

“WE FLAWLESS”:  
BLACK AND LATINA ADOLESCENT GIRLS’ READINGS OF FEMININITY IN  
POP CULTURE

by

Mia Elizabeth Hood

Dissertation Committee:

Professor Marjorie Siegel, Sponsor  
Professor Daniel Friedrich

Approved by the Committee on the Degree of Doctor of Education

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## ABSTRACT

“WE FLAWLESS”:

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Mia Elizabeth Hood

This study discusses how adolescent Black and Latina girls read the femininities made available in pop culture texts and how they take up those femininities when they narrate personal experiences. The purpose of the study is to explore how girls engage in pop culture on an ongoing basis, how these everyday engagements shape their understandings of themselves as girls, and how these engagements are themselves performances that both maintain and threaten the boundaries between boy and girl. In addition, this study witnesses the deconstruction of those meanings (Derrida, 1967/1997), exploring how attempts to make *femininity* mean something ultimately undermines itself.

As pop culture has come to saturate everyday life, American schools, following the Common Core State Standards’ (NGA, 2010) mandate for curriculum driven by “sufficiently complex,” canonical texts, have narrowed the scope and purposes of literacy

instruction in schools. This research serves as a starting point for curricula that support young people in making sense of pop culture and their relationship to it.

Situated within a poststructural feminist theoretical framework, this study uses qualitative methods to make the literacy processes through which girls make sense of pop culture texts visible and to elicit narrations of the personal experiences in which girls take up the femininities made available pop culture texts. The findings suggested that girls make sense of these femininities by reading both in-narrative and out-of-narrative—standing back from the text and treating it as a text. In their readings and discussions of pop culture texts, the girls cited and inscribed discourses of femininity, constituting themselves as respectable girls by deliberately making judgments about women's physical appearance on screen. Specifically, they acted to draw a line between what they saw as *appropriate* and what they saw as *inappropriate*. This repetitive act was one way they performed respectable femininity, stabilizing discursive meanings of gender and also holding open the possibility of the line being placed differently. The findings also suggested that storytelling as a site of discursive agency as the distance between the moment of experience and the moment of narration held open the possibility of reformulation and renegotiation of meanings.

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## DEDICATION

To Harper and Perrine—  
and to A., B., D., J., and K.—  
the next generation of yellow lemons

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation is an artifact of many arguments I've started—arguments in which all parties participated with the sort of righteous passion characteristic of people who care about ideas, arguments my mother would euphemistically describe as *robust*. And so I'm relieved to have this opportunity, at long last, to acknowledge and thank those who have argued with me, challenged me, supported me, and put up with me. First among this group, of course, is my advisor Dr. Marjorie Siegel. A decade ago, she saw something special in a couple of pages I wrote about making pancakes and, in telling me so, breathed possibility into my dream of being a scholar. Marjorie helped me find a place for humor, self-indulgence, and my own particularly obnoxious brand of contrariness in my academic work. She created space for me first and then taught me how to think more expansively about literacy, curriculum, and sites of education, as well as how to use the work of those who came before me to open rather than close possibilities. And it must be noted that, in the course of our time together, she never looked away when she came upon me in a state of disrepair—whether it was my heart, my spirit, my bank account, or my body that was broken. Marjorie, your kindness exceeds rational explanation.

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M. E. H.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF FIGURES .....	xi
PREFACE .....	xii
Chapter I – INTRODUCTION .....	1
Background .....	8
Pop Culture .....	8
American Schools .....	13
Statement of the Problem .....	15
Purpose of the Study .....	19
Research Questions .....	20
Overview of Research Design .....	22
Rationale .....	23
Significance .....	25
Theoretical Framework .....	26
Multimodality .....	26
Undecidability .....	32
Poststructural Feminism .....	37
Intersectional Feminism .....	41
Conclusion .....	43
Chapter II – REVIEW OF LITERATURE .....	46
Gender Performativity .....	49
Gender and Pop Culture .....	61
Gender and Literacy .....	70
Pop Culture and Literacy .....	83
Pop Culture, Literacy, and Gender .....	94
Intersectionality .....	95
Intersectionality and Productive Consumption .....	97
Productive Consumption .....	101
Productive Consumption and Multimodality .....	104
Multimodality .....	109
Conclusion .....	111
Chapter III – METHODOLOGY .....	116
Overview of Research Design .....	115
Trustworthiness .....	119
Research Site and Participants .....	120
Data Sources .....	124
Discussion Groups .....	124
Narrative Elicitation Interviews .....	127
Data Analysis .....	130

Data Management.....	131
Analysis of Discussion Group Data .....	133
Analysis of Narrative Elicitation Interview Data .....	135
Witnessing Deconstruction.....	137
Poststructural Validity and the Aporia of Interpretation .....	138
Researcher Role.....	140
Limitations.....	145
Summary and Conclusion .....	146
 Chapter IV – DISCUSSION GROUPS .....	 148
Multimodal Readings of Pop Culture Texts.....	153
<i>Modern Family</i> .....	154
<i>Empire</i> .....	156
<i>Step Up Revolution</i> .....	163
“Timeless” and “Still Think about You” .....	165
Relative Language.....	174
<i>Outstanding and Above and Beyond</i> .....	175
<i>Inappropriate and Too Much</i> .....	176
<i>Do More or Do the Most</i> .....	179
Discursive Meanings of Gender.....	182
A Pathway Out for Black Women.....	184
Storylines and Controlling Images .....	187
Personal Experiences.....	193
Drawing the Line as Performative Act.....	200
Summary and Conclusion .....	202
 Chapter V – NARRATIONS .....	 206
Audrey: Being in the Drama .....	209
Danielle: “Everything Has an Impact” .....	218
Caring for Yourself and Carrying Yourself .....	219
Setting an Example.....	221
Kaylee: “Boys Are Kind of Complicated” .....	225
Drawing the Line.....	226
Wanting More.....	230
Jasmine: “A Whole ‘Nother Problem” .....	233
Briana: Just Be Yourself, Say What You Want .....	242
Being Scooped Up.....	243
Saying Anything.....	249
Summary and Conclusion .....	253
 Chapter VI – UNDECIDABILITY.....	 257
Review of <i>Undecidability</i> .....	258
<i>Appropriate/Inappropriate</i> .....	260
<i>Probably/Improbable</i> .....	264
<i>Choosing/Being Chosen</i> .....	269
“Summary and Conclusion” .....	273

Chapter VII – DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS .....	275
Discussion .....	275
Readings of Multimodal Texts .....	275
Meanings of Femininity .....	279
The Substance and Act of Narration .....	282
Undecidability .....	289
Critique of the Study .....	291
Curriculum Implications.....	294
Research Implications .....	299
A Final Thought .....	303
REFERENCES .....	305
APPENDICES .....	315
Appendix A: Letter of Invitation to Families.....	315
Appendix B: Letter to Interested Girls .....	316
Appendix C: Informed Consent Form.....	317
Appendix D: Parent Permission Form.....	321
Appendix E: Sample Discussion Group Transcript .....	325
Appendix F: Sample Interview Transcript .....	334

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure		Page
1	“Hotline Bling” Meme.....	19
2	Beyoncé, “Flawless”.....	44
3	Organizational Framework.....	101
4	Cookie in the Boardroom.....	157

## PREFACE

The first time my best friend Rachel and I went camping as kids, I brought a Caboodle full of products: face wash, not soap; whatever version of lip gloss I was allowed to wear; astringent and cotton balls; toothpaste; cuticle cream; foot scrub; shine spray, which had recently been invented; and an assortment of bobby pins, barrettes, banana clips, and scrunchies. I also packed three wooden hangers to keep my t-shirts and jeans wrinkle-free. When we set up camp, I unpacked my clothes and hung them from one of the tent poles. The weight warped one side of the tent, and Rachel's mom ordered me to take them down.

I didn't mind. I wasn't actually what we would call a *priss*. I was just playing one for the weekend. I had the accoutrements but not the actual meticulousness or concern over my appearance. The whole weekend, I kept forgetting to act girly. I had watched enough sitcoms to know how to play a priss. I knew that, to be a priss out in the wild, specifically, I would have to over-pack, primp each morning and fuss over my hair all day, recoil at the sight of a bug, and act surprised to discover there's no outlet for my hairdryer. Mother Nature would be my comedic foil.

For as long as I can remember, I've drawn on pop culture's images and stories to imagine and experiment with who I might (want to) be—for the weekend, for the school year, or for good. I remember Stephanie Tanner's turn as a dance phenom on *Full House* and the ecstatic final scene in which she dances at the point of a V of lesser dancers. To this day, I daydream about dancing at the point of such a V. Blossom Russo of *Blossom* was, in today's parlance, my spirit animal. She was smart and stylish and principled, and she had floppy hats and a sweet, raggedy boyfriend named Vinny. In one episode, she

jeopardized her graduation from high school by refusing to write a paper as assigned, a plotline so intoxicatingly aspirational to me that I immediately found cause to replicate it in my own life<sup>1</sup>. I'm not sure that I'd say pop culture *shaped* or *influenced* or *inspired* me—I don't seem to want to put a stake in the ground. It just, let's say, gave me ideas.

\*

If this were the end of my story of pop culture, this study wouldn't exist. Pop culture wouldn't feel like a problem for me. It would simply be a resource for play, humor, and personal connection. But, as I got older, pop culture's images and stories of girlhood didn't seem to apply to me anymore. They were no longer available for my use. I wish I could say this was for some grand reason, like that the girls and women on TV didn't share my depth or complexity of character. No. It was actually because they were skinny, and I was not that.

As far as I can tell, there were two conditions that led me to think of myself, always a pretty medium-sized person, as fat. The first was pop culture. I grew up in the 90s, when our culture was populated by aggressively slender actresses (such as Calista Flockhart) and models (such as, most influentially, Kate Moss). Images of jutting rib cages, sternums, and shoulder blades, legs that stayed the same width all the way up<sup>2</sup> recalibrated what I understood to be the “right” way to look. The second condition was the white, southern, conservative town where I laid my scenes of dancing Vs and small-time protests. My experience growing up in this town is emblemized in my friends' moms coming up close, pinching my chin, and whispering, “You have *such* a pretty face.”

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<sup>1</sup> In my case, the stakes were lower, but the principle was of a much higher order: My sixth-grade language arts teacher assigned us to write about how prison sentences aren't nearly long enough in this country, and I refused.

<sup>2</sup> So ingrained are my self-protective reflexes that I struggled for the better part of an hour to generate value-neutral ways of describing a skinny female body (and I still wound up with “jutting”).

I'm given to understand that, to northeasterners, this sounds like a compliment. But Texans, ever the masters of the backhanded compliment, know what *you have such a pretty face* means. Yes, they're calling you fat, but more specifically they are saying: *it's such a shame that you're fat because you have such a pretty face*. The older I got, the more and more of a shame it seemed.

\*

Then, in the late 90s, just as I was about to graduate from high school, something happened that no one in my position would have dared predict. Women in pop culture started looking different, curvier, more medium-sized, more like me. First, there was Jennifer Lopez with her instantly famous backside. Then, there was Beyoncé with her sturdy, strong legs and what we now recognize as a lifelong commitment to performing pantslessly. These stars were not merely exceptions to the skinny rule. White actresses like Jennifer Lawrence, Scarlet Johansen, and Kate Winslet, outspoken inhabitants of medium-sized bodies, would not have been viable as stars without the women of color who preceded them. I would argue that if stars with such bodies seem “normal” now, it's because Jennifer Lopez, Beyoncé, Rihanna, and those who followed have retrained our eyes. All of this change culminated for me when, a few years out of college, in (I want to say) 2007, my mom called me up to proclaim some good news: “I'm watching *Entertainment Tonight*, and they're saying that it's going to be the ‘year of the booty!’”

Just as in my childhood, in my early teaching career, pop culture and my local community mutually amplified a particular image of feminine beauty. At this time, I was living, working, and socializing in a Black community and learning a totally new vocabulary, a new set of criteria for feminine beauty. One afternoon, sitting around with a



group of 6<sup>th</sup> grade girls in my classroom, I listened in with increasing horror as they swapped stories about all the ways boys had told them their butts weren't big enough. Then came the flashbacks of the boy at my middle school who commented that God must have accidentally squeezed all of the fat in body into my butt when he wasn't looking<sup>3</sup>. Of course, what struck me was how different my students' experiences were and also how similar<sup>4</sup>.

It follows that I am both deeply comforted and discomfited by the shift in my experience of pop culture and of myself through pop culture. Life is easier when you don't walk around feeling fat. And it's more fun when you have images and stories from pop culture that add texture to your daydreams and other personal fictions. To sustain this newfound comfort with myself, I took to *loving* celebrities. In college, I *loved* Jennifer Lopez so much that I wrote an honor's thesis about her video for "Jenny from the Block." Here I am, more than a decade later, writing a dissertation that begins, for no particular reason, with an analysis of Beyoncé's video for "\*\*\*Flawless." It's easy for anyone to *love*<sup>5</sup> Beyoncé: she is an unstoppable force of talent, creativity, and self-expression. But my love has just as much to do with her strong, sturdy legs, her persistence in pantslessness, and the fact that all of this feels *available* to me, feels like appropriate material for my own aspirations to confidence and badass-ness.

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<sup>3</sup> This comment would have hurt more if I had not been so distracted—as I still am to this day—by the curious theology of this boy's taunt.

<sup>4</sup> I've never written a series of paragraphs in greater need of scare quotes. For the record, I'd like to place *feminine*, *beauty*, *medium-sized*, and *horror* in scare quotes now and forever more. I hope that my reasons will become clear through the first two chapters.

<sup>5</sup> At this, the third instance of the italicized *love*, I'll say a little of what I mean. I talk about Beyoncé, I use her catchphrases, I buy her music, I go to dance classes where I learn her choreography, I apologize for her when she's attacked for not being sufficiently feminist, I post about her on Facebook, I channel her. On the day of my dissertation proposal hearing, I will, from the waist up, dress like her.

It doesn't take much critical thought at all, not much time at all, to come around to two obvious, and crucial, tensions. First, while I might derive comfort from images of women in pop culture who look more like me (in terms of size), that comfort is always precarious and partial, as any solution to a problem based in corporate interests and the objectification and commodification of female bodies would be. Second, and more importantly, I enjoy all of the benefits of Black-defined norms of beauty without any of the burden of living in a Black body. I have not been oversexualized and brutalized in song lyrics. I am not disproportionately vulnerable to rape and sexual assault. I do not live in fear that state-sanctioned violence will be visited upon me or my family.<sup>6</sup> I love and engage in Black culture without having to experience, or even reckon with, the hardship that made it possible. I love Beyoncé in part because her size-6-not-size-4 body makes life feel a bit more livable, which, as a reading of Beyoncé<sup>7</sup> depletes it of much of its cultural significance. Bell hooks (1997) speculates about White people's desire for proximity to and association with Blackness, positing that such a desire can be emancipatory when it leads to cultural appreciation, rather than appropriation. She uses the White characters in the film *Hairspray* to illustrate the former. She writes, "[T]he longing and desire whites express for contact with black culture is coupled with a recognition of the culture's value. One does not transgress boundaries to stay the same, to reassert white domination" (p. 32). Blackness, according to hooks, "invites engagement in a revolutionary ethos that dares to challenge and disrupt the status quo" (p. 32). As a White woman, I cannot always make sense of how hooks judges when White people's

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<sup>6</sup> Some of these issues are discussed, but not nearly fully enough, in the Intersectional Feminism section at the end of Chapter I. See, for example, Crenshaw's (1993) discussion of structural and political intersectionality for more.

<sup>7</sup> Beyoncé the phenomenon, not the person

desire for proximity to Blackness is appreciative and when it is appropriative. I do know that, if I mean to take comfort in categorizing myself, once and for all, as appreciative rather than appropriative, then I have already failed to engage with the “revolutionary ethos that dares to challenge and disrupt the status quo” (p. 32).

What this means for me as a researcher—what this has already meant for me—is that I have particular obsessions and patterns of thought that obscure the girls with and for whom I work and their engagements with pop culture. I will always look with skepticism at theoretical and empirical work that celebrates pop culture as a resource for creativity and self-expression for girls of color (even when the work strives to balance the celebratory and the critical). It will always feel a bit beside the point for me. When sitting with adolescent girls who want to talk about depictions of female friendships in a reality show—as the participants in my exploratory study did—I will always feel a bit like I’m waiting for them to finish with this line of discussion so we can get to the good stuff about body image. When they suggest we listen to Miley Cyrus, I won’t suggest that we listen to Beyoncé or Nicki Minaj instead, as I did during the exploratory study (to no avail), but I will certainly want to. In this research, as in all things, my goal must be to act ever less egocentrically. It is the only way to see and appreciate the riches of the girls’ engagements with pop culture and their practices and meanings I cannot yet imagine.

## I – INTRODUCTION

In *Culture and Society: 1780-1950*, Raymond Williams (1958) wrote, “We live in an expanding culture, yet we spend much of our energy regretting the fact, rather than seeking to understand its nature and conditions” (p. iv). The most common term for this expanding culture, according to Storey (2003), is *popular culture*. Today, over half a century later, our pop culture continues to expand, and we seem still to regret it. Williams wrote about the proliferations of culture made possible by the then-new means of distribution: there was simply more print text, more music, more art, more film to consume *popularly*—by the people. Since his writing, digital and mobile technologies have made it even easier to distribute culture. And pop culture has also expanded to fill more of our daily lives. The expanded means of distribution have been matched by an expanded means of consumption and more leisure to enjoy this consumption (Buckingham, 2000, p. 82). Pop culture shapes what we buy, how we pursue pleasure, how we relate to and communicate with each other, and what we think about. And the connections among individual pop culture genres, platforms, forms, and texts have thickened. For example, we can now stream a movie online and, in the course of watching that movie, read reviews of it aggregated on sites like Rotten Tomatoes; research the actors’ previous roles on IMDB, their bios on Wikipedia; and issue our own reactions and commentary on social media platforms. We can do all of this on a single mobile device in the course of other daily activities.

“Regret” over this state of affairs—or, at least, anxiety—persists in both public and academic discourses. The fear that pop culture negatively impacts children and teenagers circulates through pop psychology. This fear is based in the notion that young people want to imitate what they see in pop culture. Images of sexuality and violence produce the most fervid fears, as they are blamed for “provoking indiscipline and aggressive behaviour, for inflaming precocious sexuality, and for destroying the healthy social bonds which might prevent [these problems] from arising in the first place” (Buckingham, 2000, p. 3). These anxieties exist, albeit differently, in academic discourses as well. Critical literacy scholars, for example, seek pedagogical practices that make visible the relations between language and power in pop culture texts and, furthermore, that provide tools to challenge and resist the hegemonic messages carried by those texts (see Jones, 2006 and Janks, 2010). The assumption at work in this kind of scholarship is that young people are vulnerable to these hegemonic messages and that it is the educator’s job to equip them with the means to challenge and resist them.

The particular kinds of messages, or meanings, that interest me are about gender: what does it mean to be a girl or woman? My own anxiety is about the pop culture imagery that one might draw on to answer that question—imagery that highlights rigid standards of physical beauty, the notion of feminine respectability, subordinate roles in romantic relationships, to name a few examples. It would be easy, or at least straightforward, to resist this kind of imagery if it were simply contained within pop culture texts, ready to be consumed and internalized by a naive audience. In such a world, as feminists, we could simply contrast those images with images of masculinity, pointing out how limited the images of femininity are by comparison. We could advocate for a

wider range of images of girls and women. Walkerdine (1997) points out the limits of this approach in her discussion of popular fiction written for children: “It was common...to discuss children’s fiction in terms of stereotyping, with the assumption that sexist fiction distorted the reality of women’s lives and that feminist fiction for girls could present girls and women in other roles than those normally put forward in books” (Walkerdine, 1997, pp. 45-46). She points out that “transformation was understood as rational and cognitive. That is, progressive literature would simply present such new images and stories” (p. 46). Of course, this has been done, and it is an important mode of resistance. However, such a course of action cannot be the only mode of resistance because pop culture texts, as Walkerdine goes on to describe, are not unitary or even fixed in their meanings or in their form. They do not send discrete, concrete messages that are simply consumed by audiences. If they did, feminists might designate those texts the enemy and simply fight that enemy. But such a conception ignores the fact that pop culture is highly participatory: its audience’s engagements with pop culture are active and meanings of femininity are made, unmade, and remade through those engagements. The “enemy,” such as it is, is diffuse, multiple, unstable, and actively maintained by the audience.

Before going further, I want to illustrate two points I have made thus far: that the meanings that circulate through pop culture warrant a certain degree of anxiety, particularly around gender, and that pop culture is highly participatory and its meanings unfixed. I also want to make a third point: that, because of these qualities, pop culture can both serve as a source of pleasure and cause us to feel stuck—stuck in terms of how we are to make sense of its meanings and how we, as girls and women, are to act, think, and speak in response to it. I illustrate these points using the example of Drake’s “Hotline

Bling” (Graham, Jeffries, & Thomas, 2015). “Hotline Bling” was released as the lead single from Drake’s fourth studio album *Views* in July 2015. It reached number two on *Billboard* Hot 100 and was one of Drake’s best-selling singles. Its popularity as a single was eventually dwarfed by the popularity of the music video, which was released in late 2015. In the song, a male narrator laments the fact that his female ex has moved on from their relationship. He sings,

Ever since I left the city  
 You got a reputation for yourself now...  
 You started wearing less and going out more  
 Glasses of champagne out on the dance floor  
 Hanging with some girls I’ve never seen before  
 You used to call me on my cell phone.” (Graham et al., 2015)

In these lyrics, Drake contrasts two images of femininity: the slut and the good girl. The slut is the version of his ex who has developed a reputation for partying, wearing revealing clothing, and hooking up with other men. The good girl is the version he knew: “Used to always stay at home, be a good girl / You was in a zone, yeah / You should just be yourself / Right now, you’re someone else.”

Everyday feminists characterized the lyrics as slut shaming. Perhaps the most widely circulated critique was developed by a Facebook user and picked up by BuzzFeed and similar outlets. In the critique, Javetta Laster “translates” Drake’s lyrics:

I’m so stressed because ever since I left you alone in the city, you’ve started to recognize how mesmerizing your body can be and you get your own bottles while you enjoy bustin some moves on the dance floor. You hangin with some girls that are your friends that I’ve never seen before because I’ve been gone away from the city and they want to hang around you because you’re you but I don’t know them cause I been away so I’m confused. (Laster, 2015)

In the translated version, Laster positions the ex as a subject of her own experience rather than as a figure in the narrator’s imagination existing only to serve his needs. Laster’s

response to “Hotline Bling” was not the only critique that was circulated. Artists such as Ceresia remixed the song from the female perspective (ceresiasworld, 2015) on YouTube. In addition to these sorts of feminist responses, many on social media speculated about which of his exes Drake might be referring to in the lyrics (pop singer Rihanna, tennis player Serena Williams, and rapper Nicki Minaj were contenders).

Once the video was released in October 2015, the audience’s engagement with the song only intensified. For most of the video, Drake dances alone in a series of minimal James Turrell-inspired, fluorescent-lit spaces. He wears an oversized gray sweater in some shots, and a sweatshirt with an embroidered owl in others. His dancing has been described and parodied on *Saturday Night Live* as “dad dancing” (Hatchet, 2015): he “leans back and then bends forward, cha-chas while undulating his arms, shakes his finger at the camera, wiggles his neck, and so much more” (Kornhaber, 2015). What is distinctive about the video, however, is not Drake’s decidedly un-cool attire and dance moves. Rather, it is its GIF-able, meme-able quality. The video seems to be designed to be broken apart into GIFs, remixed with new meanings, reappropriated and redistributed by audiences via social media. And it was. Drake was already a commonly memed figure (a Google search of “Drake meme” turns up over 200,000 results, including several listicles of the best Drake memes and over a thousand Drake meme “ideas” posted to Pinterest), and the images from the “Hotline Bling” video seemed to feed into his meme persona as soft, sweet, and somewhat pathetic (Figure 1).





Figure 1. “Hotline Bling” meme (Sizzle, 2015)

Around the time when the video was released, journalist Jamil Smith interviewed scholar and television host Melissa Harris-Perry on his podcast *Intersection*. He asked if any parts of her identity are in conflict with each other, and she replied that her identity as a feminist and her identity as someone who loves misogynistic rap music are in conflict. Smith then brought up “Hotline Bling,” citing its notorious slut shaming lyrics. Harris-Perry responded:

Oh, but he’s so pitiful when he’s singing it! I mean, I guess I would have all the feelings if Drake was, like, real dominant in it, and there was some kind of—you know—if he was dressed in black leather and telling you, ‘Hey, stay home and be a good girl!’ But clearly, especially once you see the video, Drake is home in some sweatpants and a gray turtleneck, and he’s like, ‘Oh, lord, why have you gone out to the club? Why don’t you stay home and call me?’ (Smith, 2015)

These responses to “Hotline Bling” can perhaps be more accurately characterized as *participation* in “Hotline Bling.” All sorts of audiences, from ordinary Facebook users, to YouTube stars, to *Saturday Night Live*, to well-known public scholars such as Harris-Perry participated in making meaning of the phenomenon. On one hand, we could say that the images of femininity depicted in the song’s lyrics are limited and limiting: the choice is to be a slut or a good girl. On the other hand, as Harris-Perry points out, the lyrics must be read against the text of the video, which includes elements like his dress, his dance moves, his gestures and facial expressions, the scenery, and so forth. Audiences

making sense of “Hotline Bling” are drawing on the multimodality of the song and video and also on their understandings of Drake’s pathetic, love-starved public persona. These additional resources for reading the video do not undermine the reading of the lyrics as sexist; rather, they complicate it. Drake is not a dominant male narrator decreeing that women should be one way and not another. Instead, Drake is a figure deeply embedded in a pop culture context who, in his own desperation, is grasping for these sexist framings in a bid for his ex’s attention.

In the example of “Hotline Bling,” we see that pop culture texts—just like all texts—are not discrete and they do not convey discrete units of meaning about femininity or anything else in a straightforward way. In this example, we see just how participatory pop culture is, just how active audiences are in engaging with it, and how they create and circulate their own texts in response to it. We also see that these engagements can be sources of both resistance and pleasure.

At a time when, in Jenkins’s (2006) words, “[e]ach of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives” (pp. 3-4), we still do not know enough about how young people engage with pop culture and what comes of those engagements. This study is about pop culture, gender, and literacy. In many ways, it is situated within this anxiety about pop culture—an anxiety that it forecloses certain ways of being, that its depictions of people and worlds is limited and limiting. Yet this study is not bound by that anxiety. Through this research, I intend to make visible young people’s ways of engaging with, reading, and making sense of pop culture. The specific anxieties that interest me are those connected to my own history

understanding myself as gendered through pop culture: how we make sense of what it means to be a girl or boy through our active engagement in a world saturated with pop culture; how and under what conditions we arrive at certain ideas of girlhood and certain ideas of ourselves; and how and under what conditions those ideas fall apart. Because pop culture takes its shape in multimodal texts, and because how open or closed those texts are (whether meaning is contained within them or meaning is made through engagement with them) continues to be a source of theoretical tension, and because audiences make sense of pop culture through literacy practices such as reading, listening, speaking, and writing, this study must also be about literacy. It must also account for what text is and what it does, and how, through socioculturally situated literacy practices, we make sense of it.

### **Background**

In this section, I map how others have taken up the topic of pop culture in theory and research, focusing especially on how scholars in education have approached pop culture, and how they want educators to approach it. Then, I lay out how literacy curricula in American schools have changed in response to the Common Core State Standards: fewer texts and fewer kinds of texts are read as part of the official curriculum, and the texts are treated as containers of meanings to be unpacked. In short, I argue that, as pop culture continues to expand, American schools are retreating from it.

### **Pop Culture**

Much has been made of how best to define *culture* and *pop culture*. Storey (2003) and others from the Cultural Studies tradition have embraced what he describes as a

“hopelessly inclusive concept” (Preface, para. 2) of culture as all that has been thought and said. Storey sees culture not as a set of objects or artifacts of what has been thought and said but as the experiences of those objects and the meanings we make through those experiences. In *Inventing Popular Culture*, Storey traces how pop culture, in particular, has been variously defined for analysis over the centuries—from folk culture to mass culture to low culture to postmodern culture. He identifies the one feature that these diverse views have in common: pop culture is *popular*—it belongs to the people.

Following Storey’s lead, I do not seek a transcendent definition of pop culture beyond this notion of *belonging to the people*, nor am I concerned with its parameters—what “counts” as pop culture and what does not. Instead, I lay out a few common orientations toward pop culture among scholars and researchers, naming how approaches to the study of pop culture have been organized and what kinds of understandings they have produced.

Dolby (2003) writes that education researchers have traditionally conceptualized and researched pop culture in one of two ways. Some see pop culture as a set of texts to be read. Others see it as a lived experience of making, negotiating, resisting, and remaking meaning. Both of these approaches have continued relevance in pop culture research today. Because pop culture texts have proliferated across platforms, there is more text to read than ever, and the availability and mobility of this content makes such readings an ordinary part of everyday life. Simultaneously, with the range of digital and mobile technologies available, as well as the increasingly widespread use of social media platforms, audiences’ active engagement with these texts is more visible than ever.

This first approach to pop culture, one that focuses on its textuality, offers important analytical tools for revealing how pop culture texts such as television shows,

movies, and music operate according to their producers' commercial interests—for example, in promoting particular images of femininity—and therefore will always relate to wider systems of power. It is this approach that has been most productively taken up by critical literacy scholars, who have been interested in doing the work of making these systems of power and hegemony visible to young people in schools. In keeping with this lineage of work, critical literacy scholars often treat pop culture as a kind of public pedagogy. Giroux (2004) defines public pedagogy as “the diverse ways in which culture functions as a contested sphere over the production, distribution, and regulation of power, and how and where it operates both symbolically and institutionally as an educational, political, and economic force” (p. 65). More simply put, public pedagogy is comprised of the educational sites and events that occur outside of traditional schools. Theorizing pop culture as public pedagogy means addressing the complex ways education happens through engagements with pop culture. This literature treats pop culture as potentially influential in the lives of its audiences, and much of it strives to account for the unpredictability of its flows of influence. Still, critical literacy scholars who have taken up public pedagogy, either implicitly or explicitly, tend to take a negative view of pop culture and its influence. Their purpose has been to prepare young people to challenge and resist pop culture texts and their messages. In this view, pop culture is “frequently seen to be harmful to those who are regarded as particularly vulnerable” (Buckingham, 2000, p. 42). This kind of anxiety resonates with public discourses of caring and concern about pop culture's corruptive influence on youth (Dolby, 2003).

In contrast, some scholars take a less critical approach and celebrate how youth actively participate in and experience pop culture by resisting, rejecting, or remixing its

messages. They argue that the proliferation of new technologies provides young people “new opportunities for creativity, for community and for self-fulfillment” (Buckingham, 2000, p. 41). This view calls to mind the example of “Hotline Bling” (Graham et al., 2015) and the many texts it spawned. In this view, youth do not passively consume texts but produce their own kinds of meanings—and increasingly, their own kinds of texts—within and across local and digital spaces. In 2000, Buckingham noted that teenagers had ever greater access to the technology needed to create music, videos, and other texts—an access that “permit[s] a highly conscious, and potentially subversive manipulation of commercially produced media texts, for example through sampling and re-editing found material, alongside ‘original’ creative production” (p. 83). A decade and a half on, young people now not only have access to the means of producing such texts but also have greater opportunity to distribute their texts to wide audiences on social media platforms.

Paraphrasing Marx (1977), Storey (2003) writes, “We make meanings and we are made by meanings” (p. 43). He depicts the process of meaning-making as active and reciprocal. He writes, “Meaning is always a social production, a human practice; and because different meanings can be ascribed to the same thing, meaning is always the site and the result of struggle (p. 56). In these conceptions of pop culture as participatory experiences, then, meaning is not simply *contained* in texts, waiting to be unpacked. Rather, meaning is negotiated, understood, and, indeed, produced, in the active process of consuming pop culture. In this way, pop culture consumption is a productive practice. Individuals have always actively participated in the consumption of pop culture and, through that participation, produced their own meanings of it. This notion of productive consumption draws from Gramscian cultural theory, which proposes that “people *make*

popular culture from the repertoire of commodities supplied by the culture industries” (Storey, 2003, Chapter 4, para. 8). Today, productive consumption is made visible and material in individuals’ participation in social media and other digital spaces. Our readings of pop culture texts have never simply replicated producers’ intended messages (Bezemer & Kress, 2008), but today’s participatory pop culture makes such a view especially unhelpful in understanding its role in individuals’ lives. Any useful view of pop culture both accounts for producers’ commercial interests, as they are reflected in pop culture texts, and acknowledges the unpredictable and complicated ways audiences make sense of them. In this study, the distinction between activity and passivity, between making meaning and having meaning made out of you, between production and consumption is a site of struggle and exploration. As Buckingham (2000) points out, saying simply that pop culture is “interactive” does not capture the diversity of interaction (for example, among activities such as playing a video game, commenting on Facebook, and dancing to pop music at a party) nor does it capture the cultural and social contexts in which young people’s engagements with pop culture are embedded.

A pop culture in which consumers actively participate, in which grassroots and corporate media intersect, and in which the power of the producer and the power of the consumer interact in unpredictable ways reflects what Jenkins (2006) calls *convergence culture*. Convergence culture involves three concepts: media convergence, participatory culture, and collective intelligence. *Media convergence* refers to the flow of content across many platforms (e.g., television, websites, social media sites) and the migratory behavior of audiences who move between platforms with ease. This culture is *participatory* in that audiences interact and communicate with each other but are not

equal (for examples, images can be crowd-sourced and then reappropriated by corporate news media outlets). *Collective intelligence* includes the unpredictable, fragmentary, but active way individuals make meaning within this media landscape. He writes, “Convergence happens when we unite the bits and fragments of what we see and experience into our own personal mythology, we talk among ourselves about what we’re consuming, and so consuming has become a collective process” (p. 3).

Convergence culture disrupts a dichotomized approach to pop culture as *either* text *or* lived experience (Dolby, 2003). To simply examine individual texts, as if they are released into the world as whole, unitary bearers of messages, is to ignore the way individuals move those texts around, add to and animate them, and ultimately take up or reject whatever meaning they make of them. But to examine only lived experiences of pop culture without examining the texts themselves carefully is to ignore how texts operate according to producers’ interests.

### **American Schools**

In this section, I lay out recent changes in literacy curricula in American schools. It is important to keep in mind that as young people are participating in pop culture in all the ways described above, they are also participating in the kinds of curricula described below. The standards and accountability movement has narrowed the scope of literacy curriculum and pedagogy in American schools. In 2010, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were adopted by 42 states. The CCSS “lay out a vision of what it means to be a literate person in the twenty-first century” (NGA, 2010, p. 1), which entails outlining a discrete set of skills that comprise *literacy* and aligning those skills to curricular mandates and assessments (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012). The CCSS



for English Language Arts have taken an explicitly essentialist view of texts, in that they want teachers and students to focus on “what lies within the four corners of the text” (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012). Like the New Critics, literary theorists of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the authors of the CCSS favor analyzing the structure and meaning of a text (or how the structure develops the meaning of a text), excluding such factors as the author’s intention, sociocultural and historical contexts (of the writing or the reading of the text), and readers’ own emotional or otherwise personal responses to the text (Leitch, 2010). In this way, the standards promote a rational, objective approach to text and deemphasize reading as a personal, subjective act (Calkins et al., 2012). This approach reflects an autonomous view of literacy (Street, 1993), where reading is a cognitive skill set that, once mastered, can be carried from context to context, thereby ensuring one’s place in the economic and social order. The CCSS’s return to New Criticism is a rejection of the emphasis on the reader’s role in making meaning in contemporary reading instruction, an emphasis that can be traced to Rosenblatt’s (1978) transactional theory of reading, and the perceived abandonment of textual analysis.

The practices that have taken hold include a version of what the authors call *close reading*, which is, in Coleman’s (2011) framing, a way of honoring a text by doing “the hard work of reading [it] closely, carefully, and well.” In addition, running counter to decades-old instructional practices that promote high-volume “just-right” reading (e.g., Allington, 2001), the CCSS requires that students read a much more limited, and to some extent predetermined, set of texts that are thought to be sufficiently complex for a given grade level. The result of these mandates is a focus on a small canon of texts for K-12 classrooms. The CCSS, then, have influenced the teaching of reading in two major ways:

first, it is assumed that texts have an essential meaning that must be unpacked through close reading instruction, and, second, students read a much smaller set of texts over the course of their schooling. Coleman (2011) has described reading as an encounter with a great mind in the text, and the standards reflect this view. As a result, students in American schools seem to accumulate power and gain access to institutional opportunities by being able to discern and rearticulate what a given “great mind” is saying in a text. Critical literacy and multimodal literacy have little place in a CCSS-based curriculum. While ELA Anchor Standard 7 asks students to engage with multimedia texts [“Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words” (NGA, 2010)], the appendices of the CCSS offer no guidance on how one might support students in doing the work of this standard.

### **Statement of the Problem**

As many American schools have become more insular in their treatment of texts, pop culture has expanded as the technologies that support it have become more accessible and more mobile. Sanders and Albers (2010) write,

As literacy and language arts teacher educators, we continually struggle with the tension between the restrictive culture of political mandates that value traditional approaches to literacy and how we must work to develop a culture of possibilities that engage and build upon the new literacies that students bring with them to class daily. (p. 2)

The struggle Sanders and Albers describe is the impetus for this study. Pop culture can do a great deal in young people’s worlds. It can define, shape, or influence those worlds. It can bound those worlds (if we take a critical view) or expand them (if we take a more

celebratory view), or, of course, do both if we take a critically celebratory view. Existing research has argued that pop culture is influential in young people's lives; it has tried to demonstrate that popular texts—from songs to television shows to films—make only certain kinds of identities available to its audiences. It has shown that young people actively engage with pop culture by listening, viewing, discussing, and responding. Some research has shown the indeterminacy of young people's readings of texts and the range of meanings they make of them. Meanwhile, the CCSS have isolated American schools from these contexts, and this has meant that educators are given fewer opportunities to see and understand how young people are engaging in a social world saturated with pop culture and making sense of themselves through those engagements. The meanings girls make and the literacy practices through which they make them are largely invisible.

What is needed is research that tells us more than just *that* young people are engaging with pop culture but *how* they are doing so on an ongoing basis, how those engagements are shaping their understandings of themselves as girls, and how those engagements are themselves performances that can both maintain and threaten the boundaries between boy and girl. Such research can serve as a starting point for, and an undercurrent of, curricula that support young people in making sense of pop culture and their relationship to it.

To illustrate why making these meanings and practices visible is a necessary first—and ongoing—step in developing meaningful curriculum, I return to Melissa Harris-Perry's reading of "Hotline Bling." Imagine creating a lesson the goal of which is to illustrate to young people how "Hotline Bling" is sexist in the way it taps into discourses of respectable femininity and relies on them for coherence. Such a lesson

would align to a major purpose of critical literacy, to “bring to bear on language a critique which makes visible the powerful force of rationality and of linear patterns of thought” (Davies, 1997, p. 28). If we designed such a lesson without any knowledge of the kinds of meanings young people are already making of the song and its video—for example, the meanings Harris-Perry describes—we would not know how to direct our instructional energies. If we do not know that young people are drawing on more than the lyrics to make meaning of it, that they are drawing on the imagery of the video (for example, the cozy oversized sweater, the “dad dancing,” the pained facial expression) and Drake’s reputation as pitiful, sweet, and love-starved, then our lesson would, at best, feel unconvincing to students.

It is not just the meanings young people are making of gender that we need to understand in order to develop curriculum. We also need to see the practices through which they are making those meanings. Research in critical and multimodal literacy offers plenty of strategies for resisting and critiquing hegemonic meanings in pop culture texts (e.g., Davies 1997; Jones, 2006; Janks, 2010; Ajayi, 2015). If we develop lessons without knowing how young people are already practicing literacy, we might not see the strategies they have already developed for doing just that, and we miss an opportunity to build on those strategies. When critical literacy is researched or practiced as *only* a means to replace one reading of a text with another, more enlightened reading, we miss the opportunity to support students in developing portable strategies for reading and resisting.

I believe that a reading of “Hotline Bling” that accounts for sexist discourses of respectability is a *better* reading, and that a reading that embraces more of the text—not just the lyrics, but the imagery of the video, the dance, the dress—is a *better* reading. In

this sense, one could characterize my argument as replacing one reading with another, more enlightened reading. My argument is not that we should be abandoning this purpose all together, that we should not invite young people to take more into account as they read texts. My argument is that this should not be our only purpose. I suggest that one purpose of critical literacy curriculum—one that has not been emphasized in the literature—is to help young people recognize that they are *doing* literacy when they engage with pop culture texts—that they are *reading* just as much as they *read* written texts in school. This purpose includes but supersedes specific texts, specific meanings, and even specific practices and strategies. The existing literature does not tell us the extent to which adolescents are already aware that they are active in their ways of reading and making sense of pop culture texts. Consciously thinking of these practices as literacy practices creates an opportunity for them to be carried out more deliberately in more contexts and across time and space.<sup>1</sup>

To summarize, a combination of two conditions have created a gap in young people's literacy engagement in schools: (1) American schools' move to a smaller set of

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<sup>1</sup>Of course, this is based on the assumption that greater consciousness leads to greater control over literacy practices, a feature of what Graff (1979) calls the literacy myth—that literacy can be used to achieve desired social, economic, and political ends. This assumption also aligns to Scribner's (1993) *literacy as power* metaphor wherein literacy is thought to empower marginalized groups to claim their place in society. In valuing adolescent girls' consciousness of their literacy practices, I am entering a longstanding and ongoing conversation about the role of self-awareness, rationality, and strategy in literacy practices. On one hand, some have argued for the importance of metacognition in becoming self-regulating, for example describing how children learn to “differentiate and manipulate the elements of the written system...in order to engage with, and manipulate, the social world” (Dyson, 2001, p. 126). Freire (1970) argued that the basis of the “pedagogy of the oppressed” is “conscientization,” a student's process of becoming conscious of herself as oppressed and their relationship to an oppressor.

I see consciousness of literacy practices as useful in this case for the reasons laid out in this section (in essence, it gives girls an opportunity to consider and account for more in their readings of pop culture) and more generally because one of the things curriculum can do is direct individuals' attention—to texts, ideas, and practices.

texts and narrower purposes for reading, and (2) the expansion of pop culture in young people's everyday lives. What is needed is curriculum that can support young people in making sense of themselves in relation to this increasingly pervasive aspect of their lives. In order to develop such curriculum, we need research that makes visible the meanings they are making and the practices through which they are making those meanings.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to make visible the meanings adolescent girls make of femininity through their engagement with pop culture, the literacy practices through which they make those meanings, and the deconstruction of those meanings. The purpose is *not* to deconstruct pop culture texts or particular notions of femininity because, as Derrida (1991) wrote, "Deconstruction is not a method and cannot be transformed into one" (p. 273). Rather, it is something one witnesses (Bennington, 2000, p. 11). In other words, it is not an act of analysis that is done to data; rather, it is an inevitability of language and other sign systems through which meaning is made and unmade. The purpose is also *not* to understand what pop culture says about femininity nor is it to understand what adolescent girls understand about what pop culture says about femininity. To seek such understandings would be to assume that understandings are stable and unitary rather than always becoming (Grosz, 2011). Instead, this study, at the same time, uses and troubles the category of girlhood (Lather, 2000). Through this research, I seek the "ability to engage with what escapes propositions and representations" (Szyborska, 1996 as cited in Lather, 2007) and to witness how subjects are always being made, unmade, and remade through discourse and, specifically, through their

engagements with text. Finally, the purpose of this study is *not* to simply or transparently give voice to adolescent girls, as they share their experiences and understandings of themselves as girls of color; it is not to treat their accounts of personal experience as true facts, nor the language and other sign systems they use to narrate those experiences as a transparent window onto their lives and minds. Instead, this study honors the complexity of these accounts by treating the language used to describe personal experiences as, itself, a kind of performative speech act, worthy of examination in its own right.

### **Research Questions**

Through this research, I address the following questions:

- How do adolescent Black and Latina girls attending an urban middle school read and take up the femininities made available to them in pop culture texts?
  - In discussion, what semiotic resources, experiences, and knowledge do they draw on to read the meanings of femininity in these texts?
  - How do they circulate discourses in their discussion of the meanings of femininity in these texts?
  - When they narrate moments of everyday experience, how do the substance and the acts of narration position them in relation to the femininities under discussion?

The first two sub-questions address the femininities made available in pop culture texts. The methods used to address this issue—discussion groups organized around pop culture texts of the participants' choosing—produced data that offer insight into the

meanings the girls discursively make of the texts under discussion and also the kinds of resources, knowledge, and experiences they draw on to make those meanings.

The third sub-question addresses how adolescent girls narrate relevant moments of everyday experience. Here, *narrating* is distinguished from *telling*. *Narrating* “suggests shaping through strategies such as repetition, intensity, linkage, magnification, tensions, and/or interruptions” (Schaafsma & Vinz, 2011, p. 3). In the second phase of the study, I provided the space and impetus for these narrations and analyzed the substance and the acts of narration. Here, the *substance* of the narration is the referred-to moment in time—including the setting of that moment, the narrator’s stated goals and desires in that moment, the actions of others involved, and the immediate and lasting impacts of that moment. The *act* of narration includes the strategies used to narrate the story, as well as the performativity of the act. These narrations were layered with meaning: the actual lived experience, the individual’s memory of the experience, the individual’s understanding of the purpose of elicitation, and the individual’s attitudes toward femininity, to name a few. In poststructural research, these layers are not thought to obscure the “reality” of pop culture’s influence in young people’s lives. Rather, they are seen as substantive. The stories the girls told, then, can make visible how pop culture intersects with personal, local, and educational flows of influence to shape how they make meaning of themselves as girls. We can see how girls see themselves in relation to these discourses: do they accept their “truths,” do they reject them, do they remix them, do they feel conflicted and torn over them? This approach to pop culture’s role widens our lens to include the kinds of shifting and fragmentary roles it can play and the ways



young people, too, play in this world and make it meaningful as it makes meanings on and through them.

### **Overview of Research Design**

To address these questions, I conducted research in two phases, leaning on two major methods of qualitative research: discussion groups and narrative elicitation interviews. Roughly speaking, the first phase of research produced data meant to address the first two sub-questions (how girls read femininities), and the second phase meant to address the third sub-question (how they narrate moments of everyday experience). Data from both phases of research contributed to my understanding of the issues at stake when we seek to design curriculum meant to support young people in making sense of themselves as gendered subjects through their engagement with pop culture.

In the first phase of research, I facilitated discussion groups with five adolescent Black and Latina girls who attend the same school. These groups were similar to focus groups, in that they generated data by fostering talk about a designated topic, allowing individual participants to articulate distinctive points of view in collaboration with each other (Bogden & Biklen, 2007, p. 109). But these discussion groups were a bit more like book clubs or literature circles (e.g., Daniels, 2002). As in literature circles, participants chose their own reading material (in this case, a pop culture text rather than a more traditional print text), we met at regular intervals to discuss this material, and participants, for the most part, directed the conversation. In the second phase of research, I conducted one-on-one narrative elicitation interviews, the purpose of which was to create the

opportunity and impetus for participants to narrate their personal experiences in relation to these same notions of femininity.

### **Rationale**

By bringing together pop culture, literacy, and gender, this study highlighted questions and tensions that emerge from the intersections of these topics. By studying the literacy practices involved in making meaning of pop culture texts, for example, this study disrupts the unitary view of pop culture texts as sites of public pedagogy—that is, that pop culture texts contain and convey a stable set of meanings—and accommodate more, and more diverse, readings of these texts. It follows, then, that critical literacy can be seen as something more or other than a method of correcting false consciousness. By engaging adolescent girls in group discussions of pop culture texts, this study accommodates and, in fact, seeks multiple, diverse, and possibly contradictory readings of texts, as well as ways of taking up these readings. By inviting participants to bring texts that are relevant to them to the group, this study recovers what is missed in critical literacy work that predetermines texts to analyze and their meanings.

This study addresses the problem that these prevalent practices are largely invisible in American curriculum that is based in the CCSS. By inviting students to bring to the surface their own texts, their own readings of those texts, and their own ways of taking up the meanings they make of them, this study makes visible what is happening in young people's lives alongside their academic work. These methods stand in contrast to other methods of studying pop culture, such as providing participants particular kinds of texts to read in particular ways (e.g., Moeller, 2011) or studying niche pop culture

interests and engagements (e.g., Black, 2006). Moreover, by convening groups around these texts, this study asks for students to make meaning of these texts in conversation with each other, which reflects the way meanings are made—and unmade and remade—in everyday life (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Finally, by eliciting narratives about moments when the notions of femininity under discussion felt relevant in their own experience, this study makes visible what happens with those multiple, shifting, and possibly contradictory readings outside of the moment of reading itself.

We cannot assume any linearity or causality from the moment of encounter with a text, to the moment of meaning making, to the moment in which that meaning is made relevant in personal experience. These moments—including, the texts, people, settings, and other contextual factors involved—influence each other in multiple, unpredictable ways. Still, it is important that this study tracks entire arcs of engagement with texts. Much of the empirical work at the intersections of gender, literacy, and pop culture isolate particular texts or particular kinds of engagements. They might examine the moment of encounter with a single text (e.g., Crane, 1999), or a single classroom scene in which young people make use of the text in some way (e.g., Jones, 2012). Rather than isolating these moments, this study's methods broaden our view to include the reading, meaning making, and animating processes that are always underway and in continual motion. By tracing entire intersecting arcs of engagement with pop culture, this study creates a fuller picture of the practices that are happening alongside what is happening in schools.

## Significance

This study continues a tradition of literacy research that examines literacy practices in and out of schools. In this study, I pay special attention to features of young people's current engagement with a pop culture-saturated social world, including the technologies that literally mobilize literacy practices across academic and non-academic spaces and the social media platforms that facilitate consumption and production of pop culture. This study is also significant to literacy research because it broadens our understanding of what educators can do, curricularly and pedagogically, with these understandings of young people's literacy practices. Specifically, it broadens critical literacy to not only include criticizing and challenging hegemonic notions of gender found within mass-produced texts (e.g., Janks, 2010) but also examining how audiences make meaning of such texts and how they animate those meanings in their lives. It follows, then, that this research can help educators broaden their interpretation of young people's readings of these texts. Rather than interpreting these readings as either preferred or resistant (e.g., Moeller, 2011), they can also examine them for incidents of slippage, tension, and contradiction.

Not only does this study potentially disrupt the assumption that pop culture has a corruptive influence on young people, it also complicates our understanding of how, when, and why young people engage with pop culture and what sense they make of these engagements. Simply put, how does their engagement with pop culture shape their views of themselves as girls? Asking and seeking answers to such questions may enable scholars and educators to rethink the role pop culture might play in curriculum. There is a wealth of research on how pop culture might be used to entice students to be interested in

academic texts and literacies or otherwise to engage them in academic work (e.g., Hall, 2011). But pop culture is and should be more than an enticement; it can be a territory for teaching and learning. Moreover, this study may enable educators to rethink how they respond to moments when pop culture seeps into academic spaces—particularly when those moments feel disruptive, confusing, or alarming to the teacher. Developing a richer understanding of how, when, and why girls engage with pop culture and how they make meaning of those engagements can shift educators’ frames of reference when such moments occur. In the broadest sense, this study can show how and why understanding young people’s existing literacy practices can enrich curricular and pedagogical practices in school.

### **Theoretical Framework**

I have argued that, in order to develop curriculum that supports young people in making sense of themselves in relation to pop culture, we must, as a first and continuing step, learn about their processes and strategies they have already developed for doing so. I have also described two approaches to the study of pop culture in education—one that emphasizes the textuality of pop culture and the other that emphasizes its discursivity. I try to take both approaches, and therefore I used both theories of text and of discourse to shape my methods for data production and data analysis.

### **Multimodality**

Pop culture texts are multimodal. That is, they juxtapose multiple sign systems and require readers to draw on multiple modes, or “socially and culturally shaped resources for making meaning” (Bezemer & Kress, 2003, p. 171). Multimodality de-

centers language as the primary signifying system. It not only elevates other modes of making meaning for analysis—for example, spatial, gestural, musical—but also draws our attention to the way multiple modes work as an ensemble to communicate meanings (Jewitt, 2013, p. 150). Multimodality helps us understand “what literacy is and could be in a multimodal and multilingual communicational landscape, and how to study it” (p. 20). I rely on a theory of multimodality to understand the way adolescent girls *read* pop culture texts. In this section, I describe the concepts that this theory offers, and then I apply these concepts to a particular pop culture text to further clarify them.

I borrow Machin’s (2007) principle that “in order for something to ‘be a mode’ there needs to be a shared cultural sense of a set of resources and how they can be organized to realize meaning” (p. 15). Kress (2010) explains that semiotic resources are “constantly remade; never willfully, arbitrarily, anarchically but precisely, in line with what I need, in response to some demand” (pp. 7-8). So while we cannot prescribe a singular type of meaning to each mode, we can recognize the culturally shaped patterns for how they work. Kress’s (1993) notion of “modal affordance” is a useful concept in analyzing how modes *mean* without treating them as static systems. Kress defines *modal affordance* as “what is possible to express and represent easily with a mode” (Kress, 1993, p. 172). For example, spoken language unfolds over time and so allows sign-makers to sequence signs and so to present a message in a particular order. The logic of time structures spoken language. Images, on the other hand, embed meanings through the spatial arrangement of elements. In contrast to spoken language, images are experienced all at once, and so time and linearity are less relevant in analyzing how images communicate meaning. There are certain kinds of meanings and realities that individual

modes facilitate. Identifying modal affordances, then, helps us detect the culturally shaped patterns in multimodal meaning-making and also helps us to see the kinds of meanings (e.g., femininities) made possible in particular multimodal texts and in the ensembles of signs that we encounter, for example, in digital and social media spaces.

The concept of modal affordances allows us to see the kinds of meanings made possible through the selection of particular modes. This concept must be held in balance with another concept of multimodality: that modes operate in ensembles. According to Hull and Nelson (2005), “A multimodal text can create a different system of signification, one that transcends the collective contribution of its constituent parts” (p. 225). Modes such as moving image, dance, and dress in music videos, for example, do not operate simply as a support or supplement for the song’s lyrics. The video’s act of communication pivots on the way these modes are coordinated. “The meanings in any mode are always interwoven with the meanings made with those of all other modes co-present and ‘co-operating’ in a communicative event” (Jewitt, 2009, p. 15). Citing Martinec and Salway (2005), Jewitt lays out a few possibilities for how an ensemble of modes might *mean*: modes can elaborate, extend, or enhance one another. In other words, a mode can *say more*, in one way or another, about what another mode says. Modes can also work together to create contradiction (Lemke, 1998) and can, as an ensemble, produce rhythm or style—kinds of intersemiotic meanings that are only possible through the interaction of modes.

The final concept of multimodality relevant to this study is the interest of sign-makers. Multimodal meanings are not predetermined. They are situated within specific acts of communication and representation, and the modes through which those meanings

are produced are shaped by how they have been used culturally and historically. An interest, according to Kress (1993) is “the articulation and realisation of an individual’s relation to an object or event, acting out that social complex at a particular moment, in the context of an interaction with other constitutive factors of the situation which are considered as relevant by the individual” (p.174). Kress’s definition foregrounds the social embeddedness of all types of communication. Any communication that occurs between sign-maker and interpreter is shaped by the situation in which the sign is produced, the situation in which it is read, and the interpreter’s own framing and purposes for engaging with the sign. Kress argues that the sign-makers’ interests are sedimented in the signs, or texts, themselves. Rather than assuming that the sign-maker “makes” a sign and that the interpreter “re-makes” its meaning in her mind, producing an exact replica of the intended meaning, this conception allows us to examine how power operates, not within, but through the text without settling for the simplistic understanding of a text as a straightforward conveyor of meanings. About Kress’s treatment of the sign-maker’s interests, Siegel and Panofsky (2009) argue,

Although a researcher might elect to focus primarily on the way an *individual’s* interests and choice of modes shapes meaning-making, to do so in the absence of historical, cultural, and political theories of literacy curriculum, teaching, and learning is to limit what a multimodal lens can offer educators.” (p. 99; emphasis added)

Individuals are always acting as part of social groups and in ways that take on meaning in relation to the social situation in which they act. Moreover, when it comes to pop culture, treating the sign-maker as an individual who selects modes in a vacuum feels especially unworkable, as sign-makers are often operating within or on behalf of corporations.



In what follows, I analyze one line of one song from *Beyoncé*: “I woke up like this” from “\*\*\*Flawless” (Knowles-Carter, Nash, Hollis, Boots, Rey Reel Music, 2013), along with the associated passage of the song’s music video (Figure 2). The purpose of this example is to show how meaning is made multimodally and to support the argument, elaborated in Chapter III, that conceptualizing pop culture in terms of multimodality was helpful to me as I facilitated discussion of texts and analyze girls’ readings of them. In this analysis, I track the meaning as it floats among the various modes at work. What does the lyric “I woke up like this” say about what it means to be a girl? The mystery of the lyric lies in what “this” is. The word “this” is deictic: its meaning is context-dependent. It cannot signify on its own. It needs an indexical sign to accompany it in order to take on meaning.

I begin by drawing on Beyoncé’s use of language. Spoken language is governed by the logic of time. That is, meanings are invoked as language is sequenced in speech or, in this case, in song. We could draw on Beyoncé’s tone to clarify the meaning. She thumps, more than sings, the line, hitting the word “up” particularly hard. This tone suggests that she is defiant in proclaiming that she woke up like this—whatever “this” is. Through gesture, dance, intonation, and language, she indicates that “this” is desirable and that looking or being like “this” did not require any effort. It is just how she woke up. Yet, we cannot know what “this” is without listening to the lyrics that follow. She goes on to sing, “We flawless. Ladies, tell him.” “This”—again, whatever it is—is “flawless.” Then, the meaning of “this” is suspended or deferred to the lyrics that follow it. We learn that “this” is “flawless,” and thereafter we learn something else. Her directive for ladies to “tell him” suggests how the women who are “flawless” should position themselves in

relation to the men (“him”) who, it can be assumed, would say otherwise. What unfolds across these lyrics is that “she” (either Beyoncé or a kind of universal “she”) woke up looking flawless, and that she should proclaim her flawlessness to and for men who say otherwise.

How might the meaning of the lyric shift if we look instead at the visual and gestural modes? In the song’s music video, the line “I woke up like this” is played over an image of Beyoncé. She appears to be heavily made-up and styled, wearing dark lipstick and eye make-up, a plaid button-front shirt with a large gleaming necklace that fastens the collar closed, and very short denim cut-offs. The visual mode affords different kinds of meaning. We do not have to wait for meaning to be clarified or elaborated in subsequent words. Instead, we can analyze the simultaneous arrangement of lyrics, image, posture, and facial expression. The lyric seems to be in direct conflict with the image. No one wakes up like *that*. In the video, she looks down at her body as she sings the line, and her face expresses a kind of delight in her own flawlessness. The arrangement of images, gestures, and facial expressions creates a contradiction that compels us to search for another kind of meaning. Because Beyoncé did not wake up *looking* like this, perhaps she means to say she woke up *being* like this. Maybe her proclamation that she “woke up like this” has more to do with being who you are, regardless of how others (specifically, men) respond to you. The addition of imagery to language affords this kind of tension and internal contradiction, and language alone does not. Because language is sequenced in time, we assume that what follows an initial statement clarifies, elaborates, and even trumps it.



Figure 2. Still from “\*\*\*Flawless” (Knowles-Carter et al., 2013)

### Undecidability

Much of the data generated through this study was language. Participants used language to make and express meanings of femininity in pop culture texts, and they used language to narrate their personal experiences in interviews. Derrida’s (1967/1997) notion of *undecidability* allows me to see how, through these uses of language, the meaning of femininity moves around and becomes—or, better yet, reveals itself to be—*undecidable*.

Derrida’s claim that there is no outside-text (1967/1997) adds to and complicates my use of social semiotics (and, later in this section, adds to and complicates my reading of “I woke up like this”). This claim is based on his rejection of the transcendental signified—a signified that lies beyond the system of signifiers that refer to it. Derrida’s work upends structuralist notions of the relationship between the signifier and signified and goes much further than even social semioticians in showing how texts’ meanings are not essential or *contained* within the text. Work in social semiotics, including much of what is cited above, does concede such poststructuralist points. But Derrida’s absolute commitment to the belief that any attempt to mean necessarily undermines itself—a

commitment that is reflected not only in his propositions but also in the impenetrability of his writing—allows me to resist stable and coherent meanings of femininity. His work—specifically, his claim that there is no outside-text—offers what he calls *undecidability*. It helps me see how language and other signifying systems slip and fail to help us make meaning and how, when it comes to making meaning of *femininity*, young people are caught in a web of associations. I first show how Derrida makes and uses the claim that there is no outside-text and then how the claim may help us understand the way adolescent girls read the femininities made available in pop culture texts.

Our commonsense understanding of texts leads us to believe that text is a signifier representing or indicating something else, something external to it, the signified. In other words, we use language to describe the world; language and the world are two separate entities. Derrida (1967/1997) claims that we cannot transgress a text “toward a referent or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language” (p. 146). Then, to say that there is no outside-text is to say that we use language to get at some stable meaning outside of it—a transcendental signified—but that there is, in fact, nothing outside of that very attempt to mean. The signifier (language) and the signified (meaning) are mutually constituted.

If *undecidability* is a quality of meaning in language, then *deconstruction* is what exposes that quality. Deconstruction (Derrida, 1967/1997) is a way of reading texts that exposes the way Western thinkers rely on binary oppositions to make truth claims and establish authority. Through deconstruction, Derrida seeks first to identify the privileged and nonprivileged categories in the binary and then show how, through the latent inconsistencies and slippages in language, those categories can be reversed. His purpose

is not to invert the binary and recover the non-privileged category. Rather, it is to show how the binary itself is necessarily unintelligible and, through it, no truth claims can be made. Truth and meaning are seemingly stabilized in these binaries, but ultimately the binaries fail to make sense. Truth is unstable, and meaning is always contingent upon other signifiers.

Derrida's (1967/1997) reading of Rousseau's (1782) *The Confessions* illustrates deconstruction as method and outcome. Rousseau argues that writing supplements speech. Speech is primary, abundant in its presence, immediate, complete. Writing merely *adds* to speech: it is secondary and inferior to it. But *supplement* means both addition and substitution. Derrida suggests that Rousseau's use of *supplement-as-addition* invokes its other oppositional use: *supplement-as-substitution*. The very existence of writing implies that speech is, in fact, somehow incomplete. Writing takes the place of—or substitutes for—what's inadequate or absent in speech. For Derrida, this is not simply a matter of inconsistency in Rousseau's argument. Each use of the word necessarily entails the oppositional meaning. *Supplement* can never just mean *addition* because the very presence of a supplement calls to mind the insufficiency of what is there primarily, and so it must also mean substitution. In this way, Derrida shows how the speech/writing binary is already corrupted from within and how language does not and cannot have a simple relationship to the meanings it tries to describe.

How does Derrida's (1967/1997) notion that there is no outside-text help us understand the way adolescent girls read pop culture texts? Or, more accurately, how does it complicate and even undo our understanding? I have already argued that we cannot conceive of pop culture as a set of texts that are simply consumed by passive

audiences, their intended meanings replicated in individuals' minds. If we accept the premise that there is no transcendental signified, we need a way to understand how signifying works not to stabilize meaning but to defer meaning from one signifier to another. Deconstruction can expose those processes as they operate in pop culture.

For example, a commonsense reading of *Beyoncé* (Knowles-Carter, 2013) would be based on the assumption that the album is a multimodal system of signifiers that point to a perhaps large but finite set of signifieds. To take this view is to assume that the album says something definite and stable—and, for my purposes, something definite and stable about being a girl. A deconstructive reading of the album helps us see that such meanings are only made possible within a network of other signifiers and that even those meanings slip and contradict each other, rendering the notion of femininity ultimately unintelligible. I again narrow my focus to two lines of one song from the album: “I woke up like this” and “We flawless. Ladies, tell him” from “\*\*\*Flawless” (Knowles-Carter et al., 2013).

At work in these lyrics is the binary opposition *flawless/flawed*. In order to show how this binary opposition fails to mean something stable, we must first identify which category is ostensibly privileged. Is she celebrating flawlessness or flawed-ness? The easy answer, of course, is that she is celebrating flawlessness. Beyoncé proclaims flawlessness on behalf of “ladies” (presumably everywhere), and, in fact, if we draw on the imagery of the song’s video, we see that she does look conventionally “flawless.” She is heavily made-up and styled. She creates a particular image of flawlessness (we should note, one that is unlikely to be how she actually woke up), and declares that she is flawless. By saying that she “woke up” flawless, she invokes an idea of appealing

naturalness, an idea that pop music (e.g., “Comfortable,” Mayer, 2004; “Best I Ever Had,” Graham et al., 2009) and pop culture generally (e.g., *Bridget Jones’s Diary*; Bevan, Felinder, & Cavendish, 2001) circulate. She is the desired woman who is fully flawless: she does not need makeup to make up for any flaws.

Yet, we could also make the case that flawed-ness or naturalness—how we “wake up”—is privileged here. In insisting that she woke up flawless, she rejects the notion that women must put in effort to look some way to please a man (“Ladies, tell him”). This rejection could help us to resolve some of the contradiction between how she actually woke up and her heavily constructed appearance in the video. As I suggested above, perhaps she is not celebrating a way of *looking* but a way of *being*. By appealing to “ladies,” she is saying that, whoever and however you are, be that way without apology. For a moment, we see an emancipatory meaning of girlhood: be as you are, be flawed, do not change for anyone.

The problem is not that Beyoncé communicates two oppositional meanings (be physically flawless and be yourself, however flawed). It is that she cannot help but communicate these two oppositional meanings. *Flawless* only means something in relation to all of those other people out there who are flawed. Yet, she calls out to those other people—“ladies”—to declare their own flawlessness. Is she gloating about her own specific flawlessness or inviting all “ladies” to accept themselves as they are, flawed but flawless? The answer is that she is doing both, necessarily. She cannot claim her own physical flawlessness without a legion of flawed others, yet she cannot invite that legion of flawed others to be who they are without a standard of flawlessness to defy. She

cannot claim either meaning without the other meaning, and these meanings are in conflict with each other.

The analysis above does not reflect the purpose of this study. Of the shift from the question *what does this text mean?* to *how is this text read?*, Walkerdine (1997) writes,

Although we can glean important information from the narrative construction...of the various portrayals of little girls in the popular media, it is not possible to fully understand what these narratives mean in the lives of little girls from these facts alone. We have to examine the place of the films in the practices which, in their complexity, constitute the subjectivity of these little girls. (p. 107)

I share this analysis of “\*\*\*Flawless,” as I shared the history of “Hotline Bling,” as a means of illustrating concepts that are at work in any reading of the text.

### **Poststructural Feminism**

In this section, I lay out how the concepts of discursive performativity and interpellation influence the way I think about the femininities that are made available in pop culture texts. I begin by unpacking my first research question (“How do adolescent girls read feminine identities made available in pop culture texts?”) and proceed with a longer discussion of discourse, performativity, and interpellation.

I borrow from Butler (1990) to conceptualize *femininities* and from Foucault (1980) to conceptualize how they might be *made available* in texts. Butler argues that gender is an identity category constituted by the stylized repetition of acts. She writes, “[W]ithin the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (p. 25).



Pop culture texts operate within what Foucault (1980) called *discourses*, ways of being and acting that circulate meanings about who has power and status or, according to Youdell (2004), “multiple and shifting systems of knowledge that produce ideas as if these were truths being simply communicated” (p. 202). As part of these broader discourses, then, pop culture texts communicate meanings about the knowledge, behaviors, values, and consumer choices that constitute what it means to be a girl. As part of discourse, pop culture communicates these meanings as if they were simple, taken-for-granted truths about girlhood. In this way, pop culture texts *make available* certain kinds of identities to the individuals who engage with them.

*Discourse*, in Foucault’s sense, is not just about language, or what one says. It is also about practice, or one what one does. Discourse “constructs the topic. It defines and produces the objects of our knowledge. It governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about. It also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others” (Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001, p. 72). I conceptualize reading, engaging with, and creating pop culture texts as discursive practices, or, following the description above, ways of putting particular meanings into practice. They are what one does to shape and circulate meanings about girlhood. They are how one develops “a language for talking about—a way of representing the knowledge about—a particular topic at a particular historical moment” (Hall, 1992, p. 291).

Subjects are the product of discourse. Subjects are both “discursively constituted ...and constrained by discourse or, more specifically, the terms of those discourses through which [the subject] is located and produced” (Youdell, 2004, p. 203). That is,

discourse both enables and constrains particular meanings—and, for my purposes, meanings about girlhood and femininity. In her argument that gendered subjects are discursively constituted, Butler (1990) rejects two oppositional notions of gender. She rejects, of course, the notion that gender has a preexisting, abiding substance—that it is a noun, a thing. But she also rejects the notion that gender is “a set of free-floating attributes” (p. 24). By naming someone “boy” or “girl,” one deploys the discourse that makes those categories recognizable in the first place. She does away with the notion that individuals *express* gender as this notion is based on the premise that gender is a preexisting fact. Butler instead suggests that gender categories follow and are so constituted through performative acts.

Butler uses Althusser’s (1971/2001) notion of *interpellation* to elaborate discursive performativity. Althusser argues that individuals become recognizable as subjects as they are named, or *interpellated*. To illustrate this process, he offers the concrete examples of individuals calling out to (or *hailing*) each other on the street and shaking each other’s hands as acts of naming and recognizing. In these examples, he points out that individuals “constantly practice the rituals of ideological recognition, which guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects” (p. 117). Through these everyday rituals of recognition, subjects and ideology are mutually constituted. Butler (1997) suggests that the names of identity categories—the names that are the basis of interpellation—are performatives. Subjects do not preexist their naming; she argues instead that individuals come into existence, or are constituted, as subjects by being called a name—by being called,

specifically, “boy” or “girl.” Through this process of interpellation, the body “acquires the social definition that makes it accessible” (Youdell, 2006, p. 44) and intelligible.

In *Excitable Speech: The Politics of the Performative*, Butler (1997) lays out the conditions under which discursive agency is possible. Moving outside the realm of speakability—the realm in which, through language, we recognize and are recognized as subjects—requires that we risk our status as subjects, specifically, “the security of linguistic life, the sense of one’s place in language, that one’s words do as one says” (p. 163). It is a necessary risk, though, because we are already put at risk when we are recognized as subjects. Agency is not a property of the subject, according to Butler, but an effect of power. As such, it is constrained by discourse, but it is not determined in advance. Discourse forecloses certain possibilities, but it does not do this once and for all. Instead, it is through the ritualized repetition of performative acts that such foreclosures occur. It follows, then, that there is always a possibility of disrupting that repetition. In order to do this, Butler says, one must speak with authority even when one is not given the authority to speak. For example, while terms like “freedom,” as institutionalized by the state, have excluded certain groups, an individual from an excluded group can claim it for herself. In doing so, “A term like ‘freedom’ may come to signify what it never signified before, may come to embrace interests and subjects who have been excluded” (p. 160).

Discursive agency is possible, then, in “that moment in which a speech act without prior authorization nevertheless assumes authority in the course of its performance [which] may anticipate and instate altered contexts for its future reception” (p. 160). Through such a process, “freedom” and “justice” can, in future contexts, include

formerly excluded groups. Through such a process, terms that were once injurious like “queer” can be reappropriated as affirmative terms. The concept of discursive agency enhances my analysis of how adolescent girls position themselves in relation to the identities that pop culture makes available to them. Butler’s (1997) examples of discursive agency appeal to me as an educator invested in opening up more possibilities for identification among girls. When girls tell stories about their everyday lives, is there a way of reading either in their accounts, or in the act of storytelling itself, moments of discursive agency? What might the kind of reclamation Butler describes, or the insurrectionary speech, look, sound, and feel like in this context? My intention would not be to evaluate storytelling moments in terms of my perception of the girl’s agency. Rather, it would be to listen and, through listening, explore what can be meant by discursive agency in this context. I see pop culture as one of many institutional sites of discourse. Pop culture shapes and circulates meanings about girlhood and femininity—meanings that would not exist, could not exist outside of discourse. When I identify the “feminine identities” made available in pop culture texts, I assume neither that these identities express a preexisting fact of gender nor that they are whole, stable, or discrete.

### **Intersectional Feminism**

A common critique of poststructuralism is that, if we trouble categories such as “woman,” then we cannot as effectively advocate for women or work to alleviate “the material suffering of women who are hungry, violated, beaten” (Nussbaum, 1999, p. 44). The critique goes that the emphasis on becoming, on unpredictability, on the “insufficiency of signs” (p. 44) does not give us the purchase we need to analyze the categories used to marginalize certain subjects. This critique does not account for the

productive ways scholars have both used and troubled categories simultaneously (Lather, 2000) nor the potential of discursive agency described in poststructural work (Butler, 1997). Still, in these writings, it can feel as if gender has been lifted off of the material world to be made sense of in the most abstract terms. This is one reason I am drawn to intersectional feminism. *Intersectionality* refers to the way that identity categories—most commonly race and gender—intersect to create overlapping systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1993). Intersectional feminism more directly engages with the lived experiences of women of color. The second reason I am drawn to intersectional feminism is its attention to the interests of Black and Latina women—women like the participants in this study with and for whom I work.

To understand the images of women of color in pop culture, I use what Crenshaw (1993) calls *representational intersectionality*:

[C]urrent debates over representation continually elide the intersection of race and gender in the popular culture's construction of women of color. Accordingly, an analysis of what may be termed 'representational intersectionality' would include both the ways in which these images are produced through a confluence of prevalent narratives of race and gender, as well as a recognition of how contemporary critiques of racist and sexist representation marginalize women of color. (pp. 1282-1283)

Images of women of color are prevalent in pop culture, but, Crenshaw argues, in the production of these images, the interests of women of color are ignored. In addition to Crenshaw, I use hooks (1992) to understand the historical use of images of hypersexualized Black female bodies and the sorts of stories those bodies are positioned to inhabit. I draw on Collins (1991) to conceptualize controlling images of Black femininity—recognizable images that “are designed to make racism, sexism, and poverty appear to be natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life” (p. 68). The

controlling images of the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother, and the Jezebel, according to Collins, communicate messages about the proper connections Black women's fertility, sexuality, and roles in the political economy. The notion of controlling images further contributes to my understanding of the images and narratives Black women depicted in pop culture texts inhabit. This notion meshes with my poststructural feminist understanding of subject positions that are made available through discourse but adds race and class components. Finally, Collins's arguments about Black motherhood, and specifically about the special role Black mothers play in imparting values that help their daughters both cope with and transcend White supremacist patriarchal structures, enhances my analysis of the participants' narrations of personal experiences with their mothers.

### **Conclusion**

I began this chapter by quoting Raymond Williams (1958), who lamented the fact that some are too overcome with regret over the expanding culture to seek "to understand its nature and conditions" (p. iv). I connected this characterization to the anxieties about pop culture that circulate through public and academic discourses and to my own anxiety about what pop culture might mean to and about me and the girls of color I have taught. It would be suspiciously easy to suggest that pop culture is a problem and that literacy is a solution—at least, suspiciously easy for me to do so, as my experiences have organized my thinking into decidedly anti-pop culture and pro-literacy stances. I conclude this chapter, then, with a sort of prophylactic against the anti-pop culture, pro-literacy biases

that threaten to compromise the decisions I make as a researcher, the way I analyze data, and the over-hopeful implications I draw from those analyses.

In *My Life with Things*, Elizabeth Chin (2016) writes that the fears of mass culture “can be tempered...by paying attention to what people really are doing” (p. 8). She uses Barbie to illustrate this concept, asking rhetorically, “Of the millions and millions of children who have had Barbies over the last fifty-plus years, how many of them used them *only* in the approved manner? And even if everyone did stick to the hegemonic script, how many kids who played with Barbies ended up actually being like Barbie?”<sup>2</sup> (p. 8). What of those many unpredictable—or at least unpredicted—ways of using Barbies? What of the Barbie sex scenes enacted, the heads pulled off and used as weapons, the accessories improvised? Chin says, “Our own imaginations are not nearly rich enough to come up with all the possibilities that others have already explored” (p. 10).

Chin’s words remind me that this study is not about how literacy might fix the problem of pop culture. Instead, it must be about all of the ways of engaging and understanding pop culture and ourselves through it—all of the ways I cannot come up with on my own. And it must orient us to imagine a pop culture curriculum that starts from the riches of adolescent girls’ actual literacy practices rather than from an assumption of passive readings I mean to replace with prescribed resistant readings. Through this research, I strived to not fear too much, to moralize, or to otherwise pass self-protective judgment. At the same time, I did not hide my own thoughts and feelings about how the images and narratives of femininity made available in pop culture are

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<sup>2</sup> Chin’s point is powerful, but I would note that, for me, the nightmare scenario is not everyone being like Barbie but everyone finding themselves stuck *wanting* to be like Barbie.

understood and experienced by audiences that include both me and the young people with  
and for whom I work.



## II – REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This review of literature maps the intersections of the major topics under study: gender, literacy, and pop culture. I trace how scholars have conceptualized and researched the relationships between them. I have argued that, in order to support young people as they make sense of pop culture, educators must first understand how they already do so. What do they understand about the femininities made available to them, and through what literacy processes and events do they come to those understandings? Moreover, what slippages, tensions, and contradictions can we observe in these processes, and what happens when individuals do not come to a unitary understanding? The following questions, each aligned to an intersection of the major topics, frame this review:

1. *Gender and Pop Culture*: How are gendered identities made available in pop culture?
2. *Gender and Literacy*: Through what kinds of literacy processes and events do young people take up, or come to understand or not understand, gendered identities?
3. *Pop Culture and Literacy*: How do young people read pop culture texts, and what significance do these readings carry for them in and out of school?
4. *Gender, Pop Culture, and Literacy*: Through what processes do young people read and make meaning of the gendered identities made available to them in pop culture texts, and how do they activate, or not activate, those identities?

Historically, literature reviews “took the form essentially of annotated bibliographies organized by category” (Grand & Graue, 2011, p. 389) with little synthesis. In such

reviews, findings were held up as exemplary of the phenomenon under study. The question driving the literature review was *what do the data say?* Within a poststructural paradigm, notions of data saying something essential and unitary about a social phenomenon are problematized. Not only would poststructuralists say that there are multiple truths, they would also undercut the very usefulness of terms like *truth* in understanding the social world (Pallas, 2001). Within this paradigm, the purpose of a literature review cannot be to canonize certain forms of knowledge so that they “bear a certified status” (Baker, 1999, p. 379). And it cannot be to *represent* the findings of empirical studies in a straightforward, unproblematic way. Baker recommends that we consider *who* is doing the research and, further, what discourses, regimes of truth, and power effects are brought to bear on that research. In other words, what resources and ideas are available to researchers to pick up and put to use in their inquiry.

Following this poststructural paradigm, I attempt to use this review to explore, not what is *known* about gender, literacy, and pop culture, but what has been *argued*, how it has been argued, and how those arguments are situated. This review itself is situated theoretically in poststructural feminism and in sociocultural theories of literacy and text. I draw from empirical literature to explore the questions above, prioritizing studies that analyze the production of subjects through discourse. I am interested in identifying the assumptions that shape researchers’ understandings of gender, literacy, and pop culture and also in the methodological decisions that reflect these assumptions.

I searched for studies that lie at the intersection of each pair of topics and at the intersection of all three. Rather than including all literature in which these topics are mentioned, I included only literature aligned to the theoretical and methodological

investments of this study. Because one purpose of this study is to understand the femininities that are made available to adolescent girls, I only included studies in which femininity and masculinity are conceptualized as discursively produced—or “made available”—and performative, or “constituting the identity it is purported to be” (Butler, 1990, p. 25). This distinction is elaborated in the first section wherein I review several book-length studies that take up the theory of gender performativity in empirical work.

I also selected studies based on their treatment of literacy and text. Following my research questions and theoretical framework, I included studies that conceptualized text as any artifact that employs some form of signification, whether written or spoken language, image, sound, gesture, or movement (e.g., Hull & Nelson, 2005). This understanding of texts as inherently multimodal includes traditional written texts but also still images, videos, songs, dress, and toys. I also sought work that conceptualizes literacy as I have, not as a skill set that resides in an individual’s mind but instead as sociocultural: as a set of practices carried out and best understood within a range of social, cultural, historical, and institutional contexts (e.g., Gee, 1990). This sociocultural view of literacy helps us to see the wide range of literacy practices in which young people are engaged in and out of school and particularly the ways they are already engaging with pop culture texts. Following these theoretical concerns, I only included studies that employed qualitative methodology: most commonly, qualitative case study, ethnography, and narrative inquiry. Such methodologies assume that data is generated through the research process rather than neutrally collected and, thus, offer “rich, detailed, and contextually located” (Youdell, 2004, p. 202) analyses of the phenomena under study.

Prioritizing these theoretical and methodological alignments, I chose to include studies that deal with notions of masculinity as well as femininity, boyhood as well as girlhood. I also included studies that examine literacy from early childhood all the way through adulthood. Conversely, I chose to exclude studies that examined classroom practices, such as incorporating pop culture in order to engage students in traditional academic literacy, when this work was not sufficiently grounded in theory. What the studies below have in common, then, is primarily theoretical: whatever the authors have defined as the topic or context of inquiry, they treat literacy as sociocultural and gender as discursively produced.

### **Gender Performativity**

In this section, I review several book-length studies grounded in the theory that gender is performative. Unlike other sections of this review, these studies do not address an intersection between the major topics (gender, pop culture, and literacy). Rather, they focus on just one of these topics, gender, and elaborate the theoretical basis of this study through empirical research. These studies link theoretically to Butler's notion of performativity. Some of them were conducted as early as the 1980s and so predate Butler's (1990) *Gender Trouble*. However, the authors' theories of gender have a few key commonalities with Butler's theories and are therefore central to this study. First, they reject essentializing notions of gender as a pre-existing, stable fact or entity. Instead, they see gender as something that is constituted by particular acts, or performances. Second, they see gender as a set of categories constituted on an ongoing basis by both adults and children, rather than categories imposed on children by adults. Thus, gender is a category

that is actively and collaboratively constructed and maintained. These studies are part of a lineage of scholarship in gender carried out with children in schools. They show how notions of childhood and femininity and the norms of schools intersect to produce certain kinds of subject positions for young girls. The purpose of this section is to show how these studies link to each other and elaborate theories of performativity.

In *Schoolgirl Fictions*, Valerie Walkerdine (1990) explores how femininity—which she describes as a fiction lived as fact—is created in schools, families, and pop culture. Walkerdine suggests that the entire framework of activities in school is set up to produce particular subject positions. For example, she argues that girls in schools are not given access to the fiction of “masculine rationality,” which guarantees that boys are understood as having academic potential, regardless of how poorly they perform. Rote learning and passivity belong to girls, whereas real understanding and activity belong to boys. Girls’ attempts at real understanding are seen as a threat to the fiction of masculine rationality. To support these fictions of femininity and masculinity, teachers count, for example, boys’ misbehavior and rule-breaking as evidence of their deep understanding because, drawing from child-centered pedagogy, they value activity, exploration, and openness. In contrast, teachers read girls’ academic successes as performances of “good girl.” The “good girl” works hard, writes neatly, and is helpful and tidy. In these ways, femininity and masculinity are both fictions and performances. Teachers and students alike work to maintain these distinctions in schools. Walkerdine writes, “It is not necessary to counterpose fantasy to reality, but to demonstrate how fantasies themselves are lived, played out and worked through in their inscriptions in the veridicality of discourses and practices” (p. 141).

Walkerdine (1990) also studied pop culture's role in making particular gendered subject positions available to viewers. She does not see pop culture as an indoctrinating force or a site where girls find "role models" for how to be. Such a view would mean that girls passively adopt femininity as it is presented to them. Rather, she sees girls' shaky and partial adoption of femininity as "the result of a struggle in which heterosexuality is achieved as a solution to a set of conflicts and contradictions in familial and other social relations" (p. 88). According to Walkerdine, if girls do accept and adopt the fiction of femininity, it is not because of "the nature of the female body, nor the female mind" (p. 88). It is because of the power of the cultural practices in which girls engage and struggle.

In *Gender Play*, Barrie Thorne (1993) conducted an ethnography of boys and girls over eight months in the 1976-1977 school year in a public elementary school in a small city in California. She relied on participant observation, roaming freely around the cafeteria, hallways, and playground and witnessing moment-to-moment interactions between the children and adults in the school. Thorne strived to approach the world of children—or her preferred term "kids"—as she would approach the world of adults: "with open-ended curiosity, and with an assumption that kids are competent social actors who take an active role in shaping their daily experiences" (Chapter 2, para. 4). She also strived to see their actions and interactions as significant in and of themselves rather than significant in relation to who they will become in the future.

Theoretically, Thorne (1993) grounds her study in the metaphor of play.

According to Thorne,

The social construction of gender is an active and ongoing process, as suggested by one sort of dictionary entry under 'play': 'action, activity, operation'; 'actively engaged or employed.' Gender categories, gender identities, gender divisions,

gender-based groups, gender meanings—all are produced, actively and collaboratively, in everyday life. (Chapter 1, para. 10)

Like Walkerdine (1990), Thorne rejects the notion that children are socialized into their genders by more powerful adults. The question at the center of this play-based research is: “How do children actively come together to help create, and sometimes challenge, gender structures and meanings?” (Chapter 1, para. 9). Moreover, Thorne begins her inquiry not by looking at individual boys and girls but by looking at groups of boys and girls in social situations. She does this so that she can observe the collective practices through which they actively create and recreate the gender binary: the way they *do* gender. Finally, Thorne emphasizes the relevance of another definition of play, “dramatic performance.” When she observes boys and girls chasing each other on the playground or talking about “cooties,” she notes that these are dramatic performances, or what she calls “gender play.” These rituals make use of the frame of play—the children insist that they are “only playing” in such situations—“as a guise for often serious, gender-related messages about sexuality and aggression” (Chapter 1, para. 13).

Through her observations of boys and girls in school, Thorne (1993) identified episodes in which they collaboratively and actively drew, neutralized, and redrew the boundaries between *boy* and *girl*. One particularly vivid set of examples from her observations captured young boys and girls chasing each other on the playground. In these episodes, children would segregate themselves by gender and participate in play rituals that affirmed the boundaries between boys and girls such as boys-chase-the-girls and girls-chase-the-boys. The boys and girls become de facto separate teams and gender categorization overrode individual identities and cross-cutting identity categories. Sexual meanings infuse these games, such as when the game becomes “chase-and-kiss” in which

girls threaten to kiss the boys they have caught. Further, these chasing episodes were often intertwined with what Thorne calls “rituals of pollution,” in which groups—most often girls—are treated as carrying germs or “cooties.” The boys’ object of girls-chase-the-boys, then, is to avoid contamination by the girls.

In her analysis of these episodes, Thorne (1993) points out that play does not name the actions under study but names the *frame* for the actions. Play must be continually signaled as separate from ordinary life and not serious. Even so, there is always ambiguity and tension between fun and seriousness within the frame of play. Thorne argues that these kinds of episodes do more than just separate boys and girls and reaffirm the notion of a gender binary. They also reveal asymmetrical power dynamics between boys and girls. On playgrounds, for example, boys occupy much more space for their gendered play and are much more likely to disrupt or invade the girls’ spaces when they are playing with each other. This play reflects and reinforces the hegemonic view of gender that exaggerates differences between gender and disregards variations within, and commonalities across, gender categories. Through these accounts of play, Thorne (1993) shows that children actively and collaboratively define boyhood and girlhood rather than passively receiving these notions from older, more powerful adults. I would extend this logic to children’s consumption of pop culture, which I theorize as active, participatory, and, as we will see in Walkerdine’s (1990) study of the Cole family, made meaningful within everyday domestic practices.

Finders (1997) set out to study what she calls the “literate underlife,” or the unsanctioned literacy practices designed to contest official academic expectations. Included in this underlife are practices such as drawing and writing on bathroom stalls,



passing notes, and reading magazines tucked into workbooks. Finders's major argument is that the literate underlife is central to the development of the early adolescent girls she studied. For this year-long ethnographic study in a middle school, Finders (1997) followed two rival cliques—the so-called “social queens” and “tough cookies”—as they engaged in a literate underlife. She sought to “make visible the tacit rules and demands that shape [literacy] events and ultimately shape the available social roles within particular social circles” (p. 3). Finders's methods included participant observation, interviews, and written artifact collection; through these methods, Finders hoped to document naturally occurring literacy events among the two cliques.

Finders (1997) conceptualizes the social roles that the research participants enact as performances for particular audiences, and “Literacy provided a tangible means by which to claim status, challenge authority, and document social allegiances” (p. 4). She draws on Gee's (1990) notion of discourse as an identity kit “which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize” (Gee, 1990, p. 142) and on Vygotsky's (1962) notion of the self as created, fluid, and semiotic. Finders sees the girls as agents of their own histories but only within the normalizing discourses of gender and adolescence. According to Finders (1997), the social queens were what Goffman (1959) would call “performance teams,” a group of individuals who cooperate to enact a single routine. The social queens arranged their dress, physical appearance, social behavior, and reading and writing preferences to be like each other. In contrast, the tough cookies were a more loosely affiliated group of working class girls who were more family oriented and, as a result, less involved in each other's lives and more individualistic. Finders explores

how the literacy practices surrounding the release of the school yearbook revealed differences in the ways each group practices literacy. The social queens used the photos in the yearbook to assess social status (i.e., the more often a person appeared, the higher the status) and document allegiances (i.e., through participation in extracurricular activities). They would pore over the yearbooks as soon as they arrived and write messages in each other's books that further cement their high social status. In contrast, the tough cookies, who did not participate in as many extracurricular activities and had fewer close connections with their classmates, were made invisible by the literacy practices surrounding the yearbook.

In a later section of this chapter, I discuss in greater detail how Finders conceptualizes literacy practices and the meaning of those practices in the girls' daily lives. Here, I focus on her notion of gender as performative. Finders (1997) does not draw explicitly on Butler's notion of performativity, but her resistance to the idea of a stable self and her description of how gender is enacted are reminiscent of Butler's work. She writes about the importance of social roles, as many socialization theorists do, but she explains, "I am not suggesting that social roles are put on like outer garments to protect or to conceal a true self, but rather that roles represent multiple and shifting selves" (p. 9). To Finders, neither the self nor social roles are static. Rather, a social role is "a performative act [that] allows one to examine critically the context and the roles that are made available therein" (p. 9).

This notion that social roles are performative acts links Finders's (1997) work to Walkerdine's (1990) and Thorne's (1993). All three reject the socialization theory that holds that the more powerful adults socialize less powerful children into their gender

roles. All three conceptualize the process of constituting gender categories as an active one. Social roles, then, are not imposed on children, who otherwise have a truer, more authentic, more natural self. Rather, social roles are made available to children, and, in their daily actions and interactions, they take up those roles.

In *Frogs and Snails and Feminist Tales*, Bronwyn Davies (2003) explored what sense young children make of being male or female and how the boundaries between male and female are maintained. This qualitative study of four- and five-year-old children had two stages. In the first stage, Davies read stories she identified as feminist to young children to see what sense they make of these stories. In the second stage, she became a participant observer in preschools and childcare centers to see how the ideas the children brought up in response to the feminist stories related to their everyday activities.

Like the other authors in this section, Davies (2003) takes a poststructural feminist view of gender, wherein the assumption that everyone is either male or female is both a byproduct and an underlying assumption of the social structures through which we constitute ourselves as subjects. She sees this constitution as an active, ongoing process taken up and carried out by even young children. Therefore, she rejects the gender socialization theory because that theory assumes that social conventions such as dress, hairstyle, and speech patterns are a kind of “social dressing” that marks an essential biological difference. Gender socialization theory does not account for the ways young children actively work to mark those differences through their identity performances. She seeks to elaborate Walkerdine’s (1990) work by examining the *multiple* subjectivities that are available to any one person within our society’s discursive practices. Through this research, Davies argues that “children learn to take up their maleness or femaleness as if

it were an incorrigible element of their personal social selves. They do so through learning the discursive practices in which all people are positioned as either male or female” (p. xii).

In the course of this research, Davies (2003) observed how young boys and girls actively worked to maintain gender categories yet also were also accommodating of contradiction. One of the feminist stories she read to the children was *The Paper Bag Princess*, a role reversal story in which a princess sets out to save a prince but is ultimately rejected because she no longer has nice clothes. Despite the fact that the princess is meant to be the protagonist, boys who heard the story struggled to align themselves with her or identify her as the “hero” of the story. They tended to side with the unlikeable prince. At the same time, their interpretations of the story are rife with contradiction, as when the boys continue to align themselves with the prince even though they see him as “not nice.”

In her final argument, Davies (2003) draws on Kristeva’s (1981) three tiers of feminism. In the first tier, *liberal feminism*, women demand access to the male symbolic order. In the second tier, *radical feminism*, women reject that symbolic order, preferring to establish their own. In the third tier, women reject the very dichotomy between masculine and feminine and the notion that the dichotomy is metaphysical. Davies wants to move between these tiers, to see these tiers as options that are available to her as she interacts with the world and makes sense of herself within it. By extension, she argues that children should also have access to these options—through feminist stories, through play, and through developing the capacity to see binaries as just one way of

understanding the world. She points out that children have to *learn* the unitary, humanist view of the self because their experiences are multiple, diverse, and contradictory.

In *Playing It Straight*, Mindy Blaise (2005) studied how young children “do” the work of gender in a kindergarten classroom. Her work is grounded in feminist poststructuralism and queer theory. She eschews essentializing notions of gender because they are reductive and unhelpful in theorizing power. According to Blaise, such perspectives “fail to acknowledge the complexities of relationships between individuals and the social worlds they live in” (p. 14). In this way, Blaise sees the concept of agency as central to poststructural understandings of gender. She defines agency as the ability “to make choices, control events, and be powerful” (p. 18), and she cites Davies (2004) in noting that it also includes “one’s capacity to resist, subvert, and change discourses” (p. 18).

Blaise (2005) studied how discourses—ways of speaking, writing, thinking, feeling, or acting—normalize gender binaries. She borrows from Foucault (1975/1991) to theorize power as “a relation or process operating in our social world, rather than as something possessed by individuals” (p. 18), and she examines how power works in relation to the “regimes of truth” (Foucault, 1975/1991) about gender that circulate through discourse. Bringing these concepts of discourse, power, and knowledge together, she understands gender as situated in particular local contexts and “constructed through children’s talks, actions, and interactions with each other and the social world” (p. 19). Finally, she draws on Gramsci’s (1971) notion of hegemony, defined as the implicit domination of one group over another, to conceptualize hegemonic masculinity as the “desirable and powerful way to be a boy” (p. 21). According to Blaise, the most

important feature of hegemonic masculinity is heterosexuality. Blaise describes normative femininity as *emphasized femininity*, or “compliance with subordination ...oriented around accommodating the interests and desires of men” (p. 21).

Blaise (2005) conducted her study in a kindergarten classroom that emphasized the importance of play which Blaise, like Thorne (1993), argues “constitutes real, here-and-now social worlds for children” (p. 37). As a researcher, she was a participant observer in the classroom. She worked with the teacher to select focal children who could be examples of cases that manifest the phenomenon of gender. Blaise’s feminist poststructuralism led her to a self-reflexive research design that was meant to disrupt existing practices of being teacher, student, boy, girl, researcher, researched. Thus, Blaise’s methods included observing and documenting children’s play and developing relationships with the teacher and the children. To analyze her data, Blaise used critical discourse analysis, which allowed her to see “how broader forms of discourse and power are manifested in everyday texts” (p. 53). She analyzed critical gender incidents as “discourses of heterosexuality available to and used by the children” (p. 53). This kind of analysis required close attention to the social context of language, a recognition of texts as constructed and not transparent, reading texts for patterns of and contradictions in language, and recognition of these processes as unstable, fragmented, and inconsistent.

Blaise (2005) followed three kindergarteners as they played in and out of the classroom. She argues that their games were shaped by a variety of gender discourses and that these discourses were, in turn, shaped by the children’s play. For example, even though Alan attempts to enact hegemonic masculinity, he is not always positioned as powerful in the classroom. When he is confronted by counter discourses, he experiences

what it is like to be pushed to the margins, and so he works hard to position himself as powerful. Madison takes risks and expands what it means to be a girl. She utilizes her knowledge about gender discourses and the heterosexual matrix to be the kind of girl she wants to be, and so her play often functions as a kind of counter discourse. As an Asian American girl, Penny's identity is negotiated through interactions between gender, race, class, and sexuality. While she has access to a range of gender discourses, she is constrained by the heterosexual matrix. Her survival strategy is to be invisible.

Together, Walkerdine (1990), Thorne (1993), Finders (1997), Davies (1997), and Blaise (1995) show what it means to conceptualize gender as performative and research it as such. They expand on Butler's work empirically by showing how discourses of childhood and schooling intersect with gender to make certain kinds of identities available to girls. Their shared methodologies—specifically, their emphasis on reflexivity, co-construction of data, and participant observation—reflect their investments in poststructural views of gender performativity and of childhood. Because they do not see gender as a pre-existing fact or reality, they approach their research not with the goal of finding out what children or girls particularly are like. Instead, they seek to understand how children make meaning of themselves and their worlds and how, through their interactions with each other, with texts, and with institutions, they are always *becoming*, rather than simply *being*.

In later sections of this review, I show how pop culture intersects with these discourses to make identities available, and how girls' literacy practices become part of the work of doing gender, particularly in schools. What is most important here is the idea that identities are *made available*. They are not *imposed* on children, and children do not

passively absorb them. At the same time, children's options are not limitless. Their options are embedded in, and so constrained by, regimes of truth about gender.

### **Gender and Pop Culture**

In this section, I review literature that discusses how gendered identities are constructed and made available in pop culture. These studies are drawn from journals both within and outside education; nevertheless, whether explicitly or implicitly, they treat pop culture as a kind of public pedagogy (Giroux 2004), or a site of education outside of the traditional school. This often means looking at pop culture texts as way that young people are “prepared for entry” into particular discursive positions and practices (Walkerdine, 1990). We also see studies that explore how the audiences for these texts come to understand the gendered identities made available within these texts and, further, how, in reading them, they take up, resist, or otherwise relate to those identities.

The studies are organized based on their ways of conceptualizing and researching pop culture as public pedagogy. The first set of studies treat pop culture texts as isolated pieces of public pedagogy worthy of analysis in their own right. They employ rhetorical and narrative analyses to interpret the texts' messages about gender and sexuality. The next set of studies shift their focus to individuals' processes of engaging with and making meaning of pop culture and, in so doing, constituting identities. They employ ethnographic and other qualitative methods, such as questionnaires and focus groups, to look at how audiences read pop culture texts and how, in doing so, they make sense of the identities made available within them. At the end of this section, I argue that, while these studies conceptualize gender as performative and pop culture as a place where



identities are discursively made available, their methods do not always reflect their theoretical commitments.

Graf (2015) analyzed how characters in the sitcom *Ugly Betty* redefine and recodify traditional notions of sexuality, gender performance, and gender roles as well as notions of family in Mexican and Chicana/o cultures. She celebrates *Ugly Betty* as a queer telenovela because it shows characters struggling to make sense of their gender and sexual identities in a transnational context. Graf does not explicate a theoretical framework for this analysis, but she builds the context for it by describing how the intersection of Catholicism and nationalism have given rise to conservative views of gender and sexuality among Latinos. She aims to show how three characters in particular—Justin, Ignacio, and Santos—challenge those views.

Justin is a young queer character, Santos is his father, and Ignacio is his grandfather. Graf (2015) examines how Justin challenges homophobia by embracing his queerness, and, in some instances, masculinizes queerness—for example, when he beats up a peer for making fun of his mother. Santos, who initially disapproves of his son's sexuality, eventually comes to accept him. Ignacio directly challenges patriarchal authority and becomes what Graf calls a “queer macho,” or a Latino male who embraces both his masculine and feminine traits and refuses to exert power over women. Together, Ignacio and Santos embody a “queering of the macho” by not feeling the need to reject homosexual men; in doing so, according to Graf, they destabilize the macho/maricon (a weak, homosexual male) binary.

In a similar type of analysis, Khoja-Moolhi and Niccolini (2015) examine the character Kamala Khan, a Muslim American-Pakistani superheroine in the *Ms. Marvel*

comic series. The authors describe the comic series as a site of public pedagogy explicitly, and they treat it as such. They see the series as playing “a critical role in the simultaneous effort of reproduction of, and resistance to, dominant constructions of Muslims, Islam, and immigrants in the US” (p. 25). Such texts are meant to push back against stereotypes of Muslim women but, according to the authors, they “serve both regulatory and empowering functions” (p. 26). Like Graf (2015), Khoja-Moolhi and Niccolini are interested in the intersection of gender, culture, and religion. They point out that Muslim men are seen as not just threatening to Muslim women, for example, but to Western society as a whole.

In their analysis, Khoja-Moolhi and Niccolini (2015) argue that, while the series is meant to interrupt Islamophobia and xenophobia, it ultimately reproduces stereotypical images of Muslim masculinities. The Muslim men in the comic, particularly Kamala Khan’s father, is portrayed as “conservative, prone to irrational rage, pre-modern, anachronistic, and even bestial” (p. 23). The authors are critical of the narrow range of subject positions offered to Muslim men in the early issues of the series.

This analysis, like others in this section (Meyer, 2009; Graf, 2015), treats a pop culture text as public pedagogy. The authors see their analyses as significant because of the supposed power of a pop culture text to shape or influence its audience’s views of gender and sexuality. To use Walkerdine’s (1990) terms, these studies analyze how discourse operates *within* texts but not how discourse operates *through* them nor how individuals take up the subject positions on offer in those texts.

Bachechi and Hall (2016) explore two discourses around women’s sexuality circulating through pop culture: “girls gone wild” and “new virgins.” They conduct a

critical discourse analysis of popular magazines during the period between 2002 and 2007, a “critical discourse moment...a historical moment when changes occur allowing underlying discourses to become especially visible” (p. 551). They chose critical discourse analysis because of its potential to uncover how texts—including everyday talk, on- and offline print, and visual media—enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of power. Their analysis surfaced three themes in relation to these images of women’s sexuality: purity, presumed displeasure, and piety. The purity discourse was apparent in articles about the HPV vaccine in which young girls are portrayed as innocent and ignorant of sexuality. The presumed displeasure discourse was apparent in discussions of teen sexuality when it was presumed that, if a young woman is sexually active, it is only because she was pressured into becoming so. The authors point out that discourses about girls’ and women’s virginity and about their sexual activity are both “premised on an objectifying male to whom young women are supposed to appeal” (p. 551). They argue that, within these discourses, male sexuality is about freedom and choice, whereas female sexuality is about how women must accommodate male sexual expression. By the end of their analysis, Bachechi and Hall (2006) are particularly interested in the notion that girls are understood as “tame” before or until they “go wild.” They recommend future research on this discourse and how it circulates through various kinds of texts. I add that future research should also address how these texts’ audiences understand and take up these notions of gender and sexuality, how they make meaning of them in their daily lives, and how they position themselves in relation to the subject positions these texts offer up.

The two articles that follow focus not solely on a pop culture text as a unit of analysis but also on audience's interactions with that text. In work that appears in *Sociological Quarterly*, Crane (1999) studied how women interpret messages about gender in women's fashion magazines. Crane theorizes that contemporary media and pop culture produce a conflicted hegemony or "a site for conflicts, debates, and negotiations among different interpretations of the dominant culture" (pp. 542-543). According to Crane, fashion images contribute to this conflicted hegemony by displaying an array of styles and references and offering its audience—its consumers—the choice to take up any one or combination of them.

Crane (1999) noted that participants in her focus groups were receptive to images of strength but only if that strength did not violate traditional gender norms. According to Crane, the participants' responses indicate that they have internalized traditional norms of feminine demeanor and that they perceive the photographs they were shown as violations of these norms. Crane concludes that the participants responded negatively to such imagery because it contains the tensions and contradictions of a conflicted hegemony—one that sends mixed messages about what it means to be a woman.

While Crane ostensibly sought to understand the participants' perceptions of fashion photography, her own perceptions and theoretical commitments influenced her selection of photographs and the questions that guided her analysis of the data. She selected images that belong to categories—for example, gender ambiguity and licensed withdrawal—that closely align to her notion of conflicted hegemony. The difficulty in this kind of study is that, because Crane's own reading of the images is so prominent—and necessary to provide a theoretical foundation—her analysis of the participants'

reading of the images becomes an analysis of the extent to which they agree with her reading. Moreover, this study does not address the way participants make sense of these images when they encounter them in everyday life as, for example, Radway's (1984) study of romance novels does. Removing these images from their context obscures some of the lived meaning of these images for the participants.

In a critical analysis of the popular film *Shrek 2*, Marshall and Sensoy (2009) argue that, as a pedagogical text, the film teaches normative discourses of gender and sexuality under the guise of "girl power." The study is situated within the fields of critical media education and childhood cultural studies and, as such, treats *Shrek 2* as cultural pedagogy—a site of education rather than merely a source of entertainment. The authors emphasize that films such as *Shrek 2* manage to "circulate their messages in a manner, format, and consistency that classroom texts rarely enjoy" (p. 154) and so deserve close scrutiny. In addition to analyzing the film directly, the authors solicited written responses from a group of undergraduate students through open-ended prompts about the lessons the film teaches on gender and sexuality.

In their analysis, the authors look specifically at the character Fiona, Shrek's ogre-princess wife. Marshall and Sensoy (2009) argue that, while we see that Fiona has the trappings of power and voice, she ultimately uses her power and voice only to secure her relationship with Shrek and so her position in the discourse of White heterosexual femininity. For example, the authors analyze a scene in which Fiona flings a mermaid who has been washed ashore back out to sea. While this seems to depict Fiona as powerful, she only exerts this power because the mermaid is positioned (comedically) as a temptation for Shrek and so a threat to her marriage. This example epitomizes the way

Fiona's power and voice are used only in service of normative White, heterosexual femininity.

The undergraduate students who participated in the study responded to the film's messages about gender and sexuality. The authors took particular interest in the way they positioned child-viewers as "innocents" and as (in the authors' words) objects of cultural pedagogy. The students' responses focused on the film's social messages and their suitability for children. In soliciting responses from their students, Marshall and Sensoy (2009) attempt to treat the film not as a static text that contains stable messages but as a text whose meanings are negotiated in the viewing process. However, instead of examining how their students negotiate those meanings—how their consumption is, in fact, productive—the authors use their students' responses as a backdrop for their own analysis. They write, "The focus on the suitability of the humour...diverts attention from other lessons the film offers. In this way, like Disney's films for children, *Shrek* does not 'engender the critical analyses often rendered on adult films' (Giroux, 2004, p. 168)" (p. 157). Marshall and Sensoy, then, treat their students' responses as emblematic of the kind of limited responses of the mainstream viewing audience and use those limitations to justify the need for their critical analysis.

We see in this study that treating pop culture as public pedagogy can reinforce the idea that pop culture texts *contain* particular messages and lessons that are simply and neutrally conveyed to their audience. This is the case even when the authors theorize a text's meaning as negotiated within and across sociocultural contexts. In the next set of studies, we see a similar interest in public pedagogy but also greater effort to examine the processes through which audiences read pop culture texts and, in doing so, make sense of the gendered identities made available.

Ivashkevich and shoppell (2013) conducted an ethnographic, participant observation study in which the authors collaborated with a preadolescent girl and boy on making videos in their home. Following the epistemological foundation of participant observation, the authors conceived their research process as one in which evidence was co-constructed with their research participants, rather than neutrally collected. Central to Ivashkevich and shoppell's study is the notion that pop culture is participatory. They argue that children who appropriate pop culture narratives and artifacts in their own creations "challenge the conventional boundaries between consumption and production (p. 4). So, rather than conceptualizing pop culture as a site of public pedagogy where lessons are contained or conveyed, they see it as a resource for children's creative play. This concept of pop culture aligns to the way Storey (2003) characterizes consumption as "how people make culture from and with the commodities made available by the capitalist culture industries" (Chapter 4, para. 7). The authors hoped to witness "how children reenact identity roles in front of the camera and then respond to and manipulate their own representations via re-viewing and editing" (Ivashkevich & shoppell, 2013, p. 2). After working with the children on their videos over a summer, the authors identified four overlapping themes in their data: appropriation of popular culture texts, parody, gender play, and managing self-representation.

Ivashkevich and shoppell (2013) argue that collaborative video-making could be one avenue for children to be positioned as producers, and not just consumers, of digital imagery. They advocate for a "playful pedagogy" in which schools teach "not about but *through* popular culture" (p. 19). In such a classroom, they suggest, children can learn

about how media texts are produced and marketed, and they are invited to play with and parody such texts as a form of critical thought. They are not concerned with pop culture texts as much as with pop culture tools, such as digital videos, and pop culture-inspired processes of self-representation. Their focus on tools and processes allow them to trace the ways that their participants engage with, produce, and cite pop culture texts and meanings.

In this section, I reviewed literature at the intersection of pop culture and gender, focusing on studies that conceptualize gender as performative, not essential, and pop culture as a site of public pedagogy that circulates meanings about gender and sexuality. The question that frames this review is: *How are gendered identities constructed and made available in pop culture?* The authors included in this section have argued that pop culture can offer positive representations of gendered identities (Graf, 2015; see also Meyer, 2009), seemingly positively but ultimately negative representations (Marshall & Sensoy, 2009), and conflicted or at least complicated representations (Crane, 1999; Ivashkevich & Shoppell, 2013). Further, many of the authors included here recognize the importance of studying not just pop culture texts in isolation but pop culture texts as they are read, understood, and used by actual audiences—how, in Storey’s (2003) words, pop culture is *made* using the available resources. However, while they recognize this theoretically, this commitment is not always reflected methodologically. For example, while Marshall and Sensoy (2009) solicit responses to *Shrek 2* from their undergraduate students, they use these responses only to frame their own critical analysis of the text. Ivashkevich and Shoppell (2013) went furthest in developing methods that reflect this



understanding of pop culture. They did so by studying how two children actually cite, animate, and remix gendered identities to which pop culture has exposed them.

The limitations of studies at the intersection of pop culture and gender clarify the importance of bringing literacy to this effort to understand how pop culture texts operate and how notions of gender circulate within them. At the intersection of pop culture, gender, *and literacy*, we find more theoretical and methodological tools for understanding *how* individuals make meaning of the identities made available in pop culture texts. These tools can help us see what knowledge, experiences, and other texts individuals draw on to make sense of particular texts and what situated strategies and processes they employ in and out of schools to do so.

### **Gender and Literacy**

In this section, I review literature at the intersection of gender and literacy. Following my research questions and theoretical framework, I only reviewed studies that treat gender as discursively produced and performed, rather than as essential, and I only reviewed studies that take a sociocultural approach to literacy, exploring the ways literacy is practiced both in and out of schools. I revisit two of the book-length studies first discussed in the “Gender Performativity” section. Here, I emphasize how crossing gender performativity with literacy offers new understandings of how gender is constituted and performed through discourse. These studies vary more widely than studies in any of the other sections; the authors’ varying views of and investments in literacy produce this variety. While all of the authors cited here take a sociocultural view of literacy, they prioritize different qualities of literacy in their theoretical frameworks

and methodologies. Some authors, for example, prioritize the utility of literacy and seek to understand the kinds of literacy practices that girls and young women can use to better navigate institutional and academic spaces that have excluded them and to find success there. Other authors are more concerned with recommending how academic spaces might adapt and open up to include more of the literacy practices in which young people are already engaged. And other authors are less interested in this fraught relationship between the individual and the institution; they explore instead how young people find voice and agency in their literacy practices, whether or not those practices are recognized or sanctioned by schools. The studies are loosely sequenced based on the extent of their interest in academic literacies, but these distinctions are not often straightforward. For example, some studies that take place in schools ultimately say more about what happens outside of schools—or at least in the unofficial spaces of schools—and other studies seem to not have anything at all to do with academic literacies until clear curricular recommendations are made. Throughout this section, I narrate the trouble in making these distinctions and what that trouble might mean for how, and to what end, we create a curricular space in schools for non-academic literacies.

Mapes (2011) taught in a writing program for first-year college students who were labeled “at-risk” by the school. Through this work, she came to appreciate the intersections of literacy and identity and how those intersections supported some of her students in achieving success in the university. This case study offers a close look at one female student, Keneika, as she participated in the program and made sense of her identity as a woman or color within the predominantly white institution. Mapes theorizes literacy socioculturally—as embedded in social practices that are shaped by context and

relationships. To study Keneika's journey as a so-called "at-risk" student, Mapes collected her formal coursework, recordings of their student-teacher conferences, and interviews. She used recursive data analysis, comparing data across sets, composing analytic memos, and identifying broad themes in the data. As a feminist researcher, she saw her subjectivity and relationship with Keneika as investments in her research design rather than as limitations.

The program in which Keneika was enrolled was disproportionately populated by male athletes who administrators and Keneika characterized as distractible and distracting to female students. Mapes (2011) draws connections between the gendered assumptions made about students in the program with Walkerdine's (1990) account of the "good girl," who achieves academic success through hard work and compliance rather than through rationality. Mapes was troubled by the way Keneika aligned herself with "good girl" images, particularly in her final assignment. She read Keneika's collage of European-American models superimposed with phrases like "good manners" as a performance of femininity. However, through conversation with Keneika, she recognized these identifications as ways of tapping into European-American discourses of academic achievement and finding a sense of self-efficacy in a complex and daunting cultural world of the institution.

In this study, we see an elaboration of the foundational work in gender performativity reviewed above, particularly Walkerdine (1990) and Finders (1997). Mapes (2011) notes how administrators, teachers, and students read students in gendered ways and how, as a result, only certain kinds of identities are made available. However, by interviewing Keneika, she explored how race and class intersect with gender and how

students choose to take up certain identities in unexpected ways for unexpected reasons. Specifically, Keneika saw the “good girl” identity as a resource for advancement rather than a constraint. Underlying this study, then, is an interest in how educators can support young women like Keneika in navigating and being successful in academic institutions.

In an ethnographic study of six girls in a language arts classroom, Broughton and Fairbanks (2002) examined how the adolescent girls understood and responded to the classroom culture, how they negotiated positions for themselves within that culture, and how those positionings shaped their understandings of themselves as literate. The authors use a poststructuralist framework to understand how selves are constituted through discourse and practice. They theorized classroom culture as the patterned ways people interact in classroom spaces, and they see classroom culture as something that shapes what students come to understand about literacy and its desired outcomes. The authors generated data through classroom observations and interviews with the teacher and students.

Broughton and Fairbanks (2002) found that the girls acted in ways that showed they wanted to be good students but that also allowed them to manage their boredom and disengagement in the class, circumventing the teacher’s authority. They found too that both the teacher and the students valued literacy in terms of its instrumental purposes (e.g., to help pass the standardized test). By extension, the girls saw literacy as important preparation for their futures. The teacher and the girls had mutually reinforcing ideas about what kinds of activities were supposed to take place in a language arts classroom and about the purposes and outcomes of literacy. Broughton and Fairbanks highlight how schools can influence students’ perceptions of literacy and of themselves. Given their

interest in nurturing students' sense of agency as literacy learners, this study could be supplemented with an exploration of the participants' existing agency—when and how they feel agentic already, whether in or out of school. Similarly, they do not explore the girls' literacy practices outside of school (as Finders, 1997 did), even if the girls do not recognize them as such. Finally, while the authors were interested in how girls, in particular, negotiate their positions in the classroom culture, they did not address gender in their findings. One important way they might have done this would be to theorize the girls' desire to be “good,” a desire that connects to the images of the “good girl” theorized by Walkerdine (1990) and Davies (1989).

In a study that brings together critical literacy and multimodality, Ajayi (2015) examined how three Nigerian girls were taught to deploy critical multimodal literacy to interrogate texts and reconstruct unequal social structures. Theoretically, she draws on multiliteracies, or “the literacy curricula and pedagogy that respond to increasingly diverse and global societies and the burgeoning textual forms afforded by multimodal resources” (p. 218); multimodality, or the interrelations between modes of representation; and a sociocultural view of literacy as embedded in everyday social practices. Bringing these concepts together, she defines critical multimodal literacy as a way for teacher and students to “combine language, drawings, spatiality, and Facebook as tools of choice to interrogate the inequitable, cultural positioning of women in textbooks” (p. 219).

Ajayi (2015) presents multiple case studies of students to whom she taught critical multimodal literacy lessons twice per week for five months. In addition to data gathered from her teaching, she visited the case study students in their homes and conducted interviews about the kinds of texts they read at home and their digital literacy practices.

Her instruction consisted of four phases: critical reading of the text, deconstruction of its underlying messages, reconstruction or a new text meant to “talk back” to the original, and using social media to share and discuss the reconstructed texts. The participants in Ajayi’s (2015) study created and posted multimodal texts to social media. The purpose of these texts was to rewrite narratives. Ajayi argues that these artifacts show how the students are beginning to critically frame their interpretation of information presented on social media, make personal connections, and disrupt dogma to argue for gender equality.

The argument made implicitly throughout the study is that the teaching practices in which Ajayi (2015) engaged should be more widely deployed, particularly with immigrant students like the study participants. The value of these practices, she argues, is that they give students new resources for engaging as agents and authors of their own meanings. While this work functions as a useful illustration of the potential of critical multimodal literacy instruction, it does not function as well as empirical research. Ajayi instructed the participants to engage in a particular way with critical multimodal literacy, and they did. She identified themes such as “new literacy practices and social practices” and “representing self and community” as emergent, when, in reality, they fall in line with the structure of the learning experiences she crafted before the fact. Due to the circularity of this argument, we do not get to see how the participants understood their engagement in these practices and the meanings they made of the texts they read and created, as they interacted with each other. The claim that these practices could “reconstruct unequal social structures” (p. 217) is too bold, given this lack of data.

The studies reviewed above take up ideas of success within academic spaces. The authors’ hope is to support girls in being successful in school by tapping into and

building on their existing literacy practices. In the next set of studies, authors argue not to better support girls in school but to better configure schools and classrooms to recognize these sorts of practices. Davies (1997) studied how gender categories are constructed and how these categories discursively make certain kinds of identities available to children in a preschool classroom. She theorizes gender as a construction of binary categories arranged hierarchically in relation to each other. According to Davies, we come to see the world through these categories and take for granted that these categories are how the world is and ought to be. Davies explores several examples of preschool children who transgress these categories and boundaries. She depicts, for example, classroom events in which boys take up literate identities—identities that are more comfortably assumed by girls.

Through this work, Davies (1997) proposes a notion of critical literacy that opens up discursive possibilities in relation to gender. She argues that critical literacy builds our awareness of the way in which speaking-as-usual constructs binary categories and, therefore, ourselves and each other. She argues that readers bring their cultural baggage to texts and that meaning happens in the transaction between text and reader. Accordingly, she defines critical literacy as

the capacity to make language live, to bring oneself to life through language and, at the same time, bring to bear on language a critique which makes visible the powerful force of rationality and of linear patterns of thought, of usual speech patterns and usual metaphors, and a recognition of their constraints and limitations. (p. 28)

Davies's (1997) study is closely linked to Thorne's (1993) *Gender Play*. Both researchers explored the ways boundaries are established and reestablished on an ongoing basis by children and adults in schools. Whereas Thorne focuses on how boundaries can

be neutralized in the ordinary course of play among groups of children, Davies depicts more clearly delineated acts of transgression that blur these boundaries, such as a boy wearing a skirt. These acts can be seen as examples of *discursive agency*, wherein those who have been denied social power can find performative power in reclaiming the terms of their domination (Butler, 1997). While Butler offers a theoretical exploration of the possibilities of such agency, Davies documents instances of this sort of transgression and reclamation. Davies's (1997) call for critical literacy has direct, if general, implications for classroom curriculum and teaching. Davies defines critical literacy as a way to build awareness of the relationship between language, binary categories, and identities, and suggests that it is incumbent upon teachers to build this awareness in their students.

Stephanie Jones conducted a three-year ethnographic study around language, literacy, and identity in a predominantly white, working-poor Midwestern elementary school. During the study, she was a participant observer and a teacher researcher, leading after-school and summer programs with a small group of girls. In one article drawn from this study, Jones (2006) examined how the girls she studied took on particular "attitude"-filled language practices in the classroom. Jones characterizes this attitude as "tough-skinned" and "bad-ass" (p. 115). She was most interested in how language practices can be understood and utilized to construct alternative, or hybrid, language practices that help working-poor White girls to feel a sense of belonging and to succeed in school. Like many authors in this section, Jones's theories of language and literacy are sociocultural. She argues that language plays an important role in the formation of individuals' sense of selves. According to Jones, the purpose of language learning is for the teacher and



students to co-construct language practices that open up new identity positions for students to fill.

Jones (2006) drew on three critical incidents involving her research participants and their language practices. In one incident, a participant Cadence exhibited the attitude described above when asking for a female tutor. This use of language had negative repercussions on Cadence within the school community, even though the girls witnessed their parents using a similar attitude to gain power at school. Jones explains that the girls did not recognize this power as temporary and did not see the long-term negative repercussions in this kind of language use. In this example, Jones illustrates one kind of gendered and classed identity that is made available to her research participants in their local community and shows how this identity is devalued in the school setting. She advocates for teachers to recenter language and nurture hybrid language practices like the ones exhibited by the girls. Practically speaking, she argues that teachers should expect conflict in a language arts classroom and take on the work of understanding students' linguistic tools and identity performances. This work could be extended and enhanced with a closer look at the intersection of local and popular identities made available to the research participants. How do these local identities relate to and interact with other notions of girlhood we see in popular culture?

Zacher (2008) analyzes a classroom literacy event in which students were invited to read aloud stories they had written for homework. Four boys—all friends but each with different degrees of economic, cultural, and symbolic capital—read their stories aloud, and, in doing so, maneuvered for position within their social group. Zacher sought to address how the boys' stories are “sites of ideological and identity production,” how they

reflect the students' ideologies and symbolic capital, and how the "right" to speak is negotiated in this event (p. 14).

Zacher (2008) uses a Bourdieuan and a Bakhtinian theoretical framework to analyze this event. Specifically, she borrows Bakhtin's notion of intertextuality and dialogism—the notion that all language exists in response to what has been said and in anticipation of what will be said in response—and Bourdieu's concept of the classroom as a site of struggle, a place where students use their capital "to impose their view of the world or their view of their own position in the world—their social identity" (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 727 as cited in Zacher, 2008, p. 14).

Zacher (2008) argues that, by reading their stories aloud, the boys engaged in "identity-maintenance," defining themselves in relation to the social group on the basis of gender, race, and class. Zacher's (2008) analysis focused on both the literacy event itself and the social and academic contexts in which it was embedded. Ultimately, she argues that teachers and researchers must examine students' use of capital in order to understand how class, gender, and other identity categories become relevant in classroom interaction. Examining students' use of capital allows us to see how students make choices about which kinds of capital to "spend" in the social field of the classroom. For example, one of the boys, DeAndre, had higher degrees of cultural and symbolic capital within the friend group but lower economic capital. His strategic use of this capital—incorporating his knowledge of rap musicians, his neighborhood, and his father's incarceration—allowed him to maintain his position of power. Zacher's study contributes to the field of study dealing with how individuals' identities are constituted and performed through literacy. In this case, she shows how the boys' performances of their stories allows them to take

on certain identities and position themselves as powerful within the social order of the classroom. While Zacher suggests that these processes and the literacy events are worth teachers' and researchers' attention, she does not go as far as recommending particular pedagogical or curricular practices as similar studies, like Jones (2006), do.

In *Hidden Literacies and Life in Junior High*, discussed in an earlier section, Finders (1997) takes a sociocultural approach to literacy, seeing it as a sociocultural phenomenon that can only be understood within the situation in which it occurs. Finders is concerned with what she calls the “literate underlife” of her research participants—the unsanctioned literacy practices they engage in both in and out of school. She suggests that literacy provides “a tangible means by which to claim status, challenge authority, and document social allegiances” (p. 4). She worked with two groups of participants: the “social queens,” a group of popular girls and the “tough cookies” a group of academically driven, independent girls. While the social queens were heavily involved in the literate underlife—reading and writing in yearbooks, writing notes on the bathroom stalls, and reading magazines at school—the tough cookies were more invested in the literacy practices sanctioned by the school. The tough cookies pursued literacy as a way to “get beyond yourself,” to find escape, knowledge, connection, and growth. They saw literacy as a path to opportunity and success.

Finders's (1997) study demonstrates many ways that literacy is interwoven in adolescent girls' daily lives and demonstrates that social class, social status within school, and gender are implicated in their ways of practicing literacy. The study shows the participants' investments in literacy but does less to show how they make sense of the texts (bathroom stall graffiti, yearbooks, fashion magazines) they draw upon to carry out

their social and academic goals. This work calls us to engage the distinction and the overlap between the local and the popular. Finders treats the participants' notions of gender and their engagements with text as primarily local—that is, specific to the local spaces in which she is working. It would be productive to inquire how the magazines, for example, operate not just as a text through which a group of friends bonds but also as a mechanism of the normalizing discourses within which the girls find agency.

Moeller (2011) studied how the cultural category of gender influenced the way a group of high school students read three graphic novels. She drew on Hall's (1980) work on positioning to examine how the participants read the graphic novels. Hall defines three positions for reading a text: *dominant hegemonic* (the reader associates with the cultural mores communicated), *negotiated* (the reader generally accepts the preferred reading but alters it to reflect her values), or *oppositional* (the reader rejects the text). As a poststructural feminist, Moeller assumed that one's position as a reader is constantly subject to change in response to contextual factors. Moeller wanted to know which of Hall's positions the students took when reading particular graphic novels at particular moments, how gender influenced graphic novel preference, and how the students think graphic novels might be used in school.

Moeller (2011) selected 15 high school students, both male and female, to read three graphic novels and participate in unstructured focus group interviews about them. Moeller found that the boys in her study struggled to identify with one of the graphic novels, which featured a female lead character. Otherwise, she did not observe any pronounced differences in the positions that students took up in relation to the graphic novels. Moreover, they did not think of graphic novels as gendered, but rather as part of

“nerd” culture. She notes that students expressed a kind of double consciousness reading the graphic novels as they participated in a “nerdy” activity while also distancing themselves from nerd culture more broadly. In this way, Moeller points out, as students practice literacy, they are “the site and subjects...of discursive struggle for their identity” (p. 482).

It is not clear if Moeller’s (2011) major purpose is to understand how students read graphic novels or to show that high school students are more sophisticated in their literacy practices and cultural savvy than is commonly expected. By focusing on pedagogical and organizational questions like how students think graphic novels should be used in schools, she overlooks more relevant questions about how students are discursively produced as readers through their interaction with text, context, and each other. Furthermore, by sampling students who do not typically read graphic novels, she forecloses the possibility of understanding how graphic novel reading as a literacy practice is interwoven in students’ academic and non-academic lives.

In the studies reviewed in this section, authors emphasized relationships between literacy and gender. They showed how, through literacy, students constitute gendered identities across academic and non-academic spaces. They offer, with varying degrees of specificity, topics of inquiry and instructional practices that make visible the relationships between identities, texts, and power and, with varying degrees of specificity, accounts of the literacy practices in which young people are already engaged. These studies call me to notice and question how academic spaces allow and disallow particular kinds of literacy practices and rethink the relationship between academic and non-academic literacies. Many of the authors here argue for a more permeable classroom space, in

which students' everyday engagements with texts are allowed in. The role those literacy practices might play in an academic space is not always clearly defined. Is it to support students in navigating academic institutions, to leverage what they do outside of school to support what they do inside school, or simply to affirm those practices as literacy?

Davies (2003) and Jones (2006) offer the most promising approaches to critical literacy. They do more than simply suggest that young people develop critiques of and challenge the images of femininity they encounter in texts. They show how the very ways young people use language and literacy—for example, the way the participants in Jones's (2006) study deploy the language patterns of they have heard in their communities—can constitute gender. This conception of critical literacy emphasizes the discursivity of literacy itself and the potential for exploring how young people, and adolescent girls in particular, perform gender in their interactions with pop culture texts.

### **Pop Culture and Literacy**

The literature reviewed in this section addresses a question central to my study: *how* specifically do young people read pop culture texts, and what significance do these readings carry for them in and out of school? Literacy helps us see the *how* up-close, as well as the tension between two common ways of positioning oneself in relation to pop culture. In these studies, the authors attend to—and give theoretical and methodological weight to—both critical and celebratory views of pop culture. In the column “Media and Pop Culture” in *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, Mahiri (2001) summarizes this dual positioning:

[Pop culture's] multimodal, multitextual, and sometimes multicultural influences on (and resources for) learning and meaning making contain possibilities for both

agency and constraint. Culturally motivated, this pop culture pedagogy reproduces existing economic and cultural inequities. At the same time, however, because pop culture resources are often appropriated by young people for pleasure, identification, and a sense of personal power, these technologies help them circumvent limits on learning and meaning. (p. 382)

In contrast, studies in the previous section, “Gender and Pop Culture,” took a more critical view, focusing on the constraining gendered identities made available in pop culture texts such as films, magazines, and toys. Studies in this section turn their attention away from the texts themselves and toward the literacy processes and events through which individuals make sense of the texts. In doing so, they capture how these processes and events are often nonlinear and contradictory. And more than in any other section, they highlight the hybridity, novelty, and inventiveness of what young people are doing in their engagements with pop culture.

In this section, I have included several studies that look at youths’ participation in social media as both a way to facilitate the circulation of pop culture meanings and as a kind of pop culture text in and of itself. Naturally, given the addition of *literacy*, the studies here offer more recommendations for classroom practice. I excluded studies that theorize pop culture only as a way of supporting traditional academic literacies within the classroom. All of the studies here conceptualize pop culture as participatory—assuming that consumption is always productive—and influential and, as such, worthy of inclusion in classroom practice in their own right.

In a commentary published in the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, Alvermann (2008) theorizes the role of adolescents’ online literacies in order to identify implications for educators, schools, and researchers. She pursues three lines of inquiry within this topic: what drives young people to create online content, the uniqueness of the

culture of online literacies, and the implications of online literacies on researching and teaching. Alvermann (2008) argues that young people “are tirelessly editing and remixing multimodal content they find online to share with others, using new tools to show and tell, and rewriting their social identities in an effort to become who they say they are” (p. 10). She believes that young people’s engagement in this participatory culture allows them to develop literacy practices that serve them well. Schools are not doing enough to support these practices because schools focus on written text alone, while online content is highly multimodal and hyper mediated, affecting how young people process information (e.g., nonlinearly and cross-curricularly). According to Alvermann, educators can and should develop new theories, methodologies, and practices to address these new literacies, while also remaining “open to the possibility that the speed with which new technologies evolve may require us to lessen the grip on any “single, static technology of literacy”” (p. 17). The studies reviewed below take up Alvermann’s concerns about young people’s online activity and the importance of teachers and researchers understanding these practices. The focus of both of the studies is social media, which I treat as a site of pop culture. Freishtat and Sandlin (2010) explicitly elaborate how and why we might think of social media in this way, and, while Buck (2012) does not make the connection to pop culture explicit, we can see she treats it in much the same way—for example, by pointing out how individuals are both producers and consumers of corporately mediated texts.

Buck (2012) conducted an ethnographic study of one undergraduate student’s writing across social media platforms. This research was part of a larger study of undergraduate and graduate students’ literacy practices on social media sites. In this case, she studied how Ronnie integrated social media sites into his daily literacy practices, how



he managed his identity on these sites, and how he manipulates the sites' interfaces to suit his needs. Buck links this case study theoretically to Lankshear and Knobel's (2008) work on digital literacy, which they define as "a shorthand for the myriad social practices and conceptions of engaging in meaning making mediated by texts that are produced, received, distributed, exchanged, etc., via digital codification" (Lankshear & Knobel, p. 5 as cited in Buck, p. 10). Buck sees her study as a response to Lankshear and Knobel's call for research on individuals' digital literacy practices within a variety of contexts. Buck also draws on what Brooke (2009) calls "ecologies of practice," or the larger systems of literate activity in which individual practices occur. Here, Buck makes the distinction between studying ongoing literate activity on social media sites (or "medial interfaces") and studying "textual objects" on social media.

Buck (2012) followed Ronnie's online activity for two semesters, interviewed him, kept textual records of his online activity (e.g., status updates on Facebook), gave him a time-use diary to keep track of the daily activities into which his online activity was integrated, and invited him to take her on a tour of his online profiles. She traces the way Ronnie used social media to manage his identity across several sites, always attending to the different audiences, norms, and purposes of each site. She shows that Ronnie's location, daily activities, and social networks were laminated onto his literate activity. For example, he would often take photos of objects he encountered in his daily life and use social media to send them to an audience or a particular friend who he assumes will appreciate them. Buck observes that Ronnie is knowledgeable about how to use social media sites and specifically how to use them to suit his needs as a manager of his online identity—for example, by manipulating the templates sites offer to customize a

profile for himself. She argues that such manipulations are part of the larger set of digital literacy practices in which individuals participate on social media. Viewing social media activity in this way allows researchers and educators to account for the influence of these sites in students' literate lives and to better understand the writing activities and digital literacy practices that are most relevant in students' daily lives. Buck assumes that this understanding is valuable to educators, but she is less clear about why it is valuable and how we might apply this understanding to instructional decisions. Buck's study invites questions about classroom application, such as: What is the relationship between digital literacy practices and traditional academic literacy practices? What is the role of schools in enhancing or leveraging these practices, and to what end might they do so?

The studies that follow recognize young people's engagement with social media and, in addition, explore the hybrid literacy practices through which young people make and make meaning of pop culture. In a case study drawn from a larger ethnographic study on English language learners writing fanfiction in online spaces, Black (2006) explore the roles of popular and fan culture in online literacy and social practices. She asks how adolescent English Language Learners construct identities in online text-dominated spaces, how these identities develop over time, and what resources they draw on from their presentations of self in these spaces. Further, she examines the role of pop culture in the identity development and literacy practices of young people. Over a period of several years, Black collected fan texts, reader reviews, public interaction from the site, field notes, and interviews with focal participants. She analyzes these data based on thematic topics that were related to identity, language, and culture.

Black (2006) draws on Gee's notion of Discourse, which bridges literacy, identity, and context in the way it conceives of small-d discourse as language in use and Discourse as a compilation of semiotic, material, and expressive resources which act as an identity kit. Black highlights the way young immigrants are using online spaces to form and maintain their ethnic identities and affiliations across borders—following Bakhtin, who argued that language learning is about coming to know how to successfully participate in certain social situations or enact certain cultural values or dispositions.

Black (2006) found that the focal participant Nanako, who had become a popular writer on an anime fanfiction site, wrote in a way that “was not constrained by an ascribed ELL role or specific expectations and requirements for her texts. She was not expected to adhere to the identity of an immigrant...nor was she forced to choose between the languages in her linguistic repertoire. Instead, Nanako's process of fanfiction writing enabled her to perform different aspects of her identity in different ways” (p. 182).

Black's work illustrates how pop culture can be a resource for young people as they learn language and take up and present identities. The implications of this research are limited by the exceptionality of writing fanfiction: it is not as widespread a practice as the everyday literacy practices of texting or posting on social media (Warner, 2016).

Research that explores how young people do similar kinds of literacy and identity work in more popular ways would enrich the findings and implications of this work.

As part of a case study of her nephew's engagement with a set of Pokémon texts, Vasquez (2003, 2005) examined the literacies he and his friends learned and used over the course of this engagement. Vasquez conceptualizes *literacies* as “a variety of skills and strategies used by learners including reading, writing, drawing and so forth when

negotiating and constructing meaning” (2003, p. 118). Her goal in examining these literacies is to highlight “the powerful and creative learning students can bring to the aspects of popular culture with which they choose to identify” (2005, p. 203). Vasquez is interested in what motivates children to engage in complex games like Pokemon and how educators can capitalize on such new literacies. Drawing on Comber’s (2011) work in critical literacy, she eschews skills-based approaches to literacy in favor of everyday critical literacies “involving people using language to exercise power, to enhance everyday life in schools and communities, and to question practices of privilege and justice” (2005, p. 204).

Vasquez’s (2005) nephew and his friends design and trade Pokémon cards outside of school as part of an ongoing game, the object of which is to maximize the value of their collection based on each character’s relative strengths and weaknesses. In order to do so, they must make decisions about the value of their cards on an ongoing basis and identify gaps in their collections. The children in the study designed their own cards by engaging with related resources such as books and magazines in order to identify which strengths to feature on characters’ cards. Their ongoing interaction with multiple kinds of texts, along with their production of texts (the trading cards), the necessity of strategic decision-making, and their ability to insert Pokémon into the “official curriculum” of school all show principles of critical literacy in action. Vasquez (2005) depicts specific moments when Curtis and his friends are engaged in this critical literacy work. For example, the children read the repeated phrase “Gotta Catch ‘Em All” that is used on Pokémon packaging as a way for the “sellers” to encourage the audience to collect more cards. She also shows how they read the gender of the characters based on how they are

illustrated. Vasquez writes, “[T]hese new literacy pedagogies should be informed by observation and analysis of children’s participatory engagement with texts for which they have an affinity and for which they are willing to participate in complex learning situations for a sustained period of time” (p. 215). In other words, she values looking closely at what children are already doing—how they are already engaging in pop culture—in order to make a case for how pop culture might be used in the classroom. One limitation of this study, which is shared by other critical literacy studies (e.g., Ajayi, 2015) is that it is not always clear if, in the course of generating data, she is doing critical literacy with the children or if she is examining what they are already doing. In other words, her role as a researcher is not clearly defined, and so what she frames as “authentic,” naturally occurring literacy practices are actually brought about by her directives (a tension relevant to this study and explored more in Chapter 3).

As part of another case study focused on literacy practices that are not strictly academic, Sanchez (2010) examines the writing of an African American student in a transitional college writing course. She identifies in his writing hybrid language practices—or practices that combine academic writing and language practices rooted in the student’s linguistic background. While this research is part of a larger study on the transitional writing course, here, the student’s essay becomes Sanchez’s unit of analysis in order to recover it from otherwise deficit-based views of African American linguistic and literacy practices. Sanchez’s (2010) analysis is rooted in sociolinguistics and particularly in the understanding of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) as a rich language with its own logic, structure, and communicative potential. It is also rooted in parallel work in New Literacy Studies that promotes the idea that “literacy, language

development and use, and language's ties to identity are inseparable to social, political, cultural, and economic contexts" (p. 479).

Sanchez (2010) sees her student's hybrid language practices on full display in her student's essay about the song "Why?" by Jadakiss. She sees the essay as an example of how academic literacy may be expanded to include students' home languages, identities, and cultural engagements. She shows, for example, how the introduction to the essay meets the academic requirements for the remedial course (for example, "Develop an explicit thesis from particular evidence using inductive reasoning"). She also points out how he incorporates both academic conventions—such as defining key terms for an audience who may be unfamiliar with them—and hip hop sensibilities—such as "representing" by inserting his own experience into his analysis.

Sanchez argues that pop culture texts—and hip hop texts, in particular—should be allowed into the classroom space because, first, these texts can be rich territory for analysis and, second, because they validate the language and literacy practices students engage in outside of school. To support this recommendation, Sanchez points to hip hop's expansive vocabulary, its unique rhetorical and expressive forms, and its epistemological complexity. Sanchez's arguments about including hip hop in curriculum would be strengthened by a deeper understanding of the history of hip hop and the sociocultural context in which "Why?" was relevant to her student. She links the song to hip hop's history of protesting racial inequality but not to the particular moment of her inquiry when the song was in wide play on Top 40 as well as hip hop radio. In other words, she overstates the song's importance in the history of hip hop and undertheorizes the role of the *popular* in this study.

Vasquez (2005) and Sanchez (2010) both show that language and literacy practices are or can be hybrid, combining traditional academic language and literacy practices with practices developed at home and in local communities. Both authors recommend that teachers make their classrooms more permeable by welcoming the language and literacy practices that originate outside of the classroom space and recognizing the unique communicative and interpretive potential of those practices. In this way, both authors' arguments support the notion that pop culture is interactive: that individuals are both producers and consumers of pop culture and that they take up pop culture texts in their own ways, both in and out of school. These studies do not treat pop culture texts as public, as many of the studies in the previous section do, and they do not assume that a certain set of messages is simply "received" by the texts' audiences. These authors are more concerned with the nature of individuals' literacy practices and the place of those practices in classrooms. By highlighting the sophistication and, in Sanchez's case, the academic applicability of the students' literacy practices, both authors make a strong case for including pop culture in the classroom. Their up-close analyses of what the students in question do, how they do it, and what it means to them make their cases strong. However, they are less specific about how pop culture might be incorporated and what role the teacher plays in doing so beyond simply allowing and affirming students' pop culture interests in the classroom.

As part of a larger study about pop culture curriculum and identity performance and positioning, Johnson (2012) interviewed young people about pop culture in their lives, worked with them to construct photoethnographies of their pop culture engagements, and recorded their classroom interactions as a participant observer. Style

and dress stood out to Johnson as a prominent part of the participants' interactions and engagements with pop culture. In the interaction highlighted in this article, one focal participant made fun of another for wearing guitar earrings, claiming that she was "being white" by wearing them. This incident highlighted the importance of pop culture as texts we wear, carry, refer to, and engage with; the way that, through pop culture texts such as these, we negotiate race, class, gender, sexuality; and the identity work that takes place within these negotiations. Specifically, she argues that, through their readings of the earrings, they performed particular identities and positioned one another as gendered, raced, and classed. Theoretically, Johnson's work is grounded in the notion that pop culture is a site of struggle for meaning, and she views engagement with pop culture as a kind of performativity. Subjects perform raced and gendered identities to one another and the outside world through words, gestures, and dress; their identities are mediated, constrained, and juxtaposed with raced (and other) subjectivities produced by institutions, the media, and in this case, individual actors, who assign raced positions to one another. In this way, discourses leak into our daily communications in discursive performances. Johnson proposes that "teachers and researchers de-center speech and recalibrate our focus toward the variety of modes people employ...to perform and position raced and other identities" (p. 162), following Butler's (1990) focus on move, dress, and gesture as mechanisms of performativity. Her recommendation for practice is to create a pop culture curriculum that is about exploring identity performance and subjectivity production through engagements with pop culture.

Johnson's (2011) recommendations resonate with the purposes of this study and, specifically, with the goal of creating pop culture curriculum. Johnson's study highlights



the multimodality of pop culture and the range of ways young people make meaning of it. It also serves to illustrate productive consumption. The participants here are not simply replicating messages contained within pop culture texts in their interactions. Rather, they are actively reading each other and the texts they wear. They are doing this within an academic space that does not recognize these as literacy practices—and, unsurprisingly, there is no evidence that the participants recognize them as such either. Still, it is unclear from this study and others in this section like it, what it might mean to create a pop culture curriculum. What would the purpose of such a curriculum be, and how might that purpose be carried out? In the following section, the addition of *gender* offers some specificity, at least implicitly, because gender can be seen as a problem—something that, through curriculum and teacher, we might hope to address.

### **Pop Culture, Literacy, and Gender**

Not surprisingly, the concepts most central to this study, as well as my own problems and priorities, are reflected in the studies in this section: studies at the intersection of pop culture, literacy, and gender. Specifically, multimodality, intersectionality, and productive consumption all stand out in these studies, whether or not they are explicitly theorized. I organize this section based on these important interlocking concepts. Because these concepts interlock, I cannot review studies related to each concept separately. The Venn diagram in Figure 3 represents which concepts these studies engage and serves as an organizational framework for this section.

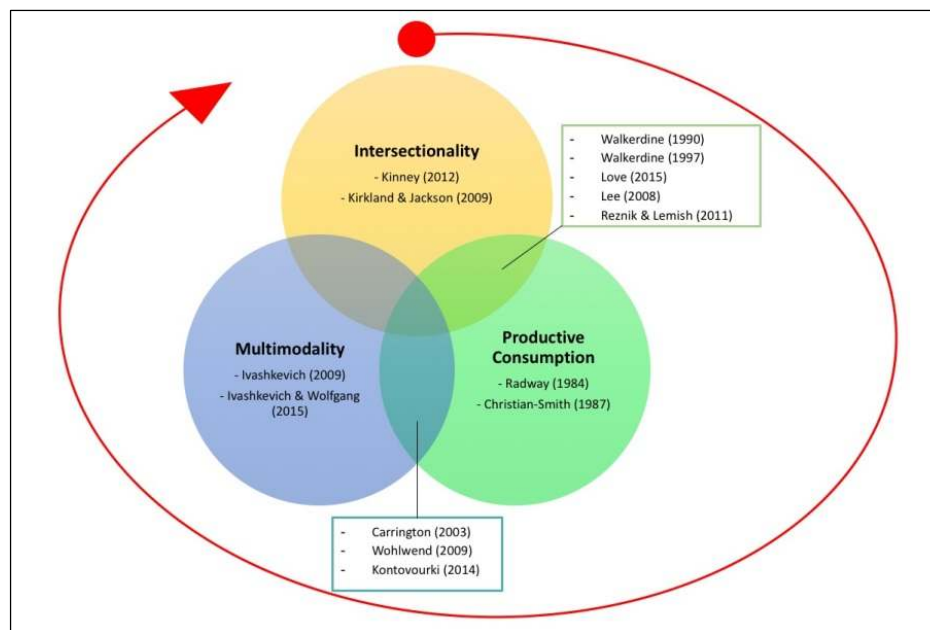


Figure 3. Organizational framework for pop culture, gender, and literacy

### Intersectionality

Kinney (2012) followed one African American teenaged boy as he wrote song lyrics in an after-school center. She saw his songwriting as a “site of resilience,” an activity in which he found the means for survival “in relation to adverse structural conditions.” Kinney sought to answer the following questions: With what forms of writing did this particular student engage? What were the functions, meanings, and purposes of this writing in this student’s life? This study shows how an individual can appropriate pop culture “tools” for their own expressive purposes.

This case study was conducted during the spring of 2010. The author spent an hour a week with the focal participant, Christopher, a 15-year-old African American male who lived in an underserved, high-poverty community. The author observed Christopher

in an afterschool center for teens where he wrote and recorded songs about his personal life. The author gathered field notes, conducted semistructured interviews, and reviewed audio tracks and written song lyrics. To analyze the data, she employed qualitative open coding procedures to identify points in the data that related to her research questions. She conducted a thematic content analysis to identify recurring themes in the data. She also consulted with the participant on her findings.

Kinney (2012) found that Christopher used songwriting as a way to “talk back” to the struggles in his life: specifically, navigating his relationships to his peers, his family members, and his community. In this way, songwriting was a “site of resilience” for him. The author argues that the research community needs to produce more studies that examine how members of underserved communities or marginalized groups find resilience. She also argues that teachers and schools would be interested to know about the kinds of literacy practices—such as songwriting—that students are engaging in outside of the classroom and to nurture those practices within schools.

Kirkland and Jackson (2009) studied a group of Black male adolescents who were involved in an afterschool program for “at-risk” students. For their study, they selected a group of students based on their “coolness,” a cultural phenomenon reflected in their reputations among their peers and their perceptions of themselves. The authors sought to answer two questions: “How did coolness relate to literacy among the young men at MBK [the program]?” and “What symbolic patterns helped to shape these relations?” (p. 281).

The authors argue, “In practicing a black masculine literacy, the cool kids constructed coolness through symbols of speech and dress taken from pop-cultural

locations. These larger symbol systems helped to shape complex relations—relationships between how the young men wanted to be cool and how they articulated this desire through literacy” (p. 293). “Coolness” helped bring Black male adolescents together as well as set them apart from each other. The participants’ speech and clothing choices helped them “write selves, make sense of pop culture in their lives, and extend shared perspectives about what it means to be a cool black man” (p. 292).

Kirkland and Jackson (2009) examined how the participants used language and (clothing) style as symbolic systems to construct their “cool” identities. For example, they describe how they use language borrowed from pop culture to signify their group membership (for example, by adding suffixes like “izzle”). They also show examples of how the participants drew themselves in certain styles of clothes (by certain brands like Fubu) to signify their Black masculine “cool” identities.

The authors counter prevailing mainstream perceptions of Black males as barely literate. They add to Tatum’s (2005) work in arguing that the Black male adolescents in the study have, in addition to Tatum’s social, cultural, and emotional literacy, linguistic and stylistic literacies. Their purpose is not to generalize to all Black male adolescents; instead, in the spirit of ethnographic inquiry, it is to contribute to a theory of Black masculine literacies that does not yet exist.

### **Intersectionality and Productive Consumption**

In the empirical work of *Schoolgirl Fictions*, Walkerdine (1990) sought to understand how subject positions are produced within everyday interactions with pop culture. Walkerdine viewed *Rocky II* with a family she calls the Coles in order to see how families might read pop culture texts within the context of their daily lives. Walkerdine

challenges the intellectualization of pleasure. She believes that theories that intellectualize pleasure position audiences as masses who are “narcotized” by pop culture. In contrast, she sees subject positions as produced not *within* such pop culture texts but *in interaction* with them. While the film creates certain possibilities for identification, it is the viewer’s interaction with it—not the film itself—that produces those subject positions. In making this argument, Walkerdine explicitly distinguishes herself from psychoanalytic theorists who would only analyze subjectivities and relations *within* the film. She also is distinguished from many scholars whose work is reviewed later in this chapter who conceptualize pop culture as a kind of public pedagogy in which audiences find role models and templates for their lives.

With regard to the Coles’ viewing of *Rocky II*, Walkerdine (1990) is particularly interested in Mr. Cole’s way of relating to the notion of fighting and fighters. Mr. Cole self-identifies as a fighter, someone whose job it is to fight for and protect his family. Walkerdine notes that he seems to see fighting as something from which women are excluded (when he does not pause the video during the fight scene when Mrs. Cole leaves the room). However, his relation to his daughter reveals more complex and contradictory relations to fighting. While he sees his daughter as an Other, as a girl in need of protection from a man, he also expresses that he wants to see her fight more at school to stand up for herself. We see their working-class status crosscutting Mr. Cole’s fantasies of gender, as he believes that his daughter, like him, must fight those in power to get what they want. Walkerdine’s argument is that this notion of fighting as a way of getting what you want is both inscribed in the film and lived out in the practices of the Coles’ daily lives. Her empirical work is meant to show the effectivity of filmic representations like

*Rocky II* within the lived relations of domestic practices. More broadly, she conceptualizes pop culture texts not as containers of preset meanings but as sites of interactive meaning-making, a view that is taken up by many of the researchers whose work is reviewed later in this chapter.

In *Hip Hop's Li'l Sistas Speak*, Bettina Love (2012) studied how a group of Black girls engaged in and made sense of the gendered and raced identities in hip hop. She explored how girls understood the images of femininity presented in rap music and videos, how those images (or “messages” contribute to their construction of raced and gendered identities, and how they shaped their lived experiences. Love used ethnographic methods to study these questions with a group of girls she knew through her work at a community center in Atlanta. She interviewed them individually and as a group as well as observed them at the community center over a year and a half. Theoretically, the study is grounded in Black feminism, which, according to Love, “draws on the intersection of race, gender, class, sexuality, and national or transnational identity to think critically and challenge the historical and cultural oppression women of color face as they continue to endure racism, colonialism, and White supremacy” (p. 22).

In one engagement with a rap video by Plies, Love (2012) found that the participants drew on the liberal and conservative politics on offer in rap music to make sense of the women who perform in the videos. She explains that the conservative principles of capitalism, individualism, and meritocracy are important in rap music as well as within the participants’ strain of southern Christianity. The participants argued that the women who perform in these videos have not considered the consequences of their actions and have made the wrong choice to be performers rather than, for example,

lawyers or doctors. Love's analysis of the data here highlights how a researcher can take a critical stance in relation to the text (in this case, her analysis of how rap and hip hop circulate conservative ideas) while also maintaining a nonjudgmental focus on the act of reading and specifically what the participants draw on to make sense of the text.

Lena Lee (2008) studied how young Korean immigrant girls interpret and reconstruct the meanings of gender roles in Disney films. Lee chose four popular Disney films to view with her research participants. She and a pair of girls would watch one film together, and then she'd lead a semi-structured interview about the protagonist's marriage, the protagonist's reasons for wanting to get married generally, and why s/he wanted to marry a particular person.

Lee (2008) found that the participants often noted that the male characters pursued marriage based on their own desires, whereas the female characters had to compromise and sacrifice their needs in order to marry. The participants' views of this phenomenon varied. Some of the participants found it unfair that the princesses weren't allowed to "have [their] own way in marriage" (p. 15), while others were less critical of the "rules" that prevent princesses from pursuing marriage according to their own desires. Lee's (2008) study illustrates how girls' interpretations of pop culture messages are embedded in their sociocultural contexts. In this case, the girls' family structure and cultural values influenced their understandings of the gender roles portrayed in the Disney films.

Reznik and Lemish (2011) studied how tween girls in Israel make sense of the messages about romantic love and relationships found in the *High School Musical* franchise. The authors conducted 19 focus group interviews in girls' homes in Israel. 45

of the 76 girls who participated came from more affluent, non-religious, European backgrounds, and the other 31 came from lower-class, religiously traditional backgrounds.

Each focus group began with a viewing of a segment from one of the movies and then progressed into an open-ended discussion of the segment. The first author asked the girls to share the feelings the segment brought up for them, their evaluations of the characters and their relationships, and the extent to which the situations portrayed seemed realistic. Reznik and Lemish (2011) identified three themes that emerged from the focus group interviews. The first is “love at first sight,” the second is the idealized “first kiss,” and the third is the notion of “girl power.” The authors found that girls’ real-world experiences—including those shaped by religious tradition and class—influenced their readings of romantic love and relationships in the movies. The more affluent girls were more likely to point out the lack of realism in the movies’ depictions of love and romance. The less affluent and more religious girls were more concerned with notions of modesty and privacy in romantic relationships. Overall, the study contributed to the notion that children actively make meaning of texts, rather than receiving and internalizing pop culture messages wholesale.

### **Productive Consumption**

Drawing on reader-response theory, anthropology, and feminist psychology, Radway (1984) studied women’s interest and engagement in romance novels, disputing common assumptions about these texts and the women who read them. For her, the shift from examining the text to the act of reading the text was important. Radway interviewed 42 women who were part of a community who read romance novels in a midwestern town. Her aim was to explore what meanings these texts held for them. She argues that,



even though the novels seem to circulate patriarchal ideas about romantic relationships and women's roles within them, the women who read them connect with the feisty, independent heroines and appreciate when their romantic interests appreciate what makes them unique. Drawing on literary theory to examine how the text elicits such responses, she describes how, in these novels, it is the heroine's desire for individuation that sets the plot in motion and how this desire mirrors the search for the lost mother—not just the pursuit of heterosexual romantic love.

Radway (1984) contributes and complicates the common understanding that women read romance novels to escape. Rather than escaping their husbands and children, the participants wanted escape from the responsibilities of their lives. Drawing on sociologist Nancy Chodorow's observations about the American family in the twentieth century, Radway describes how women are expected to take on the responsibility of nurturing and supporting the family with no one who "supports and reconstitutes women affectively and emotionally" (p. 94). Romance novels, then, do just that for the women who read them. They see the world in which the novel takes place as congruent with their own—even when the action and events are fantastical—and so the novel can operate as vicarious emotional nurturance for the readers.

Radway's (1984) study is not located in the fields of literacy, but her examination of the act of reading, combined with her use of literary theory, generates a detailed picture of the act of reading romance novels and, particularly relevant to this study, how readers come to see themselves differently through their process of reading. The way participants' actively *use* these texts in their lives highlights the productive nature of pop culture consumption. Readers do not simply adopt the novels' frameworks for romantic

relationships and women's roles within them. They seek in these texts particular kinds of heroines and heroes through which they can experience vicarious fulfillment of their own desires; they read these texts, and so making meaning of them, within communities of women; and they criticize them when they fail to serve their personal purposes, or *mean* in the ways they want them to mean.

Christian-Smith (1987) examined how notions of femininity and narratives of coming to adulthood are encoded in American romance novels between 1942 and 1982. She explored how femininity is constructed in teen romance novels, the configurations of power and control that underpin these femininities, and the “linkages [that] can be established between femininity in the novels and the present and future positions of teenage girls in the social and sexual division of labor” (p. 366). She conducted a semiotic analysis of each text, locating sets of codes through which meaning is produced. She generated three sets of codes: romance, sexuality, and beautification. She broke down each code into individual messages the books sent. First, the texts sent messages about *romance*. In these texts, romance was not only about emotion and caring but also about relations of power and control between men and women. She showed how, in these texts, romance is a market relationship involving transactions and exchanges of power and endowing girls' lives with meaning and importance. Second, the texts send messages about *sexuality*. In these texts, romance is the only proper context for sexuality. Females do not initiate sexual encounters and, in fact, actively resist them for some time before “giving in.” Finally, these texts show *beautification* as a way of “securing and maintaining male attention [and] construct[ing] gendered notions of pleasure, bodily comportment” that “lay the groundwork for one position of females in the division of

labor: that of consumers” (p. 379). Christian-Smith found that, in these texts, girls must seem “naturally” beautiful even if they use beauty products; that beauty is a precondition for romance; and that, as girls come to adulthood, their bodies are gradually sexualized.

Christian-Smith’s (1987) study offers a close analysis of a particular kind of popular text, the romance novel, and the ways that kind of text encodes messages about gender. In this study, romance novels are treated as pieces of public pedagogy, even though she does not use the term. She identifies texts to which adolescent girls would likely be exposed because she is interested in what they actually teach their audiences about gender roles and romantic relationships. Christian-Smith doesn’t address how their audience of adolescent girls bring other kinds of knowledge and texts to bear on their interpretations of these messages; how they might bring these messages to bear on their own experiences in romantic relationships; or what role these texts play within peer groups who might read and share these texts with each other. In other words, she does not address the interactive nature of the texts or the ways that adolescent girls’ identities are constructed, reinforced, or performed through the process of reading and interacting with these texts.

### **Productive Consumption and Multimodality**

In “I’m in a Bad Mood. Let’s Go Shopping,” Carrington (2003) examines a set of interactive dolls called Diva Starz and the implications of the new model of girlhood they project. While Diva Starz dolls project an image of femininity that is hipper, more hi-tech, and sassier than the more traditional femininity of Barbie, both femininities are normative. According to Carrington, the interactive Diva Starz dolls are multimodal texts that *instruct* girls on how to be girls. Specifically, the dolls construct a teenage girlhood

“concerned with consumption, outward style and appropriately feminized practices around friendship and discourse” (p. 90). By playing with the dolls, girls can try out such identities and imagine their place in a consumer world in which notions of style and taste rule. Carrington advocates a glocalized model of literacy, as opposed to a parochial or fantasy model. A glocalized model engages students in critical analysis of local and other texts. Carrington eschews the notion that childhood is merely “an incomplete version of adulthood” (p. 95) and, as such, contests the parochial and fantasy models, both of which give children access to adult-selected texts without the opportunity for critique.

Carrington (2003) draws attention to pedagogical possibilities rich with opportunities for meaning-making and critical engagement with popular culture texts within the classroom. In her discussion of the domination orientation to critical literacy, Janks (2010) advocates “critical discourse analysis [that] is used to understand how language works to position readers in the interests of power” (p. 23). Engaging children in a critical discourse analysis of Diva Starz—and, particularly, of the linguistic and conversational modes of their pre-recorded dialogue—might allow them to see how the dolls’ creators positioned them within the “conversation” and, importantly, positioned them foremost as consumers. As Carrington argues, the Diva Starz dolls, as all texts, *instruct*. Through their constructed, normative appearance and their invitations to participate in consumer culture (“I’m in a bad mood. Let’s go shopping.”), the dolls develop a particular set of dispositions within the girls who play with them. Janks’s approach to critical literacy offers students an opportunity to understand how that development works and to resist it.

Wohlwend (2009) highlights one kind of literacy challenge teachers might take up in her three-year ethnographic study of kindergartners engaging in imaginative play with Disney Princess dolls. She used discourse analysis to study the play interactions and writing practices centered around the dolls. Over the course of the year, the children were able to “replay and rewrite the well-worn storylines and characters from Disney films and to use princess themes to fuel their passions and impress their peers” (p. 58). Wohlwend grounds her study in a broad understanding of toys as both texts and cultural artifacts, bearing “traces of the social practices that produced them” (p. 58). How children take up these toys in their play reveals what kinds of roles are made available to them within mainstream discourses. The Disney Princess dolls bear traces of not only film scripts, songs, and advertising campaigns but also a host of historically defined gender stereotypes and roles. Wohlwend contends that children are neither dupes who thoughtlessly assume gender roles nor shrewd critics of the mainstream discourses that define popular culture. Instead, they laminate play frames that allow them to become productive consumers, thereby animating the Disney princess identity and authoring alternative agentive roles (p. 77). Wohlwend lauds the teacher for creating a permeable classroom in which students can not only bring in toys—and, so, practices—from home but also make those toys territories for literate experimentation (p. 79). The lack of such play in current kindergarten classrooms hinders children’s opportunity to talk back to popular culture texts and define roles and identities for themselves.

Butler’s (1988) work is particularly useful in understanding students’ literacy and play practices with the Disney Princess dolls. Butler emphasizes the pre-existence of scripts or narratives that individuals act out in their performances of gender. In these

children's practices, we see children acting out—in some ways, literally—scripts and narratives that were already in place. The children in this group draw on many popular culture resources (e.g., films and songs associated with the dolls) to perform and, so, constitute femininity. That the children performed femininity within a group recalls Butler's insistence that acts are shared experiences. She writes that “there are nuanced and individual ways of *doing* one's gender, but *that* one does it, and that one does it *in accord with* certain sanctions and proscriptions, is clearly not a fully individual matter (p. 525). The girls worked together to co-construct and re-construct the Disney Princess narratives, and Wohlwend (2009) highlights the ongoing nature of the negotiations among the individual *actors* in the play and the broader narratives that structured the play. If we pan out from Butler's notion of gender performance, we can see the children's interactive play as a mechanism of social reproduction generally. By animating Disney Princess characters according to traditional masculine/feminine gender roles, the children are reproducing—and re-constituting—these roles. Yet, their ability to author their own narratives and deviate from the traditional one allowed them to reconstruct, in Janks's (2010) sense, their own identities and take on more agentive roles both as storytellers and as princess characters within the play frame.

In “Backstage Performances,” Kontovourki (2014) depicted two classroom snapshots of literacy events involving a third-grade girl named Butterfly. By doing so, Kontovourki is able to examine “the less visible ways in which popular culture enters the classroom and shapes children's embodied performances as students and literate subjects” (p. 5). Her purpose is to uncover how school curricula and pop culture intersect and “exert power onto students' bodies and produce norms and regularities that students take

up, subvert, and/or resist” (p. 6). The snapshots are part of a larger ethnographic study of literate subjects in the classroom space. Kontovourki (2014) positioned herself as an insider-outsider in the classroom, as an adult who was also a student and who never led the class as a teacher would. Butterfly, the student featured in the snapshots, is a girl with high social status in the class who sometimes acts in ways that are associated with masculinity. She is positioned as a struggling reader and student in the classroom space.

The first snapshot shows Butterfly sharing a photo of herself from her phone and discussing the different kinds of poses men and women do. According to Kontovourki, “Butterfly recontextualised and juxtaposed two contradictory constructs of femininity, both of which emerge in popular culture texts and practices and serve to solidify a discourse of an ideal woman as beautiful, gentle, and vulnerable” (p. 11). Butterfly’s commentary suggests that she understands what kinds of familiar practices and performances are excluded in the school space.

The second snapshot shows Butterfly discussing her reading level and the kinds of books she’s allowed to read in school. She tells Kontovourki that she likes to read Scooby Doo books that are on a higher level because she finds that they make sense to her. Kontovourki (2014) recounts one episode in which Butterfly sneaks a Scooby Doo book during independent reading, looking over at her to see if she notices. By positioning herself in this way and by sneaking a book of her choosing into the classroom space, Butterfly resists her positioning as a low achiever in the classroom and positions herself as a knowledgeable literacy learner.

Kontovourki (2014) concludes, first, that pop culture texts could serve as resources for students like Butterfly to renegotiate their literate identities in the classroom.

Second, she argues that the snapshots call educators and researchers to “approach popular culture, literacy curricula, and children’s own performances as sociocultural and historical texts” (p. 16) embedded in power structures, rather than as an additional collection of texts to simply include in the classroom. Finally, Kontovourki suggests that *Butterfly* shows how girls might “(re)define their literate, gendered and raced/classed identities in relation to both literacy curricula and pop culture” (p. 16).

### **Multimodality**

In “Children’s Drawing as a Sociocultural Practice: Remaking Gender and Popular Culture,” Ivashkevich (2009) seeks to reconceptualize children’s drawing as “a sociocultural practice interwoven with discourses of childhood and gender and embedded in children’s peer interactions, daily activities, and participation in popular culture” (p. 50). Ivashkevich specifically positions her work against work that interprets children’s drawings solely from a developmental standpoint and focuses on the drawings as products rather than as processes.

In this study, Ivashkevich (2009) analyzed the collaborative image production of two ten-year old girls, Maria and Jessie. The girls, friends for several years, produced many drawings that related to ideas of beauty, fashion, and body image. While the girls showed awareness of traditional Western notions of femininity and beauty, they did not simply take these for granted. Rather, Ivashkevich writes, “It became a subject of subversive teasing and overt resistance” (p. 56).

Ivashkevich (2009) looked closely at one encounter during which Maria drew a picture of the supposed object of Jake’s affection, “Tiffany,” and simultaneously hid this drawing from Jessie. Maria’s drawing of Tiffany is a cumulative image of mainstream



representations of women found in popular culture. The girls' drawings—and the interaction in which they are embedded—contribute to a view of girls as active producers of culture, rather than passive recipients.

Ivashkevich and Wolfgang (2015) facilitated a project called *(re)Mixed Media* with a group of adolescent girls in a juvenile arbitration program. The authors define remixing as an act of appropriating and reusing the content of digital culture, including videos, images, and narratives. They see popular media remixing as a “space for productive disruption of the dominant images and discourses about girls and girlhood” (p. 51) and as an opportunity for feminist intervention. While the authors see remixing as inherently innovative and productive, they make an important theoretical distinction between agency and activity. Adolescent girls may be *active* in remixing digital texts, but they do not also have *agency* unless they develop a “critical awareness of the ideologies and messages behind them” and skillfully deploy creative techniques and technological tools to create their remixes (Ivashkevich & Wolfgang, 2015, p. 52).

Ivashkevich and Wolfgang (2015) developed several research questions to guide their work with the research participants. Through the project, they sought to address: Is it possible for girl media makers to use existing images and media to transgress and challenge existing gender codes? Are there particular remixing approaches that would enable them to do that and, moreover, to reclaim a “female gaze” outside of hegemonic masculinity? Over the course of a month, the authors worked with the girls to remix existing images and other digital content. They selected content that seemed relevant to girlhood and that would provoke discussion. Out of those discussions, the girls produced video mash-ups in order to speak back to and critique the images. To interpret these

pieces, the authors interwove fragments of the girls' mashups with their own reactions and responses to the work. This method allowed for a "non-linear, open-ended, and affective" reading that generated "yet another layer of remix as a dialogic exchange about the traps, obstacles, and potentialities of girlhood and womanhood" (p. 58). The authors conclude that the girls' acts of borrowing and remixing popular images and texts normally controlled by the male gaze "displace[d] the masculine logic of objectification and [made] imaginable new interpretations of those images" (Ivashkevich & Wolfgang, 2015, p. 69). They see remixing as a "collaborative act of female agency" (p. 69). This study connects to others (e.g., Ivashkevich & Shoppell, 2013; Wohlwend, 2009; Black, 2006) that explore exceptional literacy practices that have the potential to serve as a means to resist hegemonic messages in pop culture texts.

### **Conclusion**

In this review, we have seen how the intersections of gender, literacy, and pop culture have been studied and the kinds of conclusions researchers have drawn about these topics. By looking at each pair of topics—pop culture and gender, pop culture and literacy, and gender and literacy—we can see more clearly what the topic not included in each pair offers.

For example, in studies at the intersection of gender and pop culture, we often see close analyses of a text's messages about gender (e.g., Marshall & Sensoy, 2009). However, without literacy, we do not have as close of a look at how individuals actually make meaning of pop culture texts, what resources they draw on to do so, and what feels most significant to them as individuals. In studies at the intersection of gender and

literacy, we see how literate identities can also be gendered (e.g., Davies, 1997) and how girls and women take up literacy in academic and non-academic settings (e.g., Ajayi, 2015). Without accounting for pop culture, these studies miss an important element of the sociocultural context in which this literacy work takes place. Finally, in studies at the intersection of pop culture and literacy, we begin to see how individuals interact with and make meaning of pop culture texts (e.g., Ivashkevich & Shoppell, 2013), but without the focus on gender, they do not show as clearly how certain kinds of identities are discursively produced and made available to individuals engaged in pop culture.

In studies at the intersection of all three topics, we see research that, to varying degrees, addresses the way individuals make meaning of pop culture texts, pop culture as an important element of the sociocultural context in which literacy is practiced, and the kinds of identities that are discursively produced in these readings. In earlier studies, as well as studies in other sections, scholars conceptualize pop culture as a form of public pedagogy and, as such, a conveyor of prepackaged messages that audiences simply and passively consume. Other studies explore how pop culture texts are embedded within systems of power, but they do not do as much to explore how individuals make meaning of the texts—even when they ostensibly draw on the field of literacy for their theory and methodology. These studies are neither theoretically nor methodologically aligned to the widely theorized notion of pop culture as participatory—a notion on which this study relies. Instead, they are limited by a theory of pop culture that depicts it as a set of texts that contain a static set of messages to unpack.

Recent work at the intersection of pop culture, gender, and literacy, in contrast, is concerned with the ways individuals interact with and make meaning of pop culture texts.

Even when they see pop culture as public pedagogy, they do not assume that there is a static set of messages that lies within pop culture texts (e.g., Lee, 2008). For these scholars, meaning does not lie within the text but is negotiated between text and audience—a theoretical positioning more relevant to this study. While many studies take up this theory of pop culture as participatory, this theory is not often reflected in their methodology. For example, while Marshall and Sensoy (2009) think of pop culture as a “tool for revealing and analyzing mainstream discourses about race, gender, and class” (p. 161) rather than as a problem for which school curriculum is the solution, and while they try to carry this theory through their methodology by inviting their undergraduate students to respond to the film, ultimately, they rely on only their own critical analysis of the film to argue about its meaning. We find this inconsistency between theory and methodology in several other studies at the intersection of gender, literacy, and pop culture.

Many recent studies at the intersection of literacy, gender, and pop culture carry the theory of pop culture as participatory through the methodology. Studies like Carrington (2003) and Wohlwend (2009)—as well as Walkerdine’s (1990, 1997) older work—look closely at when, where, and how individuals engage with pop culture texts, how they make sense of them, the tensions that surface during this process, and how they take up their meanings in their daily lives. These studies are theoretically and methodologically closest to this study as well as most central to the topics I intend to address.

The assumption at the heart of this study is that in order to develop curriculum that supports students in making sense of themselves within a pop culture-saturated world,

we must first understand how they already do so. Many of the studies reviewed above (e.g., Vasquez, 2005) recommend that educators create more permeable classrooms in which students are free to bring in what have been considered “non-academic” texts and are invited to draw on, contest, and make sense of them within the academic setting. These recommendations for practice do not match the richness and complexity of the studies’ findings. The studies reviewed above have not entertained questions that are central to the process of developing a pop culture curriculum and pedagogy: (1) How does a teacher balance an interest in open-ended inquiry into pop culture texts with an interest in supporting students’ understanding of pop culture as embedded in systems of power? (2) Is the purpose of such curriculum and pedagogy to change the minds of students who have come to particular conclusions about the pop culture with which they agree? (3) If pop culture is not simply to be used to draw students into academic literacies, how is it to be used instead

In order to answer these questions, we must theorize how the teacher, the student, and the pop culture texts are positioned in relation to each other. And, in order to theorize that positioning, we must learn what students notice in the pop culture with which they engage, what they think and how they feel about it, what feels relevant to them, and what other people, institutions, and resources they draw from to make sense of it. By discussing particular pop culture texts in depth—and, specifically, by eliciting adolescent girls’ views of what girlhood and femininity mean within and across those texts—we come to understand what they notice, think, and feel about them. By inviting them to narrate their personal experiences, as they relate to the meaning they have made of these texts, we come to understand what is most relevant to them personally and how their

understandings of themselves and their worlds shift, sharpen, and blur as they engage with pop culture in their daily lives. The purpose of this study, then, is to produce qualitative data that are rich enough to help educators theorize how the teacher, student, and pop culture texts might be positioned in pop culture curriculum. Doing so requires exploring how students actually interact with and make sense of pop culture and how they take up the gendered identities made available to them in this process.

### III – METHODOLOGY

#### **Overview of Research Design**

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- How do adolescent Black and Latina girls attending an urban middle school read and take up the femininities made available to them in pop culture texts?
  - In discussion, what semiotic resources, experiences, and knowledge do they draw on to read the meanings of femininity in these texts?
  - How do they circulate discourses of gender in their discussion of the meanings of femininity in these texts?
  - When they narrate moments of everyday experience, how do the substance and the acts of narration position them in relation to the femininities under discussion?

To address these questions, I conducted research in two phases, leaning on two major methods of qualitative research: discussion groups and narrative elicitation interviews.

Roughly speaking, the first phase of research produced data meant to address the first two research sub-questions, and the second phase meant to address the third sub-question.

Data from both phases of research, once processed, contributed to my understanding of the issues at stake when we seek to design curriculum meant to support young people in making sense of themselves as gendered subjects through their engagement with pop culture.

Primary data sources for this study included group discussions of participant-selected pop culture texts, researcher analysis of same texts, and participant narratives of personal experience. The methods, described in greater detail below, followed from a poststructural feminist theoretical framework. Rather than *collecting* data as if it preexisted in the world, poststructural researchers generate or co-construct data with their research participants. According to Youdell (2004), poststructural research “offers a valuable methodology for generating nuanced representations that allow for the examination of empirical examples of the circulation and function of discourse” (p. 202). If poststructural research proposes that subjects are the products of discourse, it follows that data must also be thought of as generated through discourse. Rather than a “true reflection of what really happened” (p. 203), poststructural data is a representation of the discourses that are circulating in a particular moment. Thus, throughout the research process, I assumed that the data the participants and I produced was emergent, and I strived to recognize and take into account my role in bringing it about.

For a poststructural feminist researcher dealing with narrative data, there is tension between wanting to amplify and honor participants’ voices and also wanting not to treat their narrations as straightforward accounts of true facts, or of some knowable reality of their lives. This tension can be characterized as a tension between “story truth”—the metanarrative of how the storyteller comes to remember and make sense of what happened—and “happening truth”—or the “experiences that almost can seem too powerful to be captured in language” (Schaafsma & Vinz, 2001, p. 74). What matters, then, is how these truths are woven into the fabric of the story and, adding another poststructural layer, how the listener’s (researcher’s) own story truths and happening



truths are also woven in. Later in this chapter, I discuss how I dwelled in and made sense of that tension throughout the research process, noting particularly how the instinct to seek clarity from participants can ultimately serve to conceal the ways in which their subjecthood as girls is discursively produced.

Most of the data produced through this study was language—transcripts of group discussions and individual narrations of experience. Any poststructural analysis of language begins with the assumption that our attempts to mean through language always undermine themselves. As I illustrate in detail later in this chapter, I draw on Derrida's (1967/1997) notion of *undecidability* to shape my analysis of language. Derrida calls us to witness the deconstruction of text—the way that the binaries through which language means something are corrupted from within. While he makes it a point to say that deconstruction is not something that is *done* to language, the sort of witnessing he describes still requires us to seek out certain kinds of tensions and contradictions and to resist the urge to repair and polish meaning, allowing it to fall apart in the end.

In the first phase of research, I facilitated discussion groups with five adolescent Black and Latina girls who attend the same school. These groups were similar to focus groups, in that they generated data by fostering talk about a designated topic, allowing individual participants to articulate distinctive points of view in collaboration with each other (Bogden & Biklen, 2007, p. 109). I did not facilitate these groups as traditional focus groups have been facilitated, however. This group of participants was smaller, and the same group of participants met seven times over the course of two months (rather than a different set of participants for each group). In these ways, the discussion groups were a bit like book clubs or literature circles (e.g., Daniels, 2002). As in literature circles,

participants chose their own reading material (in this case, a pop culture text rather than a more traditional print text), we met at regular intervals to discuss this material, and participants, for the most part, directed the conversation. My role in facilitating these groups was to direct participants' attention to what the texts we read together say about being a girl—both in terms of categories of meaning and in the multimodal resources they are drawing on to make meaning.

In the second phase of research, I conducted one-on-one narrative elicitation interviews, the purpose of which was to create the opportunity and impetus for participants to narrate their personal experiences in relation to these same notions of femininity. While most interviews used in qualitative research elicit narratives to some extent, this particular approach to interviewing is meant to provide the *space for telling* sustained narratives (Shaafsma & Vinz, 2011, p. 21). Narrative elicitation interviews are not driven by a set of discrete open and closed questions; rather, the interviews more closely follow the rules of everyday conversation, with extended turns given to the participant narrating her experience (Reissman, 2008). One distinctive feature of these interviews was that they built on the discussions that had taken place in the group setting. I began our interviews by bringing to mind the topics and issues we discussed in the group setting and giving the girls time to jot down examples from their lives that related to those topics and issues.

### **Trustworthiness**

The concepts of validity and reliability, the hallmarks of sound quantitative studies, do not have the same meaning for qualitative studies—and certainly not for

poststructural studies. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that we have to identify alternative concepts for qualitative research, concepts that reflect the theoretical assumptions of qualitative work. They suggest “trustworthiness” as the criterion for sound qualitative research. The guiding question underlying the notion of trustworthiness is “How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences that the research findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to?” (p. 290). Of course, it’s difficult to imagine any researcher who would not want their findings to be worth paying attention to, so I use Lather’s (2000) poststructural reframings of validity—including *ironic*, *paralogical*, and what I call *embodied validity*—to guide my research decisions. Briefly, this will mean using and casting doubt on language simultaneously, learning to tolerate the incommensurable, and reflexively recognizing my own positioning in the process. Throughout the in-depth description of the research design below, I describe how I used these poststructural reframings of validity throughout the research process.

### **Research Site and Participants**

I conducted this research at Horizon Middle School, a public charter school in New York City, leveraging my existing relationship with the school to create a convenience sample of seventh-grade girls and to find the time and space to conduct the research (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 71). At this school, 97% of students are Black, African American, or Latinx, 90% receive free or reduced-price lunch, and 11% are English Language Learners. The school is part of a regional and national network of schools. Like all others in the network, Horizon is free and open-enrollment and uses a lottery system to select students when there are more applicants than space available.

Currently, I serve as the Director of Literacy for the regional network of schools of which Horizon is a part. I have worked within the national network for thirteen years, and what follows is my own personal account of the school's history and values. Horizon's history as one school in a national network of charter schools is distinctive. Horizon opened in 2005; at the time, there were 23 schools in the national network, and, today, there are over 200. When Horizon opened, the national network prioritized what it called the "power to lead." Practically speaking, this meant that school leaders were selected, developed, and supported in opening schools by the national network, but, otherwise, they were left to design the school—its curriculum, professional development, coaching structures, and so forth—on their own. This model stands in contrast to the more common replication model among other charter management organizations. Horizon distinguished itself early both as the school with the highest norm-referenced standardized test results in the national network and as a school with what we might call the most *progressive* approach to schooling. Specifically, the curriculum and instruction at Horizon prioritized student choice and independence and, accordingly, it was one of the first schools in the national network to adopt a reading and writing workshop model of literacy instruction. In this model, students spend a majority of their class time reading texts of their own choosing, rather than a shared text, and learn strategies that support their reading and writing primarily in small groups and one-on-one conferences with teachers. In 2015, ten years after its founding, the regional network of which Horizon is a part began to move toward a uniform curriculum across its eleven schools. The school leadership team at Horizon reluctantly accepted this shift and now teaches a reading curriculum that is in line with the mandates of the Common Core—namely, one that prioritizes close readings

of a small set of common texts. However, as the regional network invested in a common curriculum, Horizon continued to invest time and effort in its culture of independent and choice reading [so much so, in fact, that the Dean of English Language Arts is currently at work on a book about creating a culture of independent reading at the middle school level. The former Dean of English Language Arts also published a book about independent reading and the reading workshop model (Witter, 2012).] Currently, the Common Core-aligned curriculum runs alongside a robust independent reading program.

In my capacity as Director, I am responsible for setting the regional vision for literacy instruction, managing the reading and writing curricula, and coaching and providing professional development to deans and teachers across the eleven schools in the regional network. Horizon poses a number of challenges to me and to others in similar regional leadership positions, and I pose a number of challenges to it. Three years on, leaders and teachers continue to reject the common curriculum, and they seem to see me as a threat to their status as a progressive school that values independence and choice—not only the independence and choice of students but also the independence and choice of teachers and leaders. In addition to distinguishing itself as a school with strong standardized test results and a school with a progressive approach to schooling, Horizon has distinguished itself among schools in the regional network as the one with the greatest proportion of White teachers (nearly a third, according to its current principal). From my perspective, Horizon is perpetually at a crossroads, trying to reconcile its progressive bona fides with the demands of the present curricular mandates, its history as a “successful” charter school with its reputation as a school with a relatively high percentage of White teachers.

As a result of my work in their school, the research participants recognized me, but I hadn't acted as an authority figure. Regardless, inevitably I played the part of a teacher in this work, whether or not I intended to. I am a White woman, like some of their teachers, and as a former charter school teacher, I dress, move, and speak much like their teachers do. I cannot simply wipe away these remnants of my time spent as a teacher in schools. In this research space, I was like a teacher in these ways, and I was also a person who gave the girls access to "inappropriate" content. The power imbalances that result from my race, age, and positioning as a teacher who gives access are not ones I could effectively mitigate. Part of the work of exploring the potential of pop culture curriculum was observing how these power imbalances played out, how our positioning and performances as teacher and students shaped the meanings and practices made possible within the quasi-academic space we created. As described above, the literacy curriculum at this school reflects the mandates of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) described in Chapter I. While students do have significant "choice reading" time during which they choose books to read independently from classroom libraries, they receive explicit instruction on a small set of texts—approximately five anchor texts and 15-20 supplementary texts at each grade level. In addition, following the CCSS, they engage in one or two "close readings" of short passages of text a week. The purpose of a close reading lesson, as described to teachers in the lesson plans, is to "unpack what is most essential within the text." This approach to text is one this study rejects and that David Coleman, principal author of the CCSS, advocates. The problem described in Chapter I, wherein American schools are positioned to account less and less for students' more and more active engagements with pop culture, is very much relevant in this setting.

## **Data Sources**

Throughout the study, I selected, organized, evaluated, and represented knowledge in particular ways. Following a poststructural feminist theoretical framework, I attempted to think reflexively about the purposes of the methods and data sources I chose and to attend to how my own positionings and subjectivities are interacting with these choices (Scheurich, 1997/2001).

## **Discussion Groups**

I facilitated seven discussion groups organized around pop culture texts the participants selected. The groups convened about once a week for two months. I wanted the groups to meet over a span of time in the participants' lives sufficient for noticing and reflecting on how the ideas we discussed came up in their everyday experience. But I also wanted to limit the span of time so the discussions felt lively and fresh (assuming that their interest would wane over time, particularly if the discussions were facilitated similarly and assuming that knowing the beginning and end point to the work makes it feel more momentous). Each group lasted between 40 and 60 minutes, enough time for us to read the selected text together and discuss.

This method of generating data most resembles focus group interviews, but it is different in two important ways: I convened the same group of participants for each discussion, and I didn't design a "questioning route" or "interview guide" (Krueger & Casey, 2009) in order to facilitate the discussions. Such guides assume that a research design can serve as a roadmap, projecting a linear journey from beginning to the end. In contrast, following the poststructural theoretical framework, my intent was to create,

instead, an inquiry space, “multidimensional with many potential pathways in motion at the same time, one folding into others, and sometimes simultaneously” (Schaafsma & Vinz, 2010, p. 60). After we viewed texts together, I opened the discussion by asking, “What is [this video or this show] saying about being a girl or woman?” When the discussions tapered off or digressed, I either asked if they thought the portrayal of women was positive, negative, or both or prompted them with other topics we hadn’t discussed—belongings, relationships, feelings, and so forth. According to Krueger and Casey (2009), focus groups are comprised of people who possess certain characteristics who provide qualitative data in a focused discussion to help understand the topic of interest. These features of focus groups were present in the discussion groups I facilitated. Our group was comprised of adolescent girls who discussed chosen pop culture texts in order to help me understand how adolescent Black and Latina girls read the femininities made available in those texts.

Prior to gathering for discussion groups, I met twice with the participants both to generate a list of some possible texts we can read and discuss together and to build rapport and to create a “permissive and nonjudgmental” environment for discussion—one that allowed for diverse perspectives and self-disclosure (Krueger & Casey, 2009, p. 5). After the initial meetings, each discussion was centered on one of the texts selected by the participants, as in a literature circle. I drew on data generated by the discussion groups to address the first sub-question: *How do adolescent girls read the femininities made available in pop culture texts?* Unlike one-on-one interviews, discussion groups give participants time to articulate their responses, rather than putting them on the spot. They also allow for ideas to surface in discussion with others, which reflects the way



individuals' actually make sense of the world—not in a vacuum, but within social networks of other people (p. 114). The participants' discussions addressed such issues as appearance, belongings, relationships, and desires or goals. I used these topics as categories to prompt participants to explore the question more fully if the discussion lagged or if one of these topics had not yet come up organically. These *a priori* categories were not used deductively in data analysis. Rather, they were used as a tool to generate additional conversation during the focus groups (Morgan, 1997, p. 48) and, later, as a way of indexing transcripts.

As I discussed in Chapter I, the first sub-question entails two kinds of answers. When we ask ourselves *how* adolescent girls read pop culture texts, we can mean both what they think the text says and how they actually go about making that meaning—what modes they use and what resources they draw on to develop interpretations. I assume, based on the exploratory study and my experience as a teacher, that eliciting discussion of what the text says is easier than eliciting discussion that suggests how meaning was made. Therefore, while I wanted my role as a facilitator of these groups to be as minimal as possible, I prompted participants to surface the ways they were reading these texts multimodally, when necessary. In doing so, I often “taught,” or at least shaped the space, more than I wanted to. Implicit in a prompt made by an adult in a school setting is the notion that *this is what one should do*. In this case, *one should always think about [mode, topic] when one reads a pop culture text*. The problem with sending this tacitly instructive message is that participants might grasp for the kinds of responses they think I want and, in doing so, conceal their actual processes for making meaning. I began with the assumption that, whether it is done consciously or not, we all already read pop culture

texts multimodally. My goal was to elicit those readings, give them impetus and space in the discussion group.

In addition to generating data that helped me address the first sub-question, an ancillary purpose of these discussion groups was to build participants' comfort with me and with the issues under discussion. Listening to each other and articulating and clarifying their own responses to the texts helped participants be more generative as they narrated relevant personal experiences in the narrative elicitation interviews. The question of whether or not—or the extent to which—such comfort can be built in a school space is crucial to the goal of creating pop culture curriculum. If we assume that greater comfort will yield more and more diverse meanings and practices, then we must look at the nature (are discussions hewing to “school-appropriate” themes?) and depth (what are participants willing to disclose about themselves?) of what participants share in this artificial research space.

### **Narrative Elicitation Interviews**

After our discussion groups were complete, I interviewed each participant to elicit narratives of their experiences as girls. Interviews allow the researcher to understand the meanings that everyday activities hold for people (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 101) and, more broadly, how people construct their realities and worldviews. Narrative elicitation interviews, in particular, create a *space for telling* sustained narratives. I drew on data generated by unstructured one-on-one narrative elicitation interviews to address the third sub-question: *When girls narrate moments of everyday experience, how do the substance and the acts of narration position them in relation to the femininities under discussion?* The purpose of the interviews was to elicit personal narratives of how the

ideas discussed in the group have been understood and taken up in the participants' everyday experience.

Narrative elicitation interviews stand in contrast to more traditional interviews, which, governed by norms of stimulus/response, can steer the participant toward meanings that are not their own and can, implicitly or explicitly, cut responses short in the interest of completing the interview protocol (Riessman, 2008, p. 23). In narrative interviewing, "The model of a 'facilitating' interviewer who asks questions, and a vessel-like 'respondent' who gives answers, is replaced by two active *participants* who jointly construct narrative and meaning" (p. 23). In these interview spaces, stories can shift, pause when additional background or context is needed, pick up again, taper off as other stories emerge. Allowing this to happen means "following interviewees down their trails" (p. 24). Practically speaking, this means finding language that invites narrative and accommodates the widest possible range of meanings. For example, narrative interviewers invite participants to *tell me what happened*. When participants describe their experiences in general terms, a narrative interviewer might ask, *can you remember a time when...?* Rather than making assumptions about how the participant is positioning herself in relation to her story, how she is thinking or feeling about it, narrative interviewers use general language to probe, asking *why does that moment stand out to you?* This sort of question stands in contrast to questions like *why was that moment important to you?* or *why does that moment make you feel that way?*

I interviewed each participant in an empty classroom or office space at the school. As we began, I told them that I was interested to know more about how they thought about the ideas and issues we discussed in Group and how those ideas applied to their

own personal lives and experiences. Then, by way of reminding them of what we discussed, I listed some of the general topics we discussed: how women look, how women and men are in relationships, how women and men experience and express emotion. I gave them some time, if they wanted it, to jot down some connections between these ideas and their personal experiences. When they were ready, I told them that they could start wherever they wanted and that I would probably ask them follow-up questions meant to help them put their finger on particular examples and moments from their lives.

I do not assume that the language participants used or the stories they told to be transparent windows onto an essential, knowable reality of their experiences. Rather, I examined how, *through* their telling, participants made sense of their experiences and themselves (Reissman, 2008, p. 8) and how, *in* their telling, they performed gender. One of the major advantages of eliciting narratives rather than simply asking questions for poststructural research is that narratives accommodate a greater range of contradiction and tension. This is, first, because narratives unfold over time and can therefore capture shifting feelings and responses to the world. Second, narratives can capture and integrate intersecting flows of influence and contextual factors in a way that individual questions cannot. Individual questions often isolate particular influences and factors, and so the data generated through them can pull particular factors out of their context, giving them disproportionate weight, or capture only slices of a fuller picture of experience.

Following Clandinin and Connelly (1994), I examined how the stories moved inward toward “feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, moral dispositions” (p. 417), outward toward the existential conditions of the environment or what could be thought of as *reality*, and forward and backward in time. Most important is the dynamic way that “narrative

constitutes past experience at the same time as it provides ways for individuals to make sense of the past” (Reissman, 2008, p. 8). The interplay between past and present, between experience and memory, inheres in narrative; it is not a flaw in the system. This interplay means that there will always be gaps, inventions, cross purposes, and contradictions to find in narrative.

### **Data Analysis**

In this section, I describe my methods of data analysis, foregrounding the poststructural idea that data is a representation that can never completely capture what happened. Rather than analyzing to seek the “truth” of events, I asked how the discourses circulating in the moment constitute the participants as girls (Youdell, 2004). My analysis and interpretation was an iterative process designed to support continuous reflection on the factors that shape my decisions and ways of knowing as I co-construct and represent data (Bogden & Biklen, 2007). Ultimately, I present my data in a way that reflects the two distinct phases of research. In the first phase, I analyzed the discussion group data with a focus on the way the interaction between participants produces particular readings of femininity and on the way those readings, and the discussions around them, are themselves products of discourse. I looked to connect particular moments of interaction with broader discourses related to the maintenance of gender categories. In the second phase of research, I analyzed the interview data, focusing on each participant as an individual with a distinctive arc of engagement with pop culture. To this end, in addition to reading each participant’s interview transcripts, I also reached back into the discussion group data and took up each participant’s contributions to those discussions, looking for

threads that connected their readings (made visible in the discussion groups) and their tellings (brought about in the narrative elicitation interviews), as well as disconnections and breaks in those threads. In both phases, I began by reading my own multimodal representations of data and identifying critical moments. This process is described and illustrated below. A separate chapter illustrates one deconstruction of the data, based on Derrida's (1967/1997) notion of *undecidability*. For this method of analysis, I looked across all of the data—the discussion groups and the interviews—to identify the binary oppositions at work in their attempts to make sense of gender.

### **Data Management<sup>1</sup>**

Because the ways we represent and organize data make possible and impossible particular analyses of the data, I begin by detailing what I did to manage the data and how this approach facilitated analyses that address my research questions. The two major categories of data to be managed are discussion groups and narrative elicitation interviews. The data related to the discussion groups included the texts selected for discussion, my initial reading of those texts, and, most importantly, the group discussions of those texts. The data related to the narrative elicitation interviews were the participants' narrations of experience. My overall approach to managing this data began with recognizing and embracing the constructed nature of any representation of what happened in particular moments of research (Youdell, 2004). Recognizing this meant

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<sup>1</sup>The emphasis in this section is on how I will process and represent data and how I will organize it in flexible ways that will allow me to see both coherences and incoherences. The logistics of data management reflect ethical commitments in qualitative research, and they are as follows: (1) All names mentioned will be pseudonyms, (2) all videos and images gathered through the research process will be stored in a password-protected Google drive folder, (3) the participants' parents or legal guardians will sign consent forms and continuous assent will be sought from the children during the study (Luttrell, 2010), and (4) videos and images that include the children's faces or voices will not be included in any public display or presentation with the participants' and their parents'/legal guardians' consent prior to the display.

being reflexive about the decisions I made about how to organize and mobilize the data during generation and analysis. Embracing this meant taking advantage of technology that facilitates the creation of flexible, hyperlinked, multimodal texts—texts that, following my theoretical commitments, both created and undermined coherence.

Both the discussion groups and the narrative elicitation interviews were video recorded and transcribed. Transcripts included links to the texts under discussion (for example, to music videos on YouTube or episodes of television shows). In these transcripts, I included my own initial responses to the texts sectioned off in insets. In the course of analysis, sections of the transcripts were temporarily indexed based on categories used during discussion: appearance, feelings, relationships, capacities, and goals. This allowed me to quickly bring together relevant data within those categories, when it seemed useful in the course of analysis. I used tools such as marginal comments, color coding, and linked documents to allow me to track entire arcs of engagement and look across time for coherences and incoherences.

These multimodal transcripts reflect the features of qualitative data and the purposes of poststructural research, to generate nuanced representation of empirical examples. They allowed for a great degree of juxtaposition and of mobility of data. If, following poststructuralism, we see research participants not as unitary subjects but as always becoming, “tenuously constituted in time” (Butler, 1988, p. 519) through discourses that are constantly circulating, then representations of data need to be similarly fluid and mobile.

### **Analysis of Discussion Group Data**

I read the discussion group data first looking for critical moments in the discussions. I examined these moments in the context in which they occurred. Specifically, I looked for coalescences and disjunctures in the discussions, which I took to be “performative struggles over meaning” (Riessman, 2008, p. 106). As I use these terms, *coalescence* and *disjunctures* are rooted in the idea that every utterance in an interaction “carries the traces of other utterances, past and present” (p. 107). So these terms do not simply refer to explicit agreement and disagreement among participants. Coalescences can include moments when similar feelings, experiences, and meanings are evoked—of when they evoke one another. Disjunctures can include moments of disagreement, as well as breaks from what was previously articulated and moments of undecidability. I also read the discussions against my own initial reflections, identifying similar coalescences and disjunctures.

Once I identified these moments, I analyzed them discursively, seeking to address how participants read the femininities made available to them in pop culture texts. Examining a particular moment of discussion in context, I asked myself, what has made this coalescence or disjuncture in meaning possible? I examined the text(s) under discussion, for example, considering what images or narratives of femininity the text makes available. But more importantly, I studied the discussion of the text, noticing the broader discourses related to the maintenance of gender categories that seemed to be circulating in that moment (discourses related to respectability, beauty, gender roles, for example) and the ways participants tapped into those discourses explicitly or implicitly in order to read the text and its constructions of femininity. Finally, I considered how the



participants were themselves constituted as girls through their performative participation in the discussion. Throughout these stages of analysis, I also considered the extent to which the notions of femininity made available in the texts and made sense of through the discussion are intersected with race.

I also analyzed each of these moments in terms of the multimodal literacy processes and practices through which the participants were reading the available femininities. First, I used Kress's (1993) notion of *modal affordances*, or the potentialities of expression through particular modes. I noted the kinds of meanings participants made through particular modes—the juxtaposition that imagery affords, the sense of chronology that language affords, the sense of the body that dress and dance afford, to name a few. In my analysis, I looked for the kinds of meanings that were made through particular modes, not just in a single instance of reading, but across many readings of many texts. Another way multimodality enhanced my analysis is through a consideration of how the multimodality of pop culture texts enable and constrain meaning making (Mahiri, 2001, p. 382). In this vein, I also analyzed data to see how participants “circumvent limits on learning and making meaning” (p. 382)—or how the multimodal resources on which they drew allowed them to make meanings that exceed what we can say is intended by the producers of the text or what I would hope that they would see. Finally, multimodality enhanced my analysis of their readings by allowing me to see how they come to understand texts nonlinearly and cross-curricularly (Alvermann, 2008) and also with humor and playfulness (Vasudevan, 2010).

### **Analysis of Narrative Elicitation Interview Data**

In the second phase of data analysis, I analyzed the transcripts of the narrative elicitation interviews. My approach to this phase of analysis differed from the first in that I treated each girl's narration separately. The third sub-question—*when girls narrate moments of everyday experience, how do the substance and the acts of narration position them in relation to the femininities under discussion?*—calls for a narrative analysis first. The assumption beneath this question is that we make sense of ourselves and our worlds through storytelling, and so I analyzed the participants' narrations as separate stories. Shaafsma and Vinz (2011) write,

If postmodernists destabilize assumptions about the coherence of narrative, poststructuralists identify and reveal the complex ways in which forms, discrepancies, and pluralities in narrative lead to more nuanced understandings of the mutability of texts and discourses. (p. 24)

Following this purpose and its theoretical undercurrents, I did not look at the participants' narrations as transparent windows onto their experiences; rather, I treated them as discursively produced and performed. I analyzed both the act of narration and the substance of the narration—or the referred-to moment in which the action of the story took place. To do this, I read the narrative data looking for what Shaafsma and Vinz call *salience*, *incompleteness*, and *emphasis*. To find salience in the data, researchers ask, “What stays with you? What images, bits of dialogue, moments in the narrative linger and endure?” (p. 78). To find incompleteness, researchers consider what the narrator glossed over, what is implied but not said outright, and what elicits further curiosity. Finally, researchers pay attention to emphasis, to the “events, dialogue, memories [that] are intensified through repetition, vivid imagery, and dialogue” (p. 79). My search for incompleteness and emphasis, in particular, was enhanced by reaching back into the

discussion group data to identify the ideas that emerged in each participant's contributions to those discussions. What kinds of readings of femininity did she narrate, illustrate vividly, or repeat through both phases of research? Which salient readings from the discussion groups were referred to, echoed, implied, contradicted, or excluded in the narrations?

After identifying moments of salience, incompleteness, and emphasis, I analyzed them discursively, asking many of the same questions I asked in the analysis of the discussion group data. What are the discourses that maintain gender categories that seem to be circulating in the participant's narration? How is she tapping into these discourses explicitly or implicitly? How is she, through the act of narration, constituted as girl? In what ways are the notions of femininity available in her narrations intersected with race and/or ethnicity?

Additionally, in these data, I looked for moments of discursive agency—either in the act or in the substance of the narrations. According to Butler (1997), discursive agency is possible “when a speech act without prior authorization nevertheless assumes authorization and in the course of its performance may anticipate and instate altered contexts for its future reception” (p. 160). Through this process, groups who have been excluded from certain discourses can be included, and terms that were once injurious can be reappropriated as affirmative terms. According to Taylor (2011), who sought empirical evidence of discursive agency in her study of student researchers, “Failures to repeat gendered norms not only provide evidence of the subject's discursive agency, they also contribute to the ‘deconstruction of identity [and] establish as political the very terms through which identity is articulated’ (Butler 1990, 148)” (p. 3). I included in my analysis

a search for “failures to repeat gendered norms” but also actively worked to expand and complicate my search by considering intersectional identities (i.e., how girls are constituted as not only gendered but also raced and classed) and by recognizing the gaps and inconsistencies in, for example, what I perceive as “gendered norms” and what participants perceive as “gendered norms.” In other words, rather than evaluating storytelling moments in relation to discursive agency (designating myself as the one who decides what counts as discursive agency), my purpose was to explore what can be meant by *discursive agency* in the contexts of this study and the contexts of the participants’ everyday lives.

### **Witnessing Deconstruction**

A major purpose of this study is to witness the deconstruction of notions of femininity. Derrida (1967/1997) insists that deconstruction is not something one *does* to text but something one witnesses—an inevitability of language and sign systems. While I did, of course, do a great deal to the data, I also strived to let the data deconstruct, to watch how notions of femininity fell apart as the girls and I tried to hold them together. In order to witness this deconstruction, I examined the binary oppositions that seemed to be at work in the girls’ talk about femininities in pop culture and in their narrations of personal experience. I took data that I had previously analyzed, isolated binary oppositions that seemed salient, and showed how those binary oppositions fail. To fail, the two sides of the opposition are shown to rely on each other, to invoke each other, or to mean the same thing.

### Poststructural Validity and the Aporia of Interpretation

Lather (2006) writes about four aporias, or impasses, in qualitative research. Identifying these aporias helps researchers to “work against technical thought and method and toward another way that keeps in play the very heterogeneity that is, perhaps, the central resource for getting through the stuck places of contemporary educational research” (p. 48). The *aporia of interpretation* is particularly relevant to poststructural analysis of qualitative data. Lather encourages researchers to neither take what participants say at face value nor override what they say. She writes,

The task is to listen for the sense people make of their lives in order to attend to how thinking gets organized into patterns, how discourses construct and constitute with a sensitivity to issues of appropriation that does not revert to romantic ‘too easy’ ideas about ‘authenticity’ in negotiating the tensions between both honoring the ‘voices’ of research participants and the demand for interpretive work on the part of the inquirer. (p. 48)

In this description, Lather captures a difficulty that feels real and relevant to this study. An aporia is not necessarily something that a researcher “overcomes,” but it is something we must work through. It is something that calls us to develop “another way.” Lather points to the goal of “keep[ing] in play the very heterogeneity that is...the central resource for getting through the stuck places” (p. 48). For this study, keeping heterogeneity in play meant giving space to multiple interpretations—both mine and the participants’. It also meant reflexively tracking the decisions I made in co-constructing the data, representing the data, and analyzing the data, recognizing that analysis is actually occurring throughout these processes.

Lather (2007) reframes validity in a theoretical sense, rather than seeing it a technical problem for poststructural researchers to solve. According to Lather, member

checks, peer debriefing, triangulation, and catalytic validity, all postpositivist attempts to solve the validity problem, are discordant with poststructural epistemologies. Like Walkerdine (1997), I sought not to “reduce difference and agree meaning but rather actually make use of the differences between interpretations to tell a more complex story” (p. 70). Lather reframes validity in four ways, three of which I took up in my data analysis. First, she reframes validity as “ironic validity,” a reframing that calls for a reflexive exploration of how we represent: “The text is resituated as a representation of ‘its failure to represent what it points toward but can never reach’ (Hayles, 1990, p. 261)” (Chapter 6, para. 14). I worked to establish this sort of validity by juxtaposing analytic strategies, following the theoretical framework, as I tried to show above. By drawing on a theory of multimodality, on poststructural feminism and discursive analytics, and intersectional feminism, I used words to point to some phenomenon outside of language (or, at least, outside this text itself). But by applying Derrida’s notion of undecidability to the same data, I attempted to “cast doubt” on language.

Lather’s (2007) second framing is what she calls *paralogical validity*, which “refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable” via “the constant search for new ideas and concepts that introduces dissensus into consensus” (Fritzman, 1990, pp. 371-2 as cited in Lather, 2007, Chapter 6, para. 18). Establishing paralogical validity requires us to search for instabilities in the data and foreground the multiplicity of discourses circulated at any given moment. Lather illustrates how reclaiming member checks—a method that, originally, relied on the assumption that there is a correct and true understanding of the data—can establish ironic validity. When member checks are used to simply confirm the researcher’s interpretations

of the data, they function to replace a less true analysis with a truer analysis. At two points in my work, I brought up ideas from previous discussions so the participants could comment on, elaborate, and/or contest those ideas. I didn't conceptualize this method as a way of confirming or disconfirming the previous idea. Rather, I took these subsequent discussions as opportunities for additional data and read their talk with and against their previous talk on those ideas.

Lather's (2007) final reframing of validity is what I will call *embodied validity*. An embodied validity relies on an epistemology of positionality rather than one of universal claims. It requires "explicit incompleteness, tentativeness, the creation of space for others to enter, the joining of partial voices. Authority then comes from engagement and self-reflexivity, not distanced 'objectivity'" (Chapter 6, para. 30). An analysis of data with embodied validity is one that is explicit about the situatedness, partiality, and position from which the data is analyzed. The resulting text is what Lather calls a "questioning text," one that is both bounded and unbounded, closed and opened to other voices and positionings. As in the other reframings of validity, it "constructs authority via practices of engagement and self-reflexivity," (Chapter 6, "Voluptuous Validity" checklist)—in this case, self-reflexivity about the relevance of the researcher's positioning.

### **Researcher Role**

In order to identify possible difficulties in my roles as researcher and thereby define the parameters of my roles, I began this work by returning to the difficulties and mistakes I made during the exploratory study. In the exploratory study, I examined the

ways four adolescent girls made sense of notions of girlhood in pop culture texts they enjoyed. I convened this group three times, each time focusing on a different text: an episode of a television show and two music videos. Then, I conducted one-on-one interviews with each of the girls to discuss the relevance of those notions of girlhood in their own lives. The findings from this study highlighted circular and contradictory ways adolescent girls understand and take up femininity in their everyday interactions with pop culture texts and in their lives. During the study, I experienced two major difficulties that shape how I conceptualize my role as researcher. The girls who participated in the study were students at a high-performing charter school that emphasizes and enforces very specific norms of behavior and academic engagement. In this school, the asymmetry of power between teacher and student is pronounced in large part due to the consistent enforcement of these norms. As a result, girls were accustomed to interacting with adults and completing tasks in particular ways.

First, the girls were cautious to interact with me as someone other than an authority figure. In one memorable moment during a discussion group, one of the girls described a character in the television show as a “nasty ho,” at which point the discussion stopped suddenly as the other three girls turned to watch my reaction. I took advantage of the researcher “work” I was doing in that moment—typing up notes, if memory serves—to deflect their attention from my reaction back to their discussion. In other words, I did not react, and, after a few moments, their discussion picked up again. This moment called me to wonder how much else they wanted to say, or would have said, if I were not present in the group and, further, how I can build rapport with research participants so that they feel comfortable expressing all that they want to express.



In a separate instance, I gave the girls notebooks to keep track of moments in their everyday lives when the ideas we discussed in the focus group became relevant to them. The purpose of this work was to prepare students for the one-on-one interviews during which I asked for them to describe such moments to me. The girls worried about how they should format the entries in their notebook—the kind of heading they should use for each entry, how long each entry should be, and so forth. While I tried to assure them that they should use them in any way that helps them keep track of what they were noticing in their lives, they continued to treat any work in these notebooks as an assignment. When I interviewed them one-on-one, two girls read aloud an entry from their notebook. These entries were intentionally structured mini-essays on femininity and pop culture; they included thesis statements, clearly articulated reasons, and evidence from their personal experience. By producing such clear and coherent writing, they glossed over the tensions and contradictions of their experiences—tensions and contradictions that they had previously discussed during the focus groups. In this moment, again, I understood the difficulty of establishing myself as someone other than a teacher and anything I asked them to do as something other than a school assignment.

Broadly speaking, in this study, my researcher roles were to invite engagement with the texts, to invite storytelling about personal experiences, and to interpret their responses and experiences in relation to discourses of femininity. Additionally, I had a responsibility to track the decisions I made through the research process and reflect on how those decisions shape the data. There were three areas of activity in which I had to strategically define my role: how I related to the research participants and position myself

among them; how I co-constructed data with them; and how I remembered and represented the stories they told.

The two incidents described above are a reminder of how important it is to position myself intentionally, not as an authority figure, or an implement of their school, but as a woman who is, as they are, engaged in pop culture and in a state of becoming. During our first two meetings, I spent time with the participants choosing the texts we read together, learning about them, and interacting with them in ways that de-established my authority. While I could not do this totally, I focused my energies on *not* doing some of the things that are instinctive to me as a teacher: I did not correct their accounts of events or texts, override their choices, or enforce school rules and policies.

The participants' responses to the texts, their group discussions, and the narratives they told do not preexist in the world, and I did not simply discover them. Clearly, I am the one who created the opportunity and impetus for these data to exist. The participants and I together brought them into being. Yet the purpose of this study was not to explore or make visible my own engagements with pop culture or my own ways of making sense of myself as a woman through these engagements. The purpose is to make visible what *adolescent girls* are thinking, saying, and doing. Therefore, in defining my role as a co-creator of data, I needed to address several key questions: how do I draw out all there is to draw out, how do I encourage a high enough volume of discussion to meaningfully analyze, without steering the discussion on a whim? How do I elicit narrations of personal experience that meaningfully speak to the research question without prescribing the kinds of narratives that are possible, either in content or form?

My role in facilitating group discussions was to gather the participants, to honor their choices, to share the text to discuss, to ask questions as I would as part of everyday conversation (Reissman, 2008), and to prompt further discussion, when necessary. What was most important is that I trace both my premeditated and extemporaneous decisions so that the part I played in co-constructing the data is known to the reader. Similarly, my role in eliciting narratives was not to teach students how to construct a narrative—in terms of storytelling strategies, content, or form. Instead it was to provide the opportunity and impetus to tell stories. To do this, we needed to co-construct enough data beforehand—to do a high enough volume of the work of reflecting, sharing, talking, showing—that this task felt accessible to participants without instruction.

The issue at the center of my role as co-constructor of data was the extent to which I narrowed or broadened what is made possible in the data. When I interjected in a discussion group, when I said or did anything, there was always the possibility that I narrowed the kind of data that might be produced in that moment. According to Schaafsma and Vinz (2011), “The key to the process...is shaping the instrument—the researcher—to become a traveler, a medium for questioning, stories, possibilities, and interpretations. This requires *tuning-the-self* as researcher to particular dispositions and ways of working that keep a degree of flexibility” (p. 69). As a poststructural researcher, I—myself discursively produced and riddled with the resultant problems of observation, memory, and understanding—am written into the fabric of the data. An important responsibility of my role as co-constructor of data, then, is to be ever more reflexive in my approach—to “reflect on the values, beliefs, persons, and certainly the ideologies that influence the way a researcher engages in the research” (p. 73).

The final element of my researcher role deals with how I remember and represent participants' stories in my writing. My aim was not to transparently "give voice" to girls (Lather, 2000) as they made sense of themselves through these engagements with pop culture. My aim was also not to give a shape of my own design to their stories in my way of representing them. However, following my theoretical framework, it is impossible to *get out of the way* of the story in representation, so, as a researcher, I strived to track the choices I made in remembering and representing participants' stories.

### **Limitations**

This study was limited by the small number of participants and the short period of time over which it was conducted. My positionality in relation to the participants also limited the study. While I strived to be reflexive about the decisions I made as a researcher and about the way I shaped what was shared in the spaces I created, my presence enabled and constrained certain ideas in ways that I could not foresee, did not notice, and therefore for which I was not able to account. Moreover, in deciding to use personal storytelling as a way of understanding how ideas about femininity are taken up in the participants' everyday lives, I somewhat arbitrarily elevated narrative as a way of knowing. I could have chosen instead to use participant observation to understand how girls take up the ideas we discuss in their everyday interactions. In eliciting stories, I assumed that how we tell stories about ourselves is just as, or even more, salient than the way we act and speak in the context of our daily lives. This assumption comes with a host of sacrifices, chief among them the up-close look at the girls' everyday lives that participant observation would afford.

Foregoing participant observation also means that I did not get a full picture of how girls' literacy practices are embedded in everyday life and specifically how their readings of femininity shift across spaces and contexts. I assumed that discussion group data would yield more focused data, as the groups, by virtue of their purpose and structure, would constrain the texts and topics under discussion and the kinds of meanings that were aired. Discussion groups also allowed me to ask more direct questions about *how* they are making sense of femininities (in other words, what knowledge, resources, and experiences they were drawing on to do so). However, focused data is distorted data. Participants were selective about what they chose to express and share in the group, and so I did not get the full picture of their existing literacy practices.

Finally, much of the data the participants and I co-constructed was language, even though my interest was in how girls make meaning of pop culture multimodally. The multimodality of pop culture texts was lost to some extent in the data, only recovered through references to the multimodality in language. The power of these semiotic resources was somewhat blunted in a way they would not be through a more robust digital ethnography, for example, or if I invited students to respond multimodally in discussion groups.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Following the poststructural feminist theoretical framework, I studied how adolescent girls read and take up the femininities made available in pop culture texts. I drew on two major qualitative methods—discussion groups and narrative elicitation

interviews—to explore these questions. As a White researcher with ties to the school the participants attend, I unavoidably distorted the research space, implicitly encouraging and discouraging the kinds of meanings and practices that arose in that space. I strived to document and understand how the researcher-participant, teacher-student positionings shaped what I could know about the participants, their literacy practices, and how they come to understand themselves as girls through their engagement with pop culture.

#### IV – DISCUSSION GROUPS

I started work at Horizon Middle School nearly a year before I began this study. Horizon is one in a network of eleven charter schools across the city for which I direct the English Language Arts program. I spend three to four days a month at Horizon, coaching school leaders and teachers and overseeing curriculum implementation. I am a familiar presence to teachers and students alike, but I don't have direct relationships with students. I recruited seventh-grade girls for this study by sending home fliers and meeting with small groups during their lunchtime to explain what the research would entail. I told them that I was interested to know more about how they thought about the movies and television shows they watch, the music they listen to, and what they do online. I described a structure in which we would read, watch, or listen to something they liked as a group and then discuss what it is saying about being a girl or woman. After holding several meetings over two weeks, I assembled a group of seven girls who committed to weekly meetings with me after school on Fridays. By our second meeting, two girls had dropped out because of conflicting after-school commitments.

We held most of our discussions in a small pull-out classroom on Fridays after school over three months. Most Fridays, the girls were coming from the gym where Horizon would hold school-wide events like pep rallies or whimsical contests and tournaments. Our first meeting followed a much-anticipated one-on-one basketball game between the incoming and outgoing principals, for example. I often hung around these events and tried to rally teachers I knew to gather the girls from the crowd. Of the five

girls who formed our group—Audrey, Briana, Danielle, Jasmine, and Kaylee—most of the girls attended most of the meetings. Occasionally, a friend or cousin who was to be picked up from school with the participant. I didn't include their comments in the final discussion transcripts.

The girls chose the television shows, movies, and music videos we watched together. I asked each girl informally before our first meeting what she enjoyed watching, reading, or listening to, and I chose the texts that were common across the group: the television shows *Modern Family*, *Empire*, *Black-ish*, and *Vampire Diaries*; the *Step Up* movies; and songs by the artists A Boogie and Kodak Black. At first, the girls and I interacted in a way that felt, to me, akin to teacher and students. I told them that they could call me *Mia* and that they could express themselves however they wanted to in our meetings, but it took a couple of weeks for them to do so. Particularly in our first meeting, wanting the discussions to be productive, I offered more of my own ideas than I should have, with too much frequency, clarity, and certainty. Over time, the group became more comfortable with its homegrown norms, and I learned to sit back (though I never fully overcame my proclivity to share when something in a text bothered or confused me). Throughout this period, I continued to be a presence in the school—walking the hallways, meeting with their teachers during their off-periods, and observing their classes. Over time, they began to greet me more often when we saw each other, mentioning past meetings or asking about future meetings. I first noticed Briana referring to our meetings as “Group,” asking, for example, “What are we doing for Group this week?” Wanting a simpler way of referring to our time together, I picked up on the name,



and then it came to be more or less the official name of what was regarded as another elective after-school activity in the school community.

Audrey, Briana, Danielle, Jasmine, and Kaylee identify as heterosexual girls of color. Briana and Jasmine identify as Black Dominican, Danielle and Kaylee identify as Black, and Audrey identifies as Afro-Latina. I asked how they wanted to be referred to in this writing and offered a range of options (*participants, young women, students*, and so on); they chose *girls*, and in this chapter and beyond, I refer to them as such. The girls were connected to each other through friendship and their shared history at Horizon. While several pairs of them appeared to be long-standing close friends, with in-jokes and shared stories they'd call up and tell jointly, the group didn't seem to function as a cohesive group or clique. Audrey and Kaylee seemed to be closest at first, always sitting next to each other and building off each other's ideas. They both seemed to relish passing judgment on our shared texts—whether on the way women were made to appear or on the realism, or lack thereof, of situations and actions depicted. Kaylee's voice and tone often sounded, to my ear, maternal, as she was likely to express both judgment and concern for girls and women putting themselves in precarious or embarrassing situations. Briana is funny, playful, and, while a dominant personality in the group, adept at playing off the rest of the girls, riffing on their comments and teasing them. Kaylee and Briana were the pair who most often brought up shared experiences to support their points (but also, of course, just to reminisce and story-tell). Danielle was the quietest of the group, and only viewing the videos of our discussions did I realize that she vied for airtime only to be drowned out by the rest of the girls. Danielle also shared history with the other girls—Kaylee, especially—but this shared history was seldom called upon to enhance our

group discussions. In this chapter, I treat the girls as part of the bigger organism of Group, but in the next chapter, I examine each girl individually.

Our discussions lasted between 40 and 60 minutes; our meetings included viewing time, and so the length varied based on the time it took to read/view the text. Our meetings ended naturally, when it felt like there was nothing left to say about the texts under discussion. The endings felt natural to me, but I typically made this judgment based on how far away from the topic their discussion had roamed. I began the video recordings of the discussion after we finished viewing the text. By default, the girls took turns without my intervention, and they didn't seem to mind the frequent interruption and cross-talk. Occasionally, when it seemed like one girl was repeatedly cut off in her bid for a turn, I intervened to create an opening for her. All in all, the transcripts of these discussions totaled 73 single-spaced pages. In addition to the girls' spoken language, the transcripts included common gestures and non-linguistic responses and interactions such as snapping in agreement and laughing. I overlaid the transcripts with still images of the girls in moments when their faces and bodies amplified their spoken language and with still images from the texts we read together, especially when we discussed in detail what was happening in a particular scene or shot (Appendix E).

My focus in this chapter is on the way our discussions of texts produced particular kinds of readings of femininity. In Chapter V, I examine the stories the girls told in their interviews and the connections between those stories and their readings of pop culture texts in Group. In Chapter VI, I highlight the binary oppositions at work in their discussion of gender and witness their deconstruction (Derrida, 1967/1997). To determine where to direct my attention in this analysis, I listened across our seven discussions for

moments of interaction in which meanings of femininity either coalesced around a particular idea or began to fracture and diverge from previously accepted ideas. Listening across our discussions, I observed our group put the most time and attention into the topic of women's physical appearance. Discussions of women's physical appearance were the densest passages of each discussion, carrying the most fervent agreement, disagreement, personal connection, and contradiction. I observed meanings both coalesce and fracture and diverge around the question *why*? Why do women on screen dress as they do? Why do they move and dance as they do? Who is in charge of shaping the way they appear? It is not surprising that this sort of explanatory mode of discussion would take hold. We were assembled in an academic setting, a classroom, and, whether or not I wanted to, I operated as a teacher-like figure. In such a setting, one that does not feel too dissimilar to their print-based English classes, explanations of texts are expected. So, in addition to their spontaneous, sometimes funny, sometimes raucous commentary on women's physical appearance, the girls supplied deliberate reasoning and evidence to explain *why*, often drawing on academic language to do so.

In this chapter, I develop my analysis of the girls' readings in these moments in three parts. First, I examine how they read women's physical appearance multimodally—how they drew on linguistic, spatial, gestural, and visual modes to make sense of what they were seeing. Second, I spotlight the kinds of language they used to describe women's physical appearance and consider what these language choices suggest about their struggle to make sense of the desires and expectations linked to physical appearance. Finally, I consider the discourses of gender they cite and inscribe as they assess women's physical appearance on screen—not only to describe it but also to make

value judgments about it and situate themselves and their own experiences in relation to it. I argue that, through the act of reading and assessing women's physical appearance, the girls constitute themselves as *respectable* girls. Through the analysis in this chapter, I address the first two sub-questions of this study's overarching research question:

- In discussion, what semiotic resources, experiences, and knowledge do the girls draw on to read the meanings of femininity in these texts?
- How do the girls circulate discourses of gender in their discussion of the meanings of femininity in these texts?

### **Multimodal Readings of Pop Culture Texts**

In this section, I analyze the girls' readings of pop culture texts to identify the semiotic resources, experiences, and knowledge they draw on to read the meanings of femininity in pop culture texts. As I've described, I conceptualize the girls' readings as acts of productive consumption in that they "*make* popular culture from the repertoire of commodities supplied by the culture industries" (Storey, 2003, Chapter 4, para. 8), rather than passively receiving messages conveyed by these texts. In this set of data, I looked for how they actively shaped the text's modes, along with their knowledge and experiences, into meanings of femininity. I considered, too, the path they took through the text (Serafini, 2012), as multimodal texts are not strictly governed by time and so open up many possible pathways. Finally, following my rejection of an essentialist view of texts and an autonomous view of literacy (Street, 1993), I took up the personal stories they improvised off the texts as part of their readings. This analysis of multimodality is bound up with questions about the role of awareness and intentionality in reading pop

culture texts: to what extent are the girls aware that they are *reading* a pop culture *text*, and to what extent does that awareness matter?

### ***Modern Family***

Briana set our first discussion in motion by pointing out the differences in how the women in the *Modern Family* episode “A Tale of Three Cities” (Levitan et al. & Koch, 2016) dress/are dressed.<sup>1</sup> Briana attributed the differences between how the characters Gloria and Claire dress/are dressed to the physicality of their bodies. Briana explained, “So, Gloria, how they make her wear stuff that’s mad open and everything, but then they make Claire wear something that, just because she doesn’t have like a lot of curves...she don’t got that much—she wasn’t that blessed, they don’t make her wear that stuff that [Gloria’s] wearing” (DG1, 5/5/17). At this point, Briana used her hands to draw an hourglass shape in the air, reinforcing the meaning of *blessed*. While I didn’t realize it at the time, the discussion bifurcated at this point: Briana and I continued to discuss the differences between how Gloria and Claire were dressed, while Audrey and Kaylee discussed the differences between how Gloria and her sister Sofia were dressed. We continued to interact as a whole group, apparently not realizing that we were referring to different characters. Kaylee’s comment that “she” is jealous “probably ‘cause their dad—she got more attention from the dad” could apply to either Claire or Sofia in the context of the narrative. Claire could be jealous that her stepmother—and peer—Gloria gets more attention from Jay, who is Claire’s father and Gloria’s husband. Or Sofia could be jealous

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<sup>1</sup>The *dress/are dressed* duality reflects the girls’ conflicted readings of characters’ bodies. Are they individuals who choose to dress as they do, or are they made to dress in particular ways by another party? I refer to the way characters *dress/are dressed* to keep this tension front of mind. I explore it more fully later in this chapter and in subsequent chapters.

that her sister Gloria gets more attention from *their* father. Either way, both Sofia and Claire are less curvaceous than Gloria and do wear less revealing clothing. At the end of the discussion of how Gloria was dressed, Jasmine interjected to clarify that Gloria was “the one married to the old guy.” I confirmed this and then tried to pivot back to what Briana had been saying, but Audrey, seemingly having a new thought about this arrangement of relationships asked, “Wait, why is she married to the old guy?” Kaylee and I responded simultaneously to explain a joke at the end of the episode. Kaylee said, “She says it’s because she has daddy issues,” and I said, “Well what do they say on this episode? It’s because she has daddy issues, because she didn’t get enough love from her dad and so she...” Disgusted or just incredulous, Audrey exclaimed, “And so then I want to marry some old guy?” After taking this information in, and after a few moments of laughter and indistinct chatter, Audrey remembered another part of the joke, “Then she said that her dad was handsome.”

The path the girls made for themselves through this multimodal text was shaped primarily by the show’s visual imagery. They paid attention particularly to the shape of the women’s bodies and the way their bodies were dressed, with Briana connecting one to the other. Audrey seemed to experience a hiccup in her reading of the text when she interrupted to ask why Gloria was married to Jay. Drawing on the visual images of their bodies, contrasting sharply in terms of both age and conventional attractiveness, Audrey couldn’t make sense of why Gloria would be married to Jay. In my reading of the episode and the show more generally, the very sight of Gloria, Jay, and Claire comes with a built-in explanation of their motivations and conflicts. The casting of these characters and the way they are costumed make the story of the older, rich man whose marriage to the sexy,

young woman creates tension with his daughter intelligible. But, as a group, we did not draw on the indexed story these bodies tell; instead, Kaylee, Audrey, and I drew on the dialogue, and specifically on a joke that was set up at the end of the episode, to make sense of why Gloria would be married to Jay. Audrey, Briana, and Kaylee made their way through the text by first paying attention to the visual imagery of the show and then by contextualizing the imagery within the episode's plot. In the case of Gloria, Claire, Sofia, and Jay, they proposed a connection between physical appearance and the attention of men, assuming that the attention of men is motivating enough to stir up jealousy between stepmother and stepdaughter or between sisters.

### *Empire*

In our discussion of the pilot episode of the show *Empire* (Daniels & Strong, 2015), I brought up the character Cookie's physical appearance and dress. To my eye, Cookie dresses like Gloria—in tight knit dresses that reveal cleavage, high heels, bright colors, and dramatic prints. Danielle called her look “crazy,” while Kaylee described her as “pretty” and, in response, Audrey affirmed “very pretty” (DG2, 5/12/17). Audrey continued, “She goes above and beyond. Like everyone else is just wearing regular clothes, and she's taking her past personality into her clothing.” Danielle added that “she makes sure she stands out and looks unique.” Kaylee explained, “And like she tries to make sure that she's the one that is being seen, not the other people, that she wants everyone to watch her.” This exchange widened into a discussion of Cookie's tactics for regaining control of the company she started with her ex-husband Lucious. In the pilot episode, Cookie has just been released from prison after serving a seventeen-year sentence for dealing drugs, arguably having taken the fall for Lucious to protect their

company. Danielle explained “When she came back from jail, she like wanted to have the power she had before she went to jail so she is like—she believes that nothing has changed but a lot has changed.” After a detour into the question of how she could afford the clothes she was wearing, Danielle brought the discussion back to the power of her dress, saying, “The way she dresses really shows who she is as a person...because she’s like very sassy and messy [dramatic] and like the type of clothes she wear, you’re like, she’s *something*....She’s a pretty powerful woman, like she speaks her mind, she tells people what it is right then and there.”

As they did in our discussion of *Modern Family*, the girls drew on their knowledge of the show’s narrative to make sense of Cookie’s appearance. They considered her personality and motivations as a character and the events of her life. The moment when, to use Kaylee’s words, everyone was watching Cookie, she barges into a board meeting at Empire Records where no one has seen her for seventeen years. Dressed in a short animal-print dress, fur coat, and oversized sunglasses, she announces her intention to take back the company. The members of the board, dressed conservatively in dark suits, watch her dispassionately until Lucious ushers her out of the room and his son Andre takes over the meeting. In this scene, according to the girls, Cookie’s dress is an extension of her personality and her motivations.



Figure 4. Cookie enters the boardroom (Daniels & Strong, 2015)



Here, I take a moment to offer my own necessarily incomplete multimodal reading of this scene in order to throw into relief important features of the girls' readings. As I read the text multimodally, I draw on the ensemble of music, visual image, gesture, and spoken language. In the previous scene, Cookie sits with her son Andre in his home strategizing about how to secure more powerful positions within the company. Andre's final line, "Here's what we gotta do," is overlaid with a music cue that serves as a sound bridge to the boardroom scene. The music links the dramatic question set up in the first scene (what will they do?) to at least a provisional answer to that question in the next scene (Cookie will show up at the board meeting). This next scene begins with a shot lengthwise down the conference room, the board members seated in two uniform rows across the table from each other, looking at Lucious. The setup of the shot and the board members' positioning work together to create a sense of order and control. Cookie arrives dressed in a way that connotes wildness and disorder: the vague animal print of her dress, the fur coat, the long tumbling hair. The image of Cookie here corresponds to what bell hooks (1992) describes as the "wild black woman" (p. 67). In *Black Looks*, hooks analyzes specifically the way Tina Turner reappropriated Ike Turner's styling of her image as wild, savage, and hypersexual for her own career advancement, "projecting in every performance the image of a wild, tough, sexually liberated woman" (p. 67). According to hooks, Turner is "the autonomous black woman whose sexuality is solely a way to exert power" (p. 68). The image of the wild Black woman is compatible with White supremacist patriarchal notions of Black female sexuality. So while Cookie is not dressed in a particularly revealing way in this scene (she is covered by a large fur coat, after all), her overall appearance connotes the "wild Black woman" hooks described. Her

image, of course, is nested within the plotline about wanting to “exert power” and take control of the company.

Cookie’s wildness is emphasized in her movement through the ordered space. She flings the door open, struts down the length of the boardroom, plows through Vernon, who tries to stop her, and perches on the armrest of Lucious’s seat. The scene’s dialogue serves to illustrate the power struggle between Cookie and Lucious (and Lucious’s right-hand man Vernon). As she flings the door open, she interrupts Lucious by saying, “Don’t forget to thank me, baby.” Vernon, trying to assert authority, establish control, and reappropriate her presence into the official business of the meeting, stands to greet her: “Good to see you, Cookie.” Cookie subverts this attempt with “Vernon, kiss my Black ass.” Once at the front of the room, seated on Lucious’s armrest, she addresses the room, “Now, let’s talk business, shall we?” Here, the combination of spoken language—specifically, her use of the rhetorical “shall we?”—and the way she snaps her sunglasses off indicates her intention to take over, literally, the meeting and, by extension, the company. When Lucious begins to usher her out, asking the room to excuse them, she realigns herself with Lucious: “Yes, excuse us for a moment, please.” It’s not clear to me if this attempt to realign herself with Lucious is played for laughs, showcasing how out-of-touch Cookie is, or if it is meant to underline how determined she is to wrest control of the company by any means necessary.

I offer my multimodal reading here to illustrate what the girls did and didn’t do in their own readings. On the surface, it appears that we all arrived at the same conclusion: that Cookie dresses/is dressed in a way that makes her stand out, and that this way of dressing is an intentional decision and a power move. We could argue that the only

meaningful distinction is that my reading is layered with more specific scene elements—elements the viewer wouldn't notice without rewatching the scene several times, as I did. However, I argue that there is a more fundamental difference in our stance as readers and that this difference makes available different understandings of Cookie's appearance. The girls are operating *in-narrative* here. That is, they are thinking of Cookie as a real person who has a real personality and real desires. They are not seeing the scene, or the show more generally, as a text. When the girls talk in-narrative, some readings are available and others are necessarily not. They can comment on the way Cookie *dresses*, but not on the way she *is dressed* by costume designers. They can comment on what she wants and how she intends to get it, but not on why writers would choose to tell a story of a woman whose power is contingent on her physical appearance. I explore the difference between in-narrative and out-of-narrative stances, and the different kinds of readings they make possible, through the rest of this analysis, as well as in Chapter VII.

I have been tempted to presume that an out-of-narrative reading stance is preferable to an in-narrative reading stance because the out-of-narrative stance allows the reader to notice and contest the gendered and raced subject positions the text makes available. However, there is potential power and pleasure to be found in in-narrative readings. Cookie ushered the girls through the text, and, in many ways, they saw the events of the episode's plot through her eyes. The girls seem to adore Cookie, as we can see in the way their discussion of her appearance morphs into talk of her strong and powerful personality and the righteousness of her desire to take back the company. Later in the discussion, the girls' connection with Cookie shaped their reading of a scene in which she beats her son with a broom. At this point in the discussion, Kaylee was

commenting that Lucious and Cookie manage their feelings differently: “So they take it out in different ways. Like, Lucious takes it out in aggression and anger and Cookie like takes it out—tries to like—not be that aggressive.” I then interrupted to say, “But hold on, didn’t she like beat the guy with the broom?” At that, the girls erupted in passionate defense of Cookie. “Well that’s her son!” Audrey exclaimed, and Kaylee added, “He called her a b-word!” The girls then drew on personal experiences with their mothers to improvise stories that support the idea that a child’s disrespect invites physical aggression and other forms of punishment. This exchange leads me to think that the girls did not just inhabit the narrative; in moments like these, they seemed to inhabit Cookie herself, animating her feelings, desires, and rationalizations. The girls’ in-narrative reading allowed them to link to Cookie and perhaps experience vicariously the strength, power, and righteousness they admired.

The girls’ in-narrative connection to Cookie meant that her character shaped their path through the text. At the end of the discussion, I tried to bring up other women depicted on the show. I reminded them of the episode’s opening images of women in bikinis on a yacht literally feeding Cookie’s son and the images of women with him at a club later in the episode. Kaylee pointed out that the son “kept looking back at [the women]” in the club, and I added that he said the women were “part of his artistic process.” Kaylee crinkled her nose at my description of the women on the yacht, and Kaylee and Audrey both shook their heads and rolled their eyes remembering the character saying that the women were part of his artistic process. The camerawork of the yacht scene in particular drew my attention, as it cut up and highlighted specific parts of the women’s exposed bodies. The imagery of these scenes was of particular interest to

me in the moment of discussion as I felt the girls had been too charitable to the show's depiction of women. Of course, in the moment, I couldn't put my finger on the way the girls' readings stayed in-narrative, articulate my desire to pull them out of the narrative to discuss the way scenes like these were constructed, and I didn't have available to me an analysis of this imagery as corresponding to popular imagery of Black female bodies generally. I said more than I would typically want to about these scenes, for example pointing out that the women seemed to be "in service of the men." Kaylee and Audrey, who were most actively engaged in the discussion at that point, didn't pick up this reading of the scenes and overall seemed turned off by the topic. The girls then turned my point about Cookie's son saying that women were part of his artistic process into a more general discussion about boys disrespecting girls. The girls then spent some time trading fragments of stories about boys they know treating girls as disposable. Looking back at this discussion, it makes sense that the girls wouldn't pick up this topic, given that their readings of the episode stayed in-narrative and that they inhabited Cookie. Cookie is not in these scenes, and the scenes don't advance her plot. These scenes—and the exposed Black feminine-connoted bodies that populate them—seem to only be there to connote the sexually charged feel of the show's narrative world.

In later discussions, the girls did forcefully criticize the way women's, and particularly Black women's bodies, are dressed and displayed in pop culture texts. For example, when we discussed Kodak Black's music videos, and our discussion widened into a more general discussion of music video imagery, Audrey, Briana, Danielle, and Kaylee all emphasized the way Black women, and not White women, are sexualized in pop culture. Briana said, "Black women have to look a certain way. You need to have

like big booty and big boobs, but if you're a White girl you just have to look pretty" (DG7, 6/21/17). Danielle agreed by saying, "All White girls have to do is just stand there and look good." Audrey added, "I want to say that what they're doing, like, sorry to be rude, but a Black person has to look more like a ho." Kaylee disagreed with the contrast Briana, Danielle, and Audrey drew between Black women and White women, saying, "I disagree with that because like all women like try to impress men because men always look for like body stuff." This line of thinking about the depiction of Black and White women's bodies in pop culture would have been relevant to the scenes I brought up and the commentary I imposed on the group. Similarly, in that same discussion, Audrey commented on different portrayals of Black and White families on television: "[Y]ou usually just see like a White family—they'll most likely stay together and there would be like small fights, they wouldn't necessarily be big. And they're like, a Black person they like—no offense—they will like go to violence first and lies and chase the other partner out." This comment also would have made sense in the context of our discussion of Cookie beating her son with a broom after he called her a "bitch." I bring up this later discussion to suggest that the girls' lack of interest in taking up these issues in their reading of *Empire* had to do with their in-narrative reading of the text and their connection to Cookie.

### ***Step Up Revolution***

In three other discussions, the girls read the physical bodies of the women who appeared on screen, trying to make sense of them and explain why they appear as they do. In these discussions, we viewed music videos together. The first was a dance scene from the movie *Step Up Revolution* (Feig et al., 2012) which operates as a music video in

that it is a short, self-contained musical number that, in the context of our viewing, does not advance any particular narrative. The other two music videos were for the songs “Timeless” (Dubose, 2016b) and “Still Think about You” (Dubose, 2016a) by the rapper A Boogie (sometimes styled as *A Boogie wit da Hoodie* or *A-Boogie*). Our discussions of physical appearance and dress centered around how much of the actors’ bodies were revealed. The girls extended their readings of their dress into gestural readings of the way they danced, moved, and were positioned in various shots.

In the scene from *Step Up Revolution*, for example, the protagonist Emily, wearing a flouncy silver mini-dress and glittering volto mask, leads a flashmob-style dance in a restaurant. The male dancers wear dark suits and the other female dancers wear dark dresses that otherwise match hers. The lighter color of her dress marks her as the star of the troupe. Briana commented that the video “made the girl look outstanding. . . . It was like made for her to stand out” (DG4, 5/30/17). In saying that she looked “outstanding,” Briana did not simply assess Emily’s physical appearance. Instead, she read her physical appearance against the other elements of the video. The rest of the group readily supplied examples of how the video did this. “She had a short dress,” Audrey observed, and, when she danced, “I feel like you can see anything, anything, underwear.” In that dress, Audrey explained, Emily was “able to move her hips and stuff.” Kaylee, Danielle, and Briana seemed to agree that her dress was designed to highlight her dancing—to make it so that she would be seen. Kaylee described her dancing as being “on top of the man and like moving, and moving her legs and all that stuff.” She said that her dress needed to be “more open” and that “she knows how to express herself with her body.” The way she “did a twirly thing and she landed”

impressed Briana, and Danielle concluded that her dancing “was meant for her to be seen as I guess sexy.” Unlike in our discussions of *Modern Family* and *Empire*, we did not have a narrative in which to contextualize Emily’s physical appearance. Without such a narrative, the girls did not take for granted the visual and gestural elements of the video. Instead, they alluded to the notion that the video was, in fact, “made,” although their use of the passive voice here (“it was made...”) suggests that they did not consider in great specificity the roles directors, choreographers, and costume designers played in making the video as it is. In this case, they read Emily’s physical appearance out-of-narrative considering not what she might want as a character but instead what effect the producers wanted to have on the audience.

#### **“Timeless” and “Still Think about You”**

The girls’ contrasting readings of the two A Boogie music videos, “Timeless” and “Still Think about You,” highlight the way the presence or absence of a narrative as the governing logic of a text produce different kinds of meanings. We watched these two videos on the same day with the lyrics to the songs printed in front of us. In “Timeless,” shots of A Boogie and, presumably, his friends are spliced with shots of two women in black strappy leotards dancing in silhouette against a monochromatic hot pink backdrop. The video has no narrative elements—that is, nothing happens in the video—aside from a few stray shots of A Boogie and his friends walking down a city street and A Boogie smoking marijuana. When the video ended and we brought the lights back up, Jasmine didn’t hesitate to begin the discussion: “OK so like the girl, she was like dressed very, very inappropriate, like—” Briana interjected to confirm, and Jasmine continued, “Her clothes is all like strings” (DG5, 6/2/17). Jasmine, Briana, and Kaylee commented on her



dance several times in this discussion. Jasmine described her dancing as “like a fish swimming in water” and claimed twice that “no other human dances like that.” When I asked her why she might be dancing like that, Jasmine said that she was probably trying to reveal herself. Kaylee agreed and added “and trying to be sexy,” and Briana added an extended description and re-enactment of the ways the women were revealing their bodies through dress and dance. In addition to echoing what Kaylee and Jasmine said before her (that their clothes were tight and revealing and that she was dancing in a way that highlighted her body), Briana injected a bit of narrative as an explanation of why she was dancing: “[W]hat she was doing looked like she was trying to be high, but I think she was doing that on purpose because it made the girl look like she’s like a side chick because he like you know grinding like [pops mouth].” I don’t totally follow Briana’s line of thinking here, but Kaylee then picked up her comment about the women looking like “side chicks,” incorporating the lyrics into the discussion. Kaylee said, “[T]he lyrics were like a bit too much ‘cause it was like calling the girls a ‘b’ and like a side chick and stuff like that. It was like so inappropriate.” I asked why it is inappropriate, and she continued: “Because like it’s calling all these girls different names. Like they’re not good names. And we get called all these names by boys for the same things that boys do but they get called nothing.” The names Kaylee was referring to here came from the lyrics: “I cannot waste no time, bitch, I’m really grindin’./ If I ever said, ‘I love you,’ I was lyin’./ I fuck with you but you was always like a side bitch./ ‘Cause I can never put nothin’ over grindin’” (Dubose, 2016b).

While Jasmine, Briana, and Kaylee all took issue with the way the women in the video appear—from their tight and revealing clothing to their fish-like dancing—their

shift from image to language here shifts the blame for this “inappropriate” state of affairs away from the women to A Boogie. It is not the girls who refer to the women as *side bitches* (euphemized as *side chicks*); they were clear that A Boogie, and boys and men in general, refer to women in this way. By saying that “we get called all these names by boys,” Kaylee aligned herself with the women in the video who are positioned as side chicks. According to Kaylee, Jasmine, and Briana, a side chick is:

Kaylee: You’re just like, you know—

Jasmine: The other one—

Briana: You’re not—

Jasmine: You’re the one after the main.

Briana: He has the main. She’s just the side one.

Jasmine: She’s the other one.

As this pieced-together definition suggests, *side bitch/chick* is not an essential quality of a woman. It is a position a woman is given, not taken willingly, in a network of relationships. It is a state defined by what one is not (“the main”), where one falls in the man’s hierarchy (“after”), and one’s insignificance as an individual (“the other one”). The girls used the concept of being a *side bitch/chick*, cited in the song’s lyrics, to decide where to place the blame for the women’s appearance, what is, to them, an objectionable state of affairs. A Boogie’s lyrics are just a starting point. After Kaylee brought up these lyrics initially, the discussion widened to address why they think men make these videos—to please an audience of young heterosexual boys—and why women choose to appear in them—to advance their careers and provide for their families.

In contrast to “Timeless,” “Still Think about You” is set mostly in a couple of rooms of a modest home, where A Boogie and a woman are seen smoking marijuana, partying with friends, and lying in bed (sometimes they’re positioned as if they are having sex, and other times she is positioned as his pillow). Danielle opened the discussion, quietly reflecting, “[T]he girl, she was um I guess you could say like a regret,” meaning that A Boogie regrets that he is not with her anymore. Jasmine, seemingly impatient with this initial line of discussion, interrupted to say, “Just like to get it straight, she’s like ugly. The only thing he likes is her body.” The rest of the group quickly rallied to Jasmine’s point:

Danielle: Not her body, her butt.

Kaylee: Yeah

Jasmine: Yeah, but like—

Kaylee: And this part [gesturing to her butt] was all showing

Jasmine: I mean she’s not pretty

Kaylee: She’s got that purple lipstick

Jasmine: He only like from like, from her neck to her knees. That’s it.

Briana: OK, um, I don’t know why she’s dressed very inappropriately. I mean, like, I don’t know *why*. And then she’s like—I mean the dude, he has her in the back...

Jasmine: What?

Briana: ...like in the back in the bed. He has her doing weed and stuff and like drinking and everything, and that’s why she’s mad ugly and crusty.

Whereas the imagery of “Timeless” is abstract, playing with colors and shapes (and, in fact, reducing the dancers’ bodies to abstractions), the imagery of “Still Think about You” is familiar, intimate, and grounded. The video’s setting, a modest home, invited the

girls into a narrative world in which the model was not, in fact, a model, but the woman described in the song's lyrics. The girls' judgment of her was harsh. Danielle called her a "ho." Jasmine began to develop an explanation, "Sometimes like a girl could like betray you if you give her stuff," and then Briana picked up the explanation, addressing A Boogie as *you*: "She's just into you because of your money, because you're famous, and after you give her all of this stuff, she just leaves you." Briana's direct address, combined with her characterization of the woman as superficial, suggest that she aligns to A Boogie rather than to the model. Earlier, the girls aligned themselves with the dancers in "Timeless" and understood that they were made to appear as they do by the men who produced the video for the benefit of the young boys who would watch it. Here, reading the woman's physical appearance in-narrative, they are less forgiving.

The girls draw on the same modes, linguistic and visual, to make sense of women's physical appearance in both videos. In both cases, language is de-centered as the primary mode of communication. The girls brought in the lyrics only to supplement their reading of the visual images on screen—and perhaps only brought them in at all because I printed them out and because they are accustomed to academic discussion spaces in which they are asked to cite (typically printed) text evidence. The girls used the lyrics to explain why the women would appear as they do, dressed in ways that reveal their bodies, dancing, smoking marijuana, and so forth. In their readings, the linguistic mode elaborated what was available through the visual mode. However, these two videos employ these culturally shaped resources very differently, thereby making possible different kinds of readings of women's physical appearance. The girls read "Timeless" out-of-narrative, seeing the video as a constructed text, likely because the particular

ensemble of modes didn't offer an easily discernible story to follow. The video is set mostly in indistinguishable spaces where individual bodies do not interact with each other, even when there are multiple bodies in a single shot. There is no sense that something happens in the video; it is pure style. This sort of abstraction is enhanced by the lyrics and music. The lyrics are dense with repetition, and the meter accentuates the looping feel of the song (the musical phrases don't end on downbeats). The song itself does not employ language and music, both of which are typically governed by the logic of time, to create a continuous narrative or even a logical sequencing of messages. The girls' out-of-narrative reading of "Timeless" made possible an awareness of the video as a text—something that was deliberately constructed for a particular purpose and audience.

In contrast, the video for "Still Think about You" employed the linguistic and visual modes to create a sense of narrative continuity and, accordingly, the girls read the physical appearance of the model in-narrative. In this video, bodies do interact with each other, and the video itself unfolds in scenes that take place in real, recognizable, and intimate spaces. We can see that the woman in the video used to be with A Boogie's character and has since left him for someone she met at a party. The girls drew on the lyrics to solidify this storyline, but they also see contradiction between the lyrics and the video. In Danielle's words, "The lyrics and the video tell different stories." Their reading of the model's physical appearance, which includes both the particular shape of her body and the way her dress and her positioning put that shape on display, is characterized by harsh judgment of her appearance and her worthiness as the object of romantic affection.

Later in this chapter, I use a poststructural feminist framework to analyze these contrasting readings of women's physical appearance. Here, I want to emphasize a few points about the semiotic resources, knowledge, and experiences the girls used to read the notions of femininity made available in these texts. First, while the texts we read together were of different types, they all used the same combination of modes to suggest meanings—that is, they were all videos. Like written language, videos are governed to some extent by the logic of time, but their visuality “presents readers with a less directed, more open reading path. This openness requires readers to design the path through which their reading occurs” (Serafini, 2012, p. 159). Readers can attend not just to the dialogue and plot but also to the visual imagery of scenes and characters' bodies, dress, and movement. The visuality of these texts shaped many of the girls' readings. They often shoehorned other elements into the discussion of appearance—like the plot of *Modern Family* or the characterization of Cookie on *Empire*—but the discussions still foregrounded appearance. Of course, this emphasis might have been produced, in part, by the framing of the discussion. I continuously made my intention to discuss gender explicit, and so, by lingering in discussions of physical appearance, we both reinscribed and contested discourses of gender that emphasize the significance of how women choose to or are made to appear. The emphasis on physical appearance, then, could have been made possible both by the multimodality of the texts and by the discourses available to us.

Second, we see in their readings the girls' productive consumption of these texts, or the way they “*make* popular culture from the repertoire of commodities supplied by the culture industries” (Storey, 2003, Chapter 4, para. 8). Rather than simply replicating

producers' intended messages (Bezemer & Kress, 2008), they pulled together what they saw in the texts, their personal connections to the texts, and, as I discuss in much greater detail in the following section, discourses of gender to make their own sense of the texts. They often improvised stories—stories that refer to real experiences, stories that conjure hypothetical scenarios, fragments of stories, and, as I discuss later, collaborative stories—to produce meanings of gender. They often commissioned these stories as support for their judgments of characters or producers of the text. Their stories of their own mothers' reactions to disrespect, for example, supported their judgment that Cookie was right to beat her son with a broom. Their stories of boys objectifying girls and women and of disposing them supported their judgment against A Boogie and others who produced his videos. We see in their productive consumption an active struggle to make sense of women's physical appearance—particularly, when that appearance is constructed as the object of heterosexual male desire—and all of the contradiction such a struggle involves.

Finally, when the girls were absorbed into the narrative world of the text, they talked about the characters as real people, taking for granted the ways meanings have been constructed and ideas about femininity cited in the text. When the girls hovered outside the narrative, they recognized that the text was a text, that it was constructed for a particular purpose and audience. While they didn't employ in-depth knowledge of who plays what role in creating the texts before them, they did develop critiques of the texts, and, by extension, of the sign-maker's interests (Kress, 1993). They bring to their readings an understanding that men create these texts to make money and that the young, presumed heterosexual male audience demands to see women sexually objectified.

This analysis of the girls' multimodal readings of pop culture texts leads me back to the questions and issues that, for me, have always been at stake in discussions of multimodal literacy. How does positioning oneself as a *reader* of pop culture *texts* change the way one experiences those texts? Certainly, multimodality is a fact of pop culture texts, whether or not one actively and consciously engages with it. Whatever meanings one makes of those texts, one makes them through an experience of their modes as they interact with each other. In this way, the girls experience pop culture texts multimodally but only occasionally position themselves as readers of the texts. When they do position themselves as readers, commenting on the way the texts are constructed to highlight women's bodies, for example, to what extent is that reading stance produced by the quasi-academic setting of Group and what they think I expect them to say? And when one assumes a reading stance in relation to pop culture texts, is the pleasure of experiencing those texts diminished or lost? I have assumed that an in-narrative reading of a text is more pleasurable than an out-of-narrative reading, but I recognize that that isn't necessarily true all of the time for all people. Finally, to what extent is a multimodal reading of a text enhanced by knowledge of how pop culture texts are produced and how modes conventionally work together to make meanings possible? To what extent is it enhanced by sophisticated vocabulary? The girls didn't seem to have extensive background knowledge or sophisticated vocabulary; how would their readings be different if they did?

The spirit of this research question is to understand what girls are already doing to read pop culture so that I can imagine a curriculum that builds on and enhances their readings. Based on this analysis, I see that girls are already contesting aspects of pop



culture texts, such as hypersexualized images of Black women's bodies. They are already producing judgments about the characters in the texts, as well as, in some cases, the producers of the texts. They are already connecting aspects of their personal lives to the texts by improvising stories that support their judgments. They are already noticing different modes and are often led by the visuality of the text through the text—at least when they are directed to think about gender. They are already noticing, in some cases, how modes interact with each other. They notice how dress and movement enhance each other in music videos, for example, and they contextualize the visual image of women's bodies within narrative arcs that are propelled by spoken language. Finally, they already read both in and out of the text's narratives, and they seem to position themselves in response to the particular meaning potentials the text multimodally produces. Simply put, they read in-narrative when the text actually provides a narrative, and they stay there when that narrative is especially appealing.

### **Relative Language**

I was struck early in our discussions by the vocabulary the girls used to describe women's physical appearance, and I take time here to spotlight this vocabulary because I see it as part of a greater struggle to make sense of women's appearance on screen, as well as girls' and women's appearance in real life. In my own readings of pop culture texts, I am quick to recognize—and to criticize—how female characters of all sorts are made *hot* through casting, makeup, and costuming. I notice physical appearance particularly when the narrative doesn't demand that its characters be beautiful. This is to say that I recognize that the physical appearance of girls and women on screen is an

intentional construction and reject the narrow parameters placed around that appearance. I tend to use absolute vocabulary to describe how their appearance is meant to read—*hot, beautiful, sexy, pretty, attractive*. The girls also were quick to recognize how women’s physical appearance has been constructed intentionally, occasionally in service of plot (Cookie dresses to stand out in order to wield power in the board meeting) or in service of an assumed male heterosexual audience. To my ear, the vocabulary they use is actually better suited than mine to describe physical appearance as not an enduring but an intentional, artificial, and impermanent quality. They use relative words like *outstanding, too much, above and beyond, inappropriate, and doing more*. I describe this vocabulary as *relative* to suggest that, in making sense of women’s physical appearance, the girls draw on how a character looks relative to other characters and to her surroundings. In other words, one cannot look *outstanding* sitting by herself in a vacuum; one can only look *outstanding* in an environment full of other people. This vocabulary is emblematic of the way the girls discuss physical appearance more generally. They seem to be less interested in appearance as a *quality* and more interested in appearance as an *act*—and specifically as an act that serves a particular purpose. In this section, I lay out the girls’ use of these words to describe physical appearance both pop culture and their own lives and worlds.

### ***Outstanding and Above and Beyond***

Danielle first used *outstanding* to describe Cookie’s appearance in *Empire*, saying, “She makes sure she stands out and looks unique” (DG2, 5/12/17). Danielle and Kaylee attribute her desire to stand out to “wanting to have the power she had before.” Cookie wants everyone to know that, after her time in prison, she is still “something.” In

the discussion of *Step Up Revolution*, Briana claimed that the movie “made the girl look outstanding. .... It was like made for her to stand out” (DG4, 5/30/17). Kaylee, Danielle, and Briana agreed, pointing out her short, light-colored dress in contrast to the other dancers’ darker costumes and arguing that her dress highlighted her dancing.

*Above and beyond* seems to be synonymous with *outstanding*—Audrey used the term to describe Cookie in the same stretch of discussion quoted above. Audrey’s comment that Cookie “goes above and beyond” with her clothes immediately preceded Danielle’s comment that she makes sure to stand out. Audrey loosely defined the meaning of *above and beyond*: “Like everyone else is just wearing regular clothes, and she’s taking her past personality into her clothing.” Audrey described Cookie’s appearance in opposition to everyone else’s “regular” appearance. Less clear to me is what it means to “[take] her past personality into her clothing,” but two features of this description seem significant. First, Cookie’s physical appearance is intentional, rather than accidental. She is trying to accomplish her goals by going *above and beyond* with her appearance. Second, her physical appearance has some relationship to her personality—perhaps it is an outward expression of her inner personality. This point is echoed in Danielle’s subsequent description of Cookie’s personality as “like very sassy and messy.” The girls use *outstanding* and *above and beyond* to link appearance to specific situations. This suggests that they think of appearance as something that is intentionally done—an act, rather than a quality.

### ***Inappropriate and Too Much***

*Outstanding* and *above and beyond* seem to have a positive connotation in the girls’ use of the terms. In more negative assessments of women’s physical appearance on

screen, the girls use *inappropriate*—a term that Jasmine and Audrey defined as synonymous with *too much*. Over the course of our discussions, Gloria from *Modern Family* and the dancers in A Boogie’s videos were described as *inappropriate*.

Briana’s use of *inappropriate* to describe Gloria’s dress lacked the judgment and force of Briana’s, Jasmine’s, and Kaylee’s use of the word to describe the dancers. Briana used the word more obliquely, explaining that Gloria “don’t get to pick what she wants so that can really bother someone when they’re working and they have to wear something that’s inappropriate.” Briana associated Gloria’s costuming with “something that’s inappropriate” in the course of explaining how producers decide what actors wear. When Jasmine brought the word up again, several weeks later in a discussion of A Boogie’s video for “Timeless,” she said, “So like the girl, she was like dressed very very inappropriate” (DG5, 6/2/17). The word came up three more times over the course of the discussion—a discussion that exclusively addressed the way the two women dancing in the video were dancing, moving, and being filmed.

A week later, I sat down with Audrey and Jasmine to ask them about their use of the word *inappropriate*. To me, the relative nature of the term *inappropriate* seemed at odds with the way they were using it to describe the women in the A Boogie videos. I was fixated on the relative nature of the word: to me, dressing *inappropriately* means dressing in a way that does not match the setting or occasion. In the A Boogie videos, I reasoned, the women were in sexual situations, which made their revealing clothes *appropriate*. I explained my thinking to Audrey and Jasmine and invited them to tell me how they think of the word and why they use it to describe women who are dressed in revealing clothes. Jasmine said, “It’s just like an easier way—like that’s just the

categories—you're dressed inappropriate or appropriate" (DG6, 6/16/17). Audrey agreed. They went on to describe examples of inappropriate dress: "the tightest thing ever," "dress with cuts," and "cropped tops." I pushed my point again, saying "I always think of appropriate *for* something or inappropriate *for* something. Like, is there ever a time and place to dress in that way you're describing as inappropriate?" Jasmine acknowledged my point and then stated as a matter of fact, "Well, you said like there's something that's appropriate for school, something that's not appropriate for school. In some cases, it's just like inappropriate." Here, it seems that Jasmine was rejecting the relative or contextual nature of the word. She tries to give it substance. However, Audrey and Jasmine then went on to give examples of relative appropriateness. Audrey said, "You would never see [Gloria from *Modern Family*] wearing jeans. She'd go to the supermarket...wearing the most party-ish clothing." They went on to offer examples of wearing *inappropriate* clothing, for example, when they go to the pool or to a party. Ultimately, to both Jasmine and Audrey, the most meaningful context against which to judge appropriateness is simply being in public. Both offered cases in which, in Audrey's words, "it's just inappropriate to walk out of the house like that."

At the end of the discussion, I asked if there were any other words they used to describe an inappropriate outfit. Jasmine said, "It's not really—it's like two words the way people say it. If it's like kind of inappropriate we say like it's too much." Audrey agreed: "Yeah, like you're too much." Jasmine added, "Like, yeah, what are you doing?" The two examples Audrey then gave were Gloria from *Modern Family* and Cookie from *Empire*. While they both described Gloria's revealing clothes (Jasmine: "Her dresses be split like that and here"), Audrey emphasized another feature of Cookie's dress: "I like

her outfits but like sometimes she does a little too much with it like have a coat on the side. Like you're either wearing a coat or you're not." Audrey's assessment of Cookie's appearance seems to hinge not on how revealing her clothes are, but instead on how hard she is trying to stand out. Cookie wears a fur coat, which looks extravagant and stylish, but she doesn't put it on all the way, perhaps because she doesn't actually need it for warmth. *Too much* in this case is not about how much of the body is revealed but about how much effort one is putting into her appearance.

### ***Do More or Do the Most***

The final example of relative vocabulary is *do more* (sometimes, *do the most*) an expression that was only introduced after I asked Audrey and Jasmine if they noticed if portrayals of White women were similar to or different from portrayals of women of color. Jasmine responded by saying that Black women show off more of their bodies than White women. Then Audrey explained,

I feel like Black and Latino women, like they usually do the most with their outfits like, it's kind of like just to impress 'cause they're like impressing a lot of different people, and they're trying to be like the center—not the center of attention but something that people are going to remember and talk about. (DG6, 6/16/17)

In a later discussion of music videos by Kodak Black, I asked the whole group the same question I had asked Audrey and Jasmine: have they noticed differences between how White women and women of color are portrayed? Briana said,

OK in rap videos, Black women have to look a certain way. You need to have like big booty and big boobs, but if you're a White girl you just have to look pretty.... I don't understand why Black girls need to do more in order to be in the video and White girls just have to like show up (DG7, 6/21/17).

According to Audrey, “A White person just needs to have makeup on her face and that’s it. No one’s looking at her body.” Audrey claimed that “a Black person needs to look more like a ho” in order to be in a video, and Danielle agreed.

The term *do more* seems to be linked to other relative vocabulary like *above and beyond* and *too much* in that all of these terms refer to an amount rather than a quality. Specifically, in the girls’ use of the terms, they refer to an amount an individual has done to look a particular way. In some cases, when the effort has paid off, they might say the individual has gone *above and beyond*. In other cases, when the effect is *inappropriate*, they might say the individual has done *too much*. I can’t say with certainty whether or not *do more* is as much a part of their everyday vocabulary as *too much*. But the fact that three different girls on two separate occasions used the term to describe what women of color have to do seems significant. In the discussion of Kodak Black’s video, talk of the physical appearance of Black women in rap videos transformed into talk of economic opportunity. When I asked if anyone had any ideas about why Black women would have to *do more* with their appearance, Audrey explained “I honestly think that it’s like, the White people, they don’t—it’s like a lot easier for them. They have everything like, they have a pathway out, but like a Black person, a Black woman, a person like anybody they have to work way harder to get what they want in life, or like what they want to achieve” (DG7, 6/21/17). This comment reinforces my initial impression of the relative language used to describe women’s physical appearance, which is that appearance is more of a strategic act than an enduring quality.

The question about relative language that interests me is not why the girls select this language over absolute language, but what kinds of meanings this sort of language

makes possible. Derrida (1967/1997) claims that, whatever language we use, there is no outside-text—there is nothing outside of the very attempt to mean. The signifier (language) and the signified (meaning) are mutually constituted. Jasmine’s comment, “It’s just like an easier way—like that’s just the categories—you’re dressed inappropriate or appropriate,” stands out to me as emblematic of this point. In this comment, Jasmine exposed the binary that operated underneath all of our discussions of appropriateness. There are two distinct categories, and, by Jasmine’s logic, all manner of physical appearance and dress belong to either one or the other. When the girls describe a woman as appearing *inappropriate*, they employ these categories as part of a greater struggle to make sense of how women on screen—and, as I will discuss later, how they themselves—appear. In order to fully apply Derrida’s concept that there is no-outside text, we must consider not only how the girls use binary oppositions to make truth claims and establish authority, but also how those binary oppositions ultimately fail to make sense. I do this in Chapter VI.

I want to acknowledge, or perhaps concede, that I structured this particular discussion to generate comments like Jasmine’s. I explicitly asked Jasmine and Audrey why they use terms like *inappropriate* and what those terms mean. By asking these questions, I set them up to make overly authoritative statements of their meanings or to comment in ways that make it appear that they are more invested in the truth and significance of these terms than they actually are. The beginning of Jasmine’s comment—“It’s just like an easier way”—in fact, suggests that she is not terribly invested in the authority of these words. I read the comment as a conveniently compact



statement of a messy and complicated undercurrent of our discussions of physical appearance.

### **Discursive Meanings of Gender**

As a quasi-academic discussion space, Group encouraged our shared pursuit of explanations. So far, I have laid out some of the ways the girls explained why women appear as they do on screen: the physicality and movement of an actor's or dancer's body demand a particular kind of dress; a show's protagonist uses her physical appearance as a way of achieving her goals; models and dancers have an economic interest in showing off their bodies to advance their careers. I have also highlighted the relative language they used to describe women's physical appearance: *outstanding, above and beyond, inappropriate, too much, and do more/the most*. In this section, I address the question of how the girls circulate discourses of gender, and particularly gender intersected with race, in our discussions of femininity in these texts. The girls' explanations of physical appearance, and the relative language they use to render them, are part of a greater struggle to make sense of the expectations and desires connected to girls', women's, and, in fact, their own physical appearance. Much of what I see in the data supports previous poststructural empirical research of young people and their ways of circulating meanings about gender (e.g., Walkerdine, 1990; Finders, 1997; Youdell, 2004; Blaise, 2005). I attempt to add an analysis of gender, as it is intersected with race, and bring together poststructural feminist and Black feminist concepts to understand how the girls circulate discursive meanings.

Engaging with and reading pop culture texts is a discursive practice (Foucault, 1980), one that cites, inscribes, and ultimately puts into practice ideas about femininity. For Audrey, Briana, Danielle, Jasmine, and Kaylee, one part of the discursive practice of reading pop culture texts is assessing women's physical appearance on screen. By categorizing their appearance as *appropriate* or *inappropriate*, *above and beyond* or *too much*, they put into practice ideas about respectable femininity. Akin to Walkerdine's (1990) notion of the *good girl* who works hard, writes neatly, and is helpful and tidy in school, the respectable girl does not disrupt the order of things. Her body is marked as unavailable for sex—by clothing that covers and by movements and positions that cover or deemphasize the body—and so does not pose a threat to the social order by arousing male heterosexual desire. Her own sexual desire and agency are erased. She directs her attention, to whatever extent she is thought to possess such an inner state, to understanding and meeting others' expectations. This understanding of women's bodies and sexuality, of course, is linked to a whole history of Western thought on women's sexuality, to what Foucault (1978) referred to as the “hysterization of women's bodies” (p. 104). Women's bodies are hysterized in the way they are reduced to their reproductive capacity and in the moralistic expectation that women are to deny pleasure, thereby maintaining procreation and preserving the family unit as the main functions of their sexuality. King (2004), drawing on Foucault writes,

Medical and scientific discourse has confirmed the pathology of female biology and legitimated women's subjugation, prescribing in the past what activities women should engage in, what clothes they should wear to preserve appropriate 'womanliness', [and] their moral obligation to preserve their energy for child birth” (p. 32).

In the same vein, Youdell (2005) writes about the *virgin/whore* dichotomy that underpins discourses of respectable femininity in classrooms and how girls constitute themselves as respectable feminine subjects:

The literal challenge is to be a student (child), that is, sit in a row on the floor, *and* be a girl (proto-woman?), that is, maintain an appropriately feminine bodily posture, including concealing the genitals whether wearing a short skirt or not...The cost of failure here is high. .... Simply by sitting in particular ways, then, these girls' bodies cite and inscribe particular discourses of heterosexual femininity and simultaneously constitute themselves as embodied subjects within these terms. (p. 257)

Within these discursive frames, dressing/being dressed in revealing clothing makes one recognizable as an object of male heterosexual desire or marks one as, in Audrey's words, "ready for sex" (DG6, 6/16/17). By disapproving of such dress, the girls constitute themselves in hierarchical opposition as respectable. Yet, in other moments, the girls think of dressing in revealing clothes as an act of self-care and self-expression, and Audrey and Jasmine readily share that, in some circumstances, they dress in clothes they would describe as *inappropriate*. The girls' assessments, at once resolute and contradictory, circulate ideas about gender, and, in the remainder of this chapter, I show how they do so.

### **A Pathway Out for Black Women**

In their discussions of the women who appear in music videos, the girls circulate discourses of gender, intersected with race, by citing the idea that Black women have to bend to the will of men to advance their careers. By citing this idea as fact, the girls normalize the power structures that make it so, but implicit in their talk is a critique that holds open the potential of subverting discursive meanings. Earlier in this chapter, I laid out how the girls assessed the physical appearance of dancers and models in two A

Boogie videos very differently. In “Timeless,” two women in black strappy leotards dance in silhouette against a monochromatic hot pink backdrop. In “Still Think about You,” A Boogie and a woman are seen in a couple of rooms of a modest home smoking marijuana, lying in bed, and partying with friends. While the girls disapproved of the dancers’ appearance in “Timeless,” their judgment was much gentler than their judgment of the model in “Still Think about You.” I argued earlier that the different ensembles of modes (Jewitt, 2013) available in the videos produced these differences. In the case of “Timeless,” the video’s lack of physical space and narrative helped the girls think of the dancers as real people who made an economic decision to appear in a video for an up-and-coming star. In the case of “Still Think about You,” the intimate setting and discernible narrative set the girls up to think of the model as a character making decisions of which they disapproved—her revealing dress an extension of such decisions.

In Briana, Jasmine, and Kaylee’s assessment, the two dancers in “Timeless” were *inappropriate* in their strappy, revealing leotards and style of dance. When I asked why they appear as they do, Jasmine said that one of the dancers was “trying to like reveal herself” and Kaylee added, “try[ing] to be sexy.” These two comments suggest that Jasmine and Kaylee see the dancers as having agency—as *trying* to appear in a certain way, presumably acting of their own volition. However, with Briana’s next comment, the discussion pivoted away from the dancers as doers to the dancers as objects of others’ doing. Briana—herself dancing in her seat—sang that they were “told to do that to get paid.” After Jasmine teased Briana about her dancing, she brought the discussion back to the issue of physical appearance, saying that the video showed “the girl as being inferior” because of “what he’s making her do, like being a side person.” Referencing the lyrics to

the song, she continued, “He’s saying stuff bad about her like he can boss her into doing what he wants to do. When it comes to her wanting to do something, she can’t do it.”

Kaylee agreed, saying, “They don’t like it, but they do it. They earn money for it like, for example, to provide for their families. They will do anything for their families.” Briana elaborated this point:

I think that she might like doing this because A Boogie is all the way up there because he’s rich and all famous and everything. . . . Because now he’s like making money because of his music and everything and now like those two girls they should probably do it because A Boogie is all that and stuff and it might make them famous or something, I don’t know. Make them recognizable and like make the managers or like the directors choose them to do other videos with other like singers and everything.

Jasmine then summed up by saying, “They do it because that’s their job.”

In this stretch of discussion, the girls echoed each other’s points, emphasizing that more powerful men are *making* the dancers appear as they do because it is what *they* want. Whatever *trying* the dancers are doing, it is *trying* to do what they have been told to do, first, to get paid—possibly to provide for their families—and, eventually, to have access to future career opportunities. Their comments in this discussion connect to comments they made in the next two discussions, when Audrey, Jasmine, and Briana discussed the idea that women of color need to *do more* with their physical appearance to be in videos. In response to my question about why women of color need to *do more* in music videos, Audrey explained that White people “have everything, like they have a pathway out, but like a Black person, a Black woman, a person like anybody—they have to work way harder to get what they want in life, or like what they want to achieve.” In these two discussions, Jasmine, Danielle, and Briana all agreed that women of color (most often Black women) need to *do more* with their appearance than White women,

but, in Audrey's explanation, the connection between *doing more* and economic interest is clearest. Dressing in revealing clothes is a "pathway out" for Black women, or a way for them to "get what they want in life." In the girls' talk, the men involved in the production of the song and music video are conflated with A Boogie, or the speaker in the lyrics of "Timeless," and the girls in the video are conflated with the character invoked in the lyrics. Across this discussion, the girls narrated how this amalgamated man treats this amalgamated woman: he makes her appear in a video in inappropriate dress against her will, he bosses her around, and he subordinates her—or, in Jasmine's words, treats her as *inferior*—by referring to her as a *side bitch*. The girls' critique of the amalgamated man, in this case, is not explicit. They did not denounce the man, but by narrating the way he constricts a woman's range of choices and by using her choice to appear in the video to illustrate just how far a woman will go to provide for her children and advance her career, the girls implicitly criticized the systems of power involved in producing hypersexualized images of Black women in music videos. This implicit critique at the very least holds open the potential for subverting discursive meanings of femininity that reduce the feminine-connoted body to its appeal to heterosexual men.

### **Storylines and Controlling Images**

In these discussions, the girls circulated discourses of gender, intersected with race, by improvising a story that connects to storylines (Søndergaard, 2002) and makes use of controlling images (Collins, 1991)—a story that guides where they draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable forms of *appropriateness*. To soften their judgment of the dancers' *inappropriateness*, the girls tap into discourses of gender, race, and class to tell a story about the dancers, one that makes their decision to appear in the video

reasonable. In the story, the protagonists have two goals: to make money to provide for their families (Kaylee) and to have access to future employment opportunities (Audrey, Jasmine, Briana). The obstacle they encounter is that A Boogie and his producers and directors want them to wear revealing leotards even though they don't want to. They decide to do what they don't want to do because they decide that achieving their goals of financial security for their families and career success make it worth doing. The protagonists in this invented story are recognizable as mothers who "will do anything" for their families. If there are villains in this narrative, they are A Boogie and the other presumably male producers and directors who *make* women appear as they do. Yet, aside from Briana's concern that little boys watch these videos and see them as a model of how to treat women, the girls don't totally vilify the men. The heterosexual male interest in presenting women as objects of desire is treated as fact in the girls' story. The protagonists are forgiven their *inappropriateness* because they did what needed to be done in the face of this fact.

The girls collaboratively produced this story but did not invent it and it did not come from the text itself. I argue that it has recognizable features—or, more to the point, features that make subjects recognizable. There are two concepts that help me understand my own recognition of this story and how it cites and inscribes discourses of gender and motherhood: *storylines* (Søndergaard, 2002) and *controlling images* (Collins, 1991).

Søndergaard describes recognizable stories of indeterminate origin as *storylines*:

The term storyline refers to a course of events, a sequence of actions that...creates identities through inclusive and exclusive discursive movements, a naturalized and conventional cultural narrative, one that is often used as the explanatory framework of one's own and others' practices and sequences of action. (p. 191)

Storylines are recycled in cultural texts—novels, movies, music, newspapers, oral tellings, pictures—and, through this recycling, circulate taken-for-granted meanings, in this case about femininity. The girls’ story of the mother who sacrifices herself by doing sex work to provide for her family is a storyline that cites and inscribes discourses of respectability, heterosexual femininity, and motherhood. In this story, the woman is doing some kind of sex work (whether that work is appearing in a music video, stripping, prostitution, pornography) that would constitute the woman as disreputable—as, literally, *whore* in the *virgin/whore* dichotomy. However, this figure is redeemed because that work is construed as the ultimate sacrifice. The mother sacrifices her own respectability to fulfill her most important role—as a mother.

To understand how the girls conceptualize motherhood in this story, I borrow from Collins’s (1991) description of four controlling images of Black femininity. *Controlling images* are recognizable images that “are designed to make racism, sexism, and poverty appear to be natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life” (p. 68). Collins lays out four controlling images of Black femininity: the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother, and the Jezebel. The matriarch is the Black mother who takes on the responsibility to protect and provide for her children and impart the correct values in the absence of a patriarch. Collins argues, “Portraying African-American women as matriarchs allows the dominant group to blame Black women for the success or failure of Black children” (p. 74). This is one way that the controlling image of the matriarch meshes with race, class, and gender oppression. According to Collins, the image “provides effective ideological justifications for racial oppression, the politics of gender subordination, and the economic exploitation inherent in capitalist economies” (p. 78).



Collins goes on to describe Staples's (1973) notion of the "superstrong Black mother" and its prevalence among Black men: "By claiming that Black women are richly endowed with devotion, self-sacrifice, and unconditional love—the attributes associated with archetypal motherhood—Black men inadvertently foster a different controlling image of Black women, that of the superstrong Black mother" (p. 116). According to Collins, the glorification of the superstrong Black mother winds up restricting the roles Black women play in the political economy to one who keeps the family together and supports Black men. Black women's lives, then, "are a series of negotiations that aim to reconcile the contradictions separating our own internally defined images of self as African-American women with our objectification as the Other" (p. 94). In their reading of "Timeless," Kaylee and the other girls cited the controlling image of a Black matriarch who will do anything to provide for her family—who is, in Collins's words, so "richly endowed with devotion, self-sacrifice, and unconditional love," that she is willing to be objectified in a music video. Or, in other words, she will enter into the subject position produced by another controlling image of Black femininity, the Jezebel. According to Collins, controlling images designate the proper connections between fertility, sexuality, and roles in the political economy. Motherhood supersedes respectability, and so counterintuitively, within this constellation of discourses, the woman is acting nobly by positioning her body as the object of male heterosexual desire. One way the girls circulated discourses of gender, then, is by citing this storyline, "a naturalized and conventional cultural narrative" (Søndergaard, 2002, p. 191) that establishes worthy goals (mothering) and defines what is acceptable to do in pursuit of those goals. In our discussion of Cookie beating her son with a broom, the girls also used motherhood as a

justification for actions of which they would otherwise disapprove. They spoke of Cookie's special status as a mother in that discussion and in our final discussion, over two months later, when they brought her up as an example of a character we saw who has "inner beauty." Her inner beauty comes from the fact that, according to Danielle, "She never lets anything get in the way of her work, her children," and Kaylee added, "Or her success in life." Cookie's status as mother means she is not only forgiven for occasional violence but also, in spite of it, glorified as one who has "inner beauty." The girls were active in their citations of these storylines and controlling images, shaping the available resources into stories that make the appearance of women on screen make sense.

The girls' assessments of the model in "Still Think about You," as I've discussed, differ from their assessments of the dancers in "Timeless." The very appearance of the model's body restricts the kinds of stories that can be reasonably told about her, so their judgment constitutes her as Jezebel, rather than the superstrong Black mother. The girls' judgement of the model is swift and harsh. Half a minute into the discussion, she was described as "ugly" by Jasmine and "mad ugly and crusty" and "nasty" by Briana. In addition, Danielle and Kaylee specified that her body as a whole can't possibly appeal to A Boogie, only her butt. While in the discussion of "Timeless," the girls criticized the lyrics that referred to women as *side bitches*, in this discussion, they criticized the woman for occupying that position. Instead of seeing the model as an individual making sacrifices for her family by appearing in a video, they saw her as a character in the narrative of the song's lyrics and video. The girls decided that she is not only *inappropriate* but also unworthy of the male character's attention. The song's lyrics tell the story of a man still pining for a woman who left him:

Said you always gon' be there for me  
 Now you gone and just disappeared on me  
 Can't believe I really thought you cared for me  
 You was supposed to be the one that's here with me  
 I still think about you" (Dubose et al., 2016a).

While the lyrics don't offer particular descriptions of the woman's desirable qualities, the girls assumed that his feelings were genuine, presumably because he wants a relationship, not just sex. Briana, Danielle, Jasmine, and Kaylee all indicated that the very appearance of the woman in the video contradicts the feeling described in the lyrics. When I asked the group why A Boogie is still thinking about the woman, both Kaylee and Jasmine responded that he is still thinking only about her body. Briana emphasized the contrast between A Boogie's motivations in the lyrics and in the video: "The lyric is like more of a sad case like the girl did him wrong, but like in the video it kinda shows that—but it shows that he really wants her because of her body and stuff so that's it" (DG5, 6/2/17). Danielle then confirmed that the lyrics and the video are "saying two different things." The video does show the couple in sexual situations, but it also shows them at home smoking marijuana and spending time together. The only evidence the girls could and did use to support the idea that he only thinks about her body is the very appearance of her body in the video. They alluded to the shape of her body, the way her body is positioned, and the amount of her body that is exposed. The appearance of her body on screen makes the idea that she is the object of genuine romantic feeling, and not just sexual desire, impossible. Their description of her appearance, in fact, was the only time the girls use absolute rather than relative language to describe appearance. She is not just *inappropriate*: she is *mad ugly*, *crusty*, and *nasty*. The girls drew on an understanding of femininity that categorizes women as virtuous or virtue-less (the *virgin/whore*

dichotomy). The virtuous woman does not show or use her body sexually and so is worthy of genuine love. The virtue-less woman does show and use her body sexually and so is the object of heterosexual desire. This configuration meshes with Foucault's (1998) notion of the hysterization of women's bodies and what are thought to be the proper use of women's bodies in Western discourses of sexuality and gender. This dichotomy makes it impossible to be both sexual and worthy. The girls' use of this dichotomy constitutes them as virtuous, respectable girls. In their discussion of the dancers in "Timeless" and the models in "Still Think about You," the girls told different kinds of stories to explain the appearance of a hypersexualized Black feminine-connoted bodies on screen. These stories served an explanatory function in their readings of the texts and perhaps helped to mitigate the discomfiting sight of those bodies—a sight that could be particularly discomfiting in a classroom space and in my presence. Their use of these stories to *explain* leads me to wonder how else the girls might feel about and respond to those images in other contexts.

### **Personal Experiences**

A third way the girls circulated discourses of gender was by drawing on personal experiences and, in doing so, exploring the terrain of meanings of *appropriate/inappropriate*. Their talk in these parts of the discussion was more open-ended and contradictory than when they responded directly to the meanings made available in the texts. But the girls brought these stories to bear on the judgments they made about women's physical appearance on screen. Their discussions of their own dress often addressed how they negotiate what to wear in relation to others' expectations and desires. While I analyze these discussions as they connected to, and were often embedded

in, their readings of women's appearance on screen, they could also be analyzed as readings in their own right, as they show the girls reading and making meaning of their personal experiences and their social worlds. Given their readings of texts, it is not surprising that the girls often denounced *inappropriate* dress they see in their lives. Jasmine and Audrey, for example, when asked about the meaning of *inappropriate* emphasized that dressing in tight, cropped, cut-out, or otherwise revealing clothes is, in Jasmine's words, "just like inappropriate," regardless of the occasion, or, as Audrey said, "It's just inappropriate to walk out of the house like that" (DG6, 6/16/17). There are ways of dressing that Jasmine and Audrey consider inappropriate for all occasions and public spaces. Later in this discussion, I asked, "Do you think it says something about who a person is on the inside when they dress a particular way on the outside?" Audrey responded, "My mom, she says that a lot. She be like, the type of clothing that you wear is going to determine your personality, so you're walking down the street with like clothes that are super tight and like a lot of your body showing, you're gonna likely set the impression that you're like..." Jasmine then interrupted to say "attitude," and Audrey continued, "...that you have attitude and like you're outspoken and also because like you're kind of ready for that 'cause like based on what you're wearing you're trying to impress people." I asked later what Audrey meant by "ready for that," and she responded, "You're being ready for like sex and like attention. Because you're showing a lot, you're knowing that people are going to see that and are going to want you." In this commentary, revealing dress constitutes the woman in question as an object of male heterosexual desire—and, specifically, as an available object of desire. Hooks (1990) argues that the notion of *availability* is a feature specifically of Black female sexuality as

it is objectified in pop culture: “Undesirable in the conventional sense, which defines beauty and sexuality as desirable only to the extent that it is idealized and unattainable, the Black female body gains attention only when it is synonymous with accessibility, availability, when it is sexually deviant” (pp. 65-66).

At other points in this discussion, however, Jasmine and Audrey treated what they were otherwise denouncing as *inappropriate* dress as a form of self-expression and self-care, and both were quick to say that they dressed *inappropriately* at times. After they explained that their mothers don’t let them leave the house dressed inappropriately, I asked, “Do you ever try that? Do you ever try to dress like in a crop top and short shorts, and then your mom says no?” Audrey responded, “Yes,” and I sought confirmation: “So then you sometimes want to dress what you’re saying is inappropriate.” Jasmine responded, “When I go to the pool, I don’t have to wear a shirt. I can wear a bathing suit and then shoes, and she doesn’t care how my bathing suit looks,” and Audrey agreed, emphasizing that going to the pool and going to a party are two occasions for inappropriate dress. The girls went further than to say that certain occasions call for certain kinds of dress; Jasmine, Audrey, and Briana described revealing dress as a form of self-care and self-expression. For example, in our first discussion of revealing dress, focused on the *Modern Family* character Gloria’s physical appearance, Kaylee, Jasmine, Audrey, and Briana drew on their personal experience to suggest that wearing revealing clothes is positive. I asked if, in the character Gloria, *Modern Family* was portraying women positively or negatively:

Kaylee: I think it’s kind of positive ‘cause like you obviously want to look good when you go outside. You don’t want to look like weird...

Mia: So you think the way they dress Gloria and the other characters is positive because they look good.

Kaylee: Well, if they feel like they look good, then yeah.

Mia: They feel comfy—they seem to—the characters seem to feel comfortable with the way they look.

Audrey: Like to connect it to like how kids feel, how girls feel today, like you probably see a girl caring more about what they're wearing than a boy. A boy would probably like throw on whatever he want, and a girl like she probably take a very long time getting dressed (DG1, 5/5/17).

At this point, the discussion of wearing revealing clothes morphed into a more general discussion of looking good. Based on this exchange, I cannot conclude that Kaylee and Audrey were equating wearing revealing clothes to caring about how one looks.

However, the discussion's easy movement from revealing clothes to looking good to a discussion of caring suggests that, in their understanding, these ideas are associated.

What matters here is the extended focus and emphasis on the idea of *caring* and the ways that caring about how one looks can be taken to mean caring about oneself.

Audrey drew a more direct connection between wearing revealing clothes and self-care, and, later, self-expression: “[I]f you wear something like that's closed and you can't see so much then that's showing that like you don't really care about what you're wearing. You're just like trying to get clothes on” (DG6, 6/16/17). Jasmine responded:

I want to say like to relate that to school, a lot of girls in the school including sometimes me and Audrey, they would judge who they're friends with by what they're wearing, like if that person is cool or if that person could be part of their crew just by what they're wearing. A girl could be wearing a long shirt and some weird pants on like a lot of girls would be like I don't wanna be their friends. Like sometimes I do that but not all the time.

Jasmine's take on the issue, expressed in a confessional tone, differs from Audrey's.

Jasmine emphasized the social pressure to not dress in “a long shirt and some weird

pants.” To Jasmine, the way one is dressed makes her literally recognizable as part of, or not part of, a particular social group. Her conflictedness over this social fact comes out in her confessional tone and her tenuous association with people who judge others—she says that people who judge “includ[e] sometimes me and Audrey,” but she also uses *they* to refer to those people. Jasmine’s account here was repeated in our final discussion by Kaylee and Briana. Kaylee said, “[G]irls when they like look at themselves in the mirror they’re like, I wish I was just like her, and she tries to change herself all the time, and they change their whole entire body.” Briana responded by saying that there are a lot of girls who “bully another girl because they’re fat and that they don’t know how to dance, etc. etc., so the girls they spend most of the time just changing.” In this later discussion, Kaylee, Briana, and Audrey all suggested that it is not right to change oneself in response to social pressure, and Jasmine, who was present, did not participate in this line of discussion. In the earlier discussion with Jasmine and Audrey, I wondered about the social pressure Jasmine brought up, asking Audrey, “What you were saying, was it about that people are going to *perceive* you in those ways [ready for sex] or that if you dress that way you’re trying to express that?” Audrey responded:

It’s kind of like both. It’s kind of like showing how you want to be seen and it’s also like—you’re expressing yourself with your clothing because like you hear people arguing about whether or not we should wear uniforms in school, but people will be like the kind of clothing that you wear—the way you’re dressed—it’s like expressing your personality.

In this part of the discussion on inappropriate dress, Jasmine and Audrey seemed to acknowledge at least two different ways of reading inappropriate dress in their everyday lives. On one hand, they denounced inappropriate dress and drew on the influence of their mothers in particular in saying that revealing clothing can cause others to perceive you in



negative ways—or, in Audrey’s words, “[T]he type of clothing that you wear is going to determine your personality.” On the other hand, they both named instances when they dress *inappropriately*. Audrey inverted her mother’s view that clothes *determine* personality and claimed that clothes *express* personality. The related ideas that clothing expresses personality and that looking good is a way of caring for oneself circulate in pop culture texts. These ideas, of course, serve commercial interests, in that their viability guarantees a consumer base for clothing, makeup, and other personal products and services. These ideas serve these interests whether we conceptualize one’s outer appearance as *determining* or *expressing* one’s inner state (feelings, desires, personality).

Audrey’s and Jasmine’s discussion of social pressure links to other discussions in which the girls drew on ideas of normalcy to make judgements about characters and people in their lives. For example, in our discussion of *Black-ish* (Barris et al. 2017), Kaylee, Audrey, and Briana all claimed that one “learns a lesson” by being awkward in front of boys. In the episode, the character Zoe’s new friend lets Zoe embarrass herself in front of an attractive man, even though the friend could have stopped her. Kaylee said that, in such a situation, the friend’s decision not to intervene is understandable because one “learns a lesson not to say something like that ever again to somebody” (DG3, 5/19/17). A few minutes later, Audrey argued that the friend’s decision is both good and bad: “It’s good because like it’s funny and you’re learning a lesson and then it’s bad because like I don’t think you wanna embarrass yourself.” Later, Briana echoed Audrey’s dual argument, saying, “You expect someone to protect you, but in the other case if you’re making a total fool of yourself, you might learn a lesson.” In this example, it is through everyday social interaction that individuals “learn lessons” about how to act. In

Jasmine's, Audrey's, and Briana's comments about the social pressure to look "good," we see that girls can bully or exclude each other as a way of defining what is *appropriate* and also what is normal and expected. Here, in their reading of this scene from *Black-ish*, they note that girls can allow their friends to embarrass themselves, which is perhaps a small cost for the lesson on how to act normal—how to fit in. About Zoe, Kaylee said, "Like, she really confident.... She was like she got this, she could do this, and she left [the car] with her shoulders back, straight, like she was gonna fit." This discussion adds a wrinkle to my understanding of the girls' readings of Cookie and leads me to wonder about the relationship between appropriateness and normalcy. Under what conditions do the girls see it as desirable to stand out? The girls venerated Cookie for her *outstanding* appearance and personality—for the way she disrupted the ordered sameness of her social world. In their discussions of Cookie, looking and being *outstanding* were an advantage and warranted admiration. While Cookie was *outstanding*, she never tumbled over into inappropriateness; she was always, carefully, outstanding without being inappropriate. Zoe, on the other hand, was confident, but that confidence was in her presumed capacity to fit in. The girls certainly didn't judge her to be *inappropriate*—only awkward in her interaction with the man. If a girl or woman is going to be *outstanding*, then, she first needs to know where the line of *appropriateness* is, and she needs to be in absolute control of the ways in which she stands out—not like Zoe who becomes awkward when she is flustered. The contrast between their readings of Cookie and Zoe suggest that Cookie represents an aspiration and a wish and Zoe a favorable possibility. In this talk, the hierarchical relation between *appropriate* and *inappropriate* seems to be crossed with the relation between *normal* and *not normal*. Taken together, their comments suggest that

standing out intentionally, strategically, *appropriately*, and in a way that connotes total control is the highest aspiration. Below that aspiration is the desire to fit in—to submit to the social pressure to be both *appropriate* and *normal* and to “learn the lessons” that make that possible.

### **Drawing the Line as Performative Act**

From time to time, in the course of assessing women’s physical appearance—in the course of drawing the line between *appropriate* and *inappropriate*—the girls contradicted themselves, sometimes denouncing revealing dress and other times arguing for either its appeal or its necessity. My interest is not in sorting out these contradictions but instead in understanding how the repetitive act of drawing the line itself can be thought of as performative. The theory of performativity holds that individuals come into existence, or are constituted, or acquire a social definition, as gendered subjects through the “stylized repetition of acts” (Butler, 1990). The girls’ agency in drawing the line is an effect of discursive power. They have been authorized to make this judgment, to place the line where they would like, by their very subjectivation, or the process by which “one inhabits the figure of autonomy only by becoming subjected to a power” (Butler, 1997, p. 83). Whether the girls are constructing a narrative of a woman who will do anything to provide for her family, deciding whether or not a woman is worthy of romantic love, or drawing on their personal experience of deciding what to wear, the girls repeatedly act to assess appearance as *appropriate* or *inappropriate*. It matters less what they decide in a particular moment and more that a decision needs to be made in the first place.

In their repetitive act of drawing the line, we see how discourse “governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about” (Wetherell, Taylor, &

Yates, 2001, p. 72). In our search for explanations of why women appear as they do on screen, the girls drew on the meanings available to them: specifically, that women's physical appearance is somehow always shaped by issues of sex, desire, attention, and that to be a woman means to have one's appearance constantly judged and surveilled. We see how, through our discussions and the repetitive act of drawing the line, the girls put into practice ideas about femininity and used them to regulate others' conduct. They not only drew the line between *appropriate* and *inappropriate* by describing the different elements of each category, but also drew the line between acceptable and unacceptable occasions for, or uses of, *inappropriateness*. It is acceptable, for example, for the dancers in A Boogie's video for "Timeless" to appear in revealing leotards, but it is not acceptable for the character in the narrative of the video for "Still Think about You." This act of drawing the line is a ritual of "ideological recognition, which guarantee[s] for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable" (Althusser, 1971/2001, p. 117). This regulating act of drawing the line between *appropriate* and *inappropriate*, or between acceptable and unacceptable *inappropriateness*, makes certain kinds of girls and women recognizable: the superstrong Black mother (Collins, 1991) doing whatever it takes to provide for her children, the businesswoman who dresses in an outstanding way to get attention and wield power, the pathetic ex-girlfriend trying to regain the attention of a man. By drawing the line between *appropriate* and *inappropriate*, the girls constitute themselves as respectable girls who take on the responsibility to consider appropriateness—to consider how they will be perceived and understood by others.

## Summary and Conclusion

In Group, I positioned Audrey, Briana, Danielle, Jasmine, and Kaylee to read the pop culture texts in a way that produced *explanations* of the texts—most often, explanations of why women appear as they do on screen. I didn't enter into our discussions with this intention, but, in listening across our discussions, I was struck by the amount of time and fervor we poured into discussions of why women appeared as they do and speculated that Group's quasi-academic space and my teacher-like persona encouraged this explanatory mode of discussion. The girls drew on a range of semiotic resources to develop, support, or link to their explanations. They attended to how women on screen dressed/were dressed and to their physical movement, whether in everyday interaction or in dance. The girls noted how dress and movement enhanced each other and how they worked together to showcase women's bodies. Their explanations centered around who decided that women should appear in this way, who was in control, and who benefitted from their appearance. Their explanations varied. In our discussion of *Modern Family*, for example, Briana explained that Gloria wore revealing clothes because she is "blessed" with a curvaceous figure and emphasized that her clothes are chosen for her—"she don't get to pick what she wants" (DG1, 5/5/17). In contrast, in our discussion of *Empire*, there was no mention of producers or directors. Instead, the girls talked about Cookie as they'd talk about a real person, entering the fictional world of the show. They attributed her dress to her goal of regaining control of her company. According to the girls, Cookie deliberately constructs her *outstanding* appearance to express her personality, get attention, and ultimately disrupt business-as-usual at Empire Records. In our discussion of music videos, including A Boogie's videos for "Timeless" as well as

the opening dance number of *Step Up Revolution*, the girls paid more attention to the way that dress and movement worked together to showcase women's bodies. They took up the videos as texts that were made deliberately to position and portray characters in particular ways. In their discussion of "Timeless," the girls explained A Boogie and the other men responsible for producing the video *made* the dancers appear as they did for the benefit of its audience of young boys. Together, they invented a narrative of these dancers' lives, imagining that they chose to appear this way, against their will, in order to advance their careers and provide for their families. This invented narrative stood in contrast to their explanations of the appearance of the model from A Boogie's other video "Still Think about You." In that case, the girls entered into the narrative of the world created by the video and the song's lyrics, judging not the model but the character for appearing scantily clad and deciding that she was not worthy of the male protagonist's romantic affection. A pattern emerged from the limited set of data we produced. When the girls are engrossed in a text's narrative—as they were in the narratives of *Empire* and "Still Think about You"—they didn't treat the text under discussion as a text. They didn't mention the producers, directors, writers, or musicians that made deliberate decisions in the course of constructing the text. If they didn't take up the text as a text, they couldn't examine the way the texts were constructed according to commercial interests and so relate to wider systems of power. When they were not engrossed in the narrative—either because the text doesn't offer a narrative or the narrative is not compelling to them—they did consider why the text's producers might have constructed it as they did and to whom they wanted to appeal in doing so.

Much of our time in Group was devoted to explanations of why women appear as they do on screen. The girls drew on visual and gestural modes, as well as their personal experiences and knowledge of how academic discussions go, to develop these explanations. Another important feature of these moments of discussion was the judgments the girls made about the women's physical appearance. In these moments, the girls would determine, first, whether the woman in question was *appropriate* or *inappropriate* and, second, if she was *inappropriate*, how harshly she should be judged. I argued that this act of judging, or drawing the line between *appropriate* and *inappropriate*, put into practice ideas about what it means to be respectable girls. In these acts of drawing the line, the girls "inhabit the figure of autonomy only by becoming subjected to a power" (Butler, 1997, p. 83). In other words, they are authorized to make these designations of *appropriate* and *inappropriate* because they have themselves been subjected to the regulatory power that makes girls recognizable as appropriate or not, respectable or not.

The relative language the girls used to describe women's appearance—*outstanding*, *too much*, *above and beyond*, *inappropriate*, and *doing more*—stood out to me as a particularly apt way of describing physical appearance as, not an enduring, but an intentional artificial, and impermanent quality. This vocabulary is *relative* in that it positions how a body looks relative to other bodies and the environment they inhabit. On one hand, this relative language seems to reflect the girls' interest in appearance as an *act* rather than as a *quality*—for example, as one of Cookie's tactics for regaining control of the company. On the other hand, in my discussion of this language with Audrey and Jasmine, and later with the whole group, the girls tried to infuse these words with an

absolute quality—saying, as Jasmine did, for example, “Well, you said like there’s something that’s appropriate for school, something that’s not appropriate for school. In some cases, it’s just like inappropriate” (DG6, 6/16/17). Even still, unlike words that invoke stable qualities of appearance, such as *beautiful* or *pretty*, these words invoke an idea of appearance that is dependent on context and setting. Each time the girls used these words to judge a woman’s appearance on screen, they actively took up the power to decide, to make a judgment about where the line goes. (In contrast, by designating a woman on screen as *beautiful*, one supposedly is simply recognizing a quality that inheres in that image.) By deciding whether Cookie looks *outstanding* or is doing *too much*, the girls actively constituted those meanings in the moment, and those constitutions are always open to contradiction and inconsistency. The contradictions and inconsistencies in these designations only remind us that this act of judgment is always ongoing, and so the meanings of these words are always open to reinterpretation.



## V – NARRATIONS

In this chapter, I address this study's final question: *When girls narrate moments of everyday experience, how do the substance and the acts of narration position them in relation to the femininities under discussion?* This question was put into motion by the idea of *collective intelligence* (Storey, 2006), or the unpredictable, fragmentary, but active way individuals make meaning within a world saturated with pop culture, the way we “unite the bits and fragments of what we see and experience into our own personal mythology” (p. 3). The strategy I used to understand how this happens, how girls develop their personal mythologies, was to elicit narrations of everyday experience. Of course, these narrations were layered with meaning: the lived experience the girls narrated, their memory of the experience, their understanding of the purpose of elicitation, and their attitudes toward the meanings they incorporate into their understanding. And, while their stories might be a part of their own personal mythology, in Storey's sense, they were also discursively produced. My hope is that by reading the layers of these narrations I am able to trace how, over time, girls make meaning of pop culture texts and how they make meaning of their own lives, whether or not the latter is influenced by the former.

Narrative inquiry demands that I take care not only to consider all of the layers of story mentioned above but also to be clear with myself about the epistemological possibilities of narrative. What can we know from a story—much less one elicited in an interview—and what can we not know? On one hand, the study of story is “the study of epiphanies, rituals, routines, metaphors, and everyday actions” (Clandinin & Connelly,

1994, p. 415). However, story is not raw experience; how a life is told and retold is shaped by, among other things, discourse, personal investments, and feelings about the purpose, audience, and setting of the telling. In my analysis of the substance of the story, or the referred-to moment of experience, I consider *interaction* and *continuity*:

*Interaction* refers to the intersection of internal and existential conditions...  
*Continuity* refers to the temporal positioning of every situations. ... [M]ethods for the study of personal experience are simultaneously focused in four directions: inward and outward, backward and forward. (p. 417).

In a sense, these are the dimensions that define a story as *story*. These dimensions are helpful to me on a practical level, as they tell me where to look in a story, even if they suggest that stories are autonomous and self-contained—a conceptualization my poststructural framework doesn't allow.

The *act* of narration requires a different set of considerations. The narrative data I analyze is co-constructed by the research participants and me. My poststructural theoretical framework requires that I account for my own intentions and desires, some of which I know and some of which I don't, and to be aware of the ways interview participants “carve out space of their own, that they can often control some part of the interview, that they push against or resist my goals, my intentions, my questions, my meanings” (Scheurich, 1997/2001, p. 62). The stories the girls told were, in part, born out of the particular research interaction that occasioned them. Given our co-construction of data, my analysis necessarily fills some of the openness and incompleteness of their stories with my own categories, constructions, and concepts, and I try to account for those, when I'm aware of them.

I interviewed each girl once, after Group finished its run. I sat down with each after school in an empty classroom or office space at the school. I told them that I was

interested to know more about how they thought about the ideas and issues we discussed in Group and how they applied to their own personal lives and experiences. Then, by way of reminding them of what we discussed, I listed some of the general topics we discussed: how women look, how women and men are in relationships, how women and men experience and express emotion. I gave them some time, if they wanted it, to jot down some connections between these ideas and their personal experiences. When they were ready, I told them that they could start wherever they wanted and that I would probably ask them follow-up questions meant to help them put their finger on particular examples and moments from their lives.

To analyze the transcripts of their narrations, I first looked for moments in the interview that felt like actual stories—narrations that had some specificity and vividness or narrations in which they were truly *putting their finger on* particular examples of bigger ideas. I then read those stories for what Shaafsma and Vinz (2011) call *salience*, *incompleteness*, and *emphasis*. To find salience in the data, researchers ask, “What stays with you? What images, bits of dialogue, moments in the narrative linger and endure?” (p. 78). To find incompleteness, researchers consider what the narrator glossed over, what is implied but not said outright, and what elicits further curiosity. Finally, I paid attention to emphasis, to the “events, dialogue, memories [that] are intensified through repetition, vivid imagery, and dialogue” (p. 79). My search for salience, incompleteness, and emphasis was enhanced by Group data. I analyzed each act of narration for the discourses of gender circulating in the story. I considered the discourses each participant cited and inscribed in their act of narration and the ways each participant was constituted as particular kinds of girl in her narration. In this chapter, I offer each analysis separately

and then conclude with questions about what these stories can tell us about meanings of femininity and girlhood and about the way we incorporate pop culture meanings into our personal mythologies.

### **Audrey: Being in the Drama**

The stories Audrey told during her interview coalesced with stories, both real and hypothetical, she brought to her readings of pop culture. Audrey narrated her recent experiences with boyfriends and ex-boyfriends, as well as what influences her decisions in these relationships and the sense she makes of them. When I listen to the stories she told in her interview, I can't help but hear all the stories she brought up in Group and her characteristic ways of framing those stories. I remember the way she used stories to explain, either what was happening on screen or her own judgment or critique of what was happening. In my memory, I hear her saying, "Let's say, for example..." to introduce these stories and weaving in and out of pop culture examples, personal experiences, and hypotheticals. I see in the stories she told during the interview how she brings such stories together to make sense of, and make decisions about, relationships.

When I interviewed Audrey, she was processing an encounter with her ex-boyfriend at the school's dance show the day before. Their teacher, Ms. Ramirez, had put makeup on the girls, and I sensed that, between the makeup and the skirt and high heels, Audrey felt more grown-up than usual ("everyone" was telling her she was "pretty and whatever"). She walked by her ex, and, as Audrey narrated it,

He was like, 'Oh, you look like a clown, blah blah blah.' And I was like—but, like, 'I wasn't talking to you, I don't even know why you just come up to people and say that.' And he started like—he started like getting a group of people and trying to like talk about me but like I just like walked away, trying to ignore him.

And then he kept trying to like be more nearer to me so he could keep saying his rude things but I didn't really like care, or whatever." (NEI, 10/20/17)

I asked Audrey if she thought he made fun of her because he was upset that she had broken up with him. She responded:

[T]he day that I broke up with him he was like, he got mad—and I was like, wait, we can still be friends. It's not like I don't want to talk to you ever again. He was like, 'I don't care. Don't talk to me.' Just walked away. I was like, OK, you're doing too much. And I just left. And then he was like, oh, like, you're gonna want me back. I was like, no. I don't know. I don't think so because you're really disrespectful so no.

Audrey was quick to talk about her relationship with this ex-boyfriend—how they got together, how her mother found out about him, why she decided to break up with him, how she broke up with him, how he responded to the break-up, and the interaction at the dance show—but she didn't have much to say about him as an individual. She shared that she had “this other boyfriend,” and she discussed some of the tension she felt around that relationship (how close he was to her ex-boyfriend and how intent she was to keep the relationship from her mother to avoid “one of those long talks [that's] awkward to listen to”). However, again, Audrey did not mention much about the boy in particular or what, if anything, she liked about him. This incompleteness in her stories led me to speculate about why these details about personality and attraction, which, to my mind, are the substance of any story of a relationship, did not show up in her story.

Later in the interview, as she was explaining why her mom didn't want her to date boys, Audrey articulated what could be a key to understanding this incompleteness. When I asked if she agreed with her mom's assessment that “boys these days” only care about sex, she said, “I kind of agree, but at the same time I'm kind of thinking that she's doing too much 'cause like, at my age—it's not like I could do whatever I want, but like,

um, I don't know. It's just fun to experience things and be like, in like drama and whatever." In this response, Audrey seems to qualify what she is referring to as a "relationship" and what she means by "boyfriend." I assume "it's not like I could do whatever I want" means that she wouldn't, or wouldn't be able to, have sex with a boyfriend. "It's just fun to experience things" suggests that she does not have deep feelings for her boyfriends or meaningful commitments to them. Dating is, instead "just fun" to Audrey. Finally, her expression "be[ing] in the drama" could clarify the elision of personal details in her relationship stories. In her stories, the most finely narrated moments are the dramatic turning points: when they decided to get together, when her mother found out, when they broke up. The in-between parts of the relationship are missing altogether or are quickly addressed as backstory to the turning points: "[H]e was like being like kind of distant and I didn't really like him anymore."

In our interview, Audrey narrated experiences of trying out and inserting herself into the kinds of recognizable heterosexual arrangements she had seen and heard about elsewhere—experiences that were "just fun." In Group, she often brought hypothetical stories about such arrangements to her readings of pop culture texts. These hypothetical stories hinged on particular ideas about gender, sexual desire, and appropriateness and signaled Audrey's investments in what ought to happen between boys and girls, men and women. I present a series of examples here and then discuss how they cite and inscribe discourses of gender and constitute Audrey as a particular kind of girl. In our discussion of why male characters on *Modern Family* were not able to keep a secret from the rest of the family, Audrey said,

I think the girls, they're more easier to keep a secret because like I say for example like say a girl is cheating on her husband or something and she tells her

best friend and they will like—they will be able to keep a secret for a long time while maybe like a man like when he's cheating on somebody you can [inaudible]. (DG1, 5/5/17).

In our discussion of why one of Cookie and Lucious's sons on *Empire* seemed always to be surrounded by women, Audrey said,

Yeah, I would like to make an inference—like also on like shows and stuff you will see like they wouldn't really be respecting women. Like let's say for example like a man he has like a lot of different women that he's dating...and let's say that the woman is cheating on him with someone else, it becomes a bigger deal and stuff but like if a man is cheating on somebody they don't really care, it's just like, oh...Like if the girl like confronts him about it it's like you could leave, it's really not going to make much of a difference to me. (DG2, 5/12/17).

In our discussion of the character Zoe's awkward attempts to flirt with a man she met during college orientation, Audrey commented that boys and men are “supposed to know you in order to ask you out and like you could be yourself” (DG3, 5/19/17). Later in that same discussion, the girls mocked Zoe's father Andre for being overprotective as Zoe prepared to leave for college, and that discussion opened into a more general discussion of fathers being overprotective of their daughters. Audrey said, “I think the parent should be more protective over the son not over the daughter...because the son is the one fucking the daughter.” A few moments later, after Kaylee commented that pregnancy (named as the parents' major concern for teenagers) is both the boy's and the girl's fault, Audrey said, “It's also the girl because there are some girls who like they're at parties and might be drunk or something, and then like they convince the boy” before giving an example of such a story she saw on either *Dr. Phil* or *Jerry Springer*.

That Audrey brought these kinds of hypothetical stories and scenarios into her readings of pop culture texts suggests that they serve as touchstones for her, whether in her reading of texts or her reading of situations in her own life. With words like *say*, *let's*

say, and, most fully, *let's say for example*, she marked these stories as hypothetical and invited the listeners into an explanatory narrative. When describing the individuals in these situations, she most often used the definite article *the* and a gendered term: *the boy, the girl, the woman, the son, the daughter*. The lack of particularity of the individuals in these scenarios suggests a sort of presumed universality to the story she told and, of course, the centrality of gender to her understanding of the scenario. Finally, Audrey's narrations are specked with words like *supposed to* or *should*, indicating judgment on how the individuals act. Audrey's way of moving between specific and general, actual and hypothetical, linked many individual cases into a single recognizable heterosexual arrangement. In the arrangement, as Audrey narrated it, both men and women are capable of transgression (women can cheat on men, women are partially to blame for luring men into having sex), but men have more pronounced, and more dangerous, sexual desire and agency. Men desire many women and so are less committed to one woman, and sex is figured as something done *to* women *by* men rather than a mutually consensual and enjoyable activity. Audrey's stories connect to storylines (Søndergaard, 2002), about heterosexual romantic relationships and are infused with ideas about gender. These storylines create gendered subject positions, whether she uses the hypotheticals to describe relationships as they are or how they ought to be: the man who pursues the woman, the woman who can "be herself" when she is desired, the man who desires sex with multiple women, the woman who is committed to the relationship. These hypothetical stories come to mind when I hear Audrey say that it's "just fun to experience things and be like, in like drama and whatever" (NEI, 10/20/17) and when I hear her describe in detail only the points of conflict and dramatic turning points of her



relationships. I wonder if, for Audrey, the fun of being in the drama is in inserting herself into these stories and trying out the subject positions available to her.

While Audrey expressed that it is just fun being in the drama of romantic relationships, she gave credence to her mother's point of view that it's best to avoid such relationships. In explaining why she wants to keep her relationships from her mother, Audrey said,

She's like, because boys these days they don't really care. Like it's very hard for you to find someone that actually cares about you. They only really care about making you pregnant and just leaving you by yourself. Yeah, that's something she says to me.... She only wants me to study and be something. It's like kind of annoying. I kind of agree of what she's saying 'cause like, a lot of her close friends and my close friends, their children have been like getting with a boyfriend and then after you don't see them for a long time and when we do see them, they have like a little baby. It's like, oh, oh. That's interesting. (NEI, 10/20/17)

Here, as she did in Group, Audrey pulled a scenario that feels both hypothetical and real into her depiction of the dangers of getting involved with boys, and, as in her narrations of her own experiences, she elided the in-between parts of the relationship—namely, the actual sexual activity that results in the “little baby.” Audrey's explanation creates two possibilities for young women: “be something” or get pregnant by a boyfriend. Audrey speculated that her mother sees these as two distinct and mutually exclusive possibilities because of her own experience as a single mother:

Oh, my mom, she's over protective 'cause like, she's like a single mom so she's like every time I talk to her about like, oh, if I can have a boyfriend at this age and whatever, she's like no, you can't, because you're going to end up like me. 'Cause like, she—the reason she didn't—she's like, you have to go—go to college and like be something of your life. And the reason that she didn't get to do that was because like her family didn't have enough money to send her off to college but overall she was a really good student in school. And she was like, you have a lot more opportunities than I did so don't be focusing on boys at this age. And she's like really over protective on what I wear to go outside. (NEI, 10/20/17)

When Audrey articulated her mother's point of view on relationships, she did not question or contradict her mother's reasoning. In fact, some of the hypothetical stories she incorporated into our group discussions are connected to this sort of reasoning. It seems, then, that Audrey is comfortable simultaneously inhabiting her mother's self-protective stance and participating in the drama of relationships. In a moment of unhelpful commentary on my part, I said, "I'm thinking just listening to you that is a common thing about growing up where you have like something that feels fun to experience but at the same time maybe you are aware of like the possible dangers of it." Audrey simply replied, "Yeah." I asked, "Is that a good way to describe how you feel about it?" At this point, Audrey didn't engage the two sides of these experiences, or the seeming contradictions, as I invited (or pushed) her to. Instead, she voiced her interest in keeping the relationship from her mother: "My mom doesn't know about him and I don't plan on telling her about him either." Audrey's response to my attempts to create some sort of coherence out of this experience suggest that, while she recognizes the supposed dangers of entering into relationships, following her mother's reasoning, her concerns are more practical than philosophical. She prioritizes keeping the relationship from her mother over making sense of these conflicting ideas and feelings.

In Audrey's mother's and her own assessments, boys are imagined as the active agents in heterosexual relationships, the ones in control, and the ones who do damage. In Audrey's words, "[T]he son is the one fucking the daughter" (DG3, 5/19/17). It is up to girls, then, to protect themselves from these dangers; otherwise, girls incur this damage. One way girls protect themselves is by taking care to dress appropriately—not in a way that, in Audrey's words, says that you're "ready for sex." If you show a lot, according to

Audrey, “[Y]ou’re knowing that people are going to see that and are going to want you” (DG6, 6/16/17). Applying a poststructural feminist framework, I find plenty to critique in Audrey's account. The mutual exclusivity of the two choices: a girl can either have sex or “be something.” This framework makes impossible a girl who has sex and also pursues academic or professional goals. It’s a framework reliant on an overly deterministic series of causes and effects: if a girl dresses inappropriately, boys will see her, want her, have sex with her, get her pregnant, and then she will no longer be able to be something or “do something” of value with her life. But when I listen closely to the stories that give structure to Audrey's framework, I begin to wonder about when Audrey is talking about the world as she sees it and when she is talking about the world as it ought to be. Some of her stories seem to blend the two. For example, when she said, “[T]he son is the one fucking the daughter” (DG3, 5/19/17), she seems to be describing the world as she sees it, but she used this understanding to support the argument that parents should police boys as much as, or more than, they police girls—an argument for the world as it ought to be. In the case of her response to Zoe’s awkward chatter with a boy she likes on *Black-ish*, Audrey's comment can be read as a statement of both the world as she sees it and the world as it ought to be. She said that boys are “supposed to know you in order to ask you out and like you could be yourself” (DG3, 5/19/17). Audrey criticized the character’s behavior because it doesn’t reflect the world as she knows it to be (a girl doesn’t have to try to impress a boy who likes her), but it also specifies the favorable conditions under which the world is that way (the boy is “supposed to know you in order to ask you out”). Before interviewing Audrey, much of my analysis of her comments in Group centered around the way she cited and inscribed discourses of respectability. I bring up my own

confusion over whether Audrey refers to the world as she sees it or the world as she thinks it ought to be in order to undercut this analysis—especially as that analysis gathered its momentum only through sheer repetition across the previous chapter. A more complicated analysis of Audrey’s comments in *Group*, as well as her stories here, is one that recognizes what is at stake for Audrey and her mother in the world as they see it. Collins (1991) describes the troubling dilemma of Black motherhood: “[T]o ensure their daughters’ physical survival, mothers must teach them to fit into systems of oppression” (p. 123), but they must also “routinely encourage Black daughters to develop skills to confront oppressive conditions” (p. 124). Teaching daughters “to strive for an education so they can support themselves” (p. 123), to see “education [as] as a vehicle for advancement” (p. 124), is a way both to protect their physical and material well-being and to confront oppressive conditions. With Collins’s description of the dilemma of Black motherhood in mind, I see Audrey’s narration of this series of causes and effects as more than citation and reinscription of discourses of respectability. Instead, I see Audrey, following her mother’s teaching, taking a self-protective narrative stance in the face of interlocking systems of race, class, and gender oppression—in the face of the world as they see it. I call this stance a *narrative* stance because, by her account, Audrey doesn’t take this stance in the actual decisions she makes in her everyday life. The idea that not *doing something* with her life, or not *being something*, is seen by Audrey as a great loss suggests that she has taken up the self-reliance and self-valuation that, according to Collins, is the primary aim of the project of Black motherhood.

### **Danielle: “Everything Has an Impact”**

Danielle is a mystery to me. Over our two months of discussions, I never walked away from Group with a sense of what Danielle thought about our shared texts. I didn't, as I did with Briana, wonder to myself how she developed her distinctive mannerisms and style of speaking. I didn't, as I did with Kaylee, walk away with her melodic words stuck in my head. As a researcher, I thought of Danielle as a problem: *If I don't get her to talk more, I'll have nothing to say about her*. Danielle felt like a problem to me as a researcher and also as a teacher. Lively discussions bubbling over with laughter and disagreement and cross-talk feel to me like the hallmark of good teaching, and Danielle stood in my way of achieving that goal—all of which, of course, says more about me than it does about Danielle.

During our discussions, she often seemed bored, turning to her phone when Audrey, Briana, Jasmine, and Kaylee started swapping memories of embarrassing moments and arguing over whether or not boys care about their looks as much as girls, for example (DG1, 5/5/17). The first time I asked her directly to share her thoughts, she responded with silence (DG1, 5/5/17). Another time, she said, gesturing to the group dismissively, “I don't know. They already said everything” (DG5, 6/2/17). Danielle didn't put me at ease with her enthusiasm, as the rest of the group did, and I wrongly took for granted that she was in possession of that quality, and it was my job to create the conditions for her to express it.

## Caring for Yourself and Carrying Yourself

The stories Danielle told during the interview focused on her mother and how she was similar to and different from her. After telling a story about how she and her mother responded to her grandmother's death differently, Danielle moved to another topic.

I don't want to be those girls that, you know, like put themselves out there because that's not ladylike. That's not good. You're like showing yourself off, for what? For money? That's—that's not only disrespect to like the young kids who watch the videos or like the parents, but that's also disrespect to yourself because you're not caring, you're just doing it just because—but you need the money when you should be caring about how you carry yourself because everything has an impact. (NEI, 10/9/17)

Most salient in Danielle's interview is the idea that it matters how women carry themselves because “everything has an impact.” Describing her mother as the standard for carrying oneself well, Danielle explained, “She's very respectful. She's not like—she's not rude or anything.” Danielle described at length how her mother makes it a point not to show emotion in front of company. She acts “calmer” and “uses less anger in her voice” if Danielle and her sister are doing something wrong. Beyond these descriptions of modulating one's emotion for different audiences and settings, Danielle does not directly define what it means to carry oneself well. The best I can do to understand what Danielle meant by “carrying yourself” well is to define it in contrast to “those girls” from the A Boogie videos. To carry yourself well is to not “put [yourself] out there,” to be “ladylike,” to not “[show] yourself off,” especially for money. It is to be conscious of the “impact” one has on “young kids.”

Danielle's discussion of carrying oneself well repeatedly circled back to the idea that how one acts has an impact on others. Danielle explained that, while some women “just like go with life, like live life,” her mother “actually cares since she has three kids.

She actually cares how she carries herself because she wants us to carry ourself like she does” (NEI, 10/9/17). Here, the impact of one’s actions is felt by a younger generation that needs an example to follow (an idea I explore further in the next section). Following her mother’s example of suppressing her true feelings in the presence of company, Danielle takes cues from audience and setting when deciding how to act. For example, Danielle explains,

I’m different sometimes. Well, like, around some people. Like, if it’s around like family I’m the way I am because I don’t care because we’re all family. We act the way we want. But if I’m around like friends or something, I act different a little bit—like the things I say maybe or like how I act... When my grandma dropped me and Kaylee off at [Horizon Club] last year, um, I like—I felt like I couldn’t be myself around her but then there are certain things that I do around her that I like don’t around my family. Like, we gossip a lot and stuff.

Here, Danielle didn’t address what she does around her family that she wouldn’t do around her friends or why she acts differently for different audiences. What is salient here is that she sees her actions as shaped less by abiding inner qualities and more by audience and setting. I feel some conceptual friction between Danielle’s descriptions of how she and her mother modulate their actions and her references to carrying yourself well as a way of caring for yourself. In the former, personal actions are taken for others’ benefit, whereas, in the latter, they are taken for one’s own. Danielle described her mother as a woman who, unlike other women, “takes care of herself,” before entering into a lengthy discussion of how her mother deliberately acts to set an example for the younger generation and modulates her emotions and self-expression to not “show that side of [herself]” to company. Danielle did not directly equate caring for oneself with carrying oneself well, but the words “carry yourself” and “care” were linked in each of her descriptions of how her mother is, how she is, and how other women are *not*, in contrast.

In this story of her mother, Danielle cited and inscribed discourses of gender that conflate, or at least connect, how others see girls and women and how girls and women see themselves. To Danielle, carrying oneself well means not “putting [oneself] out there” like the women in music videos do. It also means acting appropriately based on audience and setting—not showing too much emotion around company and not gossiping around family. It is exercising self-control, politeness, and appropriateness to not disrupt the social order. In this configuration, how one carries oneself is either the mark or the extension of how she feels about herself, and dressing, acting, and speaking in accordance with others’ desires and expectations has been naturalized as worth.

### **Setting an Example**

Over the course of our interview, Danielle brought up her mother unprompted three times. She began by telling a story about her grandmother dying and contrasting the way that she and her mother experience emotion. Later, she brought up how different she and her mom are and, finally, how her mother carries herself. In this section, I examine some of these same stories but with a focus on how Danielle described her relationship with her mom and how she used the structure of that relationship to make points about how individuals come to understand gender.

Danielle emphasized that she and her mother are very different: “Me and my mom, we are like totally different people. When we are outside people ask like, ‘How is this your daughter? You guys are like totally different people.’ We’re like different beings. We’re like total opposites.” Even so, Danielle explained, “I always try to look up to her and I always try to compare myself to her so that, if I—if she does something wrong, I don’t do it, and if I do something wrong, I don’t let my siblings do the same



thing.” Two points of tension stand out to me in this narration. First, Danielle slipped easily from an emphasis on how different she and her mother are to how she tries to model herself after her mother. Whatever differences they have, Danielle is drawn to the idea that her mother is meant to set an example for her, and she is meant to follow it. Second, Danielle began by saying that she “[tries] to look up to her” but went on to provide an example of the inverse: “[I]f she does something wrong, I don’t do it, and if I do something wrong, I don’t let my siblings do the same thing.” I have no reason to think Danielle couldn’t supply positive examples of her mother’s influence, but the structure of the story suggests to me what is most salient to Danielle: that each generation is responsible to teach the next generation how to be in the world. Not only did she say that she looks up to her mother, but she also emphasized that her siblings look up to her. Earlier comments Danielle made in the discussion of *Step Up* and Kodak Black’s video “Tunnel Vision” prefigured this idea. In the discussion of *Step Up*, Danielle described the character Emily’s dancing: “I think it was meant for her to be seen as I guess sexy even though the audience for the movies can be like little kids” (DG, 5/30/17). She echoed this idea in the interview when she described the girls in A Boogie videos whose unladylike appearance amounts to “disrespect to the young kids who watch the videos” as “everything has an impact.” In the discussion of “Tunnel Vision,” she explained why a Black man and a White man wouldn’t want a child to see them fighting by saying, “I think it’s just the fact that she’s a kid and they don’t want her, I guess like don’t want her to grow up and get into fights about race.” In this final narration of the interview, Danielle brought greater force to this idea she introduced in Group. She doesn’t refer directly to Kaylee’s comment about some women who “would do anything to provide for

their families” (DG5, 6/2/18), but her rhetorical questions “For what? For money?” suggest that she rejects the rest of the group’s leniency toward the models in the A Boogie video. She seems to have weighed the options—appear in a video because you need the money or respect yourself and the children and families who watch the videos—and has come to a determination: because “everything has an impact,” Danielle will choose to follow her mother’s example, rather than pop culture’s example.

In Chapter IV, I argued that drawing the line between *appropriate* and *inappropriate* was a performative act that cited and inscribed discourses of gender and constituted the girls as respectable. Danielle was quiet during much of those discussions, but, in this interview, her stories show that her way of drawing the line is intentional and consistent. For Danielle, the knowledge of where the line goes is passed down from mother to daughter; pop culture is a potential disruption of that lineage, and Danielle is committed not only to rejecting that potential disruption but also to passing on her knowledge to her younger siblings.

Danielle seemed less conflicted about adopting her mother’s values and ways of being—even though she described herself as very different in personality from her mother—and most insistent that values and ways of being ought to be passed down from one generation to the next. In one sense, Danielle’s framework for thinking about gender contradicts my own as I reject the notion that children are socialized into their genders by more powerful adults (e.g., Walkerdine, 1990; Thorne, 1993). However, we can also consider how the belief in socialization itself sustains the gender binary. The belief that values and ways of being are passed down from a parent lends them credibility and authority, which, in turn, suppresses the possibility that they’d be questioned or

challenged. Danielle seems to take for granted, for example, the link between carrying oneself well and caring for oneself. Moreover, Danielle recognizes that the passing down can be done wrong—the wrong values and ways of being can be picked up by the younger generation. Her belief in socialization, then, creates an imperative to model appropriate behavior and avoid the mistakes of the previous generation—even for very young women like her. In this way, she assumes the mantle of one who acts and speaks in accordance with gender norms and, so, is an active participant in inscribing discourses of respectable femininity and self-control. On its face, Danielle’s a framework contradicts a poststructural framework, but, in practice, she actively participates in it.

Audrey and Danielle both narrate their mothers’ influence on their lives. Whereas Audrey takes up her mother’s teachings in narration but not necessarily in practice, Danielle seems to feel a special responsibility to take up the teachings in both. A second key difference between Audrey’s and Danielle’s narrations is that Audrey wants to be respectable in order to ensure a positive outcome in her own life, while Danielle wants to be respectable in order to set a good example for the next generation. Danielle’s narration shows her already taking up the responsibilities of Black motherhood, as Collins (1991) describes them: Black daughters learn “to anticipate carrying heavy responsibilities in their families and communities because these skills are essential to their own survival and those for whom they will eventually be responsible” (p. 123). I can see Danielle’s mother way of modulating her emotional expression in response to audience and setting as one of these essential skills for survival, even though Danielle didn’t narrate instances when the stakes were especially high. In Collins’s account, successfully navigating White supremacist patriarchal social spaces requires Black girls and women to fit in by

suppressing what they would otherwise say and do in private spaces. Fitting in ensures “physical survival, but at the high cost of emotional destruction” (p. 123). But, again, Collins characterizes the project of Black motherhood as a balancing act. While Danielle’s mother teaches her to suppress her emotional expression in response to audience and setting, she has also, it seems, taught her well to recognize her own autonomy and power in setting a positive example for others. Collins argues that Black mothers are strict disciplinarians precisely because “they want their daughters to grow up to be assertive and self-determining” (p. 128). Even as Danielle’s acceptance of her mother’s wisdom is unquestioning, her insistence on her own influence over and responsibility for others has an assertive and self-determining quality. Unlike Audrey, who waffles over her mother’s exhortations to avoid romantic and sexual relationships, Danielle narrates knowing for sure who she wants to be and why.

### **Kaylee: “Boys Are Kind of Complicated”**

Kaylee’s speech is so melodic that it would often get stuck in my head, like a song. I found her characteristic way of saying “Oh, no”<sup>1</sup> particularly charming, and sticky, and found myself incorporating it into my own speech after a few weeks of interacting with her. I often heard in Kaylee’s melodies the voice of a mother. I have no reason in particular to think that Kaylee has adopted her mother’s speech patterns, but they strike me as maternal. Kaylee is not quite as kinetic as Briana, but she tells stories

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<sup>1</sup> It’s difficult to represent her intonation in words, but she clips the “oh” and then breathes into the elongated and rounded “no.” One afternoon, I was looking for Kaylee and asked a group of teachers if they had seen her. They asked which Kaylee (there were several in the grade) and, not remembering her last name in the moment, I imitated her way of saying “oh, no,” and they immediately knew which Kaylee I wanted. This is to say that her way of saying “oh, no” is quite characteristic.

just as expressively and seems to especially relish reenacting situations, doing impressions of what others said and enlivening her own inner monologue using her face, body, and tone. Kaylee was particularly adept at expressing judgment by giving a quick look or a flick of the hand and exasperation by pitching her voice into an unusually high register.

Kaylee always seemed less susceptible to my influence than the others. When I heard myself ask leading questions, either in the moment or upon re-listening to our discussions, I noticed that Kaylee would not be led anywhere she didn't already want to go. While Danielle, Audrey, Jasmine, and even Briana would often mechanically agree with me in such moments, Kaylee would pause and then, occasionally, reject my suggestions. Rightly or wrongly, I connect this pattern with another memorable, and characteristic, moment with Kaylee. Early in Group's second meeting, Kaylee took out a notebook and began taking notes. I interrupted Audrey to quip, "You taking notes there, Kaylee?" "Uh-huh," she responded without looking up. She took notes throughout our discussions of *Empire*, *Black-ish*, and *Step Up*. That I never asked to see her notes, curious as I am, is one way I yielded to what I take to be her de facto leadership of Group.

### **Drawing the Line**

I opened Kaylee's interview in the same way I opened the other interviews: I invited her to take a few minutes to reflect on the ideas we discussed in Group and jot down real-life examples of those ideas. She told me that she didn't need to do that and was ready to begin. Kaylee launched our interview with commentary on how she and others dress. I include this commentary here even though it isn't a story because, as I

explain later in this section, the fact that it does not take shape as a story is significant. She said, “I like to like look, you know, nice and decent when I go outside, like, so if I’m only going to the store I would like try to like fix my hair, make sure I have the right clothes on to not look crazy outside” (NEI, 10/23/17). Kaylee put in opposition two ways of dressing: one can look either “nice,” “decent,” and “right” or “crazy.” Unlike in Group discussions, when the most salient binary was between *appropriate* (covered up and respectable) and *inappropriate* (exposed and sexualized/objectified), here, Kaylee created an ostensibly gender-neutral binary between looking normal—*nice, decent, and right*—and abnormal, or *crazy*. Perhaps sensing that Kaylee's binary was gender-neutral, I asked, “Do you think that desire to look nice is specific to girls, or is it girls and boys, or is it different for the different genders?” Kaylee responded:

Kaylee: I think it’s for both genders, because, I mean, I think it’s like how you feel—the way you feel in something like, um—like how comfortable you are in the clothing and like, wait—and how comfortable you’re in it and, yeah. But I also think you shouldn’t go outside like with a bra...that’s a bit too much and crazy, so. And for boys, you should wear a shirt. Sometimes I see guys with no shirt. Their pants is all the way down to their knees. Like, that’s not—there’s no need for that. Oh my gosh. Nobody wants to see your underwear and stuff.

Mia: So you don’t like that on boys or girls. Like, dressed in a way that’s too revealing.

Kaylee: Yeah, it’s too much.

Mia: What is it—OK. What is—why does it give you that reaction do you think?

Kaylee: ‘Cause it makes me think you have no clothes, like, your parents can’t buy you clothes or you’re just choosing not to wear them to get like a reaction from people. I feel like you want to get extra so you can get people’s attention.

Mia: OK. And you think, um, boys and girls—you feel the same way about boys and girls. Men and women.

Kaylee: I think girls they should dress a little more extra, but like, that’s not too revealing just to make sure like they feel confident and like, they feel pretty.

Mia: And that's more important for girls than for boys.

Kaylee: Boys don't really care.

What Kaylee did in this exchange was reminiscent of Group's discussions: she drew a line between an acceptable and unacceptable way to construct one's appearance. She created a binary by using language that creates contrast (as described above, the contrasting adjectives), and she acted to place judgment on one side of the binary by using words like *should* and *shouldn't*. However, there are two key differences in these comments. First, she applied her judgment of revealing clothes to both boys and girls, men and women. I asked Kaylee three times to confirm that her judgment applies equally and she confirmed that it did, adding only at the end that "girls...should dress a little more extra." Second, her reasoning diverged from the reasoning offered by Audrey, Briana, and Jasmine in Group. According to Audrey, for example, wearing revealing clothes marks one as "ready for sex," and "clothes determine your personality" (DG6, 6/1617). Kaylee didn't make such strong connections between clothes and one's inner state and personality. Instead, she emphasized her own disgust at seeing other people's exposed bodies: "Oh my gosh. No one wants to see your underwear and stuff." Her reasoning only further emphasized her disgust: "'Cause it makes me think you have no clothes, like, your parents can't buy you clothes or you're just choosing not to wear them to get like a reaction from people. I feel like you want to get extra so you can get people's attention." In Danielle's stories, dressing in a revealing way is embedded in bigger ideas about respectability, and, in Audrey's stories, dressing in a revealing way is part of a chain of causes and effects that ends with teen pregnancy and squandered potential. In contrast, Kaylee didn't offer a story at all, only commentary accented characteristically with an

exasperated tone and expression and dismissive hand gestures. When I asked if she had a specific example of a time when she felt like she should fix herself up and look nice, she gave an example from the previous day of realizing she was wearing clashing colors. Otherwise, she said that she is usually most comfortable in sweats and a tee shirt for their practicality. When I then asked again for a specific example of a time when she felt that she looked particularly nice and felt (to use her word) *confident* with what she was wearing, she shrugged and said, “I’m not sure.” The fact that Kaylee didn’t tell a specific personal story about this topic, even though she seemed eager to discuss it, leads me to wonder if she doesn’t feel as implicated in it as Danielle and Audrey do. I wonder if she relishes the position she has created for herself as one who critiques—or even mocks—others’ clothes but doesn’t experience any sort of struggle or conflict about how she dresses herself. In this understanding, Kaylee’s act of assuming that position is itself the story.

In the final comment of this exchange, Kaylee drew a distinction between genders, saying, “I think girls they should dress a little more extra, but like, that’s not too revealing just to make sure like they feel confident and like, they feel pretty.” To make *feeling* pretty comprehensible, I must, at the very least, connect inner feelings and outward appearance. Kaylee seems to draw such a connection by listing two different feelings, *confident* and *pretty*—although it isn’t clear if that connection is an equation of these adjectives, a causal relationship, or if it is just associative. By connecting how girls feel on the inside with how they look on the outside, Kaylee cited and inscribed discourses of gender, particularly those tied into corporate interests. The idea that there’s a connection between inner feeling and outer appearance is a commercially viable



substitute for the idea that women should dress and otherwise construct their appearance to please heterosexual men. Finally, Kaylee's commentary suggests that she sees the way girls and women dress as governed by degrees. According to Kaylee, girls “should dress a little more extra, but, like that’s not too revealing.” The framing of the issue as a matter of degrees—“a little more” and “not too”—reflects the way girls and women are expected to negotiate a narrow space in which they are desirable to men while maintaining respectability.

### **Wanting More**

When Audrey narrated her experiences of romantic relationships, she glossed over what I am inclined to think of as the substance of the relationships—the boyfriend himself, the reasons she was attracted to him, how they spent time together—and emphasized instead the dramatic turning points of the relationships. Kaylee also emphasized these dramatic turning points, but, in contrast to Audrey's narratives, Kaylee's narratives have her, at least, striving for meaning, both in the act and the substance of narration. Kaylee gave her reasoning for entering into and exiting relationships. Kaylee even recognized that *liking* the other person matters. I describe her as *striving* for meaning because I sense a struggle at the surface of Kaylee's narrative—a struggle to, as Audrey did, participate in the correct narrative of heterosexual relationships but to do so in a way that feels meaningful. After Kaylee made general comments on the ways boys and girls express feelings, I asked if she had any examples from her own relationships with boys. I quote her response in full below, using quotation marks to indicate when she made air quotes with her hands.

Kaylee: Boys are kind of complicated. Like, I was “dating” this boy a few months ago. He’s not complicated. Like in the hallways he barely said hi to me, he never text me, like what are you doing? I thought we were dating and I’m so confused and I asked him, he’s like yeah, sure. I’m like, it don’t look like it. So I broke up with him the next day and then two weeks later he asked me out again and I’m just like do I say yes, do I say no? ‘Cause I don’t know what’s happening.

Mia: Did you go out with him again? Like did you go do something, hang out with him?

Kaylee: Yeah, I don’t do that kind of stuff. I haven’t kissed somebody yet [inaudible].

Mia: OK. Because you feel like you’re not ready?

Kaylee: I mean, I haven’t found the “right” person.

Mia: I see.

Kaylee: ‘Cause I didn’t really “like” him that—like that, I just did it ‘cause, I don’t know. ‘Cause it’s like, he liked me a lot so I was just trying to give him a chance so...

Mia: I see. Yeah.

Kaylee: I was trying to make it work. It wasn’t working.

Mia: That’s interesting. OK. So, you felt like you didn’t really *like* him, like him. But you have had that feeling about other boys?

Kaylee: I kind of like somebody now. But I don’t know if he likes me. I’m not going to shout out to the world. (NEI, 10/23/17)

What stands out to me about Kaylee's story, especially in contrast to Audrey's, is that Kaylee saw it as a problem that “he barely said hi to me, he never text me.” In her narrative, their lack of interaction left her feeling like she didn’t “know what’s happening.” I find myself with two possible explanations of why this relationship felt like a problem to Kaylee. The first explanation is that she didn’t know what was happening because she expected some sort of meaningful connection with her boyfriend—she wanted more than to, in Audrey's words, “be...in the like drama of it.” Even though she

admitted to not really liking him, she “was just trying to give him a chance...trying to make it work.” The intentional effort she described here suggests that she has some sort of expectation of an emotionally meaningful relationship, even if that relationship was falling short. My second explanation is that she sensed discordance between what was happening in the relationship and what she understood was supposed to happen in the official narrative of heterosexual relationships. She quoted herself as saying “it don’t look like it” to the boy—that is, their lack of interaction doesn’t *look like* they are dating. This comment suggests that she holds an image in her mind of what a dating relationship looks like—not necessarily what it *feels* like—and that she detected a mismatch between the image and the reality. The other element of her narration that suggests to me that she holds an image of how relationships are supposed to go is her use of air quotes. She said, “I was ‘dating’ this boy a few months ago,” “I haven’t found the ‘right’ person,” and “I didn’t really ‘like’ him.” Her air quotes seem to indicate that Kaylee recognizes that certain phenomena exist—liking, dating, finding the right person—but that she either doesn’t fully subscribe to them or she doesn’t know where she is positioned in relation to them. She seems to be asking herself, both in the substance of her narration and in her act of narrating: *Is what I’m doing called dating? Is there a person out there who will be the right person?*

I conceptualize these two explanations of Kaylee's problem—one, that she wants more than the narrative of heterosexual relationships handed to her and the other, that what she experienced didn’t match the narrative handed to her—in opposition to each other, and I favor the former over the latter. My preference stems from my desire to find examples of discursive agency in the girls’ stories. According to Butler (1997), discursive

agency is a disruption in the repetition of performative acts that constitutes gendered subjects. I set out wanting to find examples of discursive agency, so it would feel satisfying to me to say that Kaylee's desire for a meaningful connection with a boy exceeds the storyline Audrey inscribed in her own stories of dating boys. Kaylee articulated her own desires and expectations, spotlighting her own interior experience of the relationship in a way that Audrey did not. However, an analysis of Kaylee's story that calls it an example of *discursive agency* is punctured by her narrative investments in how relationships are *supposed to go*. Even her narration of “trying to make it work” is consonant with storylines of heterosexual relationships in which it falls on the girl or woman to put in the emotional effort to sustain the relationship. The desire for discursive agency tempts me to create a rosier picture of Kaylee's situation than is warranted and to designate some accounts of experience as preferred over others. It also prevents me from seeing how both explanations actually depend on discourses of gender to make sense. Both explanations position girls and women as subjects who are more capable of and responsible for emotional work in a relationship and who are expected to overcome, for example, their own lack of attraction to be chosen. Still, as we see here and in her previous narrations, Kaylee positions herself as a critic of the expectations of girls and women and the arrangements into which we enter. In doing so, she holds open the possibility of discursive agency, even if she doesn't fulfill it.

### **Jasmine: “A Whole ‘Nother Problem”**

Jasmine only attended Group the final three meetings, when we discussed music videos and when I sat down with her and Audrey to discuss meanings of *inappropriate*.

She was absent for our discussions of *Empire*, *Black-ish*, and *Step Up*. Her interview was shorter than the others because a family member arrived to take her home not too long after we started. It was also interrupted by a school leader walking in and out of the office we were using. All in all, I have far fewer data about Jasmine than data about the other girls, but what I do have is relevant and particularly helpful to me in understanding how the girls relate to the ideas we discussed. Here, I focus on the limited data we produced—particularly on the word *inferior*, which she used each time she participated, and a set of stories she told in the interview to illustrate how women are treated as *inferior*.

Jasmine began our interview by mentioning how pop culture can depict girls as being *inferior* and, at my prompting, narrating a series of stories to clarify what she meant by *inferior*. I begin this section with an overview of her previous uses of the word in Group. While Jasmine didn't participate in Group as often as the other girls, she used the word *inferior* in each discussion of pop culture texts, and no other girl used the word. Her three uses of the word related to a range of topics but also coalesced around particular ideas about gender.

After our discussion of women's physical appearance in A Boogie's "Timeless" came to a close, I asked the group if they wanted to address any other topics—relationships, feelings, abilities. Jasmine responded, "It's kind of showing the girl as being inferior...because like what he's making her do, like being a side person...when it talks about that she's [inaudibly reading the printed lyrics], he's saying stuff bad about her like he can boss her into doing what he wants to do but when it comes to her wanting to do something, she can't do it" (DG5, 6/2/17). Jasmine's explanation of inferiority here was based on the way A Boogie positioned her as a *side bitch/chick* in the song's lyrics.

Jasmine characterized his treatment as “boss[ing] her into doing what he wants to do but when it comes to her wanting to do something she can’t do it.” Kaylee responded by addressing not the character in the song but the models in the video, saying, “[T]hey earn money for it.” The discussion proceeded into a discussion of what women will do to earn money and ended when Jasmine said, “They do it because that’s their job because they wouldn’t do it because of who it is” and then reiterated that “that’s their job.” Threaded through this exchange is this idea that women sometimes have to do what they don’t want to do—whether in a romantic or sexual relationship with a man or in their careers. One of Jasmine’s meanings of *inferior*, then, has to do with the agency and control. Women are treated as inferior when they cannot do what they want.

In Group’s final meeting, our discussion shifted from a reading of Kodak Black’s videos to a more general discussion of gender and race. The girls debated whether the inequality between genders was greater or less than the inequality between White people and people of color. Jasmine offered, “[W]omen, they’re like getting cheated and inferior to men, like they get paid less—just like, just ‘cause they get paid less it’s like unfair” (DG7, 6/21/17). In this example, Jasmine brought the word *inferior* to a discussion of pay disparities already underway, and, in the previous example, she emphasized that women are treated as inferior in their jobs when they are made to do something they do not want to do. In both cases, Jasmine’s use of *inferior* addressed inequality in the professional sphere: women have less agency and control, and they are paid less. Because of the particularity of this word, I wonder where or from whom Jasmine heard, or hears, the word *inferior* and what other topics and ideas she associates with it. My ears prick up a bit when I hear the word because of my desire to identify examples of discursive agency

(Butler, 1997). I wonder if Jasmine's use of the word, as well as the attention she pays to the unfairness involved in the production of pop culture texts like music videos, could constitute a failure to repeat gendered norms. On one hand, these examples show that Jasmine did not take for granted the meanings of femininity made available in these texts and did not accept the production of these texts as power-neutral. On the other hand, the discussions in which these comments were embedded were hospitable discursive spaces for such ideas and, in the first case, relied on ideas about respectability to build a case that women were being treated unfairly.

In our interview, Jasmine brought up *inferiority* in the context of music videos straightaway. She said, “I noticed that in music videos women like seem to be portrayed as inferior to men, the clothes they wore, there could be like women and men arguing but, like, the men not caring but the women do” (NEI, 1010/17). This comment puzzled me in the moment. Jasmine slipped from one topic—revealing dress—to another—men and women in romantic relationships. I wondered if she was plugging into something we had discussed in Group that I couldn’t remember. I asked her what men didn’t care about, and she responded, “Like if the woman wants to leave, the man really wouldn’t care. Like, they would just treat her badly but then the woman, they would like get really upset about it. They would care.” I took this to mean that men are not as invested in their relationships as women: they treat women badly and then leave. This made some sense to me, but the story that followed was harder to track. I quote it here in full in order to fully address both the substance and the act of narration:

Jasmine: I put that like sometimes when I walk around in the street, I noticed a lot of women were like arguing. Like, they’ll be on the phone arguing. Like—sometimes my mom, she would call my dad to see where he is and he would like get mad and start arguing with her but then if—that if he was to—if she was to

ask him, he would get mad, but then he would get mad if she wouldn't tell him where she was. So, like...

Mia: He would get mad if she wouldn't tell him. OK. Go ahead.

Jasmine: Like, it's like—if my dad was outside and my mom was home with me and my siblings, she would call him to see where he is. He wouldn't say nothing, so she gets mad. And then he leaves and starts arguing—like he [inaudible] and starts arguing but then if it was my mom—if it was him to ask my mom. If she said nothing, it would be considered [inaudible] 'cause he didn't say nothing and she couldn't do anything about it.

Mia: And how—tell me how that connects to what we were talking about as a group.

Jasmine: 'Cause like, it kind of shows how women are inferior. How he could get mad but when it comes to her getting mad, it's a problem.

I then asked if this situation just applies to her parents or if it applies to her own life as well. She responded:

Sometimes. Like, a boy—it's like basically the same thing but it's like me and a boy. If, like, if I was to get mad at them then it would be a whole 'nother problem but if they were to get mad at me, then like—like, if they were to get mad at me—if I were to do something, they expect that they can get mad and not speak to me or whatever. But if they were to do it would be like, well, what are you talking about? You shouldn't be mad.

I then asked her for a specific example.

Well, it was this boy. His name was Daniel. And, um, he was at the park with a whole bunch of girls and they was dancing...and then so I got mad at him because I wasn't there and he was like, 'Why are you mad at me? I was just at the park.' But then I told him it was the things he was doing and then like two days after, I was hanging out with some boys in the school and then he got mad and decided not to talk to me, but I said—but I told him that when he did something bad, like he didn't have to feel bad for it. Like, it wasn't a big deal. But if it was me then in was a big deal.

Jasmine told what I see as a single story, four different ways. I found this story in all of its retellings difficult to follow in the moment and still difficult after many re-listenings and rereadings. Here, I retrace the logic of the story, as far as I understand it, before



connecting it to Jasmine's notion of inferiority and examining the discourses of gender and storylines of heterosexual relationships that shape it. The first version of the story that made sense to me was the last one, and I use that version as a scaffold to understand the three previous ones. In the fourth version of the story, Jasmine's boyfriend got mad at her for spending time with other boys but expected her to feel fine about his spending time with other girls. Applying this understanding to the second version of the story, about her parents, we can see that her father got mad at her mother for being absent but her mother was expected to feel fine about his absence. In the stories of her parents' relationship and her own relationship, Jasmine constructed parallel situations, in effect controlling for what instigated the anger. Her parents both got mad about the other's absence. She and Daniel both got mad about the other spending time with other boys or girls, respectively.

Part of what confused me in these stories was the repetition of *get mad*. Everyone, both men and women, boys and girls, *get mad* in these stories, which seems to reverse Jasmine's original point that women care more about their relationships than men do. These stories show that everyone is emotionally invested in what happens in the relationship. One possible clarification has to do with what Jasmine means by *get mad*. *Get mad* can mean both *feel* anger and *express* anger. I originally interpreted Jasmine's use of *get mad* to mean *feel* anger. This led me to see her stories as a reversal of her original point, that women care more about relationships than men do. If we instead interpret *get mad* as *express* anger and consider the two different kinds of anger that propel these stories—first-order anger at a transgression and second-order anger at the other's expression of anger—we can see connections between her original point and the

stories she told. According to Jasmine, the boy/man in the relationship gets mad at the girl/woman for being mad. This second-order anger shuts down the girl's first-order anger, effectively enforcing a rule that the girl/woman must suppress her feelings in a relationship. In contrast, the boy's first-order anger in comparable situations goes unchecked by the girl. In this narrative framework, Jasmine's stories do support her original point that women care more than men do about relationships, only *caring more* means, not being more emotionally invested in the relationship, but doing more emotional work to preserve peace in the relationship. The boy's/man's *caring* has more to do with control and surveillance of the girl's/woman's behavior.

Even as I allow myself to arrive at a tenuous understanding of Jasmine's story, I must consider what is still incomplete or glossed over in her telling. The effect of the inequality that Jasmine described is that, just as in her other examples of *inferiority*, the girl's inner life is not recognized or valued. The girl is expected to suppress her anger if she is to avoid "a whole 'nother problem." In her telling, doing so does not seem to be an active choice or a cunning strategy. There is no choice as we see in, for example, her mother's case: "[S]he *couldn't* do anything about" (NEI, 10/10/17; emphasis added) her own anger at her father for being away. The effects of inequality, then, are a stripping away of agency and control. While these effects are narrated in Jasmine's story, the cause, or the source of the boy's/man's power, is not. What seems to be missing, in terms of the narrative logic of the story, is an explanation of why the boy/man, not the girl/woman, has the power to shut down another's anger—to make it "a whole 'nother problem"—and how exactly that power is wielded. These are two different sorts of questions: the former is more philosophical (and, of course, I would argue, is related to how we are discursively

constituted as gendered subjects), and the latter is more practical. I want to resist overstating the significance of this incompleteness, of this gap in the storytelling. After all, not every discussion about big or small injustices in everyday life probe into the causes of those injustices. However, this incompleteness feels meaningful to me when I imagine how I tell and respond to stories quite like these in my everyday experience. If a friend were telling me this story, I would certainly ask her for exactly the kind of clarity Jasmine's story lacked: *Why does he get to shut you down when you feel angry? How is he even doing that?* And, of course, just below the surface of these questions is the point I would inevitably make: *You have a right to feel whatever you feel and express that to him. There's nothing he can say or do that changes that.* If I told these stories (and I have), I would supply that commentary (at least the more practical commentary on *how* the man was able to shut down my anger) as a way of binding the events together narratively. One might say, for example, how the man raised his voice, paced around the room, or gesticulated wildly, and how this effectively shut the woman down by exhausting her or by revealing her attempts to advocate for herself as futile. I take this detour into an alternative version of the story only to highlight another way the same basic story could be, and has been, told. Jasmine might have all sorts of theories about the source of the boy's/man's power in this situation and be able to identify what he said and did to wield that power. And she might not. She might be able to develop some ideas, if prompted, but these questions also might not feel salient to her when she reflects on her experience and her parents' experiences. We cannot know for sure which is the case, but I am struck by the reasoning and rationality that Jasmine brought to assembling these stories. My initial confusion notwithstanding, she did ultimately tell two different stories

about two different sets of people in two different situations with the exact same structure—even taking care to highlight the inequality between the boy/man and girl/women by, in effect, controlling for the impetus for their original anger. She brought rationality to detecting this pattern and labeling it as an inequality—showing that this pattern positioned women as *inferior*. She did not, however, bring reasoning and rationality to the experience itself, working through why and how the boy/man would have the power to force the girl/woman to suppress her feelings. I wonder if this incompleteness reflects the fact that the experience itself feels confusing and disorienting to her. Perhaps she found herself telling him, for example, “that when he did something bad, like he didn’t have to feel bad for it” but not knowing why.

Returning to Jasmine's use of inferiority, each time Jasmine described women being treated or portrayed as *inferior*, she drew a clear contrast between the effects of inequality on men and women. Men are paid more; women are paid less. Men are covered up; women expose their bodies. Men get to make choices; women do not. What seems salient about the word *inferior* to Jasmine is the contrast it allows her to illustrate: inequality of effects. The word itself, unlike other comparative adjectives she could use (for example, women are treated or portrayed as *less smart* or *less capable*), is empty of content. Jasmine takes it up as an all-purpose word to describe all kinds of examples of superiority and inferiority. The different ways she uses it, the way she slips between topics when she uses it, the gaps in the stories she tells to illustrate it, indicate to me that she is still trying to make sense of these inequalities she sees and experiences.

I am reluctant to make bold claims about the substance of the narration, the lived experience referred to in the story. I conceptualize stories as active constructions, and,

while they sustain some relationship to the lived experience, they do not serve as a replica of that experience or a transparent window onto it. Still, when I consider Jasmine's stories in light of the concept of discursive agency, I find that I need to distinguish between the substance of the narration and the act of narration. It seems that, in her experience with her boyfriend, Jasmine inhabited the subject positions discursively made available. She seemed to acquiesce to the expectation that she suppress her feelings in order to make the relationship work by, for example, telling her boyfriend that he doesn't have to feel badly about what he did. The structure of this dynamic cites and inscribes discourses that emphasize girls' and women's emotionality and frame feminized emotion as a problem. Even as she inhabited this subject position, Jasmine narrated her own resistance to the set-up. She sees herself as being treated as *inferior* when she is expected to suppress her feelings. Contrast Jasmine's view with Danielle, who emphasized the importance of modulating your expression of feeling for different audiences in order to be appropriate. Given some distance between the moment of lived experience and the moment of narration, Jasmine reexamined the power structure of the relationship and characterized it as unfair.

### **Briana: Just Be Yourself, Say What You Want**

Briana is, to say the least, loquacious. In some discussions, Briana said twice as much—literally, said twice as many words—as the next most talkative girl. Briana didn't often speak first, and she didn't interrupt others. Her contributions most often took the form of monologues; she was able to hold the floor with energy, volume, and humor. Briana's words were often shaped and enhanced by her expressive tone, body language,

and the indescribable noises she made with her mouth. She often sang what she said and danced while she said it. When she wasn't literally singing and dancing, Briana cackled, yelled, wiggled her shoulders, bounced in her seat, and, when she wanted to indicate that she meant what she was saying, sat up straight, fluttered her eyelashes, and clasped her hands on the desk. Briana cursed often and was quick to remind the rest of the group that they were allowed to curse as well. She told stories collaboratively with the other girls—most often Kaylee—but, whether right or wrong, I always had the sense that the stories were mostly Briana's invention. She made claims about herself often and drew on her friendships with the other girls to support these claims [“And you know me because you're my twin sister,” she yelled at Jasmine and Kaylee when they questioned her claim that she doesn't care about how she looks (DG1, 5/5/17)]. In our interview, Briana characteristically held the floor, telling two lengthy stories, each with a distinct beginning, middle, and end. Given the sheer volume of data about Briana, I was relieved to see that her interview data had a manageable shape and structure. Here, I analyze these two stories individually but also, resisting the temptation to treat these stories as finite and clear-cut, bring in additional data from Group to complicate her meanings.

### **Being Scooped Up**

Briana's first set of stories dealt with boys' “expectations” of girls' physical appearance. She told a quick story about an older boy who once told her that he would date her if she wore makeup, to which Briana replied, “I'm not trying to go out with you because you're just telling me what to wear, what to do” (NEI, 10/11/17). After a side story about how that boy is mean to everyone, I asked her if she had any more positive

experiences interacting with “guys who don’t have those expectations.” She responded with a longer story about a boy named Julian from her summer camp:

Oh yeah. Um. There was—yeah—and then Justin—no it was a different guy. His name, wait, what—oh my God—oh yeah. Julian. It’s too many Js. So Julian, he was also from that camp. From, I mean, I worked in a camp, but he was also from there and he was like oh, um, it was over the summer. All the guys just kept looking at butts over the summer so apparently he started looking at mine and he said. ‘Oh, you got the fatty.’ That means you got a big butt so he was like, ‘Oh, you got the fatty so why won’t you wearing these skinny jeans and why won’t you wear any joggers or like leggings?’ I’m like, I’m not trying to make my butt pop out. I’m not trying to make anybody look at my butt. I’m just being myself, and he was like, ‘Man, that means I can’t scoop you.’ I’m like, I was trying not—I was making—I was like, oh my God. I’m like, I’m—oh my God. I was—I told him, I was like, I’m not trying to make anybody scoop me. I’m like, I’m not trying to make anybody scoop me up. All I’m doing is just trying to be myself and if you don’t like me for that, then I don’t need you in my life. And he said okay. He was like I hope we’re still friends and I’m like, no. I’m being dead serious with you, how are you trying to like, no. I’m sorry. I don’t play that.

What stands out to me first about Briana's act of narration here is her use of “oh my God” as a placeholder when she struggles to find the right words. She said “oh my God” first when she couldn’t remember the name of the boy and then again, twice, as she prepared to narrate her response to Julian in the moment. In the first case, she seemed to be remarking more on her own failure to remember the boy’s name. In the second case, her use of “oh my God” heightened the sense of her exasperation in the story. The expression served to both give her some time to get her narration straight in her mind and convey the struggle in the moment to know how to respond to such an offensive comment. Briana could have been struggling to find the words because the details themselves were fuzzy in her memory, because she needed to make a split-second decision about what she was comfortable revealing to me, or because she wanted to make sure that she performed the narration effectively. When she did get her bearings (“I’m not trying to make anybody scoop me”), the rest of her narration was smooth and strong. She picked up speed with

the sentence, “All I’m doing is just trying to be myself and if you don’t like me for that, then I don’t need you in my life.”

Briana’s narrations (here and in Group) rely on quoted dialogue, and so there is some overlap between the act of narration and the substance of narration. Here, I analyze the ideas about gender she formulated in the moment of her experience and in the moment of her narration as a single unit. According to Briana's response to Julian, there are two viable interpretations of how a girl appears (perhaps how she acts as well): she is either being herself or she is trying to attract the attention of boys. This formulation doesn’t leave room for a both/and interpretation or a third interpretation. In some ways, Briana's narration here is similar to Audrey's narration of what happens when one dresses inappropriately. Audrey narrated an airtight sequence of causes and effects: if a girl dresses inappropriately, boys will see her, want her, have sex with her, get her pregnant, and then she will no longer be able to be something or “do something” of value with her life. Briana's story is similar in that attracting the attention of boys constitutes, in one way or another, not being true to oneself. However, the stakes are much lower in Briana's story; she didn’t narrate any long-term effects of attracting boys’ attention. What mattered to Briana was being able to be herself in that moment.

Listening again to Briana's narrated response to Julian, I am aware of her repetition:

I’m like, I’m not trying to make my butt pop out. I’m not trying to make anybody look at my butt. I’m just being myself...I was trying not—I was making—I was like, oh my God. I’m like, I’m—oh my God. I was—I told him, I was like, I’m not trying to make anybody scoop me. I’m like, I’m not trying to make anybody scoop me up. (NEI, 10/11/17)



Briana repeated “I’m not trying to” four times (five, if we count her response to Justin in her first story), emphasizing the idea that girls control whether or not boys pay attention to them. If a boy is paying attention to, commenting on, or expressing desire for a girl’s body, it is because she *made him* do that. Operating according to this idea, Briana responded defensively, as if Julian’s comment about her body was an accusation that she was trying to attract his attention. She emphasized that, no, she didn’t want to make her “butt pop out,” “make anybody look at my butt,” or “make anybody scoop me up.” The opposite of *trying*, then, is being herself.

Briana’s comments in Group add some texture to the otherwise straightforward binary opposition she set up in this story. In our discussion of the character Zoe’s awkward interaction with a man she liked in *Black-ish*, for example, Briana said, “Yeah, but a woman, a girl should not be scared to talk to a guy who she likes because a guy, a guy is the one who’s supposed to be asking you out, not the girl...why does a girl gotta do all this stuff for a guy just to ask her out?” (DG3, 5/19/17). Later in that discussion, when the girls discussed why Zoe’s father is so overprotective, the girls debated whether parents should be more overprotective of their sons or daughters. Briana said, “[I]t should be equal, but I still think it should be more the boy because the boy pursues the girl.” In these comments, we see both that Briana believes that boys/men are supposed to pursue and ask out girls/women and that it follows that girls/women should not have to put in any effort to bring about the relationship. The girl should not have to “do all this stuff” to attract the boy. This idea was prefigured in our discussion of *Modern Family* when she said, “Like, me, I just put something on, I put it on and I’m fine. I don’t care about how I look when I go outside. But something, looking like a hobo? Then, you know, I care just

a little bit. I don't dress like a hobo" (DG1, 5/5/17). And, of course, the idea that a girl should not have to try is echoed in her account of "not trying to" do anything to attract Julian's attention. Taking these examples together, it seems that Briana does not want to be perceived as *trying*—or, by extension, *caring*. Instead, she seems to value *being herself*, which is "*all [she's] doing*" (emphasis added).

My first reaction to hearing her response to Julian was to be heartened that she so forcefully rejected a comment I take to be offensive in the way it both objectifies her and tries to exert control over her. She rejected it and centered her own desires—or her own lack of desire. But, of course, my assessment also includes an analysis of the subject positions into which she enters as she responds to the comment (again, treating her response to him in the moment and as narrated to me as one). At first, thinking back on Audrey's parallel narration of what happens when one dresses in a revealing way, I saw Briana as performing a kind of innocence in her response, constituting herself as respectable. She "[doesn't] play that," she told Julian—she is not *that kind* of girl. In this formulation, the dichotomy between a respectable or innocent girl and one who wants attention from boys is brightly drawn; it makes impossible the idea of simultaneously wanting to be "scooped up" and being yourself. My second analysis centered on the fluidity of Briana's narration of the sentence, "All I'm doing is just trying to be myself and if you don't like me for that, then I don't need you in my life." I see her here citing popular ideas about so-called *girl power*, thereby constituting herself as strong and empowered. She refuses to bend to a boy's will and expects that she is worthy of attention and affection for being who she is. This formulation takes for granted that there

is such a thing as *being yourself* and presupposes an understanding of selfhood defined by abiding inner qualities that are expressed consistently through speech and action.

The analysis that feels most salient to me, however, is one in which Briana constitutes herself as a *cool girl*. My understanding of *cool girl* was shaped by former scholar and popular writer Anne Helen Petersen's (2014) analysis of the movie star Jennifer Lawrence, published by BuzzFeed. The subhead of Petersen's article sums up the *cool girl*: "Be chill and don't be a downer, act like a dude but look like a supermodel."

Petersen describes Lawrence's *cool girl* charm:

On the red carpet, in paparazzi photos, and in acceptance speeches, she seems to just 'be herself,' which means anything from flipping off the camera to reacting with horror when someone spoils Season 3 of *Homeland* on the red carpet. She is the living, breathing embodiment of *Us Weekly*'s 'Stars: They're Just Like Us.'

Petersen points to Lawrence's associations with boys growing up and her tomboy tendencies as perhaps the roots of her *cool girl* image: "[I]nstead of spending time at Claire's with the middle school girls after school, she played on the all-boys basketball team." Petersen frames Lawrence as just the latest articulation of The Cool Girl, going on to map the history of The Cool Girl in American pop culture, citing several other examples. In each articulation, the Cool Girl shuns what are thought of as the typical interests and preoccupations of other girls. "Cool Girls don't have the hang-ups of normal girls," Petersen writes. "They don't get bogged down by the patriarchy, or worrying about their weight. They're basically dudes masquerading in beautiful women's bodies, reaping the privileges of both." There is much in Petersen's description that reminds me of Briana, from the emphasis on *just being yourself* and not trying, to the shunning of supposedly feminine interests (particularly fashion and style) to the embracing of supposedly masculine interests (particularly sports), and even to the *cool girl*'s

prerequisite conventional beauty. While Briana’s story forecloses the possibility of wanting to be scooped up *and* being yourself, it opens the possibility of being desired and not trying. Briana repeated through her stories that she doesn’t *try* to get attention from boys and, earlier, emphasized that she doesn’t *care* about how she looks. Considering her narration here along with her earlier comments in Group, we can see that she sees being “scooped up” or being asked out as a desirable state of affairs; what is undesirable to Briana is putting in effort to achieve it.

### **Saying Anything**

After Briana narrated the story above, I pointed out that she told me about another negative experience when I had asked her for a positive one. She laughed and said, “Yeah, it was like, it was only two that—it was only two over the summer but other than that it was really positive.” She didn’t seem to have anything else she wanted to say, so I asked her about the other notes she had jotted before we began. She said declaratively, “Women can say anything that’s on their minds.” I asked her to tell me more. She said:

Because like I was scared to try out for the flag football team and then some of the guys were doubting, they were like, no. Flag football is only for guys. I’m like, yeah but there’s girls that played it, too. I’m like—they were like, give me an example, and I said Maya. And they said, ‘No, she’s a dyke. She wants to be a boy.’ And I’m like—but it’s true, she does want to be a boy, so I was just [incomprehensible]. I was like you’re acting like, you’re acting like girls can’t do whatever they want or whatever they say. Like, what’s that want to do but like for reasons for what they want to say was because I said, one time I got really mad at a person, I said, he said—oh my God, it’s so inappropriate. I don’t want to say it. (NEI, 10/11/17)

At this point, she stopped and looked at me, perhaps reading my expression and body language to decide whether or not to proceed. I told her that I wouldn't tell anyone what she says.<sup>2</sup> She continued:

I was like—so, he was like, I got so mad. He was like, oh, like, I was like, 'Bro why won't you suck my dick' and he was like, 'You don't even got one, you're a girl.' And I'm like, 'OK, but I can still say whatever I want. It's America.' He's like, 'No, you got limitations when it comes to a girl.' And then he was like, he was gonna slap me for that and I'm like, 'Yeah, but you guys be saying oh I got titties and blah blah blah but like once a girl says something it's a problem, right?' And then I just walked away from the guy. (NEI, 10/11/17)

The critical moment of this story, of course, is her retort: "Bro why won't you suck my dick?" I address all of the force and ambiguity of that remark below, but I begin with what led up to it. Before voicing this remark, Briana offered a mostly incomprehensible string of words: "[W]as like you're acting like, you're acting like girls can't do whatever they want or whatever they say. Like, what's that want to do but like for reasons for what they want to say was because I said, one time I got really mad at a person, I said, he said..." At this point, at least in my reading, Briana explicitly named what kept her from saying more plainly what happened. She said, "[O]h my God, it's so inappropriate." I then, in effect, gave her permission to say what she wanted to say, but she continued to struggle: "I was like—so, he was like, I got so mad. He was like, oh, like, I was like." Then, just as before, perhaps coming upon a clearing in her thoughts, her narration became strong and smooth: "'Bro why won't you suck my dick' and he was like, 'You don't even got one, you're a girl.' And I'm like, 'OK, but I can still say whatever I want. It's America.'" As in the case described above, I wondered why Briana seemed to be

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, I meant that I wouldn't tell anyone in her school community what she said, not that I wouldn't write about it. After I saw this in the transcript and began to write about it, I went back to Briana to make sure she understood that this story would be a part of my writing. She seemed delighted to be reminded of this story and said she understood that I would write about it.

struggling for words to describe what happened. In this case, though, I assume that she was sussing out the interview space, who I was in that moment, and what could and couldn't be said. I am inclined to think that her hesitance—manifested in the incomprehensible string of words—had more to do with her hesitance to use coarse language than with her own emotional reaction in the moment.

Briana used this story to illustrate her point that women “can say anything that’s on their minds,” but the story began somewhere else: Briana wanted to play flag football. She argued with the boys who said that girls can’t play flag football, supporting her argument with an example of a girl who can play, Maya. They invalidated this argument by saying that she’s a “dyke” and that she “wants to be a boy.” Briana interrupted the flow of her narration to concede their point, saying to me, “[B]ut it’s true, she does want to be a boy.” According to both Briana and the boys, Maya doesn’t count as a girl who can play flag football because she has expressed that she wants to be a boy and/or something about her presentation connotes masculinity. At this point, in order to win the argument, it was incumbent upon Briana to name a girl who presents as a girl and who can play flag football. Briana's investment in this argument is connected to her desire to play flag football (she was “scared to try out” presumably because “some of the guys were doubting”). Perhaps it would feel easier to be a girl who can play flag football if she could name someone else who fits that description. I would characterize this as a turning point in the story—in narrative terms, the point at which it is clear what the protagonist, Briana, needs to do to get what she wants, to prove that it is possible to be a girl who can play flag football. This was also the point at which her narration slowed down and then broke down as she tried to decide whether or not to reveal the rest of the story. When she

picked the narration up again, she didn't supply the answer that would prove this possibility to the doubting boys. Instead, she said, "Bro why won't you suck my dick." Briana pivoted away from the kind of response that would "win" the argument on the terms that had been established and, instead, used an expression that, if taken literally, would undercut her argument that girls, with feminine-connoted anatomy and presentation, can play flag football. Of course, there is no reason to think that Briana wanted to be taken literally here. She used an expression that is used conventionally to assert power over and humiliate another person, and she chose to do so over continuing to engage in the argument with the boys on its original terms. But Briana created a new possibility for herself, taking up a subject position that is unavailable to her.

As I discussed above, I have been reading these narrations desiring examples of discursive agency. In previous cases, I tried to apply this label to fairly mundane expressions of self-interest. In those cases, I recognized that my own desire to find discursive agency muddied my analysis. In this case, Briana's crude retort "suck my dick" constitutes her unintelligibly. She took up an impossible subject position, one that would be impossible under any circumstance because of her feminine-connoted body and presentation and is especially incoherent in this particular context. She took up this subject position while participating in a sort of conversational game that emphasized her femininity, that was *about* her femininity and its supposed limitations. The power of saying "suck my dick" was not available to her, and she took it anyway. Given the way this speech act ruptured the male/female binary upon which the entire game depended, I would expect to want to call this a moment of *discursive agency*. What curtails my desire, of course, is the sexist and homophobic history of the expression. When a boy/man uses

this expression, it is meant to disempower and humiliate precisely by positioning the other person as one who performs a sex act associated with women and homosexual men. I'm left questioning whether or not there is any use or appropriation of such an expression that can constitute an act of discursive agency.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

In this chapter, I analyzed the stories that each girl told separately, incorporating data from Group when it enhanced or complicated my readings of these stories. In my analyses, I tried to show what seemed important and unimportant to each girl and make arguments about how they positioned themselves in relation to the femininities we discussed in Group.

I have avoided actively looking for connections across the girls' stories and imposing my own sense of common themes. Even where I see meaningful connections, I cannot assume that they signal transferability to other individuals in other contexts at other moments in time. It seems more likely to me that connections stem from our shared sequence of experiences in Group—and their shared experiences as members of the same community and, in some cases, as friends. Still, analyzing the girls' stories against each other threw the features of the individual stories into relief. For example, analyzing Danielle's and Audrey's stories against each other, we see how Danielle and Audrey both receive wisdom from their mothers about how to be respectable, but what motivates respectability for each girl differs. Danielle is motivated to take on the responsibility of setting a good example for her younger siblings, just as her mother set a good example for her. Audrey, in contrast, is motivated to "do something" with her life—to achieve



more than her mother was able to achieve. We also see, analyzing these stories against each other, that Audrey is much more ambivalent than Danielle in her attitude toward her mother's wisdom. Audrey doesn't narrate a feeling of conflictedness, but she does narrate simultaneously agreeing with her mother's reasoning around romantic relationships and entering into those relationships. Analyzing Audrey and Kaylee's stories against each other, we see two girls who are both trying out romantic relationships and figuring out where they fit in relation to storylines about such relationships. While Audrey narrated only the dramatic turning points of the relationship, Kaylee expressed wanting more out of the relationship—wanting a meaningful connection with her boyfriend and ending the relationship when she didn't find one. Finally, analyzing Jasmine's and Briana's stories against each other, I see two different ways of resisting the control boys try to exert over them. It seems that Jasmine acquiesced to her boyfriend's exertion of power and control in the moment and then renegotiates the meanings of his exertion and her acquiescence later. Briana, in contrast, took up an impossible subject position in the moment of experience, taking up power that was not hers to shut down boys' attempt to position her, and girls generally, as inferior.

This chapter is about the way girls position themselves in relation to the femininities they read in pop culture texts. Because I've avoided looking for thematic connections between the girls' stories, and so I cannot rely on such connections to imbue my analysis with a sense of significance, I end with comments on the role of pop culture in these narrations and what my search for discursive agency yielded. The particular pop culture texts we discussed in Group rarely came up in the interviews. The girls, in response to my direct invitation, linked to ideas we discussed in Group. However, even

when those ideas first surfaced in Group, they often quickly spiraled away from the pop culture texts under discussion. When Kaylee ridiculed people who dress inappropriately, I heard echoes of ideas that came up in our discussion of the A Boogie videos. When Jasmine, Audrey, and Briana narrated the dynamics of heterosexual relationships, I heard echoes of ideas that came up in our discussion of *Black-ish*. They didn't mention these texts directly, and I have no reason to think that their engagement with these texts shaped their thinking about their personal experiences. In fact, I heard the girls telling more complete versions of the stories that they brought up in Group—stories that were put in service of their readings of pop culture texts. This leads me to conclude that meanings flow back and forth between pop culture and personal experience.

My desire to identify moments of discursive agency was an undercurrent of my entire analysis. If my study is to help shape an approach to engaging girls to be more intentional in thinking about how they relate to the social world and its meanings of girlhood, I need to understand what kind of agency is possible and desired. I found in my analysis questioning what “counts” as discursive agency, wanting to make judgments that were both empirical and “correct,” in relation to the theoretical framework. Ultimately, whether or not Jasmine's recognition of the injustice in the power dynamics of heterosexual relationships or Briana's retort to the boys who told her she couldn't play flag football “count” as discursive agency, I find the experience of trying and failing to make these judgments most relevant to the research question. What I found is that girls, of course, don't position themselves in just one way—even in a single story, a single comment, a single utterance. We can see, for example, Briana's insistence that she is *just being herself* as both a way of taking up a position that refuses heterosexual boys' ways

of seeing her body and a way of constituting herself as a *cool girl* who attracts attention without trying. We can also see in Jasmine a girl who, in the moment of experience she narrated, submitted to her boyfriend's policing but later described that policing as unfair and linked it to greater injustices experienced by women. Just as gender isn't constituted once and for all, discursive agency doesn't alter contexts and subvert gender binaries once and for all. I leave these examples wanting the girls to take over this process of judging what "counts" as discursive agency, in a sense.

I found in my quest to identify agency in the girls' narrations, not the isolated deeds that I imagined would alter contexts and challenging prevailing constitutions. Instead, I found in the act of storytelling a potential for agency—a potential that relies on an understanding of self that endures over time. The distance between the storyteller's lived-in moment of experience (the substance of narration) and the act of narration leaves room for renegotiation and resignification of meanings. Telling again what one experienced gives occasion for rethinking, reformulating, and redefining the terms of the experience. Remember Jasmine, for example, who narrated the way her boyfriend policed and shut down her feelings—her very right to "get mad." The omissions in her narration suggest that, in the moment of experience, she couldn't quite master the causes and effects that led to the shut-down. She didn't quite know what was happening. But, in the act of narration, even though she couldn't work those causes and effects out, she could take up the power to describe this experience as unfair and to link her own experience of having her feelings treated as a problem to bigger patterns of injustice and portrayals of girls and women as "inferior" in pop culture.

## VI – UNDECIDABILITY

Much of the data produced through this study was language. The girls used language to make and express meanings about femininity in pop culture texts, and they used language to narrate their personal experiences in interviews. The purpose of this study is not only to make visible the meanings girls make of femininity through their engagement with pop culture but also to witness the deconstruction of those meanings, to show how their attempts to mean undermine themselves and, in turn, contribute to an experience of *undecidability*. In this chapter, I use Derrida's (1967/1991) notion of *undecidability* to show how three binary oppositions the girls rely on to maintain the gender binary deconstruct. I find Derrida's writing, particularly on *undecidability*, pointless and empty unless and until it is applied to real uses of language—particularly uses of language that maintain hierarchical systems of power. In one sense, I provide examples of deconstruction in this chapter, but, in another sense, following Derrida's own exhortations, I put this particular way of thinking to use to show what language does to us, as language-users, and to our attempts to make sense of ourselves. In previous chapters, I analyzed how the girls, through their readings of pop culture and their narrations of personal experience, stabilized meanings of gender, including binarized ways of thinking about gender. I also paid special attention to their particular uses of language—specifically, the relative language they used to describe women's physical appearance on screen and in the world—and showed how they cited and inscribed discourses of gender by actively drawing the line between *appropriate* and *inappropriate*,

*outstanding* and *too much*. The analysis of language in this chapter gives special attention to what that language does to its users, to the sort of stuckness it produces in us.

### **Review of *Undecidability***

Derrida's (1967/1997) notion of *undecidability* allows me to see how, through girls' uses of language, the meaning of femininity moves around, revealing itself to be undecidable. Derrida's claim that there is no outside-text is based on a rejection of the transcendental signified—a signified that lies beyond the system of signifiers that refer to it. The claim helps me see how language and other signifying systems slip and fail to help us make meaning. Our commonsense understanding of texts leads us to believe that text is a signifier representing or indicating something else, something external to it, the signified. In other words, we use language to describe the world; language and the world are two separate entities. Derrida (1967/1997) claims that we cannot transgress a text “toward a referent or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language” (p. 146). Then, to say that there is no outside-text is to say that we cannot use language to get at some stable meaning outside of it—a transcendental signified— thus there is, in fact, nothing outside of that very attempt to mean. The signifier (language) and the signified (meaning) are mutually constituted.

If undecidability is a quality of meaning in language, then deconstruction is what exposes that quality. Deconstruction (Derrida, 1967/1997) is a way of reading texts that exposes the way Western thinkers rely on binary oppositions to make truth claims and establish authority. Through deconstruction, Derrida seeks first to identify the privileged

and non-privileged categories in the binary and then show how, through the latent inconsistencies and slippages in language, those categories can be reversed. His purpose is not to invert the binary and recover the non-privileged category. Rather, it is to show how the binary itself is necessarily unintelligible and, through it, no truth claims can be made. Truth and meaning are seemingly stabilized in these binaries, but ultimately the binaries fail to make sense. Truth is unstable, and meaning is always contingent upon other signifiers.

Derrida's (1967/1997) reading of Rousseau's (1782) *The Confessions* illustrates deconstruction as method and outcome. Rousseau argues that writing supplements speech. Speech is primary, abundant in its presence, immediate, complete. Writing merely adds to speech: it is secondary and inferior to it. But *supplement* means both addition and substitution. Derrida suggests that Rousseau's use of *supplement-as-addition* invokes its other oppositional use: *supplement-as-substitution*. The very existence of writing implies that speech is, in fact, somehow incomplete. Writing takes the place of—or substitutes for—what's inadequate or absent in speech. For Derrida, this is not simply a matter of inconsistency in Rousseau's argument. Each use of the word necessarily entails the oppositional meaning. Supplement can never just mean addition because the very presence of a supplement calls to mind the insufficiency of what is there primarily, and so it must also mean substitution. In this way, Derrida shows how the speech/writing binary is already corrupted from within and how language does not and cannot have a simple relationship to the meanings it tries to describe. If we accept the premise that there is no transcendental signified, we need a way to understand how signifying works not to stabilize meaning but to defer meaning from one signifier to another. Deconstruction can

expose those processes as they operate in girls' readings of pop culture texts and/or their own lives and experiences.

In this chapter, I examine the binary oppositions that are at work in the girls' readings of femininity, both in pop culture and in their personal experiences. I make visible how the continual reinscription of these binary oppositions works to maintain the gender binary—the binary opposition of greatest concern to me in this study. I begin by revisiting the *appropriate/inappropriate* binary opposition first introduced in Chapter IV. I previously showed how the girls acted to draw the line between *appropriate* and *inappropriate* appearance and behavior and, in doing so, constituted themselves as respectable girls. Here, I show the undecidability of these categories and how any attempt to draw a line between them undermines the categories themselves. I also examine other binary oppositions at work in the girls' readings of femininity, including *probable/improbable*, and *choosing/being chosen*.

### *Appropriate/Inappropriate*

In Chapter IV, I showed how the girls used vocabulary that describes physical appearance as intentional, artificial, and impermanent. They used relative words like *outstanding*, *too much*, *above and beyond*, *inappropriate*, and *doing more*. This vocabulary is *relative* because it describes how an individual looks relative to others and relative to her surroundings. To look *outstanding*, for example, is to stand out in a given environment. This relative vocabulary set up appearance not as a *quality* but as an *act*—and specifically as an act that can be part of a bigger strategy to achieve one's goals. I went on to argue that, in the girls' readings of pop culture texts, they often drew a line

between *appropriate* and *inappropriate*, labeling particular actors, models, and characters as *inappropriate* and expressing their own desires to be *appropriate*. To witness the deconstruction of this binary opposition—to show that it is ultimately incoherent, that it fails to mean—I first show how each term’s dependence on the other makes the binary unstable and then how each term refers to both a presence and an absence, making it incoherent.

Every act of drawing the line between *appropriate* and *inappropriate* is, in effect, an attempt to assert that the terms *appropriate* and *inappropriate* point to recognizably true, recognizably opposite phenomena or conditions present in the world. To witness the deconstruction of these terms, we need to first entertain them as possible. Using the girls’ words as the basis, being *appropriate* means wearing clothes that cover the body—from the knees to the collarbone, say—and that don’t cling to the body. Being *appropriate* could also mean not moving in ways that are meant to highlight the body. Being *inappropriate* means wearing clothes that reveal parts of the body that are meant to be covered. Being *inappropriate* also includes dancing in a way that reveals or highlights the body. In Audrey’s words, it includes wearing “the shortest thing ever” and “the tightest thing ever,” cropped tops and short shorts (DG6, 6/16/17). We could be even more specific defining these words, for the sake of argument (what does it mean to “not cling” to the body, for example?), but it suffices to say that each utterance of one of these terms is meant to refer to a signified that is present, recognizable, and mutually exclusive of the other.

According to Derrida (1967/1997), every binary opposition privileges one side of the binary over the other. *Appropriate* is the privileged side here, of course, and, as such,



it can be thought of as more natural, more full and present with truth. But if that were the case, it wouldn't need *inappropriate* to exist. *Appropriate* and *inappropriate* are pulled into existence, and into relation to each other, only by the act of drawing a line between them. Derrida's notion of undecidability holds that the nonprivileged category only exists in order to fill an originary lack in the privileged category. The term *inappropriate*, then, only exists because the idea that there is a correct way of being a girl or woman is one that is fundamentally lacking. There's no transcendental presence, truth, fullness to the idea, so the notion of *inappropriate* exists. The act of drawing the line between *appropriate* and *inappropriate* is an act of force and consequence. We hear in the girls' words there is judgment, even punishment, when the line is drawn. Girls or women who are inappropriate are "ready for sex" (DG6, 6/16/17). Yet it is also an act that undermines itself because it reveals *appropriate* as contingent and undecidable—a concept that only exists when the line is drawn. In every use of *appropriate* lives the trace of *inappropriate*.

It is not difficult to argue that *appropriate* and *inappropriate* are contingent and mutually dependent concepts. Indeed, *inappropriate* is a derivative of *appropriate*; it is structured to mean, literally, the opposite of *appropriate*. Of course, we could substitute a host of other words that do not share a common root—*respectable/trashy*, *above and beyond/too much*—and make the same point. So far, I've shown a kind of instability of the binary based on the mutual dependence of the two terms. To witness the deconstruction of this binary, I must show how both terms refer to both presence and absence and so can be, in this way, equated, rendering the opposition incoherent.

*Appropriate* is the privileged term in the binary. To put it another way, based on the girls' comments, to do girlhood right is to be appropriate. As the privileged term, *appropriate* is suffused with a sort of ontological presence. The signified to which *appropriate* refers, as the girls most often defined it, is a body that is covered up, as the occasion dictates. The object of appropriateness, then, is to blend into one's environment, to not be noticed, to not stand out, and, to extend this line of thinking, to not disrupt the social order. If the object of appropriateness is to blend in, then what lies at the very center of doing girlhood right is absence and erasure. The object is *to be* appropriate, which turns out to mean *to not be*. This might sound like an incoherence, but the configuration actually continues to make sense when we situate it within the primary binary opposition *masculine/feminine*. The entire hierarchical relation of *masculine/feminine* relies on the notion that the *feminine* is absent and incomplete—what Derrida (1978) called *phallogocentrism*. It makes sense, then, to say that doing girlhood right means, literally, covering oneself and disappearing into the background. To do girlhood right, in Derrida's terms, is to embody absence—a configuration that supports the hierarchical relation of *masculine/feminine*. What doesn't make sense, however, is how one achieves this sort of feminine absence: by covering the feminine connotations of the body. In order to be *feminine*, one must *de-feminize* herself.

*Inappropriate* also refers to both presence and absence. To be *inappropriate* is to dress, move, and act in ways that draw attention and disrupt the social order. It is to be a noticed—and unwelcome—presence in a given social space. To be *inappropriate* is fundamentally to be present, specifically in contrast to others in the same space who are *appropriate*. Again, situating inappropriateness in the *masculine/feminine* binary, we can

see how being *inappropriate* is a kind of transgression because it is a refusal to make oneself absent, to erase oneself. However, one becomes inappropriate by revealing the feminine connotations of the body. One assumes presence by emphasizing a kind of femininity, which, in the context of the *masculine/feminine* binary, is already an embodied absence. In order to *not be feminine*, one must *feminize* herself. The deconstruction of the *appropriate/inappropriate* binary signals a major conundrum of girlhood and womanhood. Women can be constituted as feminine by dressing and moving our bodies in ways that expose or highlight their feminine connotations, but, as women, we are not doing femininity right unless we cover and suppress those feminine connotations.

### ***Probable/Improbable***

The girls often used hypothetical scenarios to fill in gaps in their readings of pop culture texts. In Chapter V, I discussed how Audrey in particular laced her readings with such scenarios and how they served to elaborate and support her points about the texts we read. Here, I lay out two examples of how the girls presented scenarios they spoke of as *likely* or *probable*, and how the *probable/improbable* binary deconstructs and undermines the truth claims the girls attempt to make by depicting these scenarios. First, in an early discussion about women's physical appearance on screen, Audrey said, "Like to connect it to like how kids feel, how girls feel today, like you probably see a girl caring more about what they're wearing than a boy. A boy would probably like throw on whatever he want and a girl like she probably take a very long time getting dressed" (DG1, 5/5/17). Briana disagreed but used a similar language move to reassert the binary, saying "I don't

really agree because a boy nowadays they got their hair done and everything, they got their hair curly. Most of them usually brush their hair for like 30 minutes.” In a later discussion of A Boogie’s lyrics, Briana said, “[I]t’s sad because like little boys probably listening to this music and they might be thinking like about maybe that’s how girls should be called and everything” (DG5, 6/2/17). In this scenario, the pop culture with which individuals, particularly boys, engage influences their thoughts and actions.

These are only two examples of a common occurrence across our discussions. In other cases, Audrey described the way White women dress in loose clothing and the way people respond to seeing Black women dressed in revealing clothing and Kaylee described lessons women learn in relationships in these terms. I refer to the kinds of scenarios they depict in these cases as *probable*, but they use a range of terms to indicate that they see these scenarios as *probable: most likely, usually, even nowadays*. The patterns of language within their descriptions of these scenarios also suggest that they see these scenarios as common occurrences. They use universalized gendered terms to refer to the individuals in the stories (*a boy* or *the boy, a girl* or *the girl*), and they often use a conditional verb tense (*the boy would*) to indicate both that the scenario is hypothetical and that there is a logic to individuals’ actions. The lack of particularity of the individuals in these scenarios suggests a sort of presumed universality and, of course, the centrality of gender to their understanding of the scenario. These scenarios fill in gaps in their readings and smooth over texture and individuality, thereby reinscribing the gender binary. That the girls brought these kinds of hypothetical scenarios into their readings of pop culture texts suggests that they serve as touchstones, whether in their reading of texts or their reading of situations in their own lives. These *probable* scenarios are signifying

systems that point to exterior events that are said to happen in the world. As signifying systems, these scenarios are not neutral or incidental. They are infused with discursively produced meanings about gender: that girls care more about relationships and their appearance than boys, for example. These scenarios, latent in the girls' readings of texts and experiences, already carry a sense of certainty and authority. And, in each telling of the scenario, the *presence* and *truth* of its discursive meanings bloom before us.

In our discussions, the girls didn't discuss *improbable* scenarios. The non-privileged part of the binary opposition I'm suggesting was absent—but its absence was present in their *probable* scenarios. In other words, the trace of the *improbable* corrupted the binary from within: there are some stories that are probable, that *happen*, and there are some stories that aren't. The existence of the *improbable* scenario necessitates the use of the word *probable* to differentiate it. If there were no *improbable* scenario, there would just be infinite scenarios to tell of infinite human experiences, none of which could be organized or clustered in a way that gave more weight or authority to some over others. No scenario would have any necessary relation to any other scenario. By calling some scenarios *probable* or *likely*, by saying what *would* happen, the girls invoke the existence of the *improbable* that is the impetus for speaking the *probable* scenario into existence in the first place. So even as the repetitive act of depicting these scenarios strengthens their claims to truth, it also undermines them by revealing their *probability* as fictitious.

So far, I have shown that every use of *probable* at least partially undermines itself because it carries with it a reminder of the *improbable*—a reminder that there are other ways the story can unfold. *Probable* undermines itself in another way, through its circularity of signification. To show how this happens with the girls' particular use of

*probably*, I begin by trying to take *probable* at face value. For an outcome to be *probable*, we could say that, given a specified arrangement of conditions, an outcome will happen more often than not. For example, to say that it will *probably* rain (in a commonplace, not meteorological, sense) is to say that, in the past, when one has observed the current conditions—gray sky, clouds, moisture in the air—more often than not, it has rained. One must *read* these conditions to make this determination by first deciding which conditions matter (clouds matter, but, for example, whether or not there are leaves on a tree do not) and then giving them meaning. The act of declaring an outcome *probable* is, in this way, an act of reading. Returning now to the girls' use of *probably* and *most likely*, we can conceptualize the girls' use of these terms as the result of their reading of imagined images and scenes. For example, when Briana said, "And it's sad because like little boys probably listening to this music and they might be thinking like about maybe that's how girls should be called and everything" (DG5, 6/2/17), she has read a scene of boys listening to music videos and read the components of this image as signifiers. One component of the scene is the text itself—the music and lyrics. Briana has already decided which aspect of the text is worth paying attention to: the derogatory names for women in the lyrics. Another component of the scene is the image of boys listening to music, and she has read this *image of listening* to mean a kind of internalization of what is heard. Briana has chosen to pay attention to the image of listening and has chosen to assign it a meaning. And so, given this arrangement of conditions—boys listening to A Boogie's music, particularly the lyrics, and particularly the derogatory names—Briana has determined that boys will *probably* start calling girls

names. Or, given this arrangement of conditions, more often than not, the outcome of boys calling girls names will occur.

We can interpret Audrey's use of *probably* and *most likely* similarly. When Audrey said, "Like to connect it to like how kids feel, how girls feel today like you probably see a girl caring more about what they're wearing than a boy. A boy would probably like throw on whatever he want and a girl like she probably take a very long time getting dressed" (DG1, 5/5/17), she has read not just an image of how girls and boys look but also the imagined scenes of girls and boys getting dressed. She has read components of these images and scenes as signifiers. One component of the image is the clothes themselves. Audrey has already decided that, in determining who cares more about their looks, the clothes that are selected can signify a level of care. She has also chosen to pay attention to the scene of a girl taking "a very long time getting dressed" and the scene of the boy "throw[ing] on whatever he want." She has read the length of time it takes to get dressed as signifying the amount an individual cares about their appearance. Given this arrangement of conditions (the images of girls' and boys' clothes and the amount of time taken to get dressed), then, the outcome that occurs, more often than not, is that girls care more about how they look than boys.

Of course, it is safe to say that Briana and Audrey have not measured the frequency of these respective outcomes given the specified sets of conditions and, in fact, do not mean *probably* in this way at all. In their use, *probably* winds up not meaning anything about how common the scenarios they describe are—how frequently they happen, given a specified set of conditions. Instead, it means that they have truth value: *this is true, this happens, and this tells us something meaningful about gender*. Circularity

is fundamental to the logic of their use of *probably* and its variations, and this circularity undermines their attempt to mean. Audrey, for example, thinks that it is true that girls care more about their appearance than boys, and she signifies this truth claim by depicting a scenario in which a girl “take a very long time getting dressed” and a boy “throw on whatever he want.” But it is the act of speaking these scenarios into existence and then labeling them *probable* that shores up their truth value. Above, I described how the girls *read* the signifiers involved in these images and scenes, weighing which matter and determining their meaning. In fact, they do not only *read* these images and scenes; they are simultaneously *composing* them. Audrey selects an image of a boy throwing clothes on in the very same moment she interprets that image to mean that he doesn’t care about how he looks. Their use of *probably* necessitates simultaneous encoding and decoding. Both scenarios I examine here are recognizable—so recognizable, in fact, that Briana and Audrey can conjure them easily. They are so factual, they can be fictional. The *probable* story is an internally stabilizing fiction.

### ***Choosing/Being Chosen***

*Choosing/being chosen* is the binary opposition most at work in my own thinking in this study. In two important ways, it doesn’t “count” as a binary opposition. First, the particular language I use to capture the opposition is not the girls’ language. While they describe issues of choice, agency, and control, they do not often frame their thinking in terms of who gets to make choices in a given situation. They also describe what it means for a girl to, in my words, *be chosen*. I mean *be chosen* to include being “scooped up” or “pursued” in Briana’s words. To *be chosen* is to attract the gaze, attention, interest, or



affection of men—whether in the context of romantic and sexual relationships or in the context of men producing television shows and music videos for presumed heterosexual male audiences. I describe all of these phenomena as *being chosen*, but the girls do not, so I cannot reasonably say that this is a binary opposition at work in their thinking about gender. The second way it doesn't count is that, unlike *appropriate/inappropriate* and *probable/improbable*, *choosing* and *being chosen* are not mutually exclusive concepts. It is possible to simultaneously *choose* and *be chosen*. They are probably better described as *reciprocal* concepts. Still, in my own process of sorting through data from Group and from the interviews, I see that we continually returned to the question of who gets to make choices. If women appear in revealing clothes on screen, for example, who chose to bring that image into existence? When the girls are in romantic relationships (such as they are) with boys, who chose to bring those relationships into existence? In this section, then, I want to explore this not-quite-binary binary opposition in my own thinking and use it as a way of making visible ambiguities I have not yet addressed.

The first question we ask to witness the deconstruction of a binary opposition is which side of the opposition is privileged. Based on any commonsense understanding of *choice*—not to mention any understanding based in Western metaphysics—*choosing* is privileged. To choose is to have agency and control. The girls' discussion of both *caring* and *trying* feel associated with this understanding of choice. For example, I see their ongoing discussion of the extent to which individuals *care* about how they look as a matter of choice. Did an individual make an intentional decision to construct her appearance in this way? If so, why did she do that? What does she want and how does appearing like so help her get it? These questions came up in our discussions of *Modern*

*Family, Empire*, and the A Boogie videos. I also associate Briana's talk of *trying*—or, more accurately, *not trying*—with *choice*. Briana narrates first in Group that she doesn't *try* to appear any particular way. In her interview, she was adamant that she was not *trying* to attract boys' attention. I associate *trying* with *choosing* in that it requires the intentionality of choice. To *try* to look good, or to *try* to attract others' attention is to make an intentional decision about what one wants and how one can get it.

When I consider the notion of *choosing* in the context of the data, it's hard to conceptualize *choosing* as the privileged side of the binary opposition. *Choosing*, in these cases, is about a lack: it is about not having, about wanting and striving. *Being chosen*—in the sense of attracting the gaze, attention, interest, and/or affection of boys and men—could be conceptualized as privileged. Semantically, *being chosen* means, in part, to be noticed as present, to be *there*. In the girls' talk, we see some indications that *being chosen* is a desirable state. In Group, for example, Briana emphasized that girls *should be chosen*: “[A] woman, a girl should not be scared to talk to a guy who she likes because a guy, a guy is the one who's supposed to be asking you out, not the girl” (DG3, 5/19/17). In Audrey's and Kaylee's interviews, both girls narrated experiences of entering into, or maintaining, romantic relationships with boys who had chosen them but whom they did not necessarily choose (or like). *Being chosen* was sufficient basis for these relationships, at least for a time. I am inclined to take *being chosen* as the privileged side of the binary opposition here, for both of these reasons. Of course, the proposition that *being chosen* is privileged over *choosing* quickly falls apart when we consider the objectification and erasure of interiority and agency that are implied in the state of *being chosen*. Rather than leaving it at that, I want to examine more closely the relationship of *choosing* and *being*

*chosen*—not in general terms but specifically in the girls’ talk. The basis of my claim that *being chosen* is privileged over *choosing* in their talk is that *choosing* implies a lack of what one wants. In fact, there is only one kind of *choosing* included here: *choosing to be chosen*. This is the case whether a woman is *choosing* to appear scantily clad and dancing in a way that highlights her body in a music video or a girl is *choosing* to wear leggings or joggers to be “scooped up” by a boy. In this configuration, it makes sense that *choosing* is the non-privileged side of the binary opposition. *Choosing*, in these cases, is not full, complete, and autonomous in its presence. Instead, it is contingent upon someone else’s choice. The girl’s or woman’s *choosing* is totally circumscribed by the boy’s or man’s *choosing*.

My analysis here is based on my own preoccupation with evaluating how problematic, or not, the girls’ views of themselves, their bodies, and their relationships are. The girls and I all reject the images of hypersexualized feminine-connoted bodies on screen, but, I have thought, we reject those images for different reasons. The girls see those images and act to *draw the line*, as I’ve described, and declare the bodies *inappropriate*. The woman’s choice to appear in that way is denounced. They make similar declarations and denunciations when describing what they see in their own personal experiences and lives. I see such images—again, so I have thought—and denounce the way hegemonic masculinity makes such a limited and limiting set of roles, narratives, and positions possible for girls and women. Put more simply, I have thought that the girls blame the women, and I blame the men. What my analysis of *choosing/being chosen* helps me see is the possibility that the girls and I actually reject these images for the same reason. Perhaps we all reject the state of *choosing to be chosen*.

This is a rejection of the idea that girls' and women's choices can only be thought of in relation to boys' and men's choices. When a woman appears on screen, for example, both the woman and presumably men have made choices that made that image possible, but the structure of choice subordinates the woman's choice by circumscribing it with the men's choices. This idea surfaces in the girls' discussion of the A Boogie videos when the model's choice to appear scantily clad is understood in relation to what the men who produced the video wanted—to appeal to a presumed audience of heterosexual boys. *Choosing to be chosen* also reflects the structure of choice in heterosexual relationships, according to the girls. In Kaylee's words, “[Boys] don't have to impress nobody because girls, they usually impress so they can get the boy, but guys they just get any girl they want” (DG7, 6/21/17). Here, Kaylee narrates the state of *choosing to be chosen*—the girl chooses to *impress* in order to attract the attention of boys. But, again, the structure of choice subordinates the girl's choice.

### **“Summary and Conclusion”**

Derrida (1998) would not endorse a summary and conclusion that restates previous claims. Such a structure derives its authority and sense of stability from the metaphysics of presence: the notion that evidence is collected and deployed to support sub-claims, which, in turn, are gathered and organized into a framework to support an overarching claim. Derrida would reject the notion that truth claims can be broken down neatly into their component parts. In fact, repackaging previous claims using different arrangements of words suggests that there is a transcendental signified—a stable truth—that is being referred to in the writing. The process of deconstruction we witness cannot,

in fact, weather different arrangements of words. The deconstruction exists in the very language I already used to describe it. In this way, my withholding of a traditional summary and conclusion is not just a theoretical nod to Derrida but a recognition that, on a practical level, I could not recap evidence and claims here, even if I wanted to. So instead of ending the chapter with a summary and conclusion, I end with lingering questions about the implications of a type of analysis that often feels like an overly mechanical intellectual exercise. I began this chapter with the notion that language produces a certain kind of effect on its users—an experience of stuckness. Of course, I cannot speak for other language users and, in fact, much of my own use of language, day to day, is ordinary and pragmatic. I don't feel stuck when I order a meal at a restaurant or lead a meeting or write an email or tell a friend a story, even one overlaid with ideas about gender. Any experience of stuckness, if it is somehow there, must at the very least exist outside of conscious awareness. I find myself feeling most stuck about three-quarters of the way through the deconstruction of the binary opposition, when it feels like, in order to make the deconstruction work, I have to show how the language does not work. I feel consciously stuck between the push and pull of working and not working, meaning and not meaning. If the gender binary were the only binary opposition that warranted deconstruction, it would be deconstructed once and for all, and one could think of that deconstruction easily. But, as I hope I showed in this chapter, that binary opposition is strengthened and stabilized by many others—I named only three—and their sheer number, as well their intricacy, make them hard to think of.

## VII – DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study was about pop culture and about gender. In Chapter IV, I used the data we produced to examine the femininities made possible through girls' engagement with pop culture texts. In Chapter V, pop culture receded into the background as I examined the girls' stories and considered what those stories said about the girls' meanings of girlhood. In Chapter VI, I witnessed the deconstruction of three binary oppositions at work in girls' discussions of femininity both in Group and in our interviews. In this chapter, I summarize and discuss my findings by addressing the research questions before presenting a critique of the study and curriculum and research implications.

### **Discussion**

#### **Readings of Multimodal Texts**

Through this study, I sought to address how adolescent Black and Latina girls attending an urban middle school read and take up the femininities made available to them in pop culture texts. The first sub-question of this overarching question grew out of my investment in the idea that when we engage with pop culture, we are *doing literacy*. We are *reading* multimodal texts. The undercurrent of this question is the assumption that, if we can make young people more aware that they are doing literacy as they engage with pop culture, they will somehow do literacy better. Their readings will be more astute, and they will be better positioned to challenge and resist the often limiting meanings those texts make available. In this section, I discuss what I found in the girls'

readings of pop culture texts, situate this study in existing empirical work on these topics, and consider the usefulness of this original assumption, given those readings.

In Group, I positioned Audrey, Briana, Danielle, Jasmine, and Kaylee to read the pop culture texts in a way that produced *explanations* of the texts—most often, explanations of why women appear as they do on screen. Group’s quasi-academic space and my teacher-like persona encouraged this explanatory mode of discussion. To develop these explanations, the girls drew on existing knowledge and experiences, as well as a range of semiotic resources—or “the actions, materials and artifacts we use for communicative purposes...together with the ways in which these resources can be organized (van Leeuwen, 2004, p. 285). The girls attended to how women on screen dressed/were dressed and to their physical movement, whether in everyday interaction or in dance. Their explanations centered around who decided that women should appear in this way, who was in control, and who benefitted from their appearance. When the girls were engrossed in a text’s narrative, they didn’t treat the text under discussion as a text. They didn’t mention the producers, directors, writers, or musicians who made deliberate decisions in the course of constructing the text. If audience members don’t take up the text as text, they can’t examine the way the texts are constructed according to commercial interests and so relate to wider systems of power. In these readings, the girls looked *through* the semiotic resources to the meanings produced rather than looking *at* those resources as part of signifying systems. When they were not engrossed in the narrative—either because the text didn’t offer a narrative or the narrative was not compelling to them—they did consider why the text’s producers might have constructed it as they did and to whom they wanted to appeal in doing so.

Recognizing a television show, a movie, or a music video as a text puts readers in a position to not take the meanings it suggests for granted (the woman didn't have to be dressed that way, she didn't have to move or dance that way, the story didn't have to go like that) and so to question, criticize, and resist those meanings. If this is the case, then the question becomes about whether it is enough for young people to recognize a text as a text or if there is some added value to their being able to analyze multimodally how the text actually works to make certain kinds of meanings available. If the girls knew the specific roles producers, directors, writers, costume designers, set designers, cinematographers, musicians, actors, models, dancers, and, indeed, corporations play in the construction of the text, and if they considered how particular choices made certain kinds of meanings available and appealing to an audience, would their multimodal readings of these texts be *better*?

This study fills a gap in existing empirical work at the intersections of pop culture, gender, and literacy in that it develops insight into how young people in middle school, specifically, are engaging with and reading pop culture texts. Existing studies tend to focus on younger children or on teenagers and young adults. The studies focused on younger children (e.g., Wohlwend, 2009; Vasquez, 2003; Vasquez, 2005; Carrington, 2003) examine toys as pop culture texts—texts that, as Wohlwend describes them, suggest meanings that are appealing to a young audience while also making those meanings malleable enough to invite improvisation and play. These studies show how young children play with, mobilize, and invent meanings through their play with toys. Meanwhile, the studies focused on teenagers and young adults (e.g., Sanchez, 2010; Kinney, 2012; Buck, 2012; Black, 2006) examine digital literacies, particularly



engagements with pop culture on social media. Alvermann (2010) argued that young people “are tirelessly editing and remixing multimodal content they find online to share with others, using new tools to show and tell, and rewriting their social identities in an effort to become who they say they are” (p. 10). Studies that address how teenagers and young adults use social media to remix and mobilize pop culture meanings tend to celebrate the hybridity, novelty, and inventiveness of their engagement.

Whether they call attention to the concept or not, all of these studies examine productive consumption of pop culture, or the way “people *make* popular culture from the repertoire of commodities supplied by the culture industries” (Storey, 2003, Chapter 4, para. 8). The emphasis here is on the active nature of reading, the way that individuals shape semiotic resources, knowledge, and experiences into new meanings. Studies both of younger children and of teenagers and young adults benefit from concrete artifacts of productive consumption. Researchers can observe how younger children interact with toys as they go about their daily lives, including how they animate those toys and incorporate them into their play. Their interactions with toys make their productive consumption of pop culture concrete. Researchers can observe and analyze teenagers’ activity on social media—the actual multimodal texts they produce on these platforms—to see how they are actively making, remixing, and inventing meanings out of the resources available to them. Again, researchers who focus on teenagers and young adults have the benefit of analyzing productive consumption as it is made concrete in such texts. So, in addition to studying girls who are at an age that hasn’t been studied in this way, there are features of that age that necessitated different sorts of methods for analyzing productive consumption. Adolescent girls are just as active in shaping meanings out of

the knowledge, experiences, and semiotic resources available to them, but the girls no longer play with toys and are not yet on social media. Their productive consumption of pop culture texts was only perceptible to me as a researcher through their talk, and so I had to understand their meanings as they were held in their talk. This study contributes insight into how adolescent girls' engage through talk, specifically, offers a closer look at aspects of their use of language, and examines a sort of play with the texts that takes the form of improvising stories that relate to their meanings.

### **Meanings of Femininity**

In my analysis of the girls' participation in Group, I sought to address the question of how they circulated discourses of gender in their discussion of the meanings of femininity. In Chapter IV, I argued that the girls' act of judging women's physical appearance, or drawing the line between *appropriate* and *inappropriate*, put into practice ideas about what it means to be respectable girls. In these acts of drawing the line, the girls "inhabit the figure of autonomy only by becoming subjected to a power" (Butler, 1997, p. 83). In other words, they are authorized to make these designations of *appropriate* and *inappropriate* because they have themselves been subjected to the regulatory power that makes girls recognizable as appropriate or not, respectable or not. Each time the girls used relative language to judge a woman's appearance on screen, they actively took up the power to decide, to make a judgment about where the line goes.

Here, I want to make my own judgment—a judgment of their act of judging. I want to make an argument about the extent to which these responses to women's conventional and often hypersexualized appearance on screen are the desired responses. I want to make an argument about what these five girls' responses to these texts tell us

about how girls engage with and understand the meanings of femininity generally. These are difficult arguments to make. My assumption has been that this act of drawing the line does nothing more than circulate regulatory ideas about femininity and what it means, or what it takes, to be thought of as respectable. But underneath this act of drawing the line is a rejection of the prevailing imagery of pop culture, imagery that constitutes women as objects of heterosexual male desire, imagery I also reject. Part of me is heartened by the girls' rejection of these images and relieved to discover that they do not want to imitate what they see on screen (the notion that young people will imitate what they see is a dominant theme in everyday anxieties around pop culture, even my own). However, I have thought of the girls and myself as having two different reasons for rejecting this imagery. I have thought that they reject this imagery for the wrong reason: that girls and women are not respectable unless they cover and deemphasize their bodies. But listening to Audrey talk about her mother's point of view on relationships, as I did in Chapter V, I began to question my own analysis of the girls' reasons for rejecting this imagery. Audrey's mother has taught her that dressing inappropriately will lead to relationships with boys, which will lead to sex, which will lead to teen pregnancy, which will mean "you're going to end up like me" instead of "doing something with your life" (NEI, 10/20/17). For Audrey, the stakes of appropriateness and respectability are high. I see this lesson Audrey's mother has passed down to her as an example of how, according to Collins (1991), Black mothers teach their daughters how to "cope with race, class, and gender oppression" (p. 133)—a necessary lesson as these conditions cannot be transcended. Audrey's story led me to think about the difference between the personal costs of inappropriateness for individuals who are raced and classed differently.

In Chapter VI, my analysis of the binary opposition *choosing/being chosen* also challenged my initial assumption that the girls were rejecting this imagery for the wrong reason. This analysis led me to the possibility that the girls and I all reject a structure of choice that subordinates woman's choice: *the choice to be chosen*. This is a rejection of the idea that girls' and women's choices can only be thought of in relation to boy's and men's choices. Whenever a woman chooses to construct her appearance or have her appearance constructed for her, whether in daily life or on screen, the choice can only be thought of in relation to boys' and men's choices. A woman can either *choose to be chosen*—or choose to attract the attention and desire of heterosexual men—or choose not to be. When we see a hypersexualized image of a woman on screen, perhaps we are not responding to the fact of the image but to that image as it exists within that structure of choice. I'm reminded again of Audrey's words. To Audrey, the danger of dressing inappropriately is that one marks oneself as "ready for sex" because "you're knowing that people are going to see that and are going to want you" (DG6, 6/16/17). How different is it to say that one is marked as "ready for sex" and to say that one is constituted as the object of heterosexual male desire? Perhaps, in some of the girls' framings, the blame is placed too squarely on women, but, first, there are plenty of counter-examples in which the girls do blame boys and men for creating the expectation that women appear in this way, and, second, the issue of where the blame is placed feels small in relation to the high stakes of respectability for Audrey and her mother. Furthermore, the idea of "blame" is one I've imposed on this discussion. We could think of their rejection of this imagery as not about blame at all. Rather, their rejection could come from their own reflections on the choices they want to make for themselves; perhaps they emphasize the women's

choices and actions only because they associate themselves with those who assume that gendered position. Whomever we blame, or whomever we think of as having agency and choice, judgments about women's physical appearance inevitably reinscribe the notion that women are to be judged, surveilled, and understood in terms of it. Images of exposed feminine-connoted bodies, dressed and positioned to highlight their sex appeal to heterosexual boys and men, evoked strong responses across our group, and I wonder if the placement of blame itself is a way of diverting attention from the slew of possible responses—responses that are perhaps emotional, perhaps contradictory and confusing.

### **The Substance and Act of Narration**

In my analysis of the girls' one-on-one interviews, I sought to address how the substance and the acts of their stories positioned them in relation to the femininities we discussed in Group. When I first envisioned this study, I imagined adolescent girls whose lives were enmeshed in pop culture. I imagined pop culture as a force that shapes what they buy, how they pursue pleasure, and how they relate to and communicate with each other, and what they think about. I didn't get the girls I imagined. Only Danielle has a mobile device of her own (Jasmine shares a phone with her cousin). None of them are on social media. They don't have the unlimited access to pop culture they want, and so Group was a particularly special and exciting place because it gave them access. The assumptions underneath both Jenkins's (2006) description of *convergence* and my own description of the influence of pop culture are more visible to me now. I didn't examine, for example, my own assumption that the girls carried meanings of femininity they made through their engagement with pop culture to their personal experiences—grafting those meanings onto experience. It's not that such a movement of meanings never happens (we

can see hints of such movement in Audrey's and Kaylee's narrations of inserting themselves into received stories of heterosexual relationships), but meanings flow in both directions. In Group, we produced many more examples of bringing stories of personal experience to our readings of pop culture. While I began each interview with a reminder of the issues we discussed in Group, and they began by linking their experiences and memories to those issues, the stories themselves veered away from those discussions and the meanings of pop culture texts we produced through them. While I began this study with a critique of pop culture as public pedagogy (Giroux, 2004), a critique based on a rejection of the notion that pop culture *contains* and then *conveys* meanings to a vulnerable audience of young people, I didn't fully reject the related notion that meanings flow in one direction, from pop culture to personal lives. The study's methods suggested this sort of directionality in that we *read* texts first and then considered applications of the text-based ideas second. But, in the data we produced, the girls brought a sense of *reading*, of active meaning-making, to both pop culture and to their experiences.

Following Clandinin and Connelly (1994), I treated each girl's stories as autonomous units of analysis, examining how the stories move inward toward "feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, moral dispositions" (p. 417), outward toward the existential conditions of the environment or what could be thought of as reality, and forward and backward in time. Treating the stories as autonomous units of analysis afforded a close look at the stories and prevented me from over-interpreting connections between the stories or between these stories and what we might want to say generally about adolescent girls' stories. Yet this focus on individual stories has led me to question what new insight we can derive from five girls' stories, produced as they were in a particular

moment of interaction, in a particular place and at a particular time, and at the end of a very particular sequence of experiences.

To develop insight from Audrey's, Briana's, Danielle's, Jasmine's, and Kaylee's stories, I discuss here the tension between this study's poststructural framework and my experience of these stories, as well as my desire to identify discursive agency in my analyses of them. I begin with Butler's (1990) words, which, for me, distill the poststructural feminist thinking that has shaped this study:

Gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed...that 'there is no 'being' behind doing, effecting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything. (p. 33)

Here, and throughout *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that there is no pre-discursive subject, no doer, no rational and self-knowing "I." The "I" is a fiction constituted by a deed. Scholars have taken issue with her eradication of the "I," for example, because it contradicts her use of psychoanalysis (Hood Williams & Cealy Harrison, 1998) or because it erases women's already fragile and tenuous selfhood (Benhabib et al, 1995). In response to the latter point, Butler (1995) argued that the theory of performativity is a theory of gender, not a total theory of the self. Still, conducting a study so assertively shaped by this theory—and developing analyses of the discussion group data thick with phrases like *discursively constituted subjects*—left me without a strong sense of the girls as individuals. However, when I analyzed the girls' stories, I couldn't help but recognize, center, stabilize, and even celebrate the "I," the doer, the girl behind the story. To analyze a story as Clandinin and Connelly (1994) advise, following the story inward, outward, backward, and forward, is to see the narrator of the story as an individual who possesses

an interiority that, even as it encounters existential conditions, remains the autonomous possession of the individual who narrates the story. To analyze a story in this way is also to see the narrator as an “I” that persists through time, an enduring, though not necessarily essential, self. It’s not that I would put my poststructural framework in opposition to my narrative methods. In fact, my analysis methods were inspired by poststructural narrative researchers whose purpose is to “identify and reveal the complex ways in which forms, discrepancies, and pluralities in narrative lead to more nuanced understandings of the mutability of texts and discourses” (Schaafsma & Vinz, 2011, p. 24). Such researchers (e.g., Reissman, 2008) reject victory narratives about a rational “I” triumphing over the adverse conditions of their social world. But when I reflect on my experience of these five girls’ stories, and what it took to listen closely to those stories, to understand what was salient to them about the experiences they narrated, I am drawn away from the poststructural framework that treats individuals as discursively constituted subjects whose agency is an effect of power.

I entered into this study confused and conflicted about what might count as discursive agency. Here, I review what Butler (1997) means by *discursive agency* and what it might mean to act in a way that subverts the gender binary before discussing my own desire to find examples in the girls’ stories. According to Butler, *subjectivation* “denotes both the becoming of the subject and the process of subjection—one inhabits the figure of autonomy only by becoming subjected to a power” (p. 83). In this way, agency is discursive, or “the product of being inaugurated in and by discourse and so able to join its citational chains” (Youdell, 2006, p. 519). At the moment one becomes recognizable in discourse, one’s agency is activated and so she can subjectivate another.



So, even as Butler rejects an understanding of a rational, enduring self that exists before the moment of subjectivation, she retains the notion that a subject can act with intent.

Butler's notion of discursive agency, then, holds open the possibility of subversion. In Youdell's words,

[T]he sedimented meanings of enduring and prevailing discourses might be unsettled and reinscribed; subordinate, disavowed or silent discourses might be deployed in, and made meaningful in, contexts from which they have been barred; and challenges to prevailing constitutions of subjects might be deployed self-consciously through the discursive practices of subjects who are themselves subjectivated. (p. 519)

A subversive act reveals that “nobody is necessarily anything” (p. 519), which opens subjects up to radical redefinition. Butler (1999) offers drag as an example of a kind of subversive parody that does this—that “displace[s] heterocentric assumptions by revealing that heterosexual identities are as constructed and ‘unoriginal’ as the imitations of them” (p. 66).

During the interviews, I found myself trying to contort fairly mundane expressions of self-interest and choice into moments of discursive agency—moments when, I wanted to argue, the girls were acting and speaking in ways that subverted discursive meanings. Perhaps the reason my search for subversive acts in the girls' narrations felt so futile, after all, is because individual deeds are small, momentary, and often inconsequential. To say that a subversive deed can “alter contexts” or “challenge prevailing constitutions” is to put more pressure on an individual deed than it can bear. Moreover, some deeds simultaneously inscribe and subvert discursive meanings of gender, as we saw in the example of Briana taking power that was not hers by telling a group of boys, “[Y]ou can suck my dick” (NEI, 10/11/17). It is because of the deed's smallness that I come back to the “I” that the poststructuralist framework destabilized and

obscured—an “I” that endures over time, has interiority, and has agency not just as an effect of power but also a capacity to nurture certain kinds of deeds in a way that makes them habit over time. I found in my quest to identify agency in the girls’ narrations, not the isolated deeds that I imagined would alter contexts and challenge prevailing constitutions. Instead, I found in the act of storytelling a potential for agency—a potential that relies on an understanding of self that endures over time. The distance between the storyteller’s lived-in moment of experience (the substance of narration) and the act of narration leaves room for renegotiation and resignification of meanings. The act of listening to someone else’s narration also creates a space in which meanings can be renegotiated. As I listened to the girls’ stories, I had to actively work to make sense of what happened, how they felt in the moment of experience, what they did and why, and how they felt about the experience in the moment of narration. Stories, as they are told and heard, do not necessarily or always de-naturalize discourses and subvert their meanings, and, even when they do, they don’t do so once and for all. But the distances between the moment of experience and the telling of experience and between the telling of and listening to experience, create occasion for the kind of agency that transcends individual deeds and recognizes the project of being an “I” as ongoing.

In her description of an Afrocentric feminist epistemology, Collins (1991) distinguishes between knowledge and wisdom. According to Collins, Black women require the wisdom that comes from concrete experience rather than mere knowledge—which is, as she defines it, academic, cold, and removed from the world. She writes,

This distinction between knowledge and wisdom, and the use of experience as the cutting edge dividing them, has been key to Black women’s survival. In the context of race, gender, and class oppression, the distinction is essential.

Knowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinate. (p. 208)

In popular discourse, storytelling—most often in the form of writing about personal experiences—is thought of as a valuable educational practice especially in communities of color because it centers and celebrates young people’s voices. My interest here isn’t necessarily to contest this idea. Instead, I want to add Collins’s notion of wisdom to this idea. The distances I describe above, between the substance of narration and the act of narration and between the storyteller and the listener, could be thought of as spaces in which the concrete experience of girls of color becomes the kind of wisdom that is essential for survival. The renegotiation of meanings—Jasmine recognizing the injustice in the way her boyfriend silenced her, Kaylee reflecting on what she wants a relationship to look and feel like, Audrey deciding whether to accept or reject her mother’s assessment of the stakes of sexual relationships—is not only a way of holding open the potential for *agency* in Butler’s (1997) sense but also a way of developing *wisdom* in Collins’s. The idea of concrete experience as a criterion for credibility, as Collins describes it, evokes the tension I experienced in my own analysis of the way the girls constituted themselves as respectable. Using a poststructural feminist framework, I saw their judgments of women’s appearance as citations and reinscriptions of regulatory discourses. An Afrocentric feminist epistemology invites me to reflect on my own lack of concrete experience, and so wisdom, as far as appropriateness is concerned. While, as a woman, I am certainly implicated in discussions of what sorts of dress and appearance are appropriate and not, the stakes of these discussions are much lower for me. The concrete experiences of Audrey’s and Danielle’s mothers, for example, have led them to assess the stakes of appropriateness for themselves and for their daughters very

differently. Their concrete experiences as mothers who had children at a young age gave them the wisdom they have passed to their daughters special credibility. While the message that one must be respectable in order to “be something” in life cites and reinscribes the White supremacist capitalist patriarchy, I must recognize how it is also comes from wisdom born out of concrete experience coping with interlocking systems of race, class, and gender oppression—concrete experience that I, as a White woman, lack.

### **Undecidability**

In Chapter VI, I witnessed the deconstruction of three binary oppositions at work in the maintenance of the primary opposition between masculine and feminine. I showed how, in the *appropriate/inappropriate* binary, *inappropriate* refers to both presence and absence. To be *inappropriate* is to be a noticed—and unwelcome—presence in a given social space. To be *inappropriate* is fundamentally to be present, specifically in contrast to others in the same space who are *appropriate*. Situated as part of the *masculine/feminine* binary, *inappropriateness* is a transgressive refusal to make oneself absent, to erase oneself. However, one becomes *inappropriate* by revealing the feminine connotations of the body. One assumes presence by emphasizing a kind of femininity, which, in the context of the *masculine/feminine* binary, is already an embodied absence. In order to *not be feminine*, one must *feminize* herself.

I also showed how the *probable/improbable* binary that stabilizes the girls’ hypothetical scenarios and stories deconstructs. Circularity is fundamental to the logic of the girls’ use of words like *probably* and *most likely*, and this circularity undermines the truth value of these hypotheticals. It is the act of speaking these scenarios into existence

and then labeling them *probable* that shores up their truth value. The girls do not simply *read* the images and scenes that compromise these scenarios; they simultaneously *compose* them by speaking them into existence. Their use of *probably*, then, necessitates simultaneous encoding and decoding. The scenarios are assumed to be so recognizable that they can be conjured and recognized easily, making the *probable* story an internally stabilizing fiction.

Finally, I showed how a binary opposition at work not in the girls' language but in my own understanding of gender deconstructs. The girls and I all reject the images of hypersexualized feminine-connoted bodies on screen, but, I have thought, we reject those images for different reasons—in short, the girls blamed the women, and I blamed the men. What my analysis of *choosing/being chosen* helps me see is the possibility that the girls and I actually reject these images for the same reason. Perhaps we all reject the state of *choosing to be chosen*. This is a rejection of the idea that girls' and women's choices can only be thought of in relation to boys' and men's choices. When a woman appears on screen, for example, both the woman and presumably men have made choices that made that image possible. But the structure of choice always subordinates the woman's choice.

It would be easier to subvert binarized ways of thinking about gender if the gender binary acted alone. Instead, it is shored up and stabilized by a constellation of other binary oppositions—only three of which I analyzed. My interest in using Derrida (1967/1997) to witness the deconstructions of the girls' readings began with the idea of being stuck in a web of signification. Through my analysis, my personal sense of stuckness has evolved from a facile notion of being immobile—unable to move or act in ways that feel agentic, subversive, or even just personally “right”—to a more

poststructural notion of a stuckness in thought. As a woman, I am stuck with a choice between thinking the unthinkable or not thinking the thinkable. My attention to the way the girls read pop culture texts and narrated stories about their personal experience pushed me to think about the relationship between stuckness and agency as an effect of power. We are stuck weaving the web in which we are stuck. We weave this web when we use language that relies on these binary oppositions, shape semiotic resources into meanings, tell stories about our experiences, invoke *probable* stories and scenarios to make sense of what we see on the screen and in the world. As particular and mechanistic as deconstructions can feel, for me, the process of channeling my focus toward the web of signification until it disintegrates before my eyes offers momentary relief from that sense of stuckness.

### **Critique of the Study**

As a teacher who was doing research, my major critique of the study is focused on the sort of curriculum that was created through our shared experiences in Group. I entered into the study not intending to shape these experiences intentionally. In fact, my intention was to facilitate these discussions as loosely as possible so that I could see how the girls were already working to make sense of the texts. Still, the lack of structure—which I take to include the haphazard selection of texts, the haphazard grouping and sequencing of texts, and the unboundedness of our time together—actually closed rather than opened our shared space to meanings and practices. Eventually, the girls started rehashing familiar ideas about gender and femininity, regardless of the texts before us. Our shared experiences wore our thinking in, and the girls often reverted to familiar

ideas. As a result, there is a great deal more to how the girls engage with pop culture texts and how they read the femininities they make available than was made visible in this study. It would certainly be possible to preserve the intent of the study—to identify existing literacy practices rather than promote new ones—and to give the experience the structure it needs to encourage a greater variety of existing meanings and practices to the surface of our discussion.

As a researcher, my critique of the study is focused on my methods of data production and analysis. The girls and I produced data through discussing pop culture texts and through and narrating experiences. These data were primarily language, and, in knowable and unknowable ways, that language was shaped by the school setting and the structure of the experiences. The girls' use of rational, and sometimes academic, language—including their ways of responding to each other, their use of the vocabulary of reading instruction, and their ways of categorizing and evaluating the figures and texts under discussion—suggests to me how little of their actual ways of taking up the meanings made available in these texts I was able to see. Their attachments to the pop culture texts and the way they live with these texts in their everyday lives was not made fully visible through this research.

As I analyzed discussion group data, I directed my attention most often to the language the girls used to make meanings of the texts. In some cases, I examined that language very closely, as I did their use of relative language to describe women's physical appearance. I could have made a firmer commitment to analyzing language and analyzed many more patterns in their language, rather than just analyzing what stood out to me as interesting. Alternatively, I could have made a firmer commitment to analyzing

the way their talk itself is multimodal and done more to account for gesture, facial expression, tone, movement. Just as I did with language, I attended to these elements only when they stood out to me as interesting—or, in more than one case, simply amusing. While I did attempt to account for what drew my attention to particular patterns in language use, or to the multimodality of their talk, I sense that my first two research questions would have been more fully addressed if I had made a firmer commitment in advance to either attending to language or attending to multimodality and, based on such a commitment, made more consistent decisions in my analysis.

The second critique I make of my analysis as a researcher has to do with the way I employed the two parts of my feminist framework: poststructural feminism and intersectional feminism. Throughout Chapters IV and V, I analyzed data first by examining it poststructurally to identify how gender was performed, how the girls were constituted as respectable girls, how meanings of gender were employed to regulate others, and so forth. I then *went back* and added a more intersectional analysis, accounting for how hypersexualized images of Black women in pop culture are thought of in Black feminist frameworks, for example, or how controlling images shape notions of the superstrong Black mother. These parts of the analysis feel *added on* because they were, but, more than that, I criticize the structure of the analysis. The way I approached the analysis, the poststructural feminist analysis was the default analysis—perhaps even carried out as the neutral analysis—and the intersectional feminist analysis served to undercut or complicate it. More specifically, my poststructural analysis often ended in a rebuke of the girls' thinking and the intersectional feminist analysis recuperated some of their agency and a sense of what was materially at stake that had not been recognized.



This overall structure of analysis under-utilizes the richness and variety of intersectional feminist and particularly Black feminist thought—thought that can do much more than simply recuperate unrecognized agency and a sense of what is at stake. How might my analysis have been different if I began with an intersectional feminist analysis and then added to it a poststructural analysis? How might it have been different if I integrated these two frameworks by examining the subject positions available to Black girls in particular? Certainly, my pattern of *going back* and *adding on* resulted from both my Whiteness and my various failures to account for my Whiteness. I inhabit poststructural feminism more comfortably, and that unexamined comfort resulted in this structure of analysis. That comfort had a hold on me, and had I wrested myself from it, I might have identified other ways of employing both frameworks.

### **Curriculum Implications**

There was a kind of curriculum produced through the girls' experiences of Group and the narrative elicitation interviews. Of course, my aim was not to teach but to examine the girls' existing literacy practices and ways of talking about and making sense of the meanings of femininity made available in pop culture texts. Still, the accumulated shared experiences of participating in Group—the texts, the explanations, the arguments, the stories—created its own kind of curriculum and my experience surfaced all sorts of curricular possibilities as I grappled with my own identity as a teacher desiring to do better. In what follows, I lay out some curricular possibilities that are linked to my experiences with the girls and analyses of their readings. In Chapters I and II, I showed that there is a wealth of research on the role pop culture does and can play in the

curriculum. I argued that pop culture itself can and should be a territory for teaching and learning, and young people can and should take up literacy practices that support them in making sense of how pop culture shapes their understanding of themselves and their lives.

I conceptualize curriculum as a play between openness and constraint. My experience as a poet has influenced my thinking here. The poet J. V. Cunningham (1964), describing the play of openness and constraint (*form* or *formality*) in poetic forms, argues, “The problem of form is how to get rid of it. But to get rid of it we must keep it; we must have something to get rid of” (p. 184). He describes the content and the form of a sonnet by way of illustration and definition: “For it is apparent to any poet who sets out to write a sonnet that the form of the sonnet is the content, and its content the form.... I shall define form, then, without a contrasting term. It is that which remains the same when everything else is changed” (p. 184). Following this line of thinking, the question of a pop culture literacy curriculum, for me, is a question of where the curriculum would be opened up to choice of texts and of pathways through texts and where the curriculum would be constrained, directing young people’s attention to specific texts, ideas, practices, and strategies. So, unlike the curriculum that was created through Group, the pop culture curriculum I imagine would have an identifiable shape, a shape that both accommodates individual choice and directs young people to read, compose, and think in ways they would not otherwise. As a literacy curriculum, then, it would designate periods of time when the entire group would be engaged in reading particular types of texts and particular genres within those types and when the entire group would be engaged in reading pop texts using particular guiding questions, frames, or lenses.

One goal of the curriculum I imagine would be for young people to recognize their own stance in relation to the text—in-narrative or out-of-narrative—and recognize what each stance affords and does not afford. As I suggested in Chapter IV, reading in-narrative affords not only a pleasurable experience of a text but also potentially empowering affiliations with characters, as we saw with the girls' affiliation with Cookie. An out-of-narrative reading makes it possible to see and so contest the meanings the text makes available; it makes possible a critical reading of the text. The curriculum I imagine would support both stances of reading pop culture texts, drawing young people's awareness to the stance, and would be shaped in such a way that they would have occasion to try out both. Their out-of-narrative experience would be an occasion for teaching new ways of critically examining the text as a text, including questions we might ask about the text, lenses we might use as we read them, and frames of thinking. For example, young people could use an out-of-narrative experience of a text as an occasion to learn new literacy practices, including, for example, strategies for exploring how texts mean multimodally. This includes learning how texts are constructed and learning about the iconicity and indexed histories of visual images on screen (Hartshorne, Weiss, & Burks, 1998, as cited in Wohlwend, 2009). They could also use an out-of-narrative experience as an occasion to consider the stories pop culture tells and question the kinds of stories that pop culture makes possible for subjects at particular intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality. I would want this part of the curriculum to be relatively open in terms of the pop culture texts students read and constrained in terms of the literacy practices taught. To work toward this goal, young people would need to

choose texts that are personally meaningful to them, otherwise an in-narrative reading of the text would be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.

A second goal of the curriculum I imagine would be to explore the layering of narratives in pop culture and in their lives. Storytelling and personal narrative writing are often put forth as school activities that center and celebrate young people's voices, and often narrative is thought of conventionally in schools (heroic protagonist who overcomes obstacles to achieve her goals). While I don't totally reject these notions of storytelling and personal narrative writing, I imagine a curriculum that offers a different set of assumptions about narrative and its emancipatory possibilities. I imagine this work unfolding in four parts. First, the curriculum would create a space for personal storytelling, which I take to include both oral and written storytelling. In this space (by *space*, I mean both designated periods of time and social spaces in which young people share their stories with each other orally or in writing), young people would be engaged in telling about past experiences in an open-ended way. They wouldn't be asked to tell stories that meet particular criteria or employ particular techniques. The purpose of this segment of the curriculum would be to create a habit out of personal storytelling.

Later, the curriculum would direct young people's attention to the distances I described in Chapter V, the distances between the moment of lived experience and the moment of narration and between the narration of the story and a listener's active construction of the story. I imagine young people being invited to consider what happens in those distances. How do they, as storytellers, reformulate what happened when they tell the story and how do they renegotiate the meanings of what happened—and who they are in relation to what happened? How do they, as listeners/readers, make sense of the

storyteller as a protagonist and a narrator responding to and making sense of events over time? I imagine young people, as listeners/readers, doing some of the work I did when I listened to the girls' stories. I imagine them doing this in dialogue with the storyteller, considering, for example, salience, emphasis, and incompleteness (Shaafsma & Vinz, 2011) and what those qualities might say about the storyteller's way of making sense of her experience and the possibilities for subverting discursive meanings. I would include in this work developing young people's awareness of the way we simultaneously compose and read *probable stories* as a way of stabilizing the meanings we make of ourselves and of the world. The goal of directing young people's attention in this way would not be to discourage the use of probable stories but to lead them to interrogate their own processes of conjuring those stories and what has influenced those processes.

In the third segment of this curriculum, young people would engage in shared experiences of pop culture texts that tell particular kinds of stories. At this point, I imagine the curriculum to be constrained by a predetermined set of texts that tell a range of stories, including stories that are linked to storylines (Søndergaard, 2002) and employ controlling images (Collins, 1991) and stories that subvert discursive meanings of gender, race, class, and sexuality. Constraining the curriculum would allow for shared experiences of texts and purposeful selection of texts to reflect a range of stories. Young people would then be engaged in reconstructing the stories these texts suggest and considering the origins of these stories, what makes them appealing to different audiences, and, of course, their connections to and disconnections from discursive meanings. Young people would also be invited to explore what a sort of layering of stories can tell us about pop culture's stories and our own stories. Do stories that pop

culture texts make available line up with the stories we tell about ourselves? Where are there disjunctures? What are the pop culture stories into which we have inserted ourselves, and how did those stories go for us? In the final segment of this curriculum, I imagine young people conducting a sort of auto-ethnography of the stories of their lives—including stories they tell, stories that are told in their local communities and families, and pop culture stories that are meaningful to them. The culminating experience of this auto-ethnography would be to compose a multimodal text that represented these stories, how they relate to each other, and how the storyteller uses them to make sense of herself in relation to the world around her.

In the curriculum I imagine, pop culture texts are not thought of as autonomous and stable in their meanings, and literacy practices are not thought of as fixed and whole, stable enough to be carried from one literacy experience to another without changing. This understanding of both texts and literacy practices necessitates a curriculum that sometimes invites young people to explore their own texts and stories and other times invites them into a shared experience of a single text; that sometimes introduces new strategies, questions, ways of thinking about texts and stories and other times encourages more open exploration. However curriculum plays with and negotiates openness and constraint, the one I imagine uses young people's existing engagements with pop culture text as an occasion to both explore possibilities and focus attention.

### **Research Implications**

This study examined the literacy practices adolescent girls of color brought to situated readings of pop culture texts and the ways they circulated discourses in these

readings. It also examined the way girls tell stories about themselves and the connections to and disconnections from the meanings they made of femininity from their engagements with pop culture. As expected, I find myself with more questions than answers, more uncertainties than explanations. Future research is needed to explore more of the literacy practices young people bring to their engagements with pop culture. This study produced data focused on how girls read pop culture in a quasi-academic space. Explanations dominated their ways of reading and talking about texts, much as explanations dominate their way of reading and talking about texts in school. Studies that take place across different settings—at home, among friends in social spaces, in city spaces, for example—would reveal more of the literacy practices young people bring to pop culture texts. Parallel studies in these different settings would contribute to an understanding of how setting and context shape these practices and the discursive meanings made of the texts.

One of the limitations of this study was its reliance on girls' use of language in a school setting as a way of understanding the girls' readings of femininity. This method didn't allow me to examine how the girls take up these ideas in their everyday lives. Other methods of data production would allow these processes and practices to become more visible. For example, an ethnographic study would allow researchers to locate girls' use of and engagements with pop culture in their everyday lives. Such a study would make visible how girls take up femininities unprompted in their everyday interactions and would offer a closer look at some of what was found in this study—specifically, the way their personal experiences, and their spontaneous narrations of personal experiences, are entwined in their readings of femininity in pop culture. Another methodological approach

would be action research. In an action research study, researchers could invite girls to create their own multimodal texts and examine what the process and product of creation says about their ways of reading, understanding, and taking up the meanings of girlhood pop culture texts make available. Finally, employing a youth participatory approach, researchers could invite girls to research and develop accounts of their own ongoing participation in pop culture—akin to the auto-ethnographies described in the section above. In addition to providing a potentially meaningful curricular experience, this approach would offer a closer look at how the girls make sense of pop culture as it is embedded in their daily lives.

One important element of my own critique of the study was that discussions of race were added onto discussions of gender after the fact. These discussions were added on both in the data production phase (wherein I brought up race explicitly as our time together was nearing a close) and in the analysis phase. Future research could be reframed to be about gender intersected with race from the beginning. Instead of first asking girls what the text says about being a girl and then later asking if race is relevant, researchers could begin with the question of what pop culture texts are saying about being a White girl, a Black girl, a Latina girl, and so forth. Another part of this critique is that, ultimately, I treated the girls as a homogenous group, when, in fact, three of the girls were Afro-Latina/Black Dominican and two of the girls were Black/African-American. Making race, as it intersects with gender, an explicit topic of inquiry from the beginning would allow researchers to understand the relevance and significance of individual girls' particular ethnic, linguistic, and religious locations.



Another line of inquiry and research could examine young people who identify differently in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality. This study examined the literacy practices of a relatively homogenous group of straight young women of color. Studying how different young people engage with pop culture, with attention to the different sorts of subject positions pop culture makes available to them, would offer a fuller understanding of how young people relate to the meanings suggested in pop culture texts, the conditions under which they align themselves to what is made available, and the conditions under which they carve out different positions for themselves. In addition, the girls in this study did not yet engage in social media and, with one exception, did not have their own phones. I suggested above that their lack of mobile and social engagement with pop culture was a distinguishing feature of their age group—perhaps there is some truth in that—but there are certainly young people their age who do engage in these ways. Research is needed to address how they mobilize meanings, literally and figuratively, as they use their phones and social media platforms to participate in pop culture.

I end with my own ever-proliferating curiosities. A study like this one could be extended to address much more about the girls who participate. In my capacity as a leader in their school, I have observed the girls' English classes, sat in on their book clubs and Socratic Seminars, read and analyzed their personal narrative writing, attended the nonfiction exhibition for which they created their own multimodal texts on a topic of their interest. Their work and my observations were never meant to be part of this study's data set, but I found myself wishing they were. Future research could analyze how girls read pop culture texts multimodally in a quasi-academic space against how they read print texts in a fully academic space. One of the lasting tensions in any research or

theorizing about literacy has to do with the portability of strategies. A study that addresses both kinds of reading situations could contribute insights into the extent to which strategies are carried across contexts and into how they change when they are. Finally, a study like this one could have been extended by conceiving of pop culture more broadly. The girls did not participate in pop culture on phones or social media platforms, but they live in a city saturated with pop culture conceived more broadly (structures, signs, advertisements) and they live lives saturated with pop culture (the food they eat, the clothes they wear, the objects they play with) and future research could examine their continuous engagement with pop culture as they move about their worlds.

### **A Final Thought**

I did not know then that I had embarked on something called self-invention, the making of a type of person that did not exist in the place where I was born. ... It was just when I had despaired of ever becoming a writer that I applied for a secretarial position at the magazine *Mademoiselle*. I was twenty-four years old. To my job interview I wore a very short skirt, a nylon blouse under which I wore no brassiere, red shoes with very high heels and white anklets, and no hat to cover my short-cropped blond hair. *Mademoiselle* did not hire me. The people I talked to there had been so kind and sweet toward me, both on the phone and in person, that it took me a very long time to understand that they would never hire me. I wondered if it was my shoes and the anklets, or perhaps my hair. I was speaking of these things to a friend, wondering out loud why had I not been offered a job at *Mademoiselle* when the people there seemed to like me so much, and he said, But how could I have applied to a place like that—didn't I know that they never hired black girls? And I thought, But how was I to know that I was a black girl? I never pass myself in a corridor and say, I am a black girl. I never see myself coming toward me as I come round a bend and say, There is that black girl coming toward me. How was I really to know such a thing? ... This life went on. (Kincaid, 1995)

I stumbled into Jamaica Kincaid's (1995) story "Putting Myself Together" just as I was beginning to write this final chapter. As I read along and visualized Kincaid in a very short skirt, a nylon blouse with no brassiere, and red shoes with very high heels and

white anklets, I realized that a trace of this image already existed in my mind. I had read this story before; I didn't remember when. As I read, the trace of this image blossomed with vibrancy and color. And while I felt the pulsing of recognition, this reading felt different. This reading filled me with dread. I thought, *Oh, no, this is a better version of my study*. It's a strange thing to think, that a short story could be a better version of a study, and maybe the thought signals my own attachments to narrative. I will leave out my analysis of the story and its relationship to this study. I won't explain what self-invention means in relation to poststructural feminism and Youdell's (2006) emancipatory view that "nobody is necessarily anything" (p. 519). I won't examine the resources—the short skirt, the nylon blouse, the red shoes—that Kincaid shaped into a self. I won't comment on what it means to "never see myself coming toward me as I come round a bend" and link that image to Butler's (1997) notion of subjectivation, of becoming recognizable in discourse. I won't speculate on how it is that girls come to know "such a thing" about themselves, and I won't presume that it is, even in part, through engagement with pop culture. Finally, I won't impose my interest in an enduring "I" on Kincaid's final sentence: "This life went on." I will simply pause to note how, in reading this story the second time but not the first, I was flushed with feelings and to remember so many other times when I made a meaning out of a text, and, in turn, the text made a meaning out of me.

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## Appendix A

## Letter of Invitation to Families

Dear Families,

Mia Hood, **the Director of Middle School Literacy for KIPP NYC** and a doctoral candidate at Teachers College, Columbia University, is inviting your child to participate in her dissertation study entitled "'We Flawless': Adolescent Girls' Readings of Femininity in Pop Culture." Her study focuses on how young women think about pop culture and what it says about femininity. Participation in this study is voluntary and would involve your child participating in 8 hour-long after-school discussion groups, as well as a one-on-one interview after the discussion groups have concluded. The discussion groups will take place once a week between **April 28** and **June 16**. The interviews will take place between **June 16** and **June 23**.

Please indicate below if your child is interested in participating in the study and return the bottom portion of this letter with your child to her homeroom teacher. If she is interested, you and your child will be invited to attend an informational meeting with Mia, during which your child will have the opportunity to sign up for the study.

If you would like, Mia can discuss with you the details via email at **meh2190@tc.columbia.edu** or by phone at 972-834-0350.

Sincerely,

**Allison Holley**

---

Child's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

My child is interested in learning more about participating in this study.

My child is NOT interested in participating in this study.

## Appendix B

## Letter to Interested Girls

[Distributed after informational meeting]

Dear 7<sup>th</sup> Grade Girls,

I'm excited that you're interested in participating in my study of adolescent girls and pop culture! The group will meet on **Fridays, 4:00-5:00 pm at school**. We will meet on these dates:

- Friday, April 28
- Friday, May 5
- Friday, May 12
- Friday, May 19
- Friday, May 26
- Friday, June 2
- Friday, June 9
- Friday, June 16

If you are able to attend most of those dates, you are welcome to participate in our group.

Please sign the form called "Informed Consent" and have a parent sign the form called "Parental Permission." **Return these forms to [REDACTED] by Wednesday, April 26.** If more than 7 of you express interest in participating, I will randomly select 7 from those who returned forms on time.

I hope you choose to participate. I'm looking forward to learning from you all!

My best,

Mia Hood

## Appendix C

## Informed Consent Form

**Protocol Title:** “We Flawless”: Adolescent Girls’ Readings of Femininity in Pop Culture  
**Principal Investigator:** Mia Hood, Teachers College

---

**INTRODUCTION**

You are being invited to participate in a research study called “We Flawless’: Adolescent Girls’ Readings of Femininity in Pop Culture.” You may qualify to take part in this research study because you are an adolescent girl. Approximately six people will participate in this study and it will take between 9 and 14 hours of your time to complete over 10 weeks.

**WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?**

This study is being done to determine how adolescent girls engage in and understand messages about and images of femininity in pop culture. Pop culture includes movies, television shows, social media, music, music videos, magazines, websites, and other media created for large audiences.

**WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO IF I AGREE TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?**

If you decide to participate, you will participate in a weekly discussion group with the principal investigator and your peers. During this discussion group, we will watch or read a pop culture text together and discuss what it says about femininity or girlhood. We will also share examples of our engagement with the ideas we discuss from our real lives. These examples can include photographs, screenshots, social media posts, text exchanges, and any other digital object we feel comfortable sharing with the group and discussing.

Later, you will participate in a one-on-one interview with the principal investigator. She will ask you to describe a moment in your life when one of these ideas we discussed in the discussion group was relevant to you personally. You will be invited to tell the story of that moment, how you felt, what you thought, and how significant it was to you.

The discussion groups and the interviews will be video-recorded. After the video-recording is transcribed, it will be deleted. If you do not wish to be video-recorded, we can position you away from the camera so that the recording only picks up the audio of your voice. If you do not wish to be audio-recorded, you will not be able to participate.

Each discussion group meeting will last approximately 60 minutes, and we will meet 8 times. The interview will last approximately 30 minutes. You will be given a pseudonym or false name in order to keep your identity confidential.



You will not be removed from class in order to participate in this study. You will participate once a week after school.

### **WHAT POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS CAN I EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

This is a minimal risk study, which means the harms or discomforts that you may experience are not greater than you would ordinarily encounter in daily life. However, there are some risks to consider. You might feel uncomfortable discussing personal experiences related to gender and pop culture with a group of your peers and/or with the principal investigator. **However, you do not have to answer any questions or share anything you don't want to. You can stop participating in the study at any time without penalty.**

You might feel concerned that things you say might get back to members of the school community. **The principal investigator will not share anything you say in the course of this study with anyone.** The principal investigator is taking precautions to keep your information confidential and prevent anyone from discovering or guessing your identity, such as using a pseudonym instead of your name and keeping all information on a password protected computer and locked in a file drawer.

### **WHAT POSSIBLE BENEFITS CAN I EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this study. Participation may benefit the fields of literacy, cultural studies, and curriculum studies.

### **WILL I BE PAID FOR BEING IN THIS STUDY?**

You will not be paid to participate. There are no costs to you for taking part in this study.

### **WHEN IS THE STUDY OVER? CAN I LEAVE THE STUDY BEFORE IT ENDS?**

The study is over when you have completed the discussion groups and the one-on-one interview. However, you can leave the study at any time even if you haven't finished.

### **PROTECTION OF YOUR CONFIDENTIALITY**

The investigator will keep all written materials locked in a desk drawer in a locked office. Any electronic or digital information (including audio recordings) will be stored on a computer that is password protected. What is on the video-recording will be written down and the video-recording will then be destroyed. There will be no record matching your real name with your pseudonym. Regulations require that research data be kept for at least five years.

### **HOW WILL THE RESULTS BE USED?**

The results of this study will be published in journals and presented at academic conferences. Your name or any identifying information about you will not be published. This study is being conducted as part of the dissertation of the principal investigator.

**CONSENT FOR VIDEO RECORDING**

Video-recording is part of this research study. You can choose whether to give permission to be recorded. If you decide that you don't wish to be video-recorded, you will still be able to participate in this study, but your voice will be audio-recorded. If you decide that you don't wish to be audio-recorded, you will not be able to participate in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_ I give my consent to be video-recorded

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_ I **do not** consent to be video-recorded

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

**WHO MAY VIEW MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY**

\_\_\_ I consent to allow written, video and/or audio taped materials viewed at an educational setting or at a conference outside of Teachers College

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_ I **do not** consent to allow written, video and/or audio taped materials viewed outside of Teachers College Columbia University

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

**WHO CAN ANSWER MY QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY?**

**If you have any questions about taking part in this research study, you should contact the principal investigator, Mia Hood, at [REDACTED]**

**If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you should contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (the human research ethics committee) at 212-678-4105 or email [IRB@tc.edu](mailto:IRB@tc.edu). Or you can write to the IRB at Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W. 120<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, NY 1002. The IRB is the committee that oversees human research protection for Teachers College, Columbia University.**

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**PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS**

- I have read and discussed the informed consent with the researcher. I have had ample opportunity to ask questions about the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits regarding this research study.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary. I may refuse to participate or withdraw participation at any time without penalty.
- The researcher may withdraw me from the research at his or her professional discretion.
- If, during the course of the study, significant new information that has been developed becomes available which may relate to my willingness to continue my participation, the investigator will provide this information to me.
- Any information derived from the research study that personally identifies me will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as specifically required by law.
- I should receive a copy of the Informed Consent document.

**My signature means that I agree to participate in this study**

**Print name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature:**

---

## Appendix D

## Parent Permission Form

**Protocol Title:** “We Flawless”: Adolescent Girls’ Readings of Femininity in Pop Culture Discussion Group and Interview Consent

**Principal Investigator:** Mia Hood, Teachers College, [REDACTED]

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**INTRODUCTION**

Your child is being invited to participate in this research study called “We Flawless”: Adolescent Girls’ Readings of Femininity in Pop Culture. Your child may qualify to take part in this research study because she is a 7<sup>th</sup> grade girl. Approximately six children will participate in this study and it will take 9 and 14 hours of your child’s time to complete over 10 weeks.

**WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?**

This study is being done to determine how adolescent girls engage in and understand messages about and images of femininity in pop culture. Pop culture includes movies, television shows, social media, music, music videos, magazines, websites, and other media created for large audiences.

**WHAT WILL MY CHILD BE ASKED TO DO IF I AGREE THAT MY CHILD CAN TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?**

If you decide to allow your child to take part in this study, she will participate in a weekly discussion group with the principal investigator and her peers. During this discussion group, the group will watch or read a pop culture text together and discuss what it says about femininity or girlhood. The group will also share examples of their engagement with the ideas we discuss from their real lives. These examples can include photographs, screenshots, social media posts, text exchanges, and any other digital object they feel comfortable sharing with the group and discussing.

Later, the girls will participate in a one-on-one interview with the principal investigator. She will ask your child to describe a moment in her life when one of the ideas we discussed in the discussion group was relevant to her personally. She will be invited to tell the story of that moment, how she felt, what she thought, and how significant it was to her.

The discussion groups and the interviews will be video-recorded. After the video-recording is transcribed, it will be deleted. If your child not wish to be video-recorded, she can be positioned away from the camera so that the recording only picks up the audio of her voice. If she does not wish to be audio-recorded, she will not be able to participate.

Each discussion group meeting will last approximately 60 minutes, and the group will meet 8 times. The interview will last approximately 30 minutes. Your child will be given a pseudonym or false name in order to keep her identity confidential.

Your child will not be removed from class in order to participate in this study. She will participate once a week after school.

### **WHAT POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS CAN MY CHILD EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

This is a minimal risk study, which means the harms or discomforts that your child may experience are not greater than she would ordinarily encounter in daily life. However, there are some risks to consider. She might feel uncomfortable discussing personal experiences related to gender and pop culture with a group of her peers and/or with the principal investigator. **However, your child does not have to answer any questions or share anything she don't want to talk about. Your child can stop participating in the study at any time without penalty.**

Your child might feel concerned that things she says might get back to members of the school community. **The principal investigator will not share anything your child says in the course of this study with anyone.** The principal investigator is taking precautions to keep your child's information confidential and prevent anyone from discovering or guessing her identity, such as using a pseudonym instead of her name and keeping all information on a password protected computer and locked in a file drawer.

### **WHAT POSSIBLE BENEFITS CAN MY CHILD EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

There is no direct benefit to your child for participating in this study. Participation may benefit the fields of literacy, cultural studies, and curriculum studies.

### **WILL MY CHILD BE PAID FOR BEING IN THIS STUDY?**

Your child will not be paid to participate. There are no costs to you for your child's taking part in this study.

### **WHEN IS THE STUDY OVER? CAN MY CHILD LEAVE THE STUDY BEFORE IT ENDS?**

The study is over when your child has completed the discussion groups and the one-on-one interview. However, your child can leave the study at any time even if she hasn't finished.

### **PROTECTION OF YOUR CHILD'S CONFIDENTIALITY**

The investigator will keep all written materials locked in a desk drawer in a locked office. Any electronic or digital information (including audio recordings) will be stored on a computer that is password protected. What is on the video-recording will be written down and the video-recording will then be destroyed. There will be no record matching your child's real name with her pseudonym. Research data concerning children will be kept for five years.

### **HOW WILL THE RESULTS BE USED?**

The results of this study will be published in journals and presented at academic conferences. Your child's name or any identifying information about your child will not be published. This study is being conducted as part of the dissertation of the principal investigator.

### **CONSENT FOR AUDIO AND OR VIDEO RECORDING**

Video-recording is part of this research study. You can choose whether to give permission for your child to be recorded. If you decide that you don't wish for your child to be video-recorded, your child will still be able to participate in this study, but your child's voice will be audio-recorded. If you decide that you don't wish for your child to be audio-recorded, your child will not be able to participate in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_ I give my consent for my child to be recorded \_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_ I **do not** consent for my child to be recorded \_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

### **WHO CAN ANSWER MY QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY?**

If you have any questions about the study or your child's taking part in this study, you should contact the principal investigator, Mia Hood at meh2190@tc.columbia.edu or at [REDACTED].

If you have questions or concerns about your child's rights as a research subject, you should contact the **Institutional Review Board (IRB)** at 212-678-4105 or email [IRB@tc.edu](mailto:IRB@tc.edu). Or you can write to the IRB at Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W. 120<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, NY 10027, box 151. The IRB is the committee that oversees human research protection at Teachers College, Columbia University.

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### **PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS**

- I have read and discussed the informed consent with the investigator. I have had ample opportunity to ask questions about the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits regarding this research study.
- I understand that my child's participation is voluntary. I may refuse to allow my child to participate or withdraw participation at any time without penalty. I understand that my child may refuse to participate without penalty.
- If, during the course of the study, significant new information that has been developed becomes available which may relate to my willingness to allow my child to continue participation, the investigator will provide this information to me.
- Any information derived from the research study that personally identifies my child will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as specifically required by law.
- I should receive a copy of the Informed Consent document.

**My signature means that I agree to allow my child participate in this study**

**Child's name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Print Parent or guardian's name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Parent or guardian's signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix E

## Sample Discussion Group Transcript

Empire Pilot

Gesture:	[the person speaking is doing it]
1. Gesticulating	
2. Pointing	[[someone else is doing it]]
3. Snapping	
4. Laughing	a>b = a turns toward b
5. Nodding	axb = a is looking at b
Body orientation [>initial]	“...” used only for interruption
Gaze [x initial]	“.” used only for falling cadence
Indecipherable cross-talk [[vzv]]	“—” used only for self-interruption
	“,” used grammatically

My Notes:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Women are present only in service to men</li> <li>- Cookie has her own story, she's the exception</li> <li>- Only it turns out that she took the fall for Lucious...which the show comments on, whereas the women feeding the man on the yacht is not commented on</li> <li>- Cookie is aware of how her dress draws attention</li> <li>- Cookie cares about her children—especially the son who's gay <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Uses “tough love” (?) on the youngest son</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

**1. 0:22** Mia: The girl is Cookie. The woman is Cookie, right? Are there any other women, even?

[[vzv]]

Audrey: Because they keep calling her the b-word. Like, oh, that b-word....

- Kaylee: Who? Which one? [K>A]

...The one with the short hair

- Kaylee: Yeah, he keeps calling her...

- Mia: [inaudible]

Audrey: Anika, right? Anika, that's her name.



XXX<sup>1</sup>: [Comment about her name]

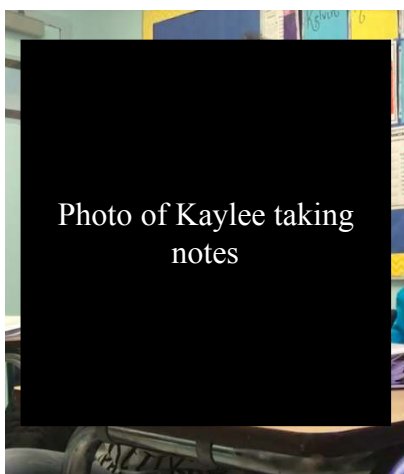
Mia: But let's talk about Cookie, though, because she's obviously the main one. So like we talked about last time, so based on what we see of Cookie, what does it mean to be a woman?

Audrey: Like, let's say for example you go to jail or something. Because like, um...

- Mia: You taking notes there, Kaylee?

- Kaylee: Uh huh.

- Mia: OK [4]



...So like, she, uh, Cookie, she's like more attached to the children than the father is because like, a lot of times the father, like, every time they like sit down to have a conversation, the father's always talking about like how to make business and stuff, but like the kids don't want to hear, the kids are actually missing a person to like sit down and talk to them. And then like Cookie like when she was in jail and afterwards she came out, the father like put things in their head, and they don't really trust her as much.

XXX: [Comment about mothers being strong]

**1. 2:25** Mia: So you're saying that Cookie kind of has that kind of connection with her children that Lucious doesn't have—it's kind of a mother thing [[3]]

XXX: [Comment about Lucious not accepting that his son is gay]

Danielle: I think the women they are like expected to know their place. Like, how she expected to come back from jail and just have the company but she has to understand that Lucious has been there longer.

Mia: Do you think that has to do with gender, or do you think that has to do with the specific situation between them, or both?

Audrey: I think both

Danielle: I think it could go both ways.

---

<sup>1</sup> XXX represents a girl who sat in on this discussion but was not a participant in the study. I've removed the transcription of her comments.

Mia: Like if she were—I guess what we'd have to do is think about if she were a man and they were like best friends who ran the company, do you think it would be the same kind of thing?

[[vvv]]

Audrey: Yeah, like he would automatically like [inaudible]

XXX: [Discussion of how Lucious took advantage of her]

Kaylee: I feel like Cookie is like—um a women are supposed to be lesser than men, and they supposed to know their role and like whatever a man says they automatically have to do it and like um like not be able to be higher.

Mia: So does she accept that or does she not accept that?

Kaylee: [shakes head] No she doesn't accept that.

- Danielle: She doesn't...

Kaylee: She wants to be higher.

Audrey: And like compared to all the other women in the movie like I mean on the show she's like strong [[3]] and she experiences so much, she like doesn't take no for an answer. Like if you tell her no, and she's gonna like what like and [inaudible] [[K4]]

XXX: [Discussion of women's rights]

Mia: Jax<sup>2</sup>, what do you think?

Jax: I agree with everything.

Mia: What else about Cookie? We didn't talk about her appearance, and how she appears

Danielle: Pssshhhht.

Audrey: She's pretty...

- Kaylee: Yeah, she's pretty

...and like her clothes, she goes above and beyond. Like everyone else is just wearing regular clothes, and she's like really taking her past personality into her clothing [inaudible]

Danielle: She makes sure she stands out and looks unique.

---

<sup>2</sup>Jax is a student who initially signed up to participate in the study but only attended this meeting.

Kaylee: And like she tries to make sure that she's the one that is being seen, not the other people, that she wants everyone to watch her, see her [end of video]



2. 0:00 Mia: Um, do you all think that idea, wanting to be seen, does that have to do with her trying to be powerful and get what she wants or does...

- Kaylee: Yes.

...how do you all think they're related?

Danielle: That she likes. OK so when she came back from jail, she like wanted to have the power she had before she went to jail so she is like, she believes that nothing has changed, but a lot has changed through the years.

Mia: Right, and what about like—how does that connect to the way she dresses? 'Cause when she gets out of jail she's wearing that fur coat and she said...

- Danielle: And that short dress

...and she said this is what she was wearing when she went into jail, right?

Kaylee: And someone brought it to her probably.

Mia: I think she said in the dialogue

- Danielle: Yeah, she said she wore

- Mia: ...when I went into jail. And then I think about what she changed into—similar kinds of stuff it was like the coat and the hat

Kaylee: Very expensive. Like I still wondered how'd she get [inaudible]

- Audrey: She got it from drug dealing

...yeah but she's out of jail so all that money would have been taken away from her

Audrey: Like, yeah, like probably there's like somebody else outside that was like smuggling the money inside the jail [[3]] or like buying her clothing or somebody that like really really knew her because her sense of style is different than everybody else's.

Danielle: Like the way she dresses really shows who she is as a person

Mia: How?

Danielle: Because she's like very sassy and messy and like the type of clothes she wear, you would think, yeah, she's...something [[JX5]]

Mia: That she's someone important, you should listen to her, that kind of thing? [[D5]]

XXX: [Comments about the connection between dress and personality]

**2. 1:59** Mia: Do you think that applies to both men and women?

Kaylee: I think to men as well. Nowadays, they like care about their appearance and everything [[3]] because appearance matters like for business and stuff.

Audrey: Like, they really care.

Mia: Do you think it's equal?

Danielle: No.

Audrey: And um I feel like women, if something is going on with them personally, they don't really show it as much but like Lucious, there are a lot of people, they could like see that like something was bothering him and it makes him be like harsher than he was before. [[K5]]

Mia: Huh, yeah.

XXX: [Comments about men being aggressive and women working hard]

Mia: So you see that in your life, did you all feel like you saw that in this episode?

[Side conversation about whether or not "grind harder" is an expression]

Mia: So my question is, what you're describing, did that come up in this episode, where like—because Cookie's been through a lot. Lucious is going through a lot, apparently he may be sick, so like they both are dealing with pain of some sort.

Kaylee: So they take it out in different ways [[3]]. Like, Lucious takes it out in aggression and anger and Cookie she like takes it out—tries to like—not be that aggressive...

- Mia: But hold on didn't she like beat the guy with the broom?

...yeah [[vzv]]

Audrey: Well that's her son! Well that's her son, and he's talking to her like she's any type of person, like if that was my mother?

Kaylee: He called her a b-word!

Audrey: Or worse [1]

XXX: [Comments about mothers deserving respect]

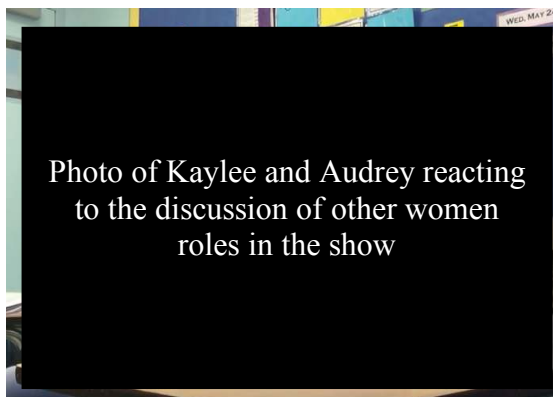
Audrey: She wouldn't even have taken the time to like talk, she'd be like what [1: claps hand to indicate slapping]

2. 4:22 Mia: But according to this, women can have aggression too.

- Danielle: Yes, they can [[AXD5]]

...when they're provo—

- Danielle: In certain situations.



Mia: OK. Alright. Um, there's something else I want to talk about. So other than Cookie, there are like these other minor women roles in the show. Um. And one thing that I noticed was that they all were like in service of the men? Like remember the image on the boat, the women are feeding the men in their bikinis and like [[K1: covers her mouth in disgust]] [[3]]



...and um, when else did that happen?

- Kaylee: Uh...

...oh! When the youngest son was in the club and there were the women, and he said

- Kaylee: He kept looking back at them

...right and he said "it's part of my artistic process" which I assume he means...

- Kaylee: Yeah, I was like...

...sex

[[vvv]]

XXX: [Related story about her brother]

Kaylee: Nobody cares. That's the point. They care how girls like act but when a boy acts the same way that a girl acts, it's like nothing else, like...

- XXX: [agreement]

...yeah they think it's cool, it's OK, like they take advantage of girls all the time.

Audrey: Yeah I would like to make an inference like also on like shows and stuff you will see like they wouldn't really be respecting women, like let's say for example like a man he has like a lot of different women that he's dating and like, and, yeah.

- Kaylee: [inaudible] bored

...and let's say that the woman is cheating on him with someone else, it becomes a bigger deal and stuff but like if a man is cheating on somebody they don't really care, it's just like, oh.

- Kaylee: like yeah, it's OK, I'll leave you all to her [1]

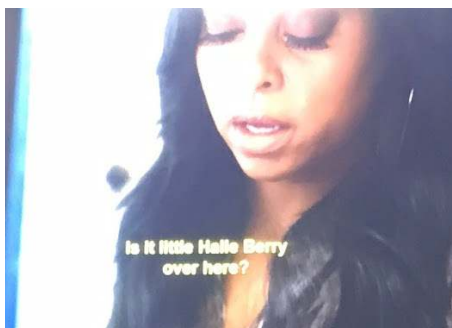
...like if the girl like if she like confronts him about it it's like you could leave, it's really not going to make much of a difference to me.

Mia: And do you see any of that coming out in this episode, those kinds of ideas?

Kaylee: I mean, um, when Cookie was in jail, I'm guessing that other girl, Becky? I don't know her name.

- Mia: right, right

...Booboo Kitty, that's what she calls her. Yeah, uh, I guess he moved on to her and saw something different in her because she thought that whatever Cookie had in her that was way different from what she had.



**2. 7:27** Mia: What about this side? We can finish up the conversation, but you both have to say something. We can finish it, but final thoughts from both of you. About what it means to be a girl or a woman based on what we saw in this episode.

**3. 0:11** Jax: That you can be like unique or different. You can stand out from the rest because like there's many other girls but like you're different from them, like you have a different personality.

Mia: Mmhm. So you think like Cookie is a positive portrayal of a woman? [[JX5]]

[Side conversation about what time the show comes on]

Mia: OK final thought from Danielle?

Danielle: I think it's a positive because she's like on the episode she's a pretty powerful woman, like she speaks her mind, she tells people what it is right then and there. [[3]]

Mia: OK. So you think it's positive. What about you all? Yeah, Kaylee?

Kaylee: What?

Mia: The portrayal of women on the show.

Kaylee: Negative.

Mia: Negative?

Kaylee: Yeah.

Mia: Were you about to say something else?

Kaylee: Yeah uh that girls today we try our hardest to look outstanding [1], to look beautiful and everything for boys when we know that they're just not gonna like—they're gonna accept us but not like accept



us in like a good way. They look at like us like we're, for example, hos and everything like that.

Audrey: I have a personal experience, like Shaun. [1]

Kaylee: She's having some problems right now. [end of video]



## Appendix F

## Sample Interview Transcript

**0:08** Mia: Okay. All right, so do you want to just start with one of your ideas?

Briana: Um, [incomprehensible] women have a lot of expectations.

Mia: Women...do you mean women expect things or women are expected to do things?

Briana: Women are expected to do things.

Mia: Okay, um, can you tell me about how that applies to your life? Maybe there's like a specific example of when you were expected -- had an expectation placed on you.

Briana: So, um, like at home my dad was like -- oh, because -- he's like, if you guys were boys I'll see that it would be different because he was talking to us about how we have to clean the house and how we have to do chores but then he said if you guys were guys, I would see why you guys wouldn't like to do chores because it's mostly, it's mostly for girls. And then in my head I was like, I wouldn't say anything out loud because I would get smacked across the head but like I mean across the face, not head. In my head I was like that's -- um, what's it called? That's um...it's like something like you guys, it's like - - I was thinking like that's an expectation and that's um...what's that word. I forgot the word. That's, um...

Mia: Describe it to me.

**1:33** Briana: It's like something that's not true but like everybody just keeps following it. Something like that. That's a --

Mia: A myth?

Briana: It's like, it's basically like a myth or something. That's what I was thinking because that's what um all the guys think but it's not true. Like guys can do chores as well. It can also be a guy thing, not just a girl thing.

Mia: That's interesting. What are the kinds of chores that your father wants you to do?

Briana: Sweep, mop, wash dishes, clean the birdcage.

Mia: Cleaning things.

**2:05** Briana: Yes. Cleaning.

Mia: And you've never said to him that you think it's a myth that girls should do that?

Briana: Mm-mm.

Mia: But you feel that way? Uh, that's interesting. Do you have—are you making any connections between that and like things that we talked about in Group? I'm trying to think if we ever talked about that.

Briana: Yeah. Um, we talked about how women are expected to dress a certain way just to get guys' attention. Yeah, I have another one. Um, so, I'm not even trying to put out names but like you saw the two girls that were walking by. [Jaylee] and Beyonce. So, yeah, just because they got like big butts and everything and because they have a body and everything and because they got the shoes and everything, because they have all this stuff because they're being spoiled, um, all the guys wanna come after them but the thing is that like, the guys—guys think that girls are expected to be dressed that way just so you could have a girl, so you don't seem as the type of guy who has a girl that, you know, doesn't wear the new shoes, doesn't have the body type, like—you know what I'm saying? Like a girl who doesn't have everything that they expect a girl to have.

Mia: And you're saying—it seems like you are saying two different things. One of the things you are saying has to do with just the body itself, like the shape of your body. And the other thing it also has to do with like clothing and shoes and like things that you wear. Are you saying -- like, both of those two things are things that you think are expectations that are placed on girls.

Briana: Yeah. [Inaudible]

**3:52.** Mia: Have you ever had an experience where you personally like, you had some relationship with some boy or you were interacting with some boy and he was like—expecting you to be a certain way or look a certain way or wanting you to look a certain way?

Briana: Ummmm, yeah. Um, one of them, his name was [REDACTED]. Um, he had a crush on me but I didn't because he was ugly and he's like he's a mean kid so... I mean, he's like in high school now but it was over the summer. He was saying, oh, if you wore makeup and um if you wore your other shoes, um, I could like totally go out with you and I'm like, I'm not trying to like go out with you because I don't -- it's one, I'm not trying to go out with you because you're just telling me what to wear, what to do, and two, I'm not trying to go out with you because you are ugly period and then I walked away from him.

**4:48** Mia: Where were you when you had that interaction with him? Was it at school or was it like out in the world?

Briana: Um, no. I was working over the summer so, um, yeah, it's gonna sound like really weird, but like, over the summer I got really close to guys instead of girls, but like this guy apparently wanted me to change and everything because I hanged around mostly guys but like, um, we were in the hallway and [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] they're like really close to

me, they're like my brothers now, and they were like right behind me because they didn't like [REDACTED] either. They didn't like [REDACTED] as a person. I just didn't like him, like, you know, to like him. So, um, [REDACTED] and [REDACTED], they were like right behind me. They were like on their phones but they were listening to the conversation so, that's where it happened. In like, the hallway.

Mia: How did he take it when you said that to him?

Briana: He took it, he took it as a joke -- outside he took it as a joke but inside he was hurt and I made sure that he was hurt because I don't like how somebody's trying to make me change for you know just to make them feel better, like -- no. He was the only guy that did that though. Every other guy said -- every other guy like me because of my personality, based off who I really was. Not because, you know, of your body type or whatever. So yeah.

**6:05** Mia: So then you've also had positive experiences with guys who don't have those expectations.

Briana: Oh yeah. Um. There was—yeah—and then [REDACTED]—no, it was a different guy. His name, wait, what—oh my God—oh yeah. [REDACTED]. It's too many Js. So [REDACTED], he was also from that camp. From, I mean, I worked in a camp, but he was also from there and he was like oh, um, it was over the summer. All the guys just kept looking at butts over the summer so apparently he started looking at mine and he said oh, you got the fatty. That means you got a big butt so he was like, oh, you got the fatty so why won't you wearing these skinny jeans and why won't you wear any joggers or like leggings? I'm like, I'm not trying to make my butt pop out. I'm not trying to make anybody look at my butt. I'm just being myself, and he was like, man, that means I can't [scoop?] you. I'm like, I was trying not—I was making—I was like, oh my God. I'm like, I'm— oh my God. I was—I told him, I was like, I'm not trying to make anybody scoop me. I'm like, I'm not trying to make anybody scoop me up. All I'm doing is just trying to be myself and if you don't like me for that, then I don't need you in my life. And he said okay. He was like I hope we're still friends and I'm like, no. I'm being dead serious with you, how are you trying to like, no. I'm sorry. I don't play that.

**7:29** Mia: So I initially asked you if you had positive experiences with guys in the past, and then you told that story. So it sounds like [crosstalk]

Briana: Yeah, it was like, it was only two that—it was only two over the summer but other than that it was really positive.

Mia: Okay. So, it seems like you really reject the idea that girls or women should be made to look a certain way or expected to look a certain way and you feel really strongly about that. What about another idea on your list here? Do you have anything else we haven't talked about?

Briana: Oh, yeah. Women can say anything that's on their minds.

Mia: Okay. Tell me more of that.

Briana: Because like I was scared to try out for the flag football team and then some of the guys were doubting, they were like, no. Flag football is only for guys. I'm like, yeah but there's girls that played it, too. I'm like—they were like, give me an example, and I said [REDACTED]. And they said, no, she's a dyke. She wants to be a boy. And I'm like, but it's true, she does want to be a boy, so I was just [incomprehensible] I was like you're acting like, you're acting like girls can't do whatever they want or whatever they say. Like, what's that want to do but like for reasons for what they want to say was because I said—one time I got really mad at a person, I said, he said— oh my God, it's so inappropriate. I don't want to say it.

Mia: That's okay. I won't tell anyone.

**8:43** Briana: I was like— so, he was like, I got so mad. He was like, oh, like, I was like, bro why won't you suck my dick and he was like, you don't even got one, you're a girl. And I'm like, okay, but I can still say whatever I want. It's America. He's like, no, you got limitations when it comes to a girl. And then he was like, he was gonna slap me for that and I'm like, yeah, but you guys be saying oh I got titties and blah blah blah but like once a girl says something it's a problem, right? And then I just walked away from the guy.

Mia: Oh my goodness.

Briana: It's big though. I told you.

Mia: Yeah. No, that's a lot.

Briana: It's big, but it's important.

Mia: Okay. So you—was that situation related to the flag football thing or was that a separate situation?

Briana: Oh, no, that's a separate one.

**9:25** Mia: Okay. Um, but the idea you were talking about was girls and women being able to like speak their minds and so they were saying you can't be on the flag football team but you were like, no, like, I can be on the flag football team and this guy was saying what he said to you and you were like, no. Right? Like, girls should be able to speak their minds and say what they want and what they don't want. Does that connect to something we discussed in Group? About women speaking their minds? I'm trying to think.

Briana: I don't know. I wasn't here for one of the days so --

Mia: What about Cookie in Empire?

Briana: She spoke whatever she wanted.

Mia: Right. Yeah. That seems like what it's most related to. Um, cool, what else do you have there?

**10:22** Briana: Oh, we went over that one. Oh yeah. Um, men—you guys—we said that it was men are more emotional than girls but then like, after that I started thinking. I was like, um, I don't think it's men that are more emotional than girls, but in that um—what's it called? Modern Family. It did show that guys are more emotional than girls but the thing is that guys and girls can get very emotional at different times. It just depends on what it is. So I guess, to me, it's not guys are more emotional or girls are more emotional. I think it's just overall, everybody is very emotional but it just depends on what it is.

Mia: So, what's an example of that. What do you think is the kind of thing that you get emotional about that is more like...

Briana: Um, so, yesterday, um when [REDACTED] was on the floor when he had the seizure, um, blood was coming out of his mouth and I saw it so then I started crying because I was like—I never saw anything like this happen and [REDACTED], he's like, I call him brother because he's like my older brother cuz I have more connection with guys so I call him older brother. He was hugging me and everything. He said, it's okay. It's okay. And I'm like, no, he could die! He could die! And then he was like -- after that, we all were called to go inside and they called -- you know. [REDACTED] was at the hospital and everything. So, they -- we went inside and he sat right next to me and he was holding my hand tightly and I was like are you okay? Are you okay? Because after I finished crying I started to calm down and I was mad because a kid was laughing at him falling but I didn't know -- I think, I thought it was him laughing at him having a seizure and then it was just him falling. So I was mad. And [REDACTED] was mad at the same thing, too, but he didn't know it was -- you know, his excuse, um, so um [REDACTED] was like -- I was like, [REDACTED], what happened? He was like, he was like, don't you know what just happened? I'm like, yeah, but before you were just calming me down and he was like but right now I need you to calm me down. I'm like, that's what I'm trying to do. He said, okay. But he was just shut the whole entire time, so me and him took the train together and then he got off a stop before me and we hugged for a long time cuz it was really hard.

**12:35** Mia: Yeah.

Briana: It was weird. So yeah.

Mia: Is there another kind of situation where like you saw a guy get upset or emotional about something that you didn't—like you didn't understand why they were so emotional about it?

Briana: Yeah. Um...in the camp, a lot of things happened in the camp. In the camp, um, [REDACTED], he didn't come one of the days because something happened, he had like a family emergency. Like one of his cousins had to go to the hospital because I think they got shot or something. They had to go to the hospital. So the next day when he came, his eyes were red and like his -- yeah, his eyes were red and he looked like he was crying, so once he came he didn't -- he like, he's really known so everybody was saying hi to him but instead he just ran down and he took me by the arm and he was speaking to me. He was like, no wait, yeah. He came downstairs and I saw him and I'm like what happened and he said, I'm not going to say it out loud, so he took me by the arm and he took me by a hole by the staircase that's like private and um, I was like, what happened? He just hugged me and he started crying and I said what happened? He said, it was like really hard for him to say, he said one of my cousins got -- and I'm like, what, one of your cousins got killed? He was like, no, don't say that, don't say that, don't say that. It was really hard for him. I was like, what? Your cousin got stabbed? He was like, no, are you stupid? I'm like, oh my God, what did I do? So, it was hard for me to understand what he was going through but then like, what? Your cousin got shot? He said yeah. I just froze and I was like why am I so stupid. I should have known. But then, it was like, how could you expect me to think that at first, like...yeah it was hard to understand.

**14:29** Mia: So he was really emotional about that. All right. Um...is there anything else you want to add? You told me a lot.

Briana: Yeah. We went over everything.

Mia: Okay. That's good! Then I can [turning off the camera]