Encouraging five- to ten-year-old children to model themselves after sex workers suggests the degree to which matters of ethics and propriety have been decoupled from the world of marketing and advertising, even when the target audience is young children. The representational politics at work ... connect children’s bodies to a reductive notion of sexuality, pleasure and commodification, while depicting children’s sexuality and bodies as nothing more than objects for voyeuristic adult consumption and crude financial profit.

—Henry Giroux, *Youth in a Suspect Society*

In late 2009, a toy company began selling a female doll which, as main feature, twirled around a plastic stripper pole. “The doll begins dancing when the music is turned on,” a blogger described, “and she goes ‘up and down’ and ‘round and round’.” On the box cover ran the following: “Style.” “Interesting.” “Music.” “Flash.” “Up and Down.” “Go Round and Round.” The targeted demographic: kids unskilled to decipher this insidious suggestion, of the stripper lifestyle as fun and chic— the thing to be.

Gone are the days when society’s young girls are encouraged to emulate educators, pioneers, lawyers, doctors, social workers, architects, activists, artists, or cultural critics. Today, the energy-expunging, dignity-diminishing exercise of stripping— all to temper the carnal demands of lustful men—is the new it. But selling spiritual death to children marks nothing new.

For years now, corporations, in frenzy to enlarge coffers, have found children (and more so young girls) most vulnerable and lucrative. “Subject to an advertising and marketing industry that spends over $17 billion a year on shaping children’s identities and desires,” writes Henry Giroux, “American youth are commercially carpet-bombed through a never-ending proliferation of market strategies that colonize their consciousness and daily lives.” The Market reigns sovereign, and profit prizes over all objectives; and items targeted at young girls offer good ground to understand how far into the gutter of exploitation some companies would stoop and slurp— so long as the promise of profit abounds:

Abercrombie & Fitch, a clothing franchise for young people, has earned a reputation for its risqué catalogues filled with promotional ads of scantily clad kids and its over-the-top sexual advice columns for teens and preteens; one catalogue featured an ad for thongs for ten-year-olds with the words “eye candy” and “wink wink” written on them. ... Girls as young as six years old
are being sold lacy underwear, push-up bras and “date night accessories” for their various doll collections.³

Disgusted? Turn on Disney and watch in horror. In The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence, Giroux argues adeptly that kids raised on Disney often fall prey to primitive, deleterious values—mostly funneled through a Eurocentric Male Supremacist prism. Reading into classic, blockbuster Disney pictures like Aladdin and Beauty and the Beast, Giroux concludes “Disney is not merely about peddling entertainment; it is also about politics, economics, and education.”⁴ Certainly, young Black and Brown girls, with TV schedules devoted to Disney, luck out on all counts.

Most Disney animated pictures have pointedly normalized (and often championed) sexism: men are dominative characters who deserve their way (with women) all times; and women must surrender to the crude advances of these men—even men they despise. (Men who refuse to take “No!” for an answer.) In Beauty and the Beast, Belle, the innocent and feckless female, swallows constant verbal abuse and torment from the maniacal Beast who once kidnapped and starved her. She somehow musters and manages, through all, to love him enough to see the soft, subtle prince lurking, and laments later: There’s something sweet/ And almost kind/ But he was mean/ And he was coarse/ And unrefined/ And now he’s dear/ And so unsure/ I wonder why/ I didn’t see it there before/. As though abusive boyfriends and husbands are not so but, alas!, gentle personalities deprived of affection, and afraid to unburden their inner prince.

Love, of course, is more potent than punishment. But when life-and-death concerns are brought to bear, not only is it insidious, but also insane, to encourage women or girls trapped in homes or relationships with demented, patriarchal male partners to keep still and dig further down till the pearl shines through—till the better angels of his nature awake. It all works out, however, for the subservient and dependent female whose life counts for nothing without a male around to validate.

Boys are no less destroyed psychologically. Imagine young men encouraged to test the limits of their hormonal predilections because no matter how much abusive, how far invasive, the young lady doesn’t feel dehumanized but flattered by the attention of a man—without whom her life wouldn’t count a shilling. There are no winners here. Boy and girl, man and woman, are driven almost beyond the point-of-no-return—never chanced to call into question values that pleasure exerting pain on human life.

Disney’s deal with parents is terribly complex. Parents must be willing to submit their kids up for inspection, after which Disney decides which roles they fit, and which identities they adopt. But parents must also realize the prize of the birthright: admission of inherent deficiency, in themselves and in their kids. After all, successful parents don’t need imaginary characters raising their kids: and smart kids don’t need imaginary characters for stimulation: and, more pernicious, a manageable society does not need moral lessons from the world’s largest media and entertainment empire. But such is the deal brokered, which explains why Disney has raked in millions of dollars from the absurd Baby Einstein products which swear to enable toddlers whose parents “want their kids to keep up in a highly competitive world”—a