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# The trouble with girls: autoethnography and the classroom

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THE TROUBLE WITH GIRLS:  
AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND THE CLASSROOM

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Curriculum and Instruction

by  
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M.S., Louisiana State University, 1996  
August 2003

To the memory of my father, Colin E. Autrey:

Speaking indifferently to him,  
Who had driven out the cold  
And polished my good shoes as well.  
What did I know, what did I know  
Of love's austere and lonely offices?

(Excerpted from "Those Winter Sundays"  
by Robert Hayden)

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## ABSTRACT

Recent research suggests that many young women are undergoing a particularly difficult time during early adolescence, beginning with the transition to middle school (The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University [CASA], 2003; Albert, Brown, & Flanigan, 2003; American Association of University Women, 1992). Employing autoethnography, I studied my experience as girl and woman, student and teacher, in elementary and middle schools and how these informed my pedagogical practices and knowledge as an elementary school teacher. Drawing upon feminist theory and cultural studies as well as research narratives, I argue for the inclusion of “kinderculture” in the curriculum by considering how Barbie, a cultural icon, provides opportunities for students to explore the role of gender in schools. Additionally, I studied the role of depression in some girls’ early adolescence. The increase in new cases of depression in females during early adolescence (Bebbington, 1996) reveals the troubled character of many girls’ experience of adolescence. I propose a menopausal theory of curriculum that supports scholarly reflection and curricular attention to young girls’ experiences of this often difficult period of their coming of age.

## CHAPTER ONE: PRACTICE

I know something about being a girl. The silence and passivity of the strange little girl I was is one place I look for ways to critically explore some of the many worlds girls may inhabit beneath the guise of the good schoolgirl and beyond. The beyond, for me, includes many guises including the present guise of menopause. These homunculi inform the turn to the past while the present informs the “biography as it is lived” (Pinar, 1976, p. 52). In other words, “I take myself and my existential experience as a data source” (p. 52). But this is not the only data source I call upon; research narratives, both quantitative and qualitative, are particular genres of story and a resource for data outside of the idiosyncrasy of my own biography.

Gee defines *discourse* as “ways of behaving, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular roles (or ‘types of people’) by specific groups of people” (as cited in Schultz, 2002, p. 360). The first conversations between teachers and students hang on the discourse of a classroom we take for granted. The “conceptual categories which organize thought into predetermined patterns and set the boundaries on discourse” in the classroom are preset by those whose ability to do so “constitutes power” (Bowers as cited in Elbaz, 1991, p. 1). In order to appreciate the extent to which girls’ identities are constructed through the discursive practices within schools, particularly girls who do not fit in well, it is necessary to explore what is left out, too. There is an “elaborate fiction” embedded in these discursive practices that works to alienate girls and women from the production of knowledge (Martusewicz, 1992, p. 154).

Because schools are the one universal experience provided for children, they are “a powerful force in the socialization of children” (O’Reilly et al., 2001, p. 18). The universal child is modeled on a “rationally inquiring boy” (Walkerdine, 1997), constructed by patriarchal discourse. Gender stereotypes are reinforced in schools and girls “learn early to be silent and that their input is not valued” (O’Reilly et al., p. 18). I could have returned to explore the worlds boys inhabit (for there is much of the masculine within me) but since I invested much of my time and energy in my male students in classrooms, it seems fitting to look for the silences in the classroom.

When I return to the first grade classroom of my childhood, even though reading and writing were “easy” for me, these sets of techniques did not help me to make sense of the world I entered in the public school. My home life had come unraveled when my father “ran off” with another woman before I entered school. The importance of erasing the fictional lines between school and home is underscored in my experiences. The making and re-making of identity through the stories we are telling ourselves about the world we find ourselves in should be a cornerstone of literacy yet, it is given little, if any, attention in our first ventures into the public world beyond home.

As Lisa Delpit (1995) notes in *Other People’s Children*, “we all carry worlds in our heads, and those worlds are decidedly different” (p. xiv). Unfortunately, as she also notes, “we live in a society that nurtures and maintains stereotypes” (p. xiii). As a first-grader, I speak against what Walkerdine (1990) has called “schoolgirl fictions” to refer to the impossible but stereotypical good schoolgirl. As a middle-schooler, I speak against an unwillingness on the part of adults to acknowledge how awful this stage of life can be in school for some adolescents. Through an autoethnographic approach, I attempt to

write “in response to or in dialogue with” representations of the disenfranchised by those in power (Pratt as cited in Buzard, 1997 March 22, p. 4). This involves what Buzard calls “partial collaboration” with stereotypes.

This partial collaboration allows the differences of this research narrative to emerge because it relies on the discourse of a classroom we believe to exist to anchor it. Autoethnography allows for the heightened self-consciousness of autobiography undercut by the simultaneous gaze through the self to the conditions of that self. Maynard (2002) calls this collaboration “an imagination of order” (p. 1). I look out to the conditions of the self at the structures of a classroom I still must believe in, even though I know it to be a fiction. The discourse of the classroom supplies “felt principle[s] of order, beneath all possible embodiments, in the mind of the listener” as props that locate boundaries and simultaneously lead to a freer discursive space. Today, the proliferation of curricular labels on the space of classrooms and schools complicates by insisting the explicit curriculum is not the only one functioning but it also leaves out what Watson (1997) calls “the voice of a tentative subject” (p. 2). William Pinar (1976) suggests instead that we are our experiences in his notion of *currere* as the “existential experience of external structures” (p. vii). Our imagination of the order of the classroom is a reference point but the courses we run are our own “creations . . . [and] responsibilities” (p. vii). Autoethnography allows the course I have run to inform my research.

### **Autoethnography**

Ethnography provides a structure upon which to hang the messiness of the everyday. Anthropology, like education and other disciplines, has experienced postmodern skepticism, and while ethnography refers to the observation and recording of

the everyday of cultural groups “not previously known in an intimate way” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 1), ethnographers have increasingly “shied away from coherent cultural ‘worldviews’” (Maynard, 2002, p. 2). “The term ‘participant-observation’ is often used to characterize this basic research approach” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 1). Considered qualitative research, ethnography is “a research mode that emphasizes description, induction, grounded theory, and the study of people’s understanding” (Biklen, 1992, p. ix) and yields data that “have been termed *soft*, that is, rich in description of people, places, and conversations, and not easily handled by statistical procedures” (p. 2). This textual difference emerges when such data is compared with quantitative data, however, and it is of note that tactile adjectives are invoked which imply the same dichotomies that have dogged so much research. The use of “soft” and “hard” seem obvious in terms of sexual connotations.

Ethnographers attempt to confront situated social systems with an eye that is willing to see the strange in those situations. The paradox is that the closer we look, the stranger the familiar becomes. Teachers, in order to resist the deskilling imposed by increasingly corporatized objectives, must *become* the participant observers they already are. Ethnography is comprised of two activities: “firsthand participation in some initially unfamiliar social world and the production of written accounts of that world by drawing upon such participation” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 1). It is in “the processes of transforming observation and experience into inspectable texts” that change has occurred in the field of anthropology, beginning in the 1960s, as anthropologists have become leery of the concept of culture. Ethnographers have turned “to stories, to narratives that feature themselves as well as the people with whom they live” (Maynard, 2002).

Teachers can learn the same leering in order to de-naturalize the classroom. Teachers' reflective practice is the same as ethnographic fieldwork in which written accounts "must be seen as texts in which the anthropologist is a central protagonist" (Maynard).

Julia Watson (1997) defines autoethnography "as an ethnographic presentation of oneself by a subject usually considered the 'object' of the ethnographer's interview" (p. 7). Autoethnography is "a hybrid form of autobiography" (Watson, 1997, p. 7). As such, this is an autobiographical work based on a "tentative performance of subjectivity" (Watson). Turning "the ethnographic gaze inward on the self (auto), while maintaining the outward gaze of ethnography, looking at the larger context wherein self experiences occur" (Denzin, 1997, p. 227), disrupts the imagined order of classrooms by emphasizing the course the writer is running (Pinar & Gumet, 1976). Autoethnography allows the author to be present both as ethnographer and participant and allows that "writing is a way of 'framing'" (Denzin, 1997, p. 224).

Maynard (2002) compares American anthropology with poetry in a postmodern context, with its emphasis on process and "a growing disquiet about received tradition," particularly structures that shape and validate cultural perspectives. Ethnographers have turned to story as "narratives that feature themselves as well as the people with whom they live" while poets turn to experience as "the one touchstone [they] can reckon with some confidence" (Maynard, 2002). The same movement to individual experience occurs in education as theorists such as Carter (1993) suggests "story represents a way of knowing and thinking that is particularly suited to explicating the issues with which [teachers] deal" (p. 6). Bruner (1984) suggested that whereas the quantitative method "verifies by appeal to formal verification procedures and empirical proof," the qualitative

method “establishes *not* truth but truth-likeness or verisimilitude” (p. 97). The methodology that emerged in my own research practices is reflective practice that attempts to figure what happens in the classroom but also in the teacher. It is postmodern and American because it recognizes in a diverse society, there can be no whole truth. The fragmentary nature of migrations and the oppressions of –isms create the disjunctive quality of a history that resists generalization.

I give shape to a methodology that emerged inductively in my doctoral research and which refigures teachers’ reflective practices. Fendler (1990) points to a “plethora of literature on reflective teaching at least since John Dewey’s (1933) *How We Think*” and suggests that “the complicated meanings of reflection get played out in complex and contradictory ways through research practices” (p. 16). A simple definition of reflective practice is the thinking we do about what goes on in our classroom. As such, Zeichner points out “there is no such thing as an unreflective teacher” (as cited in Fendler, 1990, p. 16).

The notion of a written journal about what we encounter in the everyday situations of the classroom ties reflective practice to writing. While this might be possible for those with strong organizational skills, considered by some to be essential to successful teaching, there are some of us who teach successfully and have what might be termed a messy practice. The end of the day in my elementary public school classroom found me ordering the shelves, often mopping the floor, and updating student contracts. There was not much energy left to write the fluidity of thought and yearning that circulated in a classroom where I tried to be as wide-awake to my students and their initiatives as I could. This is one reason why Fendler found teachers’ reflective practices

to “reinforce existing beliefs rather than challenge assumptions” (p. 16). Teachers have to be more concerned with instrumental practices in classrooms that demand such daily re-thinking.

The great anthropologist, Clifford, called culture “a ‘serious fiction’” but one that he could not “do without” (as cited in Maynard, 2002). The classroom is likewise, for me, a fiction I cannot yet do without. While case studies of and by teachers are interesting because they have instrumental value when I am in practice, they hold no answers when I have the time, as I have in the serious fiction of my doctoral journey, to delve beneath the daily struggles of my practice. The canon of great men who wrote and write abstractly about the classroom and the fictions that spin off of their words are better but still, I know, they cannot appreciate my struggle as a woman and a teacher. Even quite ordinary and unimpressive men are privileged in elementary schools where their scarcity gilds them with cultural value. There are some women whose writing spins alternative fictional classrooms in my reflections but they make teachers “objects of knowledge,” their agency concealed by “the gendered construction of teaching as ideologically congruent with women’s supposed innate nurturing capacities” (Munro, 1998, p. 3). Like Dorothy Allison (1995), the “women I loved most in the world horrified me” because they did not seem to exist in the world the school was spinning (p. 38). “Behind the story” some women write of the classroom “is the one I wish I could make you hear” (p. 39).

Public schools are spaces where *borders* emerge. Borders refer to “the juxtaposition of difference, of cultural contradictions, [and] occur at the margins of societies but also at the disjunctive points within them” (Maynard, 2002). The classroom

is for many the first place these disjunctive points stand out in relief. For teachers, either in practice or reflecting on practice or both, autoethnography can allow the slackening of the “intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus bring them to our notice” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. xiii). For the teacher, “preconceptual experiences” are in “dialectical” relation with “the conceptual”(Pinar, 1976, p. 53), binding us to our classrooms by looking both at the self and at the conditions of the self in practice. “Schooling is the one universal experience for all children that is provided by the states and the federal government” (O’Reilly, Penn, & de Marrais, 2001, p. 18). But teachers are as diverse as the students that pass through this universal experience. The threads that attach me to the classroom are the same threads Allison (1995) so eloquently writes: they are the threads of difference that emerge in classrooms that make some of us convince ourselves that we are “not human at all” (p. 38).

Gender matters in the classroom, even the early elementary classroom. Gender is not sex but “the overlay of individual behavior and social ascriptions that define people’s identity in relation to sex” (Bebbington, 1996, p. 296). The public school classroom is often the first place in our lives where these social ascriptions matter, having as much to do with how others interpret our behaviors in our sexed bodies as how we are using those bodies as the means to having a life. The good schoolgirl was a social ascription made on the basis of my shy and anxious existence in the classroom as well as the strange proclivity I had for schoolwork, but it was one I had learned to “think” by my final year in elementary school. As Pinar (1976) points out, “it is I who thinks but I am not my thoughts, I am more than they” (p. 54). The more that I was and am in classrooms does

not live in basal readers or trade books; the women I loved “have taken damage until they tell themselves they can feel no pain at all” (Allison, 1995, p. 38).

Classrooms are as full of loss as they are of curriculum, for me, and in order to render my working definition of a classroom, I turned to anthropology and the role of an ethnographer so that I could tour the classrooms I sat and sit in as a girl and a woman. I wanted to create “a literary text that ‘performs education’ to the complexities of” the classroom I know (Watson, 1997). The experiences of my girlhood in public school classrooms heavily inscribe and influence my practice as a teacher, informing how I “read” a classroom. The autoethnography is a map of “the coming to voice of a tentative subject who is poised discursively between the competing genres of autobiography and ethnographic memoir” (Watson, 1997). When I look at a classroom, I see, feel, hear, and intuit a space of mutating borders.

Maxine Greene (1995) expresses the same sense of the classroom in *Releasing the Imagination*: “Neither my self nor my narrative can have, therefore, a single strand. I stand at the crossing point of too many social and cultural forces; and, in my case, I am forever in the way” (p. 1). Autoethnography allows me to be in the way and to acknowledge and write the classroom as the “jumbled museum” I see (p. 2). Patricia Dunn (2001) points out that what has been “de-selected” by print-loving pedagogies that fill the education shelves are all of the “multiple intelligences” involved in teaching except for reading and writing (pp. 1-2). Like Dunn, “in trying to characterize where [she] fits into published maps of the field,” I, too, have gathered “rhetorical proofs from fields with different modes of inquiry and assumptions about what constitutes knowledge” (p. 5). As the docent of a particular process of coming-to-knowledge in

classrooms, the jumbled museum I guide the reader through draws on a breadth of experiences that span a lifetime and even as I write, the dioramas in this museum change.

### **Embodying the Worlds Between Us**

A particular case of a good little schoolgirl who became a schoolteacher, I am present and participating in various narratives that run through this work, particularly so as the storyteller, or theorist. Since “humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives,” Connelly and Clandinin (1990) reason that “the study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world” (p. 2). As educational research, this autoethnographic return through memory to the classroom involves “the construction and reconstruction” of my personal experiences as narratives that are located in space and time and contextualized by the melancholy and depression which are the conditions of their articulation. My tendency to brood over the events of my life is a “rich, complicated, and utterly absorbing process of immersion” (Mairs as cited in Johnson, 2002, p. 69) that I have experienced as a hyperactive form of meaning-making.

The teacher embodies the discourse of the classroom as well as the intersubjective worlds of her students; her classroom becomes an extension of this embodiment. “No creature lives merely under its skin,” Dewey wrote in *Art as Experience* (1934), “Its subcutaneous organs are means of connection with what lies beyond its bodily frame, and to which, in order to live, it must adjust itself, by accommodation and defense but also by conquest” (p. 13). I have adjusted myself in all of these ways in classrooms, both as student and teacher.

I return through the self to the last extended conversation I held with children in a public elementary school classroom beginning in 1997 and lasting until 1999. A constellation of narratives emerges from that public school classroom, and these form some of the substance of this dissertation. Here, like Paul Willis (2000), I juxtapose ethnography and imagination “to surprise, condition and change the meaning of both” (p. viii). Like Baudelaire’s ragpicker, I look for what has survived of those days long ago in the early elementary classrooms, and move on to the last bright routes of childhood and the muteness of middle school, through the self as a teacher. In memory, I return to a still classroom which is never the case in real time so I am conscious that what I recall are the *surfacings* of the classroom, moments when the classroom settled enough for me to look around. These are like still lifes already painted over in the pentimento of memory. Ashton-Warner (1963) remarked on the intensity of the silence that settles over a classroom sometimes. I re-visit now the junctures between students and teacher and the intersubjective lushness of the classroom.

### **Teachers’ Narratives**

A teacher’s work is often called practice. I refer to my years of work with young children in schools as practice when teaching pre-service teachers. Some see it as “any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods . . . are realized” (McIntyre as cited in Elbaz, 1991). This definition of practice implies austerity, professionalism, mastery, and repetition, none of which occur to me when I think of my time in classrooms with children. Practice is located in time and space, guided by “tacit understanding instead of rational decisions,” and intent on accomplishing its goals (Polkinghorne, 1997, p. 19). Practice is “human meaning-

making” in “a locating cultural world through which self-expression is achieved” (Willis, 2000, p. xiv-xv). But practice is more than what I think. I define practice as Dewey (1934) defines insight: practice is temporally and spatially situated insight that does not separate imagination from executive doing, significant purpose from work, emotion from thought and doing. When I am in a classroom with children as a teacher, practice is inseparable from art.

### **Working Knowledge**

Susan Finley (2001) calls the knowledge one gains in practice “working knowledge” (p. 19). The teacher’s working knowledge “is both deep understanding and reliance on intuitive and imaginative thinking” (p. 19). I recall an engraving I once saw of Pestalozzi, the Swiss educational reformer (1746-1827), with children hanging off of him at every angle. As an early elementary and preschool teacher, the intersubjective world between myself and some children was thin as a wafer but the distance between me and other children was much thicker and denser. The difference between thin and thick intersubjectivity is the difference between children who arrive in the classroom ready to suspend disbelief and those who behold the classroom from a skeptical perspective. The former children were more willing to go along with the various projects I inaugurated and the arbitrary rules imposed by the positioning of our classroom in a public elementary school. The latter children were unsure of me or the classroom and not willing to take either one as whole cloth. While some of these latter children fought with the classroom order and my agenda, they made me work harder to understand who they were and to re-think the classroom to better accommodate their needs. The fighters were mostly boys.

Some of the skeptical children were unwilling to engage the classroom at all and

were like bystanders in any project that asked for more of a commitment from them than the paper-and-pencil ilk. As David Orr (1992) wrote, “Good thinking is inseparable from the breadth and the friction between an alert mind with well-conceived experience” (p. xii). I wished my students’ experiences to be self-relevant and to encourage as well as allow for connections to curriculum that had meaning for them. These intentional threads bound me to the classroom in conceptual ways but there were other threads keeping me there. The “conceptual [took] precedence over the preconceptual” but often it was my preconceptual experiences as a young student which made clear the “biographical basis” of the conceptual realm and bound me in stronger ways to the classroom (Pinar, 1976, p. 54).

Gayle Canella (1999) makes the case for thinking of children as younger human beings while at the same time showing how romantic notions of childhood, dating back to Rousseau, have oppressed both students and teachers. Pestalozzi was one of the first Romantic educators, the first to view “children’s minds as active rather than passive, engaged in perception, analysis, and generalization” (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995, p 79). The non-participating skeptics in my classroom had active minds but there was no evident friction between them and their experiences in the classroom.

The diversity of the public school classroom requires the teacher walk into the classroom with more than a curriculum script. Teachers are diverse in the ways they extend themselves out into the environment to create certain cultural conditions in which students can engage in self-relevant practice. Working knowledge takes in the intersubjective world of the classroom while tacitly rearranging it for better connections using both mind and body to intuit how. Working knowledge is epistemological and

ontological in its orientation. The classroom is a messy place and our attempts to impose order on the activities of children deny this. Working knowledge is an open-ended response to “the myriad contingencies and opaque personalities of reality” the environment tries to accommodate (Tierney, 1997, p. 30). When we tell the story, working knowledge is assumed and difficult to articulate. “Thus, much of what is personal and context-bound, tacit and difficult to formulate, ceases to concern [researchers], and in large measure the teacher’s story is untold” (Elbaz, 1991, p. 8). How can teachers tell their own stories?

After years of receiving failing marks from school inspectors, Ashton-Warner (1963) decided there was no doubt she was “a very low-ability teacher” (p. 119). On this matter, her sister Daphne said it “would be a disgrace for a woman in [her] position to be a good teacher” (p. 119). I may also be a very low-ability teacher. The classroom is alive to me, full of spontaneity and intrigue, but there are no traditional forms of data representation for expressing the full range of subjectivities and possibilities in process in a classroom at any moment. With my working knowledge, I know that there is no definitive interpretation of my practice. There is a growing body of researchers (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Elbaz, 1991; Lincoln & Tierney, 1997) who suggest story to be the way teachers organize their own knowledge and make the case that it is best understood in this form.

Certainly, I have to acknowledge with Elbaz (1991) that “all of us retain stories of teaching, memorable or hair-raising moments which encapsulate something important about our work that we have not found it necessary to elaborate in a more explicit way” (p. 4). These finished-off stories spontaneously fall together in our working knowledge,

encapsulating several pieces of stories in one. When this happens, the story passes out of the dynamic process of our working knowledge into a more static dimension of thought, knowledge which can be thought and spoken, or conceptual knowledge. Working knowledge is a stream of pieces of story that flows over the bedrock, the grounding of our practice—our own experiences. It is a process of finding words for what we cannot say, words that can “make it whole” (Woolf, 1976, p. 72). It is finding the words to make come right what still has the power to hurt us. Woolf said that by “explaining” what she felt in writing, she laid the pain and the story “to rest” (p. 81).

Autoethnography allows return to a story that has already happened and the rearrangement of the elements of the story to make sense in a fuller narrative that is available simply because time has passed. The elements we find in common in different narratives are collected, regardless of their time and space, because “events and stories do not always unfold sequentially” (Tierney, 1997, p. 30). I am woman, mother, teacher, researcher, feminist and living what most call the midlife years (between forty and sixty years of age) of my life. There are stories from childhood which are still unfolding. At the end of *In A Different Voice* (Gilligan, 1982), Carol Gilligan suggested that “given the tendency to chart the unfamiliar waters of adult development with the familiar markers of adolescent separation and growth, the middle years of women’s lives readily appear as a time of return to the unfinished business of adolescence” (Gilligan, 1982, p. 170). “I want to paint a conceptual portrait of how it is I live now, and this includes the delicate balance or imbalance of the two realms”: the conceptual and the preconceptual (Pinar, 1976, p. 55).

## **Unfinished Business**

The bad things that some girls get into follow them into adulthood. “One returns to the past, to capture it as it was, and as it hovers over the present” (Pinar, 1976, p. 55). Developmental charts which impose qualitative states to the twenties, the thirties, and so on, impose standards that are based on someone else’s life and experiences and not my own. The three most common disorders diagnosed in adolescent girls are depressive, conduct, and anxiety disorders (Bardone, 1998). Bardone found that girls with conduct disorder had the hardest time as adults. Her research narrative regarding these girls is included here for emphasis.

In our study of the economic and social outcomes of adolescent disorder, girls with conduct disorder had minimal education, which will likely preclude their attainment of higher-status and better-paying jobs, and in turn limit their economic resources for establishing a healthy lifestyle. The already-limited financial resources of these young women may also be siphoned off into alcohol, marijuana, and cigarettes. We also found that girls with conduct disorder were more likely to be young mothers, to cohabit serially with more men, and to be in physically violent partner relationships. The results of our study suggest that the pairing of early motherhood and physical violence may be additionally compounded by the young mother’s health problems, which further divert attention and energy away from parenting and increase maternal stress. (pp. 10-11)

Bardone’s point is that the effects of conduct disorder extend into the next generation. It is the past hovering over the present which I seek to clarify in my research. The grim sequence of worst-case scenarios Bardone narrates resonate with women because we all know women who have been victimized; some of us have lived pieces of Bardone’s story ourselves.

Major depression during adolescence is a strong predictor of “subsequent psychiatric impairment in adulthood” (Daley, Hammen, & Rao, 2000, p. 525). The National Center of Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (CASA) interviewed “1220 girls and young women passing from elementary to middle school, from middle school to high school, from high school to college, and from college into the world beyond” (2003 Feb. 5, p. 4). Their findings show these transition periods to be particularly difficult for girls and young women and salient in terms of increases of substance abuse. Girls are at the highest risk of substance abuse between the ages of eight and twenty-two. CASA found that “despite promising statistics on recent declines in youth substance use,” when the data for girls and women is considered, “more girls are using substances at earlier ages” (p. 2).

I believe adolescence is “unfinished business” for many women. I have carried those years around with me like movies I never saw the end of, the story lines still haunting my adult stories. I wanted a better understanding contextualized with specificities of the conditions of growing up as a girl today in order to expand my consciousness in the classroom. As a teacher and a researcher, I wanted to explore how theory both brings meaning to practice and buries it. As a woman, I wanted to have a better understanding of what the conditions of girlhood are today and how my memories of childhood are helpful in researching present conditions.

### **Collages of Past and Present**

Finley (2001) compares teachers’ working knowledge to the collagist’s working knowledge because images are “rendered unstable as to their meaning by removing them from their originating sources” and then assembled in “an ‘open-microphone’ forum that

assumes perceiver participation and reconstruction” (p. 20). Objects are selected by the collagist “for their appropriateness to surrounding qualities” (p. 19). Teachers understand an economy of “found objects” and it is their working knowledge that imaginatively takes what is at hand in the classroom to create certain conditions. Elbaz (1991) makes the “epistemological claim that teachers’ knowledge in its own terms is ordered by story and can best be understood this way” (p. 3). Grumet refers to working knowledge as “practical knowledge” and identifies the pieces of this collage as “the stories that are never, or rarely related, but provide, nevertheless the structure for the improvisations that we call coping, problem-solving, action” (as cited in Elbaz, 1991, p. 2). Working knowledge is part “biographic past . . . complexly contributive to the biographic present” (Pinar, 1976, p. 56).

We are “at once, engaged in living, telling retelling, and reliving stories” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4). The stories of teachers’ working knowledges are too complicated for the traditional forms of data representation. An artist works in different mediums to achieve the public expression of what she sees in her mind’s eye. Here I work to suggest an image of practice that is “fluid and indeterminate” and has no empirical foundations (Polkinghorne, 1997, p. 11). `At the same time, I borrow Dewey’s (1934) notion of theory as “a matter of understanding” and his organic sense of what goes on in classrooms (p. 12). “If the gap between organism and environment is too wide, the creature dies” (p. 14).

Cornel West (1993) defines nihilism “*not as a philosophic doctrine that there are no rational grounds for legitimate standards or authority; it is, far more, the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most*

*important) lovelessness*” (p. 23) (his emphasis). Nihilism enters our lives through wisps and whispers, that is, does not arrive on the doorsteps of our existences fully formed. Hopelessness proceeds by fits and starts. In the classroom, I looked and felt for those times when a student extended a tremulous hand to reach for something the classroom had unknowingly offered—the opportunity to articulate by whatever means who they were and what they were about. I am sure I failed more often than I succeeded but I tried always to be poised to take hold of those spiritual hands as tightly as I could. When we reach out into the world beyond ourselves and pull our hands back empty, the gap between ourselves and the environment grows.

Attempting to provide the contextual background to expand understanding of curriculum and the special needs of girls, I create a messy text. “Messy texts are many sited; intertextual, always open-ended, and resistant to theoretical holism but always committed to cultural criticism” (Denzin, 1997, p. 224). It is what Ashton-Warner called the “unconscious order that looks like chaos on the top” (1963, p. 85). My classrooms, when children are working in them, are messy. The messiness is the right conditions for growth. To the casual observer of the often loud and boisterous climate in these classrooms, I say, “although the room will seem disorderly by sight, it is not so by feel” (p. 86). Our working knowledge is our feel for the classroom. Research narratives about teachers emphasize “what she does, or thinks, [that] can be replicated” so that novices “may learn to be more expert” (Elbaz, (1991, p. 8). Ashton-Warner would have called this the “conscious order,” the one “that ends up as respectability” (1963, p. 84). This is the narrative of a streetwalker in the classroom, because the unconscious order refuses to pretend such respectability.

Autoethnography provides a structure from which to work and allows the teacher's own experiences to become the narratives from which she selects pieces according to their appropriateness to the story that is taking form. There is a constellation of narratives at work here, chosen according to their appropriateness in terms of space and shape, color and texture to the exploration of aspects of contemporary girls' lives. The ethnographer is the storyteller and present in the story. It is through the "home-made difference" of the self that we resist "the old, 'off the shelf' cultural worlds [that] no longer supply believable practices and materials" (Willis, 2000, p. xv). Working knowledge is the part of practice earned from the "deep understanding of many materials" of those who have lived eight hours a day (or more) in classrooms with children (Finley, 2001, p. 19). A teacher does not have to "explain" this knowing to other teachers; they know. The exploration of girls' worlds provides a structure to perform how my working knowledge takes on form in stories and how this form reflects the aesthetic components of practice. The artful pastiche of displaced images culled from past and present "serve as platform to stand upon" (Woolf, 1976, p. 75)

### **The Platform**

Methodological reflexivity allows "there is a world of intersubjectively constituted facts out there ready to be discovered by the ethnographer" but it privileges theoretical discourse (Denzin, 1997, p. 218). Practice is a series of performative improvisations that render visible on the surface of the classroom the performer's strategies (Polkinghorne, 1997). The working knowledge of teachers is not linear knowledge but is multidimensional. Practicing autoethnography in the classroom reveals the processes by which teachers make "strategic improvisations in the service of a

guiding purpose” (p. 12). Writing fieldnotes brings working knowledge to the surface out of the everyday banality of practice. “Explaining” our practice without including the strategies which emerge from our working knowledge is like describing a painting while looking at it while we know nothing of the artist or the time or the place. Teaching is the kind of art that is situated. It may retain its beauty when reduced to what can be replicated but only as it is reanimated in practice.

Methodological reflexivity turns practice back onto practice in the process of finding the words to explain in the way Woolf (1976) found “the strongest pleasure” in “making a scene come right” (p. 72).. I am living my story “in an ongoing experiential text” and attempting to write my working knowledge in a way that reflects on how girls grow up in classrooms and other places. *How can I bring her passage to the surface of the classroom and how can that help me in understanding my practice in classroom?* The object of this kind of open-ended and multi-sited text is to expand my working knowledge; this is not so much the building of a database as it is a site of saturation in issues salient to girls and young women.

Explorations of intersubjective relations in the classroom are impossible to explore with traditional and scientific methodologies. The good schoolgirls so successful in the elementary school do not have a direct link with predominant gender stereotypes in the middle school. Some of us who were read as good schoolgirls in the elementary school are unmasked as pseudo-versions of the schoolgirl in the middle school. Popularity entered the mix which determined the parameters of one’s consciousness. I was immediately “found out” without a trial and excommunicated from the tight bunch of girls I had played with a year before.

Brown and Gilligan (1992) emphasized how important the social world is to girls both before and during puberty and how many girls begin to repress what they know in favor of fitting in with other girls during adolescence. Girls' assertions about the world become less sure, prefaced by disclaimers to any authority as they negotiate adolescence. Because Brown and Gilligan's study was a five-year longitudinal study in which they interviewed the same girls both in late childhood and early adolescence, they found girls' voices became less sure and less grounded in their own knowledges as they entered and experienced early adolescence. They were able to narrate their loss of voice and grounding but unable to question this loss.

Basow and Rubin (1999) identify early adolescence as “a *crossroads* in which girls . . . are confronted with heightened expectations to conform to the more restricted female role” (p. 31). For them, the meaning adolescence holds for girls as a “period of entry into the institution of compulsory heterosexuality” is a risky proposition (p. 33). “White girls who hold traditional attitudes toward women's roles tend to have lower self-esteem than do girls who hold more liberal attitudes” (p. 37). This begs the question as to whether the extent to which girls endorse traditional notions of femininity in their behaviors has anything to do with losses of self-esteem and confidence.

Feminist theory has “successfully” argued the social construction of the body and the accompanying “sense of inferiority and vulnerability” girls and women feel being in their female bodies (Whaley, 1997, p. 24). Masculinist assumptions are embedded in institutional discourses, and, in many of them, the attributes of femininity are pathologized (Chesler, 1973; Ussher, 1990). Besides, most girls struggle with the imposition of femininity; it is not an easy fit (Walkerdine, 1990).

In first grade, without home with its silences and comforts and my little sister to take care of, I was nobody. I never cared about being nor felt particularly feminine as a child; it was during adolescence that the notion of a certain way of being became relevant. But it was the traditionally feminized notion of nurturance, the ethics of care, which I looked to for comfort in the elementary classroom. I watched through elementary school to learn how to be in this new environment and by sixth grade, I was reasonably comfortable. But the transition to junior high school shattered that sense of security.

The transition to middle school or junior high school has been shown to be more stressful for girls than boys. The American Association of University Women (AAUW, 1990) found that girls' self-confidence dramatically declined. Another study found girls experienced marked decline in self-esteem during early adolescence as they made the transition to junior high school; if they attended an elementary school from kindergarten to eighth grade, they did not experience this loss (Simmons & Blyth, 1987). For girls, the change of schools and school structure occurs simultaneously with pubertal changes. The secondary effects of puberty on some girls, including breasts, wider hips, and menstruation, impact her sense of herself in both obvious and covert ways. Simmons and Blyth's findings suggest the loss of the self-contained classroom with depth of relationship with one teacher may be another reason the transition is difficult.

Martin (1996) points out that there has been a "glaring omission in [new] research [in] its failure to consider the effects of puberty and first sex, especially different effects of puberty for boys and girls" (p. 9). The developmental risks faced by girls include adolescence as "a key moment in the diminishing of women's sexual subjectivity,

agency, and self-esteem” (p. 13). Adolescence is a “period of entry into the institution of compulsory heterosexuality” (Basow & Rubin, 1999, p. 33). For some girls, pubertal changes and the entry into the heterosexual world are positives but this is hardly so for all girls.

### **Dissimulation**

Dissimulation refers to the covering of reality by a false appearance. Sondra Bartky (1990) uses the term *dissimulation* to refer to a side effect of her own process of *becoming-feminist*. In her heightened awareness of oppressive structures all around her, she became paranoid as each version of reality birthed new versions and she lost the horizon that enabled her to distinguish what was real. She vacillated between awareness of oppression and questioning her own awareness as hyper-sensitive and overkill. The discursive refraction necessary for transmediation between sign systems is a culprit here, as much for Bartky as for adolescent girls. The hyperreal construction of adolescence and relationship is a tenuous translation of reality into the sign systems of media and transforms reality. Active thinking is necessary in reading these maps because every mapping is a version of someone’s perception of reality. Bartky had to learn how to transmediate the situational sign systems of different situations in the same way adolescent girls must be proactive in reading their own situations.

Bartky (1990) intentionally and knowledgably pays attention to the situations in which she finds herself as she becomes feminist. But as she pulls away one false reality, she finds another one beneath it, and then another, and so on. Bartky (1990) characterizes dissimulation as like a “*double ontological shock*”: first, the realization that what is really happening is quite different from what appears to be happening, and,

second, the frequent inability to tell what is really happening at all” (p. 18). In first grade, I listened for where I should sit and stand and how I should be in school; Bartky’s description of how situations shifted reminded me of the importance of knowing my “place” in first grade and beyond.

Virginia Woolf (1976) defined “moments of being” as “exceptional moments [that] brought with them a peculiar horror and a physical collapse” (p. 72). As a child, she thought these “shocks” attributable to a stable force somewhere out there in a world she could not see and over which she had no control—“a blow from an enemy hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life” (p. 72). We cannot remember the meanings school held for us or the banal practices which developed around who we thought the school wanted us to be. Brown and Gilligan’s (1992) findings illustrate what may be some girls’ own culpability in reproducing gender stereotypes. They found “adolescence is a time of disconnection, sometimes of dissociation or repression in women’s lives, so that women often do not remember—tend to forget or to cover over—what as girls they have experienced and known” (p. 4). Moments of being are like surfacings, hardened by shock into entryways that later provide “revelation”—they are the “scaffolding in the background . . . the invisible and silent part of . . . life as a child” (p. 73). During adolescence we cover over the scaffolds, forgetting what we have experienced as girls.

Lobel, Gewirtz, Pras, Shoeshine-Rokach, and Ginton (1999) found that preadolescent and adolescent girls were more sensitive to “the fine nuances” of situations when making inferences whereas boys “were more sensitive to societal norms” (p. 495). The hypervigilance for cues of rejection that Moretti, Holland, and McKay (2001) found in adolescent girls is a reflection of their sensitivity to the politics of gatherings.

Forgetting what they knew as girls may make the stories come right for adolescents who do have troubles fitting—both with femininity and within social groups. The dissimulation Bartky discovers as an adult may have been the shifting places between what we said and did as adolescent girls and what we knew—gray areas that were necessary for our own slights of meaning.

The ontological shock of adolescence for many schoolgirls is not because they are weak or inferior or mentally dull. In the space and time school allows, it seems there would be space and time to address issues of gender with girls and boys. Eisenhart and Holland (1983) looked at fifth- and sixth-grade students at one elementary school and found that students rejected the teachers' emphasis on being "good students" and "instead stressed gender and age identities" (p. 322). While the students understood their behavior as opposition to the teachers, they actually "complemented the efforts of the school adults to socialize the students to a set of gender-related values and norms" (p. 322). Boys and girls do not have critical skills to examine their own limit-situations because this is intentionally left out of the curriculum.

### **The Trouble with Some Girls**

The trouble with some girls in my elementary classroom was they were no trouble. They assumed a relationship with me that reinforced my work in the classroom in general yet held me at arm's length. They did not demand nor need anything from me. They reflected the teacher I wanted to be back to me and reminded me of my own silence as a young girl in the elementary school. I remembered the melancholy that was the cotton wool of my life as a younger human being and wondered what rich lives might exist beneath the surface of those quiet students, both girls and boys. The melancholy of

childhood provided a critical stance in regard to the world beyond myself that felt like a protective but isolating barrier between myself and my peers.

I was a strange little girl who did not miss much. How is the good schoolgirl reproduced? What is the story that makes her helpful, kind, well-groomed, and hardworking? How do I understand her in the context of the losses of confidence and self-esteem some girls will experience during adolescence? In practice as a teacher, I was usually thankful for the good schoolgirl. Because these girls always did their work, I felt I was “teaching” them. They provided a timbre to the classroom that was sometimes its saving grace. One way the good girl is reproduced is through me, the teacher. Because she is a ready-made cultural form, I see her as a collection of qualities which complement my intentions. What hides behind the cotton wool of the good schoolgirls I have known?

The strange little girl I was consisted of all that did not fit the schoolgirl grid. The homemade differences and miscommunications that structure our first learning come with us into the school. The only meaning school had for me was that I had to go—had to in a way I rarely had to do anything. This rigidity of meaning was reinforced by the hard lines and dull tints of school, the school “smell” that might yield a million odors if analyzed but held at bay and decontaminated by antiseptic cleansers, and the way I ceased to know who I was when I was there. School was constructed of finding one’s place and doing what was asked; it was a special case of the world. The furnishings of the school have special meanings attached to them requiring certain manners of being. In the classroom, as a younger human being, I tried to figure out how I should “be”; that was the most difficult of all.

Though the return is like cataloguing a jumble of unstable field observations, it emphasizes how we trivialize the complexity of children's lifeworlds in schools. The shy and quiet girls I refer to in my practice were *soft* in the classroom, flexible and malleable, but unconnected, too. Their constraint and retreat in the classroom, what could be described as a melancholy of the body, reveals the way the space of the classroom is used by some students as an ally in a disappearing act. At the same time, it is the yawning of a gap between them and the environment, a dissonance that whispers nihilism.

### **Where the Girls Are**

Issues of representation and identity are slippery for girls. The school is where children are taught "the requirements and the practice of specific roles" (Simon & Gagnon, 1986, p. 98). The stories our culture hands down to our daughters do not feature them in starring roles. How do "good schoolgirls" become benign spirits in the classroom and disconnected from the world beyond themselves? What is the intention of this kind of practice? How does it intersect with other practices in the classroom?

At the micro level, there are ways of being in the classroom we identify as feminine and masculine, though there are homemade differences that tangle the dynamics of gender with sex. Most of my female students knew how to fit into the environment when they came to school; by this I mean they had a different orientation to the environment, what could be called a disposition for the micro-technologies of classroom work. They did not seem to need me as much as my other students did. They approached their daily work contracts like civil servants, never shirking or questioning the work. The checkmark they received at the completion of each task gave them obvious but hushed delight. Not all had such finesse or docility in the environment and

yet, no two girls who did know how to fit did so in the same way. While I practiced teaching, a few of these “good schoolgirls” practiced disappearance and they were very good at it. So had I been. This is the intersubjective world of the classroom compounded of practices mediating the processes by which our intentions meet the world.

Eventually, my attention was drawn to one good schoolgirl in my classroom I will call Emily who was pathologically shy, that is, shy to the extent of being incapable of speaking and moving at times. Paul Willis (2000) defines human meaning-making as art and points out that this making and re-making of the raw forms of the culture into vehicles of expression is the way culture is reproduced and the only way “self-expression is achieved” (p. xv). Emily shared a classroom with me in a public school that stubbornly held on to rational order confused with sameness. While, as a teacher, I was intent on re-making the raw forms of the classroom culture, Emily, as a student, kept reminding me of myself as a first- or second-grader, of how I attempted to block out the classroom and how well I succeeded. Emily was not another version of me, and, though her experiences outside of the school resonated with my own home conditions, there were notable differences. Rather, there was something in Emily’s practice I recognized; Emily provided a reason and acted as a talisman to lead me back to re-make my own early school experiences. My early attempts to shut out the harsh din of the classroom may have shown more than the attempts of a shy and wounded child to survive in a world that seemed foreign; they may have shown the uncomfortable relationship between myself and the discursive practices of the classroom.

The ways I behaved, what I valued, thought, and believed, may have been the first ways power and knowledge worked in the classroom to alienate me. When the landscape

of the classroom is rendered as symbolic forms, further, in study, the intersubjective culture of the classroom rises to the surface. As a teacher, educational researcher, and feminist, I am interested in the hidden and ambiguous ways by which an education initiates us into our culture and the ways students both resist and endorse that initiation. The “powerful set of discourses organized by pedagogical oppositions—such as normality and abnormality, natural and unnatural—has produced a set of pedagogical practices that the child is subjected to and through which he or she is produced as learner” (Martusewicz, 1992, p. 151). The “rational self” the school intends to produce is “a profoundly masculine one from which the woman is excluded, her powers not only inferior but also subservient” (Walkerdine as cited in Martusewicz, p. 152).

I have to mess up the classroom and its discourses in order to allow room for innovation. A messy classroom offers opportunities for connection as pieces of images and texts slide out, creating mysteries and entryways to the environment. This musing of the conscious order of the classroom is done strategically. Both students’ and teachers’ knowledge grow “out of a complex, dialectic relationship with the discursive social matrix that shapes it” (Elbaz, 1991, p. 5). This social matrix is what I attempt to expose and resist in the next three chapters.

I weave theoretical discourses into autoethnographic vignettes not to produce the aesthetic order of the patchwork quilt but to expose the traces of mis-sewn seams marked by tiny holes where I retrace and pull threads out with a seam ripper on a dress that does not hang well but which taught me to sew. Steinberg and Kincheloe (1997) define kinderculture as any condition affecting children, citing the *hyperreality* children grow up and become literate in as a primary teacher. They define hyperreality as the social

vertigo that results from the multiple streams of texts and images that are the wallpaper of our lives. While schools and classrooms are part of kinderculture, I use the term to refer to the conditions affecting children outside of the school which taken together form a powerful pedagogy. Because schools have sought to keep the name brand products out of the classroom, in my definition, kinderculture is perhaps better defined this way: the conditions affecting children which are barred from the classroom.

Chapter Two juggles the issues of kinderculture and the possibilities of *becoming* as pedagogical sites where we “try on” ways of being. The dividing line between child and adult has been eroded by television, a different kind of teacher that does not require age segregation, instruction to grasp its form, or sophisticated understanding. I turn the ethnographic gaze outward beyond the classroom to the girl curriculum of kinderculture, exploring the stories Mattel tells through Barbie about being girls. This “inquiry into narrative” reflects Connelly and Clandinin’s definition of narrative as “both phenomenon and method” (1990, p. 2). Barbie’s narrative endorses the “perfect girl” of “while middle class America [as] the girl who has no bad thoughts or feelings, the kind of person everyone wants to be with, the girl who, in her perfection, is worthy of praise and attention, worthy of inclusion and love” (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, pp. 58-59).

The impact of corporate constructions of girlhood on girls has not been explored (Walkerdine, 1997). A brief history of Barbie’s becomings reveals the ways corporate interests and not concern for children’s welfare have motivated decisions concerning products and though the effects seem benign for the three-year-old girls who play with her today, Barbie endorses the dissimulation of early adolescence. Her ubiquitous presence and status in kinderculture is a reminder to girls of an “idealized version” of the

“perfect girl” that will come to “cover over strong feelings and earlier distinctions” in relationships as girls develop (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 56). As such, she is a representation of what is to come.

Mattel is a learning site that functions in the realm of cultural pedagogy (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1997). A pedagogical site is any site where someone has organized and deployed power to “teach” a certain perspective of culture. Cultural pedagogy recognizes the primacy of kinderculture as an institutionalized network of such sites and displacer of authority in the home. Children grow up in a culture saturated by hyperreality, which magnifies corporate power. Kinderculture includes products such as Barbie and her attendant narratives but also productions which are not directly tailored for children and which escape our notice. As teachers, we need to acknowledge where our students are coming from.

Mattel tends to market to the same image of girlhood as a brief overview will support but not all girls feel identification with these images. What Mattel represents to some girls is *girlishness*, which may run contrary to the cotton wool of their everyday lives. The trope of the child has an uncomfortable simultaneity with the lasting fondness for such child-women as Shirley Temple, Tatum O’Neal, and Little Orphan Annie. How does the haunting image of JonBenet Ramsey function as both a warning against and reinforcement of child-women? These fictions need to be allowed into the classroom to be analyzed by students. Though all of these girls and women are not fictional, they are one-dimensional to children, symbolic forms of girls to be possibly emulated. The visual nature of these pedagogical sites calls to children’s emotions and has a narcoleptic effect on their reasoning. How these figure in girls’ identity- and meaning-making both during

childhood and adolescence is important to know as the basis of a curriculum that would inaugurate literacy connected to children's lives outside of schools.

I was a child ethnographer who covertly gave the children around me fastidious and close attention. At the same time, I understand my own introverted propensities now and wonder what my misunderstanding of my isolation then meant for my development. What meanings did I take from the pariah-hood middle school would inflict and generalize across situations? Sometimes, what happens to those who are marginalized is unjustified and merely due to some quirk in the context, the singular needs of a specific group of girls in a certain place at a certain time. But most of the time, there is something out of step, unacceptable, inappropriate about the outcast girl. She is read and found wanting in some respect. Chapter Two is less personal than Chapter Three because the meaning-making of my childhood was much more about others, both children and adults. I learned who I was by the happenstance comments of others and an "identity" was not required of me. The artifacts of childhood were part of this imposed identity. It was during adolescence that my own meaning-making became the predominant mode of currere for me.

As formidable as the good schoolgirl often appears in the elementary classroom, by middle school her situation may change. I look at the social culture of middle schools to understand why some girls experience such great losses of self-esteem and self-confidence during adolescence in Chapter Three. I consider how some girls become pariahs in middle school and how depression and other adolescent disorders may offer perspectives that "surpass the given and look at things as if they could be otherwise" (Greene, 1988, p. 3). Research narratives of depression present a particular background

of the intersubjective worlds girls share during adolescence. How girls form *belongings* in schools or fail to may offer insight into how connections with the world beyond can begin through the classroom.

I wanted to know how to be in the school; instead I tried to disappear, watched carefully, and felt intensely vulnerable when the object of attention. This appeared to those around me as the good schoolgirl who we are culturally prepared to meet in the classroom. Years later, at a summer church camp, I ran into the only girl I remembered from first and second grades—Lila. While I wanted to show her how much cooler I was ten years older, Lila reminisced about how much she had adored and wanted to be me. This was, needless to say, a moment of self-relevant learning. While I was anxious to disprove what I was trying to live down, my own frightened career as a beginning student, Lila revealed to me how blind and illiterate I had been to those around me. Fear kept me from the classroom; the partition I sensed between self and others was how I experienced the fear. But Lila experienced fear, too. Both of us expressed the same doubt about how we had been in our earliest memories of school. Both of us had perceived the space around us as negative space.

Sibley (1995) points out that “we cannot understand the role of space in the reproduction of social relations without recognizing that the relatively powerless still have enough power to ‘carve out spaces of control’ in respect of their day-to-day lives” (p. 76). Wanting to know how to be in the classroom is consonant with wanting to know how to inhabit the space of the classroom. My working knowledge, as a teacher, should encompass that space, offering multiple ways to be. If not, students are left to “survival practices” of their own and the culturally produced options in the classroom means they

have choices “heavily circumscribed and shot through with conscious and unconscious emotions, fantasies, defenses” (Walkerdine, 1997, p. 171). The role of the good schoolgirl was imposed on me. Eventually, I became a pseudo-good schoolgirl, which is to say inscribed with the emotions, fantasies, and defenses of the good schoolgirl. By allowing more of the outside world into the school as objects to be studied, students are given an opportunity to discuss what they are most familiar with: the world of commodities that landscapes childhood. “There is no room for little girls to have fantasies that belong to them . . . there are no fantasies that originate with girls, only those projected on to them” (Walkerdine, 1997, p. 166). We must create the space for other fantasies.

The institution of the school is a bridge from the private to public worlds. At home, I was responsible and hard-working, which my family valued; I was to emerge an outcast and an awkward buffoon in junior high school. I repressed what I knew about myself and the world; I would have traded anything for a friend. An education as the basis of future prosperity and happiness was not real to me. The efficacy I approached tasks with at home was dissimulated in schools; seldom, if ever, did self-relevant learning take place in terms of curriculum. However, I learned to act in a self-deprecating but ingratiating way in the public world in order to get by.

The cotton wool of depression filled the spaces between surfacings in which I betrayed myself in order to get laughs. I did eventually learn “a bit of the language, enough to pose as a member of the group” (Mairs, 1986, p. 186). But this posing only increased my sense of failure as a girl. Esther Greenwood expresses her fear of the bell jar descending as she leaves the mental hospital in Plath’s (1976) semi-autobiographical

novel about her own breakdown as a young woman. The way we story a depression, or any disorder which is not definitely due to physical causes, impacts other areas of our lives. While depression has become fashionable and symbolic of life in the new millennium, etiologists cannot agree on what causes it (Bebbington, 1996). The depressed teenage girl is as much a stereotype as the good schoolgirl. We have not explored how depression affects girls' other experiences and struggles and whether depression deserves the negative nomenclature that has come to define it. Depression resists definition but it has provided the conditions of my reflections on the difficulty of my adolescence.

In Chapter Four, I reflect on the processes of autoethnography and determine whether the knowledge “accumulated was productive” (Pokinghome, 1997, p. 8). The assemblage of stories taken out of context are surfacings which I float on various discursive structures in order to be conscious of the possibilities in practice. Those times when we work without a pattern and the untidy way we must finish off the seams which remain offer a “reading of the situation that discloses possibility; and yet there is no guarantee that the interpretation is correct” (Greene, 1988, p. 5). This is the narrative of a midlife woman reflecting, as both teacher and feminist, on her years in schools, as student and teacher, with the intent of expanding options that support female students in schools. It is also a narrative about how “I left this world, & it locked me out” (Mairs, 2001, p. 186).

I propose a menopausal theory of curriculum based on my autobiography and on the tentative courage with which I re-enter the public school world of education that locked me out. From this vantage point, the production of a good schoolgirl who was

more than that had effects which followed me out into the world as a woman. The return to the past to dig for the complicity of the school's discursive practices in marking me as abnormal is contextualized in the present by a woman who knows I was only abnormal according to "an elaborate fantasy of man's capacity for total control over nature" which required that I have "an inferior capacity for reason" (Martusewicz, 1992, p. 152). In order to live as a feminist educator, one must be willing "to live a tension between a critical theoretical space and an affirmative political space" (p. 155). Bartky's (1990) experiences of living in the space of becoming-feminist and dissimulation of the world she knew is a touchstone that reminds me of how difficult it is "to be a woman in relation to knowledge" (p. 154). The stereotype of the menopausal woman, hot-flashing and irrationally angry, does not bother me though I am vulnerable to it. Penniless and bitter in many ways, I do not have much to lose. If I can create a tension between theory and practice by sacrificing the good schoolgirl and control, I choose to do so. Menopause and mid-life is not a good time to mess with a woman.

### **The Autoethnography of a Scream**

In many ways, this study is a scream. A woman's scream is dangerous, as Clarice Lispector's (1988/1964) "G. H." realizes:

If I give the call of alarm of someone living, they will drag me along silently and harshly, for that is what they do to anyone who crosses the lines of the permissible world, the exceptional being is dragged along, the being who screams. (p. 55).

If given a preference, I would choose not to have accumulated this scream. It would not have driven me to research the lifeworlds of girls in elementary and middle schools. All girls are not "daddy's little girl," and all mothers are not good enough. Jill

Ussher (1992) begins her historical narrative on women's madness with her mother: "When I was an adolescent my mother was mad" (p. 3). The privacy of the home allows inane behaviors that might be suspect in the public sphere. Ussher locates her mother's "unhappiness, pain and fear" in the 1970s when it was called "'nerves,'" but a hundred years before it would have been called hysteria or neurasthenia, and today it "might be 'post-natal depression'" (p. 3). Since there was "no outlet" in her world, which denied "women the right to their tears," the family set aside "cracked cups and saucers" for those times she "reached a breaking point" and would head outside with the crockery and throw it at the wall in their back yard (p. 3). The sound of breaking china was the articulation of her scream. While girls receive love from their mothers and fathers, it arrives in flows that include toxic agents as well. The girl's task becomes one of sorting through the toxicity for nourishment while submerged in the watery flow (Eigen, 1999).

The part of this scream connected to the present moment is of a woman at midlife, putting down the narratives the adolescent girl is picking up. It is a rich moment to consider the narratives which scream to be told. At the same time, these narratives are entryways to other narratives in the present connected to a desire for more understanding of how girls story their lives today. The pieces of stories I collect become part of the stream, plucked from the rock bed of my own experiences, that is, my working knowledge in practice. These stones are lifted from their resting places to be smoothed and finished off in the rushing tumble of consciousness.

The constellation of discourses which emerge here are the found objects of girls worlds both past and present; not Victorian lace or Rousseau's Sophie but the things one finds in a thrift store—what the world throws away. They are framed as autoethnography

in which the ethnographer is present in the story and seeks to learn the vague alphabet of messiness which favors girls' connection with the learning environment. The story must "change easily" in order to provide the working knowledge the teacher needs to figure connective tissue for girls in the environment. The empathetic presence of the teacher in this story resists the depersonalization and interchangeability of teachers.

Autoethnography may provide a structure for education students to begin with the self and move out into the classrooms they observe; "to find ways of making good teaching more common" (Elbaz, 1991, p. 7). In the ethnographic space, theoretical discourses are used as tools to dig at the rockbed of our own experiences and to find these forms in their present states. In the end, "ethnography's central purpose [is] to produce meaningful, critical discourse about the many worlds we all inhabit" (Denzin, 1997, p. 227). Here, the intent is to build working knowledge of the many worlds girls can inhabit during childhood and early adolescence. As these narratives accumulate and take form, the need for more emphasis on the affective dimensions of classrooms and beyond the classroom emerges.

Traditional forms of data representation cannot describe the expansion and contraction of classroom activity because the classroom is not a closed system. My rationale for looking at kinderculture in childhood and depression in adolescence, and including myself in the looking, is to symbolically reorganize research findings to more closely resemble the classroom. The quiet and shy children are blessings in classrooms that can expand quickly, spinning some children into the inappropriate behaviors the classroom, with its emphasis on discipline, creates. The de facto classroom is not as predictable as it once was because the diversity of the student bodies coupled with a need

to prepare students for a technologically sophisticated future has changed the dynamics of the American public school classroom.

Classrooms are not homogenous nor do the students within them arrive with the same foundational experiences. I stayed on top of the students who disrupted the classroom while I watched the quiet and dutiful students from the sidelines. I knew the homemade differences in the students who struggled and fought with the classroom because the effects of their behaviors on the classroom was disruptive to any learning. Through autoethnography, I look back and realize these students who fought were engaged with the environment, resisting its narrow structures. The quiet and “good” students in my classroom managed to glide across the surface without engagement, either in resistance or self-relevant learning. This is a strategic bombardment of the “interrelated discursive network between institutions—such as the family, the legal system, the media, schools, language, general social practices—and conceptions of the self” (Martusewicz, 1992, p. 154). In the next chapter, I consider how including kinderculture in the classroom might allow students to express some of their homemade differences, to become aware that all of us are different in important ways, and to celebrate the differences instead of canceling them out in our teacherly desire to have order in the classroom.

## **CHAPTER TWO: STRANGE LITTLE GIRLS**

The stories our culture tells about itself are fed to us by teaspoonfuls as children. How we come to know is complicated. One thing we come to know in public schools is what “kind” of students we are, which has an immeasurable affect on the construction of our identities. What we are given as children to play with has an influence on identity construction, too. Between narrative and collage, children are situated in this hyperreal world, as are we, and it makes claims on our subjectivity. While discussions about Barbie and other name brand toys stop at the threshold of schools, where they are barred from entry, I question this ban. While many insist cultural studies have no place in academia, Rutsky has pointed out that this reflects a general “fear of popular culture” in some circles that “is also a fear of information” (as cited in Weaver, 2002, p. 7). The classroom teacher may feel particularly threatened by popular culture and the possibly sexual and violent connotations that may be inherent in it.

Steinberg and Kincheloe (1997) define kinderculture as any condition affecting children, citing the hyperreality children grow up and become literate in as their primary teacher. They define hyperreality as the social vertigo that results from the multiple streams of texts and images that wallpaper our lives. In this chapter I explore both the hyperreality that forms some of the “cotton wool” of our “non-being” as children (Woolf, 1963, p. 72) and how these pedagogical sites outside of the school can be brought into the classroom, not as entertainment but as objects of analysis. After all, “no cultural artifact, including Barbie, is as simple as it may look” (Thompson, 1998, p. 129).

In 1997, Mattel responded to critics of Barbie's idyllic body by giving her "new breasts (smaller), a new waist (wider), and a different mouth (closed)" (Borger, 1997, p. 40). Ruth Handler's now legendary sighting of "German 'Bild Lilli,' a tiny sexpot (who looks like a sinister ancestor of the original blonde Barbie) sold to men in bars and tobacco shops" (Trinidad, 1994 Nov. 20, p. 37), inspired the "knock-off" named Barbie, after her daughter, Barbara. Lilli was "born" in Hamburg, Germany in 1952 in a cartoon strip published in *Bild Zeitung*, a newspaper featuring "sordid, sensational stories," like the *National Enquirer* (Lord, 1994, p. 25). These cartoons featured Lilli "taking money from men and involved situations in which she wore very few clothes" (p. 25). But Lord excavates for Lilli's meaning as an Aryan woman who has seen the hardships of war and embraces "the so-called German economic miracle" which was under way at the time (p. 29). Some of Lilli still survives in Barbie, though she has been Americanized. Lilli, "a sexy blonde with loose morals" (Steinberg, 1997, p. 208) became Barbie, in 1959, who is "never sad, never unavailable, and never fails to 'save the day' within every story written about her" (p. 210).

Barbie's "look" has become a reference point for many discourses. Giroux (1997) refers to the little mermaid in Disney's feature-length movie, *Little Mermaid* (1989) as "mermaid Ariel, modeled after a slightly anorexic Barbie doll" (p. 58) and to Disney's *Pocahontas* (1995) as "a brown, Barbie like super model with an hourglass figure" (p. 62). Both slightly anorexic and buxom, Barbie "would measure 38-20-33 if she were human-size" (Lobdell, 2001 Mar. 14, p. 10). Naomi Wolf has said that "'Barbie's breast' is the "'official breast,'" and "argues that Barbie shares the blame for the fact that girls are raised with a clear expectation of what a sexually successful woman

should look like” (as cited in *Life in – Plastic; Barbie*, 2002 Dec. 21, p. 22). These references to Barbie acknowledge the iconic quality of the doll.

The discourse of Mattel is anchored to particular ideological interests and this makes them more than sites of entertainment that “fall outside of the world of values, meaning, and knowledge” (Giroux, 1997, p. 56). The “cultural curriculum” is narrated by those who “operate not for the social good but for individual gain” (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1997, p. 4). Mattel engages children’s “desire” for the “something beyond [themselves]” (p. 4). This “something” is shaped by “corporate cultural pedagogy” so that if we are to connect with younger human beings, we need to examine this pedagogy. The adults children eventually become are shaped, whether through resistance or endorsement, by the same pedagogy.

For self-relevant learning to take place in an environment, the substance of our desires for something beyond ourselves needs to be made explicit so the meaning-making children engage in can be expressed. This is a fundamental literacy not currently included in curricula. Cultural studies, which make “the popular the object of serious analysis,” use an interdisciplinary approach that “inserts the political into the center of the project” (Giroux, 1997, p. 64). The discourses of kinderculture have developed in “historical, relational, and multifaceted” ways and need to be incorporated into schools “as a serious object of social knowledge and critical analysis” (Giroux, 1997, p. 63).

I will approach Mattel’s discourse through Barbie and the narratives that have emerged as Mattel has added to the product line. Ruth Handler’s innovative notion of an adult doll with her own wardrobe for girls was launched by Mattel in 1959, and Barbie “has remained the world’s most popular doll by constantly tweaking an old formula”

(Tarquinio, 2003 Mar. 9). She is still Mattel's strongest product line. In 2002, Mattel saw for the first time a one-percent decrease in Barbie income and recycled the old formula of "a doll with hair that grows" in Rapunzel Barbie for Christmas 2002. Rapunzel Barbie "was largely responsible for a 17 percent increase in worldwide Barbie sales in the fourth quarter from the period a year earlier" (Tarquinio).

Mattel works "within a broad network of production and distribution as teaching machines within and across different public cultures and social formations" (Giroux, 1997, p. 64). In other words, children run into Barbie in every area of their everyday life—in Happy Meals at McDonald's, in videos shown in a variety of settings which include day care and after-school care centers, in vans now offering standard packages that include television sets and VCRs or DVD players, toys and pajamas, and so on. Mattel handles such limited licensing ventures as Harry Potter toys and games, and their product lines include Fisher-Price, Hot Wheels, Polly Pocket and ello, and Matchbook cars. The level of exposure to these popular cultural forms means these discourses "provide a new cultural register to what it means to be literate" (Giroux, 1997, p. 65). In order to be part of a critical conversation, students need to both analyze and personalize their interaction with these products. This is not a matter of bipolar arguments as to whether Barbie is healthy or not for girls; that argument in terms of kinderculture has largely become a dull one. "Kinderculture is primarily a pedagogy of pleasure and, as such, cannot be countered merely by ostracizing ourselves and our children from it" (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1997, p. 5).

Dolls have been made for centuries and imbued with special powers. Clarissa Pinkola Estés (1992), a Jungian analyst and storyteller, uses dolls as talismans and

believes they possess “an awesome and compelling prescience which acts upon persons changing them spiritually” (p. 88). She teaches her clients “fetish and talisman making” as well as other handmade crafting and believes these serve not only her female clients but those who follow after them. As a feminist teacher committed to opening classrooms up in ways that empower girls, I suggest here that Barbie is a postmodern talisman that can be used for such empowerment. “Talismans are reminders of what is felt but not seen, what is so, but is not immediately obvious” (Estés, 1992, p. 91). Barbie as an object of critical attention can provide a portal for students and teachers to express their own processes of apprehending the world. But Barbie must become handcrafted, that is, made a medium of the homunculi, or “‘little life,’” girls can craft in their own images or projections of themselves as women.

The content of the classroom should ideally connect with students’ lives outside of school. Socrates strolled through the marketplace with his students because in the marketplace are a thousand beginnings to conversation. Mattel is an example of a cultural marketplace (Giroux, 1997) and provides beginnings to richer conversations with students and critical analyses of the patterns behind the cotton wool of cultural pedagogy. Literacy, in this perspective, is broadened and richly contextualized in its meaning and relevance in postmodern schools. Students are already in the conversation. Cultural studies recognize the need to include a literacy that teaches the critical tools necessary to participate in these conversations about the everyday. At the same time, the “lack of fixity” in Barbie makes her the girl who can do anything which reflects a postmodern sense of “creative, unfixed constant reproduction of meaning that has as good a chance of

being positive as negative” (Thompson, 1998, p. 135). It is by using Barbie as a medium for self-expression that something different can happen with Barbie in the classroom.

### **Barbie’s Vita**

Ruth Handler tapped into girls’ desire with Barbie and her designer wardrobe. Barbie was “born” in 1959, at the end of a decade that celebrated home and a woman’s place in it. In cinema and women’s magazines, the home was represented as a pristine and avant garde space which the woman-as-housewife maintained. Barbie was not a *baby* doll that had to be cared for; she was a *glamorous woman* doll who belonged in the reality of the adult world. Though I understood my mother to be an adult, she was not fully-formed adult like the women in books and movies. Barbie’s “coming-out” was shortly followed by Helen Gurley Brown’s (1962) *Sex and the Single Girl* and Lord (1994) considers the similarities between “Brown’s bare, new, vaguely selfish and decidedly subversive heroine” and Barbie, inspired by a German cartoon character and manufactured in Japan. Brown was speaking to women who “lived in the material world, where beauty was the decisive weapon in the everlasting battle for men” and “Barbie and her paraphernalia conveyed it to their younger sisters” (p. 52).

The generational differences predicated on the quick time of technological advances since 1950 encourages such quasi-sophistication in daughters. I am a baby-boomer and so is Barbie. I, like Steinberg, played with Barbie by “lugging plastic cases laden with ‘outfits’ to the playground and constructing scenarios around Barbie and ‘getting’ Ken” (1997, p. 208). As Beauvoir noted, daughters are at once the “double and another person” for mothers who belong to the same “process . . . found in perderasts, gamblers, drug addicts, in all who at once take pride in belonging to a certain

confraternity and feel humiliated by the association” (1952/1949, p. 296). Kinderculture for girls confirms this double standard still floats in our cultural imagination; as a society, we tell girls they can be and do anything while at the same time, more than anything, they “must not *lose* their femininity” (p. 296). In this context, buying a Barbie for a daughter is a conflictive moment for a mother.

Barbie has been a nurse, a baby-sitter, a secretary, a doctor, a pilot, and a firefighter. She has been Police Officer Barbie and Desert Storm Barbie. Barbie has been a chef, a fashion designer, a soloist, a rock star, the tooth fairy, worked and owned her own Pizza Hut and McDonald’s, been a special Wal-Mart and Spiegel edition, the star of TV’s *Baywatch*, a prize in Happy Meals, featured in a “Magical World of Barbie” show and a series of Hallmark Christmas ornaments (Steinberg, 1997, p. 210-212). Besides an ethnic line of Barbies, there has also been an “American Stories Collection that featured a Civil War Nurse Barbie, a Pilgrim Barbie, a Pioneer Barbie, and an American Indian Barbie” (p. 214). She has been featured in the Hollywood Legends Collection: two Barbies dressed as Marilyn Monroe in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and *Seven-Year Itch*, four Barbies dressed as Eliza Doolittle, Barbie as Dorothy and Glinda in *The Wizard of Oz*, with Ken featured as the Cowardly Lion, Scarecrow and Tin Man, two Barbies as Scarlett O’Hara, and one Barbie as Maria in *The Sound of Music*. As Steinberg eloquently puts it, “As much as Barbie is a virgin in sexual relationships, she is a whore in the corporate world” (p. 211). Barbie packaged in a tableau with the accoutrements of whatever role she is playing is all surface and no substance. What is important in all of these tableaux, though, is not what Barbie is doing but how she looks. After all, it is “how a woman appears to a man” that determines “how she will be treated”

(Berger as cited in Lord, 1994, p. 52). And how a woman appears to men determines how she will be treated by not only men but everyone.

Midge has been Barbie's best friend since 1963. Pregnant Midge comes boxed with changing table, rubber ducky, teething rings, disposable diapers, and a removeable stomach with a baby curled up inside. She is part of Mattel's "Happy Family" set with her husband Alan and three-year-old son Ryan. Strangely enough, Wal-Mart had her removed from store shelves after "customers said they were not happy with the pregnant Midge doll" (CNNmoney, 2002, December 25). It seems ironic that at the same time parents call for more family-oriented toys, pregnant Midge would make anyone "unhappy." Since neither Midge nor any of the Mattel dolls have anything closely resembling a nod at vaginas or penises, it seems advisable for Midge to have what seems to amount to a Caesarean section. Although Wal-Mart's spokesperson was vague as far as what offended the unhappy shoppers, my hunch is it had nothing to do with wanting a more realistic representation of childbirth. There is no thematic Skipper Gets Her Period or Barbie On The Rag, with chocolate, tiny boxes of tinier Kotex, and loose-fitting clothing for those bloated days though, in 1975, "Mattel came out with 'Growing Up Skipper,' a preteen doll that, when you shoved its arm backward, spouted breasts" (Lord, 1994, p. 12). Barbie is neither daughter or mother; she does make it to the wedding night with Ken, after all, she needs a reason for a wedding ensemble, but their marriage is never consummated. Marriage would disrupt her "girls can do anything" credo.

A year after Brown's book was published, Ruth Handler, refusing "to give Barbie the trappings of postnuptial life," figured out a way to satisfy children's desire for a baby for Barbie: "'Barbie Baby-Sits' appeared in 1963" and was an "ensemble containing an

infant, its paraphernalia, and an apron clearly marked BABYSITTER” (Lord, 1994, p. 50). “Brown’s chapter headings—‘Nine to Five,’ ‘The Shape You’re In, and ‘The Rich, Full Life’” are seemingly referred to in the books Barbie brings to read while she babysits: “*How to Get a Raise, How to Lose Weight, and How to Travel*” (p. 51).

In the magic of Barbie’s world, a problem is an opportunity for her to canvass a community in which everyone wants to help her solve the problem. The poorly written stories feature ersatz situations. They may function as Walkerdine (1990) found British comics for girls functioned. The stories Walkerdine analyzes are so outlandish as not to be believed, but she points out this provides space for girls to project their own less-than-perfect circumstances onto the stories. Nearly all the comic strips Walkerdine examined were about girls who were victims “of cruelty and circumstance” (p. 90). Relationship is problematized in Walkerdine’s study, as it should be. In the strips, girls must “fight against private injustice [with] private endurance” in the personal politics of their lives (p. 91). The stories recede into an ambiguous fuzz while readers can project the resolution of their own problems onto the figure of Barbie, who seems to dance in every scene. Perhaps the solution most salient is how Barbie is a light to those around her, self-sacrificing and caring. She is upper-middle-class glamour willing to get dirty with the little people in the world.

Barbie recovers the ambiguity and missionary zeal with which I viewed my adult life as a child. With her stiff plastic limbs and bleached out tangle of hair, Barbie cannot do anything but be dressed and posed stiffly. Once taken out of the package, her flawless appearance begins its decline. While the introduction of bendable limbs made Barbie more lifelike, the plastic of which she was molded darkened unevenly with age. Her hair,

so silky in the box, became a tangled mass of fuzz. Velcro had not been invented and each wardrobe change was a feat of squeezing Barbie into her designer outfits and getting her snapped up. Panties and shoes disappeared right away. Playing with Barbie messed her up.

Steinberg (1997) points out that “Barbie is exclusively thematic” while other dolls in her world might occasionally be “given only professions” (p. 210). This means “she has never been a cook but has been a chef; never been a [sales clerk] but has been a fashion designer” (p. 210). In other words, despite her propensity to nouveau riche conspicuous consumption, Barbie has never been a member of the proletariat. She adopted the mod look in the 1960s, a hippie look and then disco look in the 1970s, but by 1980, Lord points out “she had the taste of a lottery winner” (as cited in Borger, 1997, p. 1). The diversity of consumers at the turn of the century is reflected in the Harley-Davidson Collection and there are adult Barbie collectors of both sexes: “a 1959 Barbie that sold for \$3 is now said to be worth \$5,000 in good condition” (Obituary: Ruth Handler, 2002 May 4, p. 103).

### **Packaging Barbie**

Part of the fascination with the Barbie “package” is the assortment of miniature artifacts Mattel packages with her according to the theme. There is a powerful corporate incentive to capitalize on the American love of gadgetry. These accoutrements validate whatever identity Barbie slips into next and provide a record of corporate constructions of consumerism over time. The importance of a woman’s appearance is emphasized in these Barbie packages over the real commitment and hard work necessary to attain such positions. Mattel packages “about 150 different Barbie dolls [every year] and designs

some 120 new outfits” (Life in – plastic, 2002 Dec. 21, p. 22). I “believed” Barbie was a pediatrician as I “believed” I was going to be a doctor; possible but not likely.

Barbie was forty-three years old in 2002 when Ruth Handler died at the age of eighty-five. If Barbie did not need a husband in 1959, she certainly does not need one now. Ken, also named after one of Elliot and Ruth Handler’s children, has been Barbie’s boyfriend since 1961. Mary F. Rogers points out that Barbie is independent, “however weakly anchored” because she is “her own person [and] . . . not primarily somebody else’s partner” (as cited in Frey, 2002 April 30, p. C01). She outlives Handler today and makes Mattel more than \$2.5 billion-a-year. “The Smithsonian had an exhibit in her honor: ‘Flight Time Barbie: Dolls from the Popular Culture Collection of the National Air and Space Museum’” and “chic New York galleries” have also featured her in exhibits (p. C01). “There are Barbie conventions, fan clubs, web sites, magazines and collectors’ events” and there are some who suggest she has become “a way of life” (Life in – plastic, 2002 Dec. 21, p. 22).

Handler was an American success story, the youngest of ten children born to immigrant parents from Poland. At the age of nineteen, “she headed for Hollywood” in hopes of making it into the film business but when this did not happen, “she took a course in industrial design, met a boy . . . and married him” (Obituary: Ruth Handler, 2002 May 4, p. 103). They were entrepreneurs and began making everything from picture frames to a child’s guitar, called a Ukedoodle. Mattel was born in Hawthorne, California in 1952 and remained there until 1991. Marilyn Monroe was born in Hawthorne, too, in 1926. It was during a holiday in Europe that Ruth purchased three of the Lilli dolls, two for daughter Barbara and one for herself. “I only saw an adult-shape body that I had been

trying to describe for years, and our guys said couldn't be done” (as cited in Lord, 1994, p. 29). In 1959, “Barbie the teenage model’ made its debut at the American Toy Fair in New York” and the rest is history, or herstory (Obituary: Ruth Handler, 2002, p. 103).

### **Symbolic Plastic**

Shirley Steinberg (1997) explores the role Barbie played in her own autobiography, calling it her “Barbie autobiography” (p. 210). She began collecting Barbie artifacts as textual research objects because she was “fascinated with the effect that Barbie had on little girls” (p. 209). Even though she owns “forty Barbies, ten Kens, several Skippers (including a beauty princess and a cheerleading Skipper) and a plethora of ‘ethnic’ and ‘special-edition’ Barbies,” she finds “when children come to visit, they plow through my Barbies within an hour and then inquire, ‘Do you have anything else’” (p. 209)? Steinberg’s Barbie-collecting is not unusual. Lisa McKendall, a Mattel spokeswoman, has pointed out that the “upwardly mobile” designer Barbies—“which start at about \$65. a pop—are designed for grown-ups to play with” (Borger, 1997 Dec. 1, p. 40). As Steinberg (1987) points out, “the affect of the Barbie curriculum is idiosyncratic: For some it facilitates conformity; for others it inspires resistance” (p. 217). The point here is that we are still culpable to this curriculum as women and I am unsure if this is more of a comment on women or on Mattel’s marketing genius.

Just like Disney’s rewriting of history in films like *Pocahontas* (1995), Steinberg (1997) found “fairy tales and fiction are not immune from Mattel’s rewriting” (p. 215). Barbie becomes a medium for little girls to make these fictions “‘come to life’” (p. 215). Steinberg marvels at Mattel’s ability to “continue rewriting history and life” with Barbie while still maintaining her integrity (p. 217). She does decide that Barbie assists “in

constructing childhood consciousness” though her proof is that Barbie operates “within the boundaries of particular cultural logics,” which include “blonde whiteness,” “anorexic figures coupled with large breasts,” “unbridled consumerism,” Christianity, and “upper-middle-class credentials” (p. 217). I, on the other hand, am not so certain. Barbie may not be constructing as much as she is reflecting the subtle processes of cultural attitudes towards children.

I have canvassed the predominantly female students in my university classrooms as to their play with Barbie and have received mixed messages as to how that play may have changed over the years. The only consistent difference I have found is that they have more Barbies (here I collapse the whole Barbie family) than I did. Today, “the average American girl aged between three and eleven owns a staggering ten Barbie dolls, . . . an Italian or British girl owns seven; a French or German girl, five” (Life in – plastic: Barbie, 2002 Dec. 21, p. 22). Though Barbie is conflated with blonde whiteness, my first Barbie in 1961 was brunette. Differences in hair, both its style and color, may be one reason girls own so many dolls today.

Beginning in 1967 until the eighties, Barbie’s body changed in some way every year, creating “dynamic obsolescence” (Lord, 1994, p. 12). Most of these changes involved “tricks,” such as holding a telephone with her webbed fingers or hitting a tennis ball. However, “Malibu” Barbie debuted in 1971 and reflected the sexual revolution. “Until then, Barbie’s eyes had been cast down and to one side—the averted submissive gaze that characterized female nudes, particularly those of a pornographic nature, from the Renaissance until the nineteenth century” (p. 12). But “Malibu” Barbie “was allowed to have that body and look straight ahead” (p. 12).

It is primarily through her outfits that Barbie reflects subtle nuances in our attitudes towards female children. The stability of her race, class, and gender provides a jumping-off point for the nuances of fashion and ideology. On the other hand, children are free to play with Barbie as they please and seldom follow manufacturer's lead in creating scenarios. Barbie is a "symbolic *homunculi*, little life" constructed by place and time and a girl's own projections into a vague future (Estés, 1992, p. 88). For women, Barbie is a talisman that helps us remember how we may have imagined our lives might be one day. Multiple Barbies may reflect the multiple identities of a postmodern era though certainly it is a sign of successful marketing.

The streams of toy culture which enter children's lives through various portals make "the experience of social life and self . . . more fluid, uncertain, and complicated than in previous epochs" (Goodson, 1999, p. 6). Generic toys have been displaced by name brands in a Fordist marketplace and a child's developmental life can be marked according to the products she or he plays with: Fisher-Price in the crib, Big Wheel for mobility, Tickle-me Elmo for those first forages into social life, and so on. These kinds of toys are often discarded after a few turns, never to become a worn plaything like the Velveteen Rabbit treasured in the past. Barbie may well be one of few post World-War-II plastic toys that bears the wear of play.

### **Barbie: Pedagogy of a Talisman**

Whether we believe meaning is constructed by language or rises out of personal experience or a combination of the two, a pedagogy of Barbie is an attempt to recognize the "phallogocentric constitution of meaning within the symbolic order" while reclaiming Barbie for our own meanings (Martusewicz, 1992, p. 145). Steinberg (1997) collects

Barbies, I would hazard to guess, out of more than just critical interest. Rand (1995) suggests in *Barbie's Queer Accessories* that we interact with material culture in queer ways that have nothing to do with corporate narratives, though these contextualize the ways we bend meaning when we personalize an object to reflect our own meaning-making. "Barbie is a doll, a convenient, silent, small and portable, posable, disposable, and infinitely replicable emblem" (Thompson, 1998, p. 4). The stories Mattel narrates are possibilities but Barbie is a medium for both girls and women "to produce and reproduce their own desires, wants, needs, and realities, regardless of the hegemonic intentions of either Mattel or parents" (p. 4). A pedagogy of Barbie begins with the multiple possibilities of this infinitely replicable emblem and as a talisman, we can appreciate the complicated meanings already projected onto her and ourselves.

The nation's largest toymaker, Mattel is turning their attention to "sales growth potential" in the global market by "recruiting a new legion of Barbie fans overseas" (Tarquinio). The way Barbie is bound to our girlhood imaginings of a woman's life are bound to be highly individual at some point. I doubt it will be the line of ethnic Barbies that will be the hot sellers in Asia or Africa; these "collectibles" are not to be played with anyway. As with early multicultural literacy work, the ethnicities are essentialized to ceremonial costumes and exoticized make-up. They are not "real" Barbies. "Barbie's hold on the imagination is as a white, blue-eyed blonde" (Life in – plastic; Barbie., 2002 Dec. 21, p. 3). Perhaps Mattel's spokeswoman is correct when she says dolls such as the Ethnic Collectibles are marketed to older collectors. One of Handler's innovative ideas was the notion of an adult doll with a wardrobe that made the doll more about changing

clothes than looking pretty. Adult admiration of collectible Barbies is not about changing clothes but of preservation of the perfect woman perfectly coiffed and dressed.

Barbie autobiographies, like photographs, show more than they intend. When I walk down the Barbie aisle in Toys-R-Us, I do not look at the doll as much as I inspect the accoutrements Mattel packages for her. Four thousand square feet is set aside for the “pint-sized princess“ in Toys-R-Us in New York’s Times Square and “this shrine is a riot of regulation (and trademarked) Barbie pink; a peculiarly nauseating hue that lies between a garish fuchsia and a medicinal shade of bubble gum” (Life in – plastic; Barbie, 2002 Dec. 21, p. 22). Mattel is hyper-protective of their trademark rights and spent five years tussling with MCA and a Danish group called Aqua in lower courts and finally, the Supreme Court, over the group’s 1997 dance hit, “Barbie Girl” (Associated Press, 2002). Mattel’s lawyers claimed advertisements for the song used Mattel’s trademarked pink. “The high court did not comment in turning down Mattel’s request to reopen” the trademark fight (Associated Press, 2002, p. 1). Ophira Edut (2000) suggests readers may wonder why *Body Outlaw* “sounds shockingly similar to a book called *Adiós, Barbie*” and reveals that would be “’cuz it’s the same book” (iii). Mattel has trademarked every part of Barbie’s plastic body, including the “Barbie leg” featured with a “pump and hairbrush” on the cover of *Adiós, Barbie*. When Mattel filed suit against the small independent press that published *Adiós, Barbie*, Seal Press could not afford to do anything other than settle, which included taking the leg off the cover and Barbie’s name out of the title.

Andy Warhol has immortalized Barbie in a portrait and she was included in the 1976 bicentennial time capsule. In 1994, the Guild Hall, an art gallery in East Hampton,

presented a Barbie exhibit as the subject of their annual Kidfest (Behrens, 1994). The exhibit included such artists' renditions and imaginings of Barbie as Grace Hartigan's large abstract oil, "Barbie 1964", Dean Brown's "Arrangement in Blue" in which Barbie poses as Whistler's mother in Cibachrome, and "a campy takeoff of Eugene Delacroix's famous revolutionary scene, [where] Barbie, heroic as Liberty, raises the Stars and Stripes on a mythic battlefield, with her right breast exposed" (Behrens, 1994, p. 1). While this exhibit was presented particularly for children, a co-curator remarked that the only disturbing piece for both children and adults was Russell Brown's photographic strip called "Aging Barbie." In this strip, Brown "subjected the doll face to progressively deepening time and laugh lines," which everyone agreed was "so disgusting" (p. 1). As a mid-life and menopausal woman, I get the message. These renditions work off of other cultural icons often but they also illustrate the way Barbie is a fluid medium for self-expression. The historical pieces work off of Mattel's own practice of rewriting history to feature Barbie as a main character.

There were some pieces that were considered "too provocative and/or too sexual—'Barbie on a Bed of Thorns,' for instance" (Behrens, 1994, p. 2). The curators "favored the Renee Dahl painting showing Barbies, some half-dressed, tossed carelessly about a room" and when a few patrons took offense, they explained that children "often leave their dolls this way, clothes half on, some with chopped-off hair" (p. 2). My daughters, as may be the case with other girls, disregarded the care of their Barbies and her significant others, which may have resulted from the many dolls they were given at every birthday and Christmas. Dahl's painting emphasizes a jaded lack of concern for the dolls. As a baby-boomer who was the daughter of parents who lived their

developmental years during the depression era, my daughters' ill treatment of their dolls and other toys gave me insight into the rule-bound play my sister and I had tolerated.

The Barbie Liberation Organization was a group of parents who stole talking Barbies and G.I. Joes off of store shelves and switched their voice boxes, returning them to the shelves, in the heyday of the second wave of feminism. The political emerges in play with this kind of switch, providing an amusing transgression which could work as a beginning for conversations about gender in elementary classrooms. Karen Detrick's "scrapbook of photos documents the wedding and honeymoon of Barbie and Elvis," including one in which they are "slipping into a fantasy motel" (Behrens, 1994, pp. 1-2). Art is play that rises out of the symbolism of the material relations of our everyday lives. The insertion of Barbie into the everyday of children's lived worlds in various poses and dress invites children to approach their own material relations as ethnographers.

The world according to Barbie is one in which she wears designer clothes, drives pink Corvettes and Volkswagen beetles, lives in dreamhouses, and seems above worrying about the details that drive most adolescent girls crazy: periods, sex, money (or lack of it), fat, and popularity (or lack of it). She has the pre-pubescent personality of the good school girl packaged in a body that has sometimes been controversial because of its long-legged buxomness. "Everyone loves Barbie and Barbie loves everyone" (Steinberg, 1997, p. 211). This is the girl everyone seems to want. The question is whether it is possible to be her and whether this is part of the repertoire of possibilities important for girls who play with her.

"Being" Barbie on the inside while obsequious on the outside does not solve problems; without the clothes and Corvette, it just looks subservient. Barbie ideology

imposes a false reality on girls that requires they disavow the troubledness of social relations. She always wears a smile, does not think bad thoughts, indeed, seems incapable of much thought at all, and is always kind and helpful. In Brown and Gilligan's (1992) study, when they re-interviewed twelve-year-old girls they had first interviewed at seven, they found what at first seemed like "selfish or self-centered" concerns but when they listened closely, they found these girls were narrating their fear of losing relationship. "If they speak their strong feelings and thoughts—that is, if they bring themselves fully into relationships—they risk losing their relationships because no one will want to be with them; yet if they do not speak—if they take themselves out of relationship for the sake of 'relationships'—they lose relationships that are genuine or authentic" (p. 165).

Twelve-year-old girls do not play with Barbies; Barbie belongs to the province of preschoolers in a shrinking childhood. But the pedagogy of Barbie is based on smiling, untroubled inauthenticity that becomes the impasse in social relations for girls at adolescence. As such, Barbie is a precursor of what might come.

Events in Barbie's world always have happy endings. Brown and Gilligan (1992) pointed to the problem with this mythology as they heard girls repeatedly narrate "'happy endings'" that seemed "more like wishful thinking on their part, something heard in a fairy tale, a pleasing and acceptable cover for experiences of feeling left out and fears of being abandoned" (p. 47). A pedagogy of Barbie would problematize the happy ending by using Barbie's protean surface to articulate what remains unsaid in our lives; Barbie becomes a talisman that may cause "us to remember, at least for an instant, what substance we are really made from, and where is our true home" (Estés, 1992, p. 7). The

mothers I knew were not like the mothers on television or in movies; my mother never seemed to have fun and rarely dressed up. It is provocative to imagine how I might have responded to an assignment requiring Barbie to dramatize my mother's life.

What meaning does Barbie have in the "little lives" girls imagine may one day be theirs? What might she help us remember as women that we have forgotten? There are traces of hours in circles on the carpet, each generation of girls leaving their own traces. But these circles were not the origins of the celebration of "blonde whiteness . . . as a standard for feminine beauty," nor of the knowledge that "anorexic figures coupled with large breasts" are the objects of male desire (Steinberg, 1997, p. 217); these strange things we already knew, distilled through the ideologies we picked up in the middle. Hyperreality is one strand in "a tangled discursive skein" with no origin and childhood is not "an epistemology of origins" (Probyn, 1996, p. 99).

### **Playing with Barbie**

The postmodern family exists within a variety of contexts that can include blended, interracial and cross-racial families headed by working and single mothers, growing numbers of single fathers, or same-sex couples. These changes have occurred over the last fifty years of the twentieth century. Barbie was introduced to the world when eighty percent of all children lived in homes with their two married biological parents (Kincheloe, Slattery, & Steinberg, 2001). While these families still exist, economic necessity has redefined the parents' roles and, therefore, children's roles.

Traditional notions of childhood are changing. The concept of childhood as a particular classification of human being demanding special treatment differing from that accorded adults is only one-hundred-and-fifty years old. Childhood can only exist in

contrast to adulthood. The modern conception of childhood relies on the need to keep “adult secrets, particularly sexual secrets,” from children (Postman, 1982, p. 9). Postman (1982) points out that society has existed throughout most of its history without such a conception; our present-day notion of childhood took about two hundred years to develop and can be traced to Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press in the mid-fifteenth century. He also points out that the idea of childhood did not “emerge overnight” and “could not have happened without the idea that each individual is important in himself, that a human mind and life in some fundamental sense transcend community” (p. 28). Today, we are in the midst of another dramatic paradigm shift as technology changes how we communicate in a revolutionary way, like the printing press did, and, correspondingly, the ways we organize our thoughts.

The necessity to protect children from violence, sexual transgression, and death has become a primary role of parents. The emergence of the latchkey child is situated in a kinderculture that includes media that seduce children to live isolated from their peers at home and maintain their ability to do so. The predominance of visual images in this media revolution does not require an aggressive response from the reader in order to discover their content. These visual images call for an aesthetic response and, some suggest, have a narcoleptic effect on the mind (Postman, 1982). The isolation of the postmodern child has replaced the loose conditions that defined play in earlier decades, when play could be organized spontaneously in a context of space and time that did not require a security role by parents. At the same time, lack of supervision over media accessibility when parents are either working a daytime job or catching up household chores in the graveyard shift means the television is often a surrogate parent. Television

programs are generally produced to be understandable by a twelve-year-old, no matter their content. The “sharp distinction between the adult world and the child’s world” is muddled in this context.

These changes do not occur in a vacuum; the family and the concept of childhood change within a context of multidimensional changes. Postman points to many of these changes but pertinent to kinderculture is his recognition that “children’s games, in a phrase, are an endangered species” (1982, p. 4). Once considered to require no instruction or supervision, special accommodations or equipment, games were “played for no other reason than pleasure” (p. 4). Today, the same games “not only are supervised by adults but are modeled in every possible way on big league sports” (p. 4). Extending this notion to play with toys, particularly Barbie, some corresponding changes can be identified.

Not only has Barbie evolved into what Rogers (1999) calls “a fantastic icon . . . exaggerating what is actual, possible, or conceivable” (p. 3), her femininity becomes ambiguous because where it should entail “specific sorts of social bonds,” it does not. Barbie is the “center” of her world and “typically spends time with people only when she feels like it” (pp. 15-16). In every other way, her style is what Rogers calls “*emphatic femininity*” because she takes “feminine appearances and demeanor to unsustainable extremes” (p. 14). As Ivor Goodson (1999) states, we story the self at a time when “the self is being ever more commodified, saturated, and legitimated” (p. 6).

The blankness of Barbie’s personality and the perfection of her body make her easy to manipulate and dress. She is not active except perhaps in the way Holly-Go-Lightly (played by Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*) is active in the frenetic

sequence where she dresses hurriedly in a room as disarrayed as my Barbie case, and emerges looking every bit the runway model. In other words, the passivity of our lives is punctuated by wardrobe changes that are swirls of activity from which we emerge flawless. The body of the woman is the doll girls most play with: Barbie when she is a child and her own body when she is an adult. Wardrobe changes in response to situations we constructed were how we played with Barbie. Boys play with action figures by becoming one with them, scrambling through jungles or mountains, riding in machines with which they also become one. G. I. Joe's body is constructed with lots of joints for posing him whereas Barbie has a flawless finish, without nipples, and with only pseudo bendable limbs. When we play with Barbie as girls, we may learn how to live our bodies as objects as well as subjects.

There are girls who resist Barbie, and I have heard more than one woman remark that she took the heads off of her Barbies. There are girls who do not play with Barbie at all. There is no official rule book on how to play with Barbie and there are differences in play between those who grew up in rural areas and urban areas. Whatever orientation girls and women express towards Barbie always seems to be a telling piece as one gets to know them better. There are those who are passionate about their hatred of Barbie and this can be accompanied by a fierce anger about other things connected to traditional femininity.

In our moderate-sized Southern city, there are "Barbie twins," that is, identical twins who have had plastic surgery and actually look like twin Barbies. Cynthia Jackson is a famous Barbie "twin," having "undergone more than a dozen surgical procedures to mold herself into a real-life Barbie" (Rogers, 1999, p. 21). Vicki Lee is a model who

dreamed of looking like Barbie from childhood. She has “undergone three breast surgeries (and now measures 34F), has had two nose jobs and multiple lip implants, and has had the bags under her eyes surgically removed” (p. 21). Illustrating how unsustainable Barbie’s look is for most women, “Lee, still in her twenties, spends \$120 every six weeks tinting and reweaving her hair, \$45 every three weeks for fingernail extensions, and ‘thousands of dollars a year’ for memberships in fitness clubs and visits to tanning salons” (p. 21).

Barbie’s physical characteristics are not difficult to emulate, but, as adults, women who do so are called “blonde bimbos.” These seem-to-be wannabe Barbies who have passed into the institution of heterosexuality show what Barbie’s fate might be in the real world—patronization and manipulation. They lack the package—the condo, the cars, the clothes—and in many respects, such becomings might be seen as effective strategies to acquire such accessories. There is variety among blonde bimbos. At a dull point in my own life, I effected such a look as a practice of survival. In the “limited terrain of self-production” that was open to me, it made sense (Walkerdine, 1997, p. 171). This was the way I carved out a “space of control” in my day-to-day life (Sibley, 1995, p. 76).

As Rogers (1999) points out, when we look at Cher, we do not see the “surgical engineering nor air brushing” but the possibility “that the odds can be beaten” (p. 20). As a talisman, Barbie is a touchstone for the belief in this possibility. This virtual reality “has the hold on our most vibrant, immediate sense of what *is*, of what we must pursue for ourselves” (Bordo, 1993, p. 104). “The distinction between the territory and its map,

between reality and appearance” is lost in the virtual reality. The images of popular culture carry authority no less for children than for adults.

At the same time that some girls project possible selves through Barbie into an ambiguous future, Barbie ideology imposes a reality on girls that requires they disavow the “troubledness” of social relations (Solomon, 2000). Barbie always wears a smile. She does not think bad thoughts, indeed seems incapable of much thought, and is always kind. The mask of the smile is constructed by the same social forces which cause girls to repress what they know in order to fit in with their peer group, which is usually gender-segregated through early adolescence (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). This is how dissimulation works: the story frames for alternate realities provide the motivation to reproduce traditionally feminine ways of being and knowing. If a girl wants to really be the girl everyone wants, she must embody feminine traits and qualities. She has to “be” a certain way.

The way we construe our worlds and understand our places in those worlds is constructed through our intersubjective knowledge. While the television functions as a teaching machine in the home, the body is not engaged. Merleau-Ponty suggests space is not “a sort of ether in which all things float” but is compounded of relationships (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/1945, p. 283). In other words, space is not determined by interior design or regions imposed on regions; rather, it is “the means whereby the position of things becomes possible” and as such, these positions must be “always carved out of it” (p. 284). In this, we can look to the ways we have constituted our worlds by tracing the ways we have carved out our positions in the space we have perceived available to us in

classrooms. The classroom can challenge the authority of hyperreality by emphasizing and building on the intersubjective world within it.

Inquiry into the narratives produced by Mattel in the classroom space allows corporate representations of “utopian possibilities” and the pedagogy of pleasure they maintain into classroom discourse. While Barbie reproduces traditional femininity, this is dissimulated in her wardrobe in which she dresses the part of power via professional identities. Though Mattel says “we girls can do anything” through Barbie, there are some things Barbie does not do. She does not marry and she also does not have complicated intersubjective relationships with those around her. When “Pilgrim Barbie meets Squanto, and he teaches her how to plant corn,” she comments: “He wasn’t savage at all” (as cited in Steinberg, 1997, p. 214). There is no “Homeless Barbie, Abortion Barbie, Alcoholic Barbie, or S&M Bondage Barbie” (Steinberg, 1997, p. 210) though versions of these can be found on the internet. Barbie lives in an idealized world in which it is possible to believe she can be anything but no one takes her wardrobe changes seriously. Barbie chooses from the limited field offered to many girls and provides a model of dreams of transcendence with no substance. As a human being, Barbie can choose to be whoever she is capable of being; as a woman, she remains rooted in traditional narratives of femininity.

Barbie is a talisman, a reminder of what we feel but cannot see, of the dissimulation that has already begun to be played out in our circles on the carpet: knowing how to dress the part but unable to follow through in action on the world. The production of counter-images in the classroom is possible. As Bordo (1993) points out, role conflicts and time pressures are manipulated by “psychology and the popular media”

and translated into the possibility of “control” that is “a common trope in advertisements for products as disparate as mascara and cat-box deodorant” (p. 105). Through the hand, it may be possible to make Barbie “say” what Mattel does not want her to say. The thematic packages used to market Barbie give themselves to creative manipulation, as the internet versions of Barbie bear witness. Gilman (2000) suggests that “surely you can construct some ‘regular’ Barbies that are more than white and blond” and follows her suggestion with such examples as “Birkenstock Barbie,” “Butch Barbie,” and “Blue Collar Barbie” among others (pp. 19-21). Of course, each is followed by a short paragraph listing the accoutrements that would be packaged with each.

Mattel’s predominance in girls’ kinderculture has other messages for us but first there is a need for further research into how these corporate products “mean” for girls and how they connect with the historical situation of girls today. The highly gendered terrain of kinderculture is significant but in many ways reproduces what is already on the surface, the heavy inscription of femininity on the body. The television, roughly produced so that it is understandable to a twelve-year-old, reveals adult secrets to both boys and girls and parents’ authority has been undermined. How do Mattel and other corporate discourses structure our thoughts, feelings, and actions? How do these cultural forms reflect and help produce the meaning teachers and students give to their lived world? What are the central themes that characterize Mattel’s storying of our lives? How can these be rendered as objects of analysis in classrooms?

### **Kinderculture in the Classroom**

The “felt” meanings of my practice with younger human beings lead me to believe the first object of popular culture which should be rendered as a text to be

analyzed in the classroom is the classroom itself. Before we can bring Barbie into the classroom, early critical work in the lower elementary classroom can negotiate the meaning the classroom has for the teacher and the students. Before such an exploration can take place, though, the teacher must have the opportunity to confront the stereotypes of teachers which have remained unchanged since the first half of the twentieth century (Weber & Mitchell, 1995). “It’s one thing to look critically at teaching in movies, books, and television, but quite another to assess the impact these media have on people, and the sense people make of the images that bombard them” (p. 28).

Pre-service teachers bring their own meanings about teaching based on their experiences to their teacher preparation and much of their time in classes and observing in schools is a search for “confirmation of what they assume to be true about themselves as teachers and about teaching” (p. 30). Unless this is apprehended and made explicit, these teachers are likely to spend their first years struggling to “defend their positions, ignore counter-examples, keep segregated logically incompatible schemata” (Anderson as cited in Weber & Mitchell, p. 30) or adjust their assumptions to fit the classroom in which they find themselves. If they choose the latter, they may find themselves “using various strategies aimed either at self-preservation or at reframing the situation” and these strategies may allow them to “succeed in establishing a productive and coherent teaching self and concomitant style” (p. 20).

I have used film with my teacher education classes and find this to be one possibility in disrupting the assumptions we bring to our teacher education. I was educated and practiced as a Montessori teacher before pursuing a teaching degree in the university. I not only brought my own agenda to Montessori, but brought both my own

agenda and the Montessori discourse with me to the university. What I did not know to explore was what it was about Montessori education that had appealed to me. Before we define ourselves as teachers, it is useful to examine popular images of teachers to not only teach the basics of film critique but to flesh out the teacher we have already constructed.

In order to bring to consciousness students' conceptions of themselves as teachers, films which feature teachers in starring roles provide popular conceptions of teachers which are safe places to enter the conversation regarding teacher identity. The need to constantly re-frame one's practice as one relies on felt meanings to create opportunities for students to carve out new positions in the space of the classroom requires a fluid understanding of practice. While Montessori celebrated the humility of the teacher, a humility that borders on subservience, the flexibility and openness humility creates in practice may not be accessible without some notion of why one is in the classroom. "We need to face more explicitly the probability that ambiguity, and multiple, even seemingly contradictory images are integral to the form and substance of our self-identities as teachers" (Weber & Mitchell, 1995, p. 32). There are multiple ways of being in the classroom, both as student and teacher.

Stereotypes "caricature" what it means to be teacher in a profession that carries "the opinions and hopes of a community" (Britzman, 1991, p. 5). With a better understanding of their own stereotype vulnerability, teachers are more likely to believe it is possible to misread students' behaviors in the classroom. My passivity and silence made the imposition of the good schoolgirl grid of identity possible and I never did anything to disrupt that reading. In fact, I never did anything but those things explicitly

asked of me by the teacher. While being trapped in a stereotype afforded me a safe space from which to function in the classroom, stereotypes determine how we read behaviors and what we do not see, as well. The danger with these stereotypes is they become internalized as we come to think of them as “innate and natural” (Britzman, 1995, p. 5). This is how stereotypes are reproduced.

In the lower elementary classroom, cultural studies can be introduced by naming and contextualizing the artifacts of the classroom. The circle on the carpet that I recall from my play with Barbie can be created in the classroom by making Barbie’s world the object of a fundamental ethnography. Examining the ways Barbie and her friends have been constructed over their history is a vehicle for conversations about race, class, and gender. The teacher can share her or his own Barbie autobiography. In the upper elementary classroom, these same conversations can be revisited individually by female students as they write their own Barbie autobiographies. Dioramas can be constructed easily with shoeboxes and old Barbie dolls in which she is inserted into the “context-sensitive and particular” of our own lives. Using Barbie as a tool to express what we do not consciously know about being a girl but can say, rich connections can be made with the world outside of the classroom mediated by a girl’s own experiences. Since kinderculture makes use of a pedagogy of pleasure, Barbie seeks to reinforce what Mattel perceives the “masses” want reinforced about being a girl and a woman.

Rowe, Fitch, and Bass (2003) were interested “in connections between dramatic play and literacy” that first graders could use as “catalysts for story writing” (p. 364). They intentionally “avoided media-based action figures (e.g., Rug Rats characters or Batman), except when children brought them from home” because they felt this would

provide more freedom for children to “invent their own story lines” (p. 366). I believe children’s vicarious identification with the toys they play with at home would provide more freedom because it would not be so rule-oriented and these represent “comfort figures” with which children are familiar. I appreciate Rowe, Fitch, and Bass’s concerns but they admittedly had to provide a lot of time for students to play with the unfamiliar characters, which were grouped in clear plastic boxes with books. Again, there is the unspoken taboo against corporate products; this may work to suggest to children that what is done at home does not belong in the classroom. By placing no constraints on the figures children wish to use in their dramatizing, the classroom becomes open to the whole child. By privileging the written text over the media image, teachers leave out a world of imagination children have already constructed.

On the other hand, Abraham and Lieberman (1985) point out there is “no evidence to support any assumptions about play with baby dolls or Barbie dolls” (p. 12). The ubiquity of baby dolls in preschool classrooms is challenged in their study of nine white females, age four-and-a-half, from middle-income families. Defining “*nonfacilitative* behaviors” as “grabbing, hitting, kicking, pushing, glaring, shouting, screaming, teasing, commanding, and name calling,” they found these behaviors were “observed much more frequently” in three sessions they observed where the girls played with baby dolls compared to three sessions with Barbie dolls. They speculate that Barbie allowed the girls to “play *through* the doll rather than *as* the doll or the doll’s mother” and that “children may be less challenged by the limited repertoire of baby’s behaviors” (p. 13). They noted how active the girls’ imaginations were in play with Barbie and that Barbie may “simply be a better match for their expanding cognitive competence than

engaging in a limited baby doll repertoire” (p. 14). By considering only book-ish characters that are unfamiliar to children, we “may be closing the door to a play material which meets children’s needs for imagination, cognitive complexity, and language development more appropriately than some of the more traditional items” (p. 14).

Because Mattel has such effective marketing strategies and is plugged into multi-institutional networks, students can compile lists of other cultural sites besides the obvious ones where they see their products. The ubiquitous nature of popular representations authorizes and legitimates these corporate constructions as images “on which America constructs itself” (p. 55). What kind of America do corporate products construct? What story do these products tell about us? The version of America that Mattel gives children is of a magical world where, indeed, our dreams do come true as long as they reinforce the status quo and make consumers of children. By making Barbie and other toy icons reflect our homemade differences, they become talismans that remind us of the potential within us.

Bruner (1984) said there are two modes of thought which are complementary but irreducible to each other: the paradigmatic and the narrative. While paradigmatic modes work with what is empirically verifiable and universal, the narrative mode “seeks explications that are context-sensitive and particular” (p. 97). The literacy we need to be critical consumers of corporate media and products must first be relevant in our own lives before we can generalize. Students working to understand the meanings that are generated by Mattel first explore the meaning these discourses have in their own identity construction. In a college course on film critique, one student asked the professor if watching a film in a critical mode ruined the pleasure usually associated with it. It is a

valid question. To be aware of one's surroundings and to understand the way those surroundings are manipulated by those with the power and resources to do so is not to detract from pleasure. It is to understand better the way these profit-oriented narratives become part of our own stories.

### **Conclusion**

Stereotypes are ready-made identities that we use to triage the characteristics of those around us for quick storage and identification. These stereotype markers tend to become incorporated in our identities. As girls grow into pre-puberty and early adolescence, how others read them begins to take dominance over how they read themselves. Social situations become opportunities to check our reflections in how people mirror who we are back to us. The play of childhood, which ideally lacks such solemnity or purpose, is a key pedagogical site. Play does not fall outside of the field of other dynamics in our lives, however, and changes as society and the family changes.

Research in the field of education has not been organized by teachers. The classroom ideally should provide multiple opportunities for connection to students as well as for expression. We need to think of the classroom as the space where students will carve out their positions and provide as much raw material as possible for this. The kinds of literacy we teach in these classrooms needs to include the literacy of our own becomings. Instead, we usually think how we can contain and control our students. The odd arrangement of one adult in an elementary classroom with twenty-five or so students privileges classroom management over self-relevant learning. But classroom management should not be considered only in terms of containment but of meaning it generates in the lives of the students it manages.

I was a girl given little attention, always quiet and obedient, as though I were not there at all. I committed as little as possible of myself to the school, only enough to get by, though I was achievement-oriented. My becomings took place in books and old black-and-white movies my mother let me stay up late to watch. They did not take place at school. The summer before seventh grade and junior high school, I worried but I had friends in school by that time and we would all go to the same school. For me, junior high school would turn out to be when I knew that nothing remains the same. As Janet Frame (1982) recalled, so was I “full of thinking yet not knowing what I was thinking, watching the beams of dust, whitened with chalk, floating around in the window light and knowing that I used to think they were sunbeams” (p. 40). This thinking never entered the classroom in any shape or style as it became more difficult to hold on to the fantasies that had seen me through elementary school.

Schools construct a parallel universe partially by banning the homemade from its curriculum. While kinderculture designated for female children reinforces traditional gender roles, Barbie offers resistance particularly the discourse of the housewife and mother. At the same time, Barbie is unconnected to the community around her and does not suffer ostracizing for her choices. As Beauvoir (1952/1949), mothers proselytize a confraternity at the same time they are often humiliated by it. The contemporary classroom takes on the interior design of the corporate workplace and made demands upon children that have nothing to do with home life for some girls. We ignore that “success is made harder by the demands made upon her for another kind of accomplishment [while insisting that] she must be *also* a woman, she must not *lose* her femininity” (Beauvoir, 1952/1949, p. 296).

In suggesting that a talisman helps us to remember what we have forgotten, Estés refers to the power of our own intuition to help us find our way in a world that often presents itself in disguise. As a symbol of intuition, the doll is the medium of “subjective affirmation and identification” (Beauvoir, 1952/1949, p. 297). Instead of providing didactic characters to children, the classroom can be made “large” enough to allow the dolls children choose to play with at home to become the media of self-expression in the school. It is critically important to allow this in the multiple currents of hyperreality we must learn to make our way through today.

At twelve, girls enter the middle school. Though today, doll play has probably long ceased for these girls, the demands of the transition to middle school at the same time many girls struggle with pubertal changes means her own body becomes the site of virtual reality. One stereotype which is available to adolescent girls is provided by the dark isolation of depression. In the next chapter, I consider how depression is both agony and salvation for some girls.

### CHAPTER THREE INSIDE THE BELL JAR

Today, the story quantitative narratives tell about early adolescence is especially grim for girls. While depression is not the only disorder adolescent girls are increasingly diagnosed with; it is one of the top three, a list which also includes conduct disorder and anxiety disorder (Bardone, 1998, p. 1). However, depression is often present, or comorbid, with other psychiatric disorders, including anxiety and conduct disorders. “One of the most reliable findings in the epidemiology of depression is that adult women are about twice as likely to be depressed as adult men” (Nolen-Hoeksema & Girgus, 1994). Like myself, many of these women, if asked when they first experienced the set of symptoms called depression, would point to early adolescence.

Research narratives consistently find that “the rate of depression in young people appears to be increasing in more recent birth cohorts” (Daley, Hammen, & Rao, 2000, p. 525). As a depressive and a teacher, I know the classroom can offer the space and time to use the intersubjective worlds between teachers and students as a dialogic tool to engage with our students and allow their storyings of the self to emerge. The story we end up with is tied up with power differentials and subsequent stories and so these initial forages clarify how we have lived and thought through our lives (Pinar, 1976). Holland and Eisenhart (1990) found “that students do at some level grasp the nature of their society and recognize the positions that people like them are conventionally afforded” (p. 17). Memory is unstable and disloyal, given to service of whatever our present narrative is. The unwelcome details which emerge and disrupt our stories are the details I look for in exploring the shape of my working knowledge in the classroom.

During childhood, depression is “relatively uncommon” and among those few, “girls do not appear to predominate” (Allgood-Merten, Lewinsohn, & Hops, 1990, p. 55). Researchers attempting to identify predictors of adolescent depression agree that it is not a “normal” state of adolescent being (Daley & Rao, 2000; Bardone, 1998). Reluctantly, I agree. Whether I chose depressing from a panoply of possibilities or it is the result of a diabolical and systematic concurrence of factors, I am convinced I could have lived without it. At the same time, it is a vital organ in the life I have. If it is possible to intervene in the stability of women’s preponderance of depressive disorder, I suggest it is in the middle school when this can be accomplished.

Nolen-Hoeksema and Girgus (1994) suggest “gender differences in depression most likely emerge in early adolescence because gender differences in risk factors for depression that develop during childhood meet up with biological and social challenges whose prevalence increases in early adolescence” (p. 424). They go on to point out that “girls both bring more risk factors for depression to adolescence and are presented with more biological and social challenges during this important life period” (p. 424). Bardone (1998) found that early adolescent females who are depressed experience more medical problems as adults. The greatest predictor of a major depressive disorder is to have already had an event. Therefore, the propensity to depress follows us into adulthood. There is a pattern to depressogenic thinking which researchers suggest becomes hardened as children make “the transition from late childhood to early adolescence and develop the capacity for abstract reasoning and formal operational thought” (Turner & Cole as cited in Abela, 2001, p. 243). The middle school’s reason for being is acknowledgment of the special needs of early adolescents. All of these

findings suggest that something happens to some girls in the middle school years which disrupts both her social and academic level of functioning.

“It is all too tempting to categorize adolescents in general, and adolescent girls in particular, by listing the multiple problems facing them and assuming that these form accurate images or themes” (Johnson & Roberts, 1999, p. 4). Behind the cotton wool of non-being of my adolescence is the dissimulation of the world, the truncating of what I knew so my working concept of the world became a false representation. As an anthropologist of the classroom and its intersubjective world, I know that my self-perceptions were colored by non-clinical as well as clinical depression and researchers have found that children of either group “view themselves negatively” (McGrath & Repetti, 2002, p. 77). As much as this is an attempt to understand “the variable interplay of biological, psychological and social factors” which most researchers believe result in depressive disorder (Bebbington, 1996, p. 296), it is also a story.

The scream I never screamed in elementary school turned bright pubertal red in the junior high school. The shape of this scream has been a point of struggle; screams beget screams. The social cultures of middle schools are punitive and awkward milieux for some girls in which cliques and pubertal bodies make depression a rational response. But “social factors are not unambiguously external” because they derive their value from the meaning attributed to them in “the psychological process of appraisal” (Bebbington, 1996, p. 297). In the intersubjective worlds which comprise any school’s social culture, some “children’s social adjustment may depend on the degree to which they obtain healthy, caring responses from peers, in addition to the degree to which they successfully

avoid aggressive overtures” (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996, p. 378). This is a narrow path and each girl negotiates it on her own.

The strategy of survival any early adolescent girl chooses is homemade; though common tropes can be culled from the myriad choices available and larger themes can be accommodated by categorizing the choices, there is no ready-made rack of subjectivities to which she turns. The desire for romance is overwhelming in some adolescent girls and yet romance itself is a slippery subject. Even though Holland and Eisenhart’s (1990) training as “sociocultural anthropologists had equipped” them to be able to deconstruct the “naturalness” of romance, they found it difficult and uncomfortable to do so (p. 19). The culture of romance is “key in sustaining women’s subordinate positions in the society” (pp. 3-4). Holland and Eisenhart found that “especially among the white students, romantic themes were emphasized to the point that gender encounters were almost always interpreted by peers as romantic in nature” (p. 13). Depression is a romantic malaise.

This autoethnographic project of return to classrooms is like Wolf’s (1992) *The Thrice-Told Tale*. Discovering a story she had written “nearly thirty years ago” in her files, one she had forgotten, “precipitated the story . . . to come back in almost unwelcome detail—sounds, smells, visual images, and emotional states” (p. 2). What she found as she “read and reread the various written records was that the fieldnotes, the journals, and the short story represented quite different versions of what had happened” (p. 2). What called to me in my initial stirrings to investigate depression and its intersection with adolescent girls was a preconceptual image I held of a girl lost in a

junior high school who was a victim of depression and of a punitive school culture. What I found on this autoethnographic return presented different versions of that story.

There are “some kinds of cultural meanings [which] *may* only be accurately understood and reported by one who has learned them without realizing it” (Wolf, 1992, p. 5). The ways we story our lives is involved with the meanings we have made and are making. My formal studies and the passage of years mean “the problem looks different and hence is different” because I have moved on to other ontological levels (Pinar, 1976, p. 53). I approach the story from a different vantage point. The hormonal havoc from which issues breasts and the menstrual cycle certainly bears closer examination, but this is the same as saying “women get more depressed because of their hormones,” and clearly, not all women, including myself at times, are depressed (Bebbington, 1996, p. 298). There are many who write about adolescent girls and chronicle this complicated and problematic period (Pipher, 1994; Brumberg, 1997; Basow & Rubin, 1999; Daley & Rao, 2000; Abela, 2001; Frost, 2001), but these researchers have no reason to return to the classroom with their findings. Although I primarily return as a teacher in order to inform my teaching, by keeping the “primary focus biographic, and the intellectual or conceptual secondary or at least subservient,” I attempt to render my own depression in ways that recognize the problem is different than it seemed then.

It follows that what we call depression is different than it seems. The appearance of anti-depressants in 1995 could not have foreseen the multiple disorders to which these drugs are addressed today. If depression is a telling characteristic of recent and present time and girls as young as nine-years-old are diagnosed with adult forms of depressive disorder, given the two-to-one preponderance of women to men, what does this

characteristic tell us about female development? If it is clear that dire risks face many early adolescent females, the middle school should provide the space for confronting these risks—if not safely, then supported.

### **Bell Jars**

Perhaps we all have bell jars hanging over our heads. Sylvia Plath's (1972) *The Bell Jar* is a semi-autobiographical tale of descent into depression that ends on a note of apprehension, an acknowledgment that she had no control over the bell jar dangling precariously over her head. But even more frightening for her was that she had no control over her self when the bell jar descended. The bell jar is characterized as something out there, outside of her self, constructed of glass. The bell jar sets apart what it displays through the ostentation of glass that offers no real protection. Esther Greenwood's tale involves a girl bent on literary success, a self-made debutante who came from a single-parent home not financially fixed for debutante-ness, the confusion of sexuality and the social constructions of sex, and the passionate romance of her imminent failure. What needs to be clarified in classrooms if we are intent on helping adolescent girls in a postmodern world that tells them they can be anything and do anything is that we cannot do everything and be everything.

'Glass' is a term which those (both men and women) who suffer the despair of a major depressive disorder use more than any other to describe the existential phenomenological aspects of their being-in-the-world. It may be that glass, perceived either as a wall between the self and others, or as the self, expresses the inadequacy of language to articulate our desire to belong and possibly disrupt our isolation: "I am here.

You can see me. But you cannot understand me.” As a depressed subject, I became the object of my most romantic longings for a dark and deep lover.

Twichell (2001) expresses his early awareness of his difference as “clear glass between me and playground, me and my young fellow humans” (p. 23). Ellen West “referred to her conditions as being in a glass ball” (Chesler, 1972, p. 15). Virginia Woolf wrote that her mother’s death “unveiled and intensified; made [her] suddenly develop perceptions, as if a burning glass had been laid over what was shaded and dormant” (1976, p. 93). Glass keeps us outside or inside, the difference making all the difference. At the same time, through it we see what we cannot have, or our own losses. Our positioning relative to this glass partition is different for each of us. We are defined by the glass, by what it allows us to see while refusing us both the sensual knowledge and social codes that would allow us in. What it keeps out is the critical awareness of the impossibility of the romantic dream.

Though by sixth grade, elementary school had become familiar enough to afford comfort, junior high school was to present an overwhelming puzzle to me. This surfacing was not qualitatively worse than my first years in school, as far as my own anxiety and constraint were concerned, but it was worse because I was marginalized by girls I had been friends with in sixth grade. By the end of the first week, it was obvious I was not to stand anywhere near them at recess. Belonging somewhere in the unstructured times of the day, when we were not in class, would have greatly helped my assimilation into seventh grade. Instead, I developed a skill for seeing detail and blocking out the big picture as I wandered the margins of the common areas. In order to distance myself from

my exclusion, a sense of my self as special and in ways, better, than my peers began to evolve.

One surfacing which has survived from my adolescence is of the first day I emerged from class at lunchtime after becoming sure of my excommunication. I recall the bright sunlight and walking in the grass between buildings, avoiding the lunchroom and breezeways students crowded in during this time. I never ate lunch in the cafeteria after that. This is when my stories about the world began to come undone. This was how dissimulation of my working knowledge of the world was intensified. In 1951 right before she won *Mademoiselle* magazine's fiction contest, Plath wrote, ". . . it's quite amazing how I've gone around for most of my life as in the rarefied atmosphere under a bell jar" (as cited in Ames, 1971, p. 250). So have I. The reality is refracted by the glass of the bell jar and so I participated in the dissimulation of the world necessary in a patriarchy.

My own melancholy hatched out of my parents' divorce and the harsh economic realities my Hispanic mother faced afterward before I attended school. I have no memory of the months she struggled to stay in our house after my father left. I went to sleep after his departure and seemed to wake up sitting across the street from our house, watching our furniture being loaded into a truck. Whether trauma altered my cognitive processes and melancholy emerged or the propensity was already right under the surface, a sense of sadness outside of me permeates the memory. In the junior high school, melancholy gave way to something denser and more rigid. In elementary school, melancholy felt like something that separated me from the other children. In junior high school, depression felt like something that was different and wrong about me and proof

that I did not belong. In a predominantly black junior high school in Long Beach, California, I remember breaking down in the home economics classroom with a young, white teacher and I wonder what difference a conversation about my confusing experiences might have made then. It was 1968 following a summer of race riots and the teacher was anxious to get away from me; it is probable she had her own melodrama.

Depression is not something I caught or that happened to me; one cannot have depression. One is depressed. Depression is the ontological effect of being depressed. For me, depression is the consciousness that I am struggling to save my life. The lines of our thoughts are connected to the need to authenticate our selves in the water of ideologies reinforcing the status quo. Saving our selves may be thought of as an ontology of belonging, becoming, and being, a state of understanding. The bell jar is the “rendering surface” of depression, the consciousness of our outcast status. If depression exists on a continuum, the other end is a sense of well-being. I did not want to save myself at the expense of my romantic dream.

One can’t stop wondering “what, if anything, about who [we] become [is] written inevitable into [our] chromosomes” (Kettlewell, 1999, p. 62). The misfit I felt in junior high school picked up the narrative of my first four years in elementary school. Though my mother often threatened that she was on the verge of a ‘nervous breakdown’, no one took her seriously and she never broke down. But madness is just on the other side of depressive disorder. Depression may keep open what the world closes during adolescence which turns out, for me, to have been a desire to be both the hero of my own story and to make that story romantic. “Some things are too complex to suffer reduction to a simple equation of why/because” (p. 60). I knew what Caroline Kettlewell

acknowledged in her memoir of her life as a self-mutilator: “A thousand girls could have gotten through my seventh grade and breezed on with a laugh; I didn’t” (p. 61).

The explicit curriculum distorts what some girls know of the world by refusing to acknowledge that “bodies are never simply *human* bodies or *social* bodies” but are sexed bodies as well and that knowledges are sexed, too (Grosz, 1995, p. 84). Like Gilligan (1982), “I want to restore in part the missing text of women’s development” (p. 156) at the same time that I write in a mode that encourages new thinking and connections, in other words, new belongings for all girls (and boys) in the school culture. The intersubjective worlds students create and share are heavily inscribed by both sexualization and punitive judgment based on attractiveness. Nobody wants to confront what is obvious in the schools and so girls learn early that appearance matters a great deal and do not have access to alternatives. Most girls experience some awkwardness as they pass through puberty given the widening of their hips, possible skin problems, the emergence of breasts, and the ‘curse’ of menstruation. The changing dynamics of childhood, that is, what Postman (1982) calls its disappearance, and the access to media images that require only aesthetic responses and do not make us think, mean that girls may not be ready for the waiting period of early adolescence. The developmental lag between girls and boys is well-documented and though girls may be more ready sexually, they do not look that part and neither are there boys who understand her sexualization as she does.

The classroom and the teacher are strategically located in girls’ lives at this time and it seems harsh that neither addresses these difficult issues. As with so many things, girls are left feeling that if they have problems, it is a problem with them. This atomistic

approach sets some girls up to concoct their own strategies for self-preservation while the body in which they have a life may become the most despised part of them. Depression, even though as a society we are “becoming increasingly prone to depression and this emerges at a younger age” (Bebbington, 1996, p. 303), is not the only problem adolescent girls confront.

In early adolescence, studies show that girls’ IQ scores drop and their math and science scores plummet. They lose resiliency and optimism and become less curious and inclined to take risks. They lose their assertive, energetic and ‘tomboyish’ personalities and become more deferential, self-critical and depressed. They report great unhappiness with their own bodies. (Pipher, 1994, p. 19)

Girls’ well-being should not be left to girls to figure out. I believe there are ways teachers can use the environment to facilitate belonging in all of its manifestations. Because gender is not the same thing as sex, some boys may find an environment which encourages belongings between students more stimulating, too. I write out of a “desire for a more equitable ending to an oppressive story” (Oliver & Lalik, 2000, p. xviii).

Even though “virtually every legislative barrier to women’s full participation in society has been removed” (Coney, 1994, p. 6), the feminization of poverty suggests that some girls are still “lost in the midst of the world as if she were at the heart of an immense, vague nebula” (Beauvoir, 1952, p. 630). One is not always lost but lostness describes well the everyday practices of adolescent life as I lived it and one of its hallmarks was not belonging. The lostness I am attempting to describe is more than losing one’s place in the developmental hierarchy of middle school; its tentacles extend into other areas of a girl’s life. It sabotages her self-esteem because once she loses her place in her own story, there is nothing that is sacred to her. The inability to recognize

what is going on, disorienting in itself, is a snare that requires all of her attention. At a time when ideally she might be fleshing out a story that will carve a space of control for her in the larger world outside of the school, the social environment of the school saps her energies.

Meaning-making is work that “is never ‘done’” (Willis, 2000, p. xv). We make and remake the meanings arising in the everyday practices of our cultures. I pull the research narratives regarding depression through the autoethnographic eye of my meaning-making needle (Willis, 2000). At the same time, I consider whether some girls and women are “doomed to immanence” (Beauvoir, 1953/1949, p. 262) and whether depression is a handmaiden to this sentence. Adolescence is a critical incubator for womanhood. Depression follows most adolescents into adulthood. The key finding in Rao’s (1999) study of depression yielded the “finding that adolescent women who are negotiating their transition to adult status are at significant risk for depression and there is substantial continuity in affective disturbance from adolescence to adulthood” (p. 6).

### **The Romance of Substance Abuse**

Rao’s (1999) study “identified a connection between adolescent depression and adult tobacco dependence and medical problems,” which may lead to use of “tobacco to self-medicate their depressed mood” (p. 8). The National Center of Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University ([CASA], 2003 Feb. 5) has determined that the consequences of adolescent challenges are greater for girls than boys. While drug prevention programs nationwide are showing notable decreases in adolescent substance abuse, for girls it is increasing. CASA interviewed “1220 girls and young women passing from elementary to middle school, from middle school to high school, from high

school to college, and from college into the world beyond” (p. 4) and show these transition period are particularly difficult for girls. One revelation of the CASA report is that “caffeine is a little known risk factor” for further substance abuse by girls. Girls who drink coffee also smoke and drink at earlier ages and “are significantly likelier than girls and young women who do not to be smokers (23.2 percent vs. 5.1 percent)” (p. 3). Starbucks and Marlboro Lights may be cultural artifacts but what does heightened use of caffeine and nicotine offer to girls besides the allure of the cool?

The CASA (2003) findings are contextualized by a cursory glance at marketing strategies and products available in the contemporary market. Mountain Dew “markets itself with the slogan, ‘feel the rush,’” while “Dr. Pepper [is] frequently advertised as the ‘friendly pepper upper”” (p. 23). Both of these contain “the highest concentrations of caffeine of any soft drink” (p. 23). Other “high intensity drinks specifically designed to enhance power and energy” are “Surge,” “Jolt” and “Red Bull.” “Furthermore, popular coffee houses such as Starbucks have been selling an increasing array of highly sweetened and caffeinated frozen drinks, which include espresso, whipped cream and chocolate syrup” (p. 23). The cultural marketplace is responsive to what is already on the surface of the way some girls experience adolescence. A willingness to engage the cultural marketplace is at the heart of this narrative for more effective classroom practices.

CASA’s (2003) findings that girls use drugs for different reasons from those given by boys, find it easier to find drugs, get drugs from different people, and are appealed to differently by media from the way boys are may mean there is a different phenomenon at work here. As girls make the transition to middle school during early

adolescence, they “begin to become more sensitive to other’s feelings and reactions, gauging their personalities, predicting their reactions and attempting to respond accordingly” (p. 13).

Girls today . . . are coming of age in a more dangerous, sexualized and media-saturated culture. They face incredible pressures to be beautiful and sophisticated, which in junior high means using chemicals and being sexual. As they navigate a more dangerous world, girls are less protected. (Pipher as cited in CASA, 2003, p. 13)

Depression is a choice that selects certain streams of hyperreality that reinforce helplessness. Substance abuse augments this simplification. The symptoms listed in the American Psychiatric Association’s (APA) updated taxonomy, currently the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition (DSM-IV-R)* include depressed mood, lessened interest in one’s usual activities, significant weight change, sleep problems, psychomotor agitation or retardation, fatigue and loss of energy, feelings of worthlessness, indecisiveness, problems in concentrating, and suicidal thought and attempts. In Plath’s words, one is “blank and stopped as a dead baby” (1991/1971, p. 237). It is a netherworld of limited resources.

It is “sometime around the ages of thirteen or fourteen [that] girls consistently begin to show higher rates of depression than boys” (p. 426). If there are any differences in rates of depression in pre-pubertal children, and this has not been researched much because reliable tools to do so have not been developed, there is “a male predominance in depressive symptoms and disorders” (Bebbington, 1996, p. 307). Bebbington points out the propensity of women to develop depressive disorders is “around twice that of men” (p. 295). It “is perhaps the single most robust finding in the whole of psychiatric epidemiology . . . virtually independent of location, method of assessment and

diagnostic system” (p. 295). But “during adolescence the F:M ratio approaches the 2:1 value seen in adults” (p. 307). In studies of large clinical examples, “this change in ratio” that occurs during adolescence is only seen “in depression, not in conduct disorder or anxiety” (p. 307).

The stories such quantitative findings tell suggest that in any middle school classroom, there are girls on their way to developing depressive disorders and at-risk for developing substance abuses. We can argue that this is not within the public school’s domain of responsibility nor should it be but the impact of depression on the academic work of students has been shown. Abramson, Metalsky, and Alloy (1989) have looked at adolescents’ vulnerability to depression specifically through the subtype of hopelessness depression. Hopelessness depression is characterized by sadness, suicidality, low energy, apathy, psychomotor retardation, sleep disturbance, and poor concentration. The tendency to locate the source of negative life events in adolescents’ self-storying to “stable and global causes (e.g., ‘I failed that test because I am stupid’) represents a diathesis which, in the presence of negative life events, constitutes a vulnerability to depression” (Lewinsohn, Joiner, & Rohde, 2001, p. 203). Not only do such attributions distort adolescent thinking but they sabotage academic work.

My thinking was distorted during adolescence, though I have only the re-scripting of that time through autoethnography to go on, but my academic work was unimpeded. The classroom and its routines were havens, with definite places for me to sit and definite ways to be. It was the unstructured moments of the school day that terrified and humiliated me. My mother had remarried by this time and my stepfather took great interest in me. He had always blamed his poor rural education for his failure to finish his

college education. My mother recounts how she was called to school when I was in first grade and told that my reading ability was very high; in seventh grade they were both called in because the results of the IQ tests they administered were so high. But these abilities meant nothing to me, though I could see they meant a lot to my parents. I was a failure at social life. I had no friends in school, which I did not want my family to know. I understood it as a personal failure, something that was wrong with me. Though my teachers did take special interests in me, their interest only extended to my schoolwork. There was no place or time that offered any possibility of articulating my self-perception and my self-loathing grew.

### **The Pygmalion Effect**

The social conditions of middle schools include lowered expectations of performance for girls. These lowered expectations do not have much to do with actual intelligence of girls inasmuch that the adoption of personality characteristics appropriate to femininity are the probable culprit. “Adolescent girls, but not boys, want to conceal intelligence, expect to be punished for assertiveness, are less popular if smart, and are more depressed if intelligent” (Nolen-Hoeksema & Gurgis, 1994, p. 430). *Gender intensification* refers to the “increasing gender differentiation in socialization pressures” that lead girls “to adopt personality characteristics deemed appropriate for their gender” (p. 428).

It was once the case that girls, in general, stopped playing with Barbie at twelve. Even though that is no longer the case and their play with dolls ceases long before for most girls, it is interesting that as they enter middle school, many girls seem to expect Barbie’s world to become real. Some girls are more precocious than others. Some of

CASA's (2003) indicated that "one of the key risk factors for smoking, drinking and drug use in both females and males is a tendency toward rebelliousness, risk taking and sensation seeking" (p. 40). The sophistication some girls long for and expect may be accompanied by a desire for adventure in a society that wants to keep them contained in the ideology of femininity. Nothing adventurous happens in the feminine world.

Even though I wanted to fit in somewhere, to belong with some one or group, in school, I resisted feminization. Like Kettlewell (1999), "my relationship with girlness was tortured" (p. 44). After all, "it was always the boys who had adventures in the wilderness and pursued mythic quests and poled their rafts down the mighty Mississippi, while the girls got stuck making sandwiches and running for help" (p. 45). I have a scrapbook I put together in sixth grade and underneath a photo of my sister, who was three years younger, and I the caption reads: "The hoods of the neighborhood." Hoods was a shortened term for hoodlums. At the same time, like Kettlewell, "I suffered furtive fascinations with alien girlness" (p. 45), which intensified during adolescence. No doubt, something queer was happening with this both/and identification but partially, girls still play supporting roles in media productions when it comes to adventure. Yet, we have all known daredevil girls and the daredevil girl who comes to an early end is a romantic tale.

The characteristics which are deemed appropriate to femininity cast girls in supporting roles. I wanted to be the hero and adventurer. "The personality characteristics linked to the feminine gender role are said to be more depressogenic than those linked to the masculine gender role; insofar as this is the case, girls would become more prone to depression than boys as they adopt their gender-linked personality

characteristics” (Nolen-Hoeksema & Gurgis, 1994, p. 428). The behaviors imposed by the ideology of femininity, in this case, are risk factors for depression.

Chodorow (1978) suggested depression is a response to powerlessness, however it is manifested, and believed it to be the result of women’s position in society. The “substantial increase in arduous social conditions that create a sense of defeat and distress” in adolescent girls may emphasize the powerlessness they inherit in a patriarchal society. The research data shows that “many of the new biological and social challenges that emerge in early adolescence are, in fact, much greater for girls than for boys” (Nolen-Hoeksema & Gurgis, 1994, p. 438). Ussher (1992) suggests that “since women are defined as the Other in relation to the phallus, their identity and sexuality can never be positive” (p. 196). I do know that despite my creation of a ‘hoodlum’ persona at home, I longed to learn the language of femininity during adolescence and to be the girl everyone seemed to want in school. At the same time, the girlish girls I knew were not adventurous and in that respect, I did not want to be them. They were unsophisticated.

Depression can be an elegant bell jar, “dark energy” percolating on the girl’s surface and pushing against the truth she cannot bear to know yet cannot deny. In order to understand the etiology of depression, it may be necessary to first consider how one inhabits paradox—how girls, as human beings, can create belongings in the world and reach for transcendence while as women, most remain rooted in immanence. “It is . . . a story of oppression and resistance, voice and silence and of girls’ desires to be seen and heard for who they are as they experience themselves individually and socially” (Oliver & Lalik, 2000, p. 2). How these experiences can emerge in classrooms is the objective of this research.

The “substantial increase in arduous social conditions that create a sense of defeat and distress” may be experienced by all girls (Nolen-Hoeksema & Gurgis, 1994, p. 438). What I identify as brooding is a cognitive style I engage in when relations become overwhelming, what Nolen-Hoeksema and Gurgis refer to as a “ruminative coping style” (p. 437). Their findings indicate that the increase in arduous social conditions “create a sense of defeat and distress” in girls during early adolescence which interacts with this coping style, already more prevalent in girls than boys before early adolescence (p. 438). This is a “less active, less instrumental style of coping” (p. 438). Their data, like Simon and Blythe’s, find that the “new biological and social challenges that emerge in early adolescence are, in fact, much greater for girls than boys” (p. 438). These less instrumental and assertive coping styles developed “in childhood “interact with the increases in sexual abuse that girls experience relative to boys in early adolescence to yield the emergence of gender differences in depression” (p. 436).

The institutionalized prerogative to heterosexuality is probably first encountered in our school experiences in the middle school. Adolescence, as a threshold state, when secondary sex characteristics emerge from hormonal imperatives, is a dissimulation of the body for some girls. ‘Getting’ my period and being ‘on’ my period felt like illness. While tampons were not deemed safe for girls at this time, the thick Kotex pads I wore that had to be clamped into an elastic, thong-like belt, felt like impedance to any activity. Wearing a bra felt like another. At the time I passed through puberty, girls were not allowed to wear pants at school. “Girls value the physical changes that accompany puberty much less than do boys; they dislike the weight gain in fat and the loss of the long, lithe, prepubescent look that is idealized in modern fashions” (Nolen-Hoeksema &

Gurgis, 1994, p. 435). While this is a generalization and not true for all girls, the same holds for the contrasting value boys have for their development of secondary sex characteristics, but in general, boys “like the increase in muscle mass and other pubertal changes their bodies undergo” (p. 435). If it was not clear to me that my girl’s body meant different things from a boy’s body to those around me in the elementary school, it was painfully obvious that the specificity of my sex meant a world of difference in early adolescence.

“The emergence of a depressive episode represents a change of state, even when it is difficult to date exactly” (Bebbington, 1996, p. 297). In my experience, puberty meant an overwhelming change of state. I was not sexually abused but sex is an undercurrent in middle schools, one which the classroom refuses to acknowledge, clearly in contemporary classrooms where sex education is based on abstinence models. Feigned helplessness is a characteristic of femininity. Girls also “tend to be unassertive, have a low opinion of their competence, and blame themselves for bad events” (Nolen-Hoeksema & Gurgis, 1994, p. 431). These tendencies emerge as girls take on feminine characteristics and behaviors, which usually follow the emergence of their secondary sex characteristics.

Research indicates that girls tend to look on school as a social testing ground that leads “to increased reliance on relationships with others for self-esteem” (Nolen-Hoeksema & Gurgis, 1994, p. 428). Not only does this place girls’ feelings about themselves outside of their control, it dissimulates the instrumental worth of an education. It follows that such reliance leads to lowered “expectations for their ability to control important events” (p. 428). Ignoring the sexual undercurrent in middle schools is

not a solution; it is a flagrant participation in the reproduction of male dominance in girls' and boys' adult lives. It is a denial of gender intensification at this time and the significance of gender in the ways girls understand their experiences. CASA (2003) found that "12- and 13-year old female smokers rate themselves as being more sexy/seductive and wanting to be more sexy, slim and attractive than nonsmokers of the same age" (p. 41). For some girls, the middle school classroom wants to keep them confined in a childhood they have already outgrown and what is offered there is likely to be stifling in light of the expanding options they are looking for.

Writers who suffer from depression write the shock of adolescence as I experienced it. This is not to say they are the only ones who have experienced adolescence this way. They are the writers who have experienced it this way. Our bell jars of depression are unique in that the experiences they cover are unique and the ways those experiences are refracted by the bell jar yield permutations beyond number. Most depressives spend time in a state of moderate depression and it takes the stress of a triggering event to blow this state up into major depressive disorder. Research shows there is "greater comorbidity in females than males with depressive disorder" (Bebbington, 1996, p. 299) which means girls are more likely to develop packages of disorders, with depressive disorder as part of these packages.

The accoutrements to depressive disorder include anorexia, bulimia, conduct disorder, personality disorder, anxiety disorder, dysmorphia, and substance abuse. Like Barbie's thematic packages, these can be put together in different ways and identifiable trends, like fashion styles, reflect the dynamic processes ongoing in culture. The rise of obesity among adolescent girls is a current trend and a subtle difference in helplessness

and hopelessness that may give rise to depression. Those with the training to make such evaluations are usually on the outside of the bell jar, though. As I have gone back through autoethnography and discovered multiple stories and possible interpretations, I have discovered that depression was a lifestyle choice that evolved during early adolescence. Just as I internalized the good schoolgirl in the elementary school, I eventually internalized the depressive so that it came to be naturalized. As the stream of images invading our lives becomes heavier and more insistent, it is not surprising that depression rates are rising among adolescent girls.

### **What Can Schools Do?**

“American children are currently experiencing pessimism, sadness, and depression at an alarming rate” (Abela, 2001, p. 241). Our willingness to wrestle with the ambiguity and complexity of what we call affective disorders in girls and their intersections with the ideology of femininity in middle schools would be one way to make curriculum more relevant to girls. The relevance of the explicit curriculum for girls in middle schools would increase because a curriculum of the self would have instrumental value for where girls find themselves in the present. Depression impacts girls’ ability to negotiate their transitions to adulthood and research suggests this follows them as women (Rao, 1999). While, for adolescents, Rao (1999) found their “school performance and intimate relationship experiences were significantly more negative,” as adults these women struggled with work demands and had poorer-quality romantic relationships which resulted in recurrent depression (p. 8).

It is critical to understand how depression impacts the negotiations girls make in the middle passage of adolescence because they are becoming women, and some are

becoming depressed women. Young children may “have a ‘here and now’ orientation that precludes the development of hopelessness expectancies” (Abela, 2001, p. 252) that will follow them. However, by seventh grade, abstract reasoning abilities and formal operational thought make the formation of attributional styles possible because focus changes from immediate consequences to long-term implications. How girls negotiate adolescence and the attributes they make about the world and themselves do follow them into adulthood. Adolescent girls are able to cull through their past experiences, compare them to present experiences, and “abstract common themes about the self and consequences” (p. 252).

The ideology of gender constructs our notions of femininity in historically and culturally specific ways and makes us want to see a certain kind of girl (Bordo, 1993). Once pessimistic or hopeless attributes are made about the self, they will emerge at the most critical junctures in girls’ lives. A curriculum of the self would seek to give girls the critical tools to explore “the forms and processes of enculturation that are often disempowering and destructive to young people” (Oliver & Lalik, 2001, p. 330). The general marginalization of student voice in schools means girls seldom have an opportunity, if ever, to explore their own active engagement in the world. Oliver and Lalik suggest the objectives of curriculum for girls should include the possibility of experiencing their bodies and minds “as a cherished and inseparable dimension of being” (p. 330).

I have invested huge amounts of energy into killing that thirteen-year-old in me, that sensitive girl who walked the grassy knolls between breezeways and other students and tried to look as if she had a purpose. The social context of middle schools is hard on

any kind of sensitivity so one launches becoming that aim at toughening the surface. Anti-depressants aside, there is still something left over at the end of every day that does not fit the grids of identity imposed on some girls. Depression disappears as the dis-ease is made into disease, treatable through medication. No one has been able to theorize etiologically why girls and women suffer with depression more than men. Bebbington (1996) points out that gender can vary considerably between individuals of the same sex and it may be that certain gender characteristics are important determinants of the sex difference in rates of depression. Whatever the culprit(s) may turn out to be, a curriculum of the self would allow students to enter conversations regarding the biological, psychological, and social factors which construct and either embellish or diminish their lives.

### **Belongings**

Elsbeth Probyn (1996) insists on the positive value of difference. For her, identity is a compound of the outside and the inside that creates a surface. On a dreary level, we render, more or less, the same surface day after day. We are recognized by our surfaces. But the surfaces we are recognized by are processes of negotiation between the forces from the outside and from the inside of us. Dewey (1934) pointed out “the marvel . . . of vital adaptation through expansion (instead of contraction and passive accommodation)” (p. 15). This adaptation is the process of making the world our own.

For Probyn (1996), what drives this adaptation is “the desire for some sort of attachment, be it to other people, places, or modes of being” (p. 19). This desire to belong “hinges on not belonging,” which is what calls to me as I consider how the dynamics of the social culture in middle schools might be inclusive instead of exclusive

(p. 13). The specificity of belonging or not belonging complicates the movement to expansion. Gender is a significant overlay on determinations of belonging or not belonging.

Probyn (1996) calls this expansion *singularity* and suggests it is the way we make our stories come right in social contexts. Singularity can only be produced in the intersubjective realm—it is “always performed with the experience of being within and inbetween sets of social relations” (p. 13). Therefore, singularity is not a “voluntary” or pre-scripted “performance” or an “individualized state of affairs whereby we happily proclaim or exchange identities like changes of clothes” (p. 24). Belonging must be negotiated in the context of the social and just as we do not know how we are different until it is revealed “more often than not . . . in a thrown epithet, we negotiate our desires for belonging as through a maze of club rules” (p. 24). Within the bell jar, I was many things but singularity is what I was unable to express in the space between myself and another. I so easily contradicted my “own personal wisdom, thus estranging [myself] from [my] inner [self]” (Oliver & Lalik, 2000, p. 8). As I attempted to disregard my own personal wisdom, I became increasingly embarrassed by how “smart” I was in the school sense. I wanted to be street-smart or smart in a sophisticated, womanly way.

Singularity is not an “intrinsic quality” but rather something that is negotiated in the course of the everyday and out of a range of “specificities” that we take as a starting point (Probyn, 1996, p. 22). Probyn refers to this range as our “zones of specificity” (p. 23). “Specificity can be understood as the necessary zones of difference, but these zones, be they of race, class, sexuality, or gender are the points from where we depart in order to

live out our singular lives” (p. 23). Belongings facilitate our desires to live out singularity.

We are born in the middle of stories, both our parents’ and culture’s, and our own story is determined by those stories at first. But the processes of negotiation between outside forces and inside forces produces not a surface but surfacings—we know nothing from one surface. Goffman (1987) pointed out that one photograph does not tell the whole story, which can only be seen in many surfacings rendered across many social situations, many “snapshots’ of the self in social gatherings, always looking for what is excessive, that is, what does not fit. “‘Being-called’” is what I have referred to as impositions of grids of identity (p. 25). Whatever we are ‘called’ limits what others see. However, through autoethnography, the teacher can return to find what did not fit what others called her. After this, she is more able to help others deconstruct their own beings-called and to identify what calls to others as they negotiate the limits of the middle school world.

### **Unforeseen Belongings**

For Probyn (1996), belonging means welcoming difference in all of its manifestations. The many ways singularities make themselves visible in the intersubjective worlds we share with others is so distant from the self-censoring most adolescent girls practice. For the good schoolgirl, “identity becomes a set of hard and fast rules that police comportment” (Probyn, 1996, p. 23). Probyn’s concept of singularity and specificity insists that the desire to belong is what fuels identity, which is never static. Because belonging occurs in the inbetweenness of social relations, it is negotiated in constant movement in our “desires for belonging as threads that lead us into

unforeseen places and connections” (p. 20). This movement is what I want to encourage in considering the objectives of a curriculum of the self.

Belongings do not have to be deeply authentic. They can be as brief as seeing the woman at Circle K I buy a coffee at everyday. She calls me “hon” and is sympathetic to whatever plight I am negotiating; she says she knows and isn’t it always like that. In return, sometimes the plight is hers and I offer a “soft” ear to her, too. The complexities of identity and difference hang on such banal belongings and yet it is in these ways that we have a sense of who we are. In the middle school, the maze of club rules work through exclusivity, that is, cliques of girls profess who they are as a group by locking out who they are not. Identity is static in this formulation. This is paradoxical given that puberty is the second most active period of change in our lives outside of neonatal development.

Brown and Gilligan (1992) found that girls, during early adolescence, invest a lot in maintaining relationship, willingly suppressing what they know so relationship is not threatened—or worse. The social structure of the middle school is a “relational climate where people tell themselves they think what their friends think, where words can cause psychological violation and pain, and cliques or groups or ‘sides’ threaten to silence girls’ voices” (p. 105). The home and social context in which girls negotiate adolescence matter very much. Girls who “negate or abandon their knowledge for an idealized view of themselves and their relationships” (p. 106) do so out of a sense of their own desires for belonging. The social conditions in the middle school provide another place for dissimulation, the replacement of the real with the false. Probyn’s (1996) notion of belongings that emerge as we live out the differences between us, in the intersubjective

worlds we inhabit, works directly against such compromises. Belongings revalue expression but it is expression that is contingent on the singularities that emerge in social interaction.

Understanding repression in organic terms helps to explain why many women remain rooted in immanence even though legislative barriers have been removed. Dewey (1934) defines life as consisting of “phases in which the organism falls out of step with the march of surrounding things and then recovers unison with it” but in the recovery, the organism is changed (p. 14). In order to remain in step with other girls in the middle school, girls idealize themselves and their relationships by pretending not to know what they know. This pretense distances them from themselves. At the same time, being true to their own knowledges may incur the wrath of other girls via marginalization so they are out of step with those around them. This is a difficult conundrum. In my experiences, I was willing to sign over my soul for a friend during those years but there were no takers. My marginalization was not due to overt expressions of self that marked me as different; there was something about my surface appearance that marked me as different, something of which I was unaware. Eventually, though, I wanted to be different and through depression I kept open and alive the possibility that something both romantic and adventurous would happen to me.

Relationship is the sea girls swim through on their way to being a woman. In early adolescence, for the first time, the surface the girl effects becomes more important than what she knows. Girls’ projects of relationship are interwoven with the stories they tell about themselves in a tango with the self and their surroundings. While I found a good hiding place inside of the schoolgirl grid in the elementary school, the necessity of

belonging with my peers during early adolescence made this always fraudulent form of self outdated. The social imperative to be the cheerful and attractive face and thin body, to decorate and civilize the world, push us into helplessness. The process of storying we are living is the vital connection which is left out of the middle school curriculum. A girl's lot in middle school is a story she picks up in the middle—in my case, I had been found wanting by something mysterious out there in the world I could not see. The dissimulating effect of not knowing was that I did not trust my own knowledge and so silencing was accomplished even in my isolated world.

Had I attended the same school for those three years, the stories might have eventually come right. Bell jars may be the vehicles for having a life in a borderland where transcendence is worth the risk. The bell jar of depression and lostness covered me like a cloak and attuned my sensitivities to belongings which were other. In their sincerest form, these becomings were the patchwork adoption of details I observed in the “tough” girls around me but as with the schoolgirl grid, this patchwork began to resemble me with time, that is, I made these stylistic details my own.

As with Nancy Mairs (1986), depression may have been the saving of me, a flotation device that kept me from going down in “a sea of womanly graces.” I formed belongings in response to the relational aggression acted out against me—a different kind of immanence. I idolized the “fast” girls, that is, girls from working-class backgrounds who smoked in the bathroom, wore tight clothes and too much make-up, and ‘cussed’. There seemed to be no avenue for belonging that did not require some repression, after all. But there was something already in me that found a refreshing lack of hypocrisy in

being as jaded as a ninth grader can possibly be. My discomfort with girliness effected a performance of gender that was unapologetically not feminine.

### **Conclusion: Dark Energy**

Adolescence is a drama in which what happens to us is scripted by the ideology of femininity and there is always the possibility that if it does not take, we may end up as the mad woman in the attic. The multiple roles awaiting girls when they become women may require the insidious damage the social pressures toward feminization do. Beauvoir (1952/1949) pointed out that “woman has been assigned the role of parasite—and every parasite is an exploiter” (p. 647). Depression is a specter that hangs over the self, the family, the school and everyone wishes it would stay in its bell jar. Within the family, depressing entangles the stories of our origins and childhoods, making our memories often dark and uncomfortable for others. We learn to be quiet about it.

Meanwhile, depression as the term we use to refer to girls who struggle to understand their own development, often experiencing relational or sexual violence along the way, has acquired such baggage, we forget it may be a rational response to cultural trauma, for lack of a better term. I was shocked by the culture of adolescence, both its cruelty and its state of heightened desire. The suspended animation which I call depression in myself during adolescence, when I was “blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself a bad dream” (Plath, 1971, p. 237), may have been a symptom of post-traumatic stress syndrome. Depression was a bell jar in which I re-collected myself and may have helped me to survive intact. But depression is also distorted thinking about the self and a problematic life raft for an adolescent girl. It drew me to belongings that were painful, dark, and dangerous. That is another story.

The complex cascade of personality traits and triggering events that become depression make the world a bad dream and yet the distortion of the bell jar contributes to the dissimulation of some girls' understandings of the world. Even though what she knows but cannot say to stay in relationship can be openly acknowledged in the bell jar, these knowings are distorted when they intersect with our darkest fears within.

Ambiguity is the attempt to live in different worlds without the certainty as to which one is real. Perhaps certainty would have turned out to be too much. A better tool can be given to all students when teachers work to facilitate literacy that enables us to enter conversations as we are negotiating this passage. As Sedgwick (1999) writes of her own depressive childhood: "One of the big features of being this kind of kid is that you articulate quite an elaborate inner space, full of all kinds of voices" (p. 31). A curriculum of the self would work to articulate an outer space where the intersubjective worlds we live could become part of the conversation.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: AN UNBECOMING WOMAN**

Without the communication of ideals, hopes, expectations, standards, opinions, from those members of society who are passing out of the group life to those who are coming into it, social life could not survive. (John Dewey, 1916, p. 3)

I begin this reflection on the experience of autoethnography in this research journey with Dewey's quote because he is one of many writers I return to when I lose my place in the classroom. It is so easy to lose one's place in the public school, both for teachers and students, because there are so many voices insistent on making the classroom an efficient and productive machine. I cannot reliably say today what I thought a dissertation should be when I began the work that would support its writing. Likewise, when I first walked into a classroom as the teacher, I brought a loose sense of the ideas, hopes, expectations, standards, and opinions I thought were important with me and, though some of that sense has survived experience and time, much of it lies on a cutting room floor in my memory just as layers of this work lie in files and piles in my office. Dewey's list of what we communicate in a classroom holds true but the specific contents of such a list are always changing.

The standardized test is the latest technology of a democracy that hides the real under the falseness of a testing surface on which bias does not circulate. I know, just as I knew in my practice, that a test could never show the genius or the juicy creativity of my students yet it is the only show in town and so I prepared them for its lingo. The fierce love I felt (and feel) for these mostly African American students made the test important because I knew these scores would be faithfully recorded in their permanent files and

would reflect on the usefulness of the Montessori magnet program we were a part of, a program that periodically had to fight for its existence. There were no miracles produced and the scores reflected fairly accurately their performances on other articles of assessment. One of my finished-off stories of teaching there is of how I fought to have several of them tested for acceptance into the predominantly white “gifted and talented” program that had emerged in our public school system in the deep south when desegregation finally began nineteen years after the *Brown* decision. The African American guidance counselor at my school told me white people always think a black child is gifted if they have any intelligence at all. That gave me pause but six of these students scored well enough on the battery of tests to be given the option of entering that program.

My own autobiography and the passivity of the good schoolgirls, white, black and Hispanic, in that public school classroom led me to extend my knowledge of the lifeworlds of girls in schools. Autoethnography allowed a return to adolescence in an attempt to find the girl who began to disappear in the red stain on my panties at menarche that were like tea leaves sealing my fate. The realization that I had to locate this girl before the advent of puberty in order to understand any of what happened to her during early adolescence carried my research further into the past, to the terrified child that entered first grade. Both of these girls, the first grader and the seventh grader, are fictions reliant on the shocks of that time as points of entry.

The fact that both of these shocks occurred during transition periods supports research findings that, in general, transition periods are harder for girls. CASA’s (2003) recent report on substance abuse in girls and women aged eight to twenty-two years

showed the transition from elementary to middle school marked “the greatest increase in girls’ belief that smoking and drinking are ways to be rebellious and disobey adults” (p. 4). Simmons and Blyth’s (1987) findings showed girls who attended schools which extended from kindergarten to eighth grade did not exhibit the losses in self-esteem found in sixth grade girls transitioning to a middle school. The AAUW’s (1992) findings document losses in self-confidence that are twice that for boys as they move from childhood to adolescence. Transitions are more threatening for girls, yet these kinds of findings have not affected the invisibility of girls in educational debates around curriculum.

The losses of competence, of efficacy, and of openness to the world of possibilities were sustained in my adult life. Autoethnography allowed me to explore both the unique strains of my own stories about myself and the stories research narratives tell of girls’ experiences. My positioning as teacher, mother, feminist, and student became part of the story that emerged. This chapter is where these stories come together because as a menopausal woman in the mid-life passage, in many ways I am putting down the stories that I carried to make my group life more palatable. The delicate language of hormones yields differences in all of the stories I am in the midst of now. The cultural scenario is changing. It is the shock of another transition.

While the medical discourse has overlaid women’s midlife years with the tissue of lack so that diagnosis accompanies every pronouncement, the adolescent girl is medicalized for her strategies of survival. “Menopause is an event of midlife, it is not synonymous with midlife” (Coney, 1994, p. 82). Before I suggest what has been most

important about this process of autoethnography, it seems necessary to further define menopause and consider the meanings generated by the ways it is defined.

### **Biology, Medicine, and Curriculum**

The medical establishment's insistence on screening a woman's various body parts to confirm absence of pathology causes women to develop what Coney (1994) has called "a surrogate identity or alter ego—femina medica—in which she is defined by a series of computer printouts and x-ray films" (p. 26). During midlife, she becomes "a living, breathing collection of risk factors waiting to fulfill the prediction" because, since the 1960s, hormone replacement therapy (HRT) has been touted as a *cure* for menopause (p. 30).

The adolescent girl is a femina medica, too, a living, breathing collection of risk factors but she is animated by a different order of pathology: the mental health field. She is cut from the paper of the *DSM-IV-R* (2000). Plath's (1971) dead baby floating in the jar of formaldehyde is a good metaphor for this sabotage on the possibilities of women and girls. It is again the tension between transcendence, action upon the world while living in the body, and immanence, the pulling back of the hand into confinement. Young (1980) calls this movement a hesitancy between "I can" and "I cannot." As women, we know that both of these are true.

Looking from midlife, it seems important to find some skills and tools that might be useful to help girls transcend the lack of support they currently receive in schools. My surface is changing and I am, too, trying to figure out what the changes mean. The 'symptoms' of puberty and peri-menopause only have the word sent down from the medical discourse by which to navigate these physical changes that are both disruptive

and natural biological processes. No other discourse has emerged to fill in the blanks in the text so the medical discourse becomes the authority by default. While it is clear that sex and gender do make a difference in the education we receive in schools, there is no effort to remedy the negative outcomes these differences engender.

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) refers to the use of estrogen and progestin together. After a hysterectomy, women use estrogen only. The general consensus has been that all perimenopausal, menopausal, and postmenopausal women should take these medications. The publication of two large prospective, randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled studies of continuous-combined estrogen-progestin therapy for postmenopausal women suggests this is not the case. The *Heart and Estrogen-progestin Replacement Study* (HERS) is a study of 2,763 women aged 55- to 79-years. The *Women's Health Initiative* (WHI) is sponsored by the National Institute of Health (NIH) and is a multicenter study begun in 1993 consisting of a set of three interrelated clinical trials and an observational study in apparently healthy postmenopausal women aged 50- to 79-years. Both of these studies suggest long-term use of estrogen-progestin therapy involves more risks than benefits. Progesterone may be the culprit.

These kinds of paradoxical findings mean women have to decide for themselves. We can refuse insertion into the medical discourse to differing degrees largely dependent on our health. The yearly check-ups at the gynecologist's keep women in connection with the medical discourse in a way that men are not and make them more likely to be consumers of new pharmaceutical products. Given the HERS and WHI studies, my gynecologist is still insistent on HRT. She smiles gently at my resistance and makes it sound like a vitamin. I think of two girlfriends who, on separate occasions, gave

exhaustive reports of their ‘dry-as-dust’ vaginas and the miracle of HRT in returning their vaginas to their previous plump state. As a truly commodified and pharmaceuticized woman, I can think of HRT as vitamins for the vagina.

My experience is that I still desire something beyond myself because identities never stand still. My knowledge makes me less vulnerable than the adolescent girl in this transition. Medical discourse, too, is not static; in fact, it is surprisingly responsive to subtle changes. It remains to be seen how pharmaceutical companies will respond to the loss of market share as the results of these studies become common knowledge. Any preventative medical program, such as HRT, inevitably makes patients out of healthy people. The impress of this discourse on women’s surfaces separates them from their bodies to differing degrees and the ambivalence the highly-medicalized woman exhibits is the same ambivalence of the pubertal girl. For this woman, menopause is a disease which must be diagnosed and prescribed to by a doctor. To look for new belongings on the surfaces of both adolescence and menopause is to begin first to connect to the body. Ambivalence and embodiment of the self are mutually exclusive states.

### **Midlife and Menopause: Menarcheal Reflections**

Ambivalence can also work as resistance. “A fairly well-kept secret is that fewer than 30% of women who fill a first prescription for Premarin are taking it at the end of a year” (Seaman, 1994, p. 4). This may be due to unconscious and healthy skepticism as to gynecologists’ claims. Why fill it in the first place? Because there is always “a sneaking suspicion that some vile, sinister disease process is ... surreptitiously invading some body part, rendering bones in danger of imminent collapse, breasts about to erupt with mountainous lumps” and, of course, vaginas “cracking and dessicating like an old seed

pod left too long on the tree” (Coney, 1994, p. 19). Midlife is generally considered to fall between forty and sixty years of age. Of these twenty years, the peri-menopausal period will take about five. However, “everything negative that happens to women around this time of their lives has been labeled menopausal” (p. 97). This subverts the experiences of women, both at midlife and menopausal, because again it is a dissimulation of her own experiences and places the locus of control outside of her.

In the same way, we have attributed much to puberty that is actually socially and culturally constructed. This is one vehicle for trivializing girls’ experiences, a by-product of the social construction of adolescence, not unlike chalking up a midlife-woman’s unhappiness to menopause. In the 1960s, there was even “a psychiatric label to put on her—‘involutional melancholia’—a major depression of midlife” (Coney, 1994, p. 67). Like hysteria, “this condition is now considered never to have existed, but in the postwar years it was a powerful tool for diagnosing the menopausal woman as ill and in need of treatment” (p. 67). Once diagnosed, she could be treated with ‘mother’s little helper’ and returned to her serene servile state. Is it a coincidence that Valium was introduced in 1955?

This is not the peri-menopausal woman’s first experience of the relentlessness of nature, of what Beauvoir (1952/1949) called “Species,” for “the words that women use to describe menarche are those that symbolize the relationship of women to their bodies in a misogynist society: fear, shame, embarrassment, humiliation, preoccupation, mess, hassle, and so on” (Lee, 1998, p. 92). Sontag puts it this way: “No wonder that no boy minds becoming a man, while even the passage from girlhood to early womanhood is experienced by many women as their downfall, for all women are trained to want to

continue looking like girls” (as cited in Coney, 1994, p. 21). To say that menstruation does not carry heavy connotations and that we have not internalized the taboo traditionally associated with it trivializes menarche. The girl cannot control the flow of monthly slough; culture cannot stem the flow of blood nor remove the girl from this unmediated relationship with nature. The negativity expressed with any conversation about menstruation needs to be disrupted by the positivity of renewal each month. Instead, menstrual blood is hidden under the false appearance of hygiene products, dissimulated by the corporate culture.

Now, the ‘monthly’ is leaving me, already having lost its punctuality and habit as it becomes loosened from me. It is queer because it feels as if I am returning to an unmediated relationship with nature and only now realize the incredible toll and isolation of the reproductive journey. It is not only that I have worked in the juncture of psychic and social, a complex intersection, but also in “the messiness of past, present, and memory” (Probyn, 1996, p. 112). The line of memory to the strange little girl is constantly disrupted and upset “by ‘all the choices I did and didn’t make’” (p. 112). As Nico sings it, “Don’t remind me of my failures. I have not forgotten them” (1966).

### **A Hormonal Language**

Far more is known about the mechanisms that trigger puberty than menopause, although it appears that “both puberty and menopause are brain-driven events” (Coney, 1994, p. 100). Particularly in this peri-menopausal period of my life, there is resonance with the threshold the adolescent girl passes through. While on the physical plane of our bodies, estrogen and progesterone are speaking a hormonal language, on the surface of our lives there is dynamic change and new frontiers of belongings become possible. Our

working-self-concept undergoes a *makeover* and, in a sense, we remake ourselves on the surface. If the adolescent girl is told to stop acting like a child, the midlife woman becomes aware of a sea change in others' relations with her. When it is all over and one emerges from the possibility of reproduction intact, experiencing more space as children grow up and marriages/relationships grow casual and sure or fall apart, there must be others who are faced with the same decisions they were faced with at sixteen. Maggie Scarf looked at depression over the course of women's lives and found that

. . . although there were certain overarching depressive themes and issues . . . the issues and difficulties of the different life decades tended to fall into distinct psychological baskets. Women in the same phases of life were, by and large, depressed about similar sorts of things. (Scarf, 1980, p. 6)

Scarf goes on to start a cursory "sausage" developmental model in her prologue, suggesting adolescence as "the frightening journey of transformation from child to sexual woman," the twenties as "the search for intimacy and commitment," and the thirties as "an 'I've been cheated' sense that the fantasies and dreams of girlhood had not been and might never *be* satisfied" (1980, p. 7). For the midlife woman, the "major preoccupations were with the loss of certain identity-conferring roles or ways of being—roles which, in many an instance, had been perceived as a person's sole source of interpersonal power or meaning" (p. 7). Scarf did not look for cohort effects, a research strategy that looks at the possible role of historical specificity in depressive disorder (Bebbington, 1996). An example would be the effect of September 11, 2001 on depressive rates of children growing up now when they reach adolescence. The midlife women Scarf referred to grew up in the forties and therefore, became housewives and mothers, most likely, in the domesticity movement of the fifties. She sees depressive disorder as "a failure in

adaptation; an inability to cope; at some juncture, with the ongoing inner and outer shifts and changes which each of us must confront throughout our human existence” (Scarf, 1980, p. 7). This is the crux of the thing.

Both puberty and menopause are biological junctures set in transitional moments when the surface of the social world’s “plates” slip and slide and skid onto, under, and over one another (Probyn, 1996, p. 34). Depressive disorder is not a failure as much as it is an adaptation, as is any project the girl embarks on to reinforce a safe space in world gone awry. For older women, it has been suggested that mild depression serves as a buffer zone.

Girls and women see with clarity but it is a murky world. For girls, it not advantageous to perceive too clearly because then they question the ideology of femininity and that gives rise to other problems. Mairs (1986) saw depressive disorder as her “struggle not to go under, not to go down for the last time, sinking into acceptance of that space which crabbed and cramped me” (p. 200). Women do confront shifts in their orientation to patriarchy based on their child-bearing status, sexuality, and age so where I want to challenge Scarf’s “psychological baskets,” I also know that the interest or disinterest of patriarchy figures boldly in how many girls and women live their lives. The charm of midlife is that patriarchy is disinterested in menopausal women in any way except as medical subjects. It turns out that is fine with me. But for girls, whether they find a fit with compulsory heterosexuality or not, whether they define their lives around home and family or career, it is not fine. Given the knowledge this autoethnographic research has allowed the space and time for me to collect, I turn to my role as a teacher

and consider the ideas, hopes, expectations, standards, and opinions important to communicate to girls.

### **A Menopausal Theory of Curriculum**

Like the velveteen rabbit, I have become more *real* to myself with age. It does not matter so much that the grid of identity which others impose on me reduces me to what Mary Douglas (1966) called a few qualities that do not offend. There is “no package deal” (Massumi, 1992, p. 54) like the good schoolgirl or the depressed adolescent to hide behind. I know that each belonging exists in its own dyadic world with its own set of rules and values. We story our intersubjective worlds with the stories our culture tells but feel them through the relief of difference, the places where the belonging disagrees with our own stories. The excess produced anytime we are called this or that is the raw material of “singularity” (Probyn, 1996) and is the part of us that resists the imposition of a unitary identity. The valuing of singularity as the positivity of difference is one entryway to new directions for curriculum that would be as concerned with “language and communication(s)” literacy as it for the literacy of “aesthetics and values” (Mahiri, 1998, p. 150).

Femininity comes from outside of us. Girls are judged according to the extent they adopt the behaviors and appearances of this ideology. Femininity, or any ideological construction reinforcing patriarchy, clogs the pores of our surfaces so that our own uniqueness is circumvented. To be feminine may be to be depressogenic, or perhaps feminine girls are depressogenic because the attempt to embody both femininity and self is impossible. The positivity of difference is the antidote to reproduction of a girl who is largely a figment of our imagination.

Guillermo Gomez-Peña suggests the border not as edge but as juncture. Girls must find the lines of their thoughts. The juncture is the in-between, the border, the belongings between us that tell more complicated stories than the ones the discourse of education wants to recognize. Singularities congregate in junctures. These are our jumping-off points. The imposition of identifiable stereotypes changes the context in which we live the social and the parts of us that fit these stereotypes condense and fold in, creating deposits with “rigid frontiers” (Massumi, 1992, p. 51). It is the stuff left over, what I have referred to as the excess, which remains supple. Douglas (1991/1966) pointed out that danger is in the corridors, where one is neither this nor that, but she adds there is also power in these transitional states. For girls and women marginalized by society, the edge is a vast reservoir of novelty. The story we are telling about ourselves includes both the unity the grid of identification confers and some level of resistance to such regularization (p. 55). It is both rigid frontier and supple in-betweenness. The midlife woman, in her release from other roles, may have time on the surface with which to form belongings that challenge stereotypes. However, in order to do this she must be able to imagine herself following all of the steps to her goal, all of the in-between possible selves. She has to actually believe the goal is possible before she can imagine it.

Traces of the strange little girl I was are imprints of women and men who left sensuous traces on my surface that qualify as part of my first understandings of sexuality and its expressions. I vividly recall showering with my father when I was two or three and, in his adolescent vivacity, watching his swinging penis while he said, “Ding-dong, ding-dong.” Girls and women see a side of men the public world does not see. While this is a playful memory, it also illustrates the very banal ways our own sexuality is

constructed. I remember my mother's friends, after my father left her for another woman. They were divorced, too, and worked as waitresses and secretaries, living out loud because they were marginalized. They wore red, red lipstick and elaborate hair, and reeked of Topaz and Jungle Gardenia. Their bosoms curdled softly on the surface, pushed up and pointed in the style of the late fifties and early sixties. These working-class women are part of me, inscribed on the surface in undeniable ways. But they were pariahs, too, and perhaps it is with their surfaces that I originally formed a healthy resistance to being who people thought I should be. Though I would become a pariah in junior high school, I know that Sibley (1992) is right when he says that no matter how powerless we are, we can still carve out spaces of control.

### **Displacing Hierarchy**

There is no reason for adolescent girls to trust women but they want to. I have chased whispers to approach girls and the lives they lead in schools because I disappeared in other schools. The meeting between woman and girl requires another condition: the laying down of weapons at the door. For the menopausal woman, this may mean acknowledging her fear, distrust, or complete dislike for what girls represent, perhaps for the girl she was. Our power as teachers is enhanced when we forego the naming of our students in terms of stereotypes.

This willingness works like an anti-histamine, clearing and creating openings for connection with students in schools. Our fears and stereotypes are disrupted because this willingness gives us fresh eyes and reveals the similarities we are so inexpert at reading in a hierarchical model based on difference. There is no tradition or ancient culture women can point to as representative of women apart from men. On the other hand, if

the older woman performs as the good mother, she cannot help the girl. Both the woman and the girl are encouraged to articulate what they know without knowing how they know, that is, what they intuitively know. The beginning points for a menopausal theory of curriculum re-inscribe the importance and intensity of transitions as a way to think about the conditions which make this meeting possible.

“There is no adequate equation for our lives” (Massumi, 1992, p. 54). Menopause is a (re)recoding, another “threshold leading from one state to another” (p. 55), another moment of transition. One threshold state cannot be another and so adolescence and menopause are not the same place but there is a resonance. The little girl I was did not want her mother’s life or any of the lives of the women she knew.

Films have largely become the stories our culture tells about itself. If the sexual politics of my life only offered belongings I resisted, movies offered vicarious becomings that were like curriculum units in the curriculum of my self. But the transmediation of life experiences into different sign systems, including the terms set by film narrations, does not work like a quadratic equation; rather, there is not equality of terms but difference. There is always something left over.

Laura Mulvey (1999/1975) considered the role of the woman as film spectator who may find herself “secretly, unconsciously almost, enjoying the freedom of action and control over the diegetic world that identification with a hero provides” (p. 123). Using psychoanalytic theory, Mulvey suggested that “for women (from childhood onwards) trans-sex identification is a habit that very easily becomes *second nature*” (p. 125). However, the female spectator’s fantasy of masculinisation . . . [is] restless in its transvestite clothes” (p. 129). This trans-sex identification allows her to occupy the

space of the hero and connects with her fantasies of action but this transmediation has a remainder. Difference emerges. Probyn (1996) points out that “desiring identities refuse to stand still,” and where we vacillate between masculinity and femininity in the stories we tell about ourselves are good places to look for our own singularities (p. 35). The girl and woman’s sexuality is experienced as both a throbbing hardness in what Lorde (1984) referred to as her “pearl” and a folding inside (p. 7). She describes so well the fragmentation into masculine and feminine, it is worthwhile to quote from her prologue to *Sister Outsider* (1984) at length. She makes the story come right.

I would like to enter a woman the way any man can, and to be entered—to leave and to be left—to be hot and hard and soft all at the same time in the cause of our loving. I would like to drive forward and at other times to rest or be driven. When I sit and play in the waters of my bath I love to feel the deep inside parts of me, sliding and folded and tender and deep. Other times I like to fantasize the core of it, my pearl, a protruding part of me, hard and sensitive and vulnerable in another way. (p. 7)

Sexuality is embodied and intensifies the minimal space a girl’s desire is allowed to operate in. Lorde expresses a sensuality society does not deem as appropriate for girls. In many cases, their boyfriends may be more familiar with their bodies than the girls are. From the beginning, there is unspoken taboo against touching one’s self as a girl. Before girls can learn to take the kind of pleasure Lorde suggests in their bodies and to re-inhabit their bodies, there needs to be some resource from which they can pull the knowledges that will allow them to create new and different belongings in their social lives. To the extent girls and women can live in their bodies may determine whether they can escape immanence; to the extent they live their bodies as things, they remain “rooted in immanence, . . . inhibited, and retain[ing] a distance from [their] bodies as transcending movement and from engagement in the world’s possibilities” (Young, 1980,

p. 150). To begin is to pick things up in the middle and to realize that transcendence and immanence are both always present. One does not make null the other.

### **Letting Go**

I call this a menopausal theory of curriculum because there is a letting-go I read into the word menopause. This is how I experience my own menopause. It is a combination of the Latin word *menses* meaning months and the French word *pause*, meaning rest or stop, that is, the end of the monthlies. I am letting go of the monthlies and the cultural terms of reproduction. Relinquishing the common-sensical meanings I have held onto of the world, I “examine the world in its primordialness” (Grumet, 1992/1976, p. 38). The “intentional threads” which have attached me “to the world” become noticeable (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. xiii). Through autoethnography, I become my “own audience” (Harré & Secord as cited in Grumet, 1992/1976, p. 33).

Menopause refers to a transitional state particular to women’s experience, adolescence being another, and both defined by the conditions of sexed biology. It is salient that the male sex has no matching characteristic. How menstruation is translated to the sign systems of culture, whether it is valued or not, considered relevant or not, has relevance in a curriculum of the self. In the strictest sense, the menarcheal moment marks my ability to reproduce and the menopausal moment marks my inability to reproduce (without medical procedure). Kinderculture becomes what Brumberg (1997) has called the “body project” for girls at this time and many of them give up toys and childhood as it becomes more important to launch projects aimed at constructing a certain kind of woman’s body. Many girls let go of childhood at this time. I am letting go, in turn, of many of the ways I have narrated my life as a woman and reaching back at the

same time to “preconceptual encounter[s]” that have grounded the “synthetic judgments, concepts, and abstractions that we call knowledge” (Grumet, 1992/1976, p. 36), not only to the unfinished business of adolescence but to the first time I entered an institutional site of education.

In thinking about the kind of space that would be the condition of a meeting between girls and a teacher, thinking of the enormous amount of time adolescent girls waste in public schools (American Association of University Women, 1991), it needs to be space that slows the flows of the social world down so there I can map the flows. In other words, the condition of a meeting between the girl and the woman would need a severe break with the other surfaces in the school, physically, aesthetically, and politically. How would I begin once these conditions were established? I would “reclaim [my] intuition by wrenching it from the fallacies that parade as society’s doctrines, moralities, and intuitions” (Grumet, 1992/1976, p. 39).

### **How Being a Girl Becomes Autoethnography**

The recent publication by The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy (Brown & Flannigan, 2003), *14 and Younger: The Sexual Behavior of Young Adolescents*, found that “while the proportion of unmarried teen girls age 15-19 who have had sexual intercourse decreased between 1988 and 1995, the proportion of unmarried teen girls who have had sexual intercourse at 14 and younger increased appreciably during the same time period” (p. 1). The resonance with CASA’s (2003) findings regarding substance abuse among girls is clear. While the subject matter of the two reports is different, both identify statistics regarding adolescent girls to follow their own trajectories, notably different from other populations the same age. The National

Campaign particularly wanted to look at “sex- and pregnancy-related issues among middle-school age youth” because, besides “numerous media reports,” there are few research reports “about early sexual activity” (2003, p. 2).

What both of these reports illustrate are the dangerous choices young adolescent girls are making. The amount of time young adolescent girls spend in middle schools could be put to better uses. It seems clear that if this demographic group is endangered, the public school is one place where different approaches could be offered to further refine and ameliorate the conditions that have produced such startling statistics. A menopausal curriculum involves letting go and in the case of schools, it is letting go of outdated curricula that do not address the needs and interests of young adolescents, particularly girls.

Though there were many teachers who took a special interest in my academic work, the work itself held no solutions to what seemed most vital to my survival during the early adolescent years. A good starting point is in providing alternative ways for girls to explore the role of both gender and desire in their lives. Some will say these issues do not belong in the middle school. Like Martin (1992), who envisions the school as a domestic space and the teacher as part of an extended family, I believe “the alternative the American schoolhouse has adopted of letting young children see evil, doing nothing, and hoping for the best has proved a dismal failure” (pp. 80-81). Instead, Martin suggests “turning evil, whatever form it happens to take, into a bonafide object of study” and “shedding light on what young children and teenagers have seen and heard firsthand” (p. 81). While discussions around what is evil could require extensive time, Martin adds, “of course, not only evil; good, too” (p. 81) and I take this to mean whatever is on the mind

of children belongs in the classroom. Letting go of puritanical mindsets that want to pretend children do not know about homelessness, “drugs, rape, [and] violence of all kinds” (p. 80) does not serve their best interests.

I was a child ethnographer and as I passed into early adolescence and the need for a self became intense, I became an autoethnographer. The close attention I paid to what others were doing and how they were looking was tied, or so I thought, to my own survival and desires. If the bell jar of depression refracted what I observed, it also emphasized the complex relationship between the images I absorbed and the images I held of my self. In order to allow these images into the classroom perhaps at first will take a fearlessness on the part of teachers and students. But what I am proposing as a menopausal theory of curriculum means letting go of the “different selves” we ask students and teachers to bring into the classroom (Martin, 1992, p. 82). At the same time, it recognizes that “in a society as diverse and individualistic as ours,” the notion of “an identical curriculum collapses” and “the idea of a unifying curriculum is an illusion” (p. 82).

### **What Schools Can Do**

Mahiri (1998) proposes the “mutable curriculum and pedagogy for teaching it” as a prime objective in schools which is capable of adapting itself to student interests and needs and validating the inclusion of all knowledges in the classroom. James Banks suggests there are five “distinct but interrelated types of knowledge” including personal knowledge, popular knowledge, mainstream academic knowledge, transformative/academic knowledge, and school knowledge (as cited in Mahiri, 1998, p. 63). Mahiri

proposes the mutable curriculum as capable of synthesizing these knowledges into school-based notions of literacy.

The mutable curriculum provides multiple entryways to students into literacy by allowing their interests, no matter what they are, to qualify them. I strongly agree with Mahiri on this: students must want to write about a subject, to “tell” a certain story about the self, before they can properly attend to the writerly characteristics of their work. If we consider that any “encounter with the world is a generative act,” then “education emerges as a metaphor for a person’s dialogue with the world of his or her experience” (Grumet, 1992/1976, p. 29). The facilitation of this dialogue becomes the teacher’s objective when education is understood as “a person’s experience in the world,” including the classroom but extended beyond it (p. 29).

The creation of the conditions that facilitate self-relevant connections in classrooms recognizes “the need for students to engage in expansive talk . . . in order to develop the kinds of relationships that will enhance their working together effectively for the rest of the year” (Mahiri, 1998, pp. 92-93). The teacher must give up the privilege of speaking that follows different rules from those of the students—there can be no hierarchy of voices. The kind of literacy that acknowledges the importance of oral communication is not currently valued in classrooms. These conversations provide models for students of how we can bracket out experiences and make those experiences the objects of inquiry. The teacher is the more sophisticated “you” to which the student can address their first inquiries.

In the elementary classroom, my experience has shown that conversation is one of the most important elements of connection between teachers and students. I was often

frustrated by the dearth of time available for conversation. The methods of assessment are the tails that wag the dogs of classrooms, and currently the emphasis placed on standardized testing means there is not time enough to work with some students on their reading and writing. The luxury of talking about everything and nothing certainly cannot be facilitated in such classrooms. But I believe investments of time in just talking with young students would enhance all other literacies. It was in casual conversation that I clarified the homemade differences in my students.

One way to amplify these conversations was during snack time, which came in the middle of our work period in the morning. Each day a different student would take home the snack basket and would then be the server the next day. When it was snack time, we all convened in the circle and waited until everyone was served. When the server was satisfied that everyone had been served, she or he would say, “You may now eat.” Even though the students in my Montessori classroom were kindergartners through third-graders, the boisterous conversation that erupted upon these words was a great source of joy and warmth to both my students and myself. Likewise, when the hurried pace of the classroom became too much for me, I turned to conversation to calm myself. Schools, as they are designed today, seem to work very hard to make sure students do not mistake the classroom for anything approaching home. As a bridge between the home and the public world, I suggest they could include a little of both and offer more support to all students as they make this crossing.

Mahiri’s (1998) work with “underprepared students” in secondary education made him conscious of students’ positioning “as ‘objects’ in the educational process” (p. 49). In working with these students on their writing, he found the generation of

“sufficient ideas and texts to adequately develop a topic in writing” was the first problem they faced. Once a topic was arrived at, his students had problems “fleshing out” the topic. One of his students, Jerod, could not break “the two-page barrier” (p. 69). He noted this student’s skill in playing complicated video games that required extensive knowledge and “hit on an image that seemed to help students see one way of clicking into a text editor mode for their own work and the work of their peers” (p. 69). By likening the “slightly developed images or episodes” in their papers to “icons on the screen” of a computer, he suggested they could click on these icons to launch programs that were “rich and dense with additional meanings and details” (p. 69). By clicking on these images or episodes, they were provided with a “window into a world of larger, more complicated, more detailed meanings” (p. 69). This put the “mouse” in their hands.

Stretching Mahiri’s (1998) heuristic of the metaphor, “clicking-on”, to include the self, expresses the way a curriculum of the self might work to help students delve beneath the surface of stereotypes and explore the rich and dense meanings their own processes of self-storying involve. This way of working recognizes students are not objects in schools and allows the richness of the stories they are “living, telling, retelling, and reliving” into the classroom (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4). A curriculum of the self has the objective of helping students find their voices to tell their own dramatic stories as they become intentionally conscious of their own experiences (Grumet, 1992/1976).

Dewey (1934) speaks to the same habitable space as Mahiri when he defined experience as having an “artistic and esthetic quality . . . implicit in every normal experience” (pp. 12-13). If students are to connect to the curriculum, it must provide the tools of expansion into the world beyond the “essential conditions of life” that determine

the nature of our experience. These experiences are the “means of connection with what lies beyond [a student’s] bodily frame, and by which, in order to live, [they] must adjust [themselves] by accommodation and defense but also by conquest” (p. 13). When Mahiri invokes West’s notion of *nihilism*, he is not being an alarmist. Dewey’s (1934) point about mindfulness on the part of the teacher of “the gap between organism and environment” refers to the same acknowledgment (p. 13). Mahiri elucidates practical methods by which teachers can scaffold students’ work in ways that support connection between the student and their writing. Experiences become icons in Mahiri’s pedagogical style that can be clicked on to reveal the subcutaneous aspects of each experience.

As Lisa Delpit (1995) points out, “because [African American] students’ experiences have not, in general, been so codified, they typically have no written text upon which to call” (p. 109). Delpit and Mahiri preach the same pedagogy based on listening to students to understand how to teach them. The object for white students, who face a larger body of codified experiences, is the bracketing out of “convictions and prejudices so that [they] may examine the world in its primordialness” (Grumet, 1992/1976, p. 38). This is true in our work with all students and I believe especially powerful in considering how classrooms can remediate the deficits in their approaches to girls. Dewey’s notion of the aesthetic quality inherent in any experience is important to contextualize a kind of listening that moves beyond reading and writing and listens for “the rhythm of loss of integration with environment and recovery of union” with the environment (Dewey, 1934, p. 15). A menopausal theory of curriculum seeks to enable both teachers and students to listen and feel for this rhythm.

## **Pricking Consciousness**

Feeling for girls' experiential pulses in the classroom is not about to be inaugurated as part of the explicit curriculum. This is not the 1970s and the consciousness-raising that spontaneously emerged then is historically and situationally fixed in the past. The conditions of the meeting between the girl and woman should allow the same freedom to speak but it will be tricky in the social culture of the school. The intensity with which women in groups broke their silences became the momentum and critical resource of the second wave of feminism. But these grass roots groups met in dens and kitchens and not a specific institutional site. Chesler (1972) pointed to the small group as "a way and a place for women to name their common plight" (p. 241). But then again, "they also discovered that neither men nor women liked women, especially a strong or happy woman" (p. 241). But the most important truth to emerge from these groups still is truth today: the personal is political. This is no less true for children than it is for adults.

The landscape of the adolescent girl is full of petty dislike and ethical considerations include protection of girls' delicate surfacings. We never see ourselves as other see us, and, though we may know we are marginalized, sometimes it is desirable to not know why. How do we raise the consciousness of adolescent girls in a collective and supportive environment on the surface of the school without losing girls' and women's words to reterritorialization by the school? Real growth is time-intensive and there has to be a way to protect those at the edges of the social surface until we all learn to travel there.

The teachers who facilitate the conditions favorable to girls' development within the contexts of the classroom would have to work out their own rituals and practices to keep their visions clear. These women cannot miss much. Women who facilitate these kinds of groups do not have any answers but by allowing space for the untested possibilities of intuition, they open the meeting between themselves and girls to non-sectarian spirituality. This is the facilitator's greatest ally given that she is a student, too. The shock of hearing what we know and cannot say works to dissipate silence. This is how consciousness is pricked.

Much of what is contained in this dissertation are not new ideas, but I attempt to connect these in different ways to produce new possibilities for girls' belongings in schools. When we enter the middle school, the fluidity of the elementary school playground and watchful eye of our teacher in a self-contained classroom are gone and there is no one to watch over us. Alice Miller (1981/1979) identified the creation of the *false self* as loss of true self in childhood when children attempt to confirm what their parents are looking for in their child: "a substitute for their own missing structures" (p. 14). In the elementary school, some girls create additional false selves by being the good and helpful school girl. It is not that we walk into the middle school with an authentic self and the punitive folkways of the girl curriculum screw it up. We are already versions of false selves created for our parents and our teachers.

Our sexual identities, as well, perform false selves. Now, the task becomes the creation of a surface with which to carve out a space of control with our peer group. As Susan Sontag wrote in 1972: "Men have faces but women are their faces" (as cited in Frost, p. 131). Girls are *sur-faces* turned to the world, hoping the world will read them

correctly. The group dynamic of a classroom committed to a curriculum of the self that makes room for all students to engage in self-relevant learning by pricking, embossing, weaving, quilting, are modes of coming to know that are particularly feminine and I use them to resist the piercing and plunging of the explicit curriculum as we know it and to remember the outside is an appropriate place to begin to understand what has remained unmarked for so long—the rich ambiguity and complexity of being human, even if we are children.

Chesler (1972) said that the only fear she had concerning the feminism that emerged from consciousness-raising groups in terms of ritual was that it would be “anything less than bold and true” (p. 240). One of the ways the school culture reterritorializes innovation is through half-heartedness, through the same ambiguous transcendency that is so evident in some girls’ movements. In my southern city, charter schools are under attack because it is stipulated that they provide a model environment which can be reproduced at other sites. At the same time, there is no provision for time. The commitment by institutional forces has to be more than a one-year, five-year, or more, grants. These breed “mediocrity and defeat” (Chesler, 1972, p. 240), which can do more damage. Instead, the guiding principles should be “power, pleasure, and self-defined works of the imagination” for girls and women in a spiritual journey of self- and body-recovery (p. 240). When girls and women work together, ripe new belongings become possible because they have many images across the life cycle to draw from.

In order to sift through the dissimulation of the psychological and social surfaces that color and fragment the world around them, girls and women must let go of time. Shaw’s (1975) study demonstrates the time-driven world many women live in which

makes her either too busy or too tired to engage in leisure. The threshold of menopause has, for me, meant letting go of so much while holding on to my self. A menopausal theory of curriculum creates the conditions for meaningful play and work in classrooms girls and women share as they come to consciousness. Using Freire's (1981/1968) *conscientização* as a guide, teachers can turn and re-present stories back to the girls in the forms of problems. This is what Freire calls the "problem-posing method—dialogical par excellence" (p. 101). The girl surfaces and the woman disrupts her re-submergence by arresting the girl's attention with her own autobiographical meditations, the stories she tells about herself.

Girls have been left to their own constructed strategies and rarely with anyone they feel safe enough around to know what "should not be known" (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 170). Because what some girls know from their experiences may not match the reality other people are referring to, these girls may begin to feel "crazy or insane" (p. 170). Bell jars emerge in these gaps and further isolate some girls from others. "Knowledge of the power others have to look at them, to judge them, to spread rumors about them, to cause them harm, leads girls to protect themselves by removing their deepest feelings and thoughts from public scrutiny, and thus from public discussion, and taking them into an underground world" (p. 172). If white, middle-class women learned that privilege was not the same thing as freedom in the consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s (Chesler, 1972), perhaps we can learn the shape of girls' and women's cultures and together find the ideal conditions for the emergence of an American feminism that is bold and true and allows girls and women the ease of living their lives fully in all contexts.

## Conclusion

I am incapable of telling the truth. Virginia Woolf (1938) knew the dissimulating effects of stories and metonymies of one's own life when she wrote *A Room of One's Own*: "Lies will flow from my lips, but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up with them" (p. 4). Perhaps there has been truth mixed up with these notions of childhood and adolescence as experienced by some girls. The stories we tell about the self and about the self in relations do not have to follow the plot lines we have learned by heart; authenticity is resistance to ambiguity and means being wide-awake to the banal belongings of everyday. It is "a heightened sensitivity to the sensibilities, to being captured by other manners of being and desires for becoming-other [called] . . . belonging" (Probyn, 1996, p. 5). One cannot model authenticity; it is a way of being in the world.

Brown and Gilligan (1992) suggest it is not perfection that women should model for girls but rather their own dissonance with "women's images of perfection" (p. 230). It seems that girls have been told they can now be anyone or do anything they want but no one really means it. If someone really meant it, then it would not depend so heavily on atomistic determination. I am accustomed to looking away, looking down, looking aside, but not looking directly at; and it startles me to find I am being looked *to*, though I have lived accustomed to being looked *at*. These partially-occluded views suggest how the world dissimulates into false realities as girls and women step out of feminine comfort zones.

Ownership of their reproductive capacity lessens the force of contingency in women's lives. At the same time, women know "there is *not* any fixed truth" (Beavoir,

1952, p. 644). Women's knowledges are fragmented by cultural expectations attached to biological sex and inscribed on our bodies during adolescence. The silence around notions of health for adolescent girls and women that are not defined negatively as lack of illness means pathology has emerged from the limited vocabulary of what can be represented visually. Some girls and women live their lives without ever directly confronting their silence; zones of specificity largely determine how likely this confrontation will be. Race, class, and gender make some more vulnerable and those who step out are most vulnerable.

The "strange little girl" gives way at menarche as the first egg bursts from the follicle. The ideology of romance was like a tab of Ecstasy and in its wild dancing, I lost the horizon of my girl world. The porous boundaries of adolescent girls' groups allowed me to find tiny footholds here and there. The strange little girl and I are closer as I exit and she approaches the reproductive journey that separates us. In between is a girl on her way to becoming a woman who could benefit from the buoyancy of a conversation between the girl and the woman, with intuition as a guide.

In this peri-menopausal threshold, I am aware of the tractor beam pulling me through a space that is both outside of me and unguates with me to the other side. Like the adolescent girl, I am trying on possibilities though certainly not as fervently. To the extent I am living on a survival basis, I remain "rooted in immanence" and separate from my "body as transcending movement and from engagement in the world's possibilities" (Young, 1980, p. 150). Or I decide I have nothing to lose and bear down to give birth to a reorganization of who I am on the surface in the limited range of representational visibility allowed women. A woman who has been dismissed is likely to choose the

latter. The chimera of movie images, romance novels, fashion layouts, and ideology stuffed between the layers of our self-schemata like prayers in the Wailing Wall channel desire and fantasy on girls' imaginings of who they can be. My own prayers are yellowed and dusty with disuse. The more embodied I become, the less I look outside of my self for solutions and the more I look for engagement in the world's possibilities.

If Barbie is a talisman, then she reminds me that we story the self at time when commodification is the rule. The flow of child pornography on the internet is a virus right under the social surface and we may only be seeing the first roaches to emerge from between the walls that structure our society. Engaging such widely disparate items, bits and pieces of girls' social worlds, has been an attempt to enable a glimpse into what it is like to be some girls. The bell jars some girls construct in order to protect themselves is singularity turned in on itself. If girls and women do nothing else than enumerate their differences, these "moments and movements . . . establish contact across a geography of devotion" (Probyn, 1996, p. 13).

Embodiment of the self means letting go of the bell jar to some degree so connection with other surfaces in action on the world through belongings is possible. Autoethnography includes the self but considers also the conditions of the meeting between girls and women and the ways these either facilitate or constrain the conditions of growth—for both of them. This is the crux of a menopausal theory of curriculum and of this exploration and reflection.

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## VITA

Pamela Autrey first worked with children as the proprietor of a Montessori school that catered to the young children of working parents. Her two daughters, Céline and Sarah, grew up in the school, too. She experienced her work with her students as a dynamic intersection of social justice, creativity, and fascination with the educative process, particularly the conditions which make an education possible. In 1991, she sold the school after eight years and returned to college to pursue a bachelor's degree in elementary education so she could teach in the public Montessori school. She decided to pursue a five-year Holmes degree instead, having realized Maria Montessori's writings and work had only been the beginning of a conversation. After receiving her master's degree in elementary education in 1996, she taught for two years in a first- through third-grade public Montessori classroom.

As Pamela began her experience in that classroom, she continued her academic conversation by choosing to pursue her doctoral studies in curriculum and instruction. She lives with her youngest daughter Sarah in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where daughter Céline attends Louisiana State University. She is a member of the National Council of Teachers of English, International Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies, and the American Association of University Women. Since 1999, she had worked as a graduate assistant at Louisiana State University in the College of Education, teaching a Foundations of Education course and a course introducing students to college life. She will earn the degree of Doctor of Philosophy on August 7, 2003.