

Cinderella goes to the purity ball: An open letter on feminism and girl culture, written to my female undergraduate students

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ABSTRACT

The author responds to the observed complacency and post-feminist rhetoric embraced by some of her female undergraduate students, exhorting them to reexamine girl culture, pop culture, feminism and the anti-intellectualism that pervades contemporary U.S. culture. An analysis of the princess trope in girl culture is followed by commentary on the place of education in a struggling economy. The letter concludes with a challenge to young women to become involved agitators instead of tiara-clad spectators in their own political lives.

KEYWORDS

gender, feminism, girl culture, popular culture, post-feminism

Dear Students,¹

I've been watching you all over the past few years. I know we've enjoyed class discussion together and I've read your papers, journals and other materials. However, I'm writing this open letter with each of you in mind because there are some very important things I want to tell you and the margins of your papers were not wide enough, nor were our class periods or lectures long enough for me to tell you how concerned I am about you. I listen to you talk about boyfriends and marriage while I hear you distance yourself from political and social discourse. I witness your skewed interpretation of and participation in contemporary girl culture. I hear you talk about 'the feminists' with disdain. I wince as you talk about taking only the easiest classes, because I know how bright and full of promise each of you are. I hear nothing about the future beyond your plans for the weekend, like Cinderella planning for the ball. In short: you and your generation worry me.

I'm going to start out by telling you a couple of little stories. One is a story about a colleague, the other is about me. Several years ago a colleague of mine who was also a teacher educator came to me, frazzled, after her late-night teaching methods class. She was upset because a student had confronted her with questions about the relevance of the course material. I smiled and shuffled through some papers and told her that of course our students question the relevance of what we teach them is, after all, critical thinkers who typically become frustrated in their intense teacher education coursework. No, she said, it wasn't that at all. She had introduced a reading on girls and girl culture and a male student had become angry, not critical, really *angry*—about the selection. He asked if she felt like they should all know about girls and girlhood because she was a feminist, and why wasn't there an equal focus on boys and boyhood? What about the white men, he had asked. The interaction so upset my

colleague not only because this material was important to her personally, but because this young man was training to become a teacher and she interpreted his resistance to mean that he didn't really think girls were important. He also characterised feminism as a malevolent influence. I asked my colleague how she handled this event and she shrugged her shoulders. 'How do you handle these things?' she asked, 'I listened, I nodded my head, I felt the anger inside me flowing right back at him.' I was a graduate student at the time. I didn't know the right answer, but I felt her anger, and my own panic. I also wondered (secretly, sheepishly) if my course evaluations would suffer because I openly identified myself as a feminist.

Now for my second story. While I was a senior in college I visited my favorite aunt at her home in New Mexico. I remember distinctly what I was wearing, what we were talking about, what the weather was like, and what we were doing. I remember these details so precisely nearly twenty years ago because this was a very important moment for me. It was in this conversation that I told my aunt that I wasn't a feminist. I think I even said something inane like, 'I'm not a feminist, I'm a humanist.' It was an offhand comment and I imagine that I thought I was very clever. My aunt did not. She turned around in her seat and asked, 'What do you mean you're not a feminist? How can you say that?'

I sputtered stupidly. She was clearly horrified. 'Do you know what your mother's and my generation did for you?' she continued. 'Do you know where you would be without feminism? Do you understand that if you don't embrace and agitate for women's rights to equality, dignity and respect every day and in everything that you do it will slip from your grasp like *that*?'

I still didn't have anything intelligent to say. My aunt's eyes narrowed as she spoke; 'the distance between your life now and your life as a piece of property is measured only in time reduced by indifference. Yours.'

I still get goosebumps whenever I think about it. I'm not sure how I responded to her but I'm sure it was far from adequate. What I do know is that from then on, anytime anyone asked me if I was a feminist, I responded that yes, I am, though people didn't always take that very well. I don't think this is because they were bad people, but like me they didn't always know what feminism and activism were, and they certainly weren't out looking for complex answers and therefore fell prey to the most facile pop culture dreck² out there. As bell hooks wrote in her book, *Feminism is for Everybody* (2000),

Everywhere I go I proudly tell folks who want to know who I am and what I do that I am a writer, a feminist theorist, a cultural critic. Most people find this exciting and want to know more . . . But feminist theory—that's the place where the questions stop. Instead I tend to hear all about the evil of feminism and the bad feminists, how "they" hate men, how "they" want to go against nature—and God, how "they" are all lesbians, how "they" are taking all the jobs and making the world hard for white men, who do not stand a chance . . . I have wanted them to have an answer to the question *what is feminism?* that is rooted in neither fear nor fantasy. I have wanted them to

have this simple definition to read again and again so they know: Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression (hooks, 2000: 3-4).

I'm beginning my letter to you with these stories for three reasons: 1) because I have heard all of you grumble about feminists and feminism in the way hooks describe, 2) because I have also grumbled, and 3) because I want you to understand that at the end of the day, feminism is truly for everybody, but especially for you and your generational cohort. For the current youth generation, the stakes have never been higher than they are at this moment. All men and women should be feminists and activists. Being a feminist means agitating aggressively for a socially and economically just world that allows everyone to be, as Paolo Freire (1974) suggests, more fully human. We all deserve to pursue this, our foremost 'ontological vocation' (Freire, 1994: 98), and I would say that feminism helps us do it.

A little context and a few canaries

I want to get back to those high stakes I talked about a few paragraphs ago. If you are reading this and are a young person, in college or University, your generation is facing some unique challenges. The world feels remarkably unstable just at this moment. The media capitalise on this perception of instability and seek to profit from our worries. Whether our concerns are economic, political, environmental or all-of-the-above, it is difficult to be forever vigilant. It is rather like working in a coalmine, deep underground where, focused on the work at hand it can be all too easy to fall victim to the lethal, odorless toxic gases that can pervade an underground environment with little warning. There was a time when miners would keep canaries in little cages with them in the coalmines as a primitive early-warning system: if a canary died, it was time to get out of the mine, as the little bird's death was a warning that toxic gases were growing strong enough to overpower the miners themselves. The bird was the warning. Hence the old phrase, canaries in the coalmine.

Sexism, patriarchy and oppression—these are all silent insidious killers that most people really don't notice or, if they do, they are all too easy to dismiss. Feminism and activism are for everybody because even though women may be the canaries, we are all in the coalmine. As you read on, dear students, there are four big ideas I want you to understand:

1. 'Girl power' and 'post-feminism' are not the same thing.
2. Princesses may appear innocent fun but are really a toxic distraction.
3. The 'New Economy' is a friend to no one, and especially not to you.
4. Understanding the lives of girls and women is in everyone's best interest.

'Girl power' and 'post-feminism' are not the same thing

Way back when I was young in the late 1990s Girl Power came to the pop culture fore: it promoted scrappy, do-it-yourself activism for girls and women, resistance to conspicuous

consumption and, as laid out by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, ‘power exercised by girls; specifically a self-reliant attitude among girls and young women manifested in ambition, assertiveness, and individualism’³. The Girl Power discourse of the ’90s and early 2000s has recently (in your lifetime, readers) evaporated and been replaced with a girl culture largely defined by ‘post-feminist’ rhetoric (Douglas, 2010). This rhetoric implies that as a global culture we are ‘post-feminist’— to wit: we don’t need feminism anymore and can go back to our regularly scheduled programming. Now, how did that happen? As Susan Douglas, author of the spectacular book *Enlightened Sexism: The Seductive Message that Feminism’s Work is Done* (2010) wryly explains,

Because women are now “equal” and the battle is over and won, we are now free to embrace things we used to see as sexist, including hyper-girliness. In fact, this is supposed to be a relief. Thank God girls and women can turn their backs on stick-in-the-mud, curdled feminism and now act dumb in string bikinis to attract guys. In fact, now that women allegedly have the same sexual freedom as men, they actually prefer to be sex objects because it is liberating. According to enlightened sexism, women today have a choice between feminism and anti-feminism, and they just naturally and happily choose the latter because well, anti-feminism has become cool, even hip. Rejecting feminism and buying into enlightened sexism allows young women in particular to be “one of the guys.” Indeed, enlightened sexism is meant to make patriarchy pleasurable for women (Douglas, 2010: 12).

Douglas observes that the illusions of power associated with post-feminist rhetoric constitute a ‘powerful choke leash, letting women venture out, offering us fantasies of power, control and love, and then pulling us back in’, and that these fantasies are dangerous because they ‘distract us from our ongoing status: still, despite everything, as second class citizens’ (Douglas, 2010: 17).

And make no mistake, we are second-class citizens. For those of us in the United States, we do not have an Equal Rights Amendment. I, for one, still make around 75 cents to a male colleague’s dollar, according to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics⁴. Rape is considered a legitimate weapon of war worldwide. The United States Department of Justice⁵ and the Centers for Disease Control statistics paint a grim picture of violence against women: One of four women in the United States will be raped before she is 18 years old, one in five during college and fewer than five percent of these will be reported to police. That is around 600 women every day, the majority of whom are young women. Also according to these same sources, three American women are murdered by an intimate partner every day. While we enjoy compulsory schooling and high literacy rates in most of the United States and Europe, most women worldwide still fight for a basic education. And no matter where we are or who we are, we are told every day that how we look to others is more important than how we feel, what we feel, or what we think. But post-feminism would have us believe that we shouldn’t worry about these things, but distract ourselves instead by buying a pair of sparkly shoes or reading novels about vampire control fantasies, or watching movies about singing

mermaids and self-sacrificing princesses whose ‘reward’ is marriage and the eternal youth implied, but never realised, in ‘happily ever after’.

Princesses may appear sparkly and fun but are really a toxic distraction

One of the biggest distractions that contribute to the preponderance and relative durability of post-feminist rhetoric starts very young with a cultural obsession with princesses that Orenstein (2011) has compellingly described as anything but benign. Orenstein writes,

Since when did every little girl become a princess? . . . According to the American Psychological Association, the girlie-girl culture’s emphasis on beauty and play-sexiness can increase girls’ vulnerability to the pitfalls that most concern parents: depression, eating disorders, distorted body image, risky sexual behavior (Orenstein, 2011: 4-6).

The concept of a ‘princess’, per se, is hardly new, but the way in which it appears in contemporary popular culture is historically and culturally unique. As Orenstein observes, when she was a child and ‘Feminism was still a mere twinkle in our mothers’ eyes, we did not dress head to toe in pink. We did not have our own miniature high heels’ (Orenstein, 2011: 4). More than simply being about the fantasy, or dressing the part, the princess phenomena is compliance and complicity with patriarchy on overdrive, what Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) might call ‘emphasized femininity’ (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005: 849) heightened for the under-18 set. That princesses are being marketed in this particular way, at this particular socio-historical moment is a clever kind of age-appropriate subterfuge: girls are being convinced to colonise themselves by adopting and promoting ‘forms of femininity that disempower women’ (Griffiths, 2006: 403), sidelining *themselves* and calling it empowerment—taking themselves out of the game and sliding into the passenger seat like so many sparkly, pink zombies.

Some of you may have read an article I wrote some years ago about this phenomenon, titled ‘Princesses and Passengers’ (Galman, 2010). In it, I talk about watching my daughter playing a pretend game with her little brother. She makes him drive their pretend boat (even though he really doesn’t want to) so she can ride in the passenger seat and sing and pretend to brush her hair and wait for her prince to come. She also explains that, in her words, ‘the princess doesn’t drive’. In the real-life incident, I suggested that maybe she could be a queen—again, thinking I was very clever because then she could wear the tiara but still have some actual power—but that was a no-go. ‘Queens are old, Mommy.’ It is important to note that even my three year old knew that she did not want to be a queen—as Marjorie Williams (2005) suggested, ‘it is a rare little girl who wants to grow up to be queen . . .to wish to be a princess is not simply to aspire upward, to royalty; it is also to aspire to perpetual daughter-hood, to permanent shelter, to dependency giving up the infinite possibilities of independence for the limitations and the seductions of dependence’ (Williams, 2005: 186-188). Being a princess is

an illusion of power. It is a gilded cage. It is a trap that puts primacy on the appearances instead of substance, power and, on some level, political and personal consciousness.

I have lots of friends who load up their houses with Disney princess paraphernalia. Indeed, one of my own daughters wore me down and I now drive around with a princess booster seat in my minivan, on which my Kindergartener rests her glittery self at least twice a day. So what if my daughter wants to be a princess, watch the Disney movies and dance around in a tiara? Right? I mean, she's just a kid and what harm can it possibly do?

Even without Orenstein's reminders of the long-term costs of princess-mania, I remind myself that this represents a disturbing cultural shift: a generation ago we idolised fictional girls like Harriet the Spy or Pippi Longstocking, and real women like Barbara Jordan, Eleanor Roosevelt and Helen Keller—not because of who they were but because of what they said and did. Today young girls idolise an imaginary maiden from the Disney cartoon film adaptation of the European folk tale *Beauty and the Beast*. In it, the maiden sacrificed herself in a bestial marriage to save her father and possibly become a princess through the virtues of self-abnegation and accepting physical, sexual and emotional imprisonment. Snow White is another Disney princess idol, but her primary value is a bit simpler: she spends most of her story appearing to be dead. Stories like these represent one of the ways that girl power disappeared, and there is much more to it than imaginary play for little girls. The same energy that fuels a dancing Disney princess promotes similar trends in adult girl culture. Adult women make choices like this all the time where they take the passenger seat in their own lives and call it empowerment. Here are just a few examples taken from examples in my own research over the years.

Cinderella goes to the Purity Ball

In my research on gender, young women, work and culture I have had a chance to see many different facets of girl culture. I'm interested in girls' and women's cultures because I think they matter, and that they tell us a lot about what is going on in the national and global culture. While working with college women in the Western US, I encountered the world of the Purity Ball. I came upon this topic a bit by accident; my original study was of young pre-service teachers in a University teacher education program. The study was about teacher education students, identity development and belief systems. I had long suspected that my participants were more politically and socially conservative than many of their age-mates in other areas of study, and the interview protocol I used focused a great deal on individual belief systems and multiple identities. For example, I might ask a participant to draw a picture of themselves and an elicitation method, and then talk together about the different identities present, such as racial/ethnic identity, spiritual identity, vocational identity and so on. 11 female study participants revealed in the course of interviews that they wore purity rings, having pledged their physical virginity and emotional purity to their fathers as preadolescents at father-daughter dances called Purity Balls. I was eager to know more. Many

described how, dressed in gowns, gloves and tiaras, they make the promise of virginity until heterosexual marriage both to their fathers and in the context of their protestant Christian religious beliefs amidst ceremony and symbolism, crossed swords and white crosses. More than one participant described herself as ‘Daddy’s princess’ or ‘Jesus’ princess’. Among my research participants, attending a Purity Ball was an important milestone common across their peer groups, on par with Sweet Sixteen or Quinceañera celebrations in other social and cultural settings, or even the more mundane American teen ritual of getting a driver’s license, or going to the prom. In the spirit of cultural relativism and emic interpretation, I sought to understand the phenomenon of the Purity Ball from the participant perspective, however it was, and still is, difficult for me to cast this ritual as an innocuous rite of passage.

Of course, nothing is ever simple. There are some positive aspects to this ritual; it is rooted in the progressive tradition of resisting extending girls’ childhoods and prioritising schooling, and of developing strong relationships between daughters and fathers. But I keep going back to the princess phenomenon, and its apparent primacy. What is the relationship between being a princess and being a virgin? Where are the mothers in all of this and why can’t you also be ‘Mommy’s princess’ if indeed you must be a princess at all⁶? Not to sound glib, but couldn’t we accomplish bonding and healthy relationships with a church-sponsored father-daughter camping trip? Finally, I wondered about the girls who do not identify as heterosexual, or who may choose other vocations instead of marriage. They, apparently, do not get to be anyone’s princess.

In examples from Banerjee’s (2008) and Gibbs’ (2007) reports on purity balls, rituals were central. Gibbs writes of one young woman, Kylie, who ‘talks with an unblinking confidence about a promise that she says is spiritual, mental and physical.’ Kylie continues, describing a conversation with her parents:

“We discussed what it means to be a teenager in today’s world,” she says. They gave her a charm for her bracelet--a lock in the shape of a heart. Her father has the key. “On my wedding day, he’ll give it to my husband,” she explains. “It’s a symbol of my father giving up the covering of my heart, protecting me, since it means my husband is now the protector. He becomes like the shield to my heart, to love me as I’m supposed to be loved” (Gibbs, 2007: 2).

Gruesome symbolism aside, it is clear, again, that there are *some* positive aspects to this kind of thinking, but they are easily lost in the more controversial, old school sexism that dominates these incarnations of the Purity Ball. Banerjee describes how fathers are scripted as protectors of ‘desperate’ and defenseless daughters. She reports how organisers address fathers at the ball itself, saying,

Fathers, our daughters are waiting for us . . . They are desperately waiting for us in a culture that lures them into the murky waters of exploitation. They need to be rescued by you, their dad (Banerjee, 2008: 1).

The combative language and discourse of masculine custodianship—fathers are ‘warriors’ for and guardians of their daughters’ physical and emotional purity until they marry (at which point we assume they relinquish interest?) aren’t so great for the girls or their fathers. Similarly, this is hardly a positive way to position young men and boys on the periphery, who are positioned-by-default as the hyper-sexual, dangerous other until they become protective fathers themselves. Girls are positioned very much as pretty, pink chattel: protected by men, from men. It calls to mind the American stereotype of a backwoods, tobacco-chewing father sitting on the stoop with a shotgun to threaten/greet his daughter’s first date or a medieval warlord locking his daughter in a convent or chastity belt until she was old enough to sell into marriage to the highest bidder. Antiquated and objectifying, the Purity Pledge so many of my research participants took and other movements were fuelled by abstinence organisations and young celebrity endorsements—think about Jessica Simpson, whose career as a talented musician took back seat to her career as a former virgin, beginning with the live broadcast of singer’s 2002 wedding and frank discussion of her virginity. She was very much her father’s princess, Cinderella at her very own purity ball, with television cameras following her right up to the doors of the honeymoon suite. The wedding special, which was the pop culture equivalent of holding up a bloody bed sheet for all viewers to see, was followed by the Music Television (MTV) series, *Newlyweds: Nick and Jessica* (2002-2005) which portrayed Jessica as the archetypal ‘dumb blonde’ whose stupidity was employed as the sitcom’s primary comic focus—indeed, she had nothing else of value left and the popular press has treated her accordingly. Virginity and abstinence quickly translated into a fashion statement—even if contemporary research suggested that, in reality, Cinderella’s magic virginity ball really does turn back into a great big pumpkin: research suggests that those who pledged their virginity were as a whole only slightly less likely to engage in sexual activity before marriage, and were significantly more likely to do so without contraceptive protection when compared with non-pledgers (Banerjee, 2008; Bearman & Bruckner, 2001; Bersamin et al., 2005).

Vampires and victims

Considering that my research has also included girls’ experiences with material and consumer culture, an analysis of girls and girl culture would not be complete without a good critique of the *Twilight* (Meyer, 2008) novels. You know these—the stories of forbidden love between a young girl and the glittery, undead boyfriend she is willing to die for? Meyer’s hero and his attentions to his beloved are intended to be romantic, even chivalrous, but when re-examined in the cold light of day he seems more like an abusive rather than loving or stable partner. For example, in one of their romantic exchanges, the romantic hero, Edward Cullen, tells the romantic heroine, Bella Swan, that he could easily kill her.

“It’s just that you are so soft, so fragile. I have to mind my actions every moment that we’re together so that I don’t hurt you. I could kill you quite easily, Bella, simply by

accident.” His voice had become just a soft murmur. He moved his icy palm to rest it against my cheek. “If I was too hasty . . . if for one second I wasn't paying enough attention, I could reach out, meaning to touch your face, and crush your skull by mistake. You don't realize how incredibly *breakable* you are.” (Meyer, 2008: 310)

This is supposed to be romantic, and desirable: women are fragile and breakable, men are natural killing machines, always on the verge of uncontrollable violence. That danger is supposed to be exciting, and all supposed love is conflated with danger, submission and sacrifice. Further, these books are another good example of the adult version of the Disney princess phenomenon, or as Orenstein (2011) writes, ‘a direct line from Prince Charming to *Twilight*'s Edward Cullen to distorted expectations of intimate relationships’ (Orenstein, 2011: 6). As a group, girls and young women voraciously read the series by Stephenie Meyer and fell over themselves to see the movies (Green, 2008). It goes without saying that the author made an absolute killing. Never mind that here we have—in the Disney tradition—another motherless protagonist and storylines that glorify voyeurism, stalking and abusive, controlling relationships where partners withhold physical affection to get what they want and require total obedience in the name of keeping their women ‘safe’—and where women are nothing without their man, for whom they cook and clean and risk their lives to reproduce. These books construct the female identity as that of the selectively passive, obedient, but nonetheless sexualised child whose only power comes in what she must withhold and surrender; her empowerment comes only in the context of what she is or is not willing to do for a man. In the narratives, girls and women surrender to total masculine control over their minds and bodies in the name of protection—from the implicit, normalised violence of men—as well as from experience and from themselves. What this says about women and about men is less than positive.

That this creates popular reading for girls and women at this particular moment in history is not surprising. It is a perfect match for current cultural emphases on girls' virginity, obedience to male authority, choosing motherhood over a career out of biological determinism and privileging heterosexual desirability as well as political invisibility, not unlike Snow White, totally silenced but looking damn good while doing it. It also affirms, in the Disney tradition, that strong women are the natural enemy of the young, innocent and ‘good’ girls. The only favourable older female in the Meyer series and most Disney material is a dead or absent (and therefore invisible and politically neutralised) mother (Orenstein, 2011). Meanwhile, a collection of animalistic, sexually rapacious and uncontrollable men must channel their violent urges into protecting their girls from the evil influence of other older women—the proverbial wicked stepmothers—who are all witches, crones, demonic sorceresses and similar. The message is clear: aging is bad, and power is bad as is the time-honoured and empowering practice of girls learning ‘critical skills from older women’ (Brumberg, 2009: 5).

While I acknowledge that popular girl culture in the US is diverse and certainly not all tied up in these oppressive trends, when combined with post-feminist rhetoric, an obsession with

purity, vampires and princesses does not bode well. Brumberg (2002) writes, ‘American popular culture is especially dangerous for girls . . . everywhere we see girls and women looking in mirrors, nervously checking who they are’ (Brumberg, 2002: 88-89), or checking their virginity, or seeking fantasies of being controlled by others, of being princesses in gilded cages. The culture encourages a nearly obsessive interest in ‘appearances’—of niceness, of love, of idealised self. This perpetual performance for the mirror, for the other, is problematic. Girl culture has shifted radically over the last century from an internal focus in which girls endeavored to become women of substance to an obsessively appearance-oriented ‘toxic culture’ in which, Brumberg continues, ‘as the twentieth century progressed, more and more young women grew up believing that good looks rather than good works were the highest form of female perfection’ (Brumberg, 2002: 5). Controlling their bodies has come at a price because appearances are not a good investment. Wearing a tiara doesn’t make you a princess any more than standing in a garage makes you a car.

In a 2010 *New York Times* article, Peggy Orenstein quoted Deborah Tolman’s work on girls and sexuality; ‘By the time they are teenagers’, she said, ‘the girls I talk to respond to questions about how their bodies feel — questions about sexuality or desire — by talking about how their bodies look. They will say something like, “I felt like I looked good.” Looking good is *not* a feeling’ (Orenstein, 2010:M11). Putting appearances before feeling and doing and dwelling in an eternal childhood where virginity is the only sexuality that matters, and in which the body is governed by others has created the devastating synesthesia that is the hallmark of mainstream contemporary girl culture, fuelling post-feminist rhetoric because that is the only logical place left to go.

Unlike the girl power generation, who reacquainted themselves with the urgency of Feminism as down-and-dirty activism, the current generation wishes to distance itself from any association with Feminism, which has become the ultimate F-word. As Hall and Rodriguez (2003) found, the archetypal feminist is depicted by college students, girl culture and the popular media alike as simplistic, ‘negative portrayals: women’s lib, man hater, bra burner, unfeminine, lesbian and/or sexually deviant, the feminazi (ugly, unable to catch a man, dyke), and whining victims’ (Hall & Rodriguez, 2003: 879). These words are jarring for a reason—those who use them intend to control and manipulate you by playing on and polemicising contemporary girl culture’s focus on heterosexual desirability, programmed in childhood with every Disney princess, among other similar cultural influences. This discourse affirms that appearances—being pretty, consumable and desirable—are much better than having something to say⁷. After all, outspoken, powerful older women are either non-existent, or are punished as wicked stepmothers, made ugly and aged, and generally held up as warnings to everyone on what not to do (Williams, 2010).

I would also suggest the cheap slander that attempts to cast a shadow on feminism and activism comes from the same pop culture place that tells men and boys that they are not ‘man enough’. That is, there is a very narrow range of clothes, jobs, identities and lives that are sufficiently masculine. This demands a show of risk-taking, bullying and violent

behaviour to prove the adequacy of one's masculinity that is responsible for thousands of deaths in men and boys every year and an astounding number of annual suicide attempts among gay and other subaltern men in the US every day. Jackson Katz, a scholar on masculinity and the co-founder of the Boston-based organisations Real Men and Men's Violence Prevention (MVP) writes that the cost of being a 'real man' is hurting our men and boys in many ways:

Men's violence against women, gay bashing, and reckless, self-destructive behavior extends the argument by suggesting that we are in the midst of a crisis in masculinity, a crisis that has produced devastating consequences. Just as, institutionally, media and other cultural systems often play up violent masculine ideals at the expense of other, healthier possibilities, on an individual level we see all around us the boy who swallows his emotions for fear of ridicule, for fear of being labeled "feminine" or weak— in essence, not a normal, natural male (Katz & Earp, 1999: 4)

Just as girls and young women are giving in to the allure of post-feminism, our boys are being literally beaten into submission by a hegemonic masculine ideal. The same hand that tries to tell us that the work of feminism is done and tells girls it's okay to mistake sparkly shoes for empowerment also tells men that they must occupy an even narrower role, one that emphasises rugged aggressiveness, rigidity, competition, ambition, compulsory, often promiscuous, heterosexuality, violence and inflexible social hierarchies (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Very few men actually construct themselves in this way, but it quickly becomes normalised as the only culturally acceptable interpretation of how to be a 'real man'.

It has been suggested that this very narrow view of masculinity and the ways in which it complicates boys' orientation toward schooling may be connected to some boys' academic underachievement by causing them to associate academic success with masculine failure (Carrington & McPhee, 2008; Drudy et al., 2005; Reynolds, 2001). It also limits the sanctioned career choices for boys and men. For example, it has been suggested that fewer men become elementary educators because masculinity is constructed as incompatible with caring for and nurturing children (Drudy et al., 2005). One of the biggest reasons why in most western contexts elementary and early childhood teachers are 90% more likely to be female has to do with a particular 'domestic ideology' (Gaskell, 1992) that conflates biological sex with personal and professional destiny, such that women, as Gaskell (1992) and Drudy et al. (2005) suggest, should have careers in the caring professions as these are the most 'like' traditional homemaking and are therefore the most biologically and socially appropriate. Men, meanwhile, should not be interested in care-work, otherwise they are not 'real' men.

The concept of a domestic ideology has been central in my research on teachers. A couple of years back I conducted a study of a small (N = 21) cohort of undergraduate women at another, Northeastern University. This cohort was also made up of young women interested in becoming elementary school teachers, but as undergraduates they had not officially

enrolled in the licensure coursework. Rather, they were only exploring the possibility of choosing a life in the classroom. I was interested, again, in the political and social belief structures at work in their self-selection for education, and more specifically how their beliefs around themselves and their enactments of gender might appear. Some research suggests that the current generation of young women may construct gender identities more aligned with conservative, traditional femininities and less aligned with feminist politics or feminist identities (Galman, 2006; Ginsburg, 1995; Hall & Rodriguez, 2003). So, I asked these young women to take a survey designed by Jim Mahalik and colleagues at Boston College. The survey was called the *Conformity to Feminine Norms Inventory* (Mahalik et al., 2005) and the score on that survey tells how closely an individual may adhere to certain western feminine norms: niceness, interest in appearance, sexual fidelity, thinness, modesty, domesticity, interest in children and interest in romantic relationships. These young women's scores were interesting because while it was expected that an interest in children would score quite high, the highest scores of all the vocationally independent areas were in the 'niceness' and 'interest in appearance'. Being 'nice' and keeping up one's physical appearance far trumped the other categories. I thought this was interesting for new, young would-be teachers in particular: For example, was it more important to be nice, or to stand up for one's beliefs that wide scale high stake testing was damaging to children? How about being and appearing 'nice' compared with joining the teachers' union, or advocating for a student you believe is being underserved, even if people think this makes you a 'bad girl'? I'll fill you in on the answer—being nice, looking sweet, always trumps the dirty work of being a teacher, which is ultimately politically invested and puts you back with the ugly, bra-burning lesbians most people conjure up when they think of feminists. It is, to me, no accident that many of these young women grew up as princesses, where being a 'nice person' and looking a certain way are conflated with being a good person. Similarly, many noted that teaching as a form of care-work was like the work of mothering, and men were only teachers until they could move up to administration because, as one of my research subjects suggested, they just aren't as nice as girls, or as adept at mothering.

This is, again, part of that domestic ideology: The story of the gendered/caring teacher is centred around a romantic image of a young, pretty teacher who engages with children and validates a biological imperative through the nurturing classroom environment she creates. This story of teaching perpetuates the mythology that 'women's work' is characterised by its nurturing or caring focus. Of course, the work of teaching *is* emotional in nature and its eventual product should be children and young people who experience love and care and teachers who find themselves deeply fulfilled by the act of caring. However, this is a far cry from the cultural message that female teachers should care for children because they have the right genitals for it, or that men cannot because they have the wrong ones. For example, think of the popular images of male teachers you typically find out there, versus the female ones. Women are either young and pretty, or else they are spinsters or otherwise stigmatised. But there is only one way to be a 'good teacher' in pop culture—and that is to be nice. And pretty. And young. (Not unlike the omnipresent Disney princess.) Male teachers, meanwhile,

are typically not ‘real men’—they are either physically overblown but intellectually feeble gym teachers or hyper-sexualised lotharios preying on teenage students, or emasculated subalterns, like the nerdy English professor, the he-must-be-gay Kindergarten teacher, the suspect man (McWilliam, 1996). Almost universally, men are portrayed as incompetent, bumbling, even dangerous caregivers. Though this is changing in some media contexts, it cannot change fast enough.

The ‘New Economy’ (and its attendant anti-intellectualism) is a friend to no one

At the end of the day what Douglas calls ‘enlightened sexism’ and the related hegemonic form of masculinity are really about distracting women and men from what is really going on politically, culturally and socially. This is becoming more and more urgent the deeper we get into what I call the new economic universe—a sluggish, post-recession economy where corporations and individuals get away with anti-intellectualism and exploitation in the name of tightening their belts, as if that somehow makes things excusable. Kind of like, ‘well, we’re taking away your health insurance and paid sick days and collective bargaining and educational attainment rights because of the recession. Sorry—it can’t be helped.’

Another casualty of this ‘The Recession Made Me Do It’ language is our collective attitude toward education in general and higher education, specifically. Over the past few years, major media have featured stories about how a college education may no longer be ‘worth it’⁸ given the difficulties imposed by a rough economic patch. Practicality has been heralded as a newly relevant value, and a college education, with its liberal arts, theory and traditions increasingly irrelevant, effete and impractical. Whatever that means. But an education, however ‘impractical’, is worth it. I remember watching the dedication of one of the 9/11 memorials a few weeks ago and former US President Bill Clinton called to mind the historic battle at Thermopylae, comparing the last stand of the Spartans with the passengers on a doomed airplane. He studied the classics, no matter how ‘impractical’, and gave us all the gift of context—of understanding sacrifice, bravery and hope across time and space. That’s not impractical. That’s resonant. That serves to make us all more fully human. An education connects us with the big ideas that keep us centred and remind us that we do not stand alone, buffeted by the whims of the ruling class. Knowledge is still power. The examples of a tyrant’s fear of an educated underclass are many: the Taliban knew exactly what they were doing when they made it a crime to teach a woman to read, and the plantation owners in the antebellum American south who criminalised teaching enslaved people to read were acting out of fear in addition to their usual cruelty. So also the Khmer Rouge sought first to eliminate the educated professionals, followed by anyone who knew, or even appeared to know, how to read. An education teaches us to imagine the possible, to question the status quo, and authority, and to imagine our better selves, a better world and to call evil when we see it. An educated populace keeps leaders on their toes. An uneducated populace is easy to control and to trick into dominating one another. Questioning the worth of an education

questions your capacity to change the status quo. In more eloquent words, Hightower (2003) writes,

Keep fighting or get out of the way. I know things are tough, but I want you to get up off your ass and go do something brave for your country. I sense that in the midst of today's grab-what-you-can culture, the most materialistic and self-aggrandizing on Earth—people are drowning and are eager to reach for something more meaningful, more satisfying, more spiritual in their secular life than, say, tax cuts, war and the opening of yet another Starbucks. The important thing to know is that you are wanted. You are needed. You are important. You are not only what democracy counts on, you are what democracy is (Hightower, 2003: 125).

These times are very, very hard. But you read it here first: don't let anyone take away the relevance of your educational aspirations and achievements. Don't let anyone call your learning, or your ideas facile, or effete, or impractical. As my doctoral advisor told me when I considered quitting graduate school for the tenth time, when you get your degree that is something nobody can take away from you. Just because other people say an education won't get you much doesn't mean they are right. The economy is in bad shape. College and university are expensive. This makes things hard. But the people telling you not to get an education are not themselves uneducated. Rather, they are afraid of an educated populace. When you are subtly encouraged to be a princess who waits in the passenger seat, to adopt a folksy, anti-intellectual 'don't need no book learnin''⁹ discourse, to choose the easiest courses and plan for the Purity Ball instead of for a politically-engaged future, consider that you are being controlled, not empowered.

Conclusion: Understanding the lives of girls and women is in everyone's best interest

Let's take a minute and go back to the canary analogy. I'm arguing that women may be the canaries, but we—men, women, children, everyone—are all in the coalmine. I've used this analogy before, and people have always asked me for an example. So, let's reflect on the Taliban. Way back when I was getting my ears boxed in by my aunt for saying I wasn't a feminist, American comic Jay Leno had just come onto the late night scene. But of more interest to me than Jay's jokes was his wife, Mavis Leno. She was an activist, focusing on the suffering of women in Afghanistan, who had been converted to property virtually overnight by this new, ultra-patriarchal cabal called the Taliban. As reported in Leno's 2001 interview with CNN¹⁰,

Afghan women before the Taliban had had equal rights under the law since the early '60s. They represented 70 percent of the teachers, 50 percent of the medical workers, they held elected positions and were free to wear the clothes they wanted and come and go as they wished . . . With the Taliban takeover, the women were immediately,

without any exceptions, told to go to their homes and stay there. They were told they could no longer work in any capacity . . . They can now be punished if they leave their houses unaccompanied by a close male relative, and wearing a shroud-like garment called a burqa. They can be punished if more than three unrelated women are found gathering together, if their windows are not painted dark so that no one can see in, or even if their shoes make a noise when they walk.

Schooling was forbidden. Women who tried to educate their daughters secretly at home were executed. Mavis Leno tried to raise money. She tried to get people to care. Her work with the Feminist Majority foundation received some support, but certainly not national attention or prioritisation, until sometime later when the Taliban, which started out in the mid to late 1990s by horribly abusing women, became a problem for most of the world through its involvement in international terrorism. If someone had paid attention to the fate of the canaries, the Taliban might not have grown to the problem they are today. If the following isn't a rule of foreign policy, it should be: *groups that systematically abuse, oppress and target women today will be large scale global security threats tomorrow*. Feminism is for everybody, and urgently so.

I'd like to end this letter on a positive, instructive note. So, while I have painted a grim picture for you, you should know that there is something you can do to begin to salvage the situation. As I tell my Kindergartener every day, 'go to school and learn all you can.' I am telling you now. Go to school and learn all you can. Use what you learn to enhance your humanity, to pursue your ontological vocation, to liberate others, to imagine and then work to make the world a place where we can *all* be more fully human. Agitate for economic justice, gender justice, whatever kind of justice. Agitate for conservative or liberal or communist or libertarian ideals or wherever your interest lies. But have an interest. Princesses, abandon the purity ball and go camping or hiking or to a political rally or independent film with your dad instead. Be substantial people instead of just nice girls with sparkly shoes and good hair. Men, defy hegemony and be the people you want to be with courage rather than the 'real men' the movies or Marlboro commercials tell you that you should be. People living in a permanent state of distraction and self-conscious identity management, pretending toward gender ideals that are not real, cannot engage with their better selves. They are as useless as Cinderella riding along in her magical pumpkin, Snow White lying in state or the heroine of the *Twilight* novels, glumly waiting for her undead Prince Charming to save her (or finally, 'accidentally' kill her?) (Orenstein, 2011). If you spend all your time worrying about appearances, sitting in the passenger seat in your ball gown, you might get so distracted that you forget what it feels like to be the driver in your own life. In the words of Henrik Ibsen, 'you should never have your best trousers on when you go out to fight for freedom and truth¹¹.' So, take off that tiara and get to work. You can do it.

Love,

Dr. Galman

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¹ This paper began when a young man asked my colleague why it was relevant for him to understand girlhood, and feminism and when, shortly thereafter, a female teacher education student gave me a poor teaching evaluation because of my 'strident feminism'. The ideas herein were developed first in a think-piece for the Gender and Education Association

newsletter (Galman, 2010), then as a lecture I gave at Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts in the United States in September 2010 on contemporary feminism for young people.

² ‘Dreck’ is an American English word derived from Yiddish, meaning trash, rubbish or dregs. While not all popular culture qualifies as dreck, a significant percentage certainly falls in that category

³ <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/248934?redirectedFrom=girl%20power#eid>

⁴ <http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpswom2009.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.ovw.usdoj.gov/>

⁶ Purityball.com insists that if a girl has no father, or if her father is unavailable, the girl is welcome to attend with ‘a grandfather, a family friend, an uncle, a pastor, or someone else who can serve as a godly male role model.’

⁷ People were very cruel to Eleanor Roosevelt because she wasn’t very pretty by the standards of her day. But she received the UN prize for human rights and was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. Do what she did and practice, every day, looking the dominant discourse in the eye and saying, “I do not care what you think.” Say it until you mean it.

⁸ <http://blogs.reuters.com/reuters-money/2011/09/15/is-college-worth-it/>

⁹ This never works, not even for the President of the United States, so you know it isn’t going to work for you <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/04/01/AR2006040101004.html>

¹⁰ <http://archives.cnn.com/2001/COMMUNITY/11/09/leno.cnn/>

¹¹ *An Enemy of the People*, Act V, Scene 1.