt Disney Company are shaped by our “enchantment” with Disney theme parks, films, and branded merchandise, all of which are specifically designed to produce emotional attachments. Disney expertly utilizes what Marc Gobé (2001, 107) calls “emotional branding,” through which brand designers ensure consumer engagement and loyalty by creating “emotions, sensory experiences, and, ultimately, sales.” As Lynne Pettinger (2015, 145) explains, “the Disney brand, and its specific sub-brands (such as the different films and the products associated with them) are themed to produce ‘enchantment’ and ‘wonder’ amongst target groups, often children.”

For generations, American consumers, the authors included, have held positive associations with Disney (Nicholas Sammond 2005), perceiving that they have been made happy by their experiences with Disney products, services, and experiences. Many American children born since the 1950s began forming emotional attachments to Disney before we learned to speak, contributing to what Shirley Steinberg (2011, 18) calls a “hegemonic hold on children’s culture.” Our love of Disney is tied up in childhood nostalgia (Stephen Fjellman 1992; Giroux and Pollock 2010; Rebecca-Anne Rozario 2004; Jack Zipes 1995) and a lingering belief in the illusive American dream: success, fortune, and pursuit of happiness. Animated Disney films provide important insights into the complex correspondence between objects and feelings, because, unlike other objects, Disney films intentionally invite a happy orientation in that they are explicitly about happiness. This complex correspondence is different from and more intense than the positive emotional attachments we feel toward other texts or objects we love because Disney films are not only things that we associate with a happy feeling; they also teach us what happy feelings should be. Thus, the pedagogical function of affect is multiplex; we learn what happiness is both through the narrative content of the texts themselves and through our embodied experience with those texts, as they become “happy objects” (Ahmed 2010). In the context of Disney Princess films, this process operates to normalize and teach children to literally buy into an ideology of romantic love that is at best unrealistic and at worst individually, culturally, and socially harmful to women not only because it teaches them that self-worth, access to agency, and sense of purpose in the world are attached to marriage, but also because it dismisses, ignores, or demonizes experiences that fall outside a White, female, middle-class, heterosexual ideal while simultaneously refusing to acknowledge how “failure” to “succeed” in enacting that ideal can be a powerful refusal of that norm as well as a conscious critique of it (Jack Halberstam 2011).
In order to examine how Disney’s promise of love is not so promising, we use critical textual analysis to consider how images, dialogue, music, song lyrics, plot, and social contexts convey messages about love and relationships (Alan McKee 2003). Drawing upon McKee’s approach to interpretive cultural textual analysis, we sought to understand how these cultural texts articulate particular meanings with/through constructions of romantic love. The Disney Princess films, along with related media about the films, are the primary sources for our critical textual analysis. The relevance of visual imagery as a source for analysis reflects Stuart Hall’s (2003) interest in the practices used to represent “difference” in popular culture, particularly stereotyping. According to Hall (2003, 258), stereotypes set up “a symbolic frontier between the ‘normal’ and the ‘deviant,’ the ‘normal’ and the ‘pathological,’ the ‘accepted’ and the ‘unacceptable,’ what ‘belongs’ and what is ‘other,’ between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders.’” We accept that, as Hall (2003, 226) contends, visual representation “engages feelings, attitudes, and emotions, and it mobilizes fear and anxieties in the viewer, at deeper levels than we can explain in a simple, common-sense way.” We also acknowledge that these particular representations might evoke different feelings, attitudes, and emotions among different viewers, particularly women, not all of whom are emotionally invested in a Western romantic ideal. In this analysis, however, we are primarily interested in the ways that these films mobilize an ideal of the White, middle-class, heterosexual American woman—the normative “family, faith, and country” ideal that was embraced by millions of American men and women in the recent presidential election. We analyze the visual texts of the films as well as the social, cultural, and academic discourses around romantic love “in order to identify power dynamics, strategies of governance, and moments of resistance” (Sharon Hayes 2014, 8).

**Romantic idealism in Disney Princess films**

Although the Disney Princess films released in the decades since *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) have offered many variations on the original film’s “Someday My Prince Will Come” theme, the belief in love as the source of true happiness has remained a persistent theme, and the resolution of the story is typically centered on the blissful union of the heterosexual couple (Shannon Puechner 2016). Although the newest generation of princesses are more spirited and complex than their early predecessors (Cole Reilly 2016), most of the princess films feature a similar focus on the acquisition of “true love” as the ultimate happy ending. As Danielle DiPirro (2007, 19) observes, “a consistent happily-ever-after image of love accompanied by traditional examples of courtship illustrate that romantic love is the most important aspect of female existence.” As seen in the films we describe here, the hopes and dreams of Disney Princesses are profoundly shaped by the desire for a true love that provides life’s magical meaning, requires suffering and transformation, and is inevitable. The emphasis on this romantic ideal as it is constructed in Disney Princess films acts pedagogically to emotionally attach us to the idea that women’s happiness is defined by the acquisition of love. Therefore, female identity is informed by the promise of true love, a romantic dream that shapes female subjectivities in ways that reinforce heteropatriarchal social structures. In particular, we find that Disney’s romantic ideal of love as the primary source of female happiness operates to limit female agency to a function of romantic love, teach destructive narratives of hope, change, and relational maintenance, and reproduce what Heise (2012) has called “marital hegemony,” which idealizes marriage and perpetuates heteropatriarchal social structures.
True love provides life’s magical meaning

Across the Disney Princess films, love is constructed as a sort of magical mystery that usually entails instantaneous attraction. For example, the first three Disney Princess stories feature straightforward “love at first sight” scenes. In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the Prince professes that he has been “possessed” by love immediately after meeting Snow White. In *Cinderella*, Prince Charming falls in love with Cinderella the moment he sees her at the ball. In *Sleeping Beauty*, Princess Aurora and Prince Phillip fall in love instantly when they stumble upon each other in the woods. In their study of images of families and couples in Disney feature-length animated films, Litsa Tanner, Shelley Haddock, Toni Zimmerman, and Lori Lund (2003) found that love at first sight was a theme in 78.3 percent of the movies they analyzed. For example,

In *Little Mermaid*, Ariel fell in love with Eric at first sight, and he fell in love with her only after hearing her voice. In *Pocahontas*, John Smith and Pocahontas fell in love based on appearances, as they did not speak the same language. (Tanner et al. 2003, 364)

These instant romances offer little insight into how relationships are formed, suggesting that love might be won by wearing pretty dresses, maintaining a flowing head of hair, and keeping an impossibly small waist.

Even in more recent Disney films, which tend to place more obstacles in the way of the fated lovers, instantaneous attraction is almost always present. For example, in *Mulan*, in spite of the fact that Mulan is disguised as a male soldier when she meets Shang, their instant connection is later revealed in the lyrics of the closing song of the film, “True to Your Heart,” which declares, “Baby, I knew at once that you were the one for me.” Similarly, in *The Princess and the Frog*, while Tiana does not immediately realize that she is in love with Prince Naveen, the viewer sees a change in her countenance when she sees him for the first time. As Naveen enters the courtyard, Tiana, upon seeing him, displays the telltale signs of Disney attraction—wide eyes and reddened cheeks—and she instantly glances up at a wishing star, signifying the importance of that fated meeting. Even in *Frozen*, where Disney attempts to satirize the idea of love at first sight, this self-reflexive moment is taken up uncritically by fans. Anna falls instantly for Hans, with whom she engages in a romantic duet that explains how their instant “mental synchronization” signifies that their love is “meant to be.” After their song ends in a spontaneous marriage proposal, Anna’s sister Elsa and her ultimate love interest, Kristoff, both warn her against falling in love with someone she does not know, and Hans is later revealed as a deceitful villain. However, Anna and Hans’ song quickly developed a life of its own outside the narrative of the story as a daddy/daughter lip sync video went viral, spawning a YouTube trend of different variations, all of which engaged with the song in a celebratory, not critical, way, perpetuating instantaneity as an essential part of romantic love.

Although, as Reilly (2016) observes, the Disney Princesses have become progressively more agentic over time, there is no question that the early heroines are helpless characters who passively wait for this “magic” love to happen so that they can begin the “good life,” a life with meaning. As Reilly (2016, 53) observes,

None of these young women exercises agency to overcome their unfortunate positions. Instead, they rely on fairy guardians and playboy princes to come to their rescue. In fact, two of the three are actually comatose and unable to consent to their suitor-stranger’s advance.
While subsequent princesses have interests that do not initially (at least explicitly) center on love—Ariel collects artifacts from the human world, Belle enjoys reading, Jasmine loves animals and longs to explore, Pocahontas loves nature and adventure, Mulan pursues military service—ultimately, their dreams and desires are driven by the hope of the magical love being bestowed upon them. Among the more recent princesses, Tiana, Rapunzel, and Anna all fall in love while in pursuit of other life goals, and Merida and Elsa, while resisting marriage, develop as characters in relation to discourses of love and marriage. While Reilly (2016, 55) notes that each of the more recent princesses “is ambitious and self-reliant, confidently believing in her abilities to realize her dreams,” we contend that these dreams are inextricably intertwined with the pursuit of love.

In these films, the pedagogical lessons are taught to us through the repetition of particular representations of “true love,” which, as they circulate, help distinguish “good” bodies from “bad” ones, to affix particular people and practices to “goodness” and discard others as abject. As these norms are repeated, circulated, commodified, and consumed, “the accumulation of affective value shapes the surfaces of bodies and worlds” (Sara Ahmed 2004, 119), rendering emotional attachments as normal and taken for granted. In this way, happiness becomes defined by the acquisition of love, and thus the princes who magically fall in love with the awaiting princesses become happy objects, or as Ahmed (2010, 26) would say, “happiness pointers, as if to follow their point would be to find happiness.” This is true not only for the princesses who fall in love, but also for Merida and Elsa, who are the exceptions in that they are not paired with a prince. While Merida refuses an arranged marriage, her ungraceful, tomboyish character is transformed and primed for her role as princess and all its attendant duties. As Annette Furo, Nichole Grant, Pamela Rogers, and Kelsey Schmitz (2016, 214) note, her “willfulness then is not emancipatory or liberatory” but, instead, leads to a moment of being “bent back” to the right will. For her efforts she simply delays the inevitable marriage and is “straightened” to the will “on the way” (Sara Ahmed 2014), the will of being and becoming a princess.

Elsa, on the other hand, who is set apart from the rest of society because of her unpredictable and potentially dangerous magical powers serves as a foil to typical Disney Princesses who desire love and marriage, illustrating that the only alternative to the pursuit of the romantic ideal is a life of isolation and abjection.

The standards of happiness, as portrayed in the Disney Princess films, are, of course, different for men. As Annalee Ward (2002, 120) observes, “to be female means to be focused on romantic love and the necessity of good looks. To be male is to pursue one’s dreams and become an active part of society.” While the princes often have limited roles in the plot of the film itself, they have identities that exist outside the pursuit of romance, reinforcing cultural norms and gendered stereotypes in which “traditional masculine roles prioritise independence, assertiveness and sexual exploration and traditional feminine roles prioritise passivity and virtue” (Erin O’Brien, Sharon Hayes, and Belinda Carpenter 2013, 23). Even when the princesses begin to exhibit more independence and assertiveness in pursuit of other goals—for Ariel, inhabiting the human world, for Tiana, opening her restaurant, and for Mulan, defending the honor of her family—unlike the princes, these goals are never presented as good enough in and of themselves. As illustrated by the princess narratives, other life goals are secondary to the pursuit of love and can be achieved within the context of the true love relationship. As Julia Wood (2001, 242) notes, “The romance narrative portrays women . . . as needing men to be complete and fulfilled.” Thus, happiness not only exists
externally, but depends upon a man, directing female agency toward the man. As Jill Henke, Diane Umble, and Nancy Smith (1996, 247) assert, it is “disquieting to witness adventurous and interesting role models . . . succumbing to the dominant heterosexual, patriarchal notion that, in the final analysis, satisfaction is defined not by self-knowledge, being or accomplishments, but by a role prescribed through marriage.”

Attaching the fulfillment of women to the acquisition of a magical, romantic love perpetuates a set of logics that “living increasingly becomes a scene of the administration, discipline and recalibration of what constitutes health” (Berlant 2011, 97), which, in the case of women, is dependent upon love. Because happiness is ultimately expressed as the acquisition of love, no matter what a woman accomplishes, she is somehow “less than” a whole person without the true love of a man. Advancing the idea that agency is limited to the acquisition of the romantic ideal, specifically a Disney love that is instantaneous and inexplicable puts women in a troubling double bind, in that our ultimate happiness is dependent upon the whims of fate. Not only are we told that we require a man in order to exercise agency, but the love that we are told we need to give our life meaning is beyond our control—we must wait for the magic of love to find us.

**True love requires suffering and transformation**

Within Disney Princess films, true love also typically involves a significant transformation that often necessitates suffering. In both *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty*, the princesses, after falling in love, suffer in a state of near-death as they await the life-giving transformation that true love’s kiss will bring. Cinderella experiences a more explicit but fleeting transformation as she is magically made over from a scullery maid into an elegant princess with an exquisite ball gown and glass slippers. Her complete transformation, signified by her marriage to Prince Charming, comes only after she suffers further humiliation at the hands of her evil step-family. This theme of transformation becomes even more explicit with the newer films, including *The Little Mermaid*, in which Ariel allows her body to be magically mutilated so that her single fin can be split apart into two legs that enable her to become part of Eric’s human world. While Pocahontas’ subtle assimilation into English culture, which is further developed in the second film, *Pocahontas II: Journey to a New World*, is perhaps less dramatic, it nonetheless serves the same purpose, allowing her to inhabit the world of her true love.

In several films, the princess, while experiencing her own changes, is also actively engaged in transforming her love interest into an acceptable mate. For example, Belle, at first horrified by her captor, lovingly and patiently “tames” the Beast, breaking the spell and transforming him into a handsome prince. Similarly, Tiana, after becoming a frog, helps Naveen see the importance of hard work, changing him from a lazy and deceitful freeloader to a hardworking, honest prince. In *Tangled*, while Rapunzel undergoes a coming of age transformation that climaxes with the cutting of her magical hair, she forcefully (and literally, with a frying pan) beats the thievery out of Flynn, molding him into a respectable man. The same theme is apparent in *Frozen*, when Kristoff and Anna encounter the trolls, who serenade Anna with a song called “Fixer Upper,” in an attempt to encourage her to fall in love with Kristoff. The trolls proclaim that “everyone’s a bit of a fixer upper,” but that “true love”—a force that is “powerful and strange”—is capable of bringing out the best in people, even when they make bad choices. These princesses thus operate as the saviors of true love. As Karen Wohlwend (2012, 594) points out, “even films with ostensibly agentic heroines, such as Ariel, Pocahontas,
Belle, and Tiana, who save their heroes, and Mulan, who saves her country, accomplish these feats through self-sacrifice and deference to a male hero.” In Disney’s view of romantic love, then, the princess must transform herself to be ready for and worthy of true love, and, if her love interest is not already desirable and princely, she must also transform him into a better potential partner.

As Hayes (2014, 66) explains, “the discourse of romantic love prioritizes relational maintenance above all else” and suggests that love conquers all obstacles. These obstacles are part of the transformation that must occur in order for true love to be acquired and maintained, which limits female agency to that which can be achieved within the true love relationship. Once fate brings Prince Charming into the picture, we learn that the princesses can control the behaviors, values, and emotions of men both through the transformation of the self and through acting upon the love partner. As Hayes (2014, 51) observes,

Disney distorts what love looks like, what it should feel like, and misrepresents the cues and signals that girls should be looking for. Our love culture teaches girls they can change and control the feelings of a man. We often believe we can make them love us.

This notion that we can control others and their feelings has long been recognized as a hallmark of unhealthy emotional dependence, as seen particularly in codependent people, who as Melody Beattie (1992, 41) explains, “think and feel responsible for other people—for other people’s feelings, thoughts, actions, choices, wants, needs, well-being, lack of well-being, and ultimate destiny.” Western ideologies of romantic love, particularly the notion that true love requires sacrifice and should last forever, contribute to the normalization of emotional dependence. As Darlene Lancer (2012, 29) observes, “It’s no coincidence that the codependency movement arose in America, the champion of romantic love with the highest divorce rate. Americans want romance to work!”

In Disney Princess films, the notion that women can and should control the feelings of a man is achieved symbolically through the transformation of the true love partner, such as the “taming” of the Beast in Beauty and the Beast. Kathryn Olson (2013, 449) noted that the Beast’s violent episodes “encourage an admirable, but compliant ‘victim’ to believe she can reform a violent mate through nurturing care” and suggest that women should interpret “rough behavior as intense romantic passion.” Other examples in the Disney Princess films—Tiana’s changing of Naveen and Rapunzel’s changing of Flynn, for instance—provide perhaps less dramatic but no less problematic examples of a similar logic, as these princesses put up with bad behavior on the part of their love interests in their attempts to change them into better partners. These “Prince Charmings” are “no less controlling and dominating” than the Beast, because, as Hayes (2014, 51) notes, when a woman’s self-worth is determined by her ability to attract a male partner, “it matters not whether he is good or bad—indeed, the bad boy lover and partner is one of the most sought-after stereotypes.” In fact, as we have seen in the sometimes difficult transformations of the princesses, suffering is celebrated and “considered an inevitable part of enduring intimate relationships” (Hayes 2014, 69). These “dark romance narratives” (Wood 2001, 244) lead to an acceptance of insidious Western notions that depict love as painful, controlling, and obsessive and contribute to self-destructive behaviors. When women believe themselves to be in charge of men’s feelings and behaviors, they become primarily responsible for the maintenance of the relationship, therefore further binding agency to the happy object of true love. Because female happiness is so tightly attached to the acquisition and maintenance of the love relationship, she becomes what Hayes (2014) describes as the “saviour of relationships,” sacrificing her needs
and desires in order to sustain the relationship. These discourses of romantic love encourage women to work toward the maintenance of relationships, even when those relationships might be harmful and destructive.

**True love is inevitable**

Finally, the Disney Princess narratives construct love as a timeless, eternal force that always inevitably prevails. As illustrated when Snow White wishes for the one she loves to “find her,” suggesting that her love for Prince Charming precedes her first fated encounter with him, the instantaneousness of true love emerges from the inevitability of an attraction that is governed by destiny. Similarly, in *Sleeping Beauty*, Aurora sings of having known her true love “once upon a dream,” again signifying that fate has already chosen her Prince for her; she has only to await his arrival. Likewise, Cinderella’s glass slipper symbolizes her fate; she is the only woman who is “fit” to become Princess. This theme of inevitability is also illustrated in Tiana’s glance at the wishing star when she sees Naveen for the first time, and in the lyrics of *Mulan*’s “True to Your Heart,” which proclaim that “Deep in my soul, I know that I’m your destiny.” In the song, “If I Never Knew You,” a duet between Pocahontas and John Smith, John sings, “If I never held you / I would never have a clue / How at last I’d find in you / the missing part of me.” Again, the idea of a “missing part” suggests that the couple is predestined for love.

This inevitable, fated love, as it is consistently constructed across the Disney Princess films, is capable of overcoming any obstacle, including dark magic as well as barriers of social class, gender, language, and even species. Dark magic was the primary obstacle for both Snow White and Aurora, each of whom were left comatose by an evil spell that could only be broken by the magic of true love’s kiss. In *The Little Mermaid*, the dark magic of Ursula leaves Ariel without a voice with which to woo Eric, but the two fall hopelessly in love nonetheless. In both *Beauty and the Beast* and *Princess and the Frog*, characters are magically transformed, leaving them to navigate their paths toward love as animals, although true love ultimately prevails. Cultural, language, and class barriers also seem to pose little threat to love’s inevitability, as illustrated by Pocahontas, who falls in love with John Smith in spite of the fact that they do not speak the same language. Jasmine, the daughter of the wealthy Sultan of Agrabah overcomes class barriers when she chooses Aladdin, a penniless “street urchin,” and the magical love that destined Cinderella to become Princess could not be hindered by the vast class gap between a lowly orphan and a royal heir.

In addition to overcoming social, cultural, and magical barriers, true love also trumps time, as epitomized by the standard fairy tale phrase, “happily ever after,” which implies that the couples are destined for eternal wedded bliss. While the later princess movies do not conclude with the fairy tale storybook image seen in the Pre-Renaissance films, the wedding—the symbolic and ostensibly permanent uniting of the fated lovers—figures prominently into the narratives. In fact, of the 11 Disney Princess films currently in the collection, only two do not end in a wedding or the promise of a wedding, and even those that do not (*Pocahontas* and *Brave*) leave open the possibility of future betrothal. Furthermore, the idea that true love lasts forever is perpetuated by the way in which the formal union of the couple operates as the romantic climax of and conclusion to most of the films, leaving viewers to assume the impossibility of dissolution.
By consistently emphasizing marriage as a natural and inevitable step in solidifying the union of the true love partners, Disney’s romantic ideal teaches that marriage is the “most highly valued form of family life in American culture, the most prestigious way to live your life” (Andrew Cherlin 2010, 9). Stephanie Coontz (2005, 292) asserts that this cultural prioritization of marriage constructs “lifelong marriage” as a “moral imperative.” As Heise (2012) explains, these discourses of love and marriage create pedagogical “bridal fictions” through which we are taught and learn compulsory heteronormativity. That is, we learn the “right” way to do (heterosexual) relationships, as “weddings, marriage, romance, and heterosexuality become naturalized to the point where we consent to the belief that marriage is necessary to achieve a sense of well-being, belonging, passion, morality and love” (Chrys Ingraham 1999, 120). These bridal fictions limit the available categories for female self-definition to either single or married, which implies “that the organization of identity in relation to marriage is universal and in no need of explanation” (Ingraham 1999, 17). This taken-for-grantedness of marriage leads to the pervasive idealization of marriage and constructs what Heise (2012) refers to as a “marital hegemony,” which is fueled by “the saturation of American popular culture with celebratory depictions of the white wedding as public performance and symbolic manifestation of the values associated with marriage” (para. 2). Because marriage is taken-for-granted as the only legitimate form for true love relationships, marriage becomes “one of the modes of cultural transmission and social organization through which society is reproduced” (Hayes 2014, 19).

The cruel optimism of Disney’s romantic ideal

The narratives of romantic love that are circulated through Disney Princess films are popular, powerful, and durable. Our long-standing positive associations with Disney have not only fostered a profound and pervasive love of Disney but also an equally profound love for love itself; thus these discourses of love are concretized as “social memories” through the repetition of “bounded sets of symbolizations (texts, images, songs, monuments, and rituals) and associated emotions” (Roger Simon, Sharon Rosenberg, and Claudia Eppert 2000, 3). The attachments and knowledges produced through this process can be mobilized to “serve particular spatiotemporal frameworks” (Simon et al. 2000, 3). The ideal of romantic love that consumers buy into constructs a “symbolic frontier” (Hall 2003) between what is acceptable and unacceptable in love relationships, shaping discourses of love that can be deployed to sustain hegemony and maintain social order. Thus, Disney, operating as an affective economy, is thus helping to change how control works within late capitalism, as direct ideological manipulation has been replaced by “the modulation of affect” (Mark Andrejevic 2011, 610). This shift to control via affect “has been essential to installing a conservative neo-liberalism” (Patricia Clough 2009, 52). Brian Massumi (2002, 45) thus posits, “affect is a real condition, an intrinsic variable of the late capitalist system, as infrastructural as a factory.”

The pervasive idealization of marriage that is perpetuated through Disney’s romantic ideal exemplifies Berlant’s (2011) “cruel optimism” because it creates a loving attachment between us and the very patriarchal social structures that limit our agency and narrowly define our categories of being in the world. These attachments are cruel in that women who focus on the acquisition and maintenance of the true love relationship “might not well endure the loss of their object or scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being” (Lauren Berlant 2006, 21). Because women are taught through bridal fictions that their
self-worth, access to agency, and sense of purpose in the world are attached to marriage, the institution of marriage provides for many a sense of continuity in identity. This focus on the acquisition and maintenance of the true love relationship influences the way we go about building our lives, embedding us in the “processes and procedures involved historically in the administration of law and bodies,” which are continually reproduced through bridal fictions and our attachments to them (Berlant 2011, 93). Thus, the happy object of marriage, concretized through the circulation of texts that romanticize love and marriage in similar ways, is an “enabling object that is also disabling” (Berlant 2006, 22).

The optimism of Disney’s romantic ideal is also cruel because it perpetuates social inequalities by distracting us from attending to the conditions in which they are produced. Contemporary bridal fictions about the romantic ideal offer a powerful hope at a time when the Western fantasies of upward mobility, job security, and social equality seem utterly unattainable. However, as illustrated by Disney Princess films, as well as other popular culture texts that romanticize marriage, including shows like The Bachelor, which airs on Disney-owned network ABC, only certain bodies are shown to us as partaking in these idealized romance rituals. As Heise (2012, para. 19) notes, “contemporary bridal fictions feature almost exclusively young to middle-aged, white, able-bodied couples with upper to middle class identities that conform to the heteronormative matrix, both physically and socially.” When we do see women of color and working-class women depicted in romance or marriage-themed popular culture, it is most often in shows like Bridezillas and My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding, where they are mocked by the show narrators and depicted as out of control, despicable, and unworthy of a beautiful wedding. By attaching “happily ever after” to particular “kinds” of people, these hegemonic discourses of romantic love and marriage thus not only promote marriage as the only way to happiness, but also “promote certain kinds of white, heterosexual, upper-class identities that normatively inform our understanding of who is seen as entitled to this form of state-sanctioned relationship” (Heise 2012, para. 5). As Hall (2003) explains, such discourses use emotional attachments to help define what is normal and deviant, accepted and unacceptable. These Disney Princess narratives help “present an essentially conservative image of the world which confirms and reaffirms the conventional and the normal” (Alan Bryman 1995, 98), including traditional images of marriage and romantic love. This image promotes what Heise (2012, para. 19) describes as a “visual regime” that stigmatizes “those who are not able or do not want to get married” and determines who is seen as entitled to the “socially validated identity” associated with marriage. This visual regime limits female agency to the single/married binary and structures categories of identity in which some people are not entitled to the happy object of marriage, reinforcing the positive affective value that constructs the entitlement to marriage as a social good.

As evidenced by the current US context of widespread political, social, and economic instability, and as illustrated by the recent presidential campaign, female subjectivity is a discursive battleground upon which the wars of heteropatriarchy are waged. Within this precarious context, there is something seductive about the destructive narratives of control and relational maintenance; the special responsibility of women to nurture and maintain true love provides us with a profound sense of purpose while operating to perpetuate the heteropatriarchal social structures that shape our everyday lives. As Lauren Berlant (2008, 174) explains, “what makes women special and singularly women is the burden they bear of producing emotional clarity for others and protecting everyone’s optimism for intimacy’s potentially lifting effects.” Within the current sociopolitical context in particular, these
discourses attach Americans to the hopeful wish for true love as the ultimate source of female happiness and fulfillment, which normalizes the white, middle-class, nuclear heterosexual family as a universal ideal, an affective fiction that, in the wake of the presidential election, has frightening material consequences for people who fall outside that perceived norm. As Naomi Wood (1996, 35) explained, “Sociologically, the dreams here are opiates of a sort in that they demand and receive a kind of subservience, an obedience to larger social structures: the institutions of love, marriage, procreation, and of patriarchal order.” Like Snow White, who trusts a dark wishing well with her fondest hopes and dreams for the true love that will make her life complete, the Disney Princesses teach women to invest their hopes and dreams in the dark fantasy of true love.

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