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The Culture of Mean: Gender, Race, and Class in Mediated Images of Girls' Bullying

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The Culture of Mean: Gender, Race, and Class in Mediated Images of
Girls' Bullying

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to my mother who raised me with a feminist sensibility and who has shown unwavering support for my academic ambitions. I thank my mother and father for living lives that showed me how important it is to do work that makes the world a better place. I thank my brother for never hesitating to make fun of me and, in doing so, reminding me not to take myself too seriously. I thank my godmother for loving me unconditionally. To the entire Ryalls family, my aunts, uncles, and cousins, who, although often exasperated by my political leanings and use of big words, never miss a chance to tell me how proud they are of me. I love you all.

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Abstract

This dissertation examines narratives about female bullying and aggression through mediated images of “mean girls.” Through textual analysis of popular media featuring mean girls (television shows such as *Gossip Girl* and films like *Mean Girls*), as well as national news coverage of the case of Phoebe Prince, who reportedly committed suicide after being bullied by girls from her school, this feminist examination questions how the image of the mean girl is raced and classed. This dissertation values an interdisciplinary approach to research that works to make sense of the forces that produce bodies as gendered, raced, and classed.

One of the central concerns of this project is explore images of mean girls in order to highlight the ideas that construct female aggression as deviant. In popular culture, the mean girl is constructed as a popular girl who protects and cultivates the power associated with her elite status in duplicitous and cruel ways. Specifically, mean girls are framed as using indirect aggression, which is defined as a form of social manipulation. This covert form of aggression, also referred to as “relational” or “social” aggression, includes a series of actions aimed at destroying other girls’ relationships, causing their victims to feel marginalized. The bullying tactics associated with indirect aggression include gossiping, social exclusion, stealing friends, not talking to someone, and threatening to withdraw friendship. The leader of the clique is the Queen Bee who is able to use boundary maintenance to exclude other girls from her friendship groups.

In media texts, while the Queen Bee is always White, the Mean Girl discourse does not ignore girls of color. Instead, girls of color are acknowledged as having the potential to be mean, but, more often, they are shown to exemplify the characteristics of normative White femininity (they are nice and prioritize heterosexual relationships) and to escape the lure of popularity. Indeed, whereas media texts continually center Whiteness as a necessary component of the mean girl image, nice girls are constructed as White, Latina, *and* Black. The constructions of the girls of color often rely on stereotyped behaviors (i.e., Black girls' direct talk and Latina girls' commitment to nuclear family structures); at the same time, these essentialized characteristics are revered and incorporated into the nice girl tropes.

The Queen Bee is always upper-class, while the Wannabe (the girl who desires to be in the clique) is middle-class. When attempting to usurp the Queen Bee's power, the Wannabe breaks with normative cultural versions of White, middle-class passive femininity in ways that are framed as problematic. Although the Wannabe rises above her class, in so doing, she also transcends her "authentic" goodness. As a result, middle-classness is recentered and ascribed as part of the nice girl's authentic image. The Mean Girl discourse defines girls' success on a continuum. A popular girl stays at the top of the social hierarchy by being mean. The nice girl finds individual success by removing herself from elite social circles. As a result, privilege is not defined inherently as the problem, but girls' excessive abuse and access to privilege is.

“The Girls Have Gone Wild!:" An Introduction to “Girl World,”¹

Female Aggression, and Bullying

There is a hidden culture of girls’ aggression in which bullying is epidemic, distinctive, and destructive...Girls use backbiting, exclusion, rumors, name-calling, and manipulation to inflict psychological pain on targeted victims. Unlike boys, who tend to bully acquaintances or strangers, girls frequently attack within tightly knit networks of friends, making aggression harder to identify and intensifying the damage to the victims...Behind a façade of female intimacy lies a terrain traveled in secret, marked with anguish, and nourished by silence. (Simmons, 2002, p. 3)

For the girl whose popularity is based on fear and control, think of a combination of the Queen of Hearts in *Alice in Wonderland* and Barbie. I call her the Queen Bee. Through a combination of charisma, force, money, looks, will, and manipulation, this girl reigns supreme over the other girls and weakens their friendships with others, thereby strengthening her own power and influence. (Wiseman, 2002, p. 25)

Contemporary cultural anxieties about bullying are commonplace in popular press books, films, television programming, and news media. These concerns are reflected in anti-bullying legislation and a March 2011 White House conference on preventing bullying in schools. Girls’ bullying was brought to the forefront of the cultural discourse in 2002 when Rosalind Wiseman’s book *Queen Bees & Wannabes* and Rachel Simmons’s book *Odd Girl Out* supposedly documented a “hidden” aspect of girl culture where bullying and female aggression run rampant and unchecked. These books and their authors received significant mainstream attention. Wiseman’s *Queen Bees & Wannabes* landed on the *New York Times* best-seller list and was the basis for the film *Mean Girls* (2004). Wiseman has been interviewed several times on *The Today Show* and is featured

¹ In *Queen Bees and Wannabes*, Wiseman (2002) uses “Girl World” to talk about girls’ day to day lives. As defined by Wiseman, “Girl World” is tribal, hierarchical, and composed of cliques (Hadley, 2003). The term is also used by the main character in the 2004 film *Mean Girls* to make comparisons to her previous life in Africa and her current life in “Girl World.”

in the 2008 *Nightline* special “Queen Bee’s and Wanna Be’s,” where Ted Koppel claims girls “have elevated social nastiness into an art form to the point at which it is almost dangerous.” In a March 2011 *Dateline NBC* special, “My Kid would Never...Bully,” host Anne Curry refers to *Queen Bees & Wannabes* as “the book of record” on bullying. Simmons’s *Odd Girl Out* also climbed the *New York Times* best-seller list and was the basis for the 2005 Lifetime movie of the same name. Like Wiseman, Simmons has appeared on *The Today Show*; as well, she has been featured on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* twice.

The image of the “mean girl”² developed in these popular books, as well as in entertainment and news media, is predicated on the idea that popular girls are protecting and cultivating the power associated with their elite status in increasingly duplicitous and cruel ways. Conscious of popularity’s attendant rewards (boyfriends, parties, awe and fear in others), mean girls employ devious and manipulative tactics to maintain their social position (Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009). Specifically, mean girls are framed as using indirect aggression, which is defined in the social scientific scholarship as a form of social manipulation (Bjoerkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992; Crothers, Field, & Kolbert, 2005; Galen & Underwood, 1997; Hadley, 2003, 2004; Remillard & Lamb, 2005; Underwood, 2003). This covert form of aggression, also referred to as “relational” or “social” aggression, includes a series of actions aimed at destroying other girls’

² The trend in popular culture is to use the terms “mean girl” and “Queen Bee” interchangeably. For example, Wiseman’s book is titled *Queen Bees & Wannabes*, while the movie that is based on the book is *Mean Girls*. In this dissertation, generally, when referring to groups of girls or cliques, I (as do media) will use the term “mean girls.” I tend to call the leader of the clique the “Queen Bee.” As explained in the television program *Gossip Girl*, the Queen Bee gives the “order” and her mean girls (or minions) carry it out (Season 2, “The Ex Files”).

relationships, causing their victims to feel marginalized (Crothers, et al., 2005). The bullying tactics associated with indirect aggression include gossiping, social exclusion, stealing friends, not talking to someone, and threatening to withdraw friendship (Crothers, et al., 2005). As explained by Simmons (2002), girls attack within close friendship networks or cliques. The leader of the clique, the Queen Bee, is framed as using boundary maintenance as a bullying tactic, allowing her to exclude other girls from friendship groups (Bjoerkqvist, et al., 1992). Because the Queen Bee is “able to command a fleet of loyal subjects willing to do her bidding” (Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009), her aggression is hidden; she escapes detention, while inflicting long term pain on other girls.

Scholars in education, criminology, and psychology note that the mean girl phenomenon is overwhelmingly perceived as a White problem (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2004, 2008; Gonick, 2004; Ringrose, 2006). I will argue that in the media texts I explore, that while the Queen Bee is always White, the Mean Girl discourse does not ignore girls of color. Instead, although girls of color are not at the center of the narrative, they are acknowledged as having the potential to be mean, but, more often, girls of color are shown to exemplify the characteristics of normative White femininity (they are nice and prioritize heterosexual relationships) and to escape the lure of popularity. Additionally, the critical research on girls’ aggression indicates the Mean Girl discourse is reflective of a cultural concern with middle-class girls (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005; Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2004, 2008; Gonick, 2004; Ringrose, 2006). I argue the Queen Bee is always upper-class, while the Wannabe (the girl who desires to be in the clique) is middle-class. In her attempts to rise in the elite social hierarchy, the Wannabe always

infringes on her middle-class morality. As a result, middle-classness is promoted as the baseline of what a nice girl should be.

This dissertation examines narratives about bullying through mediated images of mean girls. My method is chiefly textual analysis of popular media featuring mean girls (television shows such as *Gossip Girl* and films like *Mean Girls*), as well as of national news coverage of the case of Phoebe Prince, who reportedly committed suicide after being bullied by girls from her school. I approach this analysis from a feminist perspective, and I am concerned with the intersection of gender with race and class; that is, I consider how the image of the mean girl is raced and classed. My work values an interdisciplinary approach to research that aims to make sense of the forces that produce bodies as gendered, raced, and classed.

As opposed to being biological determinants of behavior, I see race and class as social, cultural constructs. I do not essentialize race by reducing it to bodies; however, as Hyun Yi Kang (2002) notes, it is important to keep in mind that “what *matters*...is the illusion of human *bodies*” (p. 99). Because race cannot be read off the body (Hopson, 2008), I instead consider how race is constituted within the parameters of the texts by taking into account the ways that casting decisions, narrative structure, and editing mediate race (Kraszewski, 2004). I additionally read racialized constructions through visible racial markers, characters’ comments about their racial backgrounds, and racial stereotypes. I understand class as established through occupation, style, and the moral and value systems of characters (Winn, 2000). As Foster (2005) explains, “class is not only about wealth, status, and birth but also about everyday performed behavior” (p. 8). I interpret class through characters’ talk about wealth and money as well as material

possession ownership (such as clothing, cars, and homes). Often times, class is constructed through difference. For example, the upper-class and middle-class may be defined by the differences in their presumed authentic value systems.

The textual examples I analyze are illustrative and not meant as “proof” of a mean girl crisis but rather as opening up a discussion of a pattern of representation when it comes to girls. In exploring the story of girls in the U.S. as it has been told through media, I build my argument by looking at the ways in which film, television, and news texts challenge and reinforce common ideas about girlhood, race, class, and aggression.

Theoretical Alliances

This project brings together scholarship on feminism, girlhood, race, class, and media. I align my work with feminist media studies, critical cultural studies, girls studies, as well as critical race and ethnicity studies. I locate this examination of mediated images of girl bullying in the recent and growing strain of inquiry within media studies, which examines constructions and representations of youth (Mazzarella, 2003). I investigate media texts that contribute to the current discourse about girls’ meanness and bullying in the U.S. While the mean girl phenomenon has received critical examination (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008; Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2004, 2008; Gonick, 2004; Hentges, 2006; Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009; Ringrose, 2006, 2008; Ringrose & Renold, 2009), this study is the first to explore the intersection of film, television, and news media to illustrate contemporary understandings of girlhood (with regard to race and class), female aggression, and bullying. The wide range of media texts I explore allows for a broad look at constructions of girls and, therefore, for an access to the popular discourses that structure our understandings of contemporary girlhood.

My goal is to examine the Mean Girl discourse, the effects of power generated by what was said, and the knowledge that was formed as a result (Foucault, 1978). Foucault (1972) believes the power that is the effect of discourse is not essentially repressive; it is productive in the sense that it produces reality. Foucault's hypothesis is that, in every society, the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized, and redistributed according to its institutions. Thus, Foucault's (1978) view of power is that, as opposed to being embodied by an individual or a single institution, it circulates widely and is produced through various institutions. Power is exercised through discourse – by what we come to know and see (Foucault, 1984b). What is at issue is the way in which claims about girl bullying and female empowerment are “put into discourse” through popular, academic, political, legal, and media institutions (Foucault, 1978, p. 11). When talk, text, and representation take hold in the cultural landscape and become a convincing “reality” (as opposed to being recognized as a social construction), a discursive formation is produced (Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009).

The Mean Girl discourse is part of how girlhood has come to be understood at this moment. I explore the changes to our knowledge about girlhood, female aggression, and youth bullying by taking up the approach of Foucault (1984a) who argues for the importance of genealogy as a method to trace the development of society through discourse. “A genealogy will not discover new forms of girlhood, but it will discuss how knowledge about girls has shaped what it means to be a girl” (Driscoll, 2002, p. 4). For Foucault (1972), knowledge is discursively constructed. Discourse is powerful in that it produces ideas that come to be defined as the truth. According to Foucault (1972), these truth claims come into being through talk, text, and representation.

The discourses about girlhood this dissertation explores are “a collection of statements and ideas that are currently producing influential meanings about girls and girlhood” (Aapola, et al., 2005, p. 18). Studying these discourses allows me to consider how images of mean girls and knowledge about female aggression have become common sense. If everything is discourse (e.g., talk, texts, images), then it is impossible to “separate discursive practice from ‘real life’...rather than existing in some autonomous realm outside of political life, media is part of it. What criticism can do is to accentuate the importance of that realization and offer specific arguments for its meaning” (Dow, 1996, p. 5).

I see Simmons and Wiseman’s books, as well as the movies that are based on them, as “symptomatic texts” (Walters, 1995), texts that serve as “symptoms” of the larger culture in which they exist, providing insight about that culture. A film like *Mean Girls* or a book like *Queen Bees & Wannabes* cannot be understood simply as distinct texts. Instead, an analysis of a wide range of media texts provides knowledge about the issues affecting the current social context. For Walters (1995), this indicates “the remarkable level of intertextuality in the contemporary social and cultural environment” (p. 14). The meanings of the narratives put forth in Simmons and Wiseman’s books, as well as in the popular media texts featuring mean girls, are informed by preexisting discourses and contribute to ongoing debates (Walters, 1995). This work outlines the social context in which the event of girl bullying exists. I argue the Mean Girl discourse reflects cultural anxieties about female empowerment, feminized aggression, and girls’ success.

The primary focus of my analysis is media because, as Walters (1995) maintains: the media have so inserted themselves into the everyday life of most Americans (indeed, most people) that they have come to construct our sense of what it means to live in the (post)-modern world...The media *are* everywhere, and as such can no longer be relegated to secondary status in any critical analysis of contemporary society. (p. 21-22)

The themes in popular media artifacts “go beyond mere amusement and, instead, become a mode by which our thoughts about girls are formed, organized, and solidified” (Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009, p. 3). Media texts are public discourses that carry important meanings that “cannot be separated from their links to the larger context in which (media) is created and received” (Dow, 1996, pp. xiii-xiv). One of the central concerns of this project is to explore images of mean girls in order to highlight the ideas that construct female aggression as deviant.

The Search for Gender Equivalency in Aggression

As discussed above, discourses do not simply come into being. Instead, they are informed by preexisting discourses. Chesney-Lind and Irwin (2004) maintain the Mean Girl discourse is the result of a “backlash to years of feminist research claiming that women are more nurturing, caring, and relationship oriented than men” (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2004, p. 49). Ringrose (2006) takes this claim a step further, arguing the sensationalized narrative of girls’ bullying is not simply a media backlash to feminism but is postfeminist. Postfeminism suggests that feminism has been successful in its endeavors to gain equality, while, at the same time, maintaining that it is because of the gains of feminism that women are unhappy (Dow, 1996; Dubrofsky, 2002; McRobbie,

2004b; Projansky, 2001, 2007; Tasker & Negra, 2007; Walters, 1995). This “limited vision of gender equality as achieved and yet still unsatisfactory underlies the class, age, and racial exclusions that define postfeminism” (Tasker & Negra, 2007, p. 2).

Particularly important to Ringrose’s claim that the Mean Girl discourse is postfeminist is McRobbie’s (2004b) argument that feminism “must face up to the consequences of its own claims to representation and power” (p. 257). For McRobbie, feminist claims of equality contribute to the postfeminist culture.

Beginning with McRobbie’s argument that postfeminism is “feminism taken into account,” Ringrose (2006) maintains the mean girl construction is rooted in feminist cultural theories of difference. According to Ringrose (2006), the research on girls’ aggression “uses feminine difference to make claims of gender equivalency in aggression and takes as its central argument girls may be as aggressive as boys if gender specific forms of aggression are considered” (p. 406). The research on girls’ aggression was couched as a challenge to the male bias in studying aggression (Bjoerkqvist, et al., 1992; Crick, et al., 2001). The male bias in scientific “objectivity” was previously highlighted by feminists in response to early psychological studies of human development, which generalized the experiences of men to describe the development of both men and women. “Gender neutral” scientific objectivity favored the masculine perspective of morality, founded on justice and duty, and, in turn, described the prominence of empathy and compassion in women’s moral judgment as a deficiency in female development. In her groundbreaking book, *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan (1982) maintained that women follow an ethic of care in which they see themselves as participating in a world of connection. For Gilligan, women’s ethic of care means women are different from, not

less than, men. Tannen (1990) noted a similar trend in feminine talk and argued that, whereas men engage the world as individuals in a hierarchical social order, women speak of themselves as participating in a network of connections.

Feminist claims that advocate women's ethic of care valorize women's empathy, compassion, and nurturance, but, in so doing, theories of feminine difference also contribute to stereotypes about women's essential "goodness." In this way, as pointed to by McRobbie (2004b), feminist theories of difference can reinforce gendered stereotypes. The essentialist view of women as caring and nurturing is partially responsible for contemporary ideas that girls who express aggression are deviant. As Ringrose (2006) maintains, the Mean Girl discourse "creates a new template for normal girlhood that moves along the continuum from nice to mean" (p. 407). The research on indirect aggression is postfeminist, because, as Ringrose (2006) explains, it "incorporates and shifts Gilligan's claims about girls' nature, maintaining that it is girls' very caring and nurturing emotional relationships (through which their difference from boys is secured) that are used to wound other girls" (Ringrose, p. 412). As Chesney-Lind and Irwin (2004) explain, the search for girls' aggression, performed in the name of gender balance and equity, actually worked to devalue and demonize girls.

From Columbine to South Hadley

I maintain the Mean Girl discourse is a continuation of a cultural concern with bullying that emerged when, on April 20, 1999, high school students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold went on a shooting rampage, killing thirteen and wounding many more before turning their guns on themselves. The Columbine massacre was the deadliest high school gun rampage in U.S. history (Frymer, 2009). "Columbine generated higher public

interest than any other (news) story of 1999 and was the third most closely followed story of the 1990s” (Muschert, 2007, p. 355). The shootings at the middle-class Denver high school were “the subject of a dramatic media spectacle and raging debate over the...problems of youth and high schools” (Kellner, 2008, pp. 118-119). Much of the spectacle revolved around the fact that Klebold and Harris were White and middle-class (Kellner, 2008). The focus in the media on Columbine and the White middle-class boys who were held responsible for the shootings reflected a cultural concern with, specifically, White middle-class youth (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009, p. 1405). Following Columbine, stories of White middle-class teens seeking revenge against their classmates took primary focus in the cultural discourse about youth and bullying (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2004).

Mainstream news outlets reported a number of potential causes for Harris and Klebold’s killing spree, including popular culture (such as violent video games and the music of Marilyn Manson) and access to guns. Generally, the narrative focused on bullying as the source of Klebold and Harris’s anger toward the popular jocks - archetypal bullies. Reports claimed that bullying caused the boys to take the typical school turf war among cliques too far (Frymer, 2009). Although the part bullying played in the massacre did not necessarily engender a sympathetic public reaction, “some Americans did at least identify with the two boys’ feelings of estrangement and their deep dislike for high school jocks” (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008, p. 95). Links were drawn between Klebold and Harris’s unpopularity and their supposed involvement with the “Trench Coat Mafia,” a group of high school outsiders who listened to Goth music and wore all black; in turn, the boys were constructed as alienated. The media coverage of the

Columbine shootings “generated a major spectacle of alienated youth gone horribly wrong...and worked to objectify White middle-class youth as a new object of fear” (Frymer, 2009, pp. 1387-1388).

On April 20, 2009, the ten-year anniversary of the Columbine High School massacre was commemorated across the country; photographs, student narratives, and expert testimony flooded the media. The *Washington Post* reported that following Columbine “public soul-searching about schools dilated, bordering on hysteria for a while, then passed from the news, only to leave a residue of sadness” (Sewall, 2009, p. A23). Contemporary concern about mean girls is an evolution of the cultural anxiety about youth bullying and violence that emerged from Columbine – a concern that is now focused on White middle-class girls. Mean girls (like jocks) are represented as popular and as participating in bullying to maintain the power associated with their elite social status. Unlike Klebold and Harris, mean girls are far from alienated; however, they, too, are framed as deviant because, similar to Harris and Klebold, they are part of the privileged norm but refuse to act in accordance with normative cultural values of White femininity. Mean girls are constructed as White and middle- to upper-class, so, as was the case with Columbine, cultural concern revolves around adolescent refusal to conform to the norms of race and class. Importantly, although a spectacle was raised regarding Harris and Klebold’s excessive violence, physical aggression is in concert with dominant expectations of masculinity. The Mean Girl discourse speaks to particular gendered concerns regarding female aggression since “we do not have notions of ‘normal’ uses of force and violence by women and girls” (Heidensohn, 2000/2001, p. 20). As a result, any expression of girls’ anger or hostility is marked as deviant.

The Columbine discourse focused cultural anxiety on the problems of bullying and at-risk students. As opposed to looking to the broader culture, policy changes centered on the school environment (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009), encouraging schools to develop “more surveillance techniques by collecting and officially reporting information about violent threats” (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008, p. 105), and precipitating responses “that led to the intensification of the surveillance of American youth” (Dimitriadis & McCarthy, 2003, p. 274). The concentrated scrutiny of youth continues today. As Males (1996) explains, solutions aimed toward “at-risk” adolescents have flourished. Whereas the bullying that Klebold and Harris faced was believed to cause them to be homicidal, the bullying of mean girls is linked to girls’ suicides. The dangers of bullying and suicide, as well as the legal and policy prescriptions for bullying, came together in the media coverage of the bullycide (suicide said to result from bullying) of Phoebe Prince. On January 14, 2010, 15-year-old Phoebe Prince committed suicide after what was characterized by the mainstream press as the relentless bullying of, as they were labeled in the media, “real life mean girls.” In the wake of Phoebe’s suicide, in an unprecedented move, the district attorney charged four South Hadley High School girls with felonies ranging from criminal harassment to violation of civil rights. The *Christian Science Monitor* calls the Prince case “this generation’s Columbine moment for school bullying” (Khadaroo, 2010). The South Hadley bullies are said to have used covert forms of aggression (e.g., name-calling and gossip). There are no reports of physical violence, yet media reports show social aggression to be a tool for murder on par with the guns used by Klebold and Harris.

Analysis of Mean Girl Media Culture

This dissertation focuses on artifacts of popular culture that produce ideas about girls' aggression in this moment. I do not attempt a comprehensive reading of all the images of mean girls in popular culture; instead, I concentrate on a range of media artifacts that provides access to the ways in which the image of the mean girl has been constructed in various media formats and genres. The primary texts that form the basis of my analysis are popular press books (*Odd Girl Out* and *Queen Bees & Wannabes*), movies (*Mean Girls* and *Odd Girl Out*), television shows (*Queen Bees* and *Gossip Girl*), and the local Massachusetts and national newspapers that reported on the Phoebe Prince bullycide. "Reality" media formats, such as reality television and the news, feature "real" people doing "real" things but do so in a way that is not random (Grindstaff, 2002). I consider narratives framed in the news and RTV, like those of scripted programming, to be constructed by the decisions of television workers (Andrejevic & Colby, 2006; Dubrofsky, 2007). At the same time, the idea that these reality media forms claim to represent "reality" means they have the potential to shape our understandings of socio-cultural issues in very poignant ways because they are presented not as mediated but as "real life" (Andrejevic & Colby, 2006; Grindstaff, 2002). I align scripted texts with reality media formats because doing so provides broad access to cultural ideas about girls bullying. The media texts I draw from span from 2002 through 2011. I begin in 2002 because in this year Simmons and Wiseman's books claimed to document the existence of mean *girl* bullies who use words and relationships to wound other girls. Prior to this, as discussed above, bullying was thought to be a violent male problem. Thus, 2002 marked a qualitative shift in cultural understandings of bullying and aggression.

Whereas the mean popular girl may be a familiar trope in a multitude of texts, I am interested in those texts for which meanness and bullying is a crucial plot point and not used simply to advance the narrative. In the texts I examine, the plot revolves around girls, popularity, and cliques within the junior high or high school environment. This focus on the educational setting allows me to examine how the Mean Girl discourse frames girls as misplacing their ambitions in school. In the postfeminist climate, where girls “have been promised equal access to all educational programs” (Harris, 2004, p. 7), gender equality is taken for granted, but, in the Mean Girl discourse, boys are shown as naturally more inclined to appropriately access educational opportunities. In the texts I analyze, all girls, regardless of class or race, are conceived of as just as (if not more) able to succeed as boys, but White upper-class mean girls *choose* not to take advantage of the opportunities the feminist movement has afforded them and instead focus on the immediate pleasures associated with popularity.

My choice of texts was also influenced by my desire to select case studies that would allow for important comparisons as well as for telling contrasts (Dow, 1996). Each text is noteworthy for its place within the trajectories of popular media, feminist media studies, and the evolution of representations of girls’ bullying. The movies *Odd Girl Out* (2005) and *Mean Girls* (2004) are based on Simmons and Wiseman’s books respectively, so the films provide access to the ways in which ideas about girls’ aggression and bullying transformed or were reinforced in the movement from print to visual media. In both films, the central plot point is the ways in which girls aggress toward one another. As well, both are easily accessible; they are available on DVD and air on cable networks

like ABC Family and Lifetime. As a result, the films are widely seen, so the messages they contain about girls' bullying are communicated to a large audience.

Reality television (RTV) is the most popular mainstay of television programming (Dubrofsky, 2006; Dubrofsky & Hardy, 2008; Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Schroeder, 2006). Analyses of RTV that focus specifically on women are sparse (Dubrofsky, 2006, 2009; Frank, 2007). I examine the RTV show *Queen Bees* in order to aid in filling that gap, with a particular concentration on RTV featuring girls, who have thus far remained unexamined. Teen girls figure prominently in RTV programming on MTV (*16 and Pregnant*, *My Super Sweet 16*, and *Teen Mom*) but not outside this network. *Queen Bees*, which aired on the major teen network Teen Nick and later in reruns on MTV, is noteworthy since the show acknowledges mean girls of color who are largely absent from mainstream media coverage of the mean girl phenomenon.

Scholars in psychology, criminology, and girls studies perceive the mean girl phenomenon as focused specifically on middle-class girls (Aapola, et al., 2005; Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008; Ringrose, 2006). In popular culture, the Wannabe, who Wiseman (2002) explains is either on the perimeter of the clique attempting to make her way in or in the clique but desiring to improve her social status in the hierarchy, is marked as middle-class. I extend the discussion about the classed construction of girls' bullying through an examination of the relationship between the upper-class Queen Bee and the middle-class Wannabe on the CW series *Gossip Girl* (2007-present). Mantsios (Mantsios, 2000b) maintains that class has been removed from popular culture and, in turn, public discourse. In contrast, class conflict is a primary aspect of *Gossip Girl*, so the program is noteworthy for its extended treatment of the relationship between the Queen Bee and the

Wannabe. Moreover, *Gossip Girl* is the most downloaded, DVRed, and streamed show among its teen fan base (Hampp, 2009) making it the most popular contemporary television text aimed at adolescents.

The media coverage of the Phoebe Prince bullycide employs many of the fictional texts I have outlined above, highlighting the intertextuality of the contemporary social and cultural environment pointed to by Walters (1995). In the wake of Phoebe's death, six teenagers were arrested for charges ranging from stalking to violation of civil rights. This makes the Prince case a watershed account of girls' bullying, as, at the time of this writing, there have been no other reported cases of girls arrested for non-violent, non-physical forms of bullying. The Prince case pulls together social unease about "real life mean girls," the criminalization of girls' communication, and anti-bullying legislation, so it provides a unique opportunity to examine the ways in which these issues have come to characterize girl culture.

Mean Girls and the Media: History and Gaps

This project is the first to examine the issues of race, class, and gender in the Mean Girl discourse through a wide-range of media texts. At the time of this writing, the center of the scholarly discussion about girls' bullying is the film *Mean Girls* (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008; Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009; Resnick, 2008; Ringrose, 2006). For this reason, the following exploration of the existing literature on mean girls in this section is primarily about the film *Mean Girls* (2004). In their analysis of *Mean Girls*, Kelly and Pomerantz (2009) note the demonization of female aggression. These scholars argue the film represents girls as "ultimate 'bitches' who ruthlessly use each other in strategic power plays worthy of melodrama" (p. 4). For Kelly and Pomerantz, the "film is

at pains to reveal the ‘mean girl problem’ as a closed loop that does not implicate boys and men in any way” (p. 6). Picking up Kelly and Pomerantz’s claim that indirect aggression is shown as intrinsic to girlhood, this project explores how and why boys are implicated in the narrative of girls’ bullying. In doing so, I update Chesney-Lind and Irwin’s (2008) claims about the conflation of girls’ indirect aggression with boys’ physical aggression by suggesting that the Mean Girl discourse does not conflate covert and overt aggression but, instead, frames girls’ use of social aggression as more dangerous and maladaptive than boys’ physical violence. In the texts I investigate, girls are marked as brutal without cause, and their victims suffer serious and long-term consequences. In contrast, boys’ physical violence is shown to be an immediate release of aggression with limited negative outcomes.

Important to the ways in which the Mean Girl discourse constructs boys and girls is the postfeminist climate within which it exists. Kelly and Pomerantz (2009) maintain the film *Mean Girls* lacks any credible feminist discourse, leaving girls “to fend for themselves, without a critique of power and an understanding of how gender is constructed” (p. 7). As opposed to ignoring feminism, Ringrose (2006) finds the film “commodifies feminist remedies for pathological middle class meanness” and relies on “simplistic liberal feminist formulas for addressing girls’ inherent feminine pathology” (p. 416). Both analyses locate the film as postfeminist; the ways in which the discourse about girls’ bullying is situated within postfeminism is a conversation this project will continue. Contemporary discourses about girl bullying sustain the idea that girls are one another’s enemies, while simultaneously contributing a more vicious and insidious enemy in the image of the mean girl. Boys are not shown bullying, so these

representations demonize girls as mean and aggressive, while White middle-class boys are typically deployed as the narrative's moral center.

In conjunction with competing representations of girls' and boys' aggression are ideas about what constitutes success for youth in the contemporary neoliberal environment.³ Neoliberalism defines freedom and success in terms of the individual, disregarding the structural restrictions on individual achievement (for example, poverty, ill-health, inadequate education, and unequal domestic responsibilities) (Somerville, 2000). In a quantitative media effects analysis of teen movies (including *Mean Girls*) on emerging adults' gender-based attitudes and beliefs, Behm-Morawitz and Mastro (2008) found that teen films rely on gender-stereotyped portrayals such as the mean girl. Exposure to these films, they argue, sends the message that "success in the female social world can be obtained through duplicitous means" (p. 142). I continue Behm-Morawitz and Mastro's exploration of representations of girls' success by coupling constructions of mean girls in media with Harris's (2004) argument that all girls in the contemporary neoliberal culture have been characterized as "can-do" or "at-risk."

In the book *Future Girl*, Harris maintains that attention to young girls' social and moral development has emerged as a key feature of contemporary times. For Harris, "changed economic and work conditions combined with the goals achieved by feminism have created new possibilities for young women" (p. 6). Girls are "produced as ideal neoliberal laborers because of their presumed work ethic, flexibility, and willingness to reinvent themselves for the labor market" (Hasinoff, 2008, p. 329). As a result, girls are

³ The social and economic policies of Western post-industrial late capitalism prioritize corporate interests over social programs; the resulting rhetorical and cultural formations, which rely on notions of individualism and flexibility, are marked as neoliberal (Hasinoff, 2008).

believed to be performing brilliantly and are imagined as the most likely to succeed in contemporary society. According to Harris (2004), the “can-do” girl exemplifies the neoliberal model of youth citizenship, which emphasizes self-invention, personal responsibility, resiliency, and individual economic empowerment. The counter-part to the “can-do” girl is the “at-risk” girl. Connected to the emphasis on the achievements of the “can-do” girl is a cultural concern that “at-risk” girls are not succeeding as they should. At-risk girls, typically of very specific populations (for example, young mothers, ethnic minorities, and working-class), have been framed as a problem for society. The constructions of the “can-do” and “at-risk” girl, as outlined by Harris, do not necessarily encapsulate the mean girl, so I aim to extend Harris’s discussion by exploring the nexus I see between these two discourses.

I locate two distinct types of the mean girl – one who is “can-do” and one who is “at-risk.” The can-do mean girl is extremely driven, resilient, and determined. She is committed to career planning and is highly ambitious. She “has the world at her feet,” yet she does not handle her privilege well. She flaunts her privilege, specifically when she uses her power to victimize other girls. The can-do mean girl is mean, ambitious, *and* sympathetic. Her construction is far more fluid than that of the at-risk mean girl, who is also White, middle- to upper-class, and heterosexual. Because she is part of the privileged norm, the at-risk mean girl *should* have the world at her feet, but her ambitions are fixated solely on the high school social hierarchy. Unlike the at-risk girl Harris outlines, this mean girl is not from a disenfranchised population. Instead, she is “at-risk” precisely because she has access to all that should make her “can-do,” but she does not take advantage of these opportunities. As opposed to being rendered vulnerable by her

circumstances (Harris, 2004), she is a victim to her own poor choices and lack of effort. Her ambition is misplaced – focused on eliteness. Aside from high standards of physical beauty, grooming, and displays of consumer luxurious consumer lifestyles that mark the successful contemporary girl (Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 1991), the at-risk mean girl turns her back on opportunity.

The Structure of the Dissertation and a Preview of Chapters

Since popularity is part of the image of the contemporary mean girl, in the first chapter, “The Price of Popularity: Tracing Girlhood Discourses through *The Breakfast Club*, *Jawbreaker*, and *Mean Girls*,” I perform a genealogy of popular girls on film. As a point of entry into representations of the plight of young girls in the U.S., this chapter traces three dominant girlhood discourses – Reviving Ophelia, Girl Power, and Mean Girl – through filmic representations of popular girls. I note how contemporary mean girl films do not feature sympathetic images of popular girls, so the popular girl is understood as aggressive, and popularity is demonized. In response, girls are encouraged to sidestep eliteness and to, instead, establish a non-hierarchical and non-discriminatory Girl World.

In chapter 2, “‘Where Mean Girls Get Stung:’ Looking at Racialized Mean Girl Narratives” I bring together scholarship on girlhood, race, and RTV in an analysis of the reality television program *Queen Bees*. The express goal of *Queen Bees* is to transform mean “selfish girls” into nice “selfless women.” Historically, the nice girl has been White, and her construction bound with idealized unachievable qualities, yet the winner of *Queen Bees* (the most selfless nice girl) is constructed as Latina. Whereas the White girls fail spectacularly in their attempt to gain appropriate White femininity, the femininity of the girls of color (particularly those girls the show marks as Latina) is

celebrated. Images of girls of color achieving the characteristics of the nice girl more easily than White girls do signify a striking shift in mediated racialized representations of femininity and girlhood and provide access to changing notions of racialized girlhood.

Chapter 3, “Prepping the Queen Bee: Gender, Class, and Social Climbing in *Gossip Girl*,” focuses on a specific subset of the mean girl narrative - the Wannabe - who uses cultural capital, as opposed to class privilege, in her attempts to usurp the Queen Bee’s power. On *Gossip Girl*, the image of the Wannabe breaks with normative cultural versions of White, middle-class passive femininity in ways that are framed as problematic. Although the Wannabe rises above her class, in so doing, she also transcends her “authentic” goodness. Thus, *Gossip Girl* suggests forays into elite society can be dangerous for middle-class girls because the Wannabe is at risk for going against middle-class morality, as success in the upper-class elite social system requires immorality. Moreover, middle-class boys seem to easily access upper-classness, which is in stark contrast to the very hard and dirty work the girls must do to enter elite society. As well, when the boys do gain access, they do not lose a part of their authentic selves in the way the girls do every time they delve into this world. As a result, middle-classness is recentered and ascribed as part of the nice girl’s authentic image.

In chapter 4, “‘Bullied to Death?’: The Demonization of ‘Real Life Mean Girls’ in the Media Coverage of the Phoebe Prince Bullycide,” I examine the Prince case as a case study, which, I argue, sheds light on the contemporary moral panic about girls’ bullying. The discourses I examine champion escalating punitive treatment of girls in the form of the criminalization of girls’ communication (both interpersonally and online) and anti-bullying legislation that would increase formal scrutiny of girls’ lives in schools, despite

the fact that there is little evidence to suggest girls are bullying more than before. The extreme legislative and criminal solutions offered in the Prince case speak to a cultural desire to tame the threat of the mean girl – a threat that is particularly salient when it is framed as coming from real girls acting in real ways.

Chapter 1

The Price of Popularity: Tracing Girlhood Discourses through *The Breakfast Club*, *Heathers*, and *Mean Girls*

Since 1980, U.S. movies catering to young audiences have become fixated on promoting the celebration or survival of adolescence (Shary, 2002).⁴ During this time, popular culture has increasingly featured images of girls, marking the present as an intense moment of obsession with girls (Projansky, 2007). This trend is not entirely new; Projansky (2002) explains that girls have appeared as important figures in popular culture throughout the twentieth century. Indeed, when adjusted for inflation, six of the ten highest-grossing motion pictures of all time are principally about adolescent girls (Gateward & Pomerance, 2002).⁵ Moreover, as Payne (1989) notes, *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), which features an adolescent girl as its lead character, “has been televised yearly on a major network since 1956” (p. 26). It appears as though popular culture has paid substantial attention to girls, yet Banet-Weiser (2004) explains that the early 21st century has seen an increase in cultural attention to girls. This intensified focus on girls has amplified concern over those issues that are framed as a primary characteristic of girl

⁴ According to Shary (2002), “many arguments persist as to why teenagers have been targeted by Hollywood: youth have disposable incomes that they enjoy spending on entertainment, today’s children become the consumptive parents of tomorrow; filmmakers engage in the vicarious experiences of their own lost youth” (p. 1). Gateward and Pomerance note that the mid-90s saw a marked “shift of the industry’s prime demographic from young men to young women” (p. 15). Gateward and Pomerance (2002) explain that girls are now the most sought after demographic of the entertainment industry, as, unlike boys who tend to spend their money on electronics and sports, girls gravitate toward shopping and going to the movies.

⁵ Taken as a whole, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Gone With the Wind* (1939), *The Sound of Music* (1965), *Doctor Zhivago* (1965), *Star Wars* (1977), and *Titanic* (1997), earned more than \$1.7 billion (Gateward & Pomerance, 2002).

culture, such as cliques. The effect of popularity on teen girls is a narrative feature in what Shary (2002) calls “school films.” In the school film, “the educational setting becomes an index of youth issues” (p. 11). The contemporary anxiety about girls and cliques is reflected in the numerous school films released in the last three decades that feature girls and popularity at the center of their narratives.

In this chapter, I extend Shary’s survey of school films by taking a Foucauldian approach to the analysis. Foucault (1984a) argues for the importance of genealogy as a method to trace the development of society through knowledges and discourses. Genealogy does not search for the origin or linear development of knowledge (Foucault, 1984a); instead, a genealogy “shifts the focus to competing, fractured, and discontinuous discourses culturally embedded in particular historical periods” (Diedrich, 2005). My goal is to investigate the discourses through which the “truth” about girlhood and its relationship to eliteness is produced. I trace the movement of three dominant girlhood discourses - Reviving Ophelia, Girl Power, and Mean Girl – in and through films, and consider the ways in which the discourses confirm and redeploy ideas about girlhood, race, class, and popularity.

I analyze mainstream films *The Breakfast Club* (1985), *Can’t Buy Me Love* (1987), and *Mean Girls* (2004), as well as independent, cult classics *Heathers* (1989) and *Jawbreaker* (1999), and the made-for-television movie *Odd Girl Out* (2005). *The Breakfast Club* and *Can’t Buy Me Love* are emblematic of 1980s versions of passive female popularity. Popular culture references to the films are common, so they continue to play a role in contemporary understandings of popularity. For example, the hit television drama *Dawson’s Creek* (1998 – 2003) (Season 1, “Detention”) and the

Canadian program *Degrassi: The Next Generation* (2001 – present) (Season 1 “Take On Me”) contain episodes that mimic the plot line of *The Breakfast Club* (five students in Saturday detention). As well, the 2003 film *Love Don’t Cost a Thing* is based on *Can’t Buy Me Love*. Most recently, the 2010 high school comedy *Easy A* referenced both *The Breakfast Club* and *Can’t Buy Me Love*. I chose to examine *Jawbreaker* and *Heathers* because, although neither was particularly successful in terms of box office numbers nor well reviewed critically, they have gained cult classic status. Chesney-Lind and Irwin (2008) explain that, in the 90s, constructions of violent girls in the media expanded a general moral panic about girls’ violence. *Heathers*, released in 1989 at the cusp of the girls’ violence crisis, and *Jawbreaker*, released a decade later as the girls’ violence crisis was being usurped by the Mean Girl discourse, bookend representations of violent White girls in popular culture, and, as such, are useful to examine the transition from the Girl Power discourse to the Mean Girl discourse. Finally, I selected *Odd Girl Out* and *Mean Girls* because they are based on Simmons’s book *Odd Girl Out* and Wiseman’s book *Queen Bees & Wannabes* respectively, so the films are indicative of the ways in which the ideas featured in the best-selling books are transformed into fictional accounts about girls. Moreover, in *Mean Girls*, Tina Fey, screenwriter of the film, uses parody and humor to express ideas about mean girls and popularity. In contrast, *Odd Girl Out* was part of Lifetime’s “The Truth about Teens” weekend, so the account of girls’ meanness in the film is represented as the “truth” about the relationship between girls and popularity.

In tracing Reviving Ophelia, Girl Power, and Mean Girl, I note a shift to postfeminism. Specifically, postfeminism happens alongside Girl Power and Mean Girl and is taken up in different ways by each discourse. “Postfeminism broadly encompasses

a set of assumptions, widely disseminated within popular media forms, having to do with the ‘pastness’ of feminism” (Tasker & Negra, 2007, p. 1). As scholars point out, the rhetoric of postfeminism celebrates how far women have come and insists that, in order to be happy, women can now reclaim an essentialized and idealized femininity (Dubrofsky, 2002; Tasker & Negra, 2007). In the postfeminist Girl Power and Mean Girl discourses, girls are seen as not only equal to boys, but as dominant to boys and men. The aggression the popular girl exhibits troubles dominant notions of passive femininity, relying instead on postfeminist tropes of women (and now girls) as deceptive and deadly.

Scholarship on postfeminism in popular culture suggests iconic images of postfeminism are White⁶ (Dow, 1996; Dubrofsky, 2002; Gerhard, 2005; Helford, 2000; McRobbie, 2004a; Ouellette, 2002; Projansky, 2001; Springer, 2007). Tasker and Negra (2007) maintain postfeminism assumes economic freedom for women, so it is, by default, White and middle-class. Moreover, in film, popularity is generally coded White and middle- to upper-class (Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009). As well, scholars have pointed to the ways in which the Reviving Ophelia, Girl Power, and Mean Girl discourses are about White middle-class girls (Aapola, et al., 2005; Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008; Mazzarella, 2008; Ringrose, 2006). For these reasons, this chapter explores the representation of the plight of young girls in school films in which the central narrative explores the effects of popularity on White middle- to upper-class teen girls.

⁶ Icons of postfeminism include Murphy Brown (Dow, 1996), Ally McBeal (Dubrofsky, 2002; Ouellette, 2002), Carrie Bradshaw (Arthurs, 2003; Gerhard, 2005), Bridget Jones (McRobbie, 2004a).

The Discourses

In the early 1990s, “several influential and high-profile studies were published addressing issues as girls’ alleged plummeting self-esteem, negative body image, and mediocre performance in some school subjects such as math and science” (Mazzarella, 2008, p. 75). The most popular was Mary Pipher’s (1994) *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, which “spent three years on the *New York Times* non-fiction best-seller list, and has sold over 1.5 million copies” (Ward & Benjamin, 2004, p. 17). The academic and popular texts that contributed to the Reviving Ophelia discourse “share a view that girls’ self-esteem crisis is a consequence of a girl-hostile culture that denies them expression of their authentic selves” (Aapola, et al., 2005, p. 45). For example, feminist psychologists Brown and Gilligan (1992) noted that, in their search for idealized relationships, fearing that conflict leads to isolation, girls silence themselves. Through the Reviving Ophelia discourse, girls’ vulnerability became part of authentic notions of girlhood, colliding with dominant versions of White femininity as passive (Ringrose, 2006).

Aapola, Gonick, and Harris (2005b) recognize Girl Power as Reviving Ophelia’s “competing” discourse (p. 18). Like Reviving Ophelia, Girl Power emerged in academic and popular contexts during the early 90s but set up an opposing definition of femininity (Gonick, 2006). Associated with the Riot Grrrls (an underground feminist punk movement), the rhetoric of Girl Power originally defined girls through empowerment and agency as opposed to helplessness and dependency (Banet-Weiser, 2004). The all female pop music group the Spice Girls is credited with popularizing the concept of Girl Power (Griffin, 2004; Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007b). The Riot Grrrls’ Girl Power was explicitly

feminist (Fritzsche, 2004); the Girl Power linked to the Spice Girls promises an all-female world of fun and sassiness (Griffin, 2004). Academic and popular reaction to Girl Power is ambivalent. On the one hand, it is seen as having the potential to empower girls to fight sexism and misogyny; on the other hand, it seems palatable because it mirrors White, middle-class femininity (Aapola, et al., 2005; Griffin, 2004; Projansky & Vandenberg, 2000).

Girls' Studies scholar Anita Harris (2004) maintains the contemporary Mean Girl discourse suggests girls have misunderstood Girl Power. In Simmons's *Odd Girl Out* and Wiseman's *Queen Bees & Wannabes*, both published in 2002, the authors argue that, in order to rule their cliques, popular girls bully in a malicious and covertly aggressive manner. Basing her findings partially on social scientific research on girls' aggression (Adler & Adler, 1998; Bjoerkqvist, et al., 1992; Crick, et al., 2001; Eder, 1985; Galen & Underwood, 1997), Simmons (2002) argued girls fight with relationships, so friendship becomes a weapon. These claims were quickly picked up in the news media. For example, in *New York Times Magazine*, in an article titled "Girls Just Wanna be Mean," Talbot (2002) labels girls' indirect aggression a "certified social problem" (p. 27). In the Mean Girl discourse, the popular girl is always aggressive, so the image of the mean girl troubles authentic notions of White passive femininity.

Although these three discourses – Reviving Ophelia, Girl Power, and Mean Girl – have been the focus of much academic scholarship (Aapola, et al., 2005; Banet-Weiser, 2004; Byers, 2005; Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2004; Gonick, 2004, 2006; Griffin, 2004; Kearney, 2002; Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009; Ringrose, 2006; Taft, 2004), there are, at the time of this writing, no explorations of the ways in which the three discourses intersect

and diverge.⁷ This chapter investigates the movement of these discourses and considers the ways in which representations of popular girls on film contribute to our understandings of girls and eliteness.

Reviving Ophelia: Girls Vulnerable to Popularity

Films in accordance with *Reviving Ophelia* offer images of popular girls that are sympathetic. As I will show, these constructions are quite different from contemporary representations of popular mean girls who are seen as brutal without cause and who are constructed as solely focused on elitism. According to Shary (2002), John Hughes created the archetypal vulnerable popular girl in his 1985 high school classic *The Breakfast Club*. The film takes place during a Saturday detention where five students (each representative of a high school clique) learn about one another as well as themselves. The students speak of facing stress from outside forces (e.g., parents, grades, etc.); this common feeling of pressure bonds the students. For Claire, “the princess,” the stress she feels relates directly to her popularity. Claire breaks down when she admits to Brian, the “brain,” that, because their cliques do not mix (she is popular; he is smart), she will be unable to be friends with him on Monday at school. Claire’s tearful admission that she hates “having to go along with everything (her) friends say” tempers her elitist attitude because her distress seems authentic, so she is framed as normatively feminine (she *wants* to be friends with everyone) but defenseless to the pressures of popularity. Throughout the film, “criminal” John torments Claire. After one of his diatribes, she exclaims, “I have

⁷ See Gonick’s (2006) “Between girl power and reviving Ophelia: Constituting the neoliberal girl subject” for a nuanced analysis of *Reviving Ophelia* and *Girl Power*. Gonick maintains the two discourses produce the neoliberal girl subject through processes of individualization. As well, Aapola, Gonick, and Harris (2005) examine what they term the “competing discourses” of *Reviving Ophelia* and *Girl Power*.

just as many feelings as you do, and it hurts just as much when someone steps all over them.” This outburst normalizes Claire, suggesting she is just like the other students, despite the privileges she accesses through her advantaged social status.

Can't Buy Me Love (1987) also features an empathetic construction of a girl vulnerable to the demands of popularity. In the film, high school “nerd” Ronald Miller pays popular Cindy Mancini \$1,000 to pretend to be his girlfriend for one month. Ronald believes that by appearing to date the most popular cheerleader in school, he will be able to break into the “cool” clique. When Ronald’s plan to gain popularity via proxy works, he tells Cindy, “popularity sure beats being treated like a social leper.” Cindy is quick to explain, “Popularity isn’t perfect. I mean it almost feels like a job sometimes.” In fact, the only reason Cindy agrees to “date” Ronald is for the paycheck, which she uses to replace a coat that was ruined when she spilled red wine on it. According to Cindy, she took her mother’s coat without asking in order to “try to impress people.” Like Claire, Cindy is vulnerable to making poor choices in order to maintain her membership in the elite crowd.

The films frame Cindy and Claire as expressing normative beauty standards (they are White, thin, and so forth). In *The Breakfast Club*, Claire wears makeup, a pink shirt, khaki skirt, and high-heeled boots, so she is dressed to the nines even for Saturday detention. In *Can't Buy Me Love*, fellow nerd and Ronald’s best friend explains, “most living organisms have a crush on” Cindy, and Ronald’s brother (who is in the seventh grade, so he does not even attend the high school) describes Cindy as “the most beautiful girl in the history of this county.” In both cases, the popular girls’ appropriate femininity is set in opposition to the unsuitable femininity of other girls. In *Can't Buy Me Love*,

Cindy's two best friends dress provocatively and are sexually aggressive. Their contrasting images work to confirm Cindy's normative femininity, as she dresses far more conservatively and never does more than kiss a boy. Similarly, in *The Breakfast Club*, the only other girl in detention is Allison, the "basket case." Allison presents herself as a bad girl who drinks vodka and has sex with married men. On the other hand, Claire is a virgin who believes that monogamous heterosexual relationships are "how it should be." Allison's outward appearance (unkempt hair, dirty layered clothing, and no makeup) suggests her lack of normative femininity, especially when compared to Claire's physical beauty. Although the two girls seem to have little in common, Claire sees Allison's feminine potential and gives her a makeover. When Allison asks Claire why she is being "so nice" to her, Claire replies, "because you're letting me." Again, the film confirms Claire's desire to be friends with everyone, even those who exist outside her popular clique.

Both Claire and Cindy are represented as searching for love, so, although their beauty grants them access to elite social circles, they are framed as actively seeking out and prioritizing heterosexual romance. This is in contrast to mean girls who, as I will argue, appear to overtly desire popularity over and above heteronormative relationships. In *Can't Buy Me Love*, Ronald's popularity comes to a crashing halt when, at a New Year's Eve party, Cindy's ex-boyfriend (a one-time captain of the high school football team), Bobby, returns from college. When he, too, is tricked into believing that Ronald and Cindy are a couple, he calls Cindy a "whore." In this scene, the viewer gains insight into Cindy's vulnerability to the domination of men. Humiliated by Bobby's outburst, Cindy announces to the entire party that Ronald paid her to pretend to date him. Because

Cindy is constructed as lonely, heartbroken, and victimized, her drunken outburst is forgivable. The cool clique shuns Ronald immediately; he becomes the least popular person in the entire school and the butt of several jokes. Cindy's popularity, on the other hand, is unaffected. Although she is less enamored with her elite clique, she continues to be granted popularity. Unlike the hard and dirty work mean girls are shown performing in order to maintain their popularity, the popular girls in these films appear to access popularity easily. By film's end, Cindy prioritizes a heterosexual romance over popularity when she kisses the now authentically nerdy Ronald.

In *The Breakfast Club*, Claire is constructed as passive to men yet as actively desiring love. Throughout the film, "athlete" Andy, who is part of Claire's popular clique, attempts to protect her from "criminal" John. Bell (1995) notes a tendency in film to link women's essential goodness to victimage and martyrdom. In *The Breakfast Club*, although Claire is constructed as powerful and elite, her goodness remains intact as a result of the victimization she faces from John, especially when, while hiding from the principal under her desk, John catches a glimpse of Claire's underwear and forces his face between her bare legs. Claire is powerless to John's sexual advances, but, perhaps more importantly, the idea that Claire does not desire protection from John's verbal and sexual abuse is salient when she seeks him out on her own accord and kisses him. Claire is a passive victim to John's abuse, but, at the same time, she appears to actively desire romance with him.

The Breakfast Club and *Can't Buy Me Love* uphold dominant heterosexist versions of passive femininity. Moreover, since both girls find love with boys who are not in their popular social circles (Cindy with "nerd" Ronald and Claire with "criminal"

John), they appear to be uninterested in eliteness and as appropriately prioritizing heterosexual, monogamous love. These films contribute to Reviving Ophelia images of girls who are seen as inauthentic when they make poor choices in order to maintain their popularity. They choose cliques and parties over the fear of isolation, yet, in the end, their choices to partner with boys outside of the parameters of their cliques indicate they have rediscovered their authentic selves. Reviving Ophelia upholds dominant versions of White, heterosexist, passive femininity. The films confirm girls' desire for heteronormative romantic relationships over and above aspirations toward eliteness.

From Girl Power to Girl Violence

The Girl Power discourse is generally associated with White, affluent First World societies (Griffin, 2004). Girl Power was the first “political subculture to be organized entirely around young women’s concerns...(including the) rejection of patronizing attitudes toward young women” (Harris, 2004, p. 17). The 1989 film *Heathers* coincides with Girl Power’s original focus on female empowerment. The Heathers, the most popular clique at Westerberg High School, are self-centered, cruel, and manipulative. We know this from the film’s slow motion opening shot when the camera pans to the feet of three of the clique members (all named Heather) as they crush a garden full of blooming red roses during a cut-throat game of croquette. The slow motion shot of mean clique members has become a trope in films about the politics of female popularity and is found in *Jawbreaker*, *Mean Girls*, and *Odd Girl Out* (all of which are analyzed in this chapter).

Heathers is indicative of the ways in which Girl Power and Reviving Ophelia, although presented as “competing” discourses, work together to reinforce and trouble ideas about girls. In *Heathers*, Veronica’s empowerment is a direct precursor of Girl

Power (Roberts, 2002); at the same time, like the films I explored as part of *Reviving Ophelia*, the film offers a potentially compassionate portrayal of girls who are vulnerable to the demands of popularity. The *Reviving Ophelia* discourse claims that because of their socialization in a girl-hating culture, when girls enter into adolescence, their IQ, math, and science scores drop, and they report great unhappiness with their bodies (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Mazzarella, 2008; Pipher, 1994). *Heathers* highlights the pressures girls feel to maintain idealized relationships - pressures, which are constructed in *Reviving Ophelia*, as manifesting in actions that indicate girls' low self-esteem. For example, clique member Heather McNamara is a bulimic who needs Veronica's (the only clique member not named Heather) help to purge.⁸ Moreover, despite the power *The Heathers* access through their elite status, they exist within a girl-hating culture – a world that is nearly erased in filmic representations of the Mean Girl discourse. In *Heathers*, Westerberg High's most popular jocks, Kurt and Ram, detail their sexual fantasies about the clique members: "Man, it would be so righteous to be in a Veronica Sawyer/Heather Chandler sandwich." When Heather Chandler dies, Ram admonishes God for killing such "hot snatch." The high school boys alone do not make up the sexist culture in which *The Heathers* exist. At a college party, a fraternity member, Davis, coerces Heather Chandler, the clique's leader, to perform fellatio on him. Alone in a room with Davis, Heather asks repeatedly if they can return to the party. Davis responds that it is difficult for him to concentrate on the party because Heather "looks so hot tonight." Placing his hand on the back of her head and nodding his chin toward his lap, Davis indicates they will return to

⁸ Although we do not get a visual of this act, as Veronica enters the bathroom stall in which Heather vomits, Veronica holds up her pointer finger, wiggles it, and says "a friend's work is never done." Apparently, Veronica's finger is the tool that causes Heather to gag and vomit.

the party as soon as his desire is relieved. Following the sexual act, Heather rinses her mouth in the bathroom, stares in the mirror with hatred, and forcefully spits at her reflection. In this scene, she “does her duty” in providing a male with sexual gratification while remaining silent to her own desires and needs. *Heathers* constructs the most popular girls in school in a manner similar to *Reviving Ophelia*: they exist in a sexist culture that is linked to their bulimia and desire for idealized relationships.

The narrative of the film portrays Veronica as shrugging off the characteristics that would align her with *Reviving Ophelia* and becoming empowered in a manner that is representative of Girl Power. Veronica is originally so enchanted with popularity that she does whatever Heather Chandler asks of her. For example, although she claims to not have anything against Martha “Dump truck” Comstock (an obese, unpopular classmate), Veronica agrees to forge a “hot and horny” love note in Kurt’s writing to slip on Martha’s lunch tray. When Martha confronts Kurt with the letter, he shares the prank with the entire cafeteria and the entire student body laughs at Martha until she runs crying out of the cafeteria. Moreover, Veronica chose the idealized relationships of popularity over excelling in academics when she decided not to skip three grades because she “would have trouble making friends.” As the narrative progresses, Veronica is less impressed with the lure of popularity as she becomes angrier at a sexist culture and an adult world that is unaware of the problematic clique-based nature of her high school. When Veronica reluctantly attends the college party with Heather, she does not succumb to her date’s pressure to have sex and, instead, vocalizes an assertive attitude intolerant of sexism during a speech she “has prepared for her suitor when he wants more than I want to give.” It is important to note that, unlike Claire in *The Breakfast Club*, Veronica is not

constructed as simply pure and virginal and, therefore, unwilling to pursue sex with any boy. In fact, upon arriving home from the college party, new student Jason Dean (J.D.) climbs into her window, and the two engage in a game of strip croquette that leads to them having sex. Veronica articulates a Girl Power philosophy when she stands against the sexism espoused by the high school and college boys in the film, and she is an empowered agent who takes pleasure in her sexuality.

Following the fraternity party, writing in her journal, Veronica claims to have “an understanding” about popularity, cliques, and elitism that her peers and the adult world do not. She writes that her choice to ignore old friendships in order to be popular disgusts her. Whereas Veronica originally goes along with The Heathers and only questions why they do not talk to “different kinds of people,” after the college party, she actively seeks out friendships with less popular girls, including her one-time best friend, Betty Finn. Betty’s name suggests she is Veronica’s “true” friend, because, as Kaveney (2006) astutely notes, “Betty and Veronica are best friends in the *Archie* comic” (pp. 59). Moreover, as opposed to dating the jocks or college boys who would secure her elite position in the Westerberg High School social hierarchy, Veronica begins to date J.D., who is “cool” and similarly not impressed with popularity.⁹

Veronica uses the phrase of speech “I want to kill Heather” to express her anger with clique leader Heather Chandler. The viewer knows this is not an actual confession of a desire to murder because, minutes later, Veronica admits, “killing Heather won’t change anything,” and she amends her statement to wanting to see “Heather Chandler

⁹ Kaveney (2006) also points out that Jason Dean “is cognate enough with James Dean to signal him as a teen rebel; his initials J.D., by which he is usually referred to, also stand, in common parlance, for juvenile delinquent” (p. 54).

puke her guts out.” Despite this, J.D. decides to carry through with Veronica’s original expression, and he hands Heather a coffee mug full of poisonous liquid chemicals (Veronica believes the mug contains orange juice and milk) that kill her. In this sense, Veronica is only a tool for J.D.’s murder of Heather, which could frame Veronica as a passive victim. Veronica’s passivity to J.D. does not last though. Much like in her relationship with The Heathers, Veronica is empowered to dismiss the characteristics that align her with the passive femininity popularized by *Reviving Ophelia*. For example, when Veronica and J.D. plan to retaliate against Kurt and Ram for spreading a rumor that they had a “swordfight” in Veronica’s mouth,¹⁰ J.D. insists they will be using bullets that are like tranquilizers: “They break the surface of the skin just enough to bleed, but not to do any real damage.” Once they shoot the boys, Veronica realizes they actually used real bullets that killed Kurt and Ram. Her initial reaction is to turn her emotions inward, so she burns her hand with a car lighter, again in line with *Reviving Ophelia*, which claims girls’ self-harm is a manifestation of their anger toward a girl-hating culture (Pipher, 1994). Later that same day, Veronica turns her anger toward J.D., and she breaks up with him, yelling, “You’re not a rebel, you’re fucking psychotic.” In this sense, her construction is more clearly in line with *Girl Power*, which validates female anger and offers girls the tools to express that anger.

When Veronica learns that J.D. intends to blow up the school with the students inside, she shoots him before he can complete his plan. J.D. exclaims, “you’ve got power; power I didn’t think you had.” She exhibits her power when she returns to school and removes the red bow (once worn by Heather Chandler) from Heather Duke’s (who has taken over as the leader of The Heathers) hair. “There’s a new sheriff in town,” Veronica

¹⁰ The boys indicate they simultaneously received oral sex from Veronica.

states, as she ties her hair back with the red bow. She is empowered and able to affect change in her universe (that of her high school), and, in so doing, she begins to create a female-centric, non-hierarchical environment. She chooses not to attend prom, instead asking Martha “Dump truck” Comstock if she would like to “rent some new releases and pop some popcorn.” Veronica begins to build a supportive female community where she can rely on other girls to help her through the trials and tribulations of adolescence. She is no longer a passive victim to patriarchy (as are girls in *Reviving Ophelia*) but instead an empowered agent in control of her world.

“Although the Girl Power era indicates a certain time of empowerment for girls, it is important to remember that anger is still largely taboo” (Roberts, 2002). Postfeminism, a backlash to the feminist movement, tends to emerge when women are perceived as gaining equality. The backlash to Girl Power constructs girls as not simply powerful but dominant, suggesting girls have too much power (Taft, 2004). In, what I am terming the postfeminist Girl Power and, as I will discuss later, the Mean Girl discourses, girls are marked as brutal without cause. Whereas *Reviving Ophelia* is overtly about troubled girls, the postfeminist Girl Power suggests girls are not troubled; instead, they have gained equality in all facets of their lives, so girls’ anger is framed as unwarranted. Postfeminist Girl Power works to soften the discourse’s powerful message while tempering girls’ anger. Thus, in these instances, Girl Power is dissociated from feminism and instead aligned with a postfeminist agenda.

The narrator of the 1999 film *Jawbreaker*, Fern, describes popular Courtney Shayne as “Satan in heels” who “rules through terror.” In contrast, Fern explains, Liz Purr (who is murdered in the opening scene) was popular because she was kind.

According to Fern, “Everybody loved Liz, not because she was beautiful and popular and rich...she was sweet.” The suggestion that Courtney and Liz were one another’s enemies, despite being members of the same clique, is part of the film’s postfeminist structure. The competitive dichotomous relationships of women on film (e.g. good/bad, virgin/whore) have been a staple in the postfeminist media culture. As Dow (1996) explains, there is a “postfeminist media theme of divisions among women and the implicit message is that the possibility of female solidarity was a feminist fantasy” (p. 148). We see these themes placed onto girls in *Jawbreaker*. The first time the viewer sees Courtney, she is in the process of kidnapping Liz from her bed. With the help of two friends, Courtney puts Liz in the trunk of the car bound and gagged and drives to, what we learn is supposed to be, a birthday breakfast celebration. Things go tragically wrong when the jawbreaker Courtney shoves into Liz’s mouth lodges in her throat, and she asphyxiates. Although the death is described as “an accident,” Fern’s early narrative contribution that Liz’s kindness really “pissed Courtney off,” combined with Courtney’s questionable and, at times, illegal tactics to frame someone else for the murder, suggest Courtney killed Liz purposely to secure her elite status. The idea that Courtney desires more than she deserves is an ongoing theme in the film. The Reviving Ophelia popular girl is granted popularity without asking. Veronica in *Heathers* actively moves away from elitism and toward the bonds of true sisterhood. This postfeminist representation of Girl Power frames Courtney as willing to do anything to secure her popularity - even kill another girl.

McRobbie (2004b) explains that postfeminism “actively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account...(to) emphasise that it is no longer needed” (p. 255). Feminism, specifically what Baumgardner and Richards (2004) refer to

as “girlie” feminism, is taken into account in *Jawbreaker*. Girlie feminism is the intersection of feminism with feminine culture. A girlie aesthetic infuses the mise-en-scene of the film: the colors are bright, sets are frilly and pretty, and The Donnas, an all female punk act, provide music for much of the film (along with a performance at prom). The film embraces superficial aspects of feminism, while also giving no presence to patriarchy; indeed, male characters are nearly absent. The two adults in the film who receive the most screen time – the school principal and the detective charged with Liz’s murder case – are both women. Feminism is acknowledged (“Look, women are principals and police detectives”) in such a way as to suggest equality between the sexes has been achieved.

In terms of the younger generation, the film takes this suggestion to its postfeminist outcome and, as opposed to equal, girls are shown to be dominant to boys. Courtney expresses no long-term romantic interest in her boyfriend Dane; instead, she admits to dating him because he “was born to be prom king,” and she desires to be prom queen. Courtney humiliates Dane during a sexual encounter when, in direct contrast to the female victim coerced into sex, she forces him to perform fellatio on a popsicle - what she refers to as her “big stick” – even placing her hand on the back of his head and forcing his mouth down the popsicle. Moreover, Courtney uses her sexual prowess to lure a man back to Liz’s home where she has sex with him in order to frame him for Liz’s rape and murder. The camera pans from Courtney’s smiling face, to the smirk of the random man she has picked up at the bar, and finally to Liz’s corpse, which is hidden under the bed. When the man is arrested, we realize that Courtney’s plan has worked, and she has used her sexuality to frame an innocent man. Feminism has encouraged women

to find pleasure and empowerment through sex, but Courtney has taken this too far and used her sexuality to oppress men.

Courtney believes her popularity has reached its zenith when her peers elect her prom queen. As the tiara is placed on her head, Courtney's confession that she "killed the teen queen Liz Purr" plays over the sound system of the school gymnasium. As the once worshipping crowd boos and begins to throw their corsages and boutonnières at her, Courtney's fall from grace plays out in slow motion: the tiara tumbles from her head, her hair falls in messy pieces around her face, and her black mascara runs down her face. The potentially subversive ideology of Girl Power, which was initially a response to the sexism, elitism, and violence of patriarchal culture, is reframed through a postfeminist suggestion that girls who desire popularity are violent.

Jawbreaker suggests girls will do anything to maintain elitism, so it serves as a precursor to the Mean Girl discourse. In *Heathers*, Veronica is empowered to kill J.D. in order to save her classmates, and, in doing so, she puts an end to the crime spree of a mass murderer. When Veronica kills J.D. and saves the lives of her classmates, she is the film's hero. Conversely, in *Jawbreaker*, Courtney has taken Girl Power too far. She is no longer simply strong and powerful; she is violent, and that act of violence was against a nice girl whom everyone loved. Fern exclaims, "She's so evil, and she's only in high school!" Courtney is too powerful, too dominant, and a threat to normative constructions of passive femininity.

The Mean Girl Discourse: Girls Victimized One Another

In popular culture, mean girls' desire to be popular is unconcealed. Griffin (2004) notes a cultural anxiety "over the context in which girls may act as desiring subjects" (p. 36). Although mean girls do not commit murder to access popularity, the ways in which they are framed as desiring, gaining, and maintaining their popularity are reflective of a social anxiety regarding girls and elitism. *Mean Girls* (2004) portrays the exploits of the most popular clique at Northshore High School, The Plastics, and Cady who is introduced to the cruel politics of Girl World when her family moves back to the U.S. from Africa. The Plastics' overt aspirations toward popularity differentiate them from compassionate portrayals of girls' popularity expressed in *Reviving Ophelia*.

As in *Jawbreaker*, *Mean Girls'* relationship with feminism is ambivalent in that feminism is shown to be successful, yet the gains of feminism are blamed for creating girls who desire too much and are willing to do anything to get what they want. The achievements of feminism are celebrated when girls are shown to have the tools to effectively handle patriarchy. For example, during Cady's first day in the cafeteria, a male classmate approaches and asks if she likes her "muffin buttered." The sexual innuendo confuses naïve and innocent Cady, but Plastics' leader Regina George steps in quickly and turns the tables on him:

Regina: Jason, why are you being such a skeeze?

Jason: I'm just being friendly.

Regina: Jason, you do not come to a party at my house with (fellow Plastics member) Gretchen and then scam on some poor girl right in front of us three days later. She's not interested... You can go shave your back now.

Jason: Bitch.

Although Jason refers to Regina as a "bitch," he does so under his breath as he walks away humiliated. Moreover, it appears as though Regina barely registers the taunt. She protects new girl Cady from Jason's sexual advances, and she defends her friend Gretchen whom Jason treated poorly.

What could be viewed as a positive aspect of Regina's personality (her ability to stand against sexism) is reframed as problematic when she manipulates others for self-serving purposes. For example, Regina appears to have complete control over her mother (who considers herself a "cool mom" and offers Regina condoms when she finds her making out with a boy) and her father (who watches in silent dismay while Regina poses for photographs in an extremely revealing Halloween costume). Regina also manipulates her school's administration, faculty, and staff. When Regina worries that Cady is usurping her popularity, she devises an ingenious plan to get her suspended. Before turning The Plastics "Burn Book," in which all of the Plastics and Cady have written scathing captions beneath pictures of their female classmates, to her principal, Regina includes a picture of herself with the label "fugly slut." She then leads the principal to Cady and the other Plastics' members when she indicates, "there are only three girls in the entire school not in the book." In shining the spotlight on the other girls, Regina

deceives the principal in order to obtain what she desires (she gets Cady in trouble and retains her popularity), and she avoids punishment. Later, when a teacher asks, “How many of you have ever felt personally victimized by Regina George,” each person in the gymnasium raises her/his hand, including the principal. Regina is shown as smart, powerful, and vulnerable to no one; at the same time, her primary characterization is as a victimizer of other girls, boys, and adults.

Despite being framed as empowered, Regina appears to knowingly perform the Reviving Ophelia discourse. In contrast, having been raised in Africa, Cady is represented as having no idea that she is pretty, and, in turn, as not understanding normative expectations of femininity. When Regina tells Cady that she is “pretty,” Cady simply thanks her. She does not demur, as a nice girl should, so Regina pounces, asking, “So you agree? You think you’re really pretty?” In a similar vein, when Regina expresses that she wants to lose three pounds, she stares expectantly at her friends until they reply, “Oh my God, you’re so skinny.” Reviving Ophelia constructs girls as developing poor self-esteem due to patriarchal socialization. Conversely, *Mean Girls* suggests that girls impersonate low self-esteem because they understand it is expected of a nice girl. This point is driven home in the film when Ms. Norbury, the girl’s math teacher (played by Tina Fey), explains, “It’s not a self esteem problem. I think they’re all pretty pleased with themselves.” Regina is shown as more powerful than anyone she encounters, yet she actively presents as vulnerable and embraces claims of victimage. For example, in her ongoing bid to refuse culpability, Regina denies the existence of any cliques and labels herself a “victim.” This postfeminist construction of girls’ popularity can be seen as a

backlash to Second-Wave feminism, which is often accused of creating a “cult of victimization.”

The idea presented in the film that mean girls embrace claims of victimage, despite being in control of other girls, boys, and adults, is framed as specific to girls in the U.S. – girls whose lives have been touched (negatively) by feminism. Griffin (2004) notes a tendency in academic literature to locate “modern” girlhood in the First World, which “is seen as civilized and progressive for women, while ‘traditional’ girlhood is associated with Third World contexts, with girls and young women of color, and is seen as anti-feminist and restrictive for women” (p. 31). In *Mean Girls*, because Cady was educated and socialized in Africa, she knows nothing about cliques, popularity, or bullying. Through a series of images of Cady’s life in Africa, the country is represented as a primitive Other. In still shots that detail Cady’s experiences with Africa, we see Cady with zebras, tigers, snakes, and native “tribal” Africans. As a result, the continent is constructed as a more innocent place, lacking industrialization and mean girls.

Mean Girls uses images of adolescents morphing into animals (for example, kids at the mall transform into animals at the watering hole) to dichotomously represent what Cady learned about life in Africa and what, upon returning to the U.S., she learns from Girl World. When Regina flaunts her romantic relationship with Cady’s crush, Aaron Samuels, Cady imagines herself as an attacking animal, leaping over the table at Regina and pulling her to the floor. The animal imagery functions to align female power with predatory nature (Bell, 1995). Cady does not follow through on physical violence. Instead, after a brief time in the U.S., Cady realizes that to attack Regina as an animal would be not appropriate because it would be obvious and unconcealed; instead, as she

says, “in *Girl World*, everything had to be sneaky.” After only a few months in a U.S. high school, Cady has learned the import of indirect aggression. Thus, covert forms of aggression are seen as natural to girls socialized in the U.S., contributing to the film’s postfeminist narrative since Africa is framed as untouched by feminism and, as a result, as lacking any problems with girls’ aggression and popularity.

Odd Girl Out (2005) contextualizes cliques and popularity as specifically a White problem. In the movie, junior high Queen Bee Stacey and fellow clique member Nikki torment their one-time friend Vanessa (Nessa) until she attempts to commit suicide. Nikki, who appears to harass Nessa in order to gain Stacey’s favor, is seen as cruel without cause. Her narrative is wholly focused on the ways she bullies Nessa (she writes and performs a rap about Nessa, calls her a “whore” and “slut,” and spreads rumors about her), so she is entirely unsympathetic. Although the narrative provides much more space for Stacey’s back-story, she, too, is framed as indifferent and cruel. The image of Stacey’s family is that of the “perfect” nuclear family. She lives with her (White) parents, brother, and dog in a spacious home. Stacey’s mother hired Nessa’s mother to decorate the home, and the project has a \$1.2 million budget, indicating the family’s upper-class status. Like Regina in *Mean Girls*, Stacey is constructed as having the advantages and privileges of White upper-classness.

Unlike in *Jawbreaker*, where Courtney’s aggression is overt and obvious, the Mean Girl discourse presents girls’ bullying as a hidden feature of girl culture. In *Odd Girl Out*, Queen Bee Stacey rarely plays an overt role in Nessa’s torment. She is typically nice to Nessa - denying there is anything wrong when Nessa asks – but she does nothing to stop the other girls; indeed, she encourages them by laughing when they tease Nessa. It

is the hidden nature of White, upper-class girls' aggression that frames the mean girl's duplicity as difficult to detect and, therefore, dangerous. The idea that mean girls are part of the privileged norm is key to this discourse. Whereas *Reviving Ophelia* constructed girls who were part of the privileged norm as victims, *Mean Girl* presents these girls as deviant. Their deviance is troubling because they are part of the privileged norm but do not meet dominant gendered, raced, and classed expectations.

Odd Girl Out makes clear the theme about Whiteness that exists in other mean girl films that have only White characters. Nessa's construction as Latina is noteworthy, as, at one time, she was part of the elite clique, so she experimented with meanness. Generally, mean girls of color are absent from media texts; however, I will explore other "recovering" mean girls of color in the reality television show *Queen Bees* in the next chapter. Like *Queen Bees*, *Odd Girl Out* acknowledges the potential for girls of color to dabble in meanness, but it also reaffirms that the "true" mean girls are White. Although Nessa originally laughs along with Stacey and Nikki when they make fun of and exclude other girls, eventually the girls turn on Nessa.

At the beginning of the film, before Nessa is ostracized, we gain insight into the power dynamics of the clique when Nikki, Stacey, and Nessa go to the mall. Stacey encourages Nessa to try on a pair of jeans, but Nessa balks at the \$125 price tag. Stacey then uses her father's credit card to buy \$600 worth of clothing, including the jeans, which she gifts to Nessa. This gesture is quickly made to seem less than selfless when, poised at the exit of the store, Stacey pulls a shirt from the back of her jeans' waistband and claims that she forgot to pay for it. Since the line at the register is so long, she says she "hates to get back in it." Nikki manipulates Nessa into shoplifting the shirt, saying,

“I’d stick it in my purse for you Stacey, but mine’s just as small as yours.” In this scene, the White mean girls pressure Nessa to steal. This borrowing of gang culture (the incident plays out as an initiation) functions to vilify the White junior high mean girls. Later in the film, Nikki uses this story as part of her campaign against Nessa, telling her classmates that Nessa once shoplifted because her “mom is poor. I mean if she hadn’t been Stacey’s charity case for the last year, all of her clothes would be from bins.” Nessa’s mother, who is Latina, is a single parent trying to make ends meet with her job as an interior decorator. Indeed, it is in this capacity that she works for Stacey’s mother. The mothers’ storyline mimics that of the daughters. Whereas the two mothers are originally friends (although with a clear power differential between employer and employee), once Stacey begins to bully Nessa, Stacey’s mother refuses to take seriously Nessa’s mother’s concerns. By the film’s end, Nessa and Stacey are no longer friends and neither are the mothers, securing the postfeminist idea that girls *and* women are incapable of building and maintaining bonds of sisterhood.

In the movie’s final scene, Nessa, who has returned for junior high graduation following her suicide attempt, confronts Stacey after Nikki reads aloud what Nessa believed to be a private instant message conversation with Stacey. Nessa, in a crowded hallway, yells to Stacey:

You are so fake. You’re annoying, you’re rude, and you lie all the time. You’re just like Nikki but worse. At least people know what they’re getting with Nikki. You make people feel so bad about themselves. You’re so pathetic. You know what? I feel really sorry for you.

Following Nessa's speech, the hallway erupts in applause, while Stacey walks away and shrugs her mother's hand from her shoulder. Stacey's petulant reaction to Nessa's speech and her mother's attempt to comfort her is countered with the shot of Nessa's mother smiling with tears in her eyes, as she mouths, "I'm so proud of you." Although Nessa tried to be a part of the elite White upper-class clique, she now realizes that instead of wanting to be like them, she feels sorry for them. White upper-class girlhood is not privileged but, rather, shown to be deviant. The Mean Girl discourse overwhelmingly places bullying on the shoulders of upper-class White girls, so it is common to mark these girl as deviant. This is a trend I explore further in an analysis of the television program *Gossip Girl* in Chapter 3 as well as the media coverage of the Phoebe Prince suicide in Chapter 4.

The only Black girl in *Odd Girl Out*, Emily, helps guide Nessa away from the lure of popularity. She refers to the mean girls as "White tornadoes" further securing the image of girl bullies as White. Emily is not impressed with Stacey and Nikki's popularity; on more than one occasion, she tells Nessa that popular girls "don't have anything that I want." The first time the viewer sees Emily, she is watching Nessa, Stacey, and Nikki's soccer practice. Later, in the cafeteria, Nikki calls Emily a "hobbit," but Emily ignores Nikki and instead looks directly at Nessa and says, "My club soccer team is recruiting new players. Truth? I think you'd be great." Emily's habit of beginning her sentences with "Truth?" is reflective of popular and academic discourses that maintain Black girls use truth-telling when communicating (hooks, 1996; Simmons, 2002; Ward, 1996; Wiseman, 2002). As I will discuss later, images of Black girls who directly communicate are also reproduced in *Gossip Girl* and the reality television

program *Queen Bees*. The Black girl who communicates in a forthright manner is seen as in direct contrast to White mean girls who are constructed as dealing with conflict in a covert and indirect manner.

Emily is also the movie's moral center. Each time Nessa faces bullying, the camera pans to Emily's disapproving face. For example, when the girls are mean to Nessa in the cafeteria, Nessa throws her food tray and runs away, and the camera zooms in on Emily shaking her head in disapproval. In science class, Emily helps Nessa answer a question and then smiles at her. In the mean time, Stacey sends a text to Nikki: "Nessa thinks she's all that...but everyone really hates her." Nikki then forwards the text to Nessa. Here, Emily is supportive, friendly, and helpful, whereas the White mean girls are cruel without cause. When Nessa overdoses on prescription pills and is in the hospital, at school a teacher leads the class in a discussion about their feelings. Much like Regina in *Mean Girls*, Stacey denies any culpability and instead maintains that she and Nessa have been life-long friends, so she wishes she "could have done something to help her." Emily, who always speaks her mind, exclaims, "That is such crap!" She goes on to blame Stacey for driving Nessa to attempt suicide by humiliating her. When Stacey claims to be "incredibly close" to Nessa, Emily replies, "yeah, close enough to kill her." In this scene, Emily reframes Stacey's bullying as a tool for murder. This is a tactic used by the media in coverage of the Phoebe Prince bullycide, where girl bullies are said to have driven Phoebe to commit suicide. In both cases, as well as with Simmons's book, girls' relationships are constructed as weapons.

The Mean Girl discourse both confirms and shifts ideas about race and girlhood. In some cases, girls of color, like Emily, are constructed as nice (this is also true of girls

of color in *Queen Bees* and *Gossip Girl*). At the same time, while mean girls of color are acknowledged, Whiteness is confirmed as an authentic aspect of the mean girl construct when generally the White mean girl is seen as incapable of transformation. For example, in *Mean Girls*, a slow motion image of three White girls who Cady's friend Damien describes as "new Plastics" indicates that White mean girls are a dime a dozen. At the same time, by the end of *Mean Girls*, Regina is still aggressive, but she has learned to channel her aggression into lacrosse (Cady says this is perfect "because the girl jocks aren't afraid of her"). Through irony, the film suggests that girls can and should access aggression, but they must use it in ways that are more productive. In all the films analyzed in this chapter, girls' cliques are constructed as primarily White and upper-class; the Mean Girl discourse treats cliques as increasingly dangerous and ubiquitous.

The amplified nature of danger in representations of girls' cliques is postfeminist. Projansky (2007) notes that "girl discourse contributes to and sustains postfeminism" (p. 44). Like the postfeminist Girl Power discourse, which suggests girls have replaced patriarchy as girls' worst enemy, discourses about mean girls focus on the damage girls are doing to one another. This process works to sustain postfeminist ideas about women and competition while simultaneously contributing a more vicious and insidious enemy in the image of the mean girl. In *Odd Girl Out*, as the bullying campaign against Nessa increases, the viewer sees images of Nessa turning her anger inward such as when she overdoses on sleeping pills. Reviving Ophelia explained that the tendency of girls to turn their emotions inward was a result of being socialized in a sexist culture that does not allow girls to access emotions, including anger. *Odd Girl Out* reframes this message such that, as opposed to patriarchy, other girls are shown as responsible for girls' low self-

esteem. That is, the mean girls who bully Nessa are framed as blameworthy for her suicide attempt. This is also the case with the media treatment of the Phoebe Prince bullycide. Although Phoebe was bullied by both boys and girls, in the media coverage, the blame is placed on what the media labels “real life mean girls.” Moreover, because the postfeminist Mean Girl discourse blames feminism for creating girls who are less feminine and more aggressive, patriarchal socialization is relieved of any suggestion of guilt in the creation of girls who bully. As a result, the victim/aggressor dichotomy shifts such that patriarchy is no longer girls’ enemy.

In illustrating that girls are one another’s enemies, the Mean Girl discourse works to demonize cliques and elitism in *Girl World*. *Odd Girl Out* offers a message about individualizing friendship as opposed to accessing networks of friends through popularity. Nessa’s mother admits to pushing Nessa’s friendship with Stacey because she thought that, if Nessa was popular, she would be less likely to face the sort of bullying that Nessa’s mother did as a girl. As a result, popularity is framed as an inappropriate solution to bullying. Instead, both Nessa and her mother now realize Emily can teach Nessa how to stand up for herself and not be afraid of conflict or isolation. Moreover, Emily’s ongoing support of Nessa’s success in school (for example, she brings her missed schoolwork to the hospital and encourages her to be “smart”) is in contrast to Stacey who is angered when Nessa gets a better grade than she does in school. Unlike Stacey who tries to keep Nessa in her place below her in the social hierarchy, Emily encourages Nessa to work hard in order to get ahead. In the hospital, she explains to Nessa:

You're strong, you're pretty, and you're smart, and they hate you for it. It makes them jealous, but if you cut off your hair, dumb down your schoolwork, and ruin your body, all you've done is become weak, ugly, and stupid, and that's not who you are.

In this way, the White mean girls are seen as responsible for making other girls desire to appear "weak, ugly, and stupid," and girls' failures are defined as resulting from their relationships with other girls, specifically their desire to impress girls who operate in elite social structures.

Defining girls' success in terms of personal relations between girls works to disregard restrictions on girls' choices and structural disadvantage. The neoliberal rhetoric of individualism requires that girls create life trajectories that allow them to take personal responsibility for their success and happiness (Harris, 2004). The girls of color in *Odd Girl Out* are represented as taking responsibility for their own achievements and learning to not fall victim to the White upper-class mean girls. Indeed, by the film's end, Nessa tells Stacey "she has nothing" that Nessa wants. Implicit in the rhetoric of individualism are the postfeminist, neoliberal ideals of egalitarianism and meritocracy. That is, we must believe that equality has been gained and that issues like sexism, racism, and classism no longer play a part in contemporary society if we are to believe that girls need only make the right choices in order to succeed. A focus on the individual works to ignore the value and power that can be found in supportive female networks.

In *Mean Girls*, when Cady is elected Prom Queen, she endorses social equality in her acceptance speech. Using her tiara as an analogy for popularity, specifically as a metaphor for The Plastics, Cady asks, "Why is everyone stressing over this thing? It's

only plastic. We can all share it.” She then breaks the tiara and passes out pieces to a diverse group of her peers (fellow nominees, a gay boy, a girl in a wheelchair, etc.). The narrative constructs popularity as a matter of hero worship, which relies on hierarchy. Cady refutes the idea that any one girl belongs at the top of that hierarchy, instead suggesting an impartial, just, and nondiscriminatory Girl World. This notion additionally flattens out difference, housing it in post-civil rights discourse. The post-civil rights discourse suggests that the U.S. is now a context in which institutional discrimination (on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, ability, and so on) has been replaced by equal opportunity (Gallagher, 2003). The Girl World that Cady advocates similarly ignores difference and erases discrimination, and, instead, oppression and discrimination are now constructed as a (wrong) personal choice.

Whereas *Girl Power* was originally a female response to the elitence of patriarchal culture, *Mean Girl* suggests Girl World reproduced elite hierarchy in troubling and dangerous ways. The Mean Girl discourse situates meanness as the only way for girls to access elitence. The context in which mean girls act as desiring subjects is troubled in that what they appear to want most is popularity not heterosexual romance. Removed from these filmic images are representations of nice popular girls, which works to demonize female elitence, and, instead, girls are encouraged to be “nice,” retreating to dominant notions of femininity as passive and demure.

Boys: From Master Manipulators to Innocent Bystanders

Contemporary constructions of mean girls rely on images of popular girls using covert forms of aggression (exclusion, duplicity, and starting rumors) to victimize other girls, while boys are absent from the bullying, typically unaware that it is occurring. This

works to situate relational aggression as an authentically feminine form of aggression and changes the victim/aggressor dichotomy from boys victimizing girls to girls creating female victims. Prior to the Mean Girl discourse, there are some filmic instances of popular boys using indirect aggression to victimize girls. For example, in *She's All That*, released in 1999 (three years before the publication of Simmons and Wiseman's book), popular boy Zach bets his male friends that he can make "scary and inaccessible" Laney prom queen. Although the boys, who are all in on the bet, continue to gossip about and tease Laney (both key acts of social aggression), the girls, completely unaware that anything is amiss, welcome Laney to their inner circle. Similarly, in *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999), the boys manipulate the film's narrative as well as the girls' actions. The film is a remake of Shakespeare's play *The Taming of the Shrew*, with Bianca unable to date until her "shrew" of a sister Kat does. The representation of Joey, the most popular boy in school, is similar to that of the contemporary mean girl. He is self-involved, conceited, manipulative, and participates in gossip and exclusion.¹¹ Thus, these films are in line with the Reviving Ophelia discourse such that patriarchy oppresses and silences girls, yet they are strikingly different from films imbricated in the Mean Girl discourse, as the boys (not the girls) use social aggression.

In today's representations of mean girls and clique-based behavior, while boys are the reason for the start of social aggression, they do not bully girls. In *Mean Girls* and *Odd Girl Out*, a boy is the unwitting cause of the rift between the mean girl and her victim. In *Odd Girl Out*, the mean girl's anger is exacerbated when she sees her victim

¹¹ There is no representation of a mean girl in the movie version of *10 Things I Hate About You*. Conversely, a decade later, in Summer 2009, ABC Family began airing the television program *10 Things I Hate About You*, which nearly erases male clique-based behavior in favor of mean girl Chastity's (no such character exists in the film) socially aggressive behavior.

talking to her crush, even though the interaction is constructed as entirely innocent. In *Mean Girls*, Cady develops a crush on Regina's boyfriend Aaron Samuels. In order to cause him to break up with Regina, Cady manipulates Aaron so that he finds Regina kissing another boy. Still, Aaron believes "there's good and bad in everybody. Regina's just more up front about it." In this sense, Aaron remains completely unaware that Regina and Cady are fighting over him (Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009). Further, his reaction to Cady's sleight against Regina frames Aaron as a disapproving onlooker. In these films, heterosexual boys do not use social aggression. *Mean Girls* represents Damien, who self-identifies as gay, as contributing covertly to Cady's battle with Regina. In fact, he is such a part of *Girl World*, he sneaks into the school's emergency "girls only" counseling session.¹² In various ways, Damien is framed as feminine, so his access to social aggression is seen as authentic, while the heterosexual boys do not use and, for the most part, cannot recognize covert forms of aggression.

Moreover, the Mean Girl discourse constructs girls' use of social aggression as more dangerous and maladaptive than boys' physical aggression, and, as a result, the ways girls access aggression, power, and popularity are made to seem aberrant. In *Odd Girl Out*, as the movie begins, Stacey, Nessa, and Nikki, witness a fight in the school's gymnasium, which ends with the two boys pulled off one another while one says, "We're cool," and the two boys slap hands. The boys' physical aggression is constituted as a positive outlet for aggression with few repercussions. Later, Stacey's father repeats this lesson: "Girls are brutal. They hurt each other and tear each other to bits over any little

¹² The rhetoric used by Fey during this scene, as both the writer of the words and the actor performing them, is borrowed largely from Wiseman's "Owning Up" program, which she sells to schools. According to its website, the Owning Up program uses group discussions, games, role-playing and other activities to teach girls the skills to stop degradation and treat others with dignity (Wiseman, 2009).

thing. Guys smack each other and go get a beer.” The inappropriateness of girls’ access to aggression is amplified over that of boys, while the reason girls experience anger is simultaneously minimized. “The lack of acknowledgement concerning broader issues - such as patriarchy, compulsory heterosexuality, and the complexity of female competitiveness in school” (Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009, p. 6) – instead represents girls as instinctively “brutal” without cause. Thus, girls’ problems are framed as emanating naturally and exclusively from Girl World.

Concluding Thoughts

This genealogy of girlhood traces images of popular girls from notions of girls as victims, as seen in the Reviving Ophelia discourse and films such as *The Breakfast Club*, to ideas about popular girls who have taken Girl Power too far as in *Jawbreaker*, and finally to contemporary considerations of popular mean girls as brutal in films such as *Mean Girls*. The Reviving Ophelia discourse depicts girls with good popularity as well liked by their peers because they are nice. Normative considerations of passive, White, heterosexist femininity are centered, and niceness is offered as a pathway to social success. In the Girl Power and Mean Girl discourses, we increasingly witness versions of bad popularity in film. Whether girls are violent, as in *Heathers* and *Jawbreaker*, or socially aggressive, as in *Mean Girls* and *Odd Girl Out*, they are ascribed with anger and a capacity for aggression that stands in stark contrast to U.S. culture’s socialization of nice girls.

Both *Heathers* and *Jawbreaker* offer representations of popular girls, infused with a Girl Power ethos, who commit murder. These films continue to present images of popular girls imbricated in the Reviving Ophelia discourse, so they uphold notions of

both aggressive popular girls and vulnerable popular girls. As a result, the films disrupt *and* redeploy cultural mythologies of vulnerable girls. While *Heathers* and *Jawbreaker* offer representations of good popularity (if only fleetingly), this sort of popularity has been erased from contemporary films featuring mean girls. Girls are not vulnerable when they are shown to have the tools to handle patriarchy powerfully, but they use those tools – including claims of victimage - in a problematic manner when they manipulate others for self-serving purposes. Thus, the femininity of the mean girl is at all times inappropriate, and, once again, girls are asked to simply “be nice” in order to flatten out difference and to create a non-hierarchical Girl World.

Chapter 2

“Where the Mean Girls Get Stung:”¹³ Looking at Racialized Mean Girl Narratives

I do have ugly friends, but I don't go out with them at night. (Brittany, *Queen Bees*)

I love intimidating other girls. It's fun, and it gives you power. (Gisbelle, *Queen Bees*)

I am the ruler. I tell my friends: “You need to change.” (Michelle, *Queen Bees*)

The reality television program *Queen Bees* premiered July 11, 2008 on The N and has since aired in syndication on MTV. On the show, seven girls,¹⁴ who believe they will be participating in a “Biggest Diva” contest, learn they have actually been nominated by friends and family who think they need to change their mean ways. The show's host, Yoanna House,¹⁵ tells the girls, “you're here to change” and goes on to warn them, “if you're faking it (being nice), we will know.” The seven girls were cast on the show for exhibiting the characteristics of mean girls (they are constructed as selfish and jealous), yet they will face eviction from the competition if they continue to act in this way. In this sense, the girls are criticized for behaving in the way they believed they would need to in order to win the show. Setting up the girls to fail is a common trope on the series. For

¹³ Featured tagline in The N's marketing campaign for *Queen Bees*.

¹⁴ The young women on *Queen Bees* range in age from 18-20. Although qualitative studies and popular books claim that girls' socially aggressive behavior is worst at the onset of adolescence (Galen & Underwood, 1997; Simmons, 2002; Underwood, 2003; Wiseman, 2002), previous RTV programming featuring children (*Kid Town*, *Jon and Kate Plus Eight*) was criticized for casting underage participants. According to Stanley (2008), the producers of *Queen Bees* may have been concerned about similar criticism, so they cast girls capable of providing consent. The majority of mean girls represented in popular media are of high school age (see: the television show *Gossip Girl*, the film *Mean Girls*, and Talbot's (2002) *New York Times Magazine* article “Girls Just Want to be Mean”).

¹⁵ House is the Season Two winner of the reality series *America's Next Top Model* on the CW.

example, in an episode entitled “Gossip,” the girls are sent to an interview with gossip blogger Perez Hilton. During the interviews, Perez pushes the girls to speak poorly about the other girls; he threatens to kick cast member Stassi out if she continues to provide “beauty pageant answers,” and he congratulates cast mate Michelle when she starts “just speaking and not thinking.” Then, when they return to the house, Dr. Michelle, a Developmental Psychologist featured on *The Tyra Banks Show*,¹⁶ admonishes Stassi and Michelle for saying unflattering things and ignoring the other girls’ feelings.

Queen Bees relies on a narrative structure that is framed by competition and deception among girls and, as a result, contributes to the postfeminist Mean Girl discourse. In each episode, the girls participate in “eye-opening” challenges (such as an inner-beauty pageant with blind judges and the performance of self-deprecating stand-up comedy routines). These challenges contribute to the show’s overall postfeminist construction, as the girls are encouraged to be nice to one another, yet their interactions are framed by competition. The girls learn they will be removed from the show if they do not change their mean ways, yet the narrative continuously puts them in situations where they must compete with one another, contributing to the postfeminist trend in popular culture to feature divisions among girls. Moreover, *Queen Bees* reproduces the rhetoric of postfeminism by insisting the girls reclaim an essentialized and idealized femininity. The program features images of girls who are mean, selfish, and out of control. In turn, through a series of challenges and therapy sessions, the girls are asked to transform into

¹⁶ *The Tyra Banks Show* (2005-2010) was a daytime talk show hosted by model Tyra Banks. The show focused predominantly on current issues facing women.

the ideal archetype of girlhood – the nice girl who is kind, selfless, and demure (Aapola, et al., 2005).

As is common in RTV programming, *Queen Bees* brings together cast mates of diverse racial backgrounds (Griffen-Foley, 2004; Orbe, 1998, 2008). Because girls of color are seen as “‘naturally’ more physical (and sexual) and less capable and/or willing to curb and manage their emotions” (Grindstaff & West, 2010, p. 145), they usually remain incompatible with dominant views of appropriate femininity. In contrast, on *Queen Bees*, the girls of color are represented as transforming from mean, selfish girls into nice, selfless women more easily than their White cast mates, so the show offers a striking shift in mediated racialized representations and contemporary understandings of race, femininity, and girlhood.

In featuring mean girls of color who are transformed into selfless women, *Queen Bees* complicates the mean and nice girl narratives. The program’s race neutral perspective does not ignore race; instead, it acknowledges race while disregarding racial hierarchy and reducing racial stereotypes to experiences that White girls and the girls of color can share (Gallagher, 2003). On the show, the Black girls, who are framed as using truth-telling strategies, provide the tools for transforming the covert communication style attributed to White mean girls, and the Latina girls, who are shown as embodying an excessive Latina sexuality, teach lessons about commitment to nuclear family structures. The girls of color are held up as different than their White cast mates. At the same time, their differences, which are attributed to racial stereotypes, signify them as better than the White girls who are framed as most clearly having the ability to be nice girls, but who refuse to make the right choice to become nice.

In examining the racialized mean girl narrative on *Queen Bees*, I bring together scholarship on girlhood, race, and RTV. This chapter contributes to the emerging genre of scholarly analyses of race and RTV (Bell-Jordan, 2008; Dubrofsky, 2006; Dubrofsky & Hardy, 2008; Hasinoff, 2008; Orbe, 1998). Though RTV “offers more images of women and racial minorities than most other mainstream television, there are still few studies that investigate gendered racial representations in the genre” (Hasinoff, 2008, p. 327). Moreover, this analysis fills a need for examinations of girls in RTV. As well, Mazzarella and Pecora (2007b) point to the need in Girls’ Studies for examinations of girls of color. Specifically, as opposed to framing race as a Black-and-White issue, I consider Latina girls, who Valdivia (2000) notes, “are woefully understudied” (p. 28).

Although *Queen Bees* appears to acknowledge mean girls of color, Whiteness is confirmed as a necessary component of the mean girl image, as the only *true* mean girls are shown to be the White girls whose attempts at transformation are spectacular failures. Although Whiteness is not privileged, it is centered, and the focus remains on the White girls who are seen as most at risk for becoming (and remaining) mean girls. Thus, *Queen Bees* centers the concern of the Mean Girl discourse as with saving and worrying about White girls.

Queen Bees

Queen Bees includes eight hour-long episodes. Traits commonly associated with the mean girl construct (for instance, power, self-centeredness, and gossip) frame the episodes. Following each episode’s eye-opening challenge, the girls engage in a group therapy session with Dr. Michelle to discuss what they learned in the challenges and how those lessons will aid their personality makeovers. The episodes conclude with a Progress

Report during which Dr. Michelle awards or takes away gold stars based on the girls' attitudes, performances in the challenges, and willingness to commit to the transformative process. Dr. Michelle puts the girl who has made the least progress and has the fewest stars "on notice." If by the end of the following episode that girl's transformation has continued to stall, she is evicted from the house. In the final episode, the girl with the most gold stars wins \$25,000.

RTV, Race, and the Call to the Real

The basic premise of RTV – that it presents “real” people doing “real” things – does not mean that what happens on RTV is “reality” (Andrejevic & Colby, 2006; Dubrofsky, 2007). Much like a scripted television show, *Queen Bees* is framed by editing choices made by television workers that construct the (fictional) story (Dubrofsky, 2006; Kraszewski, 2004). The central format of RTV – the call to the real – frames in very specific ways the story about race and gender. Grindstaff (2002) argues that reality media formats (such as talk shows, the news, and RTV) show the experiences of real people, but do so in a way that is not haphazard or random. Instead, the continuity of real events is mediated in such a way so as to construct myths about the real. In this way, the genre of RTV has the power to shape the reality of race and gender in the U.S. (Bell-Jordan, 2008). Mediated images of race and gender on RTV represent a powerful source of influence because they “are presented not as mediated images, but as real-life images captured on camera” (Orbe, 1998, p. 42).

Since this work is about raced images on *Queen Bees*, I offer the following guide to help the reader identify the contestants. I provide each girl's name and her racialization on the series. Because race cannot be read off the body (Hopson, 2008), I consider how

race is constituted within the parameters of the program. I take into account the ways that selection of participants, narrative structure, and editing mediate race and reality (Kraszewski, 2004). I additionally rely on visible racial markers, as well as the girls' commentary regarding their racial backgrounds. The winner of *Queen Bees*, Gisbelle Castillo, is raced Latina. Camille Lopez, runner-up, is also constructed as Latina. Cast mates Shavon Jovi and Kiana Jenkins (third and fourth place respectively) are racialized as Black. Contestant Michelle Madonna is the third character who is raced Latina. Last place finisher Stassi Schroeder is constructed as White. Cast member Brittany Keiffer, also represented as White, is the only girl eliminated from the show.

Learning to Communicate Like Nice Girls

The representations of the Black girls on *Queen Bees*, Kiana and Shavon, rely on two essentialized notions of Black femininity: direct communication and excessive aggression with a potential for violence. These stereotyped characteristics concurrently elevate the Black girls to the White girls (the Black girls finish the show in a higher standing than the White girls) while also foreclosing them from the nice girl construction. Kiana and Shavon are rewarded for their raced communication styles; however, they are punished when their aggression shows the potential for violence, so the association of violence and anger with mediated representations of African Americans is upheld (Bell-Jordan, 2008). In every episode, the viewer sees Kiana and Shavon engage in conflict with their housemates. The show's focus on the discord the girls create in the house means we gain little insight into their backgrounds or future goals. Instead, their aggression is naturalized as emanating from their Black femininity. Though *all* of the *Queen Bees*' cast members engage in social aggression, the viewer hears Dr. Michelle

refer only to Kiana and Shavon as “aggressive.” Dr. Michelle’s label contributes to the overall structure of the show’s race-based definitions of aggression. The White girls are framed as using social aggression (they gossip, spread rumors, and exclude other girls from their social circles). As I will discuss, the Latina girls are shown as relationally aggressive predominantly toward their boyfriends. The parameters of the show are such that Kiana and Shavon can never embody the nice girl image because they are framed as authentically violently aggressive. For example, only the Black girls lose stars from Dr. Michelle for aggression that is constituted as excessive (being loud and not listening) and for displaying the potential for violence. When Kiana exclaims that she wants to slap Latina cast member Michelle, she is put “on notice.” Similarly, Shavon loses stars for “lashing out” at White cast mate Stassi during an argument in which Stassi calls Shavon “scary” and “evil” (“Self Centeredness”). In a similar context, Stassi comforts Michelle, who claims to be afraid that Kiana will “yell” at her, and assures her that she has every right to be frightened because Kiana is “so mean” (“Jealousy”). The focus on Stassi’s characterizations of Kiana as “mean” and Shavon as “evil” contributes to the show’s categorization of the Black girls as angry and violent, showing their aggression to be more dangerous than that of the other girls.

Kiana and Shavon’s authentic aggression marks them as incapable of embodying the image of the nice girl; instead, they participate in the series in a role that allows them to teach lessons to the girls who the show frames as having the potential to be nice girls. The Black girls provide the tools for the White and Latina girls to learn how to become more straightforward in resolving interpersonal conflict. Outspokenness is a characteristic that stands in stark contrast to dominant notions of White femininity but that is often

associated with Black women as a social group (Houston, 2000). This process works to reduce the assertiveness of Black women to the nonpolitical objectification of the Black woman as a natural harpy (Andrejevic & Colby, 2006). However, *Queen Bees* codes positively this “undesirable” Black female way of speaking and problematizes the covert communication style associated with White mean girls’ social aggression (for example, gossip and backbiting). Although showing White girls behaving badly is not new to RTV, the coupling of this bad behavior with “typical” Black ways of behaving and showing the latter as better and as a solution to White girls’ meanness is remarkable. At the same time, *Queen Bees* selectively exploits the stereotype of assertive Black femininity such that the Black girls are never framed as having the potential to be authentically nice or mean girls. They are authentically the wrong kind of girl, so unlike the Latina and White girls who can choose to transform, the Black girls do not figure into either the mean girl or nice girl narrative on *Queen Bees*.

In Episode 6, “Power,” the girls learn they must vote a cast mate out of the house. One at a time, the girls enter into a room where Yoanna is waiting for them, seated at a table with seven cards, each with a cast member’s name. The girls receive no criteria on which to base their decision. Yoanna simply asks them to vote for which girl “will leave the house.” In the episodes leading to the vote, Black cast member Shavon was shown as straightforward in her approach to interpersonal conflict. For example, from the moment White cast mate Brittany enters the screen, the viewer hears her brag about being a socialite who knows Paris Hilton and Brody Jenner. The other girls talk about how “superficial” and “fake” Brittany is to one another or are seen speaking poorly about Brittany in interviews with the show’s producers; in contrast, we see Shavon confront

Brittany directly, saying, “If you want to name drop, continue to name drop, but I’m going to keep saying something about it because it’s annoying” (“Appearance”). As opposed to using the indirect communication strategies associated with White mean girls, Shavon directly confronts anyone with whom she experiences tension. In this way, her construction is much like what Collins (2004) maintains is one of the controlling images of Black femininity – the bitch. Shavon is confrontational and aggressive, so she is framed as authentically Black. It is not surprising, then, when the girls vote to evict Shavon.

After Yoanna announces the group’s selection, the White and Latina girls stay in the common room, ignoring Shavon. In contrast, Kiana helps Shavon pack while they discuss the challenge’s lesson, as well as their feelings about Shavon’s eviction. The other girls are shown writing Shavon, what are in their words, “really long” letters she can read later (a decidedly indirect technique for conflict management). The juxtaposition of these scenes illustrates the Black girls’ ability to speak their minds and value their emotions, and the failure of the White and Latina girls to handle discord in a straightforward manner. Although the show works to hold up the stereotypical Black feminine way of speaking as exemplary, there are times when Shavon and Kiana’s direct communication styles are framed as individual inadequacies. For example, during a Progress Report, Dr. Michelle takes a star away from Kiana because, although she confronted her issues with the other girls instead of talking behind their backs, she did so in a way that was negative and exhibited a “bad attitude” (“Self Centeredness”). Following the Progress Report (at the opening of the next episode), Latina cast member Gisbelle tells Kiana that she “can keep (her) voice mellow instead of making someone

feel like shit... (her) tone of voice is just really wrong.” (“Jealousy”). Scholars point to the removal of Black women from predominantly White RTV shows when they become aggressive and confrontational (Andrejevic & Colby, 2006; Dubrofsky & Hardy, 2008). Although *Queen Bees* is not a predominantly White show (only two of the cast members and the show’s host are White), Kiana and Shavon’s authentic Blackness (aggressive, outspoken, etc.) necessarily implicates them as incapable of being nice girls. At the same time, the Black girls are elevated to the White girls because, although they are foreclosed from the nice girl construct, Kiana and Shavon work hard to try to transform what the show marks as their inadequacies.

When Shavon leaves the house, Dr. Michelle explains to her, “This was just another exercise. You have not been eliminated.” Upon Shavon’s return, Dr. Michelle advises the rest of the girls, “Whenever you use power, you have to be prepared to deal with the consequences.” In this case, the consequences of what the show frames as an inappropriate use of power. The girls are given “power” when they are tasked with choosing whom to evict, but they misuse that power when they vote out Shavon instead of White cast member Brittany (Dr. Michelle evicts Brittany from the show in the following episode). Unlike Shavon, who is framed as authentic when she directly communicates, the show’s narrative has shown Brittany to be inauthentic in her desire to change and, thus, as uninterested in transforming into what is constructed as the authentic version of White femininity – the nice girl. She is prone to moments of what are produced as fake crying: she seems to force tears, often rubbing dry eyes, yet the camera lingers long after she has finished speaking. In contrast, when Latina cast member Camille sobs, tears running down her cheeks, the camera cuts away as soon as she has

finished speaking. With Brittany, the longer the camera stays on her dry face, the more time the viewer has to realize that Brittany is unable to form a “real” tear. In this way, sadness is framed as genuine through the physical act of crying; in turn, Brittany’s lack of tears confirms that Brittany is “faking” her emotions (what the girls were specifically warned against doing in the program’s premiere).

Moreover, the show presents becoming famous as Brittany’s primary ambition. She is shown talking about wanting to sign with a modeling agency or be an entertainment reporter. The show’s focus on Brittany’s socialite persona creates an image of Brittany as interested in being on the show in order to become famous and not to change her mean ways. Brittany’s construction is in line with the mean girl I outlined in Chapter 1 who is solely interested in eliteness. Brittany takes pleasure in developing relationships with popular socialites and celebrities and hopes to use those relationships, as well as her time on the show, to increase her own celebrity. Because Brittany shows no interest in transforming and as inappropriately interested in eliteness, the girls are constructed as misusing power when they make the wrong choice to evict Shavon.

Queen Bees uses Shavon to dole out the consequences for the girls’ misuse of power. Although Shavon is implicit in these narratives, the story is situated as about the troubled White girls, particularly when, upon Shavon’s return, the viewer sees her immediately tell the girls who wrote her letters, “You took the easy way out.” Shavon scolds the girls for using the covert communication style associated with contemporary representations of mean girls. Furthermore, by speaking frankly with the girls who wrote her letters, Shavon not only teaches them the correct way to manage interpersonal difficulties, she also models the behaviors for them. We do not see Shavon express anger

that the girls voted her out; instead, her concern appears to lie with the fact that they refused to directly communicate their feelings.

The use of people of color to teach lessons to White individuals is a common trope on RTV (Dubrofsky, 2006; Kraszewski, 2004), a process that centers White people as the focus of the narrative. This pattern continues on *Queen Bees* but evolves when Kiana and Shavon aim their lessons toward Michelle who is presented as Latina, but who is also marked as privileged through her class construction. Michelle is characterized as shopping and spending excessively. She laughs at other girls for running out of money when shopping, and her mother threatens to take away the credit cards she uses to spend thousands of dollars each month. She is described by the other girls as having “everything handed to her” and as “a silver spoon kid” (“Gossip”). Michelle’s access to money and material possessions constitute her as upper-class, or at least nouveaux riche, and, as a result, she is marked as privileged. Although there are a number of instances of the Black girls teaching the privileged girls (White and/or upper-class) lessons about personal responsibility, I rely primarily on the relationship between Kiana and Michelle in my discussion because Kiana’s determination to put an end to Michelle’s victim behavior is a narrative arc that spans six episodes, thus taking up a significant amount of space on the series. Kiana frames Michelle’s excessive emotional behavior as illegitimate. Academic discourse conceives of the socialization of Black girls as including strong values placed on inner strength, so they may be more apt to refuse to “accept an ideology of victim-blame” (Ward, 1996, p. 59). These ideas are reflected in *Queen Bees*, as Shavon and Kiana are shown continually accepting responsibility for their actions and as being exasperated with the girls who the show marks as privileged as reveling in

victim-like behavior. The fact that mean girls embrace claims of victimage is a trend I explored previously. In both *Mean Girls* and *Odd Girl Out*, White upper-class mean girls deny culpability and, in turn, label themselves victims. Similarly, on *Queen Bees*, Michelle is shown hugging the other girls for comfort, sobbing in bed surrounded by stuffed animals, and talking like a baby. She insists that it is “her personality” to be “very sensitive,” and she accuses Kiana of being “mean” (“Jealousy”). Michelle’s claims of vulnerability are typically shown in tandem with Kiana’s expressions of disgust at Michelle’s victim-like behavior. Kiana explains, “Michelle has her whining thing” and tries “to play the victim role.” When Michelle asks Shavon if Michelle is, in fact, acting like a victim, Shavon concurs with Kiana that she is. The viewer only sees Michelle ask Shavon this question, so the White and other Latina girls appear to be removed from this narrative. In group, Dr. Michelle reinforces these messages when she explains that Michelle should not allow people to “walk all over” her; instead, when faced with conflict, she “can choose to engage, enact, and respond.” Dr. Michelle confirms Kiana and Shavon’s message about personal responsibility and praises the communicative behaviors they have thus far shown – forthrightness, truth-telling, and accepting responsibility.

Kiana and Shavon are also the only two cast members whom Dr. Michelle refers to as “prideful,” so although she praises the Black girls for their ability to openly communicate, they are expected to remain humble and modest. After the first episode, Shavon is in first place with two stars. At the next Progress Report, Dr. Michelle takes a star away from Shavon explaining, “You got a star at the last Progress Report and it went straight to your head. You became the resident expert on everyone and everything”

(“Teasing”). Dr. Michelle concludes by telling her, “This is *not* the Shavon show,” indicating the Black girls are not the focus of *Queen Bees*. Thus, Dr. Michelle illustrates that Shavon can and should emulate the communication style the program wishes for the girls to enact as long as she does not mistake her ability to communicate well as a characteristic that elevates her above the other girls. The show indicates Kiana and Shavon have “improved,” as they learned to use direct communication, which they are framed as “naturally” embodying, for good (i.e., to help transform the communication styles of the Black and Latina girls) as opposed to bad (such as being stubborn, impatient, aggressive, and prideful). They are authentic in their communication styles, but they have improved this communication style in that they no longer are loud or potentially violent. The Black girls are used to teach lessons to the other girls about how to handle interpersonal conflict in a straightforward manner; however, mediated notions of Black girls as potentially violent, prideful, and excessively aggressive are upheld and, as a result, the Black girls are excluded from the nice girl construct.

The Top Two Selfless Women

While the Black girls on *Queen Bees* provide the tools for the other girls to transform their communication styles, the Latina girls teach lessons about commitment to nuclear family values. One of the most enduring tropes in signifying Latinas in popular culture is tropicalism, which functions to homogenize all that identifies as Latin (Aparicio & Chavez-Silverman, 1997; Guzman & Valdivia, 2004). The process of tropicalization tropes Latinidad as exotic and Other (Aparicio & Chavez-Silverman, 1997). Some of the signifiers of tropicalism include Latina characters with brown or olive-skin, dark hair and eyes, and voluptuous bodies, as well as attributes like wearing

bright colors and dancing to rhythmic music (Baez, 2007; Guzman & Valdivia, 2004). Although *Queen Bees* stereotypically races Gisbelle and Camille through tropicalism, their constructions are noteworthy because the girls finish the show in first and second place respectively, so they are depicted as Latina through stereotyped signifiers, but they are not foreclosed as an Other; instead, they are shown to access dominant (White) modes of femininity. While the lessons the Latina girls teach about heteronormativity could function to shore up Whiteness (i.e., teach how to be “good” white girls), instead, these stereotypical Latina qualities are incorporated into the nice White girl tropes.

Camille is the only girl of color not shown self-identifying as a specific race, but the series identifies her as Latina. Additionally, neither of the White girls self-identify. TV shows generally represent Whiteness as neutral, invisible, and raceless (Dyer, 1997, 2000; Nakayama & Krizek, 1999). “The privilege of Whiteness is that it couches itself in an absence of explicit signifiers” (Dubrofsky & Hardy, 2008, p. 378). Conversely, on *Queen Bees*, the narrative works to portray the White cast members as White. For instance, the first episode of *Queen Bees* introduces the girls through the animation of a story from their nomination videos. The cartoon portrayals of White cast members Brittany and Stassi situate the girls as White. Stassi, whose hair is light brown and whose ongoing “obsession” with self-tanner becomes an aspect of her characterization on the show, is drawn with blonde hair and fair skin. Similarly, Brittany’s illustration has White skin and sparkling yellow hair. Conversely, in Camille’s caricature, very visible extensive brown roots frame her blonde hair and her fair skin is shaded brown. While Brittany is represented as a “natural” blonde, and Stassi is seen as “naturally” White (despite her ongoing attempts to darken her skin with self-tanner), Camille’s animation functions to

call attention to the ways in which she does not embody the characteristics of Whiteness - fair skin and blonde hair. Moreover, she is stereotypically characterized as the hot, fiery Latina when, in her cartoon image, she literally blows her top, smoke comes out of her nose and ears, and a teakettle whistle blows.

Gisbelle's construction is similarly stereotypical. "Sexuality plays a central role in the tropicalization of Latinas" (Guzman & Valdivia, 2004, p. 211). Representations of Latinas that focus on breasts, hips, and buttocks are used to signify sexual desire and fertility (Guzman & Valdivia, 2004). While the rest of the girls are presented in a single full-length camera shot or only from the waist up, the first time Gisbelle enters on screen, the camera pans from her feet, moves slowly up her legs, lingers on her cleavage, and finally rises to her face. Gisbelle's physical appearance further codes as excessively sexual through brightly colored, revealing clothing, big hair, and heavy makeup; this is particularly noteworthy as none of the other girls are shown in this kind of attire. When the girls perform in a Talent Show, the producers give Gisbelle a clingy, midriff bearing costume to perform Flamenco, a dance form with Spanish, Latin American, and Cuban influences. The other girls receive props that are far less provocative. For example, Black cast mate Shavon is given a beret to read poetry, and White cast member Stassi juggles in a jester's cap. Through Gisbelle's and Camille's stereotypical representations, cultural assumptions about Latina femininity are upheld.

The construction of the other Latina cast member, Michelle, is remarkably different. Indeed, the characteristics used to define Gisbelle and Camille's Latiness are absent from Michelle's upper-class Latina representation. The viewer sees Michelle self-define as "Spanish," but her narrative focus is on tempering the privilege associated with

her class status. For example, when tasked with cleaning the kitchen, Michelle explains, “I think God really wanted me to get that card because I’ve always had a maid cleaning up after me.” In contrast, Gisbelle and Camille appear to have lives more clearly touched by difficulty. Throughout the course of the show, Gisbelle explains that she was teased mercilessly during her childhood for time spent in a wheelchair,¹⁷ her inexpensive and unhip wardrobe, and her very hairy and skinny arms. Camille claims that Skid Row reminds her of the neighborhood where she grew up. It is important to note the differences in the girls’ class and race constructions because, although Gisbelle and Camille finish the competition in first and second place respectively, Michelle comes in second to last. As a result, Gisbelle and Camille can be seen as embodying a stereotyped Latina agency that is rewarded. They are completely transformed when they refigure their heterosexuality from “using” to “giving” and their sexuality from “excessive” to “domestic.”

The show’s narrative dedicates significant space to representing the damage Gisbelle and Camille have done to their heteronormative relationships. The celebration of the Latina cast members heteronormative sexuality exemplifies a “post-” assumption of biologically based signifiers of femininity and race. That is, much like the praise the show heaps on the Black girls’ stereotyped communication, the Latina girls receive reward for exemplifying stereotypical notions about Latina sexuality and for showing the ability and desire to transform these things. Specifically, the girls are celebrated for transforming from colorful, sexually active spitfires to dutiful, domestic, giving young women (Baez, 2007; Beltran, 2002; Guzman & Valdivia, 2004; Vargas, 2010). Although

¹⁷ The show does not provide any details as to why she was in a wheelchair, but Gisbelle does not present as physically impaired.

postfeminist thought offers the illusory potential for a woman to choose between the possibility of the home or a career (Probyn, 1997), there is a clear emphasis on the right choice (the home) and, in popular culture, women who make the wrong choice (career) are unmarried, childless, and without satisfying romantic relationships (Dow, 1996). The focus on marriage in the *Queen Bees*' narrative (despite the girls' young ages) functions in this way, as the show draws clear links between meanness and loneliness.

Camille's boyfriend, Michael, refers to her as a "demon" who has maxed out his credit cards. He claims she is extremely "demanding," "out of control," "mean and jealous," and he states he nominated her for the show because *she* needs to change, so they can get married. Indeed, mid-way through her transformation, Camille declares she is "doing all of this for him, so they can get married" ("Jealousy"). Gisbelle's boyfriend, Brian, asserts that he works two jobs for *her*, yet she takes his paychecks as soon as he gets home. In his nomination video, he calls Gisbelle "a spoiled little brat," and, in a message similar to Michael's, he says, "If you don't change, I'm going to send you packing." Gisbelle's storyline focuses overwhelmingly on the selfish manner in which she exploits her boyfriend. In the opening episode of *Queen Bees*, we hear Gisbelle confess that she once lied to her boyfriend that she was pregnant, and then lied that she had a miscarriage, which led to them "bonding over their grief." This revelation by Gisbelle is featured prominently in three of the episodes as well as in the program's commercials. In the final episode, Gisbelle admits her lies to her boyfriend. This is framed as a mature, selfless act by the series. What is more, in directly communicating with her boyfriend, Gisbelle has transformed her communication from manipulative and covert to truthful and overt. As a result, Dr. Michelle gives Gisbelle the star that secures

her position as the winner of *Queen Bees*. The viewer sees both Camille and Gisbelle's boyfriends threaten to end their relationships if the girls do not change their mean ways. Then, in the final episode, the relationships of both girls are secured when Camille's boyfriend proposes, and Gisbelle's boyfriend forgives her previous "craziness" and looks forward to their future as a couple. Although the show rewards the winner with a cash prize, the storylines of Camille and Gisbelle seem to suggest the "real" prize is heteronormative relationships.

Although *Queen Bees* appears to prioritize monogamy, Camille and Gisbelle are required to participate in a competition where they must go out with boys other than their boyfriends. In the "Judgment" episode, the girls are told they will be attending a coed mixer, but, when they arrive, they learn it is a dark party, so they must choose their dates based on personality alone. The "Judgment" episode's focus is on heterosexual relationships, and the message is not to choose a potential (male) mate based on something as superficial as appearance. This episode functions to highlight how Gisbelle and Camille are selfless, while constructing Michelle as incapable of a mature relationship. Whereas Gisbelle and Camille excel in this challenge (they are kind to their "dates" but never cross a line that would implicate them as cheating on their boyfriends), Michelle ultimately fails. She is shown attempting to feel the boys' bodies, hair, and faces and asking if they are "hot." Then, when she sees her date for the first time, she laughs at him, calls him a "loser," and claims to not like anything about him. At the Progress Report, Dr. Michelle takes away a star from Michelle, explaining "being rude to someone is never okay." In contrast to Gisbelle and Camille who are shown as selfishly taking advantage of their boyfriends and then transforming to selflessly support their

relationships, Michelle is framed as incapable of a mature (selfless) heteronormative relationship.

Gisbelle and Camille's portrayals as nice girls, hinge on their ability to emulate appropriate femininity, which is framed as heteronormative, selfless, and self-sacrificing. Dr. Michelle describes Gisbelle and Camille as "mature," "generous," "kind," "selfless," and "honest." This is noteworthy as Lamb (2001) maintains U.S. culture is unwilling to conceive of Latin girls as nice girls. Gisbelle and Camille's selflessness is often juxtaposed to images of the other girls' selfishness. For example, in the "Power" episode, each girl receives a card with a task, such as "clean the kitchen" or "spend the night in a tent outside," which they can choose to perform themselves or to pass on to another girl. Whereas White cast mate Brittany selfishly passes her task (sleep outside in a tent) onto another cast member, Gisbelle opts to follow the instructions ("wear an orange jailbird jumpsuit while walking down Rodeo Drive"). The show presents Gisbelle's decision as selfless since she is obviously embarrassed by the task, and Dr. Michelle rewards Gisbelle with a star for "willing to embarrass herself in public." In the same episode, when the host requires that each girl vote to evict a cast mate, Camille is the only girl to ask if she can vote for herself, suggesting she is willing to put the other girls ahead of herself. That is, Camille is willing to remove herself from the show in order to allow another cast member to continue the transformative process. Moreover, after Dr. Michelle names Gisbelle the winner of *Queen Bees*, she faces one more challenge when Yoanna asks if she wants to keep her \$25,000 prize or donate it to the charity of her choice. While Gisbelle ponders her choice, the viewer sees Shavon given the same hypothetical choice. Whereas Shavon hesitates and then laughs while she admits to not being sure what she

would do, the camera cuts to Gisbelle who appears to unhesitatingly choose to donate the money to Para Los Ninos, a non-profit organization the girls worked with in their final group challenge. Thus, Gisbelle's image is confirmed as authentically nice, while Shavon's is constructed as selfish. On *Queen Bees*, Camille and Gisbelle are exemplars of niceness when their heteronormative femininity is transformed from using (selfish) to giving (selfless).

The Ultimate Mean Girls

In applying the label of “nice girl” to the Latina girls, *Queen Bees* upsets traditional ideas about White femininity. In acknowledging the potential for girls of color to dabble in meanness, the show additionally redeploys the mean girl narrative; however, it also suggests Whiteness is an implicit prerequisite for the mean girl construct, as only the White girls, who are the narrative focus on the series, remain untransformed. The program centers the stories of the two White cast members, Brittany and Stassi, and they are the primary focus of the show's rehabilitation process. In fact, the more spectacularly they fail at transforming into nice girls, the more screen time they receive.¹⁸ The girls' extensive screen time and Dr. Michelle's concentration on their transformations points to the ways in which molding the subjectivities of White girls is of primary import in the U.S. (Harris, 2004).

The framing of the White girls as penultimate mean girls begins in the opening episode of *Queen Bees*, as the narrative begins to explore its differing race-based

¹⁸ In an analysis of the RTV romance show *The Bachelor*, Dubrofsky (2006) found “the more spectacularly the white women fail to become the bachelor's partner, the more screen time they get” (p. 40).

definitions of aggression. When the girls are introduced, Latina cast mate Gisbelle speaks of lying to her boyfriend about being pregnant. White cast member Brittany, who calls herself a “socialite,” claims to have ugly friends but admits she does not go out with them at night. The Latina girls are constructed as mean toward their boyfriends, while the White girls are seen as mean toward their female friends. Both of these representations create links between girls’ meanness and, what is presented as the resulting, loneliness. The idea that girls who are mean will inevitably end up lonely is a postfeminist scare tactic aimed at creating apprehension in girls about rejecting dominant expectations of femininity. The fact that the Latina girls are constructed differently from the White girls, despite their narrative’s similar postfeminist messages, is not surprising, as Joseph (2009) explains, “discourses of post-race are undeniably gendered, and discourses of post-feminism are undeniably raced” (p. 240). Here, the postfeminist suggestion that girls who meet dominant modes of femininity (they are nice) will lead happy, fulfilling lives is aimed toward Latina girls whose anger is focused on their boyfriends. At the same time, the message about meanness and loneliness is extended to the White girls who exhibit socially aggressive behaviors toward their female friends. The White girls’ nomination videos articulate the implication that girls who are cruel and aggressive toward other girls will end up alone: Stassi’s mom worries that because Stassi is mean to her friends, she will “end up alone,” and Brittany’s childhood friend contends that if Brittany does not change, she too will “end up alone.” The connection between the girls having no friends and, as a result, as also being unable to find a male romantic partner becomes salient as the same qualities that are shown to make them mean and selfish are tied to their inability to be wives and mothers.

Throughout their time on the show, Brittany and Stassi are portrayed as mean, boundlessly shallow, and insensitive. The stated goal of *Queen Bees* - to turn “selfish girls into selfless women” – is mired in cultural expectations for nice, selfless, and demure White women (Aapola, et al., 2005; Brown, 1998). Representations of excessively self-centered women are seen as in opposition to the ideology of the self-sacrificing wife and mother (Rowe, 1990). On *Queen Bees*, during a conversation with Camille and Gisbelle, Stassi claims to reject marriage (and implicitly child rearing) because she is “too selfish” (“Jealousy”). In one scene, we see her spill orange juice while walking across the kitchen. In the next shot, we see that instead of cleaning up the spill, she pouts, while Latina cast mate Gisbelle gets down on her hands and knees to wipe up the juice (“Self Centeredness”). In another episode, Stassi empties an iced tea pitcher in the toilet and mistakenly the pitcher’s lid as well. She then rushes into the kitchen and pleads with Black cast member Shavon to get the lid out of the toilet (“Judgment”). The show presents Stassi’s actions as part of her selfish construction in that she expects others, in these instances a person of color, to clean up after her. Similarly represented as selfish, White cast member Brittany says she “really doesn’t feel sorry for homeless people” (“Appearance”). The show frames Brittany’s inability to empathize with the suffering of another individual as particularly unfeeling because “good” femininity is supposed to include “natural” inclinations toward care giving (McRobbie, 1991). Instead, Brittany’s lack of sympathy for homeless people emerges as particularly poignant when the girls drive down Skid Row, and the producers intercut Brittany’s commentary with images of homeless women and children.

The other girls continually accuse Brittany of trying to be the center of attention, furthering her image as selfish while contributing that she is shallow and superficial. The show indicates that Brittany needs to temper her narcissism, yet her narrative is the predominate focus of the series; in fact, in the first three episodes, Brittany receives more screen time than any other cast member does. Brittany exemplifies inappropriate femininity, as she is not suitably modest about her beauty. She is shown saying she “started teasing other people” when she “became pretty in college” (“Self Centeredness”). The intense focus in Brittany’s narrative on her attractiveness suggests Brittany is aware of the privilege she enjoys because she possesses the traits of idealized White beauty. The horror is that Brittany has it all and is not subtle about it. Further, instead of balking at the idea that she is stunning, as the nice girl would, Brittany is represented as knowingly making a spectacle of her beauty by being cruel to other girls. She lavishly displays her good looks (such as when she claims she would have won the inner-beauty pageant if it was based on outer-beauty) while viciously highlighting what in other girls does not adhere to normative White standards of beauty (for example, when she calls another girl “fat”). The girls and Dr. Michelle take Brittany to task for trying to be a “super star” and a “party girl,” labels that function to indicate she uses her beauty to garner success and popularity. Similarly, White cast mate Stassi complains about how difficult it is to be beautiful and claims to sometimes “wish (she) looked ugly.” Yet while these words play in voiceover, the viewer sees Stassi roll down the window of the limousine to say “hello” to the male driver in the next car. When he responds with a beep of his horn and a wave, Stassi laughs, “I just made his day” (“Appearance”). In these ways, the viewer sees the White girls use their bodies in extravagant ways for their own

advantage. They are represented as recognizing the power to be gained with their beauty (such as being included in elite social circles and gaining boyfriends), yet, according to the show, they use that power in an inappropriate manner.

Because Brittany and Stassi are constructed as unwilling to transform their aggressive, selfish, and unruly personalities, the mean girl construct is confirmed as White, as the only girls who do not change are the White girls. Dr. Michelle eliminates Brittany from the competition for “giving up on the process.” During the Progress Report, Dr. Michelle insists that Brittany is not being honest about her flaws and explains she is dismissive and defensive when anyone attempts to point them out. Once eliminated, Brittany maintains she “was targeted right away,” indicating that not only has she not transformed, she remains unwilling to admit there is anything that needs to change (“Self Centeredness”). The other White cast mate, Stassi, comes in last place. She never rises above second place in the standings and plummets during the final episodes for speaking unkindly about the other girls behind their backs, such as when she tells Perez Hilton that Shavon is “the biggest bitch in the house” (“Gossip”). Even when directly confronted with the evidence of her slander, Stassi continues to deny saying anything bad about the other girls. Not only does she refuse to take responsibility for what she says, but she is also quick to help the other girls assign blame. Dr. Michelle tells Stassi she must “reevaluate all the qualities that (she) thought made (her) powerful but instead made (her) selfish” (“Finale”). Although *Queen Bees* does not privilege Whiteness, in the end, Whiteness is centered. Whiteness is confirmed as a necessary component of the mean girl image, as only the White cast members are shown to be quintessential mean girls and are the main concern of the series.

Concluding Thoughts

Queen Bees, housed securely within postfeminist rhetoric, works to transform mean girls into nice girls, which is the culturally assumed authentic identity for White girls. In much popular culture, girls of color are seen as naturally more violent and less capable of managing their emotions (Grindstaff & West, 2010); however, the winner of *Queen Bees* (the most selfless nice girl) is constructed as Latina. *Queen Bees* transforms the mean girl narrative by acknowledging the potential for mean girls of color (largely ignored in media coverage of the mean girl phenomenon) who are rehabilitated to become nice girls. In showing girls of color achieving the characteristics of the nice girl more easily than White girls, the show merges notions of authentic girlhood in a way not previously seen in media.

Queen Bees illustrates and contributes to the movement of the mean and nice girl constructions. The program presents as race neutral, as it acknowledges race while disregarding racial hierarchy and suggesting that all girls can use stereotypical racial behaviors. On the show, the Black girls are exemplars of direct communication and conflict management styles, yet they are incompatible with normative constructions of girlhood when framed as angry and potentially violent. Stereotypical representations of Black women's excessive aggression suggest a lack of femininity (Andrejevic & Colby, 2006; Dubrofsky & Hardy, 2008; Hill-Collins, 2004). Conversely, excessive sexuality is generally prominent in the construction of Latina femininity (Baez, 2007; Guzman & Valdivia, 2004). In this sense, the Latina girls on *Queen Bees* are elevated racially to the Black girls. Their commitments to their boyfriends tame their excessive sexuality, so they represent heteronormativity and suitable femininity. In adhering to the correct

postfeminist choice of family, their femininity is appropriate, which ultimately elevates them to the White girls as well. The construction of the nice girl is bound with a list of idealized qualities that are not only formidable but unachievable (Ringrose & Renold, 2009), yet *Queen Bees* suggests this image *is* achievable for Latinas.

Queen Bees constructs an appropriate form of girlhood using particular stereotypical aspects of girlhood from the girls of color – Black girls’ direct (and not aggressive) communication style and Latina girls’ supposed allegiance to heteronormativity. The show praises the stereotypical characteristics of Latina and Black femininity that are typically used to Other women (and girls) of color. As opposed to ignoring racial differences, *Queen Bees* makes a particular effort to uphold them in order to reward them. In the end, the White girls on *Queen Bees* fail spectacularly in their attempt to attain appropriate femininity. Although *Queen Bees* does not privilege Whiteness, Whiteness is centered. As a result, societal concern about girls’ bullying is refocused on White girls. *Queen Bees* illustrates the need for a scholarly reassessment of the racialized assumptions found in both the mean girl *and* the nice girl narratives. The program reproduces gendered and racist stereotypes, yet opens up a space for consideration of the role of girls of color in the mean and nice girl discursive constructions not seen in the contemporary media landscape.

Chapter 3

Prepping the Queen Bee: Gender, Class, and Social Climbing in *Gossip Girl*

“You need to be cruel to be queen. Anne Boleyn thought only with her heart and got her head chopped off, so her daughter Elizabeth made a vow never to marry a man. She married a country. Forget the boys. Keep your eye on the prize Jenny Humphrey. You can’t make people love you, but you can make them fear you.”

(Blair, *Gossip Girl*, Season 2, “The Goodbye Girl”)

When *Gossip Girl* premiered on fledgling network The CW in 2007, it was touted in *The New Yorker* as an inside look at the “tantalizing spectacle” of the “most privileged part of Manhattan” (Franklin, 2007, p. 171). The hour-long drama, now in its fourth season, centers on the sordid lives of Upper East Side (UES) teenagers who attend elite preparatory schools.¹⁹ The Manhattan in *Gossip Girl* remains untouched by economic hard times. In 2009, when *Gossip Girl* actors appeared on their magazine covers, *Rolling Stone* claimed the show provided a look at “the last people in America living the fabulous life” (Gay, 2009, p. 40) in what *Vogue* presented as an “ultra-sophisticated New York” (MacSweeney, 2008, p. 594).

It can be difficult to examine classed representations in popular culture because, as hooks (2000) and Mantsios (2000a, 2000b) argue, the U.S. remains dedicated to notions of a classless society. In fact, very little attention is paid to class in popular culture and, in turn, public discourse (Foster, 2005; Mantsios, 2000b). On the other hand, *Gossip Girl* takes as its central narrative class-based relations, specifically those between

¹⁹ In the finale for season 2, several of the main characters graduate from high school and go on to attend Manhattan based colleges such as Columbia and New York University.

the middle- and upper-classes. As a result, a case study of the program allows for a detailed and nuanced examination of the role of class in the mean girl image. The close textual analysis I perform of *Gossip Girl* provides access to the important work the show does in representing girlhood, class, and social climbing. While the show confirms many of the generalizations of the Mean Girl discourse I have thus far highlighted, its narrative concentration on class makes it interesting and important on its own. For example, boundary maintenance, which works to protect an individual's elite position, is a key aspect of social aggression in popular culture. The Queen Bee has the power to choose whom to include and exclude from her elite clique. Boundary maintenance is, according to Kendall (2010), also the primary goal of upper-class individuals. *Gossip Girl* is useful for analysis of this trope because "class warfare" is a major and continuing plot point that takes up a large amount of space in the program's narrative.

The American Dream relies on the myth that any individual has the potential to access upward mobility, yet upward mobility has mostly proven unattainable for people who do not have ready access to relationships with people and institutions in the upper-class (Winn, 2000). The reality of an individual's inability to pull herself up by the bootstraps is, perhaps, more true than ever in contemporary U.S. society where income inequality is greater now than it has been since the 1920s (Leonhardt, 2011). In popular culture, upward mobility is most often celebrated (Foster, 2005), yet, on *Gossip Girl*, middle-class Jenny Humphrey's attempts to rise in the class hierarchy are problematized. Instead, Jenny is framed as happiest when she is her authentic middle-class self. At a time when the failing U.S. economy is a primary focus in news media (Thardoor, 2011), the valorization of the middle-class in *Gossip Girl* is noteworthy.

On *Gossip Girl*, the members of the upper-class are living the high life in terms of their access to money, designer clothes, and fabulous restaurants and clubs. At the same time, as seen through the exploits of the UES teenagers and their parents, the upper-class is constructed as immoral and depraved, while the middle-class, primarily represented by the Humphreys (father Rufus, brother Dan, and sister Jenny) and family friend Vanessa, is good and principled. Unlike the upper-class characters - whose lives tend to be mired in unhappiness - the Humphreys, when remaining true to their middle-class values, are joyful and content. Whereas Dan and Rufus are able to navigate the UES seamlessly, always in tune with their authentic selves, Jenny Humphrey breaks with normative cultural versions of White, middle-class femininity in ways that are framed as problematic, and her rise in the social order is pathologized.

This analysis is based on the first three seasons of *Gossip Girl* (2007 – 2010), with emphasis on those episodes that served most useful in considering the concepts of cliques, class, and upward mobility. The textual examples I analyze are illustrative of a pattern of representation of the upper-class Queen Bee/middle-class Wannabe relationship.²⁰ Although the class-based relationship of the Queen Bee and Wannabe is a common trope in the mean girl narrative, it has yet to be examined by critical scholars. This focused analysis of class in the mean girl phenomenon continues discussions of the roles gender (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008; Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2004; Gonick, 2004; Ringrose, 2006) and race (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2004, 2008; Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009) play in images of girls who bully, extending the conversation to a consideration of

²⁰ The upper-class Queen Bee/middle-class Wannabe relationship is also featured in the teen television drama *90210*, the reality television show known as the “real-life *Gossip Girl*” *NYC Prep*, and the family drama *Gilmore Girls*.

class. I examine character construction, dialogue, and plotlines on *Gossip Girl* with these questions in mind: How do the class constructions of the Queen Bee and Wannabe factor in to their relationships with one another, their friends, and families?; In what ways does the Wannabe use cultural and social capital in order to gain power and privilege in the social order, despite her lack of economic capital?; How do the constructions of middle-class girls in elite society differ from those of middle-class boys?; As the Wannabe gains capital, in what ways is she framed as breaking with her middle-class morality?

Narrating the Gossip

Gossip Girl “is narrated by an omniscient blogger, the titular Gossip Girl, who intersperses plot development with cutting remarks about the protagonists” (Martin, 2009, p. 21). The Gossip Girl blog functions similarly to contemporary gossip websites (such as PerezHilton.com and TMZ.com). An individual sends a piece of gossip, a picture or video, or even an unsubstantiated rumor to Gossip Girl who then sends a “blast” (usually a text message or email) to her followers. It is through the accumulation of gossip that Gossip Girl is made to seem all-knowing. At the beginning of each episode, Gossip Girl provides a recap of the previous show. Her opening statement is always the same: “Gossip Girl here - your one and only source into the scandalous lives of Manhattan’s elite.” Through this repeated opening statement, the show is situated as about the upper-class, but the framing of elite society as “scandalous” works to prepare the viewer for plotlines about the upper-class that are disgraceful and shameful.

In episode after episode, Gossip Girl calls attention to the ways in which the middle-class is different from (and inherently better than) the upper-class. Gossip Girl never refers to the middle-class specifically, instead, by creating an “us (UES) versus

them (middle-class)” mentality, she situates the viewer as not part of the UES. For example, *Gossip Girl* describes Sundays on the UES in comparison to a “normal”

Sunday:

Is there anything better than a lazy Sunday? Reading the paper in bed, scrambling an egg or two...yeah, right. We Upper East Siders don't do lazy. Breakfast is brunch, and it comes with champagne, a dress code, and about 100 of our closest friends. (Season 1, “The Wild Brunch”)

Through this bait-and-switch technique, the middle-class representation of Sunday is normalized, while “we Upper East-Siders” is made to seem strange, thus maintaining the us versus them mentality so important to the program’s narrative. Moreover, when *Gossip Girl* calls attention to the ways in which the UES is different from the rest of the country, it is typically in some problematic way. For example, *Gossip Girl* claims “On the UES, appearances are often deceiving” (Season 1, “The Handmaiden’s Tale”), suggesting that in the rest of the country, where middle-class values rule, appearances are *not* deceiving, and you can trust what you see. In a similar vein, *Gossip Girl* claims, “For the rest of the country, Thanksgiving is when families come together to give thanks, but, on the UES, the holiday thankfully returns to its roots: lying, manipulation, and betrayal” (Season 2, “The Magnificent Archibalds”). *Gossip Girl*’s narration works rhetorically to center the middle-class as “normal” and “average,” while encouraging us to think about the elite upper-class as having the potential to corrupt middle-class morality.

Constructing Class: At Play in the Upper East Side

The idea that the middle-class is normal and the upper-class is scandalous is one way in which *Gossip Girl* constructs class through difference. Additionally, the show

marks class in its characters through material possessions (such as clothing, cars, and homes), lifestyle, and values. On *Gossip Girl*, the person middle-class Jenny Humphrey most admires and fears is Queen Bee Blair Waldorf. Blair is part of the upper-class - the elite group that constitutes one percent of the U.S. population and is comprised of the wealthiest and most powerful people in the country (Kendall, 2005). Blair lives in a penthouse on the UES with her mother, who is a successful fashion designer. Despite living in New York City all her life, Blair has never ridden the subway, preferring instead a private car or limousine. When her boyfriend attempts to teach her the ropes of public transportation, she exclaims, "There's no way I'm going down there. It's full of mole men and middle-class professionals. That's why God created drivers. Rats go underground, not Waldorfs" (Season 2, "Southern Gentlemen Prefer Blondes"). Queen Bee Blair wields her elite class status and its attendant privileges as weapons. She brandishes a sort of political power; she is the gatekeeper of class who maintains her place in the social hierarchy of *Girl World* through manipulation and rejection. Blair is defined by her use of covert aggression, which takes the form of behaviors typically associated with upper-class women, such as the use of privilege to exert boundary maintenance (Kendall, 2002).

In contrast, Wannabe Jenny Humphrey is represented as middle-class. Jenny lives with her one-hit wonder rock-star father and brother in a loft in Brooklyn. Living outside of the UES is one way the program marks middle-classness. As well, Jenny is always at pains to keep up with her upper-class peers' lifestyles, predominantly due to her lack of money. For example, she sews her clothes because she cannot afford designer labels. At times, she sells personal belongings in order to go on vacation or to dinner with her

classmates. Queen Bee Blair takes pride in her ancestral bloodline and good breeding, and she sarcastically encourages Jenny to “pretend you’re well bred” (Season 3, “Ex-husbands and Wives”). In doing so, Blair points to the ways in which Jenny’s forays into upper-class society are always inauthentic. Additionally, there are a series of metaphors that work to distinguish Jenny as not belonging to the upper-class. For example, the narrator Gossip Girl calls her “poor little orphan Jenny” in need of a “Daddy Warbucks” (Season 2, “Bonfire of the Vanity”), and, when Jenny is invited to the Masquerade Ball, her father refers to her as “Cinderella” (Season 2, “The Handmaiden’s Tale”). These metaphors mark Jenny as lacking economic capital (“poor”) and in need of social capital (in the form of relationships with powerful elite people - “Daddy Warbucks”). It is also interesting to note that both metaphors position Jenny as an orphan, so, although Jenny has a close knit family, the fact that they are middle-class locates her as without the family bloodline necessary for successful navigation of the UES. In “The Handmaiden’s Tale,” Jenny’s construction as subservient to the Queen Bee (and, in turn, members of the elite upper-class) continues when Jenny is labeled as the “handmaiden” to Blair’s Queen. Although Jenny tries to spin the term positively, her friend Vanessa is quick to point out that “handmaiden is Jane Austen for slave.” In contrast, Blair’s friends are referred to as “Ladies in Waiting,” a term that situates them as nobility, although of a lower rank than their Queen. These metaphors work to position Jenny as a servant or slave, necessarily subordinate to her upper-class Queen.

Jenny and her brother Dan attend elite preparatory schools on partial scholarships. Jenny is a student at the Constance Billard School for Girls, while Dan goes to Constance

Billard's brother school St. Jude's.²¹ Although considered outsiders initially, Jenny and Dan are allowed to participate in the social hierarchy of the UES, unlike working- and lower-class students who are absent from the show's narrative. Despite the noticeable absence of working-class characters, the show is replete with jokes about the working-class. For example, when UES bad boy Chuck Bass calls Dan Humphrey "trash," Dan replies, "I live in Brooklyn, not the Ozarks. Don't you think we're taking this class warfare thing a little far?" (Season 1, "The Wild Brunch"). In this way, middle-class Dan points to the ways in which he has a right to attend his prep school – a right that does not extend to lower-class individuals living in the Ozarks. *Gossip Girl* marks the elite social hierarchy as upper-class. Middle-class individuals can play in the power games of the elite, while lower-class people are so far removed, they are used as a joke.

Gendering Capital

An ongoing theme on *Gossip Girl* concerns the ways in which middle-class Rufus Humphrey sacrifices for his children's education, while the UES teens are expected to sacrifice for their parents. The parents of the UES include a father who left his wife to live with a man in France; another father who is a cocaine-addicted, embezzling criminal; a ruthless fashion designer more focused on her daughter's weight than well-being; and a mother so concerned with maintaining romantic relationships with men that she allows the doorman of her building to sign her children's school permission slips. The upper-class teens are sympathetic, as they struggle with the adolescent issues of self-determination, non-conformity, and alienation from adults common to adolescent passage

²¹ Constance Billard and St. Jude's share a campus, so the male and female characters often interact on school grounds.

dramas (Payne, 1989, 1992). For example, a story arc in the first season of the show follows upper-class golden boy Nate Archibald's struggle to please his parents. Nate's father, who has recently been arrested for embezzlement, insists that his son maintain his now defunct relationship with Blair so that he does not lose his business deal with Blair's mother. In this sense, the upper-class parents are shown using their children like commodities. In contrast, Jenny's forays into elite society are often exasperating because she has such a loving and dedicated father in Rufus,²² who is the most involved of all the parents; he cooks breakfast and dinner for his children and has open conversations with them about school, parties, romance and sex. Rufus works to instill a middle-class value system in Jenny and Dan through, what Jenny calls, his "anti-capitalist rants" (Season 1, "Pilot") and his ongoing insistence that they should work hard for what they desire and never use people in pursuit of their goals. Despite his attempts to keep his kids grounded, Jenny cannot escape the lure of popularity and elite society that she accesses through her preparatory school.

According to Bourdieu (1984, 1986, 1990), it is possible for an individual to transcend her lack of economic capital through the accumulation of cultural capital. In *Reproductions*, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) explore "the extremely sophisticated mechanisms by which the school system *contributes* to reproducing the structure of the distribution of cultural capital" (p. vii). In elite prep schools, students accumulate cultural capital (including credentials, status, symbols, an appreciation for the fine arts, and linguistic skills) that can be used in later life, so prep schools help transmit power and

²² Jenny and Dan's mother, Allison, divorces Rufus in the first season of *Gossip Girl*. Allison lives in Hudson (a city outside of Manhattan). Jenny often spends breaks from schools or weekends with her mother in Hudson.

privilege (Cookson & Persell, 1985). On *Gossip Girl*, the prep school environment of Constance Billard is distinguished as the biggest threat to Jenny Humphrey's middle-class morality. Jenny's brother, Dan, describes her prep school as "populated by mean girls and date rapists" (Season 1, "17 Candles"). Jenny is shown to be most interested in socializing, making connections, and rising in the high school social hierarchy, so she is never framed as having the potential to access the true benefits of a prep school education. *Gossip Girl's* message is inherently regressive – returning to paternalistic ideologies about why women should not be educated. That is, we should not send our middle-class daughters to elite schools because it is too dangerous for *them*.

Despite his warnings about their fellow students, Dan clearly benefits from the cultural capital associated with a prep school education and appears to do so without trying, while also remaining true to his authentic middle-class identity. By graduation, Dan, who has always considered himself an outsider, realizes that the cultural capital he accrued make him an insider. Queen Bee Blair explains, "You're friends with Nate Archibald...you got into Yale...published in the *New Yorker*. You may pretend to not be like us, but you are" (Season 2, "The Goodbye Gossip Girl"). With ease, Dan gained a significant amount of cultural capital, but he also remained true to his middle-class value system, so his achievements are framed as individual successes resulting from hard work and self-discipline. Indeed, he is the ultimate neoliberal citizen. He shows self-determination and self-empowerment, and he happily endures hardship while showing facility for overcoming class-based disadvantages (Hasinoff, 2008; Joseph, 2009; Ouellette & Hay, 2008).

While Dan collects cultural capital, Jenny pursues social capital, which the program's narrative frames as an inferior form of capital. Bourdieu (1984, 1986) conceived of social capital as relationships that provide access to networks of influence (as opposed to the educational credentials and verbal facility afforded by cultural capital). In feminizing social capital, *Gossip Girl* problematizes the qualities women are most encouraged to display, such as intimacy and nurturing. In contrast, Rufus consistently articulates and valorizes middle-class individualism. He tells both Dan and Jenny they can do anything they set their minds to and argues that when Jenny and Dan use the connections they make through prep school, they are "using" people, which is against their moral code. Jenny attempts to create relationships (building social capital) with "The Girls on the Steps"²³ - Queen Bee Blair and her minions - because being a part of the ruling elite carries certain rewards (parties, boyfriends, etc.). Social capital, which Jenny finds to be a more useful tool for her rise in the social order, is feminized and problematized in comparison to Dan's use of cultural capital.

Jenny's relationships with the Queen Bee and her minions are seen as threatening to middle-class innocence. In the early part of season 1 of *Gossip Girl*, Jenny's image is innocent and childlike. She wears little to no makeup and her blonde hair falls simply in long locks. Her physical appearance is in line with what Walkerdine (1997) highlights as the blonde-haired girl who needs to be protected by the middle-class. In "The Wild Brunch," one of the first steps Jenny takes to imitate Blair is to mimic the flowers Blair has in her penthouse – hydrangeas. After complimenting Blair on the flowers and

²³ The Girls on the Steps are the most powerful and elite clique at Constance Billard. The members of the clique eat breakfast and lunch on the steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Their status as the ruling members of the school is made clear by their positions on the steps, as no one is allowed to sit above them.

learning their name, Jenny asks her father to go with her to the Sunday Market, so she can get some for herself. This scene is purely innocent: a father/daughter trip to the market where Jenny buys flowers. From these early episodes, Jenny's image and actions become more and more troublesome.

Jenny's first big break into the elite social circle comes when she accepts an invitation to Blair's annual slumber party (Season 1, "Dare Devil"). Jenny enters the slumber party trusting and naïve, carrying a pink Hello Kitty sleeping bag and stuffed animals. Upon getting off the elevator, Jenny walks into Blair's penthouse, replete with manicurists, massage therapists, and trundle beds fitted with silk sheets. Jenny is marked as young and immature through her terrified facial expression and the child-like sleeping bag and stuffed animals she carries, confirming her outsider status. Her innocence is almost immediately corrupted when the fourteen-year-old tries to turn down an offer for a martini. Blair says, "It's a party Jenny, either swallow or swipe your metro card back home." As opposed to staying true to her middle-class values, Jenny is instead framed as willing to do whatever is necessary to gain Queen Bee Blair's approval, even drink alcohol. As becomes the norm when in elite society, inevitably one bad choice by Jenny leads to another. For example, she begins her night at Blair's sleepover with a cocktail, then goes on to accept a series of dangerous and illegal dares from Blair, the last of which requires that Jenny break into a store to steal a jacket. Later in the evening, Dan, disgusted by Jenny's actions, exclaims, "This is not who you are!" For Dan, Jenny's behavior, which is in contrast to their middle-class morality, makes her other than her authentic self. Meanwhile, Dan is able to remain authentic *and* gain cultural capital - a seeming impossibility for Jenny. For Dan, amassing cultural capital through his prep

school education is incidental. Conversely, for Jenny, being a part of the prep school environment is an ongoing struggle and lots of hard work.

Like Dan, Rufus is quick to point out when Jenny is not being her authentic middle-class self. Importantly, because Dan and Rufus are framed as ideal middle-class neoliberal citizens (they work hard, take responsibility for their actions, and rely on their individual abilities to get ahead), their perspective, especially as it relates to Jenny, is always privileged. When Rufus learns that Jenny has stolen a dress, he explains, “you don’t have to do those things Jenny. You’re making a choice.” When Jenny argues the only other choice would be to have no friends, Rufus maintains, “you’ve got so much more to offer than those girls have.” In an ongoing theme, behaving badly (i.e., breaking and entering, drinking alcohol, and stealing) is constructed as not in Jenny’s nature but instead as an aspect of her attempts to fit in with her much wealthier classmates. If she would simply be “true to herself,” both her brother and father suggest she could succeed on her own. Whereas the upper-class Queen Bee’s boundary maintenance, gossiping, and socializing are seen as authentically part of upper-class femininity (the show is ripe with ongoing references to adult upper-class women who behave in a similar manner), when Jenny attempts to rise in the social order, her actions are consistently framed as inauthentic.

One of the key ways in which the narrative of *Gossip Girl* frames Jenny’s rise in the social order as inauthentic is through the ongoing modifications she makes in her stylistic choices. The program is often noted for its love of fashion. In fact, in 2009, the show’s signature style was “all over the collections at February’s Fashion Week in New York” (Hampp, 2009, p. 14). Importantly, while the other main characters remain true to

their style (for example, Chuck's signature scarves, Serena's boho-chic aesthetic, Dan's cardigans, Blair's preppiness), Jenny changes her style along with her personality in each season. When the viewer is first introduced to Jenny, she is the physical embodiment of middle-class innocence: modestly dressed, fair skin unmarked by makeup, long blonde hair falling naturally to her shoulders or swept back in a simple ponytail, and wearing little to no jewelry. When Jenny attends Blair's slumber party, she receives a makeover. She puts on a skimpy yellow dress, her makeup is done, and her hair is made to appear wild and tousled. When Jenny expresses to Blair that she does not "feel right," Blair replies, "All that matters is the face you show the world." The idea that Jenny wears a mask to present an outer appearance that fits with the image she is trying to maintain becomes a part of Jenny's plotline, and she is seen as always inauthentic except when she is an innocent, simple girl.

At the start of season 2, Jenny, again, indicates middle-class innocence with her appearance. She claims to have learned her lesson after the previous year's foray into the elite hierarchy of *Girl World*, and her stylistic choices mirror her return to middle-class purity. Her face is scrubbed free of makeup, her hair is simple (at times pulled back in a ponytail), and her clothes feature bows, ruffles, and a color scheme of pink and white. After Jenny is on the receiving end of a day of hazing by the mean girls at Constance Billard, she begins skipping school, and her fashion reflects her outsider mentality when her appearance takes on a punk aesthetic. She cuts her hair in choppy layers, wears heavy black eyeliner (Rufus refers to her "raccoon eyes"), paints her lips blood red, and her clothes begin to feature chains, studs, and a lot of black.

In season 3, Jenny is completely situated within the UES. She lives in a penthouse with her father and his new socialite wife, and she has become Queen of her school.

Despite her now real economic capital, her Queen Bee makeover is consistently referenced as inauthentic, as in this exchange between Jenny's stepbrother Eric and his boyfriend Jonathan (Season 3, "How to Succeed in Bassness"):

Jonathan: Invasion of the body snatchers? Looks like Jenny, smells like Jenny.

Eric: She's still the same Jenny. She just has to wear that mask at school.

Jonathan: That mask is becoming her face.

Jonathan's comment reflects the narrative's framing of Jenny's foray into elite society as dangerous. Her "mask," the outer appearance she performed in order to appear as part of the UES, is becoming a reality. She is so far removed from her authentic middle-class innocence the concern is that she may never be able to return. In one pivotal scene, Jenny empties her closet, tossing the clothes on the floor in a heap, even throwing out the sewing machine she used to make her own clothes when she lived in Brooklyn. Through voiceover, Gossip Girl explains, "some little girls forget Halloween is only for one night. They wear their costumes for so long, they can't even remember who they were before they put them on" (Season 3, "Rufus Getting Married"). In this way, Gossip Girl suggests Jenny's performance of an upper-class Queen Bee is a "costume," a costume that contributes to a performance that Jenny no longer recognizes as inauthentic.

In season 2, burgeoning fashion designer Jenny begins to skip school, removing any chance she once had at gaining cultural capital. Instead, again focused on social capital, Jenny crashes an UES gala (she claims the event will be full of "Fortune 500 owners") with a guerilla fashion show. The fashion show is a huge success and is

featured on Page Six (the gossip column of *The New York Post*); however, Rufus tells her he has “never been more disappointed.” Not only does he attempt to punish Jenny, he even goes so far as to identify her as the person responsible for crashing the gala to the police. Although Jenny escapes legal retribution, her life spins out of control when she runs away from home and finds herself alone, with no place to stay, on the cold Manhattan streets on Thanksgiving. Importantly, Jenny is not framed as incapable of achieving success. Indeed, the fashion show is well-planned, organized, and a true victory. Additionally, when she begins to meet with agents about designing her own fashion line, she expresses knowledge of her clientele and is able to explicate what makes her unique as a designer. As is common with Jenny, she is both empowered and victimized. Despite her success, she is punished for turning her back on her family, lying, skipping school, and using others in pursuit of her dream when her business partner (a 16-year-old model), Agnes, is revealed to be a self-involved, immature, hysterical sociopath. In a dramatic turn, Agnes, angry that Jenny has been seeing agents without her, burns all of Jenny’s designs, essentially putting an end to Jenny’s dreams. In contrast, Jenny’s UES peers, who drink, do drugs, break into the school, have sex with multiple partners, and use people constantly, face few consequences for their bad and, at times, illegal actions. The idea that a middle-class girl’s entrée into elite society will necessarily lead her to dangerous situations suggests that social climbing is always problematic for middle-class girls. Instead, middle-class girls are framed as at their best and happiest when they are situated within authentic White, middle-class, passive femininity.

Middle-Class Girls Gone Bad

The narrative of *Gossip Girl* suggests that middle-class girls are incapable of accessing authentic upper-class femininity, which includes an authentic ability for exhibiting social aggression, so middle-class girls who attempt to play in the social hierarchy of the upper-class will become bad as opposed to mean. Much like my previous argument that, although girls of color may be acknowledged as mean, Whiteness is confirmed as an authentic aspect of the mean girl image, in *Gossip Girl*, middle-class Jenny is acknowledged as a Queen Bee, but upper-classness is secured as part of the Queen Bee construction. In season 3, when Queen Bee Blair graduates high school, she handpicks Jenny as her successor. Although Jenny attempts to bring a middle-class sensibility, featuring neoliberal ideals of egalitarianism and meritocracy, to her ruling of Constance Billard, she is met with resistance (Season 3, “Dan de Fleurette”). When Jenny endeavors to put an end to the hierarchy at Constance Billard, her minions overrule her, explaining, “We’re going back to the old way. Queens, hierarchies, and no more Brooklyn Wannabes.” Thus, hierarchy is confirmed as authentic to the upper-class. At the same time, despite the fact that Jenny’s father Rufus is now married to an extremely wealthy UES socialite, granting her real economic capital, Jenny’s middle-class roots are referenced constantly, pointing to the ways in which, because she was not born into the UES, she is not qualified for the position of Queen Bee.

When Jenny realizes her egalitarian leadership style is not going to work at Constance Billard, she comes to understand that in order to rule she must acquire significant economic capital. Former Queen Blair explains, “a true monarch bestows favors.” Blair’s economic capital allowed her to throw extravagant parties for her

minions, take them out for dinner, and gift them designer clothing and accessories.

Whereas Blair is authentically rich, Jenny finds increasingly dangerous ways to maintain her clout. In order to earn money and make connections, Jenny begins to deal drugs with her boyfriend Damien. She devises a plan to smuggle drugs into a state dinner and steals Oxycodone from her stepmother's medicine cabinet. By dealing drugs, Jenny makes her own money as well as her own connections. Having been unable to gain cultural and social capital from her prep school education, she does so instead through dangerous and illegal tactics. When Jenny is caught with a large bag of pills, Rufus exclaims, "I look at you, and I don't see my daughter anymore." As the narrator Gossip Girl explains, "there comes a time when every father learns you can't keep a *bad girl* down." Thus, the middle-class Wannabe has become a bad girl. In turn, meanness is confirmed as authentic to upper-class femininity.

The tendency of middle-class girls to become bad instead of mean is shown to be true of White middle-class women as well. In the second season of *Gossip Girl*, a new teacher, Rachel Carr, begins to work at Constance Billard. Ms. Carr is originally from Des Moines, Iowa, and was working most recently with Teach for America (a non-profit organization that provides teachers to low income communities). Despite her philanthropic roots, Ms. Carr is also constructed as incapable of maintaining her middle-class value system when she is lured into a war with Queen Bee Blair. In "You've got Yale," Ms. Carr gives Blair a B on a paper, which leads Blair to explain, "you're new here, so you don't know how it works. Second semester seniors get a free pass." Ms. Carr expresses her middle-class sensibility, as well as her belief in egalitarianism and meritocracy, when she replies, "maybe in time I'll get in trouble for not inflating grades,

but until then I'll give them based on merit." When, in retaliation, Blair humiliates Ms. Carr by inviting her to dinner and the opera and then standing her up, Ms. Carr reports her for hazing a teacher. As discussed earlier, the construction of the upper-class teens is empathetic as they are shown to be used as commodities by their parents. In some ways, this is especially true of Blair whose mother is framed as contributing to Blair's bulimia (which she has overcome). Blair often tries to please her mother, who wants a fashion model for a daughter, and her father, who most wants his daughter to attend his alma mater Yale. In her battle with Ms. Carr, Blair's construction remains sympathetic (Ms. Carr stands in the way of Blair's lifelong dream of attending Yale), while Ms. Carr, as I discuss below, follows a path similar to Jenny's, as she becomes a bad girl intent on proving that she can rule the female students in her school.

In order to take down Ms. Carr (who worked to get a new rule in place forbidding students from bringing cell phones to school), Blair has her minions investigate her past, which comes up blemish free. Never one to give up, Blair creates a rumor that Ms. Carr engaged in an inappropriate relationship with high school student Dan Humphrey, even going so far as to send in a picture to the Gossip Girl blog of Dan and Ms. Carr hugging. Although the hug is innocent, Rufus explains that "meeting a student, one that wasn't hers, off-hours and off-campus" is inappropriate. When Dan learns that Ms. Carr has been fired because of the picture, he goes to visit her in her home. Although she is no longer employed by the school, her sexual aggressiveness with Dan – she grabs him by his shirt, kisses him, and pulls him inside her apartment – frames her as a bad girl. Moreover, when Ms. Carr is reinstated at Constance due to a lack of verifiable evidence, her bad girl construction continues when she engages in sex with Dan on school grounds

during play rehearsals for which the entire senior class is in attendance. She also stoops to the level of Blair when she sends Gossip Girl information about Blair and (Blair's best friend and Dan's ex-girlfriend) Serena that Dan told her in confidence. Dan, who often serves as the show's moral center, admonishes Ms. Carr: "I believed in you, all your talk about integrity and ideals...you're just as bad as (Blair). No, you're worse. Blair's a high schooler; you're an adult." Admonished by Dan, Ms. Carr, humiliated, admits, "I don't know what's happened to me. I don't know what I've become" (Season 2, "The Age of Dissonance"). In this way, *Gossip Girl* suggests that upper-class society is dangerous for middle-class girls *and* women, both inevitably becoming bad if they attempt to rise in the elite hierarchy.

Raced Meanness: The White Queen Bee

While I have thus far argued that *Gossip Girl*, despite ostensibly being about the upper-class, actually works to center middle-classness, it is important to note that the show also marks the Queen Bee as implicitly White. Blair is the Queen Bee of the most popular clique at Constance Billard – The Girls on the Steps. Although the majority of Blair's minions are raced other than White (for example, Latina, Black, and Asian), none are ever considered seriously for the role of Queen Bee, despite their upper-class constructions. That is, much like in *Odd Girl Out* and *Queen Bees*, girls of color are acknowledged as mean girls, but the ultimate mean girl and the leader of the clique is always White. Blair's primary minions in the first season of *Gossip Girl* are Kati Farkas and Isabel (Iz) Coates. The girls, who are constructed as Asian and Black respectively, are nearly cartoonish. They dress alike, often in ridiculous outfits (e.g., sailor suits or matching floral swim caps). Although the girls rarely speak, their deviant sexual

escapades are articulated by the White characters, such as when Blair explains that Kati and Iz had a threesome with a boy in the Cornell University ethic's program (Season 1, "School Lies"). As Projansky (2001) notes about media treatment of African Americans, Kati and Iz are very visible (indeed, their flashy matching outfits make them difficult to miss), but they have no voice. Two other members of The Girls on the Steps are introduced mid-way through the first season of *Gossip Girl*: Penelope who is Latina, and Nelly Yuki who is Asian (perhaps brought in to make up for the loss of Kati whose family moved to Israel). A primary aspect of all the mean girls is their questionable loyalty – even to their leader, the Queen Bee. For example, when Gossip Girl sends out a blast indicating that Blair had sex with Chuck Bass and Nate Archibald (Chuck's best friend and Blair's boyfriend) in the same week, the mean girls immediately ostracize Blair (Season 1, "A Thin Line between Chuck and Nate"). Penelope tells Blair, "Consider yourself dethroned." The girls show no loyalty to Blair, who Nate explains, "they have been friends with forever." Indeed, Blair's best friend, Serena van der Woodsen compares the girls to hummingbirds – "they move from flower to flower." Because we know nothing about the girls lives outside of school, they appear to have no redeeming qualities, so their lack of loyalty is seen as particularly cruel. This construction of disloyal mean girls of color is noteworthy because, as I argue in chapter 2, it is far more common for girls of color to provide the needed transformation for the White Queen Bee. Instead, on *Gossip Girl*, the mean girls of color function to confirm Blair's essential goodness. Although Blair is mean, she is also good (she gets excellent grades, does service work, and participates in heteronormative monogamous relationships). She bullies, but we sympathize with her because of her characterization as always needing to please.

The only prominent secondary character on the show who is not White is Vanessa. Vanessa, an old family friend of the Humphreys, is introduced in the show's first season as a potential threat to Dan and Serena's budding love. Although the show does not explicitly address or identify her racially, she and her mother are constructed as mixed race Black and White. They have curly, kinky hair, and they also express a hippie aesthetic through their "ethnic" way of dressing (long colorful skirts, scarves, plastic and beaded jewelry). In the majority of the episodes of the first season, Vanessa wears bamboo doorknocker earrings, a mid-80s fashion trend, popularized in hip-hop culture by artists such as Salt N Pepa and MC Lyte. Additionally, Vanessa's mother's politics are marked as extreme in a way that constructs her as potentially a Black radical. Vanessa's politics appear to mimic those of her mother. For example, she tries to save an historic Brooklyn landmark and builds community gardens in Alphabet City (a neighborhood in the Lower East Side of Manhattan).

Throughout three seasons on the show, Vanessa never merits her own storyline. Unlike Jenny and Dan who both have narratives that do not revolve around the other characters (for example, in Season 2, Jenny drops out of Constance Billard and attempts to start her own fashion line), Vanessa's life outside of her interactions with Dan, Jenny, and *their* UES classmates is never shown. Instead, her primary role seems to be to move the action of the White characters along. As noted by Dubrofsky (2006) about the RTV show *The Bachelor*, "the overriding message is that women of color do not count" (p. 44). The mean girls of color are never considered for the role of Queen Bee, and Vanessa apparently does not warrant her own plot. Because Vanessa is used primarily to move along the storylines of the White characters, most of the information we learn about her

family and home life is told to us through bits and pieces that typically work to move forward another character's narrative. For example, when Nate Archibald asks why she is not taking the SAT, Vanessa explains, "My parents are artists, my sister is a musician. Just like going to the Ivies (Ivy League universities) is your family's way, not going is mine" (Season 1, "Desperately Seeking Serena"). Here, we learn a bit about Vanessa's family; at the same time, her construction as not like the other characters is salient (even middle-class Jenny and Dan are expected to go to college). More importantly, this storyline allows Nate to be constructed as Prince Charming (a common trope in the series) when he picks Vanessa up the next day in a limo and surprises her by driving her to the SAT, explaining, "There's nothing wrong with keeping your options open."

Vanessa is frequently used to expose the good qualities of the White boys. For example, after reading the personal statement Nate has written for his college applications in which he details the difficulties of having a father who is a coke-head embezzler, Vanessa seeks him out to apologize, explaining, "I was wrong about you" (Season 2, "Chuck in Real Life"). Indeed, Vanessa is the only primary female character on the show to have sex with all three of the main male characters (Dan, Nate, and Chuck). She is positioned as neither a legitimate nor illegitimate romantic partner for the White boys, yet she is a vital part of the story of two White people finding a partner (Dubrofsky, 2006). In season 2, Vanessa helps to reunite star-crossed lovers Chuck and Blair. In a plotline, which borrows generously from the 18th century novel *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (or perhaps the 1999 teen film *Cruel Intentions* based on the novel), Blair offers to have sex with the heartbroken Chuck if he will seduce and humiliate Vanessa. During the seduction, Vanessa sees aspects of Chuck's personality that paint him as

empathetic (such as his desire to renovate a historic Brooklyn landmark that she is attempting to save and the cruel manner in which his father treats him). As Vanessa and Chuck begin to get close, Blair becomes jealous and reveals their game to Vanessa who refuses to believe the worst about Chuck, claiming that Blair “can’t stand that he might actually be a good person when he’s not around you” (Season 2, “Chuck in Real Life”). Chuck’s construction as a bad boy is tempered by the glimpse Vanessa gets into who he “really” is, while Blair is able to come to realize that she is, in fact, in love with Chuck. By pairing the White boys with Vanessa, the series seems open to the possibility of interracial romance. On the surface, then, *Gossip Girl* “operates as if color does not matter, as if people in the series (and implicitly the makers of the show) are neutral when it comes to racial differences” (Dubrofsky, 2006, p. 44). Importantly, though, Vanessa never gets the guy. Through her eyes, the viewer gains insight into the best parts of the boys, securing their appropriateness for other White mates.

Vanessa, who is the only adolescent character to hold a job, does not attend a preparatory school and consistently expresses disgust with the upper-class, including Jenny and Dan’s classmates whom she calls “overprivileged, underparented, trust fund brats” (Season 1, “The Handmaiden’s Tale”). In this sense, she is constructed differently from the upper-class mean girls of color. She does have a voice, and she is never afraid to express it, even when to do so means she must admit that she was wrong (as in the case with Nate). She does not cower in the face of pressure from the UES teens, and, unlike her good friend Jenny, she is not enamored with the pull of popularity and elite society. She is in many ways more honorable than the White characters, yet always somehow unsuitable as the show’s star. For example, in order to win a grant that will help her pay

her rent, Vanessa, who wants to be a film maker, directs a documentary about Dan - what she describes as “the outsider goes inside.” When she catches on film Blair and Chuck discussing their sexual encounter (which, at this time, is unknown to anyone), they both attempt to bribe her. Blair’s offer is met with complete resistance, as Vanessa explains, “you have nothing I need” (Season 1, “School Lies”). Like in *Queen Bees* and *Odd Girl Out*, the Black, middle-class girl is a straight talker who expresses her lack of interest in popularity or eliteness. Moreover, when Chuck offers Vanessa \$10,000 for the tape, she accepts the money, but then gives him a blank tape and uses the money to start a medical grant in his name for teens with genital herpes. As is typical, Vanessa does things her own way when she brings Blair the tape, explaining, “I know this might come as a shock, but not everyone operates from an agenda. In fact, some people do things simply because it’s the decent thing to do.” Vanessa maintains her image as hard working and unwilling to sacrifice her value system for access to elite society. Like the girls of color in *Odd Girl Out* and *Queen Bees*, Vanessa excels at direct communication, for which she is valorized, but when she attempts to be covert, as I will explore next, she fails miserably.

Like Cady in *Mean Girls*, Vanessa’s homeschooling²⁴ has not provided her the equipment necessary to play in the political game of Girl World. In this way, she is constructed as not part of the main (White) action because her homeschooling does not allow her to access the correct social skills. She is incapable of overcoming her lack of economic capital, she never accesses cultural capital, and, for the most part, she chooses not to build social capital, so on the rare occasions when she tries to be mean, she ends up

²⁴ No information is provided about Vanessa’s schooling, which she appears to do herself, but we know she is smart because she “aces” SAT practice tests and is accepted to college at the end of the second season.

hurt and vulnerable (unlike White middle-class Jenny who becomes bad). For example, when both Jenny and Vanessa develop crushes on Nate, the normally incredibly supportive Vanessa treads into mean girl territory when she finds a letter Nate sent to Jenny expressing his feelings for her (Season 2, "It's a Wonderful Lie"). Because Vanessa hopes to date Nate, she steals the letter and tells neither Jenny nor Nate what she knows. Although Nate and Vanessa hope to keep their relationship a secret, their clandestine romance is made public with a Gossip Girl blast. Jenny is furious to learn that Vanessa has been dating Nate behind her back, so she is easily persuaded by The Girls on the Steps to retaliate. Jenny delivers Vanessa a dress to wear to the Snowflake Ball (to which Nate will be her date) that, unbeknownst to Vanessa, is completely see-through in the light. When Vanessa arrives to the Ball, she is hit with the spotlight and the crowd erupts with laughter. Vanessa, as a result of her attempt at being mean, is publically humiliated. Importantly, immediately prior to the spotlight hitting Vanessa, she told Nate the truth about stealing his letter. In this sense, Vanessa is framed as the ideal middle-class nice girl. She is not vulnerable to the demands of elite society or popularity, she speaks her mind and is always willing to admit when she is wrong, and she does not put idealized relationships with boys ahead of her "true" friendships with middle-class Jenny and Dan.

Rape, Relationships, and the Sexual Revolution

On *Gossip Girl*, the sexual escapades of the upper-class adolescents are a primary plot device, so much so that the Parents Television Council (PTC), which dubs itself "a non-partisan education organization advocating responsible entertainment" was outraged by the first season of the program ("Parents Television Council," 1998-2010). Despite the

potentially negative framing of the series by the PTC, the CW used the PTC's warnings as part of the marketing campaign for the second season premiere. In order to generate awareness for the show, the CW released a series of print ads and commercials featuring stills of the adolescent characters in various stages of undress, during or after sex, over which were placed the PTC's critiques (for example, "mind-blowingly inappropriate").

Sex scenes on *Gossip Girl* are treated erotically, and intercourse rarely leads to any repercussions (minus Blair's single episode, "A Thin Line between Chuck and Nate," pregnancy scare). This is true even of Vanessa, who never gets the guy, but who always appears to come out on top. The exception to this rule is middle-class Jenny. The narrative of *Gossip Girl* presents Jenny's middle-class purity (her virginity) as always at risk when she mixes with the upper-class. The viewer continually sees Jenny as vulnerable to rape.²⁵ In fact, in the series premiere, at the first party of the school year, Jenny finds herself alone on the rooftop with bad boy Chuck Bass who attacks her. The attempted rape is thwarted by Jenny's brother Dan and upper-class Serena (who only hours before was quite drunk, yet still managed to escape Chuck's advances with no help from anyone). Even when Jenny attempts to change her life for the better, the potential for rape remains, as when Agnes slips drugs into Jenny's drink and leaves her alone and comatose in a bar with a bachelor party (Season 3, "The Empire Strikes Jack"). When Jenny awakes, she has no idea where she is, so she calls Nate, who, once again, comes to her rescue using a device on his cell phone to map her coordinates. The ongoing threat to Jenny's purity suggests that forays into elite society are inherently destructive and dangerous for White middle-class girls.

²⁵ See Kelly and Pomerantz (2009) for a similar argument about middle-class girls' purity as at risk when under the influence of lower-class girls in the movie *Thirteen*.

Despite the danger that Jenny faces, she continues to seek out relationships with upper-class boys, as the program makes clear that while maintaining relationships with the Queen Bee or other powerful clique members is important for the Wannabe, social capital can also be amassed through romantic relationships with upper-class boys. Jenny explains that if she is going to be Queen, she needs a King. Not just any boy will do however; instead, he “has to be from the right kind of family” (Season 1, “Desperately Seeking Serena”). Jenny believes she has found the perfect king in Asher Hornsby a fellow prep school student, but trouble begins to brew when Gossip Girl posts that Asher was locking lips with another boy. In an attempt to maintain the illusion of her relationship and the power it brings her, Jenny lies to her friends when she tells them she “went to third” with Asher. When she visits Asher later that afternoon, she attempts to turn that lie into fact, but is rebuffed by Asher who maintains that he is holding up his end of the bargain. He explains, “You’re Jenny Humphrey from Brooklyn. You need status, access, resources. I give that to you.” Thus, Asher articulates the social capital he provides to Jenny (relationships, access to networks of influence, etc.).

Jenny’s attempt to rise in the social hierarchy through relationships with boys is revisited in season 3 when Jenny becomes Queen of Constance Billard and decides to make her debut at cotillion. Jenny believes the disadvantages she faces due to her middle-class upbringing (for example, her lack of skill in ballroom dancing) can be assuaged as long as she finds the proper escort. She turns down one boy because the school he attends is, according to her, “practically a public school.” Eventually Jenny is able to land her dream date, elite prep school jock Graham Collins. Jenny attempts to use Graham in order to get what she desires – to be Queen of not only Constance Billard but of the UES.

At the same time, it appears as though the only way for a middle-class girl to access eliteness is through a boy, upholding heteronormative and sexist values. Jenny's stepbrother Eric thwarts Jenny's attempt to become Queen of the UES by threatening her escort. Eric, who apparently had sexual contact with Graham at summer camp, tells Graham he will expose their secret tryst if Graham attends cotillion with Jenny. It is interesting to note that this is the second UES boy Jenny believed could help her social standing who is marked as gay or bisexual. Indeed, what is clear is that what makes Jenny attractive to these boys is her Brooklyn, middle-class status. Her covert desire to social climb is so obvious, she makes the perfect date for them because she holds no power and is blind to their homosexuality.

When Graham attends Cotillion with a girl other than Jenny, she believes she has lost the ability to be Queen until she thinks to call her Prince Charming Nate. Nate, once again, rescues Jenny when he steps in at the last minute as Jenny's escort and helps her to secure the title of UES Queen. In this sense, Jenny uses Nate to secure her ultimate desire. Jenny continues to use Nate when, the day after he rescues her from the potential rapists at the bachelor party, she decides to make a romantic pass at him (despite the fact that Nate has a girlfriend). Again, Jenny uses Nate's concern for her in order to manipulate him when, on Nate's birthday, for which his girlfriend, Serena, has planned a surprise party (and asked everyone to pretend to forget that it is his birthday, so he is truly surprised) Jenny decides to make her move. She calls to wish Nate a happy birthday and when he asks how she is doing, she complains, "Whenever I'm alone, I think of the other night. You're the only one who understands what I'm going through right now." Like the girls I examined in films representative of the Mean Girl discourse, Jenny embraces

claims of victimage for her own selfish desires. She allows Nate to believe that everyone has forgotten his birthday, and then continues to present herself to Nate as incapable of moving past the trauma she faced when she was drugged and left in a bar alone, thus downplaying the real feminist issue of sexual violence. Despite all she does to break up Nate and Serena, she is not able to gain Nate's love and instead angers both Nate and her now step-sister Serena.

In the season 3 finale, the narrative about Jenny's virginity comes full circle. She has been vulnerable to rape repeatedly and lied on multiple occasions about her sexual promiscuity (for example, when she lied about going to "third" with Asher; as well, she led her friends and family to believe she had lost her virginity to her drug dealing boyfriend Damien). The fact that Jenny lies about being sexually experienced contributes to both her authentic middle-class purity and her inauthentic performance of upper-classness. Her upper-class peers (both girls and boys) treat sex like a game. When Jenny tries to do the same, she loses. By the season finale, Jenny's life is once again out of control. She has stolen from her stepmother, dealt drugs, lied about losing her virginity, attempted to break up Nate and Serena. Even worse, she has lost the respect of her brother who describes Jenny as "out of control" (Season 2, "It's a Dad, Dad, Dad, Dad World"), her father who explains he has no other option but to send Jenny to live with her mother in Hudson, and her step-brother, Eric, who encourages Rufus to "send her crazy ass away." Eric goes on to warn Rufus, "I would do it before she hurts anyone else" (Season 2, "Dr. Estrangelove"). With nowhere else to go, Jenny goes to Chuck Bass's penthouse, her attempted rapist in the series premiere. Chuck sits alone in the dark, drinking liquor, and nursing a broken heart. His loneliness – secured by not only Blair's

rejection but by the recent death of his father – makes him far more empathetic than Jenny, who is shown as petulant in her refusal to go live with her mother.

Jenny and Chuck have sex, but the sex occurs entirely off screen. Whereas the majority of sex scenes on the show are treated erotically, the scene where Jenny finally has sex is hidden from the viewer. According to Projansky (2001), rape narratives historically link rape to women's independence. Throughout her tenure on the show, Jenny has worked to emphasize her autonomy through a series of choices that are framed as problematic (i.e., she runs away from home, considers being emancipated from her parents, and so forth). When Jenny enters into Chuck's penthouse, she is again shown making a troubled choice. We do not see Jenny leave Chuck's bedroom, but, in the next shot, Jenny is slumped over, tears running down her face, with black mascara covering her eyes and cheeks. Projansky (2001) notes a trope in rape narratives to briefly represent the women's point of view of the aftermath of the rape. When Jenny cries to Eric, "I wanted to wait. I wanted it to be special," she emphasizes the trauma of her experience (we do not see Chuck's perspective of this event). When Eric tries to console her, she exclaims, "Don't touch me!" Discomfort with touch is a detail specific to many women's physical responses to rape (Projansky, 2001). There is no reason to believe the sex was not consensual, yet the rape narrative is implied, and Jenny is cast as the victim. Through a series of tropes used to frame rape in popular culture, Jenny's sexual dalliance with Chuck is presented as a travesty in terms of her middle-class virtue. The use of the tropes of rape show how inauthentic Jenny has been in the UES and the grave dangers of this sort of social climbing on the part of girls. At the same time, the rape transforms Jenny from inauthentically bad in upper-class society to authentically good when she *chooses* to

return to the suburbs. In this sense, rape is seen as “a painful but ultimately positive event” in what it produces (Projansky, 2001, p. 100). Throughout past seasons, the need for Jenny to return to her middle-class roots has been made salient by comments from both middle-class and upper-class boys that suggest she is different from UES girls. For example, when a game of Truth or Dare leads Jenny into a bar, Dan tells Jenny “this is not who you are” (Season 1, “Dare Devil”), and, when Blair is dethroned as Queen Bee (for two episodes), Nate warns Jenny about the mean girls, telling her “you are not like those girls.” Eventually, Jenny recognizes the necessity of returning to her authentic middle-class self:

I would give it all back – the clothes, the limos, the parties – just for one day that felt like *normal*...nothing would make me happier than to go back to Brooklyn forever. When we lived in Brooklyn I had to ride the subway and make my own clothes, but at least our family was happy.

Concluding Thoughts

Jenny’s troubled attempts to penetrate the boundaries of elite upper-class society function as a warning to middle-class society that girls’ access to upper-class power will necessarily lead to a series of bad choices until a middle-class girl’s life is completely and totally out of control. Because Jenny is shown rebelling against her middle-class morality when accumulating social and cultural capital, she is punished for her covert desire to be popular and rise in the hierarchy of Girl World and the elite social structure of the UES. As a result, middle-classness is promoted as the baseline of what a nice girl should be. The story line of Jenny Humphrey is ultimately a warning about the dangers of middle-

class girls' entree into elite society, as we are encouraged to think about the scandalous upper-class as corrupting Jenny's middle-class innocence.

Jenny's attempts toward upward mobility are stigmatized, and her efforts to climb in the social order are characterized as defying the middle-class values of self-control and self-discipline, honesty and integrity, family, and sexual purity. Jenny's brother Dan floats easily through his time at St. Jude's preparatory school, amassing cultural capital and eventually an acceptance to Yale University. In line with his middle-class authenticity, Dan turns down Yale because the tuition is too expensive, choosing instead to go to New York University and live at home in Brooklyn. Dan is marked by the most "upright and valued motives in the American mythos of upward mobility: hard work, perseverance, and moral uprightness" (Winn, 2000, p. 44). In contrast, Jenny is shown as incapable of using cultural capital and, instead, her forays into elite society cause her to become dishonest, cruel, and bad. Overwhelmingly, the prep school environment is shown to be a dangerous place for White middle-class girls. On the other hand, Vanessa, as a girl of color, is presented as strong enough to stand against the pull of popularity and eliteness. She is, at all times, authentically good, so she is seen as the ideal middle-class girl.

Unlike in much popular culture, which takes a skeptical view of cultural capital while moralizing the fantasy of upward mobility (Winn, 2000), *Gossip Girl* shows boys as able to access and easily use cultural capital while suggesting upward mobility is dangerous for girls. In gendering upward mobility in this way, the program suggests that girls are unable to access eliteness without sacrificing their authentic good moral character and substance. By the season 3 finale, Jenny has lied, stolen, dealt drugs, and

lost her virginity. As Jenny's world crumbles around her, her foray into elite society is causally linked to each bad choice. Although each season has seen Jenny lie, cheat, and steal, it is the use of rape tropes to tell the story of Jenny's virginity loss (the potential for which has been constantly foreshadowed) that leads to Jenny's exile from Manhattan. Because Jenny *chooses* to leave for the middle-class suburbs, where Rufus explains there are no "mean girls or drug dealers," middle-classness is privileged. The narrative presents middle-classness as the baseline of what a good girl is, and Jenny is at her best and happiest when being her authentic middle-class self.

In three seasons of *Gossip Girl* Jenny's relationships with young women are dominated by fear, control, and aggression. What is more, it is the male characters on the show who "save" Jenny from potential rapists, from the police, and from herself. Despite the narrative's insistence that Jenny always find herself in jeopardy, there is no move to provide her with the tools necessary for the successful navigation of high school and adolescence. Indeed, feminism, which could potentially give young girls the mechanisms to empower themselves, is referenced only once when Jenny lies to her boss about having the day off from school for "Women's Suffrage Day." Instead, the solution to, what are framed as, Jenny's problems is a return to the middle-class suburbs where she will be safely removed from the capital she has gained toward attending an elite college or starting her own fashion line. This loss, it seems, is a small price to pay for the return of a good, happy, and "normal" Jenny.

Chapter 4

“Bullied to Death?:” The Demonization of “Real Life Mean Girls” in the Media

Coverage of the Phoebe Prince Bullycide

In the fall of 2009, 15-year-old Phoebe Prince moved from Ireland to South Hadley, Massachusetts - described in *The Boston Globe* as “a nice, comfortable middle-class suburb” (Cullen, 2010). According to national and local Massachusetts news reports, after enrolling at South Hadley High School, Phoebe briefly dated the school’s football quarterback, Sean Mulveyhill, earning the ire of several popular girls, including Sean’s on-again, off-again girlfriend, Kayla Narey. Labeled by the media as real life mean girls, Narey, Sharon Velazquez, Flannery Mullins, and Ashley Longe allegedly taunted Phoebe relentlessly in school and on social networking sites, such as Facebook. On January 14, 2010, while Phoebe was walking home from school, a group of girls reportedly drove by yelling insults and threw an energy drink in her direction. Tragically, Phoebe went home and hanged herself with the scarf her sister gave her for Christmas.

In the wake of Phoebe’s suicide, in an unprecedented move, the district attorney charged six²⁶ South Hadley teenagers with felonies ranging from statutory rape to violation of civil rights. The Prince case pulls together social unease about mean girls, the criminalization of girls’ bullying tactics, and anti-bullying legislation, so it provides a unique opportunity to examine the ways in which these issues have come to characterize girl culture. The representation of aggressive White middle-class girls as deviant is not

²⁶ Three younger girls were also charged in juvenile court.

new to the Prince case; however, the repercussions these girls are facing as a result of their constructed deviance is far more severe than anything I have outlined in the media texts I examined. The very real consequences the girls who allegedly bullied Phoebe faced include criminal charges, expulsion from school, and death threats. I previously noted that, in *Gossip Girl*, Jenny Humphrey was banished to the middle-class suburbs, where her father maintained there are no “mean girls.” In contrast, an analysis of media coverage of the Prince case affords access to the construction of a mean girl culture at work in a middle-class suburb, and, in turn, the cultural response to the deviant middle-class mean girls who are framed as killing Phoebe.

I do not attempt to tell the story of what “really” happened between Phoebe and the girls who allegedly bullied her. As Dow (1996) notes, “It is, of course, vital to know ‘what really happened’ ... (but) it is also illuminating to know what popular media told us was happening” (Dow, 1996, p. xvi). The Phoebe Prince case sheds light on the contemporary moral panic about girls’ bullying. Chesney-Lind and Irwin (2008) apply a moral panics paradigm (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978) to representations of aggressive and violent girls in media. I extend their discussion through this case study of the media coverage of the Prince case. Historically, the press has played a significant role in fueling moral panics over youth (Mazzarella, 2003). A moral panic has occurred when a group of people, classified as deviants, comes to become defined as a threat to societal values (S. Cohen, 1972). Mean girls are seen as deviant because they are part of the privileged norm (they are White, middle- to upper-class, and heterosexual), but they do not act in accordance with dominant gendered, raced, and classed expectations. The media frenzy surrounding girls’ bullying reveals “a public

concern with the erosion of normative heterosexual, middle-class gender roles” (Batacharya, 2004, p. 62). The moral panic is most clearly applicable to the Prince case, as the legislative and criminal outcomes speak to the amplification of a desire to tame a threat that takes on new salience when it is framed as coming from real girls acting in real ways.

According to Bergman (2010), by June 7, 2010 – five months after Prince committed suicide – “811 news stories were written about her in 45 countries” (p. A17). Details of the Prince bullycide (suicide said to be a result of bullying) were covered on news channels Fox and CNN, in national newspapers (e.g., *New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, and *USA Today*), magazines (i.e., *People* and *Newsweek*), and on morning television programs (such as *The Early Show*, *The Today Show*, and *The View*). In addition, at the time of this writing, there have been two academic articles written on Phoebe Prince, both in the *Annals of the American Psychotherapy Association* (Kalman, 2010; Kern, 2010).

In order to determine the sample that would serve as my primary source of analysis, I searched LexisNexis Academic database for “Phoebe Prince” in all English news. I defined the time-period as January 14, 2010 (the day Phoebe died) to December 1, 2010 (the day I began my research). The search returned 1, 317 stories, which I condensed to 840 by including only stories published in newspapers and magazines. The sample was reduced further by the removal of international publications. Finally, I chose to focus on magazines and newspapers with a national readership (for example, magazines such as *People* and *Newsweek* and newspapers like *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*) or Massachusetts based newspapers (such as *The Boston Herald* and the

Lowell Sun). Relevant articles were defined as those that dealt directly with the Prince case. As such, articles about beauty pageants (bullying was the winners' platform), school plays (about bullying), and essay contests (the topic was bullying) were excluded. I did include letters to the editors because they are one component of the cultural discourse about girls' bullying (Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007a). Given these selection criteria, 50 articles from 13 newspapers and magazines were included in the final analysis.

Critical scholars note a media convention to focus on an individual rather than grapple with structural problems (Dow, 1996, 2001; Sloop, 2000). In a similar manner, the Prince case specifically, as well as the Mean Girl discourse to which it contributes, ignores the role systemic classism, sexism, racism and heterosexism might play in cases of girl bullying. In contrast, media coverage of the suicides of boys who were bullied for being (or appearing to be) gay more clearly focus on the structural problem of homophobia. Less than a year after Phoebe killed herself, in September 2010, college freshman Tyler Clementi committed suicide after his roommate posted video online of him having a sexual encounter with another man. While Tyler's suicide was linked to homophobia, the Prince discourse remains mired in postfeminist ideas about mean girls and ignores the similar issues of compulsory heterosexuality and sexism that may have contributed to her suicide. Media coverage of Tyler's story connected his death to the suicide of three other boys who reportedly also took their lives that month after enduring homophobic laced bullying. Together, the boys' suicides became part of a larger narrative of gay bullying, which "catalyzed thousands of people to tape video messages – including

President Obama, celebrities, politicians – for the ‘It Gets Better Project’²⁷ to inspire and encourage LGBT youth” (Sheperd, 2011). The empathetic cultural outpouring about these boys’ deaths and the inherent demonization of the homophobia that is seen as causing the boys’ suicides is noteworthy. While not my focus here, the two cases are connected. For example, the October 2010 issue of *People* magazine, which features Tyler on the cover, includes a follow up on the Prince case entitled “Phoebe Prince’s Legacy.” However, as I will argue, unlike news stories about Tyler’s suicide, which partially blame the structural issue of homophobia, the Prince coverage lays the blame for girl bullying on individuals.

The Prince case is unique among other areas I examine since the popular films, books, and television shows I explore in chapters 1 through 3 place the blame for girls’ bullying squarely at the feet of girls themselves. Instead, much of the media coverage of the Prince case tells a narrative in which the school, its teachers, and administrators (along with the mean girls) are complicit in Phoebe’s death. The discourse at work in the Prince case calls on teachers and school administrators to watch for the hidden world of girls’ aggression. As reflected in the cultural discourse about the Prince case, teachers and administrators are blamed for not paying attention to the ways girls are treating one another. Despite the fact that there is little evidence to suggest girls are bullying more than ever before (indeed, some data indicates the opposite), discourses about girl bullies work to champion escalating punitive treatment of girls in the form of the criminalization

²⁷ According to its website (<http://www.itgetsbetter.org/>), the “It Gets Better Project was created to show young LGBT people the levels of happiness, potential, and positivity their lives will reach – if they can just get through their teen years...(it) has turned into a worldwide movement, inspiring over 10,000 user-created videos viewed over 35 million times.”

of feminized bullying tactics and anti-bullying legislation that would increase formal scrutiny of girls' lives in school. Grossberg (1994) notes, "the most silenced population in society" is youth (p. 25), yet these increased surveillance techniques are primarily focused on girls' communication (indirect aggression uses talk, not physical violence) and would, as a result, function to silence girls further.

Constructing White, Middle-Class, Heterosexual Girls as "Deviant"

It is rare to find moments of aggression by girls that are signified culturally as "normal" (Heidensohn, 2000/2001). Instead, girls' aggression, particularly the aggression of White middle-class girls, is nearly always problematized. Indeed, the Mean Girl discourse relies on notions of female aggression as troubling. In widespread media accounts, the girls who allegedly bullied Phoebe have come to be defined by the label "mean girl" (Constantine, 2010e), contributing to stereotypes about deviant White girls who are mean, aggressive, and violent. Prior to the Prince case, "mean girl" was a term bandied about in popular culture but rarely applied in news stories about real girls, yet the first article published on Phoebe's suicide in *The Boston Globe* (before the media frenzy began) was titled "The Untouchable Mean Girls" (Cullen, 2010). Additionally, on the cover of *People* (2010), the magazine claims to have "new details about the accused 'mean girls,'" and an article in the *Daily News* refers to Sharon Velazquez's mother as the "'mean girl' ma" (Nocera, 2010, p. 16). Aside from using the label "mean girls," segments about the Prince case on *The Today Show* and *The View* used clips from the 2004 film *Mean Girls* to contextualize girls' bullying. This process is exemplary of Foucault's understanding of discourse, as the images of girls' bullying in popular culture have come to be defined as the "truth" about girls.

In the representation of the Prince case, calling Kayla Narey, Ashley Longe, Flannery Mullins, and Sharon Velasquez “mean girls” works to move past defining the actions of girl bullies and, instead, defines the girls themselves as evil. The girls’ constructions as wicked are even more salient in newspapers that describe the girls as “a coterie of aspiring fascists...predatory...cruel, hedonistic, and self-absorbed” (R. Cohen, 2010, p. A13) or as “criminal torturers” (Eagan, 2010b, p. 006). The deviance of the girls is amplified as they are seen as responsible for causing harm to other girls - even death. While any form of aggression in girls is typically represented as deviant, it is important to note that instances of physical aggression against Phoebe are nearly absent from the media coverage, so the Prince discourse appears focused on the elements of the girls’ communication that are framed as bullying tactics. The girls’ communication is then vilified through hyperbolic, vague, pathos-ridden language such as “social blood-letting” (Gelzinis, 2010). The bullying tactics mentioned in *The New York Times* and *People* include “taunting and physical threats” (Eckholm & Zezima, 2010a, p. 14), name calling and verbal abuse (Eckholm & Zezima, 2010b), insults and hectoring (Meadows & Herbst, 2010). The only report of actual physical contact can be found in the April 2010 issue of *People*, which claims Phoebe was shoved into lockers (Meadows & Herbst, 2010). Despite the fact that the bullying is constructed as primarily communicative in nature, there are causal links drawn that suggest Kayla, Sharon, Flannery, and Ashley killed Phoebe. For example, the tagline of a March 30, 2010 segment on CBS’s *The Early Show* is “Teen Bullying Leads to Suicide,” and Byrne (2010), in *The Patriot Ledger*, calls the girls “murderers” (p. 8). *The Christian Science Monitor* reports that the girls harassed Phoebe “to the point that she committed suicide” (Khadaroo, 2010). In *The Boston*

Herald, Gelzinis (2010) makes the link even more salient when he calls the tactics the girls reportedly used to bully Phoebe “weapons” that are “far more subtle, but just as deadly” as “teens gunning each other down” (p. 005). There are no reports of physical violence, yet the feminized form of aggression is shown to be a tool for murder. In laying the blame for Phoebe’s suicide at the feet of “real life mean girls,” the fact that suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15 to 24 years olds is ignored (CDC, 2007).

When visual images accompany coverage of the Prince case, the kinds of pictures of the girls who reportedly bullied Phoebe contribute to their vilification. For example, the April 26, 2010 issue of *People* features a picture of Ashley Longe, her head bowed as if in shame, flanked by a police officer leading her into a car (all we can see is the car’s windshield, but the assumption is that this is a police car). Although Ashley’s gaze is down, the picture frames her face directly, so her fair skin and reddish-brown hair are clear. The caption to the right of Ashley’s face reads “ACCUSED,” the word surrounded by a red box, which functions to highlight her alleged role in Phoebe’s suicide. Taken in tandem with the construction of South Hadley as a “nice middle-class suburb,” Ashley’s seeming Whiteness speaks to her deviance (she is a White middle-class girl who is “accused” of a serious crime).

Not only are the girls constructed as deviant, they are held responsible for the negative framing of South Hadley. In *The Republican*, a Springfield, MA newspaper, Sandra Constantine argues the mean girls are tarnishing the image of a “tight knit community” (Constantine, 2010b). Constantine notes that, on its website, South Hadley describes itself as an “inviting and charming community,” and the town’s slogan is “A Great Place to Live” (Constantine, 2010c). Using the voices of South Hadley residents,

Constantine paints a picture of a town that is suffering because of the actions of a few deviant girls. For example, one multi-generational South Hadley resident says, “It was always nice to say I was from South Hadley. That is no longer the case” (Constantine, 2010c, p. A01). Constantine quotes another South Hadley resident as saying, “I would absolutely not want to have to sell my home right now. Who wants to move to a town where all this is going on?” (p. A01). These quotes work to suggest that the girls’ aggression is out of the norm and not to be expected in a small middle-class suburb like South Hadley. Also quoted in Constantine’s story is school Superintendent Gus Sayer who reportedly read a statement at a school board meeting in which he called the high school’s reputation “tarnished” and promised the bullies would be subject to punishment. This quote also functions to blame the girls for blemishing the otherwise pristine reputation of South Hadley and its school.

The Evil Insiders vs. the Vulnerable Outsider

Although very few concrete details are provided about the actions of the bullies, the girls are framed as evil. These constructed images contribute to a clear story about the vulnerable outsider Prince and the evil insider mean girls. Newspapers feature descriptions of Phoebe as suffering “unending humiliation” (Ollove, 2010), “relentless, sadistic abuse” (Fitzgerald, 2010, p. 002), “relentless taunting” (Eckholm & Zezima, 2010a, 2010b), “psychological” (“Our culture is to blame for widespread bullying,” 2010, p. 10A) and “verbal torture” (Murphy, 2010, p. 9). In a letter to the editor of *USA Today* (2010), Alexandria says she realizes just “how evil” these girls are, while Eagan (2010b) in *The Boston Herald* calls them “criminal torturers” (p. 006). The girls are also referred to as “tormentors” (Chabot, 2010; Szaniszló, 2010). Fitzgerald (2010), in *The Boston*

Herald, claims Phoebe's suffering is analogous to the "unspeakable horrors of internment at Dachau and Buchenwald" (p. 002). In turn, the mean girls are framed as like the Nazis who tortured and murdered millions of innocent people. The girls' construction as similar to the Nazis is clear particularly through the myriad references to their bullying as "torture." Additionally, in *The Boston Globe*, a high school parent claims to be angry that the town has not confronted "the evil among us" (Cullen, 2010b). Comparing Phoebe's experiences to those of individuals who were in concentration camps relies on constructions of not only the bullies as evil but of Phoebe as an innocent victim.

Phoebe's vulnerability is framed through her description as "extremely sweet" (Constantine, 2010a, p. A01), pretty and popular (Bergman, 2010; Van Sack, Wedge, & Weir, 2010), smart and charming (Fanto, 2010), and beautiful (Constantine, 2010b, 2010d). Phoebe is represented as defenseless in the face of unending, relentless attacks by the wicked mean girls. In *The Boston Herald*, Fitzgerald (2010) describes Phoebe as "cowering in the halls of South Hadley High School, praying only to pass unnoticed by the crowd" (p. 006). Fitzgerald does not quote any of Phoebe's acquaintances nor any of the teachers at South Hadley High School, so his posthumous description is entirely hypothetical and stands in direct contrast to the Phoebe who is described by her friend Patrick as always "smiling and laughing" (Constantine, 2010a, p. A01). Describing Phoebe in this conflicting manner - as an isolated victim and as an outgoing popular girl - is a trend in the coverage of the Prince case. For example, in the opening paragraph of "Insider her torment" in *People*, Smolowe (2010) quotes one of Phoebe's female friends as saying the day Phoebe committed suicide, "she was skipping around. She seemed great" (p. 66). I do not mean to suggest that Phoebe must necessarily have been *either*

miserable *or* happy; however, I do want to argue that the overwhelming focus in the narrative on Phoebe's vulnerability works to suggest that the alleged bullies made every moment of every day of Phoebe's life unbearable, which contributes to the demonization of the girls.

The image of Phoebe as the ultimate victim – alone, scared, and without the tools or channels to combat the bullying - becomes most salient through the construction of Phoebe's outsider status. In 30 of the 50 stories I analyzed, Phoebe's Irish heritage is discussed, if not attached to her name when first mentioned, as in “15-year-old Irish immigrant named Phoebe Prince” (Ollove, 2010). She is described as an “Irish immigrant” (Khadaroo, 2010; Meadows & Herbst, 2010), “a recent immigrant from Ireland” (Greenwald, 2010), “a newcomer from Ireland” (R. Cohen, 2010; Eckholm & Zezima, 2010d), “a new student from Ireland”(Eckholm & Zezima, 2010c), “a transplant” (McNeil, 2010; Smolowe, et al., 2010), and “the despairing new immigrant from a small Irish village” (Nocera, 2010). In this sense, her outsider status is confirmed. The initial media focus on the two Columbine shooters similarly verified Harris and Klebold as outsiders by labeling them “as members of the ‘Trench Coat Mafia’ who were influenced by goth culture and rock music like Marilyn Manson” (Kellner, 2008, p. 119). These labels framed Harris and Klebold as apart from the dominant student body but did so through tropes of alienation that functioned to vilify the boys and the youth culture of which they were a part (Frymer, 2009; Kellner, 2008; Muschert, 2007). Far from being constructed as alienated, Phoebe is shown to be a young girl who desperately wanted to ignore the bullying and to participate in the normative school culture, such as the upcoming school dance about which media report Phoebe was very excited (Constantine,

2010b; Fanto, 2010; Smolowe, et al., 2010). As a result, despite Phoebe's immigrant status, she is framed as the ideal White middle-class girl, unlike the girl bullies who are represented as aggressive and "foul-mouthed" (Van Sack, et al., 2010, p. 006).

These dichotomous images of Phoebe as the ideal White middle-class girl and the bullies as deviant suggest that Phoebe was welcomed into U.S. culture, a culture that she openly desired to be a part of, only to have the South Hadley High School mean girls uphold her outsider position. Much like the mean girls I have studied in previous chapters, the girls who allegedly bullied Phoebe are constructed as using boundary maintenance, but this idea takes on a new level of meaning when attributed to mean girls who are keeping an immigrant out of their elite clique. The discourse of the Prince case suggests Phoebe made the ultimate mistake when she deigned to date above her station in *Girl World*. In turn, the mean girls are framed as bullying Phoebe in order to remind her of her place (Cullen, 2010b). In *The Boston Herald*, Rosalind Wiseman, author of *Queen Bees & Wannabes*, responds to the Prince case by maintaining that when a girl is new to the community and begins to date the popular "quarterback of the football team...older girls are going to take the attitude: 'Who does she think she is? She can't come into this community and hook up with our guys. She needs to be put in her place'" (Gelzinis, 2010, p. 005). *The New York Times* quotes one of Phoebe's classmates as saying, "She was new, and she was from a different country, and she didn't really know the school very well. I think that's probably one of the reasons why they chose Phoebe" (Eckholm & Zezima, 2010a, p. 1). The idea that Phoebe "didn't really know the school very well" frames the narrative of girls' bullying as a problem specific to the U.S. Much like Cady in *Mean Girls* (2004), who is represented as unaware of the rules of U.S. high school

cliques and popularity because she was socialized in Africa, Phoebe is seen as ignorant to the U.S. high school social caste system. In *The Boston Herald*, Eagan (2010b) claims Phoebe was not only new to the U.S. but new to “high schools’ cliques and brutal pecking order” (p. 006). In a manner similar to the way in which Africa is represented in *Mean Girls*, Ireland is constructed as an innocent place, free of mean girls and bullying.

In the Prince case, much like the Columbine shooters, the mean girls are constructed as taking pleasure in aggression. Although one way to view Klebold and Harris is as victims to the jocks who reportedly bullied them, their constructions are more similar to those of the South Hadley mean girls. For example, following the Columbine massacre, media reported the joy the shooters seemed to take from their rampage. In an interview on *The Today Show*, Katie Couric describes the boys as “laughing and carrying on” and a fellow Columbine student confirms “they were acting as if it was like a party” (Frymer, 2009). In a similar manner, *The Boston Globe* reports the girls who reportedly bullied Phoebe:

went on Facebook and mocked (Phoebe) in death. They told State Police detectives they did nothing wrong, had nothing to do with Phoebe killing herself. And then they went right back to school and started badmouthing Phoebe. They had a dance, a cotillion, at the Log Cabin in Holyoke two days after Phoebe’s sister found her in the closet, and some who were there say one of the Mean Girls bragged about how she played dumb with the detectives who questioned her. (Cullen, 2010b)

Cullen’s phraseology is interesting in that he claims the girls “had a dance...two days after Phoebe’s sister found her.” The girls did not host the cotillion; it was a school-

sponsored event that Phoebe had planned to attend, yet Cullen seems to suggest the girls threw a party to celebrate Phoebe's death. In this sense, Cullen ascribes the mean girls with a sense of power that he attributes to their elite social status. In this way, although the girls are vilified in some of the same ways as Klebold and Harris, they are not shown to be misfits and outcasts; instead, Cullen reports they are "pretty and popular," placing them in an elite position in the high school hierarchy (Cullen, 2010b).

The Feminization and Demonization of Indirect Aggression

While I have thus far examined the media treatment of the girls in the Prince case, I now turn to the representations of the two boys who were arrested following Phoebe's death: Austin Renaud who was arrested for statutory rape, and Sean Mulveyhill was also charged with statutory rape, as well as criminal harassment, disturbing a school assembly, and violation of civil rights (with bodily injury resulting). In the news coverage of the Prince case, the two boys are generally mentioned only in passing or, when they are mentioned, their circumstances tend to receive a more positive spin. For example, in a *Washington Post* editorial, Marcus (2010) maintains the "statutory rape charges are *especially* troubling, assuming the sex was consensual. Teenage boys engage in this conduct with teenage girls every day without being prosecuted. That activity, however unwise, does not suddenly require criminal overtones because the girl killed herself" (p. A17). Statutory rape is, in fact, a crime, so inherently the charge carries with it criminal overtones. On the other hand, bullying is *not* currently a crime, yet Marcus implies that it does require criminal overtones. Additionally, the criminal charges against Sean Mulveyhill indicate he did more than have sex with Phoebe. As detailed in the affidavits that support the charges against the bullies and as reported in *People* (2010), on the day

Phoebe killed herself, Sean allegedly wrote “‘Irish bitch’ and other obscenities on the library sign-in sheet” and called Phoebe a “whore” (p. 70). In my analysis, I note a trend to downplay the role of the boys in Phoebe’s bullying in order to make the girls’ carry the burden of the responsibility for Phoebe’s death. The October 18, 2010 issue of *People* states Sean’s “charges include statutory rape.” Although the magazine suggests there are more charges against Sean, the charges associated with bullying are listed only under the girls’ names. Similarly, the April 26, 2010 issue of *People* quotes Sean’s friends who describe him as a “good kid” who “would bend over backwards for a buddy,” while Austin Renaud’s lawyer claims his client has been “vilified.” In turn, a picture of Sharon Valezquez shows her glaring at the camera flanked by her attorney coming out of juvenile court. We read no similar affirmative claims about Sharon. In this case, the *People* piece provides space for positive narratives about the boys and the damage that has been done to their lives as a result of the criminal charges, while “mean girl” Sharon is denigrated through pictures and her description as a troubled girl who deserves to be in police custody.

The focus on the girls as Phoebe’s primary bullies works to feminize indirect aggression. The discourse about the Prince case rarely provides examples of boys using covert forms of aggression. In *The Boston Herald*, Eagan (2010b) claims:

Boys beat each other up. Girls spread vicious rumors. They call each other ugly names. They roll their eyes and laugh derisively and whisper as their victims squirm before them, helpless. Girls exclude. Their prey is banished from their cafeteria lunch table. She’s not invited to the party. She’s isolated, alone. (p. 006)

Here, Eagan suggests covert forms of aggression (spreading rumors, name-calling, etc.) are specific to girls. Moreover, she reduces the physical violence more often associated with boys and men into a single sentence, which, in turn, lessens the threat of physical violence, as well as suggests boys only bully other boys. Although Eagan's article is ostensibly about the "constant torment" Phoebe faced, she does not link the description of girls' bullying above to Phoebe's bullying. Instead, Eagan presents the fictionalized, hypothetical description of girls' bullying as the "truth" of Phoebe's torment and generalizes the narrative to be true of all girls. Ringrose (2006) maintains physical aggression "is held as a neutral, normative masculine standard of aggression against which the feminine is constructed as indirect, repressed and aberrant" (p. 411). Similarly, descriptions of mean girls that focus on social aggression normalize boys' physical aggression and suggest the criminalization of girls' communication is necessary. More specifically, with regard to the Prince case, although Mulveyhill faces the same charges as the female bullies, he is rarely depicted in media as using the tactics of indirect aggression that are marked as feminine.

Chesney-Lind and Irwin (2008) remind us that "the national concern about 'bullying' emerged out of horrific incidents of violence, like Columbine, virtually all of which involved boys" (p. 7). There are multiple references to Columbine in the media coverage of the Prince case, but none discusses the differences in the boys' physical violence and the girls' indirect aggression. For example, on Boston.com, Cullen (2010a) explains that months before Phoebe's suicide, South Hadley High School brought in Barbara Coloroso to talk to student, parents, teachers, and administrators about bullying.

According to Cullen:

Coloroso knows as much about the subject as anyone. She was brought into Columbine after two kids who were bullied decided to get even with guns. She was brought into the Red Lake reservation in Minnesota after a 16-year-old shot seven people dead at the high school where he was bullied.²⁸ And she was brought to South Hadley, ahead of the curve, ahead of a tragedy, five months before Phoebe Prince...hanged herself after being tormented by a group of girls who just wouldn't leave her alone. (para. 2-3)

Note the gender-ambiguous manner in which Cullen describes the school shootings. As opposed to referencing that Klebold and Harris were boys, Cullen calls them “kids.” Instead of referring to Weise as male, Cullen indicates a “16-year-old” committed the murders. In contrast, Cullen is quite clear that the bullies in South Hadley were a “group of girls.” In the media coverage of the Prince case, the alleged girl bullies are demonized and held as primarily responsible for Phoebe’s death.

Monitoring Girls’ Communication

An important indicator of a moral panic is a concern “over the behavior of others and the consequences such conduct is believed to have on society” (Welch, Price, & Yankey, 2002, p. 7). “Moral panic typically manifests in lawmaking designed to combat a putative problem” (Welch, et al., 2002, p. 9). The Prince case takes its place within a cultural climate that is anxious about bullying and the responsibility of school officials. Three months after Phoebe’s death, in April 2010, the Department of Education hosted the first federal school bullying summit. In March 2011, the White House hosted a

²⁸ On March 21, 2005, Jeff Weise shot and killed seven people at Red Lake Senior High School, including one teacher and a security guard, before turning his gun on himself.

conference on preventing bullying in schools. Several states are considering enacting anti-bullying laws, while 43 states have already enacted some form of anti-bullying legislation (Paulson, 2010). A Massachusetts state law, passed in April 2010, requires schools to investigate acts of bullying and report the most serious cases to law enforcement officers (Eckholm & Zezima, 2010e; Engel & Sandstrom, 2010). In some cases, anti-bullying legislation in schools is said to be too weak. Instead, critics, such as “well-known child advocate” Wendy Murphy, quoted in *The Boston Herald*, argue that legislation that fails to make bullying a crime will not work. According to Murphy, “the reason people are bullies is because they know there’s no law against it” (Chabot, 2010, p. 005). The article does not supply Murphy’s credentials or support for this claim, yet Murphy’s argument works to pull legislation and criminalization together, further increasing close inspection and punitive treatment of girls. Charging the alleged bullies in the Prince case criminally speaks to a trend noted by Chesney-Lind and Irwin (2008) to “upcrime” or for police to respond more seriously to forms of youth violence, a trend these scholars argue is a result of Columbine. Despite the fact that multiple data sources maintain girls are not becoming more aggressive (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008; Mile Males & Chesney-Lind, 2010) and despite the fact that critical scholarship has shown that girls are not in crisis (Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007a), the moral panic about girls’ bullying indicates a cultural desire to subject girls to further surveillance and to silence girls’ voices.

The criminalization of bullying, specifically the way in which girls use communication (i.e., gossip and name-calling) to aggress, reveals a moral panic in which mean girls are defined as a social threat and, in turn, are treated punitively in order to

inhibit any further negative consequences to society. Following Phoebe's death, the girls were charged with felonies, including criminal harassment, violation of civil rights, and stalking. This sharp response is the first of its kind: "Legal experts said they were not aware of other cases in which students faced serious criminal charges for harassing a fellow student" (Eckholm & Zezima, 2010a, p. 1). Actions that may have been previously dealt with by school administrators or parents are now processed as criminal offenses. Media reflect the idea that these charges are not enough and feature cultural calls for tougher charges, such as manslaughter (Schwartz, 2010), again framing girls' communication as a weapon for murder.

The Prince case also reflects concerns about girls' communication online. Contemporary moral panics about youth point to adult fear of new technologies and the ways in which youth use these technologies (Jenkins, 1999; Mazzarella, 2003). According to the prosecutor in the Prince case, the majority of the bullying took place on school grounds (Eckholm & Zezima, 2010c), yet the newspaper articles that were among the first to report the January suicide of Phoebe nearly all blame cyberbullying for Phoebe's death or reference cyberbullying as a key aspect of her case (Donelan, 2010; Eagan, 2010b; Van Sack, et al., 2010). Eckholm and Zezima (2010a) use the term "plotting" when discussing the cyberbullying Phoebe faced (p. 1). This term works to create an image of students working together to pre-plan their actions toward Phoebe. Communication technologies (such as instant messaging and texting) are framed as "weapons," in some instances, for murder. For example, in an April 6, 2010 segment on CNN, Anderson Cooper claims that "cyberbullying is blamed" for Phoebe's suicide. Similarly, Donelan (2010) asserts Phoebe "committed suicide...after being inundated

with cruel messages on her Facebook profile and through text messages on her cell phone,” and Cullen (2010b) explains, “cyberbullies using text messages and social networking websites were among those who hounded 15-year-old Phoebe Prince to the grave.” Bhat (2010) maintains that Phoebe’s suicide “highlights the tragic number of adolescents who have been cyber-bullied and see no recourse other than death” (p. 7). In each of these cases, girls’ cyberbullying is shown to have caused Phoebe to kill herself, so the criminalization of bullying is seen as acceptable, indeed necessary.

Scapegoating the Failure of the American Dream

The blaming of agents of socialization, such as the school system, is common during times of moral panic. Schools are understood to be (at least partially) responsible for developing adolescent moral character. In this postfeminist climate, there is a particular preoccupation with the moral character of girls (Coppock, Haydon, & Richter, 1995). The idea, constructed in the news coverage, that the teachers at South Hadley High School failed to protect Phoebe from the evil mean girls, suggests the school system failed to recognize the immoral character of the most popular and powerful girls in the high school, or, perhaps more troubling, recognized the girls’ were lacking in moral character and chose to ignore it, thereby allowing their power to increase unabated. Many news reports quote District Attorney Scheibel as detailing a relentless campaign against Phoebe that “faculty, staff, and administrators of the high school were alerted to before her death” (Eagan, 2010a, p. 004). *The Boston Herald* quotes one student as saying Phoebe would often run out of class crying (Van Sack, et al., 2010). In the *Daily News*, parents of South Hadley High School students claim the teachers, as well as the bullies, should be tried criminally. Wendy Murphy, “a vocal advocate for anti-bullying laws”

says in the same article that “she was stunned the DA ‘didn’t have the guts’ to charge the adults” (Nocera, 2010, p. 16). Much like the vague language that characterizes the descriptions of what the bullies allegedly did to Phoebe, the discourse about what the teachers *should have done* to help Phoebe is also ambiguous.

Postfeminism questions the possibility for any sense of unity among women (Walters, 1995). While the South Hadley principal and superintendent are marked as male through their masculine names (Dan and Gus respectively) and the use of masculine pronouns, the “teachers” and “nurse” who consoled Phoebe when she wept are not gendered in this way; instead, they are marked as female through their occupational choices and their descriptions as nurturing. Teaching and nursing are considered traditionally feminine career choices. Moreover, women and girls are seen as “naturally” inclined toward care giving. In *The New York Times*, Eckholm and Zezima (2010d) claim, according to several of Phoebe’s classmates, teachers and the school nurse consoled Phoebe as she wept. The image of an individual consoling a young girl while she weeps reads as implicitly female. A report in *The New York Times* suggests that when Phoebe arrived to class in tears, her teacher “tried to console her in the hallway and then left her there” (Eckholm & Zezima, 2010d, p. 1). The teachers are constructed as either ignorant to what was happening or indifferent (Gelzini, 2010). In either case, the women are framed as having contributed to the death of a child. They have failed as women, and that failure, according to Eagan (2010a) is “so monstrous it’s almost incomprehensible” (p. 004). The suggestion that Phoebe’s teachers and the school nurse did not protect her functions to construct the feminist ideals of mentorship and sisterhood as failed.

The girls who allegedly bullied Phoebe and the female teachers who did not protect her are scapegoated, to borrow Burke's (1969, 1970) use of the term, for the failure of the American Dream. According to Burke (1969), the scapegoat "is profoundly consubstantial to those who, looking upon it as a chosen vessel, would ritualistically cleanse themselves by wading the burden of their own inequities upon it" (p. 406). Phoebe's immigrant narrative positions Phoebe as having come to the United States to achieve the American Dream. The Horatio Alger mythology that centers on individual triumph over humble beginnings is a staple of U.S. culture. Implicit in this ideology are the cultural values of egalitarianism and meritocracy, which are also commonly understood as normative feminine ideals. At the heart of the American Dream is the mythos of the self-made person, in concert with the rejection of structural critique of racism and sexism (Cloud, 1996). Blaming women and girls for the failure of Phoebe's American Dream blatantly ignores the role sexism may have played. According to Oliver (2010), Phoebe "moved from Ireland to Massachusetts with the promise of a new life." As well, the defense motions in the cases against Phoebe's alleged bullies quote Phoebe's mother as telling the grand jury she had hoped for a "new start" for Phoebe in South Hadley (Contrada, 2010). Phoebe's "new start," the discourse suggests, was thwarted by, as described by Meredith Vieira of *The Today Show*, a "predatory pack" of mean girls, and the female educators who "could have stopped the torture of Phoebe Prince...(maybe) even have saved her life" (Eagan, 2010a, p. 004). The implication is that girls and women are a threat to the American Dream – one of our longest standing and most powerful ideologies.

Despite the argument that structural racism and sexism make the American Dream impossible for many, cultural blame seems focused on the girls who bullied Phoebe for the failure of Phoebe's American Dream. In the media, it is reported repeatedly that the girls who bullied Phoebe called her a "slut" and a "whore." These words are not intrinsic to girls, but instead indicate the structural power imbalances between males and females that manifest through a sexual double standard that allows for a wide range of acceptable sexual practices for men and boys and insists that girls remain pure and chaste (Miller & White, 2004). The sexual double standard in contemporary U.S. culture plays a significant role in the bullying of girls, as still today, the ultimate insult for a girl is to be called a "whore" or "slut." The sexual double standard rewards boys for sexual conquests and punishes girls for having even a modicum of sexual experience, yet in the Prince case, girls are demonized when constructed as enforcing that double standard. In the discourse of the Prince case, the historical realities of sexism or the persistent feminist struggles against domination are displaced in favor of images of girls who bully.

"The 'mean girl problem' is seen as a closed loop that does not implicate boys or men in any way, never hinting at a sexual double standard" (Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009, p. 6). Without acknowledgement of the interlocking systems of oppression that may contribute to girls' bullying, jealousy emerges as the motive for the girls' bullying of Phoebe. In *The New York Times*, Phoebe's relationship with Sean Mulveyhill is said to have caused his ex-girlfriend Kayla Narey to be so jealous that she and some of her friends started their "campaign" against Phoebe (Eckholm & Zezima, 2010d). As a result, Kayla is framed as the Queen Bee – the girl who was able to get the other girls to do her

bidding. As described in *The Republican*, Kayla “took offense to Prince’s flirting with a senior boy and got her friends to bully the Irish girl and they, in turn, got their friends to join in” (Constantine, 2010a, p. A01). Inevitably, news reports boil the cause of Phoebe’s bullying down to the fact that she dated Sean (and later Austin Renaud). *People* (2010) quotes a student at South Hadley High School as saying, “she was bullied out of pure jealousy” (p. 68). This way of thinking relies on stereotypical notions of girls and women as jealous, emphasizing competition among women. The Prince discourse feeds “the postfeminist media theme” (Dow, 1996, p. 148) of divisions among women and contributes similar images of girls as one another’s enemies. As Dow (1996) explains, implicit in this message is that “the possibility of female solidarity was a feminist fantasy” (p. 148). The Prince discourse demonizes the girls involved through their constructions as jealous and competitive. In the process, boys are relieved of any potential blame. This process works to scapegoat deviant White, middle-class girls for the failure of Phoebe’s American Dream.

Concluding Thoughts

Those moral panics that are specifically about young people are characterized by “adults’ fear of losing control over ‘vulnerable’ youth” (Mazzarella, 2007, p. 49). In newspaper articles and editorials about the Prince case, teenagers are described as having a lack of maturity, raging hormones, limited impulse control (Anonymous, 2010), while the teenage brain is said to be “a work in progress” (Marcus, 2010, p. A17). Adolescence (and, thereby, girlhood) is entirely a cultural phenomenon (Driscoll, 2002). As a culture, we have socially constructed ideas about what constitutes childhood. The result is a malleable creation, which makes the assignment of an age range to the period of

adolescence difficult, if not impossible. Yet, in the discourse about girls' bullying, characteristics that are said to define girls (i.e., aggressive, mean, out of control) are not seen as socially constructed but instead as the "truth" about contemporary girlhood. Moreover, defining girls as "at the mercy of their hormones, signaling the loss of rationality seems very closely related to the disease of hysteria, which was also thought to befall young women at this time of their lives" (Aapola, et al., 2005, p. 46). The construction of White middle-class girls as out of control and deviant contributes to the idea that adults are responsible for keeping an eye on youth, while calls for anti-bullying legislation and the criminalization of girls' communication work to increase punitive control over girls, despite the fact that there is little support for the idea that girls are out of control or in crisis.

Court documents filed in preparation for the trials of the students arrested in the wake of Phoebe's death have brought more information about Phoebe to light. According to Phoebe's mother, Phoebe began cutting herself in 2008, while still living in Ireland. Further, in November 2009, Phoebe reportedly overdosed on Seroquel, a medication used to treat bipolar disorder for which she was prescribed (Contrada, 2010). This knowledge in no way justifies the girls' bullying of Phoebe, if, they in fact, are guilty of bullying her. However, it does raise questions about the persecution of the alleged bullies, especially the violation of civil rights charge, which carries a maximum sentence of 10 years. As opposed to exhibiting the presumption of innocence so integral to our legal system, the cultural discourse about the South Hadley mean girls indicates they are guilty. Newspapers feature calls for the bullies to "be held publicly accountable" (Fanto, 2010). *The Boston Globe* quotes a South Hadley parent as suggesting that "the kids who bullied

Phoebe look at the autopsy photos” (Cullen, 2010b). This response to girls’ aggression is extreme and an infringement on the students’ legal and privacy rights. Making an example of this group of girls, while continuing to ignore the structural issues at work in girls’ bullying, will do little to bring an end to bullying.

Although “mean girl” is a term found in much popular culture, applying the term “mean girl” to the girls who allegedly bullied Phoebe is noteworthy, as the case works to pull together stories about “real” girls with images of girls bullies in popular culture (such as when clips from the movie *Mean Girls* were used in segments about Phoebe on *The Today Show* and *The View*). The ways in which the discourses about girls’ bullying and aggression are shown to be “true” of real girls in South Hadley exemplifies Foucault’s notion of the discursive formation. *The Boston Globe* quotes a high school parent as saying “things like this aren’t supposed to happen in South Hadley” (Cullen, 2010b). What is left unsaid – that heterosexual, middle-class, White girls are not supposed to be mean, aggressive, or violent – is at the heart of the moral panic about girls’ bullying.

Conclusion

On January 16, 2011, at the 69th Annual Golden Globe Awards, Aaron Sorkin won the Best Screenplay award for *The Social Network*. Sorkin's acceptance speech, in which he thanked the female nominees "for demonstrating to my daughter that elite is not a bad word; it's an aspirational one," stands in stark contrast to the anti-female popularity and anti-female hierarchy message that I have argued permeates narratives about girls who bully to maintain the power and privilege associated with their elite social standing. Whereas the Mean Girl discourse works to demonize popularity, hierarchy, and upward mobility in *Girl World*, Sorkin encouraged his daughter to access female empowerment and to strive to be the best.

The ultimate irony, for me however, was that Tina Fey, writer and producer of *Mean Girls* (2004), presented Sorkin his award. Although often through a satiric lens, in some ways, no individual has done more to keep the mean girl rhetoric in popular culture. Aside from basing her screenplay for *Mean Girls* on Wiseman's book, in a September 30, 2010 episode of the Bravo TV talk show *Watch What Happens Live*, Fey broke down the hierarchy of the cast members of the RTV program *The Real Housewives of Orange County*. After holding Wiseman's book up to the camera, Fey went on to label each housewife with one of Wiseman's terms for the positions in a clique (i.e., Queen Bee, Wannabe, Banker, etc.). Since that episode, it has become commonplace in the *Housewives* universe to bandy about the vocabulary of mean girls and bullying. In fact, in a recent episode of *The Real Housewives of New York City*, "Following Pecking Orders,"

which aired on May 5, 2011, new housewife Cindy, the Wannabe, is admonished by Sonja for not following the rules of the hierarchy and bowing down to Queen Bee Ramona. The ease with which the Mean Girl discourse has been picked up and restructured in representations of adult women in the *Housewives* programs speaks to ongoing cultural anxiety about female empowerment, while also working to infantilize women.

I return now to a question I posed in the introduction: Where does the mean girl fit in contemporary categorizations of girls as either “can-do” or “at-risk”? The can-do mean girl, exemplified by Blair Waldorf in *Gossip Girl*, is extremely driven to succeed, determined, and resilient. As I have outlined, the image of the can-do mean girl is fluid. She is mean and good, vicious and sympathetic, ambitious and kind. The at-risk mean girl, embodied by Regina George in *Mean Girls*, has all that should make her can-do. She is White, upper-class, and heterosexual. She is part of the privileged norm, but has misplaced her ambition and appears solely focused on maintaining hierarchy. As exhibited in *Queen Bees*, the focus of the Mean Girl discourse is on the at-risk mean girl, which does not privilege Whiteness, but does center the concern of the discourse as with saving and worrying about White girls. It is the at-risk mean girls’ blatant disregard for the constructed norms of femininity that is at issue.

As I have shown, the Mean Girl discourse is housed securely within postfeminist rhetoric. Taking for granted that feminism has achieved equality for girls, the Mean Girl discourse suggests that, as opposed to being nurturing, selfless, and caring (Chodorow, 1974; Gilligan, 1982), girls are aggressive, selfish, and angry. In both cases, the assumptions about girls are essentializing and need to be rethought. Indeed, as Mazzarella

and Pecora (2007a, 2007b) argue, girls are not a generation in crisis. In contrast to *Reviving Ophelia*, which argued girls are vulnerable to the demands of being raised in a patriarchal culture, the Mean Girl discourse shows girls who have the tools to handle patriarchy powerfully. They are not victims to boys and men; instead they victimize girls, boys, and adults. Most often, the mean girls and Queen Bees I examined are smart and clever, yet they are shown as using their talents for self-serving purposes, particularly when they embrace claims of victimage. Housing the mean girl within postfeminist rhetoric takes for granted that girls are equal to boys. As a result, when popular mean girls deny their culpability or attempt to label themselves as victims, they are seen as only performing vulnerability, so they are framed as brutally aggressive without cause.

Criminologist Males (1996) notes that the issues that receive the most mainstream attention are subject to the “pretense that teenage behaviors are wildly out of control, separate from those of adults, and demand uniquely vigorous management” (p. 26). In popular media, mean girls are constructed as out of control when they act in an aggressive and unrestrained manner in order to maintain the high school social hierarchy and their position at its top. At the same time, hierarchy, the tactics of social aggression, and the sexual double standard are all a part of U.S. culture, not just *Girl World*, and these issues are certainly not separate from adults. As Hadley (2003) explains:

The tactics involved in social forms of aggression are also not new. They include calling people names, such as “the axis of evil;” refusing to let people into your group, often part of racism, anti-semitism and playground games; threatening to cut off relations or resources, such as embargoes, ending diplomatic ties, and divorce; practicing the elitism and exclusion emblematic of caste systems or the social register. (pp. 376-7)

Hierarchy is an intrinsic aspect of U.S. culture, yet girls are demonized for reproducing hierarchical pecking orders in school. Moreover, when mean girls communicate the cultural sexual double standard, which rewards boys for a variety of sexual escapades and punishes girls for having a modicum of sexual experience, when bullying (i.e., they call other girls “whore” or “slut”), they are vilified. In this way, the behaviors associated with mean girls are seen as out of control (in *Mean Girls* the school secretary announces, “The girls have gone wild”) and as separate from adult behavior.

The construction of the mean girl crisis is a continuation of the social anxiety about youth violence that came to the forefront of the bullying narrative following the Columbine High School massacre. The association of indirect aggression with girls’ bullying uniquely situates female bullying as more dangerous than the physical aggression largely associated with boys. Indeed, this feminized form of aggression is seen as unnatural because it is performed by girls who are part of the privileged norm (White, middle-to upper-class, heterosexual). In fact, as I have worked to show, the seemingly natural inclination of men toward physical violence is revered and seen as the better way to handle aggression. In framing the behavior of girls as out of control, the discourse suggests the need for increased inspection of girls in school through anti-bullying

legislation as well as greater legal control over girls, as I outlined in the Phoebe Prince case where four girls face criminal charges for using communication to bully. In the guise of “protection,” we continue to further oppress and marginalize girls, a population that Grossberg (1994) notes is among the most silenced in our culture.

While I have argued against the totalizing image of the mean girl who is always selfish, always cruel, and always immune to transformation, I do not mean to suggest that bullying is not a serious cultural problem. What I find troubling is that, although bullying occurs among both boys and girls, the focus in popular culture on girls’ bullying characterizes girl bullying as different from and, in most cases, more dangerous than physical violence. In turn, boys are removed from the bullying of girls. As I have shown, in films, television programming, and news media, the blame for bullying is most often placed on the shoulders of White middle- to upper-class girls. In laying the blame for girl bullying at the feet of girls, girls are constructed as one another’s enemies and patriarchy is relieved of any blame in creating girl bullies or in victimizing girls.

The Problems with Zero Tolerance

My goal has been to offer a genealogy of the ways in which contemporary culture has come to understand female empowerment, bullying, and girlhood. However, since I have expressed my concerns with the criminalization of bullying as a solution to girls’ bullying, it seems appropriate that I also discuss the problems I see with zero tolerance policies. Politicians and many school experts advocate a zero tolerance policy to combat bullying. Much like the language that has come to characterize the Mean Girl discourse, zero tolerance is mired in vague and generalizing terms. For example, Massachusetts Senator Jennifer Flanagan, responding to the Phoebe Prince bullycide in the *Sentinel* &

Enterprise, a Fitchburg, MA newspaper, said she would “like to see a no-tolerance policy on bullying, that says if you’re identified as a bully, you have to face consequences” (Donelan, 2010). Who might identify an individual as a bully, under what circumstances, and for what cause is not clear nor are the “consequences” that would be doled out in response. The media coverage of the Prince case claims that “zero tolerance for bullying is a must” (Fanto, 2010), and, in some cases, that “zero tolerance isn’t enough” (Eagan, 2010b), yet zero tolerance as a policy is never detailed. The problem, of course, is that what constitutes bullying and the range of seriousness of these behaviors varies dramatically. For example, would zero tolerance treat physical violence the same as social aggression? If the tendency is, as argued by Chesney-Lind and Irwin (2004), to conflate covert aggression with physical violence, then arguably a zero tolerance policy could see a girl expelled from school for gossiping. A zero tolerance policy that expels students from their high school culture leaves youth with fewer options for support. In demonizing bullies, we risk ignoring the reasons why they bully.

In some ways, the issues with girl bullying and zero tolerance are especially salient since discourses about girl bullying are defined by their imprecision and ambiguity. The construction of female bullying in the Mean Girl discourse relies on the idea that girls’ aggression is hidden. It is so well-hidden, so secret and clandestine, that media, academic research, and the legal system struggle to define it. How, then, is it possible to enforce zero tolerance in a Girl World that is framed as impenetrable and largely unknowable to adults?

The potential problems with zero tolerance are raised rather cleverly in the second season episode “In the Realm of the Besses” of *Gossip Girl*. Following her foray into the

fashion industry, Jenny Humphrey returns to Constance Billard (the preparatory high school for girls she attends). When her stepbrother Eric asks if she is nervous about facing the mean girls, Jenny replies, “In the last few months, I hijacked a society gala, had my entire fashion collection torched by a crazy model, and I was basically homeless. I think I can handle high school. OK, I’m a little nervous.” In this case, girl bullying is framed as the most dangerous kind of threat to girls. Despite all the very serious things Jenny has gone through (for example, living on her own, starting a business, etc.), she is ultimately still nervous about facing the mean girls in her high school.

Although Jenny admits to being nervous, her experiences in the “real world” also provided her strength and, when she witnesses the mean girls hazing Nelly Yuki, she becomes an empowered bystander who stands against the bullying. Despite her stepbrother’s warning to not get involved, Jenny attempts to broker Nelly’s release from the clique. Jenny maintains, “Nelly put in a year of service, so she should be able to leave without reprisals.” The elite clique refuses to consider this because, as explained by clique member Penelope, “once people find out Nelly quit, the Girls on the Steps will be finished.” In this sense, Penelope articulates the import of eliteness to girls’ cliques. The Girls on the Steps are the most popular and elite clique at Constance Billard. Girls work hard to get into the clique; allowing a member to leave would tarnish the clique’s reputation.

Having met with resistance, Jenny takes another tactic and sits at The Girls on the Steps’ table at an ice cream parlor. When she refuses to get up, Penelope warns Jenny she “will pay for this.” Penelope and the other Girls on the Steps then ask their parents to call Headmistress Queller to report Jenny for bullying them – a plan that Eric calls “genius.”

Constance Billard does not have a zero tolerance policy, so Jenny is not expelled, but the potential ramifications of such a policy are made clear. In this instance, Jenny is innocent of the charges, but her middle-class status means that she does not have the capital necessary to fight the mean girls' charges. The construction of Girl World in *Gossip Girl* as closed off to outsiders, especially adults, highlights how a zero tolerance policy, which punishes *anyone* who is identified as a bully, could work to secure the privilege of the bullies.

Final Comments

As Chesney-Lind and Irwin (2004, 2008) and Ringrose (2006) articulate, the Mean Girl discourse reflects a cultural concern about White middle-class girls. In popular media, middle-classness is offered as the baseline of what a nice girl should be, and a girl's attempt to move beyond what is shown as her authentic place in the social hierarchy is demonized. First, the nice girl is middle-class; however, as I have shown, she is not always White. Indeed, whereas the texts I explored continually centered Whiteness as a necessary component of the mean girl image, nice girls are constructed as White, Latina, and Black. In *Mean Girls* (2004), *Odd Girl Out* (2005), *Queen Bees* (2008), *Gossip Girl* (2007-2010), and in the media coverage of the Phoebe Prince case, all middle-class girls, regardless of race, are constructed as having the ability to access the nice girl construct. This is remarkable, but it is also clearly housed within a post-civil rights discourse, which works to flatten out difference within the gender, race, and class categories that are represented stereotypically (Winant, 1998). Indeed, the constructions of the girls of color I analyzed often rely on stereotyped behaviors (i.e., Black girls' direct

talk and Latina girls' commitment to nuclear family structures); at the same time, these essentialized characteristics are revered and incorporated into the nice girl tropes.

The contradictions of the nice girl, as she has been reproduced within the Mean Girl discourse, become clear when we question the nice girl's relationship with popularity. In media, today's popular girl is never nice, so, in turn, the nice girl must be unpopular. The Mean Girl discourse suggests White middle-class girls are unable to access eliteness without sacrificing their authentic good moral character. In order to be nice, a girl must give up her popularity. At the same time, a nice girl is naturally inclined toward care giving (McRobbie, 1991) and willing to extend her friendship to anyone, especially to those who are not part of the privileged norm (i.e., girls of color, working-class girls, differently-abled individuals, as well as gay boys – although not lesbians). The nice girl is never aggressive; however, as I have argued, indirect aggression is framed as natural for White girls socialized in the U.S. Although not aggressive, the nice girl directly communicates her feelings and does not shy away from conflict. The nice girl is the ideal neoliberal citizen; she encompasses the ideas of meritocracy and egalitarianism. This nice girl is, at all times, willing to take responsibility for her own successes and failures, but she also fails when she does assume responsibility for her actions. She can never be the ultimate neoliberal citizen, yet this is held up as the ideal. Perhaps most importantly, the nice girl recognizes that failure is imminent if she works to build relationships with girls who operate in elite social structures. Instead, the nice girl realizes that girls who exist within elite circles do not have access to anything the nice girl desires, especially since the only thing a nice girl should desire is heterosexual romance.

Sorkin's speech, in which he argued that eliteness is worthy of aspiration, stands in stark contrast to the Mean Girl discourse as I have illustrated here. In fact, overwhelmingly the texts I analyzed present a message that hierarchy, eliteness, and popularity should not be revered in Girl World. Moreover, the ways in which girls access eliteness are framed as problematic. Quoted in the *New York Times*, Rosalind Wiseman asks, "Haven't I told you girls are crafty? Haven't I told you girls are evil?" (Talbot, 2002). This equivocation is indicative of the kind of troubling imprecision that shades the images of girls I have explored. Girls are empowered but mean; they are active desiring agents who are also victims. In many of the texts analyzed, I found images of girls who were bright and talented, but these images were tainted by the seemingly natural leap from smart to mean. If we continue to rely on dominant notions of passive femininity, then we miss opportunities to encourage girls to pursue their dreams in a manner that may require taking risks and challenging authority, "leaving young women unprepared for the precarious negotiations necessary for all young women in the U.S." (Bell & Golombisky, 2004, p. 301). Girls' success in the Mean Girl discourse is defined on a continuum. A popular girl stays at the top of the social hierarchy by being mean. The nice girl finds individual success by removing herself from elite social circles. As a result, privilege is not defined inherently as the problem, but girls' excessive abuse and access to privilege is.

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