"A Proper Little Lady" and Other Twisted Tales of Adolescent Femininity.

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“A Proper Little Lady” and other twisted tales of adolescent femininity

Adams, Natalie Guice, Ph.D.
The Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical Col., 1994

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"A PROPER LITTLE LADY" AND OTHER TWISTED TALES OF
ADOLESCENT FEMININITY

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Doctor of Philosophy

in
The Department of Curriculum and Instruction

by
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DEDICATION

To my grandmother, Georgia Mott Guice, and my great-aunt, Rebecca Moore Guice, who helped me to see beyond stereotypical Southern womanhood.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Although this dissertation bears my name as the sole author, in reality, this work has been a collaborative effort among many people. To these people I wish to express my sincere gratitude.

I am eternally grateful for my mother and father, John and Bonnie Guice, and their unconditional love, support, and guidance. They remain the constant in my all too often chaotic life. To my children, Hunter, Rebecca, and Chris, I thank them for their patience in having an absent and often crazy mother. They are the true joys of my life. To my husband, Jim, words fall short in expressing how thankful I am for his encouragement and constant love. He is truly the music of my life.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this ethnographic study is to explore the stories told by four adolescent females about how they construct a gendered identity amidst the conflicting and contradictory expectations of them as adolescents and as females. After situating the study within a feminist poststructuralist framework, the dominant cultural scripts that have dictated what constitutes normative adolescent and feminine behavior are examined. Of particular importance to this study is the way in which these dominant discourse of femininity and adolescence are manifested in the middle school that the participants attend, especially in the school’s attempt to mold its female students into "proper little ladies."

However, as illuminated by the dominant metaphors the participants used to describe their lives (e.g. the cowboy, the gangster, the goddess, the good woman) as well as their stories about fighting, what constitutes normative femininity is a highly contested issue in the everyday lives of adolescents, and their stories reveal an understanding of masculinity and femininity as unfixed, fluid, and contextual. Also, their stories suggest that adolescence is not a universal construct, and how people experience adolescence is greatly impacted by their race (both Black and White girls are represented in the study), class, and gender. In short, these tales told by
adolescent females illuminate sites of conflict and challenge us to "unlearn the truth" about gender, identity, adolescence, and schooling.
CHAPTER ONE
LEARNING THE "TRUTH"

Almost everything is double like that for adolescents; their lies are true and their truths are lies, and their hearts are broken by the world. They gyre and fall; they see through everything, and are blind.
(LeGuin, cited in Partnow, 1992, p. 2034)

According to Foucault (1980), "every society has its regimes of truth," thereby determining what constitutes truth, who is allowed to speak the truth, and how truth functions to dominate some and liberate others. However, as LeGuin’s quote suggests, in the everyday lives of adolescents (as well as adults), the very dichotomies of "truths and lies", fact and fiction, reality and fantasy—become blurred as we struggle with the realization that rarely does our world conform to the truths that supposedly govern it. Likewise, we wrestle with the lies we have been told and the lies we continually tell ourselves and each other, recognizing that these lies reveal much about who we are, who we think we should be, and who we wish we were. Inevitably, we must construct our identities against and within both these truths and lies that frame the human condition.

For adults, finding one’s place amidst a world entangled with contradictions, paradoxes, and misunderstandings is an arduous task; for adolescents, it sometimes seems impossible as Madeline Grumet (1988) reminds us:
Learning the truth is tricky business. Distinguishing the consensual agreements that constitute knowledge from one's own notion about the world is not always easy for adults and is often much more difficult for children, who may not know that there is a general agreement we call truth about many matters. (p. 157)

Learning the truth is indeed a tricky business in light of the poststructuralist claim that truth is discursive and always integrally connected to issues of power (Foucault, 1980). Likewise, learning the truth is tricky business when truth is claimed in many places: in the voice of reason; in the voice of God; in the voice of written text, and in the voice of everyday experience. Furthermore, as feminist researchers and scholars (Personal Narratives Group, 1989) have reminded us, learning the truth about women's and girls' lives is an even trickier business for they must tell their stories through a masculinist language that is often inadequate and in a world that has taught them to be silent.

When I began this research, I realized that "learning the truth is tricky business"; nevertheless, I embarked on my ethnographic research journey fully expecting to uncover some truths about adolescence, femininity, and schooling. I intended, in particular, to discover: (1) how four working class adolescent girls from the South construct their own discourse of adolescence and femininity and (2) how the middle school these girls attend shapes their identities as adolescents and as females. In the early months of my
research, I struggled to get the four female participants' story "right" as I searched for the answer to my questions. Consequently, I grew increasingly frustrated and exasperated by what I perceived to be blatant contradictions (I called them lies) in the stories the participants told me.

Inevitably, I gave up trying to discover the truth about femininity, adolescence, or the right kind of schooling for adolescent females, realizing that, like William Tierney (1992), the "task of the researcher is not to discover the true interpretation, for none exists, instead the challenge is to uncover the multiple voices in society that have been silenced" (p. 4). Finally, I began focusing on the four participants' stories and what their multiple and contradictory ways of telling a story suggest about how adolescent females construct a gendered identity.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (1989), the word "story" was first used in the thirteenth century to mean "a narrative, true or presumed to be true, relating to important events and celebrated persons of a more or less remote past" (p. 797). By the seventeenth century, story had accrued another meaning - "an allegation, statement; a particular person's representation of the facts in a case" (p. 798). Also, in the seventeenth century, story began to be used colloquially to mean "a lie" (p.798). As highlighted in this brief etymology, the word story changed
from meaning something that was true to someone’s representation of the truth and, in colloquial use, to mean the opposite of truth - a falsehood.

What follows then are not the "factual" and "truthful" portrayals of adolescent girls and their school (such a presentation would suggest, after all, that there is a unitary way of being and knowing). Rather this dissertation draws from the multiple meanings of story and focuses on the truths, the representations of truths, and the lies about what it means to be an adolescent female in the South in the 1990’s and what their stories have meant to a White, thirty-two year old Southern woman who is herself struggling with the truths and lies of her own life as a woman, a mother, a wife, a teacher, a researcher, and a scholar.

Recreating Tales of Adolescent Femininity

Tale One

My journey in trying to make meaning of my experiences as a Southern woman has forced me to recognize the contradictory and competing identities embedded in the cultural lessons of Southern womanhood -lessons that formally begin at adolescence. Undeniably, the myth of the Southern lady still lingers in much of today’s Southern culture and for many of us growing up in the rural South (even as late as the 1970’s), as proper young ladies, we were taught to hold the ideal of the Southern genteel lady
the disciplined, compassionate yet strong-willed woman who was the manager of the house as well as the spiritual foundation of the family - in high regard. My own adolescence is marked by vivid memories of my great-aunt (herself an independent, aggressive, extremely intelligent teacher; an avid hunter and an accomplished equestrian, horse trainer, and dog breeder; and an unmarried woman who, to my knowledge, never had any lasting relationship with a man) sitting me down on three separate occasions and reading to me an excerpt from John Brown’s Body which is a portraiture of the quintessential Southern woman in which the "whole duty of womankind" was:

To take the burden and have the power
And seem like the well-protected flower
To manage a dozen industries
With a casual gesture in scraps of ease,
To hate the sin and to love the sinner
And to see that the gentlemen got their dinner
Ready and plenty and piping hot
Whether you wanted to eat or not.
And always, always, to have the charm
That makes the gentlemen take your arm
But never the bright unseemly spell
That makes strange gentlemen love too well
Once you were married and settled down
With a suitable gentlemen of your own.
And when this happened, and you had bred
The requisite children, living and dead,
To pity the fool and comfort the weak
And always let the gentlemen speak
To succor your love from deep-struck roots
When gentlemen went to bed with their boots,
And manage a gentlemen’s whole plantation
In the manner befitting your female station.
This was the creed that her mother taught her
And the creed that she taught to every daughter.
(Benet, 1927, p. 140)

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Paradoxically, in the same breath, my aunt would read to me another excerpt from *John Brown’s Body* which portrays another Southern woman, one who resists the "creed", recognizing that to marry inevitably means to lose one’s self:

Her eyes were veiled. She swayed in front of the mirror [She speaks to her own image in the mirror]
"Honey, I love you," she whispered, "I love you, honey.
Nobody loves you like I do, do they, sugar? Nobody knows but Lucy how sweet you are. You mustn’t get married, honey. You mustn’t leave me. We’ll be pretty and sweet to all of them, won’t we, honey?
We’ll always have beaus to dance with and tunes to dance to,
But you mustn’t leave me, honey. I couldn’t bear it. You mustn’t ever leave me for any man.
(Benet, 1927, p. 243)

However, it was neither the Southern lady of the first poem nor the non-conforming woman of the second whom I chose to emulate in my own adolescent years, for I had created my own myth of femininity – I wanted with all my heart to be Scarlett O’Hara – the beautiful, cunning, spirited woman who was proof that Southern girls could have it all: beauty, brains, and boyfriends. Consequently, I spent all of my adolescence flip-flopping between independence and dependence; activity and passivity; submission and control, and I never seemed to get it quite right. My Rhett Butler never appeared, and I spent almost 12 years of my life searching for the manifestation of my Scarlett fantasy.
Tale Two

Sharon Black is a White fourteen year old eighth grade student who is described by her social studies teacher as a "real problem" because "she tries to act tough" and "she wants to be Black." At school, Sharon does indeed engage in frequent physical fights, mainly with boys, and most of her friends and boyfriends at school are Black. Of the four participants, Sharon is the most academically successful. On her mid-year report card, she made a B in industrial arts, a C in English and reading, a D in social studies and science, and a F in physical education (Sharon refuses to dress out). On the 1993 California Achievement Test, Sharon scored at the 36th percentile in reading, the 73rd percentile in language, and the 83rd percentile in math. Sharon plans to obtain her GED at age 17 and then go on to college to become a zoologist.

Several months into the study Sharon described herself as a "Black girl trapped in a White girl's body." Her nickname is "Lil black"; the father of her eight month old baby is Black, and for the first half of the year, Sharon lived with a Black family in an inner-city all-Black neighborhood. In January, Sharon returned to live with her mother (age 32), her step-father (age 59), and her younger half brother (age nine). This change, along with her numerous suspensions from Foster Middle School (the
research site) for fighting, resulted in her moving to another middle school.

Sharon claims that because she "acts Black" her teachers and White peers do not like her. "Sharon explained, "Most of the fights I get into here are because people call me a nigger lover, and I don't like the word nigger." Early in the study (as reflected in the following excerpt from my field journal), I sensed that Sharon was disliked by many of her teachers, and I began questioning how the school helps to shape normative understandings of White femininity: "As I observe, Sharon does not appear to be that big of a behavior problem. She participates in class, seems eager to please the teacher, and makes A's on tests. But adults just don't like her. Is it because she is living with Blacks? Interestingly, Sharon takes on both a male and female discourse. In many ways she acts like a male - she fights, she tells boys to shut up, she sits with her legs sprawled, but she also acts like a girl. She carries hair spray, she talks about names for her baby, and she gets mad when she can't meet her boyfriend after class. How does she know when to switch identities? (Field Journal, October 6, 1993)

Tale Three

Sharon's best friend is India Jackson, a Black fourteen year old eighth grader. Like Sharon, India is described by her social studies teacher as having
"problems" in school, mainly because she does not complete assignments and she frequently sleeps in class. India is not an academically successful student. On her mid-year report card, she made a D in English, reading, social studies, and science; an F in typing, and a C in math. On the 1993 California Achievement Test, she scored at the 43rd percentile in reading, the 81st percentile in language, and the 58th percentile in math.

However, outside the classroom, India is quite gregarious, very flirtatious, and according to her, "smart about the world." India plans to be a cosmetologist once she completes high school. During most of the study, India lived with her mother (age 42), her older half-brother (age 21), her younger half brother (age 6), and younger half sister (age 4). India lives in a housing project in an all-Black neighborhood. Her mother is the sole provider for the family. India’s father was killed when she was three years old.

In response to the question "Tell me about your life," India replied: "I don’t have an easy life. I have three brothers and one sister. I’m the oldest girl; most of all I have to take care of my little sister and brother, I have most of the housework to do, I have to go to school every morning, come home, wait until my little sister and them get off the bus, and when they get off the bus, my mom leaves and goes to work and I have to watch them until she
comes back about 12 o'clock at night. So really, it's not very easy being a teenager and having sisters and brothers and having to watch them."

India's stories not only challenged my assumptions about adolescence, but also forced me to continuously question my position as an outsider and the implications of this situatedness on my interpretations: "When India talked today in our first interview about her life, I was well aware of my position as an outsider. I listened intently but her stories seemed foreign to my experiences as a White upper-middle class girl growing up in the South. We were sitting in a conference room in the library; I in my blue denim skirt, long-sleeve cotton button-down shirt, and topsiders; she in her short flowery split skirt, red shoes, and white bow. I am White; she is Black and between those five inches which separate us from one another are miles of differences." (Field Journal, October 13, 1993)

**Tale Four**

India's cousin, Kerry Singleton, is a fifteen year old eighth grade Black student and the oldest participant in the study. Unlike Sharon and India, Kerry is not spoken of as a "problem student." Rather, she is simply seen as an apathetic student. She is quiet in class; she rarely participates in class discussions, and, like India, she spends a great deal of time in class with her head on the desk. Like India, Kerry is also a poor student. On her
mid-year report card, she made a D in math, science, and chorus; an F in English and physical education, and a C in reading and social studies. On the California Achievement Test, Kerry scored at the 20th percentile in reading, the 28th percentile in language, and the 37th percentile in math. As of now, Kerry has no plans for her future other than "getting out of middle school."

According to Kerry, the reason she is not seen as a problem student this year is because she is "trying to act right" so that she can get out of middle school. However, outside of class, Kerry does not necessarily "try to act right" as she has quite a reputation for being a fighter, boasting, "I don’t stop fighting until I see blood." She is part of a group of Black girls who refer to themselves as "Messy Girls"; others refer to them as the "Loud, Bad Girls." Kerry is the leader of her clique and is quite popular with boys.

Kerry is the only participant who has any kind of relationship with her father. However, according to Kerry this relationship is strained because of "the way he treats my mamma and me." During the first three months of the study, Kerry lived with both of her parents in a single dwelling home on the outskirts of the city. Around Christmas, her father moved out of the house but returned again in March. Upon his return, Kerry went to live with a friend and began attending another middle school. However,
she moved back home in April and returned to Foster Middle 
(the research site). Kerry has one sister (age 21) and 
three brothers (ages 20, 16, and 9). At the time of the 
study, she and her younger brother were the only children 
living at home.

When I asked Kerry to tell me about her life, she 
began talking first about her mother: "My mamma, she’s a 
quiet kind of person; she don’t like bad things or 
anything. She tries her hardest to please him [her 
husband]. My mama tries to keep peace and tries to get 
along with everybody. My mamma is a good woman. She’ll do 
something for somebody else before she’ll do something for 
herself. If you ask her for something, she’ll get it, no 
matter how she gets it. They [other people] just try to 
run all over her... I try to be nice and all that too cos 
boys like nice girls."

Kerry’s "good woman" narrative stood in stark contrast 
to her fighter narrative in which she "fights like a man." 
Clearly, there seemed to be a contradiction between the two 
metaphors Kerry used to describe her life. Consequently I 
began questioning my own assumptions about gender, 
realizing that my understandings of Southern femininity are 
not necessarily reflective of all Southern females: "What 
does it mean to be a Southern female? Against what norms 
do Black girls like Kerry read their lives as girls and
women? Is there even such a thing as feminine behavior?"
(Field Journal, January 19, 1994)

**Tale Five**

Trisha Freeman is a White fourteen year old female living with her 76 year old grandmother who has reared her from birth. Trisha rarely sees her mother whom she initially described as "having long blonde hair to her shins" and as being "a lawyer in Florida" who is "so rich, it’s pitiful." Much later, Trisha revealed that her mother is a "drug addict, who likes to party." Furthermore, according to Trisha, her mother makes no attempt to see her: "She was in New Orleans last year and didn’t even bother to call me."

Trisha is a highly successful competitor in rodeo events, being both a barrel racer and the only girl bull rider in the state. In the rodeo arena, Trisha shines; in the classroom, she struggles. On her mid-year report card, she made a D in reading and typing; an F in English, social studies, and math; and a C in science. On the California Achievement Test, she scored at the 59th percentile in reading, the 30th percentile in language, and the 16th percentile in math. Trisha has no plans of ever graduating from high school and expects to continue rodeoing as a profession.

During our first interview, I asked Trisha to tell me about her life; this is how she began: "I’m the only girl
in [this state] who rides bulls [in rodeos]. So I compete against boys, and I win just as much as they do. It’s kinda hard cos you’ve got to put up with them always teasing you, making fun of you, and when you’re out there riding, most of the girls will hoop and holler at you, but the guys, "Boo, get off; you’re a girl, you don’t need to be riding."... I’ve broken one of my ankles twelve times, the other one six. I broke my nose and one of my ribs. I broke my nose in 32 pieces.... When I’m rodeoing, I don’t know if I will live to see the next day."

Juxtaposed against these stories about the "rugged cowboy" who is tough both in and out of the arena were Trisha’s references to herself as a "dumb blonde" (she, in fact, has brown hair) and her many stories about her beautiful princess mother. It was the many contradictions in Trisha’s stories that led me to begin questioning the importance of "truth and lies" in the construction of identities: "It seems that Trisha exaggerates a lot - her stories about rodeoing, are they true? Her stories seem to be full of contradictions - her mother is rich, but Trisha can’t afford plastic surgery to correct her nose; her grandmother doesn’t care if she gets suspended, then she said her grandmother would be mad if she knew she had told me about her getting suspended. I wonder why she feels she has to twist the truth? (Field Journal, October 27, 1993)
Undeniably, in our culture, grand "truths" exist about what constitutes normative femininity (i.e. girls are more passive, quiet, nurturing, and sensitive than are boys), adolescence (i.e. a stage of development marked by "storm and stress"), and the best type of schooling for adolescents (i.e. similarly aged students should be grouped together in large classes under the tutelage of one adult with the purpose of preparing them to be good workers and good American citizens). One purpose of this research is to explore how these "regimes of truth" (Foucault, 1980) shape gender and adolescent identity. However, as illuminated by Sharon’s, India’s, Kerry’s, and Trisha’s tales, what constitutes normative femininity is a highly contested issue in the everyday lives of adolescents, and their stories, in fact, reveal an understanding of masculinity and femininity as unfixed, fluid, and contextual. Likewise, their stories suggest that adolescence is not a universal construct, and how people experience adolescence is greatly impacted by their race, class, and gender. In short, these tales told by adolescent females illuminate sites of conflict and challenge us to question, like Walkerdine (1990): "How is it that truth is constituted, how is it possible, and what effects does it have?" (p. 136)

The remainder of this dissertation is concerned with the "truths and lies" of femininity, adolescence,
schooling, and identity. In Chapter 2, I discuss the methodological and philosophical implications of truth and representation in conducting ethnographic research. In Chapter 3, I contextualize my research within a feminist poststructuralist perspective. In Chapter 4, I explore the dominant cultural scripts that have dictated what constitutes normative adolescent and feminine behavior. In Chapter 5, I examine the relationship between school culture and gender identity. In Chapter 6, I discuss the dominant metaphors that frame Kerry’s, India’s, Sharon’s, and Trisha’s stories. In Chapter 7, I explore their fighting as a text for representing the struggles girls have in constructing a gendered identity. In the final chapter, I end by raising questions of how these girls’ stories might guide us in unlearning the truth about gender, adolescence, and schooling.

By now, I have quit trying to decipher what is true and what is false in my participants’ stories. Like the Personal Narratives Group (1989), I now realize that in our lies we often learn "truths":

> When talking about their lives, people lie sometimes, forget a lot, exaggerate, become confused, and get things wrong. Yet they are revealing truths. These truths don’t reveal the past "as it actually was," aspiring to a standard of objectivity. They give us instead the truths of our experiences. (p. 261, emphasis original)

As I have become less concerned with discovering the truth, the focus of my research has changed, and I have begun
questioning instead: "What do the contradictions, tensions, and conflicts in these girls' stories reveal about the many ways in which adolescent females create their own discourse of femininity? How do adolescent females construct a gendered identity amidst the truths and lies taught to them about what it means to be a lady/woman/female in today's society? And how do their tales challenge us to question the invention, creation, and sustenance of the multiple, conflicting truths about adolescence and femininity?"
I am well aware that, as an ethnographer, I put myself in a precarious position by openly acknowledging that my participants told me many different stories that often conflicted with both their own stories and their friends' and teachers' stories. It was, after all, only eleven years ago that Derek Freeman (1983) published his refutation of Margaret Mead's portrayal of adolescent females in Samoa which questioned Mead's findings that Samoan girls experienced little of the "storm and stress" found in American adolescents. According to Freeman (1983), Mead was not "scientifically equipped to investigate the subtle and complex interaction in Samoan behavior, of biological and cultural variables" (p. 75).

Although I certainly make no claims to be the next Margaret Mead, I recognize that by choosing ethnographic research as my methodological approach, I am forced to examine the epistemological and philosophical implications of such a choice. Like Freeman's (1983) account of Mead, will future researchers claim that "[my] account is inadequate" (p. 205), "[my] assertions are markedly at variance with the facts of [Southern] history" (p. 157), and "[my] assertions are inaccurate and misleading" (p. 191)? Will they maintain, as Freeman did, that "[my] informants must have been telling lies in order to tease
[me]" (p. 290)? Will Southern adolescent girls themselves claim in future years (as did the Samoans, according to Freeman) that "the girls who . . . plied [Adams] with those counterfeit tales were only amusing themselves, and had no inkling that their tales would ever find their way into a book?" (p. 290)

The fact that much attention in anthropology has been devoted to the Freeman-Mead debate (see for example Appell, 1984; Brady, 1983; Caton, 1984; Cote, 1992; Ember, 1985) suggests that the belief that an ethnographer can capture the truth about a culture by attending closely to the natives' point of view still pervades anthropological thought despite the current postmodern crisis of representation which Patti Lather (1991) describes as "an erosion of confidence in prevailing concepts of knowledge and truth" (p. 25).

Because the crisis of representation questions the very foundational truths of Enlightenment thought and the scientific method, the nature and purpose of research has also been challenged (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Therefore, a researcher can no longer purport to know the Truth, for no Truth exists (only truths exist). Similarly, the notion of representing another's reality becomes suspect since true representation is no longer possible because there is no unitary, stable self or fixed reality. Postmodernism has supposedly rejected all claims of authority, asserting
that no totalizing theories or grand narratives exist and that knowledge and language is not absolute but rather socially constructed. Furthermore, postmodernism has forwarded an understanding of a de-centered subject by claiming that our subjective identities are always culturally inscribed.

However, some feminist and non-White researchers (Alcoff, 1986; Flax, 1986; Hardstock, 1987) have argued that postmodernism is but one more master narrative that keeps the master (i.e. White males) in power, thus the status quo (especially in academia) intact. These scholars assert the following: If knowledge is socially constructed, then all knowledge is legitimate even if that knowledge is used to further oppress non-Whites and women. Furthermore, by de-centering the subject, subjectivity is abandoned – thus no grounding exists for personal agency and political action. Hardstock (1987), Fox-Genovese (cited in Lather, 1991), and Flax (1986) have argued that at the precise moment when females and non-Whites began to move from object to subject, from unknowledgeable to knowledgeable, from political and social silencing to political and social activism, postmodernism claimed that they could only be but one of the many voices clamoring to speak. Fox-Genovese (cited in Lather, 1991) asserts:

Surely, it is no coincidence that the Western White male elite proclaimed the death of the subject at precisely the moment at which it might have had to share that status with the women.
and peoples of other races and classes who were beginning to challenge its supremacy. (p. 28)

Like other academic disciplines, the discipline of anthropology has found itself in the midst of this philosophical and epistemological crisis (Lather, 1991; Rosaldo, 1989) — a crisis, according to James Clifford (1986), that offers much hope for new ethnographers:

But is there not a liberation, too, in recognizing that no one can write about others any longer as if they were discrete objects or texts? And may not the vision of a complex, problematic, partial ethnography lead, not to its abandonment, but to more subtle, concrete ways of writing and reading, to new conceptions of culture as interactive and historical? (p. 25)

Undeniably, the worlds anthropologists once explored come into our living rooms daily through mass media; the people ethnographers once purported to represent now want to represent themselves. And the ethnographic product (the written account) which was once written strictly for bureaus and universities can now be read by the "natives" the anthropologist sought to represent. As the world grows smaller and the boundaries between self and Other become more blurred, anthropologists have been forced to seriously confront the question, "What can anthropology hope to accomplish if it cannot represent its subjects?" (Manganaro, 1990, p. 10)

In light of the current belief that knowledge is not absolute but socially constructed, how can ethnographers claim that the central aim of their research is to
represent a culture from the native's point of view? If, as postmodernism claims, a fixed reality does not exist in and of itself, how can ethnographers through anthropological texts purport to convey the cultural reality of their subjects? If all research is imbued in power relations, how can ethnographers claim that the authority to speak for their "natives" is gained through value-free, logical-empirical research? The following is a cursory overview of how ethnographers have dealt and continue to deal with these issues of truth and representation. Like the ethnographers discussed below, I, too, struggle with the tensions between current theoretical perspectives surrounding ethnography as both product and process and the methodological practices embedded in ethnographic research.

Truth and Representation in Ethnographic Research

Realist Ethnography

Since the birth of anthropology as an academic discipline in the late 1890's, the dominant ideology in anthropology has been that trained anthropologists could represent the reality of a culture by engaging in ethnographic research. According to Malinowski (1922), the goal of ethnographic research is to "grasp the native's point of view, his relations to life, to realize his vision of his world" (p. 25). To understand the natives' point of view, the ethnographer must become both an observer of and participant in her "natives'" culture. Indeed, traditional
ethnographic research has been based on the belief that an ethnographer can be both an insider and outsider; because of rigorous scientific training, the ethnographer can be detached, scientific, and objective but humanistic enough to get the natives to accept her and talk openly with her. A good ethnographer knew how to delicately balance her stance between being a participant or an observer. Thus, the norm in ethnography has been to situate the ethnographer as a detached outsider inside the world of her informants. According to Spradley (1975), "the most productive relationship occurs between a thoroughly enculturated informant and a thoroughly unenculturated ethnographer" (p. 58).

**Interpretative Ethnography**

However, by the early 1970’s, the traditionalist’s view of ethnography with its aim of cultural representation began to be challenged by interpretative ethnographers like Clifford Geertz who claimed that the aim of ethnography was to interpret the interpretations that people give to their lives (realizing that even our informants’ perceptions of reality are themselves reconstructions). Geertz (1973) in *Interpretations of Cultures* maintains that "anthropological writings are themselves interpretations and second and third order ones to boot. They are thus fictions: fictions, in the sense that they are ‘something made,’ ‘something fashioned’" (p.15). Thus, the vocation of the
ethnographer is to inscribe the symbolic actions of another culture by mediating experience-near concepts (those we take for granted) within experience-distant concepts (Geertz, 1975).

Like traditional ethnographers, interpretative ethnographers claim to present the world from the natives' point of view, doing so with "thick description" (Geertz, 1973, p. 6). However, differences do exist between these two strands of ethnographic thought. For Geertz, culture does not simply exist in our informant's head; rather, it is embodied in symbols through which members communicate their world view (Ortner, 1984). Geertz (1975) makes no claim to get into his natives' skin, but he does claim an understanding of the symbolic systems which frame how his informants interpret their lives.

However, interpretative ethnographers like Geertz have been sorely criticized for the assumption that they can interpret the unarticulated concepts which shape the lives of others simply by employing the lens of an objective outsider. Minh-Ha (1991) challenges those ethnographers (especially Geertz) who claim that Westerners can present non-Westerners more objectively than they (the non-Westerners) can present themselves. In fact, according to Minh-Ha, the insider view versus the outsider view serves to reinforce remnants of colonialism by projecting an us versus them mentality. Said (1989) goes even further to
suggest that ethnography is not even about cultural description or cultural interpretation; rather it serves to create fictions which promote imperialism and colonialism:

In such cases it is irresistible to argue that the vogue for thick descriptions and blurred genres acts to shut and block out the clamor of voices on the outside asking for their claims about empire and domination to be considered. The native point of view, despite the way it has often been portrayed, is not an ethnographic fact only, is not a hermeneutical construct primarily or even principally; it is, in large measure, a continuing protracted, and sustained adversarial resistance to the discipline and the praxis of anthropology (as representative of "outside" power) itself, anthropology not as textuality but as an often direct agent of political dominance. (pp. 219-220)

**Experimental Ethnography**

This notion of power, authority, and getting to the "truth" which is embedded in both traditional and interpretative ethnography has been critiqued by experimental/impressionist/postmodern ethnographers (e.g. Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Marcus, 1986). Experimental ethnographers have articulated the necessity for reconceptualizing the ethnographic process from being simply one of representing the natives' point of view by participating in and observing their rituals, customs, and habits to one of mitigating the natives' point of view with one's own point of view to create a cultural inscription based on the intersubjectivity of knowledge (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). No longer does time in the field or rigorous scientific training give one the right to claim

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that he/she has captured the total essence of what it means to be a Javanese or a Balinese or a Southern adolescent female. Additionally, some experimentalists (e.g. Clifford, 1986) have argued that ethnographers must problematize the ethical and moral issues inherent in the ethnographic process of imposing one’s self on another for the sake of gathering data and publishing books (Clifford, 1986).

**Feminist Ethnography**

Similar to my search for finding a place in theory (discussed in the next chapter), I have also struggled with articulating from what anthropological perspective I speak. The role of the researcher espoused by both traditional and interpretative ethnographers as being a detached outsider – the scientifically trained person from "the university" – is not a comfortable role for me. Yet, experimental ethnography which claims as central aims the creation of texts based on the intersubjectivity of knowledge seems equally troublesome since this research will, after all, have my name on it and not those of my participants. Because of these concerns, I have looked to feminist ethnographers who share similar struggles in trying to negotiate a position as outsider-insider while acknowledging authorship, and even, occasionally, authority.
Visweswaran (1988) argues that experimental ethnographers have much to gain from feminist anthropologists' critique of ethnographic fieldwork. Certainly, on the surface, ethnographic research seems to be congruent with feminist goals since a primary aim of feminist research has been to establish collaborative and nonexploitative research relationships. Undeniably, feminism and the ethnographic method share many qualities. Both are grounded in the everyday experiences of human agents, and both seek to "give" voice to those often silenced. Additionally, the ethnographic method calls for a reciprocal research relationship - one based on empathy, compassion, and connection (Munro, 1993; Stacey, 1988).

Yet, as feminist ethnographers (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Borland, 1991) have illuminated, the ethnographic method has the potential to be just as exploitative as positivistic research. Stacey (1988) cautions ethnographers about the dangers of masking exploitation under the guise of collaboration and equality: "Precisely because ethnographic research depends upon human relationship, engagement, and attachment, it places research subjects at grave risk of manipulation and betrayal by the ethnographer" (pp. 22-23). The ethnographic method thrives on getting our subjects to talk - to tell their stories of pain and loss; to reveal their deep-dark secrets, to relate the often hidden tragedies of their lives. And though we
may listen attentively and display sincere compassion and empathy, ultimately their story becomes the "data" for our research - "the grist for the ethnographic mill" (Stacey, 1988, p. 23). Additionally, we run the risk of exploiting our informants by using their words to substantiate our own preexisting claims or theories (Anderson & Jack, 1991; Borland, 1991; Christman, 1988). Furthermore, even when we try to establish reciprocal relationships in the field, in the end, the written document reflects the authorship of ethnographer and serves to promote the best interests of the ethnographer while the ethnographic subject remains in the field (Mascia-Lees, Sharp, Cohen, 1989; Patai, 1991; Stacey, 1988).

Tales of the Field

Having situated myself as a feminist researcher well versed in the concerns surrounding the current crisis of representation (as discussed above), I began my ethnographic fieldwork in August, 1993 with the intention of conducting collaborative and non-exploitative research. The following are two stories about my research journey. In the first story, I relate in a traditional, "objective" manner the specifics of my research (i.e. how data was collected, how data was analyzed, how data was interpreted, how data was written up). I know this story must be told, for it proves that I am capable of conducting worthy and well-grounded academic research. However, after writing
this part of the chapter initially, I realized that it was too clean; it lacked both the pain and the passion that was, in fact, such a vital part of my involvement with my participants. Thus, I have included a second story, not to dismiss the first, but to add that part that made my research both excruciatingly painful and exceedingly joyful.

**Story One: Conducting Ethnographic Fieldwork**

**Data Collection**

**Choosing the Research Site and the Participants.** To answer what I considered to be a fundamental question raised by this study (i.e. How does the school challenge or reinforce traditional understandings of femininity and adolescence?), I began in July, 1993 looking for a school that would be agreeable to my request for freedom to "roam" around as I pleased. I approached the assistant principal (who was a friend of a friend) at Foster Middle School with a four page summary of my research proposal. He was agreeable to my requests and recommended that I begin by observing Mrs. Hill’s (a White, 50 year old veteran social studies teacher) classes. He also made two requests of me: (1) to delay my first observation until the second week of school ("It’s a zoo around here the first week") and (2) to refrain from observing Mrs. Conner’s (an eighth grade English teacher) classes as she did not welcome "intruders" into her class. I, of course, complied with both requests.
I began observing two of Mrs. Hill's eighth grade history classes with the intention of choosing approximately ten of the girls in these classes to participate in my study. After observing their classes for five weeks, I asked nine girls (five White and four Black) to participate. These nine girls were chosen for a variety of reasons: three were specifically chosen because they seemed to challenge what I considered to be normative feminine behavior; three were chosen because they seemed to embrace traditional understandings of "good girl/good student." One was chosen because I, for some reason, immediately bonded with her; two other were chosen because they showed interest in my study and asked if they could participate. Since a major focus of the study was on the dynamics of race in the construction of a gendered identity, I specifically asked both Black and White girls to participate.

Gathering the "Data." Two formal interviews and several informal interviews (during class, at lunch, during recess, on the phone) were conducted with each of the nine participants during the first three months of the study. These first interviews were open-ended, using descriptive or "grand tour" questions (Spradley, 1975). I asked the girls broad questions such as "tell me about your life" which allowed me to learn how these students created meanings about their own lives. Although all of the girls...
were included in group interviews and group projects, after these initial interviews, I continued to focus on only four of the girls: Trisha (White female), India, (Black female), Kerry (Black female), and Sharon (White, female). I decided to focus on these four girls because they were considered "at-risk" students for several reasons; they were not excelling academically, their home life was considered deficient for various reasons, and they often exhibited inappropriate school behavior. Thus, I wanted to examine the relationship between gender, class and school dysfunctionality.

After selecting the four girls to be the focus for my dissertation, I began shadowing each of the girls once a week for two months. Shadowing, according to Stevenson (1992), is a systematic way of observing and recording the daily school life of an individual in which an anecdotal account of the student's behavior and responses to events and activities during his/her school day is kept. During the shadowings, I followed each girl for at least three or four consecutive hours a day to her classes, to lunch, to recess, to the bathroom, and to assemblies. This allowed me not only to view how these girls interacted in different contexts with different adults and peers but also to gain a better understanding of the school culture. During this time, I also conducted another formal interview with each of the four girls.
During these two months, I also conducted one formal interview with the assistant principal for the purpose of gathering information about the students and teachers, the philosophy of the school, strengths and weaknesses of the school, the curriculum, discipline policies, and other pertinent information about the school. During this time, I also informally interviewed approximately six eighth grade teachers, usually after shadowing the girls in their classrooms. These discussions generally concerned the teachers' impressions and comments about the four participants although we also talked about other issues, such as teaching strategies, school rules, and "the problem with kids today." Additionally, I conducted two group interviews - one to clarify my own understandings of girls' fighting (discussed in detail in Chapter 7) and one to engage the girls in an art project in which they visually represented the ideal woman (discussed in Chapter 5). These interviews offered me an opportunity to begin asking semi-structured questions that helped expand on issues, themes, questions, and concerns that had emerged from my analysis of the data thus far.

During my classroom observations and shadowings, I kept detailed field notes, paying special attention to the four student participants. Some of the questions that guided my observations were: (1) How do these students use their bodies in class? (2) Do the female and male
students adopt traditional gender roles in the classroom? (3) How does the teacher reinforce or challenge these traditional roles? (4) What adolescent behaviors are accepted in the classroom? (5) How does the teacher interact with each of these students? (6) Do these students voluntarily participate in class discussions? (7) Do they express their opinions about race, gender, class, and ethnicity in class discussions?

During the time that I was shadowing the girls, I also informally interviewed their peers (usually at recess) and the guidance counselor as well as the administrative clerk and the secretary. I also informally interviewed several parents (not the parents of the girls). Because I often arrived at the school earlier than my scheduled interview or observation or the regular school schedule had been changed for some reason (e.g. activity period), I spent considerable amounts of time sitting and talking in the office with other visitors (usually parents) while waiting for my scheduled appointment. These discussions took a variety of routes: often we talked about their own children (most of whom were discipline problems at the school); sometimes we talked about their impressions of the school; sometimes I asked them specific questions, such as "What is the school's policy toward fighting?" or "What influence does the Family Prayer Center (a large, fundamentalist
church nearby which participates nationwide in protests against abortions) have on the school?"

During the last two months of the study, I conducted two structured interviews with each of the four participants with very specific questions for the purpose of clarifying and following-up (Spradley, 1979). I also conducted one interview in late April to discuss with each of the girls their experiences in participating in this research process.

Additionally, data was also collected for the study from other sources: cumulative folders of the participants, school documents (e.g. curriculum guides and students handbooks), teacher handouts and worksheets, bulletin boards and posters displayed in the halls and classrooms, copies of school and classroom rules and consequences, announcement memos, personal writing of the students, posters created by the students, a questionnaire completed by all of the students in the first two classes I observed (Appendix A), an informal questionnaire completed by the participants (Appendix B), and a questionnaire completed by the assistant principal giving demographic information about the school (Appendix C).

Data Analysis

Interviews. All interviews were recorded with the permission of the informants and transcription was done promptly. Formal analysis began almost immediately as I
looked for themes which emerged from the texts. I used a coding system to differentiate between these emergent themes. I also made note of contradictions, conflicts, ambiguities and repeated phrases and words in these interviews. The process of coding with the very first transcription provided me ample time to follow up with questions, ask for clarifications, and elicit further responses on pertinent themes.

Field Observations. After each observation, I transcribed my field notes (condensed notes) into an expanded account. The purpose of this expanded account was to transcribe the on-the-spot account into a detailed written text (Spradley, 1980). Similar to the analysis of the interviews, I began very soon with the process of interpreting my field notes, again looking for themes, questions, concerns, and differences which emerged from the data.

Field Journal. In addition to both observing and interviewing, I also kept a weekly fieldwork journal which was my personal account of the questions, fears, anxieties, concerns, joys, mistakes, and problems that arose during my fieldwork.

"Writing Up the Data"

Inevitably, ethnographers must wrestle with the issue of "writing up" their research. Ethnography by its very definition (ethno meaning people and graphy meaning writing, recording, or representing in a specified way)
requires one to create a written text in some way. Thus, the question in ethnography is not will we write, record, or represent a culture of a people, but how and for whom will we write (Rabinow, 1986; Richardson, 1990). Traditionally, the ethnographic text was an extension of what was done in the field derived objectively from detailed field notes, transcriptions of interviews, maps of places, and so on. Indeed, the ethnographer has been traditionally absent from the ethnographic text other than in the introduction in which the researcher established his/her authority by relating the trials and tribulations of getting into the field; "I was there; thus, my account is true/real/factual".

However, many experimental ethnographers and feminist ethnographers have begun to look at alternative ways of writing which fuse the objective and subjective practices embedded in research (Marcus & Cushman, 1982; Clifford & Marcus, 1986). These ethnographers have openly acknowledged that we are always reflexively placed within our work, and we are always in relationships with who or what we study (Abu-Lughod, 1990). Viewed as such, "the point [of ethnography] is not to attempt to eliminate the effects of the researcher's own presence, a fruitless and theoretically unsound goal" (Briggs, 1986, p.100) but to find new ways of textual productions which allow for an ethnographer's voice to be heard amidst a polyphony of
other voices. In writing up my research, I have chosen to interweave my own story as a woman, as a teacher, as a rural Southerner with the stories of my participants.

**Story Two: Revisiting Ethnographic Fieldwork**

The second story that can be told about my past year as a researcher is one that is far less academic but much more representative of the real problems and promises of conducting "scholarly" research. During my fieldwork, I have struggled with concerns often omitted from ethnographic fieldwork handbooks (for example moral and ethical responsibilities). I questioned the difference between being a participant-observer and being a voyeuristic gazer. I struggled with the implications of using my participants' words as "data" for my research. I wondered why the best preparation for this kind of research was a lesson I had learned years ago from my grandmother - "to listen means to learn." I debated with myself the ethical and moral considerations of conducting research on vulnerable and impressionable teenagers.

What follows is my personal reflexive account of the difficulties I encountered while pursuing the academic work of "collecting data," especially in establishing a research persona and in trying to conduct collaborative research. **The Role of the Researcher**

*Researcher, Friend, Authority, or Expert?* Throughout this research, I have continuously grappled with my role as a
researcher in light of the fact my participants are children/teenagers. Should I be a researcher, friend, authority, or expert?

According to Fine and Sandstrom (1988), four basic research roles are available for adults conducting research with children: the supervisor role, the leader role, the observer role, the friend role. It is their recommendation that the friend role is the most appropriate role for conducting ethnographic research, for this role fosters trust and rapport without positioning the researcher as the authority or expert. However, I am uncomfortable with the role of friend for several reasons. First, the structure of our society which positions adolescents and adults as occupants of oppositional subcultures virtually erases any possibility of friendship based on similar interests, concerns, and needs. Secondly, in the structure of our society, adults are almost always positioned as the powerful and the teenager as the powerless; thus, it is virtually impossible to establish an equal power relationship as is required in friendships. Last, I worry that our claims to be "friends" with our participants may be yet another way of concealing the potentially exploitative nature of research, particularly research that involves adults studying children.

Unlike Fine and Sandstrom who emphasize a single role of friend for researchers, Barrie Thorne (1993) claims that
"within the ethnographer, many selves [are] at play" (p. 11). Often, by virtue of our size and appearance, the adult researcher is positioned as the "authority." However, as we separate ourselves from the adult world and strive to learn from children by entering that part of their world that is socially and culturally possible, we may see ourselves as children and our participants as friends of some sort. At times, this disjuncture between adult-self and child-self may cause the researcher anxiety as she is forced, according to Thorne, to confront "the vulnerable child within each adult" (p. 12).

Outsider or Insider? Similar to my concerns regarding my research role, I question also the traditional assumptions concerning the ethnographic stance of insider/outsider. Kincheloe and Pinar (1991) suggest that to make sense of the "truths in lies" and the "lies in truths" that become embedded in our sense of self, we, inevitably, must turn our place inside out. As a Southern woman trying to make sense of the experiences of my participants as well as my own experiences with race, gender, and class in the South and the cultural myths that have been situated as "truths," I often embrace the position of insider/outsider suggested by Trinh Minh-Ha (1991) who explains: "The moment an insider steps out from the inside, she is no longer a mere insider (and vice versa). She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside" (74).
At times during this research, I was an insider desperately trying to look out so that I could relate the implications of the truths and lies embedded in the girls’ stories to a larger cultural, social and political context. As I listened to the stories of Trisha and Kerry, the differences in age, class, and race (in Kerry’s case) were blurred, and I was once again a thirteen year old girl growing up in rural Louisiana trying to learn the truth about who I was, what was expected of me, and what/who I should become.

Trisha’s story of rodeoing and taking up a male discourse to succeed in that sport juxtaposed with her being chosen Miss Rodeo Queen intersected with my own adolescent story. I remember keenly the anxiety of trying to be both the aggressive, independent, assertive female competing against males for the top scholastic honors as well as the adoring and dutiful girlfriend/cheerleader and the feminine, beautiful Junior Miss. Like Trisha, I spent most of my adolescent years negotiating and re-negotiating a gendered identity that would allow me to be myself while staying within the confines of "normality."

And when I listen to Kerry’s conflicted stories about her mother being the "good woman," I resonate with both her resistance and her conformity to the lessons learned from watching her mother. When Kerry talks about her mother, often very painfully, I am reminded of my own mother with
her ladylike manners, her reluctance to deal with conflict, her always even tempered manner. I am also reminded of the mothers of my best friends – mothers who worked long hours only to come home and work longer hours; mothers who deferred to their husbands all matters of importance – mothers who looked old far beyond their age.

Yet, more often than not, as these girls tell their stories, I am an outsider, desperately trying to remember how to look in. How do I (or even should I) interpret the truths and lies of their own highly contextual lives?

As India talked very philosophically about death (after having had a gun put to her head the previous night) and Sharon and Trisha rationally explained the reasons why their biological mother (in Trisha’s case) and father (in Sharon’s case) abandoned them at birth, I am reminded once again of how feeble my attempts are at uncovering the stories of my participants. How can I presume to understand their lives? How do I tell their stories without resorting to romanticization or condescension?

Student or Teacher? My role as a researcher studying the lives of four girls has forced me to vacillate between being a student (a seemingly impossible task since I neither look nor act like a 13 year old girl) and an adult/teacher (an identity that is viewed with much suspicion by the participants in my study).
Like Fine and Glassner (1979) and Roman (1993), I knew that I had to establish rapport with these girls so that they would trust me enough to talk about issues that are typically not discussed openly between adults and adolescents (especially in a school setting). Although I did not view myself as "one of them," I did take measures early on to align myself with the girls rather than the adults in the school. I always dressed very casually (and much differently from the teachers), usually wearing blue jeans and tennis shoes or sandals. I ate at the student table in the cafeteria rather than the faculty table; often I used the girls' bathroom rather than the faculty bathroom; during classroom observations, I sat in the closest available desk to the participants (rather than in a chair situated apart from the class as is the custom for most observers). When shadowing the students (in the hall, in the cafeteria, in the classroom), I tried to avoid "adult" conversations with teachers and administrators.

However, as an adult both in appearance and behavior (thus different from my participants) who had clearly aligned herself with students rather than teachers, I walked a fine tightrope. Since my continued work in this school was predicated on the goodwill of the adults in the school (teachers, administrators), I had to gain their trust also. Thus, I sneakingly engaged in conversations with adults away from the gaze of the participants. (This

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was, of course, in opposition to my earlier commitment to collaborative research — discussed later in this section). I met behind closed doors with administrators and teachers; I talked to teachers during their planning periods; occasionally, I talked to the assistant principal and one of the teachers on the phone. In the office away from the participants, I engaged in conversations with the guidance counselor, the secretaries, and the principals.

This role of being "student" often worked at cross purposes with my being an adult. For example, one day during recess India and another student were on the verge of a physical fight, and I was the only adult around. Questions of my ethical responsibility as an adult researcher came to a forefront: Should I intervene and try to prevent the fight (after all someone could be physically harmed) or should I stay out of it (after all my recording of the fight would later become the thick description of my ethnography)? Fortunately for me, several other students intervened and the fight never actually occurred; however, the two girls were sent to the office and I spent the next three periods fearing that the principal would call me into his office and ask me for my record of the fight. (The students of course would view this as ratting on my friends.) Being an adult, I knew that I would be the authority and thus trusted to give the truthful account. In
the end, the principal did not ask me to relate the incidents surrounding the fight.

However on another occasion, I was asked by a teacher to betray the trust of my participants by relating my interpretation of incidents that occurred during her absence. Mrs. Hill, the teacher whose classes I initially observed to select the participants, asked me if the students were cheating on a test that was given by her substitute. There had indeed been blatant cheating by many of the students in the class; yet, I was torn as to how I should respond. I ended up replying, "Yes, there was some cheating." However, I did not tell her whom and to what extent. On another occasion, a substitute teacher asked me to verify to the teacher how rudely the class was acting towards her. I explained to her that I felt I would be betraying the trust of my participants if I complied with her request.

Despite my attempts to disassociate myself from teachers, when teachers spoke to me in the classroom, it was always as a teacher talking to another teacher. When students could not answer questions, some teachers would make comments to me such as "Did you ever have this trouble with your students?" or "This is truly pitiful, huh?" Once when a teacher was explaining plagiarism, a student asked, "How can a teacher tell if we copied something out of an encyclopedia?" The teacher then looked at me and said,
"Mrs. Adams, can’t you tell when a student is plagiarizing?" On other occasions, I was drawn into the private and exclusive world of the teacher simply by a "look" given to me by the teacher - that special teacher/adult look that says - "You know how it is" or "You know what I’m going through." During these times, I very much felt like I was betraying my participants.

However, there were times that I also felt very uncomfortable with my role as "student," especially when this role required me to be silent on issues and behaviors to which I objected. For example, I abhor the act of cheating on tests; however, when I saw students, especially my participants, cheating, I usually said nothing. On one occasion, I was walking down the hall with Kerry and her friends when they began to verbally abuse an obese Black girl (calling her "lard ass" and "fat auntie") who was walking very slowly in front of us. I was outraged by this cruelty demonstrated towards one of their peers. I was also quite upset with Kerry, for I had never seen her engage in this kind of behavior. However, in my attempts to gain Kerry’s complete trust, I said nothing; thus, it seemed that I was condoning their unkind actions.

Another problem that emerged as a result of my shifting roles as adult and student concerned the issue of confidentiality. Because I did somewhat become an insider in that the participants trusted me enough to divulge
information not given to other adults in the school, I was faced with the dilemma (that is still unresolved) of what to do with the information students had given me that needs to be known by adults in the school. For example, India, Sharon, and Kerry have all been victims of physical abuse (although they claim they are no longer being abused). Should I tell school authorities this? Kerry, who became pregnant in October, spent most of her time sleeping in class during the first trimester of her pregnancy. The teachers did not know of her pregnancy and wondered why Kerry was always tired in class. I did not reveal what I knew.

Other problems also emerged as a result of my attempts to balance the role between insider/outsider – friend/"big sister" (which is how most of the participants describe me). The participants have told me that they feel honored to be in a research study and both Sharon and India proudly boasted to a group of friends that they were special because they had a "shadow" (referring to me). However, their willingness to participate often created problems which I did not know how to handle. As the months progressed, Trisha became quite possessive of me and my time. She constantly asked me to follow her, and when I had not written enough about her, she would frequently get mad. Also, she would get upset if I would not sit by her in classes in which I was shadowing someone else. Whenever
I shadowed Sharon and Kerry, they would make comments such as "I have to be good today, so you’ll write something good about me." Indeed, their friends said that Kerry and Sharon acted "too nice" around me.

At times during the research, I have wanted to accentuate my role as an outsider – an informative and objective adult whose job is to listen attentively and give advice (both solicited and unsolicited). At other times, I have wanted to be a role model, not a researcher, and I must admit that I was quite honored (self-righteously so) when the guidance counselor told me one day that she had seen a marked improvement in the behavior of some of the participants since becoming a part of the study; she attributed this change to their seeing me as a positive role model. However, I usually tried to refrain from either being a role model or a counselor and tried to maintain the outsider/insider research stance.

However, my placing the role as researcher above counselor and role model presented me with ethical and moral concerns. For example, when Sharon told me she wanted to have another baby by age 14 and Trisha said she planned to quit school at age 16 to work at Hooters (a local restaurant which employs scantily dressed waitresses), I did not lecture them. I simply matter of factly asked them why. Throughout this research, I have wanted desperately to lecture them – to tell them the
statistics about unwed mothers, to explain the cyclical nature of physical abuse, to preach to them about the chances of ever getting ahead if you have a baby at age 14 – but, for the most part, I have refrained. I knew my lecturing would be perceived by them as adult nagging.

There were times that I could not refrain, for I viewed my silence as being morally reprehensible. When Kerry told me that she felt responsible for her father and mother’s marital problems, I talked to her at great length about adults being responsible for their own behavior and that children should not be blamed for poor decisions that adults make on their own. When India talked about violence in her neighborhood and her not being afraid to die, I did spend some time after that discussing with her why she felt that way and what steps she could take to ensure a safer and better future for herself.

Perhaps the biggest moral decision I had to face while conducting this research was when Kerry asked me what she should do about her pregnancy. She said she did not want the baby; however, she was afraid to get an abortion because she felt she "would go to hell" if she killed her baby. At that point, I turned the tape recorder off and spent the remainder of the hour talking about different options – keeping the baby, abortion, and adoption. However, as I reflect upon that conversation, I have very conflicted feelings as I realize that I talked to her not

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as a friend or "big sister" (had I been a friend, I would have personally advised her to get an abortion) but as an adult "objective" counselor. Being very attuned to the conservative nature of the school and surrounding community as well as the problematics of non-authorized adults talking to teenage girls about these kinds of issues, I chose to give Kerry a very factual summary of the advantages and disadvantages of each of the options. Our conversation, at least on my part, was devoid of emotion, and I ended with telling her, "Only you can decide what is best for you, and you will have to live with that decision."

Conducting Collaborative Research

Another piece of my story as a researcher involved my earliest intentions to conduct collaborative research with the girls. By now, I am well aware that true collaboration is problematic and, in reality, rarely achieved even by those who claim it as their guiding principle. During my fieldwork I, like Stacey (1988), Munro (1993), and Borland (1991), was forced to reconceptualize the meanings and implications of collaborative research as highlighted by the following accounts of my failed attempts at such "collaboration."

My earliest intentions were to share with my participants my fieldnotes as I wrote them, asking them for their input at the time of writing them. However, I soon
realized that if I shared my field notes with them, I would be unable to record much of what I saw and observed because these observations could be emotionally harmful (if read by the girls) to them. For example, I recorded informal conversations that I had with teachers and administrators; often these conversations were critical of the girls themselves. A physical education teacher told me sarcastically one day that I "had chosen some real winners to follow"; I recorded this and later Trisha grabbed my field notebook and read my comments. To resolve this problem somewhat, I soon learned to write in an illegible handwriting and to use shorthand and codes that only I could understand. However, this subterfuge was in conflict with my original attempts for collaborative research.

Similar to my hopes that we could somehow write the fieldnotes together, I also planned to involve them in the interpretive process. However, my intentions to have them read my emerging interpretations were met with resistance from the girls themselves; they claimed they already had "too much reading to do." When I then tried to share with them my interpretations orally, they acted very disinterested and usually would agree with anything I said.

As the year progressed and I grew increasingly anxious about dissertation deadlines, the non-collaborative nature of my research became more and more apparent. When I would interview and shadow them, I directed how long I would
spend doing this, what questions I would ask, and how much
time I would allot for each answer. However, this is not to
suggest that our interactions were completely directed by
me. When they did not feel like answering a question (for
whatever reason), they simply said, "I don't know" which
was usually my cue that this was not something they wanted
to discuss. Furthermore, the group interviews were much
more controlled by them as they often directed their
answers to one another rather than to me. In fact, when I
tried to interject a question or comment, I had to get
really loud to overpower their voices; often I was not
successful.

Besides their hesitancies and silences in answering my
questions, in other ways, Kerry, India, Trisha, and Sharon
very much determined the nature of my research as well as
my research methods. For example, my original intentions
were to journal with these four participants on a weekly
basis, and I did, in fact, buy Sharon a journal. However,
they resisted my attempts to engage them in writing,
claiming that they "already had enough writing to do with
school." They did share with me on occasions their
personal writing in the forms of letters from friends and
boyfriends, notes passed in class, and poems written by
them (some of these are included in Chapter 6); however,
they chose what to show me and what to keep private.
I also intended to interview their mothers but my intentions were thwarted by their objections and by the nature of the relationship that I had established with them. India and Sharon had serious problems with their mothers and both of them were victims of their mothers' abuse. Thus, they viewed my interviewing of their mothers as a potential act of betrayal; they were afraid I would "slip" and reveal to their mothers information that would get them in trouble. Trisha was hesitantly agreeable to my interviewing her grandmother; however, her grandmother did not want me to interview her. She said she did not have time to sit and talk to "that woman from LSU." Kerry, likewise, was agreeable to my interviewing her mother; however, Kerry did not think I should interview her at her house. She claimed she lived in a "bad" neighborhood where White people were not accepted and that her father was "prejudiced against White people." If this were truly collaborative research, I would respect the wishes of my participants; however, I realize that by not interviewing their mothers, I am missing a vital part of how they construct a gendered identity. At this point, I am still trying to work out a compromise with the participants on this matter.

After this research experience, I have come to the conclusion that truly collaborative and non-exploitative fieldwork is not possible. I am doing my best to minimize
the exploitation and to collaborate when I can. However, when it is all said and done, I will get a Ph.D. and a job out of this, what will these girls get? Will my presence in their lives for one short year actually be detrimental to them or will it be a positive effect? As far as collaboration goes, I have settled this in my mind somewhat by openly acknowledging the problematics that are associated with collaborative attempts and by putting myself squarely in the text to wrestle with these issues so the reader can share in my concerns and anxieties. I intend for my story to be one of the stories told.

As the end of this particular research story approaches, my greatest anxiety is about what will happen to these girls and what will happen to me when I leave. At the time of this writing, I have been unable to make the break from them as I continue to visit them almost weekly. I do not want to exalt my position of influence over them; however, I do think I am one of the few adults who really listens to them without hollering at them, judging them, or criticizing them. How will they feel when this year is over? How will I feel when this year is over? I realize that I continue to see them because I need a connection to students – that feeling that I am somehow making a difference in the lives of adolescents (a feeling I do not have sitting in classes at the university). What are the emotional costs of conducting this kind of research to both
the participants and the researcher? Sharon wanted to know if I would be here all year. I told her yes. Trisha wanted to know if she could still see me next year; I did not answer.

**Telling Someone Else’s Story**

In addition to my concern with establishing non-exploitative relationships with my adolescent participants, I have also struggled with the presumption that as a researcher I can tell someone else’s story. Like hooks (1989) and Minh-ha (1991), I am well aware of the power relationships embedded in research, even under the guise that we are "giving voice" to our participants by speaking for them. Inevitably, our participants become our "objects" of study, and, according to hooks (1989), "as objects, one’s reality is defined by others, one’s identity created by others, one’s history named only in ways that define one’s relation to those who are subjects" (p. 43).

Yet, I also realize that I cannot avoid either the responsibilities or the rewards of authorship. As Richardson (1990) asserts, we may give up our "authority over the people we study, but not the responsibility of authorship of our text" (p. 28). In writing the stories of my participants, I am claiming full authorship; yet, I also acknowledge that the text is a "partial truth – committed and incomplete" (Clifford, 1986, p. 7). It is my interpretations of my participants’ interpretations, my
story of their story, and not the final, unmitigated truth about anything.
CHAPTER THREE
FINDING A PLACE IN THEORY

As a female born and reared in the South, I struggle with my sense of self as well as my sense of place. Undeniably my roots are deeply sunk in Southern soil as my homeplace and the homeplace of my family for over 100 years has been a rural town in north Louisiana. My journey in trying to make meaning of my experiences as a Southern woman has been an arduous one, and my research stems from this on-going journey in trying to critique the "truths" of Southern femininity as taught to me. It is a journey that involves the difficult task of making the familiar strange. Susan Edgerton (1991) explains this process:

"Making the familiar strange" [means]
critically examining the cliches by which one has learned to live—cliches expressed not only through language but also via routines, habits, and modes of perception as well. What is their origin? What purposes have/do they serve(d)? What occurs when they are challenged? (p. 79)

To critique my own understandings of Southern womanhood, I am forced to cross established lines - to blur the distinctions between me and Other - insider and outsider. I must become both the object and subject of study. Thus, I must look with new lenses to my own story as well as the stories of my female participants - themselves Southern girls. For me, those new lenses have been feminist poststructuralism.

The purpose of this chapter is to contextualize my research and my interpretations by telling my own personal
story of finding a place in what seems, at times, to be a theoretical maze. In telling this story, I hope to blur the distinctions between theory and practice, researcher and teacher, academician and woman/mother/wife, thus reinforcing the notion that our public and private worlds inevitably become intertwined in our choosing a theoretical perspective (or perhaps more accurately, our theoretical perspective choosing us).

Cautionary Tales from a Feminist Perspective

I begin this section on "theory" on a cautionary note, for I am hesitant in labeling myself any term that suggests a fixed, unproblematic, and simple way of thinking about the world. To suggest that I embraced feminist and poststructuralist theory through some sort of rational, orderly sequence of events is a distortion of how I eventually merged with these theoretical perspectives. The reality is that my subjective experiences of having once been a Southern adolescent female as well as my experiences as a middle school teacher, mother, step-mother to an early adolescent and graduate student cannot be factored out of the way I think (or theorize) about adolescence and femininity. (Although at a recent job interview, I was told by a male associate professor that I needed to be "careful" to keep my experiences as a teacher and a mother separate from my theoretical perspective.)
Finding my place in theory has been an unsettling task - one that has forced me to reconceptualize not only what it means to be a rural Southern woman but what it means to be a teacher, researcher, scholar, and student. Valerie Walkerdine (1990) asserts that one’s sense of place is not fixed or stable, but struggled over and continuously changing. This notion of place as being fluid, ever changing, and negotiable is one that I embrace in my search for finding my place in theory. It allows me to situate myself within a critical feminist poststructuralist perspective while acknowledging that the meanings that both I and others give to these labels are not fixed, static, or monolithic constructions; my theoretical perspective will change as I do.

Critical Pedagogy

Having been reared in a rural Southern community in the heart of the Baptist Bible Belt, the preachy, dogmatic tone of most critical pedagogists’ writing was familiar and, thus, comfortable to me. As I read Peter McLaren’s *Life in Schools* (1989) in which he proclaims that the fundamental objective of critical pedagogy is "to empower the powerless and transform existing social inequalities and injustice" (p. 160), I could not help but shout a loud "Amen!". Anyone familiar with Southern Baptist tent revivals can easily recognize the parallels between the impassioned claims of "what Jesus can do for you if you
just let Him into your heart" and the equally passionate claims of what critical pedagogy can do for all the lost souls of education (i.e. powerless non-White students and economically disadvantaged students as well as powerless teachers).

My religious experiences were only partly responsible for my easy seduction into critical pedagogy and its rhetoric of "power to the powerless." As the granddaughter of a zealous Presbyterian environmentalist, social activist, and local missionary, the espoused goal of critical pedagogy for a more just and equitable society was also quite appealing. As a child growing up in a small community in North Louisiana, I was taught early that it was my Christian duty to "feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, and visit the sick" (Matthew 25: 35-36). Thus, I spent many hours picking up litter along the railroad tracks running through the center of town - sitting on front porches of dilapidated houses in the middle of "nowhere" teaching entire families to read - visiting elderly people who were too sick, or too tired, or just too old to get out - and playing with mentally retarded children at a special school in my hometown.

My desire to enter both the field of teaching and, later, the field of higher education was based, in part, on this missionary zeal that I had inherited from my grandmother. Thus, I have always been a strong believer in
the capacity of schools to help create a more just and egalitarian society. It is no wonder that it was Paulo Freire, himself a radical Christian and social activist, and his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1983) that first sparked my interest in critical pedagogy. I saw Freire as an anomaly in education, putting theory into practice (or perhaps practice into theory). He not only wrote about social justice and educational reform, but he actually fought for it! His work with illiterate adult Brazilian peasants resulted in his being jailed and eventually exiled. During his exile he worked for a short period of time in Switzerland for the World Council of Churches. As an English teacher, it was exhilarating and refreshing to study his beliefs about the relationship between illiteracy and oppressive social structures. Freire (1983) argued that the power of becoming literate lay not in the ability to simply decode words on a page but in the ability to transform one’s position in society: "To surmount the situation of oppression, men [sic] must critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible pursuit of a fuller humanity" (pp. 32-33).

My interest in Freire’s work led me to the work of Apple (1979), Giroux (1983; 1988), McLaren (1989), Anyon (1988), Carnoy and Levin (1985), and Bowles and Gintis (1976) (many of whom are self-proclaimed Marxists) who...
write about schooling and its place in a capitalist society. According to reproduction theory, a strand of critical pedagogy most notable in the work of Bowles and Gintis (1976) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), schools serve to produce a stratified work force which mirrors the hierarchial divisions of the society at large. Thus, a primary function of schooling is to transmit dominant culture and ideologies, thus reproducing the hegemonic structures of capitalism for the purpose of preserving unequal political, social, and economic power relations (Anyon, 1988; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). However, reproduction theory has been critiqued by other critical pedagogists (Apple, 1979; Giroux, 1983; Willis, 1977) for being overly deterministic and reductionist and for dismissing the notion of individuals as creators of their own world. These proponents of what is called "resistance theory" argue that students produce their own ideology (based on their own experiences and conceptions of reality) and, thus, resist or contest the dominant ideology put forth in school.

Despite the differences between the strands of critical pedagogy and their limitations (discussed later), critical pedagogists have been vocal in their critiques of the dominant discourse of education which perpetuates the myth that school is the great equalizer. This view of school is so ingrained in the ideology of teaching that it
remains largely unchallenged by most of the American public (including teachers and students themselves) as evident in the abundance of public service announcements claiming that knowledge, literacy, and hard work will supposedly fill the gap between the have’s and the have not’s. By asserting that schools are neutral places of equal opportunities, we can easily dismiss those individuals who fail to achieve the "American Dream" as being lazy, culturally, morally, ethically, or socially deficient, and/or undesirous of an education (Kutz & Roskelly, 1991; Rose, 1988).

Michelle Fine’s *Framing Dropouts* (1991), Mike Rose’s *Lives on the Boundaries* (1989), Jonathan Kozol’s *Savage Inequalities* (1991), Jeanne Oakes’s *Keeping Track* (1985) and John Ogbu’s *The Next Generation* (1974) have disrupted this discourse of education by revealing the "secrets" and "lies" embedded in the dominant ideology, practices, and structures of schooling. Children who are marginalized outside of school tend to be marginalized in school as they are "tracked" in classes which are unchallenging, unstimulating, and unfulfilling (Oakes, 1985; Rose, 1989). Poor children go to poor schools (Kozol, 1991). Whites not only have a higher achievement rate in school but they also get better jobs, better pay, and better benefits (Fine, 1991). Thus, if one is non-White or non-male, "acting white" and "impersonating males" are the best ways to achieve any degree of academic success – although this
impersonation may come at a cost of personal, cultural, and gender identity (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986; Fordham, 1993; Rodrigues, 1982).

Critical pedagogists' insistence upon making the political implications of schooling explicit—thus taking seriously issues of class, race, and gender (in that order)—seemed to validate my own experiences as a middle school teacher. As a teacher in the gifted program for several years, I was well aware of the inequalities inherent in our present structure of schooling. Early in my career as a "gifted" teacher, I voiced grave concerns about the lack of non-White students in our program. I was told that our program was open to all students, regardless of race, as long as they met the state criteria. When I questioned why in a newspaper article featuring gifted preschoolers at a local elementary school there were no Black students pictured, I was told that none had qualified for gifted services and, furthermore, I was making a "big stink about nothing." I soon learned to keep my mouth shut!

Michelle Fine (1991; 1987) has written extensively about how the silencing of such discussions about race, class, and gender inequalities in schooling serve to keep present institutional structures fixed and the status quo intact. Fine (1991) asserts:

In the 1990's, the voices of some are silenced while others are nurtured throughout their years of schooling. The silenced voices are disproportionately those who speak neither
Indeed, a primary goal of critical pedagogy is to make known the secrets and to talk openly about the impact of race, class, and to a lesser degree gender on how students experience schooling and with what degree of success. By making explicit the "isms" embedded in the institution of schooling, critical pedagogists have proposed a view of schooling that is emancipatory – that is, its goal is to engage in the struggle to both name and transform the powers which keep one marginalized (Fine, 1987; Giroux, 1988; Lather, 1986).

However, most studies of reproduction and resistance in schooling tend to place class (and recently race) rather than gender as the primary determinants of discrimination in schools. Most notable among these are Willis's (1977) Learning to Labour, Everhart's (1984) Reading, Writing, and Resistance and Fine's (1991) Framing Dropouts. Certainly, Fine, Willis, and Everhart's studies are poignant in their portrayal of the inequities of schooling and the ways students attempt to resist the school's reproduction of dominant ideology. However, as illuminated in their studies, the students' resistance to dominant school culture inevitably contributes to their own oppression and operates to keep the British lads, the junior high boys, and the dropouts socially and economically marginalized.
Underlying these critical ethnographies seems to be a "romanticization" of student resistance that is problematic in that such pessimistic portrayals of schooling and "romanticized" pictures of the "underdog working class" student seems to deflect responsibility for actively working for social change. Indeed critical pedagogists have been sorely critiqued, especially by feminist theorists, for their failure to offer concrete strategies for effecting change for a more just society (Gore, 1993).

In addition to critical pedagogy being overly pessimistic and being more concerned with the abstract than the actual lived experiences of those they seek to empower, critical pedagogy has been critiqued by feminist researchers (Ellsworth, 1989; Gore, 1993) for several other reasons. Critical pedagogy literature maintains that teachers must bring the experiences of students into the classrooms - that teachers must validate the language and culture of their students in the classroom - that teachers must bring to the forefront issues of oppression - that teachers must encourage social consciousness in their students - in short, the burden for creating a more just and egalitarian society seems to be on the shoulders of teachers with little attention given to students as participants in their own emancipation. Ironically, as Gore (1993) argues critical pedagogists' employment of unusually abstract, jargonized academic writing (e.g.
Giroux's naming of teachers as "transformative intellectuals") serves to potentially alienate the very persons they supposedly seek to empower.

Furthermore, the notions of empowerment embedded in critical pedagogy implies not only that someone needs to be empowered but that someone else has the power to empower. McRobbie (1982) questions this patronizing position of critical pedagogy by asking "How can we assume that they [the supposedly disempowered] need anything done for them in the first place? Or conversely, that we have anything real to offer them?" (p. 52). Under the guise of "empowerment", Ellsworth (1989) argues that critical pedagogy can itself be a vehicle for the perpetuation of racism, classism, and sexism through the maintenance of unequal power relations.

Since most critical studies of adolescence place an over-emphasis on the male experience and position gender as secondary to issues of class and race, I have turned to feminist theory as a way to centralize the experiences of females and to acknowledge the many ways female adolescents make sense of their experiences both within and outside of school.

Feminist Theory and Southern Womanhood

Contrary to my easy embracing of critical pedagogy, I have come to feminist theory kicking, clawing and resisting all the way. The same experiences of being a Southern
rural upper middle class woman which impacted my easy seduction by critical pedagogy presented a potential impasse for my engagement with feminist theory. Entrenched in the values and beliefs of a patriarchal Southern community in which Jane Fonda was the only feminist I ever heard about (and she was a Communist feminist!), labeling myself a feminist is, in fact, an act of resistance and courage.

It was not until my first semester as a doctoral student that I took my first feminist theory class; in fact, as an undergraduate student and as a graduate student working on a Masters, I intentionally shied away from any class having "woman", "gender" or "feminist" in its title. I saw little need to centralize issues of gender, especially since the little contact I had had with feminists (e.g. Gloria Steinem, NOW organization, and a group of women lawyers for whom I worked one summer) seemed very alien to my experiences as a young Southern woman. The liberal feminism of the 1970's and early 80's which implicitly asserted that women had to act like men to succeed in a career (i.e. be aggressive, competitive, authoritative, powerful and wear a "power suit" while keeping your career first and family second) was not appealing to me, and, in fact, was instrumental in my decision to abandon my plans to become a lawyer. However, the cultural feminism of Daly (1978) and Rich (1979) with
its celebration of the essential woman who draws her beauty and power from the body and its ability to bring forth life was equally alien to my understandings of self. Although I certainly value the qualities traditionally associated with women (e.g. nurturance, compassion, gentleness, peacefulness), I did not view them as being superior to the traditionally viewed male qualities of rationality, independence, competition, and aggressiveness, for these were the traits most often ascribed to me (I still have vivid recollections of my fourth grade boyfriend telling me he was breaking up with me because I was too bossy). Not only did I question why these characteristics were seen as "male" traits (the women with whom I was associated growing up were, in fact, aggressive, rational, and independent) but I also prided myself on being both independent and dependent, submissive and aggressive, passive and active.

As I began to read the works of feminists in education (e.g. Martin, 1985; Grumet, 1989; Pagano, 1990) who specifically addressed ways of reconceptualizing the curriculum so that women's experiences were validated, I became more and more attracted to feminist writing and because of the respect and admiration I had for several women college professors who proudly named themselves feminists, I desperately wanted to be a feminist. The problem lay in my uncertainty of just what a feminist was. Bartky (1990) poses what seems to be a simple question "Why
aren’t all women feminists?” The problem with such a question is that it assumes that there is one essential understanding of womanhood, one essential understanding of feminism and that all women who speak from a feminist perspective do so for the same reason. This view of feminist theory was oppressive and alienating to me as revealed in my April 6th, 1992 journal entry:

The concerns of black women or rural Southern women are quite different from the concerns of the liberal, northeastern (northwestern) upper-middle class woman. Quite frankly, I resent their presumptuous attitude that they speak for all of us.

Paradoxically, the nice, neat categories of liberal, radical, and socialist feminists were equally problematic to me. In response to Weedon’s (1987) Feminist Practice and Poststructural Theory in which she explains these labels (liberal, radical and socialist), I wrote in my journal: “I’m struggling to identify if I am a feminist and if so, what kind am I. I hate feeling that I must identity with one group – it is very oppressive to me.”

Barbara Christian (1988), an African-American literary critic, speaks eloquently about her discomfort with the exclusiveness of mainstream feminism:

So often I have read books on feminist literary theory that restrict the definition of what feminist means and overgeneralize about so much of the world that most women as well as men are excluded. And seldom do feminist theorists take into account the complexity of life – that women are of many races and ethnic backgrounds with different histories and cultures and that as
a rule women belong to different classes that
have different concerns. (p. 75)

In fact, it has been through my readings of non-White
feminist authors, researchers, and theorists that my own
understandings of the contradictory and tense ways we not
only construct our gendered selves but also how we name our
oppression have been validated. Writers such as Christian
(1975), Mukherjee (1989) and Shange (1982) have been
instrumental in disrupting this notion of a unitary
feminist theory.

bell hooks's *Yearnings* (1990) and *Talking Back* (1989)
have been especially influential in my own metamorphosis
into a "feminist". My tribute to hooks as the person who
"sold" me on feminist theory is somewhat ironic. My
initial response to hooks and her book *Yearnings* was of
misunderstanding and dislike. In my journal I wrote:

> To be completely honest, it has been very
difficult for me to make connections with bell
hooks. Though I can empathize with her sense of
powerlessness in being a black woman in a "white
capitalistic world," I do not share her dislike
of white males (viewed by hooks as one group, all
being white supremists), white females (viewed by
hooks as having nothing in common with black
females even in their mutual struggle for
equality), and even black males (seen by hooks as
being "too cool" - *Yearnings*, p. 180). I find her
message to be one of hopelessness. (February 2,
1992)

Indeed, hooks has been emphatic in her claims that White
women have no understanding of Black women's experiences
and, thus, should be cautious in their claims to any kind of unified sisterhood.

Although hooks and I had a shaky beginning (and she may be suspect of my motives for claiming her as a "mentor"), she has been and continues to be a guiding influence in my own search to retain my identity as a Southern rural White woman and a feminist academic scholar. I resonate with hooks’s strong desire to meld the public and private selves — to mesh her understandings of herself as a college professor and as a Black woman. Her style of writing, her choice of words, her juxtaposition of Black dialect and (abstract) academic jargon continues to remind me of the multiple, competing, and often contradictory ways of experiencing life and constructing a self.

Thus, today — two years after taking that first feminist theory class, I can at last say that I am a feminist which means according to Alcoff (1986) "when women become feminists the crucial thing that has occurred is not that they have learned any new facts about the world but that they have come to view those facts from a different position, from their own positions as subject" (p. 324). This notion of woman as subject (rather than object) is crucial to analyzing the ways female adolescents make sense of their "femininity" and their female adolescence.
As a woman who has struggled with feminist theory, I remain cautious about any totalizing claims about femininity or adolescence. Elizabeth Spellman’s (1988) cautionary note in *Inessential Women* serves to remind me of the problems in presenting any kind of essentialist view of womanhood: "Herein lies a cautionary tale for feminists who insist that underneath or beyond the differences among women there must be some shared identity - as if commonality were a metaphysical given" (p. 13).

Like Gilligan (1982), Brown and Gilligan (1992), and Apter (1990), a central aim of my research is to centralize the experiences of female adolescents; however, their work as well as that of other feminists (e.g. Chodorow, 1974) is limited in that it seems to present an essentialist (i.e. there are essential, innate, natural qualities that determine femaleness, such as caring and nurturing) view of womanhood. By attempting to present a fixed "truth" about what it means to be a women, a "master narrative" (albeit a female master narrative) is still maintained. Furthermore, their emphasis on White, middle and upper class female experiences coupled with their presentation of a unitary, monolithic understanding of "womanhood" fails to account for the many and diverse ways women are oppressed in our society as a result of not only their gender but also their
race, class, ethnicity, religious affiliation, and sexual orientation.

Because of many mainstream feminists' failure to seriously address the points of diversity among women, thereby creating a single understanding of what it means to be a woman, I have ultimately embraced a feminist poststructuralist perspective for my research on adolescent females.

At the heart of feminist poststructuralism is the acknowledgement of the multiple, contradictory, and partial ways we understand our lives as women—how we view oppression—and how we elect to counter oppression (Alcoff, 1986; Flax, 1986; Hawkesworth, 1986; Gore, 1993; Weedon, 1987). This feminist poststructuralist's notion of positionality is defined by Alcoff (1986) as follows:

The concept of positionality includes two points: first...that the concept of woman is a relational term identifiable only within a (constantly moving) context; but, second, that the position that women find themselves in can be actively utilized (rather than transcended) as a location for the construction of meaning, a place from where meaning is constructed, rather than simply the place where a meaning can be discovered (the meaning of femaleness). (p. 324)

Central to a feminist poststructuralist analysis of gender and adolescence is an understanding of gender as non-unitary and a reconceptualization of traditional notions of power, knowledge, and subjectivity. According to feminist poststructuralists (Alcoff, 1986; Hawkesworth, 1986), all knowledge is historical and contextual and
connected to issues of power since knowledge has always been used both to communicate and to control. Furthermore, women should be creators of their own knowledge based on their experiences. Consequently, feminist poststructuralists reject the claim that women by virtue of their sex experience the same oppression. Rather, women's various and diverse struggles to counter oppression and to demonstrate political action must be grounded in their raced, classed, and gendered positions.

Feminist poststructuralists in education such as Michelle Fine and Pat McPherson (1992), Valerie Walkerdine (1990), Nancy Lesko (1988), and Signithia Fordham (1993) have begun exploring how adolescent girls negotiate a sense of identity that is partial, changing, and impacted by one's positionality.

In Walkerdine’s (1990) analysis of how girls respond to the traditional understandings of femininity that are reproduced in comic books, she illuminates the ways in which girls are active agents in their own construction of a feminine identity. Current approaches to dealing with such blatant sexism have been to simply replace images of the stereotypical woman with non-stereotypical images. This rational approach assumes that girls are passive learners who unproblematically adopt any version of femininity presented to them. In reality, early adolescent females do not willingly, passively, and unproblematically
accept traditional roles of gender; rather, according to Walkerdine (1990) "their adoption of femininity is at best shaky and partial; the results of a struggle in which heterosexuality is achieved as a solution to a set of conflicts and contradictions in familial and other social relations" (p. 88).

Similar to Walkerdine, Michelle Fine and Pat MacPherson (1992) position femininity and adolescence as highly contested and struggled over social constructs. In exploring the different ways two Black females, one White female, and one Korean female interpret their own experiences of being adolescent and of being a female, the authors illuminate the intersections of race and class in how womanhood is constructed. For the Korean female and the White female (both from upper middle-class backgrounds), their construction of womanhood was formed in opposition to and, thus, in competition with White males, whom they saw as holding preeminent positions of power, prestige, and privilege in our society. However, for the Black females (both from impoverished backgrounds), womanhood was constructed in connection with men and with their community. They viewed any attempts at female domination as "castration" of the Black males who are already under attack by the rest of society. Whereas the Black females viewed maturity or "becoming a woman" as an increased participation in the community (especially with other Black
women), the White female and Korean female viewed maturity as a breaking away from family and friends to achieve an identity of one’s own. The Black females spoke of close, loving, communicative relationships with their mothers while the other two females spoke of alienation from their mothers and their inability to meet the expectations of their mothers.

Not only do Fine and MacPherson critique the essentialist view of femaleness, they also critique current feminist theory which seeks to project adult feminists’ notions of power, domination, and oppression upon female adolescents who construct their world quite differently. According to the authors, feminist researchers need to rethink their "fantasies of feminism for female adolescents" (p. 175). The tales these girls told of adolescence and femininity spoke of a rejection of traditional female roles (which adult feminists would applaud) but they also "hunger for a strong version of individualistic, 'gender-free' adolescence" (which many adult feminists would critique) (p. 175). Additionally, their studies of adolescent females have disrupted the dominant discourse of female adolescence that privileges the concerns and needs of White females (e.g. eating disorders and the increase of cosmetic surgery in the female adolescent population, two popular research topics
which are predominantly concerns of White, middle class and upper class females).

Likewise, Signithia Fordham (1993) claims that gender construction is neither universal nor unitary; she further reveals the inadequacies of normalized definitions of femininity (which assert White femaleness as the standard) in interpreting Black females’ academic success and non-success. According to Fordham, Black females do not unproblematically absorb definitions of femininity that are presented to them by the school — rather negotiation, struggle, compromise, and resistance play key roles in their construction of a female self. (Fordham’s study is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5)

Nancy Lesko’s (1988) study Symbolizing Society explores those relations between schooling, society, individuality, and the construction of identity. She focuses on an all-girls Catholic high school and how it constructs an identity based on the conflict between caring and contest, the two predominant themes that emerge in the symbolic functioning of the school. By deconstructing the rituals, customs, and traditions of St. Anne, she explores how the school shapes students construction of self by mediating the conflicting and contradictory principles of care and contest (i.e. the school purports to be a caring environment intent on all succeeding; however, competition and individuality are deeply embedded in the school
structure). By focusing on three groups of - the rich and popular, the burn-outs, and the mellows, she illuminates the very different ways adolescents resist, reproduce, and mediate the contradictory expectations that are presented to them in school. For example, the rich and popular girls emphasize individuality, autonomy, and competition (all part of the contest code of St. Anne’s) whereas the burn-outs view themselves in relation to others (thus embracing the caring code of St. Anne’s).

The research that follows is an extension of an already begun conversation among feminist poststructuralists about the construction of identity and the politics of difference. However, my focus on both Black and White adolescent females as well as my attention to the importance of place and history in the construction of identity differentiates my work from other feminist researchers. In the next chapter, I focus specifically on the historical significance of the creation of various discourses of adolescence and gender identity. By exploring these discourses of adolescence and femininity through a feminist poststructuralist perspective, I intend to highlight the multiple and moving ways that adolescence and femininity can be constructed.
In most psychological, historical and sociological accounts of adolescence, the stories of adolescent females like Kerry, Sharon, India, and Trisha have not occupied a preeminent place in the telling of adolescence. In fact, in the introduction of his book *Coming of Age*, John Springhall (1986) asserts that a possible critique of his historical account of adolescents in England is in his "referring to the ‘adolescent’ purely as a male phenomenon" (p. 10). This tendency in both psychology and history to posit the male adolescent experience as the adolescent experience is problematic to those of us who do not want to read the tales of adolescent females against a master narrative that has established the male experience as the standard or norm.

Although the story told below, which draws from the work of notable historians of adolescence, is an important one in our understanding of adolescence as a social, historical and political construct, it largely omits the experiences of girls and thus, it represents but one story that could be told about adolescence. However, by examining this story — one reflective of the dominant discourse of adolescence as portrayed in history — we can then critique it for its omissions, thereby providing space for other tellings of the adolescent story.
Tale One: Adolescence as a Masculine Story

With the notable exception of a few historical accounts (e.g. Alexander, 1992; Brown, 1992; Dyhouse, 1981; Ruiz, 1992) most of the seminal historical studies of adolescence have focused specifically on the experiences of male adolescents. Most notable of these accounts are Gillis’s *Youth and History* (1981), Kett’s *Rites of Passage* (1977), Springhall’s *Coming of Age* (1986), and Musgrove’s *Youth and the Social Order* (1964). Although these historians pay little attention to issues of gender, the impact of class on the creation and institutionalization of adolescence is a major focus of their accounts.

Although today we view adolescence as a culturally universal "fact" of human development, according to Gillis (1981) and Kett's (1977) an historical perspective of adolescence reveals that, in fact, adolescence initially began as a middle class phenomenon. Family demographics were such that, by the mid-1800's, the middle class begin experiencing a drop in child mortality rates. Since children were no longer considered an economic asset, many middle class families began to limit family size to two children. Because there were fewer children and these children were living for longer periods of time, parental attitudes began to change, and a new kind of parental care and concern for older children emerged. Since children in middle class homes no longer served an economic function
within the family, their familial responsibility was to attend school, for schooling promised a way for middle class children to ascend financially and socially. For the middle class, adolescence was "invented" to justify this prolonged period of dependence both on parents and teachers.

However, it was G. Stanley Hall (1904) who is attributed with the taking of this middle class notion of adolescence and extending it to all classes by positing a theory of adolescence that was culturally universal and, thus, an inescapable stage of human development - a stage of life that was unavoidably a time of "storm and stress" (p. xiii). In short, Hall presented a theory of adolescence which sought to represent a normative reality explained by biology and psychology. However, according to Gillis (1981), the "reality" this new discourse of adolescence sought to present was the creation of middle class thought:

> What were historically-evolved social norms of a particular class became enshrined in medical and psychological literature as the "natural" attributes of adolescence. The transmutation, through institutional imperatives, of social values into natural laws suited the new materialist outlook of the middle class. (p. 114)

**Schooling and Adolescents**

Although Hall is credited with the institutionalization of adolescence (Ketts, 1977; Springhall, 1986), several changes in the political,
social, and educational fabric of the United States at the turn of the century contributed to both the acceptance of and resistance to Hall’s theory of adolescence. By the end of the nineteenth century, economic conditions were such that "boy labor" began to be seen as a threat to the employment of adults. Furthermore, automation and technology had advanced such that gainful employment for unskilled adolescents was hard to find (Troen, 1976). Additionally, there were thousands of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe who needed to be enculturated into the "American way of life." Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century, American society was faced with an unprecedented social problem: What was to be done with the thousands of unemployed and immigrant teen-agers? Not surprisingly, it was the schools that were given the responsibility of dealing with the large number of untrained, unemployed, unschooled, and "un-American" adolescents who were now a liability to society (Gillis, 1981; Ketts, 1977; Troen, 1976).

Stemming from this need to educate a large number of previously unschooled adolescents was a philosophy of education that situated schools as a distinct and separate entity from both family and from society at large. Ironically schools began to operate under the assumption that they could prepare students for life while removing them from life (Musgrove, 1964). Schools emerged as forms
of social control under the guise of "protecting" youth; however, according to Musgrove (1969), by protecting adolescents, an inferior status was bestowed upon them and their continued subordination reveals much about domination, oppression and the sustenance of unequal power relations in our society at large:

Adolescence has been a "protectorate" administered by adults for the past two centuries. Our contemporary conflict has the character of a colonial revolt. The subordination of the adolescent -- like the subordination of the African--was first justified by the claim to protect him. His subordinate status was a "protected status"--honourable and generally accepted when protection was apparently needed. Adolescence was justified by society's corruption. (p. 43)

In fact, what emerged in schools as the result of educational reforms and the institutionalization of adolescence at the turn of the century was a deemphasis on precocity. Whereas precocity and independence were prized attributes in youth who worked on the farm, in the factory, and in apprenticeship positions, by the mid-nineteenth century, precocity was viewed as a detriment to the normal development of a child. By associating precocity and independence with abnormal adolescent behavior, working class adolescents and immigrants were easily cast as deviants. Since normative adolescence was associated with conformity, self-denial, and dependence -- values reflective of the White middle class culture of the time, deviation from this norm was viewed as evidence of inferiority. Thus,
working class youth who were independent and precocious were viewed as inherently inferior and in need of reform (Gillis, 1981).

Consequently, working class adolescents and their families did not readily embrace this new mission of schooling - to protect adolescents from the realities of the adult world (Gillis, 1981; Hudson, 1984; Springhall, 1986). Many working class parents strongly resisted the school’s imposition into their lives, viewing this forced removal of teens from the labor market through coercive legislation (e.g. child labor laws and compulsory education laws) as severely threatening their economic livelihood. Many working class families simply did not exhibit the belief that education was a way up and out for their children as did middle class families and even upper working class families who by the twentieth century greatly emulated the ways of the middle class. The reality for much of this nation’s population was that adolescents had to work. For example, in New York in the 1930’s, 31 percent of the population still lived below the poverty level (Gillis, 1981); and as late as 1948 the decision to pursue schooling or to pursue work was clearly divided along class lines (Hollingshead, 1949). Children of the poor had to work in order for their family to survive.

Additionally, coercive legislation which severely restricted where adolescents could work, how much they
could be paid, and at what age they could work was viewed by the adolescents themselves as a curtailment of their much needed independence. Legislation was created to increase the state’s control over these precocious, independent youth—now termed delinquent youth. Understandably, such attempts at control were met with resistance and inevitably conflict arose between working class youth and authorities. Undeniably, from its very inception in the 1800’s, the dominant discourse of adolescence that shaped normative understandings of adolescence has omitted the experiences of working class youth who were not exempt from the world of work, who did not have large amounts of leisure time, and who viewed institutional control as a threat to their very existence (Gillis, 1981; Musgrove, 1964). As Gillis (1981) asserts, "the sons and daughters of the poor did not adjust nearly so well as middle class youth to the model of adolescence that schools and youth organizations presented to them" (p. 177).

Furthermore, as illuminated by the works of authors throughout the twentieth century (e.g. Cusick, 1973; Fine, 1991; Friedenburg, 1959; Hollingshead, 1949; Musgrove, 1964; Willis, 1977) working class students and/or non-White students continue to be inherently disadvantaged in the schooling system as their status within the school tends to parallel the social status of their parents in the adult
world. Undeniably, middle class students continue to reap the most rewards from schooling as they are the ones who get the best grades, win the most honors, receive the most awards, and serve in leadership capacities in the school.

Tale Two: Gender and the Construction of Adolescence

During one of our earliest conversations, India remarked to me "My life is not easy." She then began telling me about her responsibilities at home—responsibilities that are typically associated with adulthood: disciplining younger siblings, cooking, cleaning, putting sisters and brothers to bed, ironing the next day's school clothes, and protecting her sisters and brothers from the dangers that lurk in her neighborhood at night. Like India, once she leaves school, Sharon is expected to act like an adult as she takes care of her eight month old baby. Similarly, Trisha, who spends most of her time barrel racing and bullriding, is involved in adult activities once she leave school as she refuses to compete in the junior division in rodeos; rather she lies about her age so she can "race against better people."

Unquestionably, for these girls adolescence is a contrived developmental stage, and outside of school, adolescence as a transitional stage of life between childhood and adulthood has very little meaning in their everyday lives.
Carol Dyhouse (1981), a British historian, makes a similar argument about working class females in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century:

In exploring the lives of working-class girls and women, particularly in the early decades of the current century, it is tempting to suggest that . . . many of these women never experienced anything resembling a state of adolescence at all. As children, as soon as they could be considered remotely competent, they would have been expected to take on household duties and encouraged to see themselves as "little mothers" ministering to the needs of the family. Girls were much less likely than their brothers to have been allowed a period of legitimate freedom, however transitory, removed from adult surveillance and unencumbered by responsibility for domestic chores. (p. 119)

Although Gillis, Ketts, and Springhall provide an illuminative account of the impact of class on the creation of institutionalized adolescence at the turn of the century, as evident by Dyhouse's quote above, there are significant pieces missing in these accounts, specifically in relation to how girls experienced adolescence.

First, significant differences existed between what constituted mature behavior for boys and girls at the beginning of the twentieth century. Since adolescence is viewed as the stage of life in which one acquires a mature self, then boys and girls experienced adolescence very differently. Dyhouse argues that males were judged to be mature if they were developing in appropriate ways towards the creation of an independent self - one who had economic as well as emotional independence. On the other hand,
maturity for girls was equated with economic dependence upon a husband. A mature girl, in preparation for her role as wife and mother, was taught to sacrifice her personal desires for the desires of others.

Secondly, while middle class adolescent males in the late nineteenth century were allowed considerable amounts of freedom and leisure time as well as the opportunities for a prolonged period of education, middle class adolescent females did not enjoy the luxury of such leisure time away from the watchful eyes of adults. Furthermore, middle class girls were less likely to attend a prolonged period of schooling, and when they were schooled, the emphasis was on developing skills that would make them better wives and mothers (Dyhouse, 1981).

Third, the psychological views of adolescent development popular at the turn of the century (most notable in the work of Hall) sought to naturalize the already existing laws of patriarchy. According to Dyhouse, Hall argued that girls were emotionally unstable during adolescence (thus needing male protection from the harsh realities of the world), and, in fact, females never outgrew adolescence which "constituted their charm, their eternal womanliness" (p. 12). Furthermore, Hall’s theory suggested that girls were subject to special problems during puberty; thus, they should be protected from undue
stress, worry, exercise, or intellectual stimulation as these could seriously damage their reproductive organs.

Like Dyhouse, Barbara Hudson (1984) argues that adolescence as typically constructed does not adequately reflect the experiences of females. She claims that adolescence is a masculine construct as evident in the images upon which adolescence has been based – the Hamlet figure, the sower of wild oats, the lovesick Romeo, the rebellious black jacketed "rebel without a cause." Since adolescence is a masculine construct built upon theories and images that maintain the male experience as the normative reality, Hudson argues that "adolescence is subversive of femininity; young girls’ attempts to be accepted as ‘young women’ are always liable to be undermined (subverted) by perceptions of them as childish, immature, or any other of the terms by which we define the status ‘adolescent’" (pp. 31-32). Because society views adolescence (i.e. male) and femininity differently, teenage girls are confronted with conflicting expectations in trying to establish a sense of self.

Like Dyhouse and Hudson, Carol Gilligan (1982) asserts that the theories of psychological development upon which most of our associations about normative adolescent development are based are, in fact, theories of male adolescence. Quoting David McClelland, Gilligan (1982) asserts:
Sex role turns out to be one of the most important determinants of human behavior; psychologists have found sex differences in their studies from the moment they started doing empirical research. But since it is difficult to say "different" without saying "better" or "worse", since there is a tendency to construct a single scale measurement, and since that scale has generally been derived from and standardized on the basis of men's interpretations of research data drawn predominantly or exclusively from studies of males, psychologists have tended to regard male behavior as the "norm" and female behavior as some kind of deviation from the norm. (p. 14)

In studying how individuals think about moral conflicts and moral decisions, Gilligan found that women's identities are often constructed in relational terms; thus, they make moral decisions which give primacy to issues of responsibility and maintaining connections to others. However, this ability to view morality in interpersonal terms and to equate goodness with helping others marks women morally deficient according to Kohlberg's six stage theory of moral development (the highest moral state in Kohlberg's theory is the ability to understand human rights using an abstract de-contextualized set of laws). Paradoxically, the same characteristics that make a woman a "good" woman or a girl a "good" girl - nurturance, sensitivity, attunement to the needs of others - mark them as morally deficient. What Gilligan argues for is a theory of moral development which validates women's relational ways of thinking about themselves and others.
In *Meeting at the Crossroads*, Lyn Brown and Carol Gilligan (1992) specifically focused on younger females, studying 100 girls over a period of five years. What is especially significant to my study is Brown and Gilligan’s focus on the impact of early adolescence on the construction of a feminine identity. They describe early adolescence for girls as the crossroads – the time in which girl-self and women-self meet. It is a critical time in the lives of girls who prior to adolescence view themselves as living in connection with themselves and with other girls. However, adolescence, for many girls, signals a disjuncture – a time when they must separate from themselves and from other girls –ironically, a time in which they must take up a male discourse in order to become the "good" woman who puts her interests and needs as secondary to the needs of others, especially males. In fact, their relationships with males often come at the expense of silencing their own voices and severing their connections to other females.

By making explicit the androcentric bias in theories of adolescence, Brown and Gilligan (1992) as well as other feminist researchers like Apter and Dyhouse seek to celebrate "women's ways of knowing":

By listening to women and to girls and bringing their voices into the center of psychological theory and research, we are changing the voice, the body, and also the story about relationships (including the point of view on the canonical story), shifting the societal
location, and, by the work itself, attempting to change the cultural framework. (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 22)

Although the dominant discourse of adolescence has largely ignored the experiences of girls, what clearly emerges from the work of researchers such as Dyhouse and Gilligan is the importance of contextualizing discussions of normative adolescence. The reality is that girls experience adolescence differently than boys. Furthermore, girls are forced to read their life against both the cultural scripts for normative adolescence and normative femininity (discussed in the next section). When neither script seems to fit, girls like Kerry, India, Sharon, and Trisha (as illuminated in the subsequent chapters) feel that they "never get it quite right."

Theories of Gender Identity

At the end of a recent interview with Trisha, Kerry, and India, I asked them, "What is the difference (if any) between being a male and being a female?". They looked at each other, giggled profusely, and finally Trisha replied, "Well, Miss Natalie, don't you know that by now? You do have a husband and some kids, don't you?"

As illuminated by the above conversation, talking about gender is a difficult task - not because it provokes any great emotional tension; rather gender is such a natural part of who we are that questions such as "How do we know we are female?" or "How do we learn to be a female?"
seem quite ludicrous to most people - including the girls in this study.

Undeniably, gender is the most salient feature of identity, and unconsciously it is the first category that we use to define a person's identity. One is, after all, in most cases either male or female. Katz (1979) suggests that labeling someone male or female serves a fundamental psychological need, and once a person has been defined as such, we can automatically begin to make some assumptions about that person's occupation, about how he/she should look and how he/she should behave.

However, how one becomes a gendered being is a highly contested theoretical issue and although most non-theoreticians do not engage in such scholarly debates as "How do we know we are female? How do we become female? What is the difference between femaleness and femininity?," the ramifications of such debates determine to a large degree the substance of women's everyday lives (e.g. who will be the primary breadwinner? Who will take off from work when a child is sick? Who will handle finances? Who will mow the yard? Who will cook dinner?).

Like the stories told in the above section about the creation of adolescence in our society, how one becomes a woman can be told in many different ways. The following is a brief summary of the various ways in which gender identity has been theorized.
Biological Essentialism

Very similar to the way adolescence was constructed as a biological given in the early twentieth century, biological essentialism has played a significant role in mandating normative views of gender identity (Bem, 1993). This notion of biological essentialism is based on the understanding that because women have female genitals, a predominance of female hormones, and the capacity to give birth, her psychological makeup will be in compliance with her physiological structure. What follows from this kind of logic is that women are perceived as inherently more nurturing, caring, dependent, and emotional (traditionally seen as feminine behaviors) while men are by nature more aggressive, competitive, independent, and rational (seen as masculine behaviors). As a result of biological essentialism, women have been and continue to be relegated to the private and domestic sphere while men naturally take their position in the public and corporate sphere.

According to Ortner (1974), this theory of biological determinism has always functioned to position males as the superior sex and women as subordinate beings who find completeness only though the heterosexual relationship. Furthermore, throughout history the theory of biological determinism has been used to naturalize already existing inequalities (e.g. slavery), including sexual inequalities. In various ways, the assumption that women are biologically
different from men (thus inferior) has been used to keep women from being educated, from being allowed to vote, from being allowed to join the military, and from attaining high-paying jobs. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, notable doctors and psychologists used the theory of biological determinism to argue against education for girls. Hall (1904) argued that co-education would detrimentally affect both a woman's menstrual period and her maternal desires. Earlier, Clark (1873) argued that the energy girls used to develop their brains through learning actually was energy taken away from developing their reproductive organs, thus educating girls interfered with a woman’s "natural" duty and responsibility to give birth and rear children. Indeed, a somewhat prevalent belief in the late 1800's was that educated girls were believed to have shriveled up ovaries and thus, incapable of giving birth (Dyhouse, 1981).

Although biological essentialism is no longer used to prevent girls from being educated or women from voting, the belief that women are innately better equipped to perform some duties (such as childrearing) and men to perform other duties (such as making a living) remains a popular theory not only in the everyday lives of men and women but also in popular science. As succinctly suggested by Trisha, "there are some things that men can naturally do better like lift..."
weights and some things woman can naturally do better (like cook)."

Although biological essentialism has more often than not been used to keep women in subservient roles by pleading to the argument of natural law, radical feminists such as Witting (1981) and Rich (1979) have used the argument of innate and radical differences between males and females to forward their own argument that women can only be liberated if they gain control of their bodies and sexuality. By situating the body and female sexuality as the primary conceptual framework for feminist analysis, radical feminists have suggested that biological essentialism can be used to counter the hegemonic forces of patriarchy. Although not all radical feminists are lesbian separatists, many radical feminists (e.g. Johnson, 1974; Wittig, 1981) argue that the only way women can be truly liberated is by breaking away from heterosexuality (which always situates men as the powerful and dominant and women as the passive and subordinate). They argue that because aggressiveness and dominance is seen as a "natural" part of the heterosexual relationship, women are always situated as the powerless and passive in a patriarchal society. To be truly liberated then, a woman must break away from the bondages of heterosexuality and lesbianism is the only way in which women’s bodies and sexuality and
innate goodness can be enjoyed and celebrated (Daly, 1978; Rich, 1979; Wittig, 1981).

**Psychoanalytic Theories of Gender Identity**

Another prevalent theory of how one constructs a gendered identity is found in psychoanalytic theory first developed by Sigmund Freud in the early 1900’s. The basic argument of psychoanalytic theory is that gender identity can be traced back to the psychosocial development of children prior to age six or seven. (Freud, 1968)

For the first three years of life, girl children and boy children undergo similar means of identity development. As newborn infants, both sexes make no distinction between self and Other. Infancy for both sexes is a time of primary narcissism. However, this understanding of self as the center of the universe comes to an abrupt halt when the infant realizes that sometimes he/she cries and no one picks him up or she is hungry and nourishment is not immediate. Thus, the infant must develop other strategies to have his/her needs met. She smiles, he cries, she burps, he makes eye contact with the Other (usually the mother). At this stage, the infant has begun to recognize that one’s self and (M)other are different - "we are no longer the world."

However, throughout these first few years of development, both boy child and girl child continue to have a strong attachment to and identification with the mother.
At about age four or five, the boy child suddenly begins to notice that he is different from the mother, and he develops sexual feelings for her (known as the Oedipal conflict). Thus, he views the father as a rival while simultaneously identifying with him because of the same genitalia. The boy child notices his own inadequacies (e.g. penis size) and forgoes the fight for his mother at this time (realizing that someday he will have his own woman/mother). The Oedipal conflict is resolved by the boy child developing a strong identification with the father, imitating him in action, beliefs, and values. This resolution of the Oedipal conflict leads to the development of normal masculinity.

Unlike the boy child, for the girl child there is no incentive to shift identification from the mother for the girl child and mother are the same. However, according to psychoanalytic theory, when the girl child discovers that she lacks the same genitals as her father and brother, she is envious of the very visible penis. She, thus, breaks with the mother to identify with the father who does have the penis. According to Freud, penis envy is central to the development of normative femininity as eventually the girl child abandons her desire for the penis and desires instead a child.

Freud does assert that for some girls, penis envy, can lead to abnormal development in girls and manifests itself
in different ways: sexual inhibitions, homosexuality (those women who refuse to concede that they do not have a penis and, thus, act like men), and the rejections of traditional roles of wife and mother. (Freud, 1924/1959)

Rewriting the Freudian Plot

In the 1970’s, Freud’s theory of the development of gender identity was sorely critiqued by feminist scholars (e.g. Firestone, 1970; Friedan, 1974; Millett, 1970), predominantly because of its argument that a woman’s gender identity is determined by her lack of the male penis. Other feminists (Apter, 1990; Chodorow, 1974; 1978) have sought to rewrite the master narrative of psychoanalytic theory by reconceptualizing traditional understandings of the Oedipal complex by emphasizing the role of the mother, not the penis, in the construction of a gendered identity. Chodorow (1974; 1978) asserts that it is not the lack of a penis that is significant in the development of a feminine and masculine identity but it is the preoedipal relationship between mother and child that is largely responsible for the creation of distinctly different gendered identities. Since women universally are responsible for the care of infants and children, this relationship between mother and son/daughter is the significant factor in determining the differences in personality between boys and girls. Because mothers are more likely to view their daughter as extensions of
themselves, they do not encourage their daughters to separate from them to form a distinct identity. On the other hand, mothers relate to their sons as being separate and distinct from themselves. Thus, boys develop "a self that denies relatedness" and girls develop "a self in relation" (Chodorow, 1978, p. 15). Consequently, adult males have a strong need to deny their attachment and dependence on women in general; thus, they devalue femininity and use a variety of means to position women as the powerless other.

Similar to Chodorow, Teri Apter (1990) concentrates on the impact of mothers on the development of a feminine identity; however, Apter argues that the type of personal growth both mother and daughter undergo during the daughter's adolescence is just as important to a daughter's development of a gendered identity as is the bonding that occurs between mother and daughter during infancy. Apter claims that females develop an identity not in opposition to their mother but in relation to her since it is the mother who exerts more influence over her daughter than either friends or father. Girls turn to their mothers for self-confirmation and the push towards individuation often comes from the mother. The tense and often shaky relationship between mother and daughter during adolescence is necessary, for it forces the mother to acknowledge her
daughter’s new identity and forces the daughter into a new self-awareness.

Social Construction of Gender

By the 1920’s, theories of biological essentialism began to lose their importance partly as the result of the work of social anthropologists who documented how different cultures vary in their beliefs about normative feminine and masculine behavior (Bem, 1993). In arguing that gender was culturally determined, Margaret Mead (1935) wrote:

If those temperamental attitudes which we have traditionally regarded as feminine—such as passivity, responsiveness, and a willingness to cherish children—can so easily be set up as the masculine pattern in one tribe, and, in another be outlawed for the majority of women as for the majority of men, we no longer have any basis for regarding aspects of such behavior as sex linked. (pp. 279-280)

However, as noted by Mead (1949), almost universally men and the tasks associated with masculinity are more valued than women and feminine tasks. This almost universal law of men being valued over women should not be interpreted as evidence of the biological superiority of males; rather, as suggested by Rosaldo (1974), "Biology becomes important largely as it is interpreted by the norms and expectations of human culture and society" (p. 4).

Emerging from the work of anthropologists (as well as sociologists and psychologists) has been the theory that gender is socially constructed. It is this theory of gender identity that has dominated social science for the
last fifty years (Beall, 1993). The basic tenant of a socially constructed view of gender is that males and females learn the cultural scripts that determine normative feminine and masculine behavior. Our socialization into these appropriately defined gender identifications begins at birth and is fostered throughout childhood by direct reinforcement (i.e. we are positively rewarded when we act in appropriately gendered ways) and by modeling processes (i.e. we acquire appropriate gendered behaviors by imitating same-sexed parents/close adults) (Katz, 1979).

In fact, boys and girls are socialized throughout their childhood and adolescence to use the culturally sanctioned lens for evaluating the world and their position in the world.

According to Bem (1993), the problem with these cultural lens (especially for females) is that they are androcentric and gender-polarizing:

> These androcentric social practices do two things simultaneously. First, they situate men and women in markedly unequal positions in the social structure, positions where men have much more opportunity than women to earn money, acquire marketable skills, advance in their own careers, and yield power. Second, these androcentric social practices communicate to all the participants in the social world, both male and female... that males are the privileged sex and the male perspective is the privileged perspective. (p. 144)

Again, all of these gender-polarizing practices do two things simultaneously. They program different social experiences for males and females, respectively, and they communicate to both males and females that the male-female distinction is extraordinarily important, that is
has—and ought to have—intensive and extensive relevance to virtually every aspect of human experience. (p. 146)

Feminists have for the most part embraced the view that gender is socially constructed, arguing that the cultural and societal norms of our patriarchal structure mandate that women act in appropriately feminine ways so that the sexual, economic, and emotional needs and interests of men will be met.

**Gender Identity and the Regulation of the Body**

A recurring theme throughout these three theories of gender identity is the importance of the female body in the construction of a feminine self. Yet, how the female body is regulated, thus controlling feminine identity, receives scant attention in the above theories. However, feminist poststructuralists (Bartky, 1990; Jagger & Bordo, 1989) view this regulation of the body as central to understanding how a feminine identity gets constructed.

Foucault (1979) argues that modern institutions such as the army, the school, the prison, and the hospital function to inscribe bodies in specific ways. The result of such regulatory practices in our society is the production of "docile" bodies. Bartky (1990) describes how these regulatory practices function in the school:

The student, then, is enclosed within a classroom and assigned to a desk he cannot leave; his ranking in the class can be read off the position of his desk in the serially ordered and segmented space of the classroom.
itself. . . . The student must sit upright, feet upon the floor, head erect; he may not slouch or fidget; his animate body is brought into a fixed correlation with the inanimate desk. (p. 64)

Foucault (1979) gives similar examples of how the bodies of soldiers and prison mates are relentlessly controlled.

However, Bordo (1989), Haug (1987), Bartky (1990), and Bloom and Munro (1993) assert, unlike Foucault, that bodies are always sexually specific; thus, the regulatory practices for controlling female bodies differ from male bodies. In fact, it is in the cultural inscription of the female body that all women, regardless of race and class, living in an institutionalized heterosexual society share a similar experience; Black women, White women, Latino women, poor women, and rich women define themselves against idealized images of femininity (Bordo, 1989). Bartky asserts, "Femininity as spectacle is something in which virtually every woman is required to participate" (p. 73).

Bartky (1990) describes three primary ways in which the female body is molded and shaped into a feminine identity: (1) through practices designed to produce bodies that meet culturally sanctioned ways of being feminine (undeniably, the "tyranny of slenderness" is a powerful regulatory agent in our culture); (2) through practices aimed at controlling a woman’s facial expressions, gestures, bodily movements, and the amount of space she can occupy (3) through practices situating the female body as
object of beauty and desire (by participating in such practices as plucking eyebrows, shaving legs, removing pubic hair, enlarging breasts through surgical procedures, and wearing high heel shoes, women learn there is a price to pay for being feminine). According to Bartky, these disciplinary practices are "part of the process in which the ideal body of femininity - and hence the feminine body-subject - is constructed; in doing this, they produce a 'practiced and subjected' body, i.e., a body on which an inferior status has been inscribed" (p. 71).

Similar to Bartky, Bordo (1989) explores the inscription of cultural codes onto the female body to create an ideal feminine identity. However, her examination of gender-specific disorders such as anorexia nervosa reveals how some women "parody twentieth-century constructions of femininity" (p. 17):

In the pursuit of slenderness and the denial of appetite the traditional construction of femininity intersects with the new requirement for women to embody the "masculine" values of the public arena. The anorexic... embodies this intersection, this double-blind, in a particularly painful and graphic way" (p. 19).

What may begin as an embracing of cultural norms of femininity (i.e. slender and attractive) - anorexia nervosa often emerges as a resistance to femininity. By refusing to succumb to hunger and the desire to eat, the anorexic exhibits a sense of power and feels a mastery over her life that before was non-existent. By doing so, she gains an
entrance into a spiritual and psychological realm usually reserved for males, marked by "an ethic and aesthetic of self-mastery and self-transcendence, expertise, and power over others through the example of superior will and control" (p. 23).

However, as Bordo points out, the power a woman feels as a result of anorexia is a mythical and sometimes fatal illusion. To look like a man (or in the case of some anorexic woman, to look like a prepubescent male) is not to be a man or to have the power and prestige afforded to men. This form of resistance to the feminine ideal actually serves to further limit a woman's potential; thus, Bordo cautions women to use their bodies to resist the regulatory practices that serve to inevitably reproduce gender domination and gender normalization.

Bartky (1990) claims, however, that such resistance seems almost impossible since it is difficult to name the disciplining powers who are charged with regulating feminine identity. That power is "everywhere and nowhere" (p. 74). Foucault (1979) argues that institutions inevitably produce self-regulating individuals, giving the example of the prison mate whose cell isolates him from others but places him under the constant surveillance of the tower guard, thus inducing him into a kind of self-policing. However, Bartky (1990) and Bloom and Munro (1993) contend that no official rules or institutional
powers for sanctioning appropriate feminine bodies/behaviors/identities need to exist. A woman becomes her own regulatory agent as she internalizes the rules and sanctions, feeling ashamed if she somehow fails to live up to the standards of appropriate femininity.

Black Women and the Construction of Identity

Other than in the above section in which I discuss the similar ways in which all women's bodies are regulated, I have made few references to the intersections between race and gender and identity. It is precisely this omission of the importance of race and gender identity in the above theories that has been sorely critiqued by Black scholars (Christian, 1988; Collins, 1990; hooks, 1981). As hooks (1981) and Collins (1990) remind us, any theories about how one constructs a feminine identity must not only take into the lived experiences of Black females but also the different ways in which they experience oppression and domination.

As Collins (1990) and King (1973) argue, Black women's lives have never been read against the dominant discourse of femininity rooted in the "true womanhood" ideology of the nineteenth century in which White elite and middle-class women were encouraged to be pious, pure, submissive, and domestic. According to Collins (1990), this very discourse of femininity is made possible only through the creation of an opposite discourse that positions Black
women as the Other. By creating a different set of controlling images whereby Black women are judged, Black women are marginalized not only within the dominant discourse of femininity but also within the dominant discourse of Whiteness.

One externally defined controlling image of the Black woman is that of the mammy (Collins, 1990; White, 1985). This discourse rooted in the culture of the antebellum South positions Black women as Black domestics whose happiness is derived through their service to White families. The Black mammy is an asexual being (thus, not a threat to either the White male or White female) and loves her White family more than her own; she, of course, knows her "place" also. According to White (1985), the "mammy was the perfect image for antebellum South. As the personification of the ideal slave, and the ideal woman, Mammy was an ideal symbol of the patriarchal tradition" (p. 58).

Despite the attempts of Black scholars (Dill, 1980; Harris, 1982) to disrupt this image of the subservient, docile mammy by revealing the myriad ways in which Black women have resisted, subverted, and rejected the mammay ideology, Black women continue to be judged against the image of the loving and caring mammy who happily takes her place in the White patriarchal structure and teaches her children to do the same (Collins, 1990).
Whereas the mammy represents the ideal "good" Black woman, a second controlling image symbolizes the bad Black woman – the matriarch who is too aggressive, too independent, too powerful, too "masculine" and who seeks to emasculate Black men (Collins, 1990; King, 1973; White, 1985). The matriarch spends too much time away from her children; she does not nurture and care for their emotional needs, and she is too unfeminine to attract a man. This image of the matriarch serves to position Black women as the cause of everything that is wrong with the Black community (Collins, 1990). She is to blame for the low achievement rate of Black children in school (i.e. her children are unsupervised because she spends too much time working away from home) and the high rate of poverty in Black communities (i.e. she is responsible for Black men’s low self-esteem; furthermore, she takes away jobs that should be fulfilled by Black males). As Collins (1990) points out, the Black matriarch who loses her husband or lover because she fails to submit to the code of femininity serves as a powerful reminder to White women of what happens when the patriarchal structure is challenged.

A third more recently defined image of Black women is that of the single welfare mother who, unlike the matriarch who is too assertive, is perceived as having too many children and no initiative to work. Like the matriarch, she is blamed for her children’s inability to excel in
school because she does not teach them the proper work ethic (Collins, 1990). David Duke’s recent candidacy for the governor of Louisiana attests to the prevalence of this image of Black women and the belief that the state and federal government has the right and responsibility to curtail the welfare mother’s right to have children. Duke’s suggestion of forced sterilization of all women on welfare who have more that two children is a pertinent reminder of how Black women continue to be regarded as objects to be manipulated and controlled by the dominant culture.

The fourth controlling image by which Black women are evaluated is that of the sexually aggressive Jezebel (King, 1973; Powell, 1979; White, 1985). She is the counterimage of the ideal asexual Black mammy and during slavery times, this image was used to justify White men’s sexual attacks on Black women. Since Black women had raw sexual allure to which White men could not resist, White men were not responsible (either morally or legally) for their sexual aggression towards Black women. Powell (1979) argues that this image of the promiscuous Black woman is extremely harmful to Black adolescent girls who are struggling with their new found sexuality. By situating Black females as loose, wild, and inherently more oversexed than White girls, Black girls continue to be subjected to unwanted sexual advances. Furthermore, this image is falsely used
to reinforce dominant understandings of unwed teenage mothers as females responsible for their own poverty and oppression because they are unable to control their sexual appetites.

As King (1973) illuminates these controlling images bear little resemblance to how Black women actually live their lives, but the myths are created and sustained as a way of maintaining a White patriarchal society. Collins (1990) asserts:

Even when the political and economic conditions that originally generated controlling images disappear, such images prove remarkably tenacious because they not only keep Black women oppressed but are key in maintaining interlocking systems of race, class, and gender oppression. The status of African-American women as outsiders or strangers becomes the point from which other groups define their normality. . . . African-American women, by not belonging, emphasize the significance of belonging" (p. 68).

As Carothers (1990) and Collins (1991) assert, to live in a world that tries to both control and dismiss their identities, Black women develop strategies of both accommodation and resistance. For many Black woman, this is a lesson they learn from their mothers.

Critiquing Eurocentric White views of motherhood that have either placed the traditional mothering role as the central cause of women’s inferior status or located women’s power in their control of the private, domestic sphere, Carothers (1990), Collins (1991), and others (Bell-Scott,
1991) have demonstrated the complex relationship between mothering and identity.

As Carothers (1991) points out, Black women have never enjoyed the luxury of being "just a mother" and the protection that status affords one in a White patriarchal society. Most Black women have always worked outside their homes, and, in fact, this double identity as mother-worker is central to an acquisition of a Black feminine identity. According to Carothers:

The daughters have learned from their mothers by being exposed to the complications, complexities, and contradictions that as working women, their mothers faced a society which has traditionally viewed working and mothering as incompatible roles. The recognition of this difference requires that Black women, as a condition of their daily existence, constantly negotiate an alternative understanding of female identity that challenges the dominant gender paradigm in American culture. (p. 245)

Since most Black women, in their lives as workers in the White culture, experience the realities of multiple jeopardy (i.e. they are jeopardized for being Black, for being female, and for being poor), Black women teach their daughters to construct an identity that allows them to survive in a world that denigrates them but also to transcend race, class, and gender oppression (Carothers, 1990; King, 1986).

Another way in which Black women construct an identity that challenges the dominant discourse of femininity is in their rejection of a binary understanding of gender. Fox-
Genovese (1990) asserts that in the dominant discourse of gender identity, a feminine identity can only be formed in opposition to a masculine identity— that is, being a woman means being the opposite of a man and vice versa. However, for Black women this model of gender identity has not historically reflected their experiences. She states: "Slavery bequeathed to Afro-American women a double view of gender relations that fully exposed the artificial or problematic aspects of gender identification. Slavery stripped black men of the social attributes of manhood in general and fatherhood in particular. As a result, black women had no satisfactory social definition of themselves as women" (p. 188).

As illuminated by the work of Black female scholars such as hooks (1981; 1989), Collins, (1990; 1991), Fox-Genovese (1990) and Carothers (1990), any discussions of gender and identity must take into account the very different strategies Black women use in constructing a sense of self. These strategies are integrally connected not only to their gender but also to their race and class, thus different from the strategies of White women, White men, and Black men.

Gender as Everyday Performance

Although these theoretical stories about gender identity are important to our understandings of how language and discourse structure oppression and
inequalities, the stories of individual women and girls who daily engage in the struggle to make sense of their lives are often overlooked in theoretical perspectives of gender. Sojourner Truth's eloquent speech (cited in White, 1985) to the Women's Rights convention in 1851 is a poignant reminder that, far from being uncontested, monolithic, and unchanging, what it means to be women is highly contextual:

That man over there say that women needs to be lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helped me into carriages, or over mud puddles, or gives me any best place and ar'n't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have plowed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me—and ar'n't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man (when I could get it), and bear the lash as well—and ar'n't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children and seem them most all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard—and ar'n't I a woman? (p. 14)

As we study the lives of individual women like Sojourner Truth, we realize the inadequacies of theories of gender construction that continue to advance a gender-polarized view of identity, that imply women have no agency in the creation of their own identities, and that situate identities as fixed notions of self.

In studying the individual lives of women and girls, feminist poststructuralists such as Munro (1991), Lesko (1988), Davies (1989) and Walkerdine (1990) have been instrumental in advancing a non-unitary understanding of gender that suggests that gender is always discursively positioned in relationship to race, class and other salient
features of personal life. By situating discussions of gender identity within the individual and everyday lives of women and girls, we can better understand the intersections of these discursive practices. As illuminated in the stories that follow, Trisha, Kerry, Sharon, and India struggle in constructing a feminine identity. Continuously their identities change, their subjectivities change, and their understandings of themselves change. Who they are perceived to be (e.g. by school officials) is rarely who they think they are, and who they should be (as defined more universally by societal norms and more specifically by individuals, like their mothers, teachers, and boyfriends) is seldom who they are. It is to their stories that I now turn.
When they need things they have to call on the boys; they never ask the girls to do nothing. You know they treat us like we ain’t nobody. The boys are more important and I feel it shouldn’t even be that way.  
(Kerry, 15, Black female)

They think we ain’t nothing cos we’re Black.  
(India, 14, Black female)

Kerry’s and India’s comments about their school experiences illustrate the struggle they have in constructing both a raced and gendered identity that is not only valued but visible in school. Their struggle, however, is muted by a widely held "truth" about public education — that is, "equal education for all." Embedded in this dominant discourse of education is the belief that schools are apolitical sites where identity-less students presumably gather and by mass consumption absorb the same information, and thus, all equally share the same opportunities to succeed (Rose, 1988).

Of course, most of us know that this "truth" is a "lie." We know the statistics about who succeeds in school and who does not (Fine, 1991); we know the facts about the racial composition of cheerleading squads, gifted programs, high ability groups, and academic magnet schools (Oakes, 1985). We know that despite the school’s attempts to operate under the guise of equality, all students are not
equal in school as suggested by India’s and Kerry’s opening quotes. The truth is many female students, especially those who are Black and/or economically disadvantaged, feel they are "nobodies" and "nothings" as they struggle in school to try to meet conflicting expectations of what is means to be a female adolescent.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore how girls like Kerry and India become situated as "nobodies" in school. It is admittedly a critical examination of the cultural, social, and political context of schooling, specifically the ways in which school shapes gender identity. I could have just as easily focused on the relationship between school culture and race or class identity, and, in fact, the intersections of gender, race, and class emerge throughout my analysis. However as a feminist researcher, I wanted to centralize the experiences of females. Thus, the primary focus of this chapter centers on how one particular middle school in a large metropolitan Southern city shapes female students’ understandings of gender. The questions that guided my interviews and observations were: How are boys and girls treated differently at this school? What is considered appropriate feminine behavior at the school? How does the formal and informal curriculum at the school shape gender identity?
This chapter has been, by far, the most difficult one to write. As a researcher who was graciously allowed to wander as she pleased throughout Foster Middle School for an entire year, I am hesitant to write any account of this school which could be construed as a disfavorable reflection on the teachers and administrators there. Part of my hesitancy is due to the fact that I became friends with one of the teachers and one of the administrators at Foster, both of whom I not only genuinely like but also respect tremendously as educators. The other part is that I know without a shadow of a doubt that the majority of the teachers and administrators at this school work long hours and spend much of their own money to improve themselves as teachers so they can better meet the needs of their students. They are earnest in their beliefs that they are doing everything within their power to ensure that all students (regardless of race, class, or gender) have the chance to succeed and enjoy a better life.

In recent years, numerous researchers (Britzman, 1991; Bullough, 1989; Cohn & Kottkamp, 1993; Lortie, 1975; McNeil, 1988; Munro, 1991; Schubert & Ayers, 1992) have examined the complexity and contradictions of teachers' lives within the technocratic institution of schooling. However, teachers and administrators were not the focus of my study; thus, this research is not the teachers' or the administrators' story; rather it is the story of how four
adolescent females (all of whom are typically seen as "marginalized" individuals both in school and outside of school) make sense of their experiences as females and as adolescents. Since the focus of this research concerns the construction of identities, their school (as the place in which they spend more time than in any other social institution other than their home) must be examined since it operates as a powerful agent in shaping their identities as adolescents, as future workers, as American citizens, and as gendered individuals. However, the story that follows is but one story that can be told about this school; others could be and should be told. The "truth" it reflects is, at best, "partial, uncommitted and incomplete" (Clifford, 1986, p. 7).

In this chapter, I first explore how Foster Middle School operates under the guise of equality ("Everybody’s Equal Here") by filtering out issues of race, class, and gender. However, as examined in the second section ("Gender Makes All the Difference"), the school’s expectations of appropriate feminine behavior dictate both the formal and informal curriculum; thus, everybody's not equal there. In the last section ("Never Getting It Right"), I describe how the girls in this study struggle to meet conflicting expectations of normative feminine and adolescent behavior in school.
"Everybody’s Equal Here"

Approximately one-fourth of a mile from a large Walmart store, Foster Middle School sits unobtrusively amidst a lower-middle class neighborhood. Its location in a neighborhood is deceiving, however, for Foster Middle School is not a neighborhood school as the students who live across and next door to the school are bussed to another middle school ten miles away. Located in a town on the outskirts of a large metropolitan city in the Deep South, Foster Middle School defies categorization. It is certainly not an urban school, and although horses lazily feed in an open field approximately 200 yards from the school, Foster is not a rural school either. Yet, the label suburban with its connotation of White and middle class also does not accurately describe Foster Middle School. It is a school that, according to Mr. Crane, the assistant principal, "does not fit any particular category. We draw kids from some real urban areas, but we also draw kids from suburban areas, and even some real rural areas too, so it’s really a combination."

The majority (60%) of the 792 students at Foster Middle School are Black; socioeconomically they come from predominantly working class and lower-middle class families. Fifty-three percent of the students receive free or reduced lunches. The majority of the students are males (55%) and of the 358 females, the majority are Black. The
teachers at Foster, however, are predominantly White (60%) and female (80%). Although White females comprise the lowest percentage of the student population, the teachers at Foster are predominantly White females (53%).

These are the "facts" about Foster Middle School with all the mandatory references to race, class, and gender that appear on formal school reports. However, once the paperwork is neatly filed away, issues of race, class, and gender become subsumed under the guise of equality as highlighted by one of the teacher's comments to me: "Everyone is equal here." In this section, I explore the three major ways in which the school strives to "make everyone equal", thereby supposedly erasing gender (as well as race and class) differences: (1) by separating the students' private lives from the public life of school, (2) by emphasizing the commonalities that all students share because of their age (i.e. early adolescents), and (3) by offering all students the same (or, at least equal) curricular and extra-curricular opportunities.

"You Can't Mix Away from School with School"

One of the primary ways in which Foster tries to make all its students equal is by separating the public - the school - from the private - the home. This philosophy of education that situates schools as a distinct and separate entity from the home has a long tradition in public education, dating back to the educational reformers of the
early twentieth century who embraced G. Stanley Hall's view of adolescence as time of storm and stress and used it to justify schools assuming primary responsibility for preparing adolescents for adult life (Gillis, 1981). After all parents, especially poor parents and non-American parents, supposedly lacked the knowledge and experience that was needed to guarantee proper enculturation into the American way of life and the American work force. Thus, schools were seen as superior substitutes for families and for real life (Gillis, 1981; Troen, 1976).

At Foster Middle School, this distance between home and school manifests itself most obviously in the forced bussing of students who live in close proximity to the school. However, this message that school will be a separate sphere from the private world of the students is made clear in numerous other ways from the design of the building, to the use of space, to the interactions between students and teachers.

The physical building of Foster Middle School itself symbolically represents a concerted effort to keep the outside world outside. There are no windows in the school; thus, students literally never see outside unless they go outdoors for physical education or for recess (which is held in the back of the school). Two glass doors are located at the entrance of the school; however, the doors are tinted so that people entering the building cannot see
inside unless they actually open the door. Visitors (meaning, anyone who is not a student, teacher, or administrator at Foster) must visit the office first to obtain a "visitor tag".

Once inside the school office, the long counter that runs horizontally through the office also functions to separate non-school people (i.e. outsiders) from school people. Visitors at the school usually talk to the secretary and other school personnel over the counter, and check-outs, check-ins, payments of any kind, and other written transactions take place on the counter. Clearly, behind the counter (where the telephones, xerox machines, the secretaries’ desk, the intercom, the bells, and the filing cabinets are located) is off-limits to non-school people. In fact, even after being in this school for a year, I never felt comfortable behind the counter and avoided that area whenever possible. Interestingly, some students are allowed behind the counter: sick students who are calling home, misbehaving students who are being chastised by teachers or administrators, and students who work in the office. However, students do not go behind the counter uninvited.

This attempt to make the school a distinct (and superior) entity from the home is also clearly evident in the interactions between students and teachers, especially in teachers’ attempts to control unruly behavior. For
example, one day India, Sharon, and several Black males entered the classroom in a boisterous manner; Mrs. Hill, a social studies teacher, quickly reprimanded them saying, "When the tardy bell rings, you are to sit down. We're not going to have street behavior in here. Anything not having to do with school, I consider to be street behavior."

Similarly, Coach Wilder spent approximately 20 minutes lecturing one of his physical education classes about the appropriate behavior for school: "At school, I expect you to act like students. We cannot mix away from school behavior with school behavior. . . . Act like you're in a learning institution, not like you're at home." And Mrs. French, a math teacher, scolded a group of girls (including Sharon), "Don't come in here like animals; this is school, not home."

Often when teachers do make reference to the private lives of students, they do so in a way that positions that private sphere (the home life) as deficient as illustrated in the above quotes about "street behavior", "away from school behavior", and "home/animal behavior." For example, Sharon's language arts teacher told her that one of her "major problems" was she lacked "home training" and when Trisha failed to comply with her science teachers' instructions to copy notes from the overhead, the teacher told her, "You don't show any respect; I guess that's what you're taught at home." Sharon's history teacher commented
to me, "As long as Sharon stays in that same home environment, she doesn’t stand a chance." And India’s language arts teacher asserted, "I don’t understand their (Black girls) home life, so I can’t cope with it."

Interesting, Mr. Crane, the assistant principal, asserted that the major strength of Foster Middle School was "the support we get from parents when we call them. I’ve been places before where you call parents and they say, ‘I can’t do anything with them, so you handle it.’ So what are we supposed to do if parents can’t do anything with them? I would say that 99 percent of the time when we call on parents, they’re very supportive; they’re willing to do what we ask them." What is implied in this comment is that the bridging of school and home occurs almost solely in the context of students’ exhibiting inappropriate school behavior (such as cursing, fighting, and being disrespectful to authority figures).

A common way of handling misbehaving students at Foster is to make the student call his/her parents at home or at work and relate to them the nature of their inappropriate behavior. This conversation between parent and child is always either followed by or begins with the teacher explaining to the parent that his/her child is acting inappropriately at school. Another way in which Foster Middle School handles inappropriate school behavior (although much less frequently than telephoning parents) is
to ask parents of misbehaving children to observe their children in class. Indeed, during one of my classroom observations, a Black woman who was the mother of one of the students was sitting in the back of the room observing her daughter. When I asked her why she was observing the class, she replied, "Well, Shamekia's (her daughter) been acting up in class, so they called me and asked me to come in and follow her in her classes to see what she's doing to the teachers."

Although the strategies described above of bringing parents into the public realm of school (here, school discipline) seem to be an attempt to bridge the public and the private, the underlying assumption of such actions remains: students who do not adhere to school rules are deficient; parents are somehow responsible for this deficiency; the school (as the repository of knowledge and cultural values) has the right to intervene in the parenting process to ensure that students learn the proper codes of behavior.

This separation of public and private, especially as it manifests itself in the curriculum, is so ingrained in the way we school early adolescents that a critical language to talk about other ways of being between the home and school do not exist for the girls in this study. One day Kerry, India, Trisha, and I began talking about issues they consider to be pertinent to their lives (i.e. teen
pregnancy, prejudice, drug abuse and AIDS). Certainly, these issues have been clearly constructed in institutions outside of school as social, thus public, problems; however, Kerry, Trisha, and India thought the school made a concerted effort to relegate these issues to the private sphere - as problems that needed to be addressed at home or at church (as an extension of home). When I asked them how the school addresses these issues, India matter-of-factly stated, "They don't." Kerry somewhat sadly added, "I don't think they care."

This inability to critically talk about the meshing of public and private in the context of school was most evident in the girls' comments about the curriculum. As illustrated in the following remarks, school knowledge (as reflected in the formal curriculum) was entirely separate and different from their out-of-school knowledge. During the nine months of this study, I asked these young women hundreds of questions; however, the question that was the most difficult for them to answer was "How is what you learn in school related to your life outside of school?" Without exception, this question was followed by blank stares, uncomfortable silences, strange looks, quiet stammerings of "Well, um, let me see" and "I don't know" as illustrated by the responses Trisha, India, and Kerry gave:

Trisha: Uh, let's see, reading ain't nothing compared to my life. Let's see, art, I draw a lot, that helps me to have ideas of what to make and what to do. Social studies don't have
nothing to do with my life, not even close. Math, I don't do math. I sleep during that class.

India: It ain't related cos what we learn in school is stuck way back in 1600, 1700, stuff my great-grandfather didn't even know, and now they’re teaching it to us. What do I need to know about way back then for?

Kerry: Well, I really don't know. (pause) I don't know. (pause) I really don't think they teach you nothing in school.

Interestingly, when I asked the students individually how school could be made more relevant to their life, they all answered, "Teach sex education." On this particular subject, the girls were quite articulate about the school's refusal to deal with the realities of their students' lives outside of school as evident in India's comments: "They need to get sex education in school because these little children walking around here talking about what they're doing. They could have AIDS. They need to put sex education in Foster Middle this year cos when my little sister gets in eighth grade, I want my little sister to know what she's doing before she starts." When I pointed out that some schools in the United State offer a very comprehensive sex education program, India sarcastically replied, "I know, but Foster Middle, we're the home of the World's Greatest Kids; we don't need that kind of stuff at our school. Brick Wall!!!" Similar to India, Kerry suggested, "They need to be teaching these young girls out here not to be getting pregnant and stuff cos a lot of them
think it can’t never happen to me. But somehow it’s going to happen."

Admittedly, the school recognizes that students come from homes that are not "equal" – they are aware of the violence in many of the neighborhoods of their students; they recognize that many students live with single parents and many of their parents are unemployed; they know that many of their students, when they leave the school every afternoon, become adults as they care for younger siblings while mothers work late. However, by separating the public (the school) from the private (the home), these issues of home life become secondary to the school’s attempts to filter out issues of race, class, and gender so that "everybody is equal here"; thus, supposedly everyone shares similar opportunities to succeed.

"Adolescence is a Disease"

A second way in which Foster Middle School tries to achieve equality is through its emphasis on the commonalities students share because of age rather than on their differences of race, class, and gender. Like most middle schools across the United States, Foster Middle School operates under the assumption that adolescence is a universal time of social, emotional and physical upheaval as illustrated in Foster’s Student Handbook (which all students receive during the first week of school):

"Message from the Principal – ... Middle school is a time
of change. The work load and social adjustments are greater here than at the elementary level. You will be expected to attend school regularly, complete assignments and behave appropriately...." (p. 6).

Indeed teaching students to "behave appropriately" becomes a central goal of Foster Middle School and much of what is done at Foster reflects an underlying belief that adolescents need an education in social control. Indeed, the first sign that greets Foster students as their school buses turn into the circular driveway of the school every morning is a sign which reads "Any student or non-student found guilty of carrying a firearm on a school campus or school bus shall be imprisoned at hard labor for up to five years. LRS 14: 95.2". The sign serves as a poignant reminder that, in our culture, adolescence translates into delinquency, and adolescents/delinquents (regardless of race, class or gender) must be "controlled" and "managed" so that they can reach adulthood psychologically sound.

This understanding of adolescence as a turbulent and traumatic stage of development dates back to the early twentieth century and the work of G. Stanley Hall. In his two volume treatise entitled Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relation to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education (1904), Hall argued that in coping with the physiological and emotional changes associated with puberty, all adolescents undergo a stage of
development in which conflict and difficulties are inevitable (Ianni, 1989; Springhall, 1986). As a Darwinian evolutionist and a staunch believer in the theory of recapitulation, Hall (1904) claimed that the storm and stress of adolescence was an inescapable (and in evolutionary terms, necessary) feature of human development: "Adolescence is a new birth. . . .suggestive of some ancient period of storm and stress when old moorings were broken and a higher level attained" (p. xiii). In short, Hall presented a theory of adolescence which sought to represent a normative reality explained by biology and psychology.

Unfortunately, the last ninety years have brought few changes in the way adolescents are perceived by the school and other adult institutions as evident in a recent article in Rolling Stone which states, "If the symptoms are rapid increases in teen deaths from murder, suicide, and car crashes, alcohol and drugs. . . The Disease is Adolescence" (Foster, 1993, p. 55).

Again, by emphasizing that all adolescents are subject to the trauma of adolescence (or the "disease of adolescence"), the school downplays the myriad ways in which adolescence is actually experienced by different students, experiences that are, in fact, integrally connected to gender, race, and class. For example, Linn, Stein, and Young (1992), in citing the growing numbers of
girls being sexually harassed at school by both male teachers and peers, offers poignant evidence that adolescent boys and girls clearly experience school and adolescence very differently.

However, at Foster Middle School combating this "disease of adolescence" means a de-emphasis on gender and race differences and an emphasis on the universality of adolescent delinquency and, therefore, the need for adult control. With approximately 800 students and only 50 adults in positions of authority - 42 teachers, three administrators, one guidance counselor, one librarian, and two administrative assistants (a ratio of sixteen adolescents to every one adult), how a large number of students can be controlled by a relatively small number of adults becomes a central issue at Foster Middle School and maintenance of order and control is evident in every aspect of the school - from the signs that decorate the walls ("Keep to the Right"; "Speak Softly", and "Walk Slowly") to the way classes are organized and time is structured.

Although the teachers at Foster certainly vary in their specific strategies to maintain an orderly, well-run classroom (and, of course, some are more successful than others), overall the classes at Foster are teacher-directed and teacher-controlled. In most classes, teacher-designed seating charts dictate the physical space a student will occupy, class periods are organized around teacher selected
activities, and teacher created rules are enforced at the discretion of the teachers.

Indeed, underlying most of the programs and practices of middle schools like Foster are assumptions steeped in the psychological findings of stage theorists such as Piaget (1952), Erickson (1963), and Kohlberg (1981) who purport to present a gender, class, and race neutral explanation of the normative adolescent experience. Embedded in these theories is the assumption that there is a biologically and psychologically predetermined way of experiencing adolescence (thus, "everyone is equal here"). Indeed, most of us who were prepared to be teachers can remember quite vividly those adolescent and children psychology courses in which we were made to memorize Erickson's eight stages of personality development and Piaget's four stages of cognitive development.

Thus at Foster Middle School, like most middle schools in the United States, the primary determinant of the best kind of schooling for early adolescents is based on the assumption that there are some universal cognitive and behavioral adolescent characteristics. At Foster Middle School, students progress through sixth, seventh, and eighth grade sitting in classes with similarly aged students and learning from textbooks that are deemed academically appropriate for that age student. Multi-age classrooms are non-existent at Foster, and certain subjects
are reserved for certain aged students; for example, only eighth grade students (who are mainly thirteen and fourteen year old students) can take the state history course and pre-algebra.

Juxtaposed against this emphasis on the commonalities students share because of their age (thus, "everyone is equal") is Foster’s mission statement which reads "[our mission] is to promote the maximum academic, physical, social, and emotional development of each child through the combined efforts of the school, the students, the parents and the community (emphasis added)." According to the mission statement, it is the development of the individual child that is the concern of the school; however, despite the sincere intentions of the administration and many of the teachers, individual identity actually becomes translated at Foster Middle School into collective identity. There are simply too many children at Foster to make the "development of each child" a reality.

Mr. Crane, the assistant principal, is well aware of the rupture between the ideal (as stated in the mission statement) and the reality of the bureaucratic underpinnings of schooling: "Sometimes we don’t meet the needs of some of the kids because there are some kids whose behavior is to me a cry for help, but I don’t think we’re always able to reach them because of having so many kids. If you have a small group of kids, it’s easier to get to
know them, their problems; whereas, if you teach a class of 30 and a 150 all day, then that gets hard, and I think sometimes we have too many kids and too many responsibilities and we’re not meeting some of those needs." Thus, individual needs are subordinated to the collective needs of early adolescents in general.

Unwittingly what happens in schools in which age (here adolescence) dictates programs, philosophies, and curriculum is an erasure of the actual experiences of the daily lives of individuals. In this study, there was ample evidence of boys making lewd sexual remarks to girls, of girls deferring to boys to answer questions and to be the leader of learning groups, of boys being given the most visible roles in plays and skits (e.g. in one play presented by the drama class, the three servants were all played by girls, and in a skit presented in a history class, all the parts were played by boys with the exception of one White female), and in one case, of girls being sexually harassed by a male teacher outside of class. All of these incidences support the claim made by others (Fine, 1988; Linn, Stein, & Young, 1992) that schools are not sufficiently attuned to the real concerns and needs of their teenage female students.

"Everyone, Even Girls, Can Try Out for the Football Team"

The third way in which Foster Middle School operates under the guise of equality is through their offering of
the same (or "equal") curricular and extra-curricular opportunities to all students, regardless of race, class, or gender. Thus, on the surface, gender does indeed appear to make no difference at Foster Middle School.

Boys and girls sit side by side in most classes as well as in the cafeteria where forced integration occurs through teacher and administrative intervention (e.g. seating charts and the seating plan in the cafeteria in which students have no choice in where they will sit - the seats are filled up in order). All eighth grade students take the same courses at Foster Middle School (i.e. English, math, science, physical education, and state history) since there are no advanced courses and classes are not ability grouped. (Students do have a limited number of electives from which to choose). Even those classes which were once segregated according to sex - Industrial Arts and Homemaking - are now co-educational at Foster Middle School although there are more girls in Homemaking and more boys in Industrial Arts. Boys and girls participate in physical education together (although they do have separate dressing rooms) with the exception of contact sports (e.g. football, basketball); in these sports girls compete against girls, and boys against boys.

This myth of equality is a powerful agent in the advancing of meritocracy (Rose, 1989). In an educational system which asserts that anyone can achieve success if
he/she has some intellect and a sense of the work ethic, students soon come to internalize that failure in school is a personal problem, rather than a reflection of institutional sexism, classism, and racism. The rhetoric of equality serves to perpetuate the status quo in that schools can show concrete evidence of non-discriminatory policies and practices (e.g. a curriculum undifferentiated for boys and girls), thus, disavowing any need to address the real issues of racism, classism, and sexism. For example, Foster Middle School can rightfully boast that their Homemaking class have a large number of boys sitting in it. They can point out that boys and girls compete against one another in physical education classes. They can even cite the district mandate requiring that girls be allowed to try out for football.

This particular point that the girls can try out for the football team was very important to the girls in this study, for they saw it as "proof" that great strides had been made to establish equality between the sexes. In fact, all four of these girls boasted to me that they had signed up for football team tryouts.

"You know," Sharon told me one day while the four of us were talking, "over the summer the school board passed a rule that girls could play football."

"Yeah," India interrupted, "you could not stop a girl from playing football."
Sharon quickly added, "I was going to play football this year; I had to get a physical and the doctor said that I was not in shape for football."

"I had put my name on that list," Kerry jumped in, followed by Trisha. "Me and Sharon did too."

"And my friends that take PE in Mr. Burch’s class, we put our names on the list," Kerry finished.

Trisha repeated, "So did me and Sharon."

"Coach Burch was going to let me play cos I wanted to," Sharon said.

"Yeah," India stated proudly, "I stayed for almost all the football..."

Sharon interrupted, "The only thing that stopped me was when I went out to get my physical, the doctor said I wasn’t in no shape to play no football at that time. Next year I can play football!"

The reality is that there are no girls on Foster Middle School’s football team and no boys on their cheerleading squad. True, girls cannot legally be prohibited from competing on a public school football team; however, numerous cultural, social, and institutional roadblocks practically guarantee that football will remain a boys sport. According to Linda Brodky (1989), schools operate as if "the classroom is a separate world of its own, in which teachers and students relate to one another undistracted by classism, racism, and sexism that rage.
outside the classroom" (p. 308). The reality is that despite the school’s attempts to offer a gender-free (thus equal) curriculum neither teachers nor students at Foster Middle School can leave their gendered, race, and classed identities neatly packed away at home. Thus, they bring to school all their cultural beliefs and with that comes a whole host of ideas and values about what should and should not be. By dismissing the relevance of gender to the creation of a school identity, the school unwittingly serves to erase the real experiences of girls, thus reinforcing the notion that they are nobodies who as individuals do not really count. Consequently, gender which supposedly makes no difference inevitably makes all the difference to girls who are struggling to construct a gendered identity amidst the flood of conflicting messages and expectations described in the next section.

Gender Makes All the Difference

The Control of Bodies in School

Although the rhetoric of schooling may pronounce that biological differences have no impact on the opportunities available to boys and girls, the fact is, girls are consistently shortchanged (AAUW, 1992) in schools because of the cultural and social expectations which shape gender and function to regulate appropriate feminine behavior (Lesko, 1988). One of the primary ways in which the school operates to define what is considered appropriate behavior
is through the "micropractices of regulation" (Foucault, 1980) which control and contain femininity and female sexuality. These regulations of the body through institutional regulations and through social interactions with boys often serve as an erasure of self since as Foucault (1980) suggests the body is the nexus between knowledge and power. After all, it is our bodies that prove that we are real; our bodies take up space – they signify that we do exist – that we are some body. For Kerry, Trisha, Sharon, and India as well as many adolescent females, their "selves" and their bodies cannot be separated; they are, in fact, their bodies as poignantly and disturbingly illustrated by the posters I asked them to create in which they were to visually represent what they thought was the ideal woman (Appendix D). Their posters presented a view of women as disjointed anatomical parts: pictures of large breasts, long blonde hair, flat White stomachs, long curvy legs, and big brown and blue eyes adorned their posters. Trisha astutely commented, "If they [boys] could, they would take every body apart and put their favorite parts. They would be like, OK, you’ve got nice boobs, you’ve got a nice butt…”

However, in school, their bodies are regulated by the "micropractices" of schooling that either control or dismiss their sexuality and femininity. The ways are often
subtle yet they remind the girls that female sexuality must be contained.

Unlike the dress codes of private and parochial schools which function mainly to regulate female sexuality (see for example, Lesko, 1988), the dress code at Foster Middle School seems to address issues of both normative femininity and masculinity. Boys are not allowed to wear earrings. Skirts and dresses that have revealing lengths and splits are prohibited, and neither boys nor girls can wear clothing with obscene drawings or that advertises drugs, alcohol, or cigarettes. (During my observations, I did see several males wearing Camel cigarette shirts.) However, when girls at Foster are reprimanded for inappropriate dress, the message received by this enforcement in integrally connected to beliefs about normative female behavior which asserts that the exhibition of female sexuality is dangerous and, thus, needs to be controlled.

Kerry told the following story about her encounter with the assistant principal, Mr. Donell, regarding a tight shirt that she was wearing: "One day I had on this shirt and the sleeve part was cut out of it and he was fussing about the shirt, telling me, 'If I ever see you in this office wearing something like that, I guarantee that you won't be back at Foster Middle anymore this year.'"
Chasity, a participant of the larger study, related a similar incident involving her wearing of tight black stretch pants: "One time I was wearing tight pants; they were tight but like my shirt was about this long, and it covered my butt up. But she (the Black woman assistant principal from last year) made me change. I guess she thought they revealed too much." As revealed by Chasity's comments - "it covered my butt up" and "they revealed too much," these girls have already internalized the appropriate ways to show or not to show their bodies.

Although Kerry and Chasity told stories of resisting the school’s dress code, during my observations they (as well as Sharon) actually seemed to use their clothing as a way to hide their bodies from public scrutiny. Both Chasity and Sharon routinely wore a loose-fitting knit shirt hanging almost to the knees with blue jeans (Chasity) or knit pants (Sharon) that were visible only from the knee down. Frequently Sharon would also tie her jacket around her waist, thus, hiding her lower body. Both Chasity and Sharon make F's in physical education because they refuse to wear the mandatory physical education uniform consisting of shorts and a shirt.

In Kerry’s case, she frequently hid parts of her body inside her clothes as illustrated in my field notes recorded during various observations in October and November:
Kerry has her shirt pulled around her face and nose; only her eyes are peeking through. I wonder what is wrong with her today?

Kerry covered her face with her jacket; she always covers parts of her body and seems tired.

Kerry has her arms stuck in her shirt folded across her chest. Is she cold?

Kerry pulled her jacket over her head and went to sleep.

In many ways, these three girls have failed to meet culturally sanctioned ways of being a teenage girl today—both Sharon and Chasity are overweight and Kerry is pregnant (although few people know of her pregnancy); therefore, they use their clothing to detract attention away from their "less than perfect" bodies. Additionally, Kerry’s withdrawal into her clothes closely paralleled her emotional withdrawal from friends and family during this time as she struggled with a pregnancy that not only did she not want or plan, but a pregnancy that she thought would provoke her father into physical abuse.

The school also works in other subtle ways to contain female sexuality. For example, purses, which in mainstream culture are distinctly feminine objects, are a source of tension between Mrs. Hill and her female students. She is constantly telling the girls "Hang your purses up; get them out of the way; put them on the back of the desk."

Similarly the use of brushes, combs, lipstick, hair spray, perfume, and fingernail polish is prohibited in class. Again these objects are (with the exception of combs)
intimately connected with femininity, and displaying femininity is considered inappropriate and grounds for punishment as evident in this substitute teacher’s comments to one Black female, "Young lady, please sit down and put that fingernail polish up, or you’ll get punish work."

However, India, Sharon, Kerry, and Trisha in various ways challenge the school’s regulation of their bodies by boldly displaying their femininity and sexuality. India often dresses quite provocatively, wearing tight dresses, low-cut shirts, tight jeans, short skirts, and red lipstick. Kerry quite conspicuously will retrieve her compact mirror from her purse and apply lipstick and powder in the full view of the teacher. Sharon unabashedly told the assistant principal that she was having sex with Darrin, a Black male student at the school, and that what she did out of school was none of his business. Trisha, in front of her science teacher, revealed to me that she had "put an earring on her belly button last night." She then added, "My sister has two earrings in her titties." And India, Kerry, and Trisha are already plotting to wear Daisy Duke shorts (extremely short shorts that are named after the female character of the 1970’s sit com - "The Dukes of Hazzard") the last day of school. "They can’t do nothing to us the last day of school," said Kerry.

In addition to the "micropractices of regulation" that serve to contain female sexuality in schools, the
culturally and socially prescribed roles of men and women in the world at large operate in the school as a further indication that the bodies of adolescent females are subject to the control of others. Although seemingly playful, the popping of bras, the grabbing of girls' behinds, and references to their breasts as "hooters" and "tits" position girls as victims of male aggressiveness; however, as discussed in greater detail in chapter 7, these girls do not passively accept this role as the acted upon as explained by Sharon, "You do with your body what you want to do. You don't let nobody do nothing to you unless you want it. Like sometimes I'll be standing at my locker and somebody will come grab my butt. I'll turn around and he'll be standing there, and I say, 'Leave me alone you chip-toothed MF'er!'"

The stories that these girls told about the power boys exert over girls in school does indeed closely parallel the hegemonic structures in the world at large which function to keep women oppressed. Kerry, Trisha, Sharon, and India spoke poignantly of girls' vulnerability to male sexual threats and assaults (both physical and verbal), even if the assaults were justified by the boys as "I was just playing." Even a "look" can cause women and girls to fear for their physical safety as exemplified in Nicole's, another White participant in the larger study, fear of a particular boy who harassed her because she refused to
cheat for him on a test: "This boy last year, I wouldn’t let him copy off my test and he knows where I live and I was home alone and he knows that, and he came looking at me all funny. He showed me a look that I didn’t like. He was looking at me all funny, so I didn’t even go outside."

Although seemingly innocuous, various rules and practices in school serve to transmit a powerful message to girls about the proper way to dress, act, and be a female. Undeniably, the gender code that is legitimated at Foster reflects the values of its middle-class teachers and administrators, thus essentializing femininity into a middle-class White construct. For those who are not White and/or not middle class, their gendered identity (as exemplified by their behavior and dress) is judged against a norm that does not necessarily reflect their own understandings of what it means to be a woman/female. Thus, Kerry, Trisha, Sharon, and India find themselves in conflicted positions that must be continuously negotiated.

"A Proper Little Lady"

Another way in which Foster Middle School shapes gender and appropriate feminine behavior is through the subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) message that "girls should act like ladies." Mrs. Hill, after a week of numerous fights between girls, commented, "Where I’m from, nice girls didn’t fight." And Ms. Lee, a physical education teacher at Foster, scornfully stated (in
reference to Sharon’s dating a Black boy), "When I was growing up, White girls wouldn’t dream of dating a Black boy." Certainly, the teachers and administrators would deny that one of their educational goals is to teach girls how to act like ladies; yet, the school does indeed work in many ways to help create "proper little ladies" as evidenced in this incident that occurred during my second week of observations:

Sharon walked into class on this particular day being unusually boisterous. She was hitting desks, shouting to a girl in the hall, "Go ahead, girl", and tapping people on the head as she moved to her back row seat. The bell rang, and Sharon continued talking rather loudly.

"Sharon?" Mrs. Hill warned her.
"Huh?" she replied.
"Sharon!" Mrs. Hill repeated.
"Huh?" Sharon replied.
"Ma’am," Mrs. Hill corrected her.
"Ma’am," Sharon answered.
"I want you to move to the table over there to take your test."
"Just for the test," Sharon replied on the verge of defiance.
"Yes," Mrs. Hill replied.
"OK." Sharon picked up her bags and made a big production of moving to the back table (the designated "time out" chair).

Once in her new seat, Sharon continued being disruptive, yelling to a male student, "Shut up!"

Finally, Mrs. Hill called Sharon into the hall. Minutes later, Sharon returned to her original seat and was quiet and cooperative for the remainder of the period.

Later Mrs. Hill commented that she had told Sharon, "I thought I was going to see a courteous young lady in you. That's what I'd like to see. Do you think you can go back in the room and be a courteous young lady?" Sharon had replied, "Yes ma'am."

Indeed, Sharon’s, India’s, Kerry’s, and Trisha’s imitation of what has traditionally been viewed as male ways (e.g. cursing, fighting, behaving aggressively, talking back to the teacher, and being loud) has marked them as "problem" students with their teachers. Sharon, India, and Trisha receive punish work from at least one teacher almost daily. Sharon has been suspended from school three times this year (once for cursing a teaching and twice for fighting), India and Trisha have been in Behavior Clinic (a classroom manned by a paid teacher in which misbehaving students must go after school as punishment for in-school behavior) numerous times. Although, Kerry has stayed out of trouble this year ("I
have to get out of middle school this year"), and is quiet in class (discussed later), she has been a discipline problem at this school: "I used to be the baddest girl in this school."

One of the primary reasons that Trisha, Sharon, Kerry, and India are viewed as "problem students" at school is their propensity towards physical fighting. These girls fight other girls as well as boys at school. As discussed in detail in Chapter 7, Kerry, Trisha, Sharon, and India have all been suspended for fighting. However, the message they receive from the school is that fighting is deviant behavior for adolescent girls (it is unladylike) although it is considered normative (although inappropriate school) behavior for adolescent boys.

In addition to being a "proper little lady", the school also fosters an image of adolescent girls as being loving, responsible, and married mothers even though formal sex education is virtually non-existent at Foster Middle School. (Interestingly, Mr. Crane said the school "covered" sex education in the seventh grade science classes, but these eighth grade girls said that they had never been taught sex education although they all felt it was badly needed). Displayed on several walls of the school are posters depicting adolescent girls with babies. In one poster a Black teenage girl is holding a baby - the caption says "The one on the left [the baby] will finish high
school before the one on the right." Another poster, sponsored by Russell Athletic Wear, depicts a White teenage girl holding a crying baby and reads: "Some very talented athletes won’t be wearing our uniform this year. Nearly half of all females dropouts quit school because they’re pregnant. Stay in school." The message is quite clear: smart girls do not get pregnant while in school and good girls do not have babies without the benefit of a husband.

In Homemaking, the students (both male and female) sew rag dolls and later carry these babies with them for an entire week; the purpose is to impress upon them the huge responsibility of taking care of a baby. India participated in this project, bringing her baby to all her classes in a shoebox that was made to resemble a cradle. Although Sharon was not part of this Homemaking class, she brought a Black Cabbage Patch Doll (complete with real Evenflo bottles and baby bibs) to school one day and proudly boasted to me, "I have four outfits for her in my locker, so I can change her after every class." In fact, it seemed quite a contrast during the group discussion of fighting when Sharon while gently stroking the plaits of her Cabbage Patch Doll talked about her breaking a forty ounce malt liquor bottle and threatening to cut her boyfriend with it.

Numerous studies (Arnot, 1994; Deem, 1980; Delamont, 1980; Grant, 1984; Valli, 1986) have documented how schools reproduce traditional notions of femininity and a "woman’s
place." In *Becoming Clerical Workers*, Valli (1986) demonstrates how a cooperative office education program in a Midwestern high school serves to reinforce traditional beliefs about a woman's "place" being in the home first and at work second. Years of being a cheerleader, Homecoming Queen, obedient daughter, mother's helper, and loyal girlfriend make the transition to office work relatively easy for the senior girls in Valli's study, for what is expected of them as clerical workers mirrors the sexual division of labor to which they have already been socialized.

Like Valli, Linda Grant (1984) claims that schools serve as transmitters of both gender and social position from generation to generation. For Black females, the school continues to reinforce understandings of Black females as "mammies" as teachers expect Black females to put the needs of others above their own and to serve as the liaison between Black culture and White culture.

Certainly, "being a proper little lady" in school has its rewards, especially in terms of academic success. Signithia Fordham (1993) claims that to be taken seriously as a student, Black females have to minimize their Black female identity and impersonate the White male. Successful Black females achieve academic success by becoming voiceless and by adopting male ways of thinking, speaking, and writing in school. They learn to "respond as if
absent, rather than present" (p. 21). Fordham calls this impersonation of the White female, and ultimately the White male, "gender passing" (borrowing from Pagano's (1990) use of the term to describe females in the academy). However, this "passing" comes at a cost as academically successful Black females must separate themselves from their community and from association with "Loud Black girls." The loud Black girls are the Black females who, although academically able, refuse to be silent and voiceless. They push for visibility, ironically, by adopting the male loud voice. By being loud, they demand to be acknowledged – yet do so at a cost of academic success.

Although the student handbook at Foster asserts that all middle school students will be expected to "behave appropriately", as evident in the above section, the principles guiding appropriate behavior are gender-specific and often contradictory. If, for example as Fordham suggests, Black girls must act like White males to succeed in school, then being a proper little lady becomes problematic. Furthermore, behaving appropriately in school requires girls to obey orders, follow rules, and act passively in order to be a "good student" (i.e. well-behaved, quiet, and obedient) while simultaneously requiring them to demonstrate competitiveness, exhibit independent thinking, and show initiative to be an academically successful student (Arnot, 1994). It is these
conflicting expectations in which girls can "never get it right" and how they struggle to "get it right" that is central in understanding the school experiences of Kerry, Trisha, Sharon, and India.

"Never Getting It Right"

Nicole (who was part of the larger study) is the embodiment of a "proper little lady". As a member of a fundamentalist religious group, she is not allowed to date until she gets to be "marrying age" (approximately 18 or 19). Holding hands, kissing, and dancing with boys is strictly prohibited by her church. Furthermore, she is not allowed to wear make-up "that attracts boys" or red fingernail polish - "only women should be able to wear red." Although she is marginalized in school because of her religion (according to Nicole, she is continuously harassed for being a "nerd"), she does extremely well academically. She is quiet, she never speaks without being called upon, she helps the teacher by stapling papers during lunch recess, she erases the board and picks up other people's paper from the floor, she helps other female students if they do not understand something in class and she makes A's and B's in school. She is, as one teacher commented, "the perfect student."

Although schools seem to reward girls like Nicole who exhibit the traditional feminine characteristics of caring, sensitivity, quietness, and unaggressiveness, they
simultaneously ask girls to adopt traditionally viewed masculine traits of independence and competition to achieve academic success (Hudson, 1984) as illustrated by the comments made by the principal after an assembly conducted by a White male baseball coach, "All 792 of you need to focus on competition - compete in the classroom for A's and B's. Some of you just need to compete for D's, but compete!"

Because of the contradictory and conflicting ideologies embedded in school practices, Trisha, Kerry, India, and Sharon frequently feel that "nothing they do is right."

Furthermore, what is considered appropriate feminine behavior is highly contextualized for these girls; thus, they continuously move between several different gendered identities.

Undeniably, they very often take up in school what is considered a male discourse; however, they also just as often embrace traditional feminine characteristics. Kerry is quiet in class because "boys don't like loud girls." Trisha acts mature (which means quiet) in physical education because "Coach Hurts is fine" and she wants him to think of her as a woman, not a child (all the girls agree that women are quiet). India and Sharon spend much of their time in class secretly writing love poems to boys.

Both India and Sharon often sacrifice doing their own work in order to "help the boys out," thus embodying the good, selfless woman who puts others needs in front of her
own. One day in history, India acquiesced to the demands of a very insistent Black male who wanted her to write a title on a booklet he was completing. After completing the work, the young man rudely exclaimed, "Ok, go back to your desk now!" India complied obediently.

Another day during math, a Black female substitute was having great difficulty getting the class to settle down and be quiet. Five Black males were especially unruly, and the first half of the period was devoted to her screaming at these boys "Shut up" and "This is your last chance" [said approximately six times]. Sharon was very quiet and polite, raising her hand once saying, "Excuse me, can I sharpen my pencil?" Finally the substitute teacher gave one of the boys, Jerry, punish work; after doing so, Sharon promptly put her classwork up ("I’ll do this this weekend"), took Jerry’s punish work, and began completing it. Several times Sharon shook her hand as if it were tired, but she continued to write voraciously. As the substitute walked towards Sharon’s desk, she pointed to some punish work on the floor and asked, "Whose punish work is this?" Sharon replied, "His." Nick, another Black male, retorted indignantly to Sharon, "Girl, don’t be calling my name." Sharon replied, "Is your name His? Give it to me and I’ll copy it." Sharon then finished the first boy’s punish work, handed it back to him, and began working on Nick’s
punish work. Later, I asked her why she did their punish work; she answered, "I like to write."

Interestingly, the times in which these young women do conform to normative expectations of females as caring and in connection with others, they often break school rules (as in the above incident, Sharon’s completing another student’s punish work is a violation of school rules). One day when Sharon and India were sharing their dedication pages in a history booklet they each had completed, Mrs. Hill reprimanded them, saying, "Wait a minute, India. We’re going to have to make some changes. Look at me. You’re going to have to do your work alone and not talk to Sharon. I know y’all are good friends and that’s wonderful, but be good friends out of class." When Sharon was suspended for wanting to fight ten girls who were harassing India, the principal told her, "Concern for others can get you in trouble. You can care too much."

Inevitably, what happens to Kerry, India, Sharon, and Trisha in school is they struggle to construct a school identity that validates their continuously changing adolescent and feminine identity. However, time and time again, their identity is questioned, and they are left with the feeling that nothing they do is right. By the end of the year, they have quit trying to get it right.
Being Nobody

Foster Middle School is certainly not the only place in which Kerry, Trisha, India, and Sharon learn the sanctioned rules and regulations of being a woman/lady/girl. Judging by their seemingly indifference to most of their teachers, I question how much influence the school actually has over them. However, through these micropractices of regulation, school functions to transmit what is accepted truths about gender from generation to generation; in this way, the school functions to perpetuate a patriarchal society. Furthermore, what becomes accepted as a fact or natural law in school is more often than not the White, middle-class version of truth.

By ages 13, 14, and 15 Sharon, Trisha, Kerry, and India know all too well the socially accepted and appropriate ways of being a female in their school - that way is White and lady-like and middle-class. In many ways, they have resisted these norms; they fight, they curse, they often use their body in seemingly inappropriate ways. By taking up a male discourse, they have failed to conform to the normative standards of White female adolescence; in short, they are not proper little ladies. Yet, when they do act like "ladies" - when they sacrifice their needs for others, when they show a sensitivity to the concerns of others - they are reprimanded for not following school rules. They never seem to get it right.
By vacillating between a masculine discourse and a feminine discourse, these girls have defied the notion of a unitary self. However, by constructing an identity that is nonunitary and unstable, Trisha, Kerry, Sharon, and India are perceived by the school as having an "identity" problem as illuminated by comments from teachers such as "Sharon doesn't know who she is"; "India is having an identity crisis"; and, "Trisha can't decide if she is a boy or a girl." Because their identity is continuously questioned or dismissed as "abnormal," they feel that more often than not they are simply "no/bodies" and "no/things" in school. However, as illuminated in the next two chapters, Trisha, Sharon, Kerry, and India create their own discourse of femininity and adolescence in an attempt to be "some/body."
CHAPTER SIX
GANGSTERS, COWBOYS, GODDESSES, AND GOOD WOMEN: EXPLORING/EXPLODING THE MYTHS OF FEMININITY

Standing in the cafeteria line with Trisha, who often refers to herself as a "dumb" blonde, and several other eighth grade students, a male student leaned over and asked Trisha, "Is she your mother [referring to me]?" Trisha replied, "No, they kinda look alike, but my mom has long blond hair to here" [she pointed to her shins]. She then quickly added, "My mom’s so rich it’s pitiful; she a lawyer in Florida." Earlier in her math class, Tricia had told the same story about her mother’s long hair to another male, who replied "Yeah, right" and then looked at me and muttered, "Trisha always lies."

I do not know if Trisha is "lying" about her mother, for Trisha does not live with her mother and, in fact, rarely sees her. I do know that Trisha's mother is not a lawyer, and she is certainly not rich. And I also know that despite Trisha’s constant remarks such as "I don’t even know my ABC’s, but hey, I’m a blonde," that she is not blonde haired; she is, in fact, unequivocally brown haired. However, I also know that her stories about her mother – the story of the princess woman with long blonde hair and the story of the successful, powerful superexecutive woman – are fictions that reveal much about what we think our lives should be as females/women/ladies.
Stories and lies - truth and fiction - fact and fantasy - that is what this chapter is about. Borrowing from the Southern use of the word "story" to refer to an embellishment of the truth (my parents never once accused me of lying, however, they frequently sternly inquired of me, "Natalie, are you telling me a story?), I intend in this chapter to examine not the "lies" these girls told me but rather the "stories" they told. Certainly, my use of the term "story" could be construed as a concerted choice of a narrative style that stays true to the subject of the study - that is, Southern girls. And although this is, in part, true, it is not the whole "story".

As discussed in Chapter 1, during the first three months of the study I grew increasingly frustrated with the number of contradictory stories these girls told me. I kept wondering "Why are these girls lying to me?" Initially, I questioned myself as a researcher; after all "good" researchers knew how to prod "the truth" out of their informants. Then I began regretting my choice of methodology - ethnographic research: How can we guarantee that our participants are not duping us by telling us what they think we want to hear? Lastly, I turned to questioning my participants' psychological frame of mind - insisting that some of them were simply pathological liars who needed professional help. Of course, I may not be a good researcher and ethnography may be a faulty research
method and my participants may be pathological liars – but I really do not think so! Therefore, I have chosen not to view their contradictory stories as lies or intentional dupes. Rather, I have chosen to view them as "stories" that highlight both the truths and the lies about cultural myths of femininity.

In the following sections, I explore four central metaphors that Trisha, Sharon, Kerry, and India used to frame their stories about themselves. By presenting a single dominant image by which these girls told their stories, I do not wish to suggest that these individual girls are unitary and unproblematically gendered beings. Indeed, their stories presented in the other chapters demonstrate how, as Davies (1989) puts it, "individuals, through learning the discursive practices of society, are able to position themselves within those practices in multiple ways and to develop subjectivities both in concert with and in opposition to the ways in which others choose to position them" (p. xi). However, my intention in this chapter is to explore these dominant images and cultural myths not as undisputed and unitary "facts" or "truths" about their experiences as adolescent females but as "stories" that reveal how these young women learn the discursive practices of society that often become constituted as the "truth" about femininity.
Metaphors of Femininity

Rapunzel and Scarlett: The Myths of Southern Womanhood

Trisha’s stories about her mother being a princess with long blonde hair and a highly successful lawyer, thoroughbred owner, and jockey are stories that I know all too well. Growing up, one of my favorite stories was the fairy tale Rapunzel. In the fairy tale, the beautiful Rapunzel with "splendid long hair, as fine as spungold" (Grimm and Grimm, 1965, p. 130) is trapped in a tower isolated from the world of good and evil. However elusive, she is still the object of desire of a male admirer – the King’s son who spots her in the tower and yells to her, "Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair." She does so, and the King’s son climbs up it. When Rapunzel, the virtuous and innocent virgin, sees the man, she is afraid, "for she had never set eyes on a man before (p. 131)." However, the King’s son talks soothingly to her, wins her trust, declares his love and desire for her, and asks her to marry him. Losing her fear, she agrees to marry him because he is strong and virile and young and handsome, and, of course, they live happily ever after.

Trisha and I as well as countless other White women understand all too well the implications of the Rapunzel story – innocent beautiful girls with long blonde hair always have a handsome prince who both desires them and protects them. The cost is simple – "we let our hair down"
only in front of our handsome prince; in return, he promises to love, cherish, and protect us from all evil. It is no wonder that Trisha portrays both her mother and herself as the beautiful blonde princess!

However, the beautiful, helpless, protected princess is but one piece of my story of femininity – the other is the story of the superwoman – "the lawyer who is so rich, it's pitiful." For me, that superwoman was found in the story of Scarlett O'Hara!

In 1973 as a sixth grade student, I decided to read *Gone With the Wind*. This experience was a pivotal moment in my understanding of who I wanted to be, for I longed with all my heart to be Scarlett O'Hara. Of course, good Southern girls should want to be Mrs. O'Hara or Melanie Wilkes, for they embodied the idealized virtues of Southern femininity (virtuousness, piety, and domesticity), but not I. As a young girl just recognizing her own sexuality, I thought Scarlett was the epitome of what it meant to be a true Southern woman. Besides being beautiful and having an 18 inch waist, she was bright and cunning and brave and spirited. She knew how to get what she wanted, and it was certainly not by cowering behind the coat-tails of a man. After all, she did almost single-handedly save Tara, provide for her own and Ashley's family, and build a lucrative lumber business out of her husband's mediocre one. Certainly, Scarlett rejected the myth of the passive,
virtuous White southern lady by becoming an active woman, intent on getting what she wanted. And men still worshipped and adored her! To a young, naive girl of 11, Scarlett O'Hara was proof that you could have it all — brains, beauty, and boyfriends. I just knew that there had to be a dashing, handsome Rhett Butler out there waiting for me. When he never appeared, I spent the next ten years wondering "What went wrong with the story? Was it all a big lie?"

Reconciling the truths and lies — the multiple and contradictory stories these girls learn about femininity — becomes central in negotiating a sense of self that is, on the one hand, "normal" and, on the other hand, individual. Like my own Rapunzel and Scarlett story, Trisha, Kerry, India, and Sharon have their own stories — their own myths — their own truths about what it means to be a woman. Often their stories do not seem in accordance with their behavior and actions. By exploring the primary images and stories which these girls used to describe themselves we can learn much about how adolescent girls construct a gendered identity that both reinforces and challenges traditional gender norms.

The Rough and Tough Cowboy

When Trisha walked into the history class I was observing during the first week of school, I knew immediately that I would ask her to participate in the
Standing five feet and eleven inches tall and wearing cowboy boots, Wrangler jeans, and a heavy silver belt buckle, Trisha was easily identifiable as a rodeoer— that is, someone who competes in rodeos. Having been reared in a town in which the welcoming sign outside the city limits once read—Welcome to Greensville, home of Miss Sally Jo Kramer, 1978 Miss Rodeo World and 1978 World Champion Barrel Racer, I always held a secret envy of girls who excelled in what I considered to be a "boys' sport." My first impression of Trisha was of a "tomboy" who defied stereotypical understandings of females as passive and unaggressive.

Indeed, Trisha's stories of rodeoing were framed within the traditional masculine narrative that situates the rugged male as one who embarks on journeys of thrill and adventure. Never afraid, the rugged male individual faces what seems to be insurmountable obstacles, always to emerge the valiant victor! Trisha’s stories sound remarkably similar to these masculinist narratives:

I was barrel racing in a rodeo and a snake came out underneath one of the barrels and my horse went to jump over it and there was a hole and he slid. When he went to get up, he jerked his head and broke the tiedown and he hit me in the nose, broke my nose in 32 pieces. I got back on my horse and finished the pattern. I had red all over my western shirt; Grandma kept it and showed it to me... When I got out of the hospital, the doctor told me, I do not want you on a horse for two months. But the day I got out I had that big white thing on my nose, I went out in the pasture, saddled up my horse and started running the barrels. I said, "I'm not getting
off my horse for no two months." I've always been like that... A week after I broke my nose, I still had that white caste thing on my nose, and there was a rodeo and I had already paid to bull ride and I got out there with the white thing on my nose and rode. I won $2000; it was good enough!

The longest I ever stayed on a bull was eight and a half seconds; that's when I broke my ankle the first time. I jumped off and I was running and the clown cut in front of me and I stopped and the bull picked me up and flipped me and then he ran toward me and I jumped and he ran over my ankle and crushed my ankle. But they didn't give me a penalty; no, they gave me 96 points cos I broke my ankle and I got up and walked off; I literally got up and walked off.

When I go to a rodeo, I don't know if I'm going to live to see the next day. When I'm on a bull, I'm like, "I hope I live to see tomorrow; I hope I live to see tomorrow!"

By telling her story through traditionally viewed masculine plots, Trisha positions herself as the powerful protagonist who, in pursuit of her own happiness, overcomes the odds (i.e. a girl succeeding at a boy's game), eventually to become the winner, thus deserving of power and respect.

Interestingly, part of Trisha's stories about rodeoing involves her experiences as Miss Rodeo Queen - a title she won last year. What appears to be a disjuncture in her masculine narrative actually reinforces this identity as a girl who "acts" like a boy, for even as Miss Rodeo Queen, Trisha exaggerates her "maleness" and reappropriates different meanings to the terms "queen" and "pageant":

It's not a beauty contest; they don't care what you look like. It's more the questions, and
what your horse can do and will do. As queen, I have to show up at all PRCA (Professional Cowboy Rodeo Association) and IPRA (International Professional Rodeo Association) rodeos. I just brush my hair, put on a cowboy hat, put on a long sleeve shirt, Wranglers, cowboy boots, my queen buckle, and that’s it, get on my horse and ride. Some girls are all fussy; they worry about their nails, their hair, their makeup, not me, I get out there and play in the mud.

Although Trisha positions herself as a risk-taker and thrill seeker, Trisha’s story of rodeoing is also the story of woman as the proverbial outsider. In fact, in Trisha’s first story about rodeoing, she emphasized her gendered identity and the conflicts that inevitably arise when a girl tries to play "a boys game":

When I go back behind the gates, the boys say, "What are you doing back here?" because I’m a girl. And they, like, make fun of me, and I go out there and I think about, "Well, the guys make fun of me because I’m a girl and this is a guys’ sport", so I just go out there and try to win and I do.

Trisha’s success in rodeoing is judged by her ability to "gender pass" (Pagano, 1990), to "impersonate the male." Trisha feels that she must constantly prove to the male rodeoers that she is "one of them" thus worthy of their praise and their friendship:

It’s kinda hard cos you got to put up with them always teasing you, making fun of you, and when you’re out there riding, most of the girls will hoop and holler at you, but the guys, "Boo, get off, you’re a girl; you don’t need to be riding." And when I get off, and I land, a girl lands better than guys do cos you have more of a balance; the guys get stepped on; I can’t say I’ve never been stepped on, but that was when I first started riding, and, they say, "What score did you get" and they’ll hear my score and
they’ll say, "You need to quit riding cos you’re better than us. We take back everything we said."

At rodeos, bullriding, the guys will go, "This ain’t nothing for girls; girls get hurt too easy. Oh, I broke my fingernail; I messed up my hair. Is my makeup smeared?" They think all girls are sissy types, and you know, I got out there one night, it was muddy bullriding, and I fell in the mud. I got my hair full of mud; I looked like a mud dog; everybody’s like, "Look at that girl; she’s all muddy." I got up and got a big glob of mud and threw it at him. He said, "Oh, you ruined my shirt." And you thought girls were bad, look at you. I’m not even worried about my jeans; that’s what a washing machine is for.

Although the stories above situate Trisha as the rough and tough (and thus powerful) cowboy, within this story of dare and adventure is another story — one in which Trisha positions herself as the dutiful and obedient woman who defers her sense of agency to the power and will of others — in Trisha’s case, it is her boyfriend and two influential adult males who are responsible for her being the only girl bullrider in the state. Interestingly, Trisha began talking about her decision to ride bulls as a deliberate choice she made by herself to prove her stamina and toughness:

"How did you decide to ride bulls?" I asked Trisha.

She answered, "Well, I seen them at the rodeos and everybody said that bullriding was the roughest sport — to get away from the fences because this is a mean bull. So I said that I’d try it. And that’s how I got into it."

However, this was the only time in our conversations that she acknowledged her own sense of agency in deciding
to ride bulls. Usually she related her decision to ride to the determination of her boyfriend ("He’s the one who got me into it") or to adult males who seemed to think it was advantageous to be connected in some way to the only female bull rider in the state:

We like have bulls down the street from our house, and I go down there and I practice riding the bulls, and well, Mr. Fred Blanson, uh, he taught me how to ride.

Mr. Bobby Soreski got me into it. He gives me $50 for every bull I ride in a rodeo. Uh, he says he trains me, you know, which he does, he works with me and he works with his bulls, and so he helps me a lot too. He gets thanked and gets all kinds of stuff from people. People say, "Thanks for letting a girl be a bull rider."

In the above story, Trisha takes up the princess narrative by becoming the responsibility of others – by disavowing control of her life. By deferring her sense of agency, Trisha inevitably places her life in the control of others – here, male others. She maintains the image of girls as needing male protection, as being the "weaker sex" but does so within the realities of her own life as a rodeoer. Trisha’s story of the submissive girl couched with the rough and tough cowboy story highlights the conflicted negotiations that occur in constructing a gendered identity. On the one hand, Trisha is keenly aware that the masculine story of competitiveness, physicality, and individualism is the prized story in our culture and affords one economic and emotional privileges. Indeed, the one place in which Trisha is continuously validated and
feels the most confident about herself is in the rodeo arena. On the other hand, Trisha’s references to herself as a "dumb blonde", her depiction of the ideal woman as being beautiful, big-breasted and scantily clothed (Appendix D, Poster Three), and her willingness to give men the credit for her riding bulls demonstrate the power of the controlling images in our culture that situate girls as unthinking objects of men’s desires.

The Gangster

Unlike Trisha, Sharon rarely used the myth of the beautiful princess to frame her stories about herself. Rather her stories were much more attuned to the images of the "new Superwoman" - (my Scarlett story) in which women are positioned as powerful beings who defy conformity to societal norms, women who are ultimately responsible for their own lives. Sharon refers to this non-conformist, empowered sense of being not as the Superwoman or Scarlett story but "the gangster" story - the story of being in charge of one’s own life. For Sharon, being a gangster transcends traditional understandings of normative feminine and masculine behavior:

Sharon told me during our first interview, "I just can’t act like a young lady cause I’m loud and like to be active and stuff."

I responded, "Do you think those are male or boy traits?"
Sharon quickly replied, "No, they’re more gangster-like acts."

Her reference to gangster draws from the images of many of the popular rap artists (most of whom are male and Black) who seem to defy authoritative figures (e.g. parents and teachers) and established institutions (e.g. White policemen). In many youth sub-cultures (both Black and White) these "gangsters" embody a sense of power and control and a rejection of traditional understandings of unempowered teenagers. What becomes telling about Sharon’s gangster story is her positioning of herself as always on the "outside" of the dominant culture and institutions, yet always in power. For Sharon, "being true to myself" necessitates a rejection of mainstream beliefs about gender and race.

Like Trisha, Sharon piqued my interest early in the study. In a world in which the ideal woman is blonde, beautiful, blue-eyed, and slim, and has gorgeous teeth, hair, and complexion, Sharon fails miserably. She is tall and overweight; her hair is brown and short and often unruly; she has acne, and her teeth are chipped and a dullish brown. Sharon also seemed to challenge what I considered to be traditional feminine behavior. As a White girl, who towered over almost everybody in her class, Sharon made sure her presence was known. She was loud, often hollering out answers without raising her hand. She
verbally challenged teachers when reprimanded, and she fought quite frequently, especially with boys smaller than she. After the incident described in Chapter 5 in which she was reminded to act like a "proper little lady", Mrs. Hill told me, "Sharon tries to act tough; she’s always getting in fights; she even wants to be on the football team." Months later during an interview with a close adult friend of Sharon’s family, Dana [the adult friend] commented, "I’m amazed that after all she’s been through, Sharon is still hanging tough."

As exemplified in these two very different remarks made about Sharon’s toughness – (one used disparagingly and the other positively), being "tough" connotes multiple interpretations; however, for Sharon "acting tough" - "being a gangster" - reflects an emotional and physical survival strategy that demonstrates that she alone is in control of her fate, thus responsible for what she does and who she becomes. It is this understanding of self as an empowered woman that becomes the central metaphor in the myriad stories Sharon told about herself and her world.

In describing herself, Sharon on several occasions said, "I’m a Black girl trapped in a White girl’s body." Sharon’s friends are Black; her boyfriends are Black; for most of the study, she lived with a Black friend in an all-Black neighborhood, and last year she had a baby whose father was Black. Her "acting Black" is considered by the
teachers at Foster Middle School to be abnormal behavior for a White girl. According to Ms. Tate, Sharon’s physical education teacher, "Sharon’s vocabulary and the way she talks is so Black. I’ve never seen anyone so much act the other way." "The other way" is, of course, Black. In response to why Sharon signs her name Sharon "black" [her last name is, indeed, Black], Mrs. Hill responded, "Sharon is trying to associate herself with Blacks. She runs around with them; she talks like them; she even lives with them."

By taking on a Black discourse, Sharon’s teachers feel that she has an identity problem. As one teacher put it, "Sharon doesn’t know who she is."

Sharon claims that her identification with Blacks is at the root of her problems with both her teachers (all of whom are White) and with White students. "I’m different from y’all [meaning White girls]," Sharon told Trisha one day during class. "Yeah," Trisha answered, "you act weird." "No," Sharon replied, "I act Black."

Additionally, as discussed in Chapter 7, Sharon also acts tough in that she gets in frequent fights, and when she fights, she brags, "I fight like a man": Yeah, I’ve been in trouble with the police for fighting with an armed weapon. When they found me, I had a knife in my shoe, a knife on my side, a gun on my side, a gun in my hand.

In short, according to Ms. Hill, "she wants to be one of the boys."
For White girls, being "one of the boys" and "acting Black" is not an option in a culture in which the constructs of male and female black and White are diametrically opposed. Since Sharon very often takes on both a male discourse and a Black discourse, she is considered abnormal and culturally deficient. Indeed, Sharon is judged much more harshly at school than either her White male or Black female counterparts. Thus, when her raced or gendered identity is questioned, Sharon always situates herself as an "outsider" - a "gangster" - in control of her own life as illustrated in this story Sharon related:

One teacher at this school called me out of class and told me what I’m doing is embarrassing us. And I said, "Who do you mean by us?” and she said, "the Whites" and I said, "Whatcha mean by that? Look you can teach me at school but you can’t tell me if I want to date a Black man or a White man. You don’t tell me nothing about my love life."

On another occasion, Sharon was sent to the principal’s office for fighting with a White female who had called her a whore. Again, Sharon situates herself, even in relationships with adults, as the one in power: "I was about to fight in this classroom with Katie Cassman cos she went back and told somebody I was a whore for dating Black boys. And Mr. Donell told me that I had no business confronting her, and I said, ‘What else I’m supposed to do? Let people talk about me? I don’t think so. Nobody’s going to talk about me and get away with it.’"
In her relationships with men, Sharon also portrays herself as the one who controls the relationship. She talks candidly about her ability to manipulate her boyfriends. Although manipulative behavior has stereotypically been viewed as a feminine trait, this behavior is in keeping with her "gangster" identity; manipulation is often the most viable strategy to ensure that she will not be "used" by boys:

Some boys will tell you they love you and when they ask you for it [sex] and you don’t give it to them, they get mad. Well, I tell them, "If you love me, then you can wait for it until I’m ready to give it to you, and if you can’t you can go find another woman."

Like India, Sharon claimed that she has sex with men for money. However, unlike India’s story, there is no element of love or romance to Sharon’s story — it is simply her ability to exert power over boys for her own gain: "I asked him [a boyfriend] for some money on the phone cos he wanted me to skip school yesterday and come to his house and spend the night with him. He said he didn’t have no money. ‘You don’t have no money but still you want me to come spend time with you; that’s time I could be spending with somebody else that gives me money.’ I didn’t go."

Like her stories about her interactions with adult figures and her interactions with males, Sharon’s stories about having a baby at age 12 present her as a person in charge of her own life and one not worried about the criticisms of others. Unlike Kerry who asserted that her
getting pregnant was not a deliberate choice or India who romanticizes mothering, Sharon talks very matter-of-factly about her pregnancy last year: "I don’t care what people be saying. I should know what comes in me and what comes out me. There’s nothing wrong with having a child. I wanted it; I had it; I’m going to keep her, and I’m not getting rid of her."

When I asked her about her mother’s response to her having a baby whose father was Black, she replied, "My mamma don’t approve of me having that baby, but I don’t live with my mamma. The school think I do, but I don’t. And the only time my mama sees the baby is when I decide to bring her to her, and I stay there with her."

When India claimed during one of our group discussions that "your parents can push you into getting pregnant", Sharon emphatically disagreed, saying, "Your daddy didn’t make you do it; your mamma didn’t make you do it either cos when you was laying there, they weren’t there with you."

Later she declared, "What I do with my body is my business."

In Sharon’s public stories there are no deferrals to men, no references to being a "good woman," no romanticized portrayals of relationships with boys; thus, the main text of her story seems to disrupt a traditional construction of a feminine identity; however, like most stories, as we peel away the layers, we inevitably uncover other texts – the
ones that speak poignantly of the mysteries, paradoxes, tensions, and conflicts that make us human. It is in Sharon’s private personal writing that another text surfaces – one that positions Sharon not as a gangster but as a vulnerable adolescent female struggling with her sense of self:

Feelings

Happy,
Sad,
Mad,
Hurt,
Upset,
Alone.
Why do they change on me?
One day I might be one
The next day I’m another
Why do they change on me?

Dreams

Hold fast to dreams
For dreams of love die
Love is a broken heart
That cannot be fixed!
Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
You will not go
With them.

If

If I were you
We would be the same.
If I were you
I wouldn’t be me.
If I were you
Where would we go?
If I were you.
But look I’m not,
I’m me!
Early one morning in January I walked into the office and found Sharon sitting on the couch crying. Next to her were several small pieces of facial tissues which she was using to dab at her eyes. I asked her what was wrong, and she replied, "I’m getting suspended for ten days for trying to fight for India." As we continued talking, Sharon poignantly articulated what she saw as the crux of her problems in school, "You know when I was in sixth grade, I never said a word, and I never got in trouble; I kept all my feelings inside til I was about to bust. You know I can’t do that no more, I’ve got to express myself, and seems like when I do, I get in trouble. I can’t even be myself here."

This year Sharon has chosen not to be silent although she is well aware that "good" silent girls are rewarded at school. But talking back and speaking up are, to her, necessary for her spiritual and emotional survival. However, by positioning herself as a woman fully in charge of her own life, one invulnerable to pain and the criticisms of others, she continues to hide another part of her life. The moments of self-doubt, the times of loneliness, and the feelings of vulnerability remain unspoken truths about Sharon’s identity but truths she rarely reveals in public.

In Sharon’s stories of "acting tough" and "being a gangster," she fights to make her voice heard, her presence
felt, her sense of self validated. By emphasizing her own
determination and free will, Sharon, in many ways,
reinforces the myth about identity construction that
suggests "we can be anything we want to be." Indeed,
throughout my interviews with Sharon, she continuously
repeated comments such as "I can do anything I want to do"
and "Nobody tells me who to be."

In reality, who Sharon can be is severely limited by
the material realities of her life: she is poor, her
mother has a drug problem, her step-father is an alcoholic,
she has a one-year baby and receives no financial help from
the father. Therefore, she fights hard to create a sense of
identity that defies vulnerability. Unquestionably, her
insistence upon taking control of situations before they
control her often contributes to the reproduction of her
own oppression. By having sex for money with multiple
partners, she is subjecting herself to the dangerous and
often life-threatening consequences of promiscuity; by
challenging the school rules that assert that fighting is
inappropriate behavior, she places herself in jeopardy of
being expelled. By resisting the schools’ attempts to
educate her, she runs the risk of dropping out of school,
thus her dream to become a zoologist remains just a dream.

The gangster story is, of course, the story of the
marginalized seizing power without the endorsement of the
dominant culture. Sharon has indeed constructed a sense of
self in many ways that epitomizes the "gangster" story; she clearly stands on the margins of the dominant culture, for she is a White female who wants to be Black. Her sense of power comes mainly from her ability to use her body, voice, and intellect in ways not accepted by White middle-class culture. It is, in fact, her nonconformity that gives her power and gets her in trouble. Ironically, as long as she conformed to the acceptable codes of behavior for a White girl (i.e. being quiet, keeping feelings inside, avoiding conflict), she was not considered abnormal or "a problem"; however, when she stepped outside those restrictions and embraced a view of herself as an empowered being, she was considered to have severe problems, especially identity problems.

Paradoxically, adhering to normative feminine codes of behavior does not always result in the approval of the mainstream culture. As discussed in Chapter 5, when Sharon does exhibit traditionally viewed traits of femininity (e.g. care and nurturance of others), her behavior is also condemned as evident by the principal’s comment in response to Sharon’s willingness to fight for India, "Sometimes you can care too much." By now the predominant message Sharon has learned about her identity is that being silent and disconnected has its rewards from the dominant culture but the cost of being "nobody" is too high and one she no longer cares to pay.
The Good Woman

Unlike Sharon and Trisha, my reasons for asking Kerry, an African-American fifteen year-old female, to participate in the study had little to do with her physical appearance or her seemingly resistance to normative femininity. Quite simply and unexplainably, I bonded with Kerry the minute I saw her. Standing 5’7’’ and weighing 150 pounds, she looked much older than the other girls in the class. Her warm grin (the only one I received on my first observation), the frequent eye contact she made with me, and her obvious frustration with the teacher’s attempts to treat the students as children (she would look at me and roll her eyes or make a exasperated look) conveyed to me the message that we were both women in a class of children.

During our first interview, Kerry, in a quiet voice, talked painfully about her strained relationship with her father and the pain her father had caused both her mother and her. "My mamma is the man and the woman cause he [her father] don’t do nothing. She works, she cooks, she buys us things. My dad doesn’t do anything but sit home all day, watch TV, and drink and when my mom gets money, he be having his hand out wanting my mamma’s money."

At that point in the interview, I asked Kerry, "Do you think it’s a man’s world or a woman’s world?"

She softly yet assuredly answered, "A man’s world."
"Why?" I asked.

"Cause it seems they got the power of everything. You know women can’t do nothing; it seems like women need men or something, but women don’t need men."

Kerry’s use of the word *seems* illustrates quite poignantly the difficulty adolescent females (as well as adult females) have in distinguishing between what is constituted as truth – the "it seems" – and the realities of their material world – "but women don’t need men." In Kerry’s family, it does indeed *appear* that her mother does not need a man, more specifically her husband to whom she has been married for over 20 years. According to Kerry, her mother is not only the breadwinner of the house but also the spiritual and emotional stability.

However, Kerry’s father has situated himself as the dominant and powerful head of the household by his use of both physical and mental abuse of his wife and children. According to Kerry, he tells her mother, "You can’t do nothing without me. If it wasn’t for me, you wouldn’t have nothing, you wouldn’t have this house, you wouldn’t have this car, you wouldn’t have no job, you wouldn’t have nothing." Occasionally, Kerry’s mother leaves him; however, she eventually returns – sometimes by choice – sometimes by force:

One time we had moved out and we were going to stay with my brother and my dad came and tore my brother’s house up, acting all crazy. So we
went back. But it’s got to where no one wants to be around him.

He’s always talking about "The children, I hate them, I wish they wasn’t here, and he be telling my mamma I wish I wasn’t married to you; I wish you would leave me, and every time my mamma finds her somewhere to go, he calling her back to come back and she goes back. I don’t know why.

Throughout our many conversations about her mother, Kerry does provide glimpses of a woman who does indeed take charge of her life and who refuses to succumb to her husband’s oppressive attempts to control her. For example, Kerry’s mother refuses to be seen in public with her husband: "We don’t go to church together. He goes to Mt. Olive and me, my mamma and my brother go to Mt. Pleasant. My mamma don’t want to be seen with him. She goes where she wants to go in her car and he goes where he wants to go. And he don’t like that." By mid-February, Kerry’s mother had forced her husband to move out; Kerry said, "This time it’s for good." Yet, in two months, he had returned to live with them.

Although Kerry’s reference to her mother as being "the man and the woman" initially seemed to demonstrate the inadequacies of the cultural myths that suggest that "women need men", as her story unfolded over the year, the power of that myth, even as it stands in opposition to the realities of her individual life, became ever so apparent. Indeed, it was the narrative of the "good woman" - the woman who hides her true identity from men/boys in an
attempt either to avoid confrontation with them or to win approval from them that emerged as the dominant discourse by which Kerry judged both her mother’s success as a woman as well as her own.

Because her mother tries to keep her family together even at the expense of both her and her children’s physical and emotional well being, Kerry repeatedly boasts — "My mamma is a good woman. She’s nice, she takes care of her family, and she’ll do something for somebody else before she’ll do something for herself." Kerry’s use of the "good woman" narrative seemed to offer a counterimage to the matriarch Black woman who is too aggressive and, thus, cannot "keep her man." Indeed, most of Kerry’s stories about her mother emphasize the traditional feminine qualities of nurturing, passivity, quietness, and self-sacrifice.

Kerry spoke quite candidly about her father’s infidelities, claiming that "he wants to be young; he messes with young girls. He even will have his girlfriends come to our house and they will sit in front of our yard and wait for my daddy to come outside; my mamma don’t say nothing."

"Why doesn’t she say anything?" I asked.

"My mamma, she’s a quiet kind of person; she don’t like bad things. She don’t like to start any mess with
nobody and if she tells him something, it’ll start a big mess and he’s going to be ready to fight somebody."

"So she tries to keep peace?" I questioned.

"Yeah, my mamma tries to get along with everybody. She tries her hardest to please him, but it just don’t work."

The cultural myth that situates women as "good", sacrificial individuals whose value is judged by their ability to please and placate others (husbands, children, boyfriends) is deeply embedded in Kerry’s perception of how she should act as a woman. She goes to great lengths to verbally create a picture of herself as a passive, quiet, and submissive teenage girl. One of the first statements Kerry ever said to me was "I never get in trouble at school."

However, Kerry is not the passive, "good girl" that she often elects to talk about. With her girlfriends, Kerry is, in fact, quite loud, boisterous, and physical. Weeks after telling me that she never gets in trouble at school, Kerry admitted, "when I was in sixth and seventh grade, I was the baddest girl here. They got referrals on me this high....." By adopting a "good woman" narrative, Kerry seems to be conforming to the dominant (White) discourse of femininity. However, in school, Kerry has chosen to play the part of the "good girl" for one reason: "I’ve got to get out of middle school. I am too old to
still be here with these babies. I got to get to high
school with my friends." Kerry is quite adept at
negotiating an identity that meets the expectations of the
dominant culture in school and her own understandings of
what it means to be a woman.

In Kerry’s everyday life, being a woman means knowing
how to protect herself. Thus, juxtaposed against this
discourse of the "good woman" are Kerry’s stories of being
a fighter: "When I fight, I don’t stop until I see blood."
This tension between being a good woman who does anything
"for her man" and the independent, assertive, unfeminine
woman (i.e. the matriarch) is highlighted by Kerry’s
attempts to minimize her sense of agency in fighting.
Without exception, interspersed within every story Kerry
told about her fighting were her assertions, "I don’t like
to fight; fighting is for boys." She claims that she
fights only as a last resort - "when people just push me so
far I can’t take it no more." By disclaiming both the
desire and the initiative to fight, Kerry is
able to maintain the "good woman" image while also
exhibiting a form of control over her life.

This tension between the idealized and the real was
also revealed in Kerry’s stories about her pregnancy.
Midway into the study, Kerry hesitantly revealed to a group
of us that she was pregnant. I was somewhat surprised for
in our earlier conversations, Kerry always talked about her
being a "nice" girl - "I don’t mess around with boys"—a nice girl being one who did not engage in sexual activity: "I was going with this boy and he tried to make me have sex with him, and I didn’t want to cause I’m not like that."

When she told us that she was pregnant, she quickly added, "It’s not like I planned it or anything." Again, by deferring her sense of agency and desire, she is able to maintain an identity of the "good woman" who does anything for her "man"—in this case, having unprotected and uninitiated sex with her boyfriend.

As Collins (1990) asserts, Black women have traditionally been situated at the bottom of the social ladder, and Black women are forced to fight against both racism and sexism; thus, they are doubly jeopardized. Fighting to prove that you are "somebody" is extremely difficult for Black girls who are continuously denigrated by White men and women as well as Black men (hooks, 1990). As illuminated by her comments about the school "they treat us like we’re nobody" as well as her comments about boys "I can’t stand when a boy disrespects a girl", Kerry is determined to construct a sense of self that demands respect. Of the four participants, Kerry does seem the most self-confident as illustrated by her response, "I will be the ideal woman cos I’m already the ideal girl." By positioning herself as a good woman, Kerry claims that boys
respect her, and if they do not, she will command their respect by fighting them.

According to Kerry, it is not respectful to get pregnant "everyone talks behind your back" but it is even more disrespectful to openly admit that one has sexual desires. Women as passive recipients of male sexuality is much more in sync with the discourse of the "good woman", and Kerry is quite critical of girls who are "wild" with boys; she is especially critical of India, her cousin, who Kerry says blatantly flaunts her sexuality:

India has done talked to [here talking to means having sex with] just about every boy here; that’s why they don’t mess with her. India is too wild, and the boys talk about her, talking about she a "ho".

Later Kerry told me, "When India was in sixth grade, she was so fast with boys."

"So boys don’t like fast girls," I sought clarification.

"No, not really, all the boys I know, they like quiet girls."

Like India, Sharon also talks quite openly about her sexuality and according to Kerry, she brags about getting money from boys in exchange for sexual favors. Again, Kerry is quite critical of this kind of sexual promiscuity: "In fifth hour, Sharon be telling what she be doing with boys and all that, how she be getting their money; boys do not like girls that talk like that."
In return for being a "good woman" - Kerry expects to be treated with respect from boys. Although her mother's being a good woman does not result in her father's respect, Kerry has nevertheless constructed a world in which everything is fair: "If you be nice to me, I'll be nice to you." She realizes that the terms "bitch" and "ho" are words boys use despairingly to exhibit power over women, and she, more than any of the other girls in the study, becomes livid when boys use these terms - even if they are "playing."

"I just don't like boys to call me a bitch, and ho is even worse. You don't call no girl a ho."

"Well," I pointed out, "Trisha said that it doesn't matter to her if someone calls her that."

Kerry emphatically replied, "Well, it matters to me - a whole lot! I don't like no boy to disrespect me."

In fact, most of her fights with boys stem from their calling her a "bitch" or a "ho."

Although Kerry's use of the good woman provides what she considers a positive counterimage to the stereotypical image of Black women as single, domineering, and unfeminine, this "good woman" narrative also functions to perpetuate her oppression. For Kerry, being a good woman means to take the blame for the actions of an abusive father/husband; being a good woman means being quiet around boys; being a good woman means not taking responsibility
for sexual activity or pleasure; being a good woman means refusing to have an abortion even though she does not want a baby nor does she feel competent to take care of one. Kerry, like many adolescent females, struggles both to conform to and resist the norms that being the "good woman" dictate.

The Natural Goddess

Unlike her cousin Kerry, India, a thirteen-year old African-American girl, is seldom quiet. She walks down the hall yelling to her girlfriends comments like "You need Jesus" or "You too crazy, girl," and she flirtatiously tells the boys (both Black and White), "Boy, you know you fine." In the classroom, she wanders around to everyone, saying "hi" or asking them for their homework. She is a gregarious girl and seemingly well-liked by both girls and boys, Black and Whites. However, her out-going and unquiet manner contribute to her being considered a "discipline problem" at the school.

Sitting in the office one day (both of us feeling isolated from the adults at Foster Middle School - India had been sent to the office for being disrespectful to her science teacher and I had been waiting for over an hour for the secretary to find me a room in which I could conduct an interview), India told me that her mother had broken off her marriage plans (this would be her fourth husband).
because "she wants to be treated like somebody, not just anything. And he don’t treat her like that."

Being somebody as highlighted in both Chapter 5 and Chapter 7 is a pervasive theme in these girls’ struggles to find their place in a world that all too often situates them as an object – a thing – that has no feelings and no thoughts – thus easily dispensable. When one is Black and a female and poor like India, this fight against objectification and erasure becomes compounded in a seemingly endless struggle. It is against this struggle that India constructs the identity of the fertile goddess who draws her power from her body.

India, who lives in an all Black urban housing project where incidences of violence, drug abuse, and sexual assaults are commonplace, experiences daily the harsh realities and injustices of growing up poor in today’s society. Unlike many of her middle class counterparts who have the luxury to linger for many years in adolescence – that separate stage of life that is a transition between the dependency of childhood and the independence of adulthood – when India leaves school, she becomes an adult who has the sole responsibility for the care of her two younger siblings while her mother works a minimum wage job as a nurse’s aide from three in the afternoon to midnight. It is not an easy job according to India:

I don’t have an easy life. I have three brothers and one sister; I’m the oldest girl.
Most of all I have to take care of my little sister and brother. Really I am the mother and father from 3 o’clock to one o’clock in the morning. I have to cook; I have to clean up, I have to give them their baths, put them to bed, and make sure their clothes are ironed for the morning, their socks and shoes are out, and everything. So really it’s not easy being a teenager and having sisters and brothers and having to catch them.

Unlike the traditional discourse of White, middle class femininity that situates women as the protectorate of male domination, India’s discourse of femininity locates women as naturally independent individuals who assume responsibility for their own emotional and physical survival. This "truth" of femininity is one that India learns from her female relatives.

One day I asked India, "Do the women you know depend on men much?"

She answered, "My mamma don’t depend on nobody. My mamma told me and my older cousin, "If you lay up and have a baby, if this man leaves you before you have the baby, who you gonna have to take care of your baby? Nobody but yourself." So she say, "I’m going to depend on myself. If I get married, I ain’t going to depend on nobody but myself to pay bills. If he wants, he can help pay the bills, but I’m going to depend on myself to have those bills paid before the next ones come in." My godmother, she don’t depend on nobody. She has two children and she’s pregnant, so she really don’t depend on nobody but herself cos her boyfriend ain’t going to stay with her."
Later India shared with me another lesson she learned from her godmother: "You ought to depend on your own self; don’t depend on nobody else to take care of you, to give you what they say they’re going to give you. Most of the time they don’t give you what they say they will."

Unlike the matriarch Black woman who is perceived as being unfeminine, thus, unworthy of the attention of males, India positions herself as a powerfully feminine woman who draws her strength in part from women’s procreative abilities and innate nurturing capabilities. In response to one of my standard questions "Do you think it’s a man’s world or a woman’s world?", India answered, "The women, cause they do most of the stuff in the world. If it wouldn’t for a woman, nobody would be here. It’s a woman’s world cause women bring life to the world so if it wouldn’t for us, nobody’d be on earth."

Although childless, (India has been pregnant several times, and did, in fact, announce excitedly to several of us one day that she was pregnant again), India is frequently situated in her stories as a good and nurturing mother. She is the mother to her little sister and brother. She leaves home to live with her godmother who needs help with her new baby. She speaks frequently about her mothering Sharon’s baby, claiming "if I wouldn’t be for me, I don’t know what would happen to Baby T."
In addition to women’s power being drawn from their abilities to reproduce and to nurture children, another form of empowerment for India is derived from her feminine sexuality. Standing 5’5” and weighing 125 pounds, India does not hide her sexuality in long shirts and loose-fitting pants as does Sharon. She wears tight shirts and jeans, flowery short skirts, bows and red lipstick. A central component of most of India’s stories about herself is the desire males (both Black and White) have for her. She proudly boasted on our very first meeting, “Boys like me” and “When I break up with one person, I always have somebody else to talk to.”

For India, her sense of power and agency is derived from what she sees as her ability "to have any man she wants"; this sexual control over boys often pits her against other girls.

Girls at my home don’t like me cause they’re jealous because I stand outside and I talk to all the boys and when they pass, the boys don’t stop talking to me and go talk to them and they want to fight me cause their boyfriends stand up there and talk to me all day.

A lot of girls don’t like me cause I mess with anybody I want to. I can walk up to somebody’s boyfriend and hug them and their girlfriend be standing right next to them and I don’t care.

India claims that she does not care if other girls dislike her, saying, "They don’t like me, but I don’t care. I didn’t come into this world for nobody to like me. Ain’t
nobody wrote a book and tell you to like India Sherita Manning."

Like many girls who are taught that it is our bodies not our minds that get us what we want, India uses her femininity for her own advantage. For example, during the study she was being actively pursued by a young man whom she detested. To thwart his sexual advances, she devised a scheme with the help of several other boys:

When this boy comes around and wants to talk to me, he’s my worst enemy, he’s my worst nightmare. He is so much in love with me. So I just get down and mess with anybody when he comes around. I say, 'Yall come here, just come stand by me. Act like we’re talking.' I can’t stand this boy, so all the boys be hugging on me when he pass by and he go, 'Oh' and he goes on.

Not only is India able to manipulate the other boys to help her in her scheme to get rid of an unwanted male, she also claims that she can manipulate money from boys whenever she needs it:

Yeah, I ask this boy for five dollars and he say, "I ain’t got no money." "Where your money went?" I say. "Don’t be worrying about my money." "Well, I need some money," I say. He pull out a big wad and he give me $25. I say, "But you gotta pay my telephone bill. Give me some more." I was lying cause I got my telephone cut off, but he give me some more money.

The reality of India’s life is that money is scarce in her family. Her mother is the sole provider in her family, and with four children, her paycheck does not go far. Thus, India claims that when she has sex with her boyfriends she expects them to give her money if she needs
it. She rejects the notion that her behavior could be considered prostitution, claiming: "A prostitute stands out on the corner of Camp Road (a street known locally as a haven for prostitutes) and does it with anybody and another thing, when your boyfriend gives you money, he loves you."

Like the dreams of most teenage girls (as well as adult women), being in love, falling in love and staying in love occupy a central location in India's construction of a gendered identity. Despite the fact that most of the women in India's life are unmarried, in many ways she reads her life against the dominant discourse of femininity and true womanhood: find a boy, settle down, get married, have two children, and live happily ever after.

I asked India, "What do you think your life will be like in ten years?"

She perfunctorily answered, "I'll be 24 years old; I'll have two children, and I'll be married cause the boy I'm supposed to be marrying already gave me an engagement ring."

Although the simultaneous positioning of herself as the tempting seductress who can control and manipulate men and the young school girl who still believes in love, romance, and marriage may seem ironic, it is, in fact, reflective of the conflicting discourses that shape femininity and leave girls, especially Black girls, feeling that they "never can get it right."
India has constructed a story in which her power is not derived from any rational, logical source; rather to survive in this world as a woman, she has a natural, innate strength. She claims, "knowing what to do and how to be a woman comes naturally; you don't have to be taught that."

However, this sense of herself as being naturally smart about the world — as possessing intuitive powers — as drawing her strength from her body — is also an emotional survival tool and reflective of the material realities of her world as reflected in the following story:

I'm not scared of guns. I've been through too much to say I'm scared of guns. I've been standing outside in a drive-by shooting and I didn't get hit. My friend standing right beside me, right here, she was pregnant, she got shot 12 times. I got missed. I can stand outside while they're swinging guns, and I never get hurt. . . . I'm not scared of dying; you can only die once. When you die somebody else going to come in to the world in your place; they'll come in my place and take over what I started. So it's really not like you're dying; you're going to sleep and somebody else is going to wake up in your place and come into the world after you've done what you had to do, after you've taken care of your business, somebody will come in and finish. Like if I die, if I have a baby, my baby will carry on what I did. . . . There's always somebody else to take over what you did.

Exploding the Myths of Femininity

The cowboy, the gangster, the good woman, the goddess — are these "true" stories? To be truthful, I cannot absolutely attest to the veracity of the many stories these girls told me about their lives. However, when read from a poststructuralist perspective, getting to the "truth" of a
story is an impossible feat, for all "truths are... inherently partial - committed and incomplete" (Clifford, 1986, p. 7). From a feminist perspective, what becomes important about the stories we tell about our lives as women are the "truths" they reveal about the historical, social, and cultural constructions of gendered identities. What are the truths and lies contained in the stories told above?

A popular myth about femininity that these girls' stories explode is that of the passive, submissive women who places her life in the control of others. Certainly, elements of the myth find their way into the stories these girls told (e.g. Trisha's deferral to men as being responsible for her bullriding; Kerry's willingness to "give in" to her boyfriend's demands for sex); however, overwhelmingly these girls in various ways position themselves as active agents in their own lives.

Furthermore, all four of the girls in their stories reveal an astute understanding of the position of men and women in the world. They know men and male ways of being are prized; thus, they, at times, adopt a masculinist narrative to gain power and respect. At the same time, they are also aware of the many and diverse cultural rules that dictate what constitutes a "real" woman. Sometimes they form an identity that reinforces these understandings. For Trisha, she becomes a dumb, beautiful princess. For Kerry,
she becomes a good woman. For Sharon, she becomes a mother, and for India, she becomes an object of desire. Sometimes, they challenge the very assumption that there are "rules" that govern who they should be. Certainly, gangsters, fighters, and cowboys are not traditional metaphors used to describe women.

The various myths and images that are contained within each of these girls' stories illuminate an understanding of femininity as being struggled over and negotiated. After all, female adolescents create their own discourse of femininity – ones that are intimately connected not only to their race, gender, and class but also to their family background, geographical location, and historical moment.

These stories also reminds us of the power of imagination and fantasy in the construction of identities. According to Trinh Minh Ha (1991), "our very existence consists in our imaginations of ourselves." We do not have to be simply the end products of some social construction of identity; rather we can use our imagination and create our own stories and our own identities. Kerry's, India's, Trisha's, and Sharon's stories of the good woman, the goddess, the cowboy, and the gangster function as a way for them to imagine and create a self which resists cultural norms.

However, simply imagining that their life could be better and different does not change their positions as
no/bodies in a White, patriarchal society. What is imperative for these girls (as well as adults concerned with their welfare) is to develop a critical consciousness that allows these girls to challenge and change the oppressive forces in their life. One way that the girls themselves demonstrate a sense of agency in resisting cultural norms is through their practice of fighting as discussed in the next chapter.
CHAPTER SEVEN
FIGHTING TO BE SOMEBODY:
RESISTING ERASURE AND THE DISCURSIVE PRACTICES OF FEMALE ADOLESCENT "FIGHTING"

Huddled together in a close circle one December afternoon (careful that our conversation would not be heard by "intruders"), Kerry, India, Sharon, Trisha, and Chasity (a participant in the larger study), and I gathered to talk about their fighting. I was candid about my own White, middle-class bias that "where I come from nice girls don’t fight" and my desire to understand from their perspective what their physical aggression signified.

"Tell me some reasons why you fight," I began the conversation.

"I’ll fight someone if they’re being messy with my boyfriend," India exclaimed.

Chasity quickly interjected, "If someone talks about my family or my friends, I’ll fight them."

India jumped in again, "I’ll fight for money or if someone tries to steal something from me."

Trisha, who was being unusually quiet that day, said, "I’ll fight if someone hits me first."

"Or," Kerry added, "if someone calls me a bad name."

"I fight," Sharon concluded, "for rulership, to show that I’m somebody."

For Kerry, India, Sharon (and Trisha and Chasity to a lesser degree), fighting is a way of life – a "truth" about their lived experiences. India’s father was stabbed to
death during a fight with his brother; during a fight with her step-father, Sharon injured him so badly that he had to be hospitalized, and Kerry’s father has been jailed on several occasions for fighting. These girls fight at school (all of them have been suspended at least once from school for fighting), they fight in their neighborhoods, they fight at home, and in Kerry’s, Sharon’s, and India’s case, they are victims of parental physical abuse.

Viewed as such, their stories about fighting and physical aggression can be read in many ways. Their fighting can be interpreted as a form of deviance signifying maladjustment to femininity and adolescence which is how I initially interpreted their aggression. On the other hand, their fighting can be interpreted as a means of assuming responsibility for their own survival; hence, it is an act of self-empowerment. Or, their fighting can be reduced to a materialistic interpretation of the realities of growing up poor in today’s society. However, these interpretations when read individually suggest a monolithic, decontextualized truth about fighting that does not adequately reflect the many ways these girls situate themselves in their own stories about fighting. Sometimes they are the victims of violence - sometimes the victimizer; sometimes their fighting signals a taking up of a masculine discourse - sometimes a feminine discourse. Furthermore, their stories about fighting reveal a
connection to larger issues of power, gender identity, and oppression.

For these young women, interwoven in their tales of why they fight, how they fight, under what circumstances they fight and how they justify their fighting are the "truths" that guide their understandings of what it means to be a woman/female/lady in a world that strives to make them nobodies. Thus, their fighting can be read as a text in much the same way as Geertz (1972) read the Balinese cockfights that he observed, noting:

The cockfight is not the master key to Balinese life any more than bullfighting is to Spanish. . . . But to regard such [symbolic] forms as "saying something of something" and saying it to somebody, is at least to open up the possibility of an analysis which attends to their substance rather than to a reductive formula professing to account for them. (p. 29)

Borrowing from Geertz's definition of a text, I intend in this chapter to explore fighting as a metaphor - a symbolic form that attunes us to the multiple, contradictory and partial ways these girls understand their lives as females as well as how they view oppression and how they elect to counter that oppression. By interpreting fighting as a text - as a symbolic form - I have tried to avoid either romanticizing their physical acts of fighting as resistance or pathologizing them as deviancy. Rather, what I intend to do in this chapter is to blur these very different and distinct interpretations and explore fighting as a concrete reality of their lives but also as a metaphor for
representing the struggles these girls have in constructing a gendered identity. By reading fighting as a symbolic act, we can better understand how adolescent girls understand their multiple feminine subjectivities.

In the first three sections ("Fighting to be Some/body"; "Fighting Like a Man"; "Fighting to Be One of the Boys"), I explore how their fighting can be read as a way of positioning themselves as active agents in their life (i.e. the traditional masculine discourse). In the last two sections ("Fighting for Connection" and "Fighting to Be a Lady"), I analyze their fighting as a feminine text.

Reading Fighting as a Masculine Metaphor

"Fighting to Be Some/body"

When I began this research, I had no intentions of exploring the relationship between fighting and gender identity. My recollections of being an adolescent in the South in the 1970’s simply did not include fighting - at least not girls fighting. Certainly, there were some girls who fought (I remember a rather vicious fight between two Black girls in my twelfth grade physical education class), but fighting among girls was simply considered "trashy"; certainly, "proper little ladies" did not fight - we let our boyfriends do that for us! Thus, I resonated with Mrs. Hill who confided to me one day, "Where I come from, White girls don’t fight" and with Mrs. French confession, "I just
don’t understand these girls [meaning Black girls], so I can’t cope with it [their fighting].” Undeniably, in a culture that presents a normative view of women as passive, submissive and docile, fighting is viewed as the most symbolic form of deviancy for girls. By not adhering to normative gender expectations, girls who fight (as illustrated by the teachers’ comments) are perceived as being "abnormal" because they are taking up what is traditionally considered a masculine discourse.

However, in a world in which the dominant norms and discourses of femininity function to make Kerry, India, Trisha, and Sharon feel as if they are no-bodies, their fighting can be read as a way for women to exhibit a sense of agency in a culture that presents women’s bodies as objects for desire and consumption. According to Sharon, "acting tough" is a strategy women employ to become actors rather than the acted upon - to be Some-body, rather than just any-body or no-body.

Undeniably, adolescence for girls marks a rapid increase in sexual violations to their body (Linn, Stein, & Young, 1992). In negotiating a gendered and adolescent identity, adolescent females, according to Michelle Fine and Pat McPherson (1992), must continuously wrestle with the question of "who will control, and to what extent can they control, their own bodies?" (p. 181) Therefore, bodies become a "site for gendered politics enacted through
Consequently, adolescent females are forced to exert an air of confidence and control of their bodies. For the girls in this study, fighting was seen as one viable option for protecting themselves from unwanted sexual and physical advances, thereby demonstrating control over their own bodies.

One day while we were discussing rap music and gangster images, I asked Sharon, "What do you think about the rap songs that talk about beating up women and putting them in their place? Does that bother you at all?" She replied, "No, not really, my man ain’t going to beat me and put me in my place cos I’m already in my place. And I tell him that when I meet him, ‘If you hit me, you gotta go. You can’t hit me, and if you do, I will fight back and then you gotta go.’"

However, Sharon is quite frequently involved with men who have a reputation for being physically abusive. For example, one of her boyfriends is currently in jail for beating up the mother of his child. Yet, Sharon asserts that these men do not abuse her because she knows how to protect herself as illustrated in the following vignette:

After I got in a fight with his ex-girlfriend, me and him [a boyfriend] got into a fight cos he say, ‘Sharon, why did you hit that girl? You didn’t have to hit her.’ And he came back and hit me and I was drinking a 40 ounce and I took it and cracked it on his TV and I said, "You want some of me?" He backed off and said, "We don’t have to do all that."
Like Sharon, India rejects a view of women as passive recipients of male violence. It is a lesson she has learned from other women in her family: "I never let a boy rule me. My sister always tells me, 'Never let a boy hit you cos if they hit you they think they taking advantage of you.' . . . I used to play with Montel [one of her boyfriends], every time he hit me, I tell him, 'Alright, that's strike 2, if you hit me again, I'm going to punch you in the eye.' He'll hit me for the fun of it, and I'll hit him back too."

The struggle these girls encounter continuously is a struggle against an erasure of self that splits apart their bodies from their mind and soul, reducing them to a body—a thing. To challenge this objectification of their bodies, these young women use physical aggression to stave off unwanted advances, thus proving to themselves and others that they are in control of their own bodies.

Sharon told the following story about a male student who violated what she considers to be her "right to do with her body as she pleases":

Yeah, you can be sitting in class with your legs open; in sixth hour this boy asked me, "Why your legs open?" I told him, "Why did you ask that?" He said, "Why your legs open?" I said, "It's hot. Why?" cos I got tired of him asking me that. He said, "Can I touch down there?" I said, "Try if you want." He tried and I slapped him.

Although Trisha often excuses boys' touching her body without permission as "playfulness," she also uses physical
aggression to reclaim her body from unwanted physical advances:

Last week there was this boy, and he kept coming up behind me and I had a cut on my back, a big old lash. But he kept coming up behind me and he knew it was there, and he would pop my bra. And I told him, "You best quit!" And he goes, "Why whatcha going to do?" "Watch, do it again." And he did it again, so I knocked the crap out of him.

These young women who see themselves as empowered in their interactions with physically aggressive males are quite critical of girls who allow males (most often their boyfriends) to abuse them. One day Kerry came to our interview quite upset about an incident that had just occurred in the hall: "I can't stand when no boys tries to handle no girl cos this boy, he was in the hall, this happened just a minute ago, his girlfriend was walking off and he slapped her dead in the face. She didn't do nothing but just stand there." Trisha quite contemptuously said, "That ain't me. I would have hit him back so hard and so fast and it wouldn't even be funny. Man, there ain't no boy going to hit me."

As highlighted in the above section, adolescent girls recognize the oppressive ways in which women's bodies are situated as "things" to be controlled by men for the pleasure of men. However, they refuse to be seen as passive victims of male sexuality, and their fighting becomes the embodiment of this resistance. Fighting back becomes a way of talking back. bell hooks (1989) speaks of the
necessity, especially for Black women, of developing a
language for talking back — for challenging oppression and
domination:

Moving from silence into speech is for the
oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and
those who stand and struggle side by side, a
gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new
life and new growth possible. It is that act of
speech, of "talking back", that no mere gesture
of empty words, that is the expression of our
movement from object to subject — the liberated
voice. (p. 9)

For Sharon, Trisha, Kerry, and India, their fighting is an
target to move from no/body (an object) to some/body (a
subject).

"Fighting Like a Man"

As evident in the above accounts of fighting, often
these girls seem to construct an identity that takes up a
masculinist discourse. In a culture in which men are
valued because of their superior physical strength, their
independence, and their prowess, it is no wonder that these
girls speak proudly of their ability to "fight like a man",
thus positioning themselves in a discourse that is
powerful.

Kerry, who says that it was her brother who taught her
how to fight, on several occasions boasted about her
fighting skills: "When I fight I don’t stop fighting until
I see blood or something. I don’t pull no hair, I don’t
scratch, I just be hitting, I just go for the face first.
My brother used to beat me up all the time, so he just taught me how to fight."

Likewise India’s brothers taught her the fighting skills necessary to survive in a world that India describes as a world in which "what you don’t know will kill you":

I don’t do the windmill on nobody and stand there and just swing my arms. I fight like my brother, my brother most of my brothers taught me how to fight, and when I fight I fight until I see blood. If I don’t see blood, I’m going to fight you until I see some. I learned that from my brothers. If you don’t see no blood, they ain’t hurt. If you see blood, you know they hurt, so they’ll leave you alone.

The stories these girls tell about fighting are quite different from the "cat fights" so popular in today’s soap operas in which women scratch and bite and pull hair (usually over a man), and no one is seriously hurt. Trisha talked about banging a girl’s head into a brick wall, and India claims that in one fight in particular she was "trying to kill" another girl:

The first time I got in trouble with the law was when these people over in Tanglewood wanted to fight my cousin. I wasn’t going to let my cousin fight by herself so I hit the girl, and she and her cousin tried to jump on me but my cousin beat one of them up, and the other girl was sent to the hospital cos we kicked all of her face and her nose bled; we busted her head open and broke her leg. So really they put us on probation for assault and battery, so really we tried to kill her but we hurt her most of all.

In fact, they are very disdainful of girls who "fight like babies" as illustrated in the following conversation between Kerry, India, Sharon, and Trisha.
Trisha began by saying, "Sometimes these girls like to pull hair and scratch you."

India quickly jumped in boasting, "I don’t. I punch."

Kerry added, "I don’t pull hair."

Sharon, "I fight like a man. I don’t bite, I don’t pull their hair, I hit them."

Trisha concluded, "The only time I pull hair is if I’m banging them into something. I’m serious."

Frequently, when these girls "fight like a man," they do so as a way of demonstrating their physical and intellectual superiority over males. Contrary to popular images of women needing physical protection from men, Kerry, Sharon, and India claim that they are, indeed, more physically adept than boys. Their stories about fighting almost always situate themselves as the eventual victor (the traditional male narrative). In Kerry’s case, she is always the winner of a fight as illustrated in this discussion we had one day:

Kerry said, "Yesterday this boy came over to my house and wanted to fight me; he was messing with me bad, so I ended up fighting him."

I asked, "Who got the best of who?"

Kerry answered, "Me, I always do, cos I didn’t give him a chance to get a lick off of me cos I just jumped on him. I was hitting him everywhere. I kicked him, and he
fell on the ground, and I got on him and started beating him up."

India, who is physically smaller than both Kerry and Sharon, claims that her victories do not come as easily as Kerry’s and Sharon’s; however, she is eventually the winner:

Most of my fights be with boys, and they might knock me out, knock me down, but I’m going to get up and I’m going to fight back until I hurt them; they’re not going to take advantage of me.

In addition to proving their physical superiority over males, these girls also "fight like a man" in order to prove that they can outsmart men, especially as a way of conning money from them. Trisha, who often has to combat sexist remarks made by males about her being a bullrider, told the following story about how she turned one incident of fighting into a monetary gain for herself:

I hit one of the guys [a fellow bullrider] because he told me that I made the wrong decision by being a bull rider. He came up to me and said, "You ride bulls, don’t you?" And I said, "Yeah." And he goes, "Well you shouldn’t be doing that; it’s a guys’s sport." And I hauled off and hit him, and then he goes, "I want to see you ride and if you beat me, I’ll give you $20." And I beat him, and I got $20. So now when I go to rodeos, I make a bet with all the bull riders, "I bet you $20, I’ll beat all of yall." They all get their $20 and I say, "Alright." And I go out there and ride, and get 20, 30, maybe 40 dollars from that bet.

Sharon also told a story about a friend of hers who used physical aggression against a boy in order to get some money from him: "I had a friend girl and her boyfriend
slapped her, and she just beat him up and he had two black eyes and he came back the next day and gave her some money."

By pretending (and I emphasize the word pretend because they are quite emphatic in their claims that their fighting should not be interpreted as a desire to be like boys) to take up a masculine discourse ("fighting like a man"), these girls accomplish two goals that are imperative for their own survival not only as females but also as economically disadvantaged individuals: they ensure their own protection from the physical and verbal assaults of others that is commonplace in their neighborhoods, and they subvert, for their own gain, the hierarchical structure that traditionally positions men as physically and intellectually the dominant sex.

Fighting to Be One of the Boys??

Undeniably, in our culture fighting is viewed as a naturally masculine behavior. However, as stated above, the girls in this study did not view their fighting as abnormal behavior for girls. Indeed, numerous ethnographic accounts (for example, Davis, 1982; Meyenn, 1980; Thorne, 1993) have documented that fighting is not a gender specific activity. Yet, what to make of girls fighting has not been sufficiently explored. For example, in Davies (1982) study of Australian primary school children, her examination of fighting is relegated to a footnote which
reads "Though I was surprised that the girls fought physically, other researchers have found fisticuffs amongst girls accepted as the norm" (p. 95). And in Meyenn’s (1980) account of four adolescent peer groups, he describes one fight that occurred among the "PE girls" under the supervision of a parent; however, his discussion about this incident centered on the role of the parent in peer group affairs. However, Barrie Thorne (1993) in her ethnographic study of elementary students in California and Michigan voices her critique of most analyses of girls’ fighting that perpetuate an essentialized understanding of how boys and girls construct an identity – most popular in the work of Gilligan (1982), Noddings (1988), and Belenky et al (1986) who assert that girls form identities of care and communion whereas boys construct identities based on competition and hierarchy. Thorne (1993) asserts:

> My own fieldnotes contain enough instances of girls using insults, threats and physical fighting to make me uncomfortable with the assertion that these behaviors are somehow distinctively "male". . . . Either by ignoring the occasions when girls hurled insults, made threats, and got into serious physical fights, or by rendering them as forms of gender deviance, the different cultures framework diverts us from examining important sources of complexity. (pp. 102-103)

Indeed, the tales that Kerry, Trisha, Sharon, and India told about fighting were quite complex. Certainly, through their stories about fighting, they seem to construct a sense of self that is in power, that exhibits a
sense of agency - a person who is a rational thinker in charge of her own well-being (all the characteristics traditionally associated with male ways of being).

However, when I suggested to them one day that some people might interpret their aggressive behavior as "trying to be like boys", they grew quite indignant. Sharon claimed that such interpretations were "sexist." India added, "When I fight, I'm just handling my business. I ain't got no time to act like a boy. I'm a girl and I'm going to stay a girl for the rest of my life. I ain't like Michael Jackson" [meaning her gendered identity was not subject to being questioned]. And Sharon loudly announced, "When I fight, I ain't trying to act like no boy; I'm just acting like myself." She then quickly added, "I mean I'm just being myself."

Her quick change of the word acting to being highlights the struggles these young women encounter in trying to construct a gendered identity in a culture that situates femininity and masculinity as dualisms. Often they are expected to act (e.g. "act like a lady") in ways that are antithetical to their sense of being - as illustrated in Kerry's comment during this discussion: "No one's going to stop me from fighting; ain't nobody going to stop me from being who I am!"

However, in school their fighting is viewed as evidence of their inability to assume an appropriately
feminine role. The message these girls receive loud and clear from their teachers (who are predominantly White women) and the three principals (all males) school is "fighting is for boys," thus unacceptable behavior for a girl. During one point in our group discussion of fighting, the girls started imitating (quite humorously) various teachers and principals who had spoken to them about the inappropriateness of fighting.

India, who is a great storyteller and a wonderful comedian, was the first to stand up, "Oh, let me see, who can I imitate? Miss Ross, (in a high-pitched White voice) 'Young ladies are not supposed to fight. Young ladies are supposed to walk up to each other and talk it out and go about your business. Young ladies aren’t supposed to fight; that’s for men to do.' Oh, then there’s Mr. Donnell [the Assistant principal in charge of discipline] (in a deep voice), ‘You know you aren’t supposed to, at Foster Middle, fight. I told yall young ladies about fights, fighting is not what young ladies do.’"

Sharon spoke next, but much more seriously, "Well, some of them (teachers and principals) say it’s wrong for girls to fight a boy, cos the girl know she going to get beat, but that’s not true. They say girls should act like young ladies; well, young ladies shouldn’t be, shouldn’t no girl come up to you and call you no bad name if they’re supposed to be a young lady."
Kerry added, "See when I have a fight, they always tell me you should have more respect for yourself; young ladies don’t fight; you leave that up to the guys. But I don’t like to fight that much."

In addition to fighting being seen as a form of deviance in girls and normality in boys, girls who fight are considered immature by the school officials as illuminated in Trisha’s comment during our discussion, "When I got in my fight the first week of school last year, I got in a fight with a boy and Mrs. Waller said, ‘Fighting is immature especially when a girl fights a boy.’" Whereas fighting is considered childish (thus inappropriate adolescent behavior) and unfeminine for a girl, for boys it is a sign of physical prowess – it signifies masculinity and manhood. Since strength, prowess, and the ability to take care of one’s self and others (e.g. one’s family) are positive attributes for males, fighting among adolescent boys is simply seen as a rite of passage – a necessary evil that goes along with being a teen-age male – something that they will "outgrow" as they become adult males. For females, fighting signifies an inability to communicate with others (as evident in the teachers’ comments about girls being "able to talk it out"); thus, fighting is incompatible with the expectations of women being especially attuned to the needs and interests of others (e.g. their children and husband) and of being non-physical.
beings. As a White, middle-class female, Nicole’s (who was part of the larger study) reflections about girls fighting represent most accurately the beliefs of the teachers and administrators at Foster Middle School: "I think it’s kinda stupid for girls to fight. They should resolve their differences between each other and if they can’t resolve them, stay away from each other and don’t talk about each other. I mean if they want to forget somebody, forget them. Anyway, it kinda OK for boys to fight because they have more of an animalistic nature."

Ironically, when girls engage in what is considered "unladylike" behavior – that is, fighting, they can avoid harsh punishment by reverting back to what is considered "feminine" behavior. They cry, they talk in an infantile voice, they bat their eyelashes, they promise to never do it again, they succumb to the male administrators’ power over them. It is their way of subverting a patriarchal system for their own gain, and they talked quite candidly about their manipulation of the system:

Trisha said, "Oh, they be letting you off and stuff, like if you go in there and you cover up and pretend you’re crying, ‘Oh it’s OK, don’t do it again. They let you go." Kerry added, "Yeah, I just put on a sad face and say ‘I’m sorry," and they say, ‘Ok, we’re going to give you one more chance." India remarked, "I cried in front of Mr. Donnell one time, and he let me go."
However, the girls were well aware that it was a fine line between subverting the patriarchal system of schooling for their own gain and allowing the system to further oppress them. According to Kerry, "If they see you cry, they think you're scared and they'll try to do it to you every time." Trisha commented, "If you cry, then they think they have something over you."

As highlighted by the stories above, Kerry’s, India’s, Sharon’s, and Trisha’s fighting can be interpreted as a challenge to the fundamental "truths" about gender identity that suggests there are indeed essential feminine characteristics and essential masculine characteristics and behaviors (fighting being a masculine behavior), and usually these traits are in opposition to one another.

As discussed in the next section, rather than reading their stories of fighting as "trying to be a boy", their stories can just as easily be read as a "feminine" way of seeing the world. Brownyn Davies (1989) asserts that "Stories are located within a number of different discourses, and thus vary dramatically in terms of the language used, the concepts, issues and judgements made relevant, and the subject positions made available within them" (p. 229). By locating their stories within multiple discourses, I hope to avoid the reification of a fixed identity and demonstrate that our positions as women are
never unitary, and we construct a sense of self within a context of options we see viable at a particular time.

The Feminization of Fighting

Fighting for Connection

Numerous studies have been conducted about boys fighting (Henggeler, 1989; McCord, McCord, & Howard, 1961; Miller, Geertz, & Cutter, 1968; Olweus, 1978; Roberts, 1987); however, when I conducted an ERIC search looking for articles about girls and fighting, without exception, every entry that I retrieved positioned females as victims of fighting or physical abuse rather than the perpetuators of the aggression. Such a reading of fighting places the masculine narrative as the norm, thus positioning females as the "other" or as deviant. However, there is another tale that can be told about these girls "acting tough," one that rejects a reading of their fighting as a taking up of a masculinist discourse. Indeed, their tales of fighting often reveal a feminization of fighting that suggests an alternative view of physical aggression - one that validates what has traditionally been viewed as women's ways of knowing and making sense of the world through relationships and connections to others (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, 1982). For these girls, fighting is very often a way of validating one's connection to others and proof of one's loyalty and affection.
When Sharon talks about fighting, she often speaks of putting the concerns of others above her own as evident in this discussion we had one day during physical education.

Sharon told me, "If someone talks about my man, that's grounds for fighting."

To this, I replied, "Why don't you just let your man defend himself?"

She answered, "If it's a girl, I have to take care of that so he won't get in trouble."

Another day when we were outside for recess, talk began circulating that a fight was about to ensue between India and another Black girl (Monica). Sharon quickly began looking for India, telling me "I'll be India's back; I'll beat Monica up; India's not going to get suspended for that."

During our group discussion of fighting, Sharon explained again her understanding of fighting as a way to prove her loyalty and love: "I know if India fights, I'm going to help her fight cos I know whoever she going to fight they going to have girls back behind her, and if India hit her back, they all going to crowd up in there."

One morning before school, several girls began antagonizing India into a fight. Sharon stepped in and said she would fight in India's place. To this, India said, "Sharon, calm down. You got a baby, you don't need to be fighting for nobody. I can handle my own business."

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Sharon answered, "No, you’re my baby’s godmother; I don’t want nobody hurting you cos if something happen to me, my baby going straight to you."

Later, India spoke glowingly of Sharon’s willingness to fight in her place: "Me and Sharon got the relationship of a lifetime. I really don’t think nothing could break me and Sharon’s relationship. Because if I’m ready to fight somebody, Sharon’s got to say, 'Don’t fight them. I’ll handle it.' She’ll fight for me. Sharon will get suspended for me."

Trisha, too, spoke of her willingness to be physically violent in order to protect someone she loved (her boyfriend): "If my boyfriend was in trouble, if someone was messing with him, I would get my mac 10 and shoot them. I wouldn’t care what happened to me."

In Sharon’s case, she will also fight to prove her loyalty to her Black friends. If someone calls her a "nigger lover", Sharon considers this legitimate grounds for fighting. What she objects to is not the association of herself with Blacks (since she views herself as a Black person trapped in a White person’s body); what she finds deplorable is White people’s use of the pejorative term "nigger" to refer to her friends.

Sharon tells the following story about her first suspension this year:

This boy [a Black male] was asking me for a pencil, and I was picking with him cos him and me are cool, and I said, "Mican, I don’t look like
no K & B [a local drug store]." And that boy [a White male] said, "I know you look like a nigger lover cos that’s what you are." So I just stood up and said, "What did you say?" And he hit me, and he thought I wasn’t going to hit him back. But I hit him in his face and he flew back on the floor, over the desk, and the teacher was saying, "You done knocked the boy out." And I said, "No, I didn’t knock that boy out."

Sharon, India, and Kerry are keenly aware that being Black is equated with being nothing. India stated that "Whites think Sharon is nothing cos she hangs around with us [Blacks]" and they view White people’s use of the term "nigger" as an attempt to confirm this status of nothingness. Because Sharon is White, she is continuously berated by White people for "acting Black"; she astutely knows that acting Black is unacceptable behavior for Whites: "You know when a teacher tells me that I’m embarrassing Whites cos I act Black, that puts me down. A lot of kids call me nigger lover and sometimes I let it pass. But sometimes I can’t, I can just take so much, like last year, this girl called me that and I picked up a stool in shop class and just hit her in her face and busted two nerves up in her face."

By reading their texts of fighting as a feminine discourse in which the girls exhibit caring and connecting, the notion of fighting as deviancy is disrupted, and the lived experiences of girls are validated.
As illuminated in the preceding sections, their stories of fighting become symbolic readings of how they view the world and their position in it. Sometimes their fighting represents a way of exhibiting a sense of agency and power in a world that strives to make them powerless; other times their fighting demonstrates women's ways of seeing the world in relational ways - in connection with others. However, there are times in which their fighting also reveals the ways in which they affirm normative understandings of feminine behavior as being "ladylike"; furthermore, by fighting they often reproduce a patriarchal world view that emphasizes heterosexuality and women as the "weaker sex."

It seems ironic that in many ways they resist being "proper little ladies," yet, in many ways, they struggle to maintain an identity that meets this normative view of girls as ladies - quiet, pure, protected and one who does not like to fight. Repeatedly, Kerry made comments such as the following: "I don't like to fight; that is for boys;" or "I don't really like to fight but people, they just get on my nerves to a point that I can't take it no more and I end up fighting." India, at times, also claimed that she tries to avoid fighting: "I fight as a last resort; I let it build up inside and when I get angry, I just go off on them." Interestingly, during the first interview with
Sharon (after I had already heard from the teachers about her proclivity to fighting), I asked her, "Do you get in a lot of fights?" She answered, "No ma’am. I’ve got into a couple."

Although these girls usually do not try to emulate the idealized version of a proper lady in their behavior and are, in fact, resistant to the school’s attempts to mold them into young ladies, references to them acting "unladylike" precipitates great anger that is usually followed by physical aggression.

Earlier in the year, I had asked Sharon, "Why do you get in fights with boys, what provokes it?" She answered, "If they call me a W [whore] or a B [bitch]’ that’s the main reason I fight." Kerry expressed a similar sentiment: "I can’t stand for no boy to call me a bitch or a ho, that’s disrespecting me, and I’ll punch them for that." In fact, during our group discussion of fighting, all five of the girls stated that a legitimate reason for fighting someone was if they called you a bad name, like a bitch or a whore.

Also references to them engaging in "unladylike" behavior is a legitimate reason for fighting as illustrated in Kerry’s account of her expulsion from school last year:

I got expelled from this school for fighting cos this girl said something bad about me. She told me you know you be licking on boys’ bodies and stuff. I tried to ignore her, but I just couldn’t. She said it in front of everybody. So I tore into her.
Often their tales of fighting reinforce traditional understandings of the female-male monogamous heterosexual relationship that situates females as being incomplete without a man. Although these girls are seldom involved in monogamous relationships (they often boast of their "running around" on their boyfriends), they recognize that monogamous heterosexual relationship is the standard relationship by which all others are judged (i.e. homosexual relationships and relationships with many partners are considered "wrong"). When they fight other girls, most of the time it stems from another girl "messing" with a boyfriend, thus violating the rules of the culturally sanctioned, monogamous heterosexual relationship and threatening their own sense of security in "belonging" to a man.

Kerry is the only one of the girls in this study who is involved in a somewhat monogamous relationship; she has been dating Clayton for over five months. He is the father of her baby and has agreed to be financially supportive, either by helping finance an abortion or by providing monetary aid once the baby arrives. Kerry on numerous occasions boasted proudly that she would fight for her man as illustrated by the following:

I was with my boyfriend one day and we had went to the mall and this ex-girlfriend came up to him and asked him something, and I asked him what she say, and she started talking crazy, so I just punched her in her face.
Later in the year, Kerry told me another story about a fight she had with some girls from a rival community:

I was at a dance last New Year’s Eve and this girl come in my face and asked me, “Are you messing with such and such a boy?” And I say, “Yeah, why?” “Oh that’s my boyfriend.” And I say, “Well I got him,” and I hit her.

Trisha told a similar story about her encounter with a girl who wanted to "steal" her boyfriend: "Last weekend, I got in a fight over my boyfriend, cos I liked him and another girl who lives in my neighborhood is a slut and she wanted to go out with him, and I told her she wasn’t going to get him, so we fought."

Certainly, most of the stories these girls told about fighting situated them as the "actor" who does the fighting; however, some of their tales reified traditional understandings of females as passive, recipients of male protection, thus validating the stereotypical tale of the "protected Southern belle". They often spoke proudly of their boyfriends' willingness to fight for them - to protect them from other men. Usually the stories were told as proof to me and others of their boyfriends' love and devotion. This particular story about fighting seems to legitimate traditional understandings of the male as the physically strong - the protector and the female as the "weaker sex" - the protectorate. However, for Trisha, Kerry, and India, who often feel unprotected by the adults in their lives and who lament not having a person on whom
they can always depend ("I don’t have any role models"
India said of her mother), their stories about their boyfriends fighting for them seemed to offer a feeling of comfort and stability.

Trisha told several stories about the sacrifices her boyfriend Jeramy makes for her. For example, when she broke her nose during a rodeo, she said that Jeramy stayed with her in the hospital, day and night for seven days. She also talks glowingly about Jeramy’s willingness to protect her from the verbal and physical assaults of others. Since Trisha is often the brunt of others’ jokes calling her "hillbilly" and "Mac truck," her repeated stories about Jeramy’s protection seemed to offer her a sense of, at least, mythical security:

Jeramy told me if anybody at Foster messes with me – Black, White, purple, green, orange or yellow, whatever colors – he said, tell him, he’ll come beat them up. He says he don’t’ care if they’re a girl or not, if they mess with me, let him know.

India also talked about one of her boyfriend’s willingness to fight her battles:

I know Gerald will fight for me. He just that crazy. This boy told me he was going to slap me in my face, and I was on the phone. "You going to slap me? Gerald, you heard that? Gerald, he say he going to slap me in my face." He say, "Hold up, I’ll be there in five minutes." I hung up the phone and he was over there in five minutes, and he stay way in Fairview, and I stay in Barkely Square. He say, "I’ll be over there in five minutes. He was over there. "Where’s that dude saying he going to hit you?" He walked up behind him, "Say, boy, you that dude that when I was on the phone with my woman say you wanted to
hit her or something?" He say, "Yeah, I said I was going to hit her." Bam!! I say, "Oh goodness!" He got back in the car and left.

And Kerry, in reference to a fight she had with another Black male, told me, "If Clayton [her boyfriend] would’ve been here, he would have been fighting for me."

Anyon (1983) claims that women "appropriate the ideology of femininity and shape it to [their] own end [thus] . . . . femininity may become a way of gaining security against a harsher world (p. 25). As highlighted in the above stories about their fighting, Kerry, Trisha, Sharon, and India’s fighting seems to perpetuate stereotypical understandings of women as the weaker sex. However, as explored in Chapter 6, our sense of self is often intimately connected to the cultural myths upon which our realities are based – and by embracing this myth of femininity, they create a sense of order in the world that adheres to the socially prescribed rules for female and male relationships.

Fighting as a Text

Jo Anne Pagano (1991) suggests that "there is more that one way to tell a story and more than one story to tell." By telling several different stories about why and when and where and how Kerry, Trisha, India, and Sharon fight, I have tried to disrupt the notion of a unitary sense of self; our stories as Davies (1989) suggests, reveal the many coherent selves that constitute who we are.
Indeed, the discursive nature of these girls' fighting illustrates the changing subjectivities embedded in their sense of self. In their stories about fighting, they often situate themselves as active agents who control their own lives; on other occasions their fighting can be read as a feminine text that reinforces women's ways of being in the world — that is, in caring relationships and in connection with others. And in some situations, their fighting can be read as recreating the dominant discourse that situates women as the "weaker sex".

Reading their fighting as a text allows us to better understand the multiple ways we position ourselves as conscious thinking subjects within the realities of our own lives. Furthermore, their stories about fighting illuminate the ways in which femininity is struggled over and the importance of our subjective experiences in constructing a gendered identity. Most importantly reading their fighting as a text — one that is partial and often contradictory — challenges us to "unlearn the truth" about normative understandings of femininity. It is this notion of "unlearning the truth" that I explore in the final chapter.
When I was about three or four years old, representatives from the Census Bureau in Washington, D.C. came to my hometown in Franklin Parish, Louisiana to conduct an official census. Several months later the Census Bureau received the following letter from a Black woman:

I was born in 1895, the onliest child of Jace White and Lue Etta Johnson, Fort Necessity, Franklin Parish, Louisiana, baptised in the Morningside Baptist Church that has a creek running through the grave yard. My folks died when I was small I knows their names because I read them in the Bible. I moved in with some other folks they worked for Mr. Bonner on his farm wasn't no address. They was so many children at that house, I didn't think a soul knew about me and now they tell me that you came and counted. Enclosed six dollars can I have two copies, one for the Retirements, and one for me to show I was there. (cited in Mee, 1980, p. 90)

I read this story of an anonymous Black woman, who lived in the same town as I, who knew the same people and places as I but who lived a life far different from my own, and I am jarred from my complacency. I read her story and remember another story: My great-aunt (the same one who read the poems to me from John Brown’s Body cited in Chapter 1) and I are sitting in her dimly lit, warm bedroom; she in her large, worn green recliner, I on her four-postered bed. On this particular day, she has chosen to read to me a poem by W.H. Auden - "Musee Des Beaux Arts" which begins: About suffering they were never
wrong, The Old Masters: how well they understood its human position; how it takes place while someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along (p. 289)."

Once again I am back to the story of the Black woman who "didn’t think a soul knew about me", and I am forced to see the parallels between her story and the stories of Kerry, India, Sharon, and Trisha. Like the anonymous Black woman, these girls want their lives to count for something - they want to "show that they were there."

Stories do this to me - they force me to traverse between me and Other - real and fiction - what is and what could be - the truths and lies of what it means to be human. Stories are transformative and push me from the complacency of my everyday experience to confront the inconsistencies and paradoxes of human existence - "of how people envision a society of love but live in a society of hate, of how they conceive of a collective soul but live in individual cells" (Richardson, 1990, p. 28).

Thomas Barone (1992) asserts that stories have the power to move people in ways that research articles and technical monographs do not, for stories disrupt "implicit, habitual, taken-for-granted beliefs . . . [and] "normative ways of seeing" (p. 17). Thus, according to Barone, storytelling is a powerful tool for bringing about educational reform. Certainly, I share Barone’s belief that critical storytelling can potentially aid in
enlightening the public, thus provoking them to work for social change. However, I am well aware that much of what is done in the name of emancipatory education has little impact on the lives of individuals in schools. Therefore, I question: "What is the value of telling Kerry’s, India’s, Sharon’s and Trisha’s stories?"

Undeniably, the stories told by Kerry, India, Sharon, and Trisha about their struggles to construct identities that defy erasure and dismissal force us to rethink those "truths" that have governed our understandings of the world. Learning the truth as Grumet (1989) suggests is a tricky business, but unlearning the truth seems to be an even more difficult task, especially for those whose "truths" have always been privileged and legitimated. Yet, these girls’ stories highlight, as discussed in the next three sections, the crucial need to "unlearn" the truths about gender, adolescence, and schooling so that girls like Kerry, India, Sharon, and Trisha can be a "somebody."

Unlearning the Truth about Gender

The Interplay Between the Dominant Discourse of Femininity and Lived Experience

At a recent educational conference, a female researcher, interested in how pre-school students become socialized into gendered roles in the classroom, presented her findings from a study in which she calculated the number of times boys and girls in a particular class exhibited non-traditional gendered behavior (e.g. when a
girl behaved aggressively or when a boy played with a
doll). Her conclusion was that many students take on non-
traditional gendered roles (e.g. boys will play "dress-up"
or girls will behave assertively) as a result of the
interaction and intervention of peers and teachers.
However, the basic premise of her research was that there
were indeed masculine and feminine traits upon which
everyone agreed. In reality, what constituted feminine
behavior in her study were actually White, middle-class
notions of femininity. However, as illuminated by the
stories of Kerry, India, and Sharon such a precept is
faulty, for it assumes that behavior is always either male
or female, masculine or feminine.

Admittedly, I, like the researcher above, began this
research with an already preconceived idea about what
constitutes normative feminine and masculine behavior. I
believed that since the participants and I were all
products of Southern culture we would all share a similar
understanding of what it meant to be feminine. For me,
being feminine (in addition to being pretty and petite)
meant never saying or thinking an unkind word about anyone;
it meant mediating conflicts and avoiding subjects that
caused people discomfort; it meant deferring to others.
Quite simply, being feminine meant being the opposite of
masculine. However, how I understood the construct of
femininity was often far different from the way Sharon,
Kerry, India (and Trisha to a lesser degree) made sense of appropriate feminine behavior.

In many ways, Trisha did share my polarized understandings of gender. (Interestingly, she is the one closest to the dominant culture as she is White and the most economically stable.) For her, masculinity and femininity were clearly distinct ways of being. Trisha told the following story about the first time she realized that one could be either a boy or a girl, but not both:

Up until I was nine I thought I was a guy, then one day when I was nine, I walked outside dressed like a boy and everybody teased me and laughed at me. I learned then I wasn’t a guy. Ever since then all I’ve heard [from the women in my life] is to be a girl - don’t try to be anything you’re not [meaning a boy].

Trisha learned from this experience that boy-girl, male-female, masculine-feminine were polar opposites and trying to cross over or blur the distinction between the two (i.e. a girl dressing like boy) was grounds for ridicule and humiliation.

In Trisha’s construction of the world, women are supposed to stay at home, care for their children, cater to the needs of their husbands, and look like a Playboy centerfold while doing this. Several months ago when her boyfriend (after being kicked out of his house) came to live with her, Trisha told me, “As long as Jeb stays at my house, I cook for him, clean for him, wait on him hand and foot. My grandmother said that’ll be good preparation for
me when I get married." Yet, "cooking, cleaning, and waiting on boys" is not how she usually leads her life as she spends most of her time riding horses and bulls and competing in rodeos. However, Trisha is acutely aware that riding bulls is not within the range of normative feminine behavior and is the reason why she is unpopular with boys. "They see my bullriding shirt and say, 'you're a bullrider; I ain't' messing with you'." Trisha talked at great length about how she will act like a "girly girl" in order to get a boyfriend: "I wash my hair, wash my face, cut my nails, and put on my tightest pair of Wranglers." However, she does not enjoy performing like a "girly girl" in order to get a boyfriend. Of course, as her stories illuminate, Trisha challenges this dominant discourse of femininity and despite ridicule and criticism from both males and females, she persists in "blurring" gender distinctions.

However, unlike Trisha, Kerry, India, and Sharon challenge the very notion that there are indeed characteristics we can distinguish as feminine or masculine. Indeed, femininity and masculinity as typically constructed in the dominant discourse of gender as essentialized and opposite traits has little meaning in their everyday lives. In the lived experiences of these girls, these binaries become blurred, reversed, or obliterated as illustrated by Kerry's comment "my mamma is the man and the woman" and Sharon's reference to gangster
traits as being neither male nor female. Consequently, these girls do not necessarily negotiate their identity against traditional binary understandings of male-female -- masculine-feminine. As Benson (1994) pointed out to me, gender is a continuum, always in flux, and has little to do with passively accepting a feminine or masculine role.

This rejection of a binary way of thinking about gender is most evident in their stories about fighting and aggression. In the dominant discourse of gender, fighting is identified as a masculine behavior; thus girls who fight are seen as abnormal. Indeed, as illustrated in Chapter 7, I, as well as the teachers and administrators at Foster Middle School, shared a world view that situates fighting as deviant behavior for girls -- "something nice girls wouldn't do." However, Kerry, India and Sharon rejected the belief that fighting and assertiveness was a masculine trait. They dismissed such ideas as "sexist" and argued that in no way should their fighting be construed as imitating boys. Fighting was simply a natural part of who they were ("I'm just being myself") and a way to prove that they were "somebody."

Although the dominant discourse which equates femininity with passivity and submission would situate Kerry, Sharon, and India as resisting or rejecting femininity, Kerry, India, and Sharon do not view their behavior as such. Quite the opposite -- they perceive
themselves to be quite feminine as India pointed out (during a discussion about fighting), "I'm a girl, I'm going to stay a girl; I don't have no time to be acting like a boy; I ain't a Michael Jackson." For these girls, asserting one's self (either physically or verbally) was not only appropriate behavior for both males and females but also a necessary survival tool. As discussed earlier, to be silent or to become a victim of someone else's aggression was considered by them a disgrace and indicative of a moral and psychological weakness, and interestingly, girls who allowed others to control them, either physically or emotionally were seen as abnormal. As bell hooks (1989) reminds us, "woman's silence may be reflective of WASP women but Black women have not been silent" (p. 6).

As evident in their stories, Sharon, Kerry, and India recreate their own ideology of femininity that bears little resemblance to the gender polarized views of masculinity and femininity. However, this is not to suggest that the dominant discourse of femininity has no impact on their lives, for these girls are influenced by what our culture deems to be the ideal woman. Trisha's desire to work at Hooters or be a Playboy model and India's willingness to pose in a skimpy bathing suit for her boyfriend to photograph demonstrate the powerful message adolescent girls receive about their bodies and for what they are to be used. Their portrayal of the ideal woman (Appendix D)
scattered with pictures of beautiful (predominantly White) women and fragmented bodies reveal a pervasive myth about femininity against which they have to construct an identity that often falls short of this ideal. Ultimately, they seem to create their identities both in accordance with and in rejection of the dominant discourse of femininity.

Because the dominant discourse of femininity is often in sharp contrast to the realities of their lives as women and the lives of women close to them, Kerry, India, Sharon, and Trisha do not uncritically and passively accept the White, middle-class version of femininity. For example, they often reverse the traditional notion of women needing men to assert that, in reality, it is men that need women—both sexually and emotionally. Kerry’s claim (based on watching her mother "handle" her father) that "it seems women need men, but women don’t really need men" highlights their already developed way of critically analyzing gender and power relations. India’s and Sharon’s insistence that boys pay them for sexual favors is one way in which they disrupt the myth of passive women and controlling men. Their fighting boys is another way they reject traditional understandings of femininity. How they negotiate these conflicting expectations of what it means to be a woman in our society is crucial to their developing a positive self-image.
As stated earlier, Trisha struggles in constructing a sense of self that meets the expectations of the women in her life, her teachers, male rodeoers, female non-rodeoing friends, and boyfriends (all who subscribe to a binary understanding of gender). She attempts to construct an identity that is unique but within the range of what she considers to be acceptable feminine behavior. Of the four participants, Trisha is the one who most reads her life against the dominant discourse of femininity and makes accommodations to fit those culturally prescribed codes of appropriate feminine behavior. She is also the one who expresses the most doubt about herself as a female, feeling that she never seems to "get it quite right." In response to my question - "Will you ever achieve the status of the ideal woman (as represented on her poster)," she responded, "No, because I will always be a tomboy and be rough." For Trisha, being a tomboy does not meet the culturally sanctioned way of being a "woman."

Like Trisha, Sharon feels that she also fails to meet the expectations of normative White feminine behavior. During one interview, Sharon commented, "I know I should be a lady and all that stuff, but I can’t; that’s just not me; I’m loud, and I like to be active and stuff. I can’t be no lady who just sits there." Sharon also realizes that her refusal to "be a lady" coupled with the fact that she "acts Black" marks her as deviant. Unlike Trisha, Sharon copes
with this inability to meet the standards of white femininity by rejecting these ideals as being irrelevant to her life since she is, in fact, "a Black girl trapped in a White girl’s body."

India and Kerry seem on the surface to have a much easier time than do Sharon and Trisha in negotiating an identity that both rejects and embraces the standards of the dominant culture. They seem comfortable with their physical appearance and their bodies. They exert an air of confidence about boys and about their activities outside of school. Although neither excels academically, each is confident that she will graduate from high school. (Interestingly, neither Sharon nor Trisha has plans to finish high school.) In response to my question — "Will you ever achieve the status of the ideal woman (as portrayed on their posters)?" Kerry and India both answered affirmatively. Kerry stated, "Yes, I think I will become the ideal woman. Why? Because I am the ideal girl. I am sweet, nice, pretty, fine, sexy and have plenty of guys." India responded, "Yes, because the ideal woman can achieve any goal that she wants. I know I can do it." Although I have not included the responses of the other five participants, (Appendix E), it is worth noting that the other two Black females also answered "yes" to this question, and the three White females answered "no".

Perhaps negotiating conflicting images is a strategy Kerry
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and India as Black females learned long ago to survive in two worlds – the Black world of their community and the White world of the dominant culture. Du Bois (1903) explains this theory of "double consciousness":

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, -- a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (p. 45)

However, being able to negotiate contradictory images and expectations does not mean that Kerry and India are immune from the conflicted feelings that accompany the realization that somehow their life does not meet the expectations of the dominant culture. hooks (1981), in citing the tendency in the White feminist movement to romanticize Black women's lives and their courageous ability to face oppression, reminds us, "to be strong in the face of oppression is not the same as overcoming oppression, that endurance is not to be confused with transformation" (p. 6).

Indeed, reconciling conflicting images of how life should be and how life is causes India, in particular, great pain and resentment. She is angry that her mother
does not act like the mothers she sees on TV; she tells her mother, "You ain’t no kind of role model, and I need a role model." She knows that her mother is supposed to take care of her physical and emotional needs, and when her mother falls short in doing this, India feels cheated. "My mama told me she would buy me some new shoes when she gets paid; she’s done got two paychecks and I still ain’t seen those shoes. I told her, that’s alright, I’ll find me another way to get those shoes."

One way that these girls reconcile these conflicting images is through the use of the imagination or fantasy. In the next section, I explore both the possibilities and the limitations of fantasy in constructing an identity that transcends the realities of the material world.

**Imagination and the Construction of Identities**

Ruth Sidel (1990) in her book *On Her Own: Growing Up in the Shadow of the American Dream* talks about the large number of adolescent girls who because of the conditions of their daily lives no longer believe that the American Dream is possible. She further asserts that poor, non-White, adolescent girls are, by far, the most disenfranchised in our society:

> If adolescents by virtue of their developmental stage are Outsiders, if female adolescents by virtue of their gender are also outside the system, if the poor are outside the American Dream, then, if we think in terms of concentric circles, those who are poor, nonwhite, and female must be farthest from the center, farthest from the image of what is good, what is
shining, what it means to be an American. Can these young women on that periphery even see the center? Can they touch it? Can they imagine it? Or is it just too far--too far even to dream? (p. 68)

Undeniably, Kerry, Sharon, India, and Trisha constantly negotiate an identity between what is and what should be, and more often than not they do stand outside the margins of the dominant culture. But, do they consider themselves Outsiders? Do they believe the American Dream has already escaped them? Have they quit dreaming?

Without a doubt, India and Sharon (at age 13) and Trisha (at age 14) still dream; they still think they will achieve the American Dream (or at least a modified version thereof). Sharon plans to be a zoologist; India plans to be a cosmetologist and own her own beauty shop; Trisha plans to rodeo professionally, which she says is a lucrative business ("some people win $60,000 at one rodeo"). It is largely through the use of imagination and fantasy that they are able to create another way of being. It is by telling "lies" that they construct an identity that transcends the material realities of their life, thus giving them hope that they can be "somebody."

Trisha’s stories about the princess who is beautiful and "so rich, it’s pitiful", about the cowgirl/boy who successfully competes in a man’s world, about the waitress at Hooters who has an adoring husband and baby at home provide a way for seeing the world not as it is but how it
could be. Through her stories, she has created a world in which women do not have to make compromises to achieve their dreams. Like my Scarlett story, Trisha’s stories give her a sense that she can have it all.

Similarly, Sharon stories about the confident gangster offers her a way to deal with the racism and sexism that are very much a part of her everyday life. By situating herself as an empowered individual who, by choice, defies societal norms, Sharon creates a sense of self that is invulnerable to the critiques of the dominant culture who have labeled her as "abnormal." Like Sharon, India’s stories of the cosmic goddess who naturally possesses an inner strength instill in her a sense of protection from the all-too-real dangers of living in her world. Somehow goddesses appear immune to the pain of death and the fear of living.

They also still dream that life can be better. Sharon’s dream of being a zoologist seems very attainable to her: she will quit high school at age 16, get a GED from the Teen Parenting Center at age 17, enter college, and her boyfriend will pay for her courses because "that’s his responsibility to put me through school." She already plans on getting a job this summer at an animal shelter to help prepare her for the future. Trisha’s dreams of getting married at age 15, having a baby at age 16, and rodeoing professionally also seem within her grasp: "I’ll
just have to bring my baby with me. She’ll be on a horse by the time she’s two weeks old, just like me.” India
dreams the following:

I don’t want my children growing up like I did, like I’m growing up around people outside slinging guns at you, shooting at you. I don’t want my children growing up like that . . . I’m going to move to Virginia — there’s lots of space there and a lot of room for children, I’ll have a big house with a big yard so I don’t have to worry about nobody messing with my children cos you know where they are.

Their dreams, hopes, and aspirations, childlike in many ways, are nevertheless poignant to a 32 year-old woman like myself who often needs a boost of adolescent idealism. Yet, I know that fantasies and imagination can also raise a false consciousness and induce false hope. Jacobs (1994) cautiously questions “When does our imagination of self become a trap that perpetuates our own oppression? How successfully can poor women, black women live against the patriarchal grain?” I certainly do not want them to quit imagining that life can be different and better, but I question: How effective are their dreams in countering the oppressive forces that frame the lives of girls like Sharon and India who are non/White and/or poor? If Sharon, India, and Trisha fail to achieve their dreams, will they blame themselves for failing “to get it right?” Perhaps, Kerry’s comment (as the oldest of the participants) about the future indicate the limitations of relying solely on imagination to create a better life:
I have no idea what I'll be doing in ten years. I really don't know. All I can do is stay in school, cos he's [her father] always saying, and it makes me feel bad my own daddy telling me, "You ain't' going to be nobody; you're going to be on the street, drifting and dragging [depending on others]."

Although they may use their imaginations to dream about transcending the "nobodyness" that is all too often associated with being non-White, non-male, and non-middle class, in reality, they struggle constantly in their everyday lives to be recognized as "somebody, and not just anybody." They want their lives to count for something. They struggle against the dominant discourse of gender to construct identities that defy erasure and dismissal. Consequently, they are continuously involved in shaping and reshaping their identities to make themselves known - to show that they are somebody.

However, to acknowledge these girls as "somebody" requires unlearning the truth about gender. Since these girls do not necessarily view gender as being organized around dualistically prescribed masculine or feminine roles (as does the dominant discourse of gender), the very construct of gender needs to be problematized so that the world views of others like Kerry, India, and Sharon can be validated as worthy ways of being. By problematizing gender in this way, we would be forced to enlarge our understandings of what constitutes an appropriately gendered being. Thus, Sharon, Kerry, Trisha, and India
would not be viewed as deviant in school nor would they be perceived as having an identity problem because they fail to meet the standards of femininity prescribed in school.

Furthermore, unlearning the truth about gender and identity (as illuminated in these girls’ stories) forces us to acknowledge the multiple positionings that all of us take up based on our race, class, and gender. According to Davies (1989) the value of focusing on the "multiple subject positions that a person takes up and the contradictory nature of these positionings. . .[is that] we are able to see individuals not as the unitary beings that humanist theory would have them be, but as the complex, changing, contradictory creatures that we each experience ourselves to be, despite our best efforts at producing a unified, coherent and relatively static self" (p. xi).

Last, unlearning the truth about gender in school forces us to recognize that schools are powerful transmitters of the dominant discourse of femininity, often in subtle ways as illustrated by the ways in which Foster Middle School seeks to regulate feminine sexuality. Yet, schools operate under the guise that gender makes no difference despite the reality that adolescent girls (as illuminated in the participants’ stories) experience schooling very differently than do boys. As a result of the rhetoric of "everybody’s equal here", adolescent females are denied access in school to a language for
critiquing the dominant discourse of femininity and the patriarchical structure of schooling. When they fail to meet the conflicting expectations of what it means to be an adolescent and a female in school, they inevitably internalize the problem as a personal problem for which they are individually responsible. In the next section, I explore how the dominant discourse of adolescence plays out in middle schools and the struggle girls encounter in negotiating an identity against both the discourse of femininity and the discourse of adolescence.

Unlearning the Truth about Adolescence

As illuminated in the historical accounts of adolescence (Gillis, 1981; Ketts, 1977), since the institutionalization of adolescence in the nineteenth century, this stage of development has been situated as a time of inevitable "storm and stress." All adolescents (regardless of race, class, or gender) in their search to form an identity separate from their families and parents supposedly undergo emotional trauma and distress. Regardless of studies (Adelson, 1986; Bandura, 1964) which document that adolescence is no more or no less stressful than early childhood or late adulthood, the belief that adolescents (by virtue of their age) need to be protected not only from themselves but from the evils of society pervades most discussions of adolescence. Missing in this dominant discourse of adolescence is the impact of race,
class, and gender and how storm and stress becomes situated as normal or abnormal.

At Foster Middle School this understanding of adolescence as a time of storm and stress in which students need to be controlled not only to "protect" them from their own uncontrollable desires but also from the outside world underlies most of its practices. From its attempts to filter out race, class, and gender to the teacher centered curriculum and teaching strategies to the organization of the school day, Foster Middle School operates to control students, thereby inducing them to "behave appropriately."

Of course, dealing with the storm and stress of adolescence is an expected role of the school. However, at Foster a distinction clearly exists between what is considered normal storm and stress and abnormal storm and stress.

Talking back to the teacher (within reason) is considered normal storm and stress. However, girls fighting is not considered normal adolescent behavior as reflected by the teachers' comments that "girls should be able to talk out their problems" and "it's immature for girls to fight." Teenage girls passing notes in class is considered normal behavior. White girls giving love notes to Black boys is abnormal adolescent behavior as evidenced by Sharon being sent to the office for writing a love note to Darrin (her Black boyfriend) and by the school's subsequent call to her mother, asking her "Do you allow
your daughter to date Black boys?" In school storm and
stress is allowed as long as those behaviors are viewed as
age-related deficiencies (e.g. goofing off in class,
passing notes, challenging the authority of the teacher);
however, when a girl’s adolescent identity challenges the
dominant discourse of femininity (e.g. when a White girls
"acts Black" or when girls reveal too much of their
bodies), when cultural rules are broken (e.g. when White
girls show affection towards Black boys ), havoc is wreaked
and those individuals who fail to meet the expectations of
the dominant culture are labeled deviant, abnormal, at-
risk. How Kerry, Sharon, Trisha, and India as well as
countless other poor, non-White, and/or culturally diverse
students get situated as deviant, at-risk, and marginalized
students in school reveals much about the patriarchal
structure of schooling.

Repeatedly, these four girls were referred to by their
teachers as students with problems. Yet, rarely was their
intellectual capabilities questioned. In fact, teachers
frequently spoke of Sharon as "very bright" and India as
"quite capable." Rather, it was the girls’ emotional and
social well-being that their teachers questioned. In
short, Kerry, Sharon, India, and Trisha failed to meet the
culturally prescribed rules for normative feminine
adolescence. Something was either wrong with them
personally or something was wrong with their home culture.
For example, Trisha’s untidy appearance was a source of constant consternation to her teachers. The guidance counselor told me that she had done everything she could to "get Trisha to cut her nails, wash her face, and take a little pride in her looks." The principal told me that he had seen a marked change in Trisha since participating in the study, "She’s really taking pride in her looks; she’s being more of a lady like you." Because Trisha seemed to care little about her looks coupled with her propensity to "talk back" to the teachers, Trisha was viewed as needing special help in learning "how to be a lady."

By assuming what the school considered to be a male identity and a Black identity, Sharon was, by far, seen as the most deviant of the four girls. The teachers state that they have tried everything – punish work, talking to her mother, time out room, and even suspension – in order to get Sharon to behave appropriately (i.e. like a White girl should). However, they believe that Sharon lacks the proper guidance at home in learning the appropriate rules for feminine behavior. Two of Sharon’s teachers shared with me on several occasions how Sharon’s mother was dressed for a parent-teacher conference: "You wouldn’t believe how she came dressed... short shorts, tight t-shirt... She’s a very large woman and has no business wearing something like that." By mid-January, most of her teachers had given up hope that Sharon would amend her ways
and "act like she should." Days before Sharon was finally expelled from school, Mrs. Hill sighed, "Sharon is a lost cause."

Sharon's story is an powerful example of how adolescent girls are implicitly and explicitly taught the dominant discourse of femininity and adolescence. Two years ago when Sharon was in sixth grade, she was not considered a problem student; in fact, she was relatively unknown by most of the teachers and students. She was quiet, obedient, and conforming. She internalized the "storm and stress" she was feeling of having no friends and of being ostracized for her weight. She had learned to keep her feelings inside - to contain her storm and stress, but she felt as if she would "bust." According to Sharon, her trouble in school began when she "started expressing herself." Sharon had decided to "unlearn the truth" which keeps "good" girls meek and unquestioning.

Unlearning the truth about adolescence, as Sharon's story illuminates, requires us to question the discourse of storm and stress: Why has adolescence continued to be characterized as a time of storm and stress? What constitutes normative storm and stress? How do schools through their control of time, knowledge, and power reinforce our traditional understandings of adolescence as a time of storm and stress? What does the construction of adolescence reveal about power structures in our society as
a whole? Most importantly, how are adolescent females like Sharon situated as abnormal or "at-risk" students when they fail to meet the conflicting expectations of being an adolescent and a female?

In the next section, I explore how the middle school curriculum (both formal and informal) at schools like Foster operate unintentionally to make Sharon, Kerry, Trisha, and India feel as if they are "nobodies" and "nothings." I end the final section by exploring the implications of unlearning the truth about schooling "at-risk" students and the possibilities of a curriculum of resiliency.

Unlearning the Truth about Middle Schools

As discussed in Chapter 5, the curriculum at Foster Middle School is based on a subject-centered, teacher-directed approach. The assumption underlying this kind of curriculum is that students must acquire a kind of knowledge that will benefit them in their future roles as workers and citizens (Beane, 1990). Thus, knowledge becomes defined as an abstract de-contextualized "thing" that, by virtue of age, experience, and a college education, teachers "have" and students, by virtue of their age, experience, and lack of a college education, "lack." Not once during any of my observations did students make any substantive curriculum decisions. Overwhelmingly, what is to be learned, how it is to be learned, and why it is to
be learned is determined by individuals other than students (e.g. teachers, curriculum guide makers, textbook publishers). The intended outcome of spending three years at Foster Middle School is that students will have acquired a common knowledge as measured, in particular, by how well they score on national standardized tests. Freire (1983) describes this kind of education as the "banking concept" (p. 58). By refusing to acknowledge that knowledge is socially constructed, and thus all have knowledge, the banking concept, according to Freire, actually numbs students' creative powers, keeping them passive, unquestioning members of society. The purpose of this kind of education is to enculturate students into the dominant existing culture rather than educating them to change it (Brodky, 1992; Freire, 1983).

Of course, as numerous studies (Fine, 1991; Willis, 1977) document, students do not passively accept their role as docile, unquestioning, obedient, unknowledgeable beings. Kerry, India, Sharon, and Trisha certainly resist this kind of education in many ways. Trisha, Sharon, and India goof off; they talk back to teachers; they refuse to participate in classroom discussions; they disrupt the teacher by asking inappropriate questions. Kerry simply says nothing, puts her head on her desk, and falls asleep. The personal cost of this resistance, as Everhart (1983), Fine (1991) and Rose (1989) assert, is that non-White and non-middle
class students who reject school knowledge usually remain poor and disenfranchised members of society with little hope of any kind of better life.

Furthermore, the curriculum at Foster is based on the philosophy that if all students have access to the same de-contextualized knowledge, then all students will have the same opportunities to succeed. Differences of race, class, and gender are downplayed in school. Thus, students are given few opportunities to bring their subjective experiences into the classroom. What emerges is a curriculum that has little relevance to students' lives outside of school as reflected in Kerry's comment, "They don't teach you nothing at school."

In fact, Kerry, India, Sharon, and Trisha feel that the school is negligent in its refusal to address the issues that crucially impact their lives: AIDS, pregnancy, sexual abuse, drug abuse, racism. India is well aware of the irony of the school's unofficial motto - "We're the home of the World's Greatest Kids" when "half the kids around here are pregnant, or walking around just waiting to get AIDS, or hooked on drugs or beaten at home."

Repeatedly, all four of the girls stated that if the school really cared about individual students, then sex education and AIDS awareness classes could be part of the regular curriculum. Of course, discussions of sexuality, racism, date rape, drug abuse, sexual harassment are volatile
subjects that have the potential to erupt into discipline problems. Thus, controversy is avoided in most school – Foster Middle is no exception where sex education is "covered" in a seventh grade science unit, drug abuse is "handled" by an outside counselor who visits the school once or twice a week, and discussions of racism and sexual harassment are avoided at all costs.

Furthermore, Foster Middle School’s curriculum (as evident in its regulation of feminine dress, its emphasis on mothering, and its attitudes towards girls’ fighting) seeks to regulate what is considered appropriate feminine and adolescent behavior. Since these girls fail to meet these standards of a "proper little lady" and a "normal" adolescent, they are situated as "at-risk" students whose problems are viewed as being individual problems of nonconformity and cultural deficiency.

Interestingly, Foster Middle School is part of a school district that has very recently decided to restructure its middle schools based on the philosophies of the middle school reform movement. Indeed, Foster’s mission statement echoes the basic philosophy of the middle school movement; that is, middle schools should provide for the unique academic, social, emotional, and physical needs of early adolescents. In an attempt to provide for the academic needs of early adolescents, many of the teachers at Foster have undergone special training in the different
learning styles of adolescents. To meet the social and emotional needs of its students, Foster has implemented an advisory program which meets once a month for approximately 30 minutes. The purpose of the program, as I heard it explained to a parent while I was sitting in the office, is to "build students' self-esteem."

Implicit in the current middle school philosophy which Foster has somewhat adopted is the belief that early adolescence is a stage of development (different from both late childhood and late adolescence) in which all individuals progress in a linear, sequential fashion. In short, all students experience this stage of development in very similar ways. Since all students experience adolescence in a similar way, programs and practices (e.g. advisory programs, interdisciplinary teaching, exploratory programs, teaming) assumingly can be designed that will collectively meet early adolescents' special age-related needs. Although I do not want to dismiss the value of Foster's advisory program are the need to offer exploratory programs or to implement interdisciplinary teaching, the middle school movement itself can be critiqued based on several factors: (1) its minimizing of the importance of race, class, and gender on the myriad ways in which adolescence is experienced (2) its propensity to offer band-aid remedies (e.g. an advisory program) for dealing with the emotional needs of students - remedies that make
little difference in the lives of students like Kerry and India. (3) its de-emphasis on the social, cultural, and political context of schooling. I question whether Kerry, India, Sharon, and Trisha would fare any better in a "reformed" middle school that has changed its programs and practices without reconceptualizing the fundamental tenants of schooling.

Unlearning the truth about middle schools would force us to reconceptualize taken-for-granted notions about schooling: What is knowledge? Who has it? How could teacher-student relationships be re-formed? What is the purpose of schooling? How could we educate students like Kerry, India, Sharon, and Trisha to transform the oppressive structures in schools and society that marginalize their experiences so that they would be "somebodies" in school?

Unlearning the truth about middle school forces us to take seriously the implications of labeling students when they fail to meet the standards of the dominant discourse of gender or of adolescence as "deviant, abnormal, and at-risk." Unlearning the truth about middle schools challenges us to re-envision a curriculum for resiliency rather than a curriculum for deficiency.

Despite the fact they are continuously told they are "nobodies," as illuminated in their stories, Sharon, Trisha, Kerry, and India are resilient youth who are still
"hanging tough" and have every intention to continue "hanging tough." Interestingly, in a recent article written by the Western Center for Drug-Free Schools and Communities (1994), the authors suggest that the focus on disadvantaged youth should change from being that of "at-risk" students to "resilient" adolescents. The article defined resilient youths as those "who have social competence, including responsiveness, caring, flexibility, and especially a sense of humor; are good at problem solving; and have a sense of identity, independence, and control over their own environment . . . and a sense of purpose and future" (p. 2). I cannot help but wonder how Sharon, India, Trisha, and Kerry would fare in school if their stories were read against a discourse of resiliency rather than a discourse of deficiency or deviancy.

Of course, re-envisioning a curriculum of resiliency based on the positive characteristics students like Kerry, Sharon, India, and Trisha bring to school requires us to unlearn the traditional model of schooling, for a curriculum of resiliency invites an understanding of curriculum that seeks to legitimize the lived experiences of all students, rather than a privileged few. Such a curriculum acknowledges that students come to school as raced, gendered, and classed individuals who have acquired a way of seeing the world that may differ from that of the dominant culture. A curriculum of resiliency would allow
students to bring their out of school subjective realities into the classroom and would allow the curriculum to focus on the lives of students and their culture. Furthermore, a curriculum of resiliency would acknowledge the many ways in which individuals construct meaning. However, a curriculum of resiliency would demand much more than simply recognizing multiple ways of being and knowing. This understanding of curriculum would challenge students to critically analyze power and domination in our society, and by doing so, become critical agents of the reconstruction of that society. Most importantly, a discourse of resiliency rather than a discourse of deficiency would offer a way of reading the lives of Kerry, India, Sharon, and Trisha in a way that would validate that they are indeed "somebody."

"Unlearning the Truth is a Tricky Business"

Undeniably, unlearning the truth about gender, adolescence, and schooling is a tricky business, for it forces us to rethink the fundamental truths upon which our world is based. Such an undertaking is painful but necessary - especially in schools which continue, despite the numerous attempts at reforming and restructuring, to be alien places for girls like Sharon, Trisha, Kerry, and India who themselves need to unlearn the truth that they are "nobodies" and "nothings."
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX A
QUESTIONNAIRE COMPLETED BY 48 STUDENTS IN HILL'S CLASS

Name ___________________________________ Phone # __________

I. Put a check mark next to the following activities in which you participate. Following the activity, in the blank write the name of the specific group in which you are involved.

____ Organized sports program __________________________

____ Youth organization sponsored by ____________________
a community group

____ Church youth program ____________________________

____ School sports __________________________

____ School clubs __________________________

____ Other clubs, activities ____________________________
or organizations in which you meet with people your ____________
own age

II. Which magazines do you read or a regular basis?

III. What chores do you perform in your home?

IV. Do you have a paying job of any kind? If so, what do you do?

V. Is your relationship with your parents better, worse, or the same as your friends' relationship with their parents? (Circle one)

Better  Worse  Same

VI. When are you treated most like an adult?

VII. When are you treated most like a child?

V. What is the hardest part of being a teen-ager today?
APPENDIX B
QUESTIONNAIRE COMPLETED BY PARTICIPANTS

Name ___________________________________________ (fake name)

1. Define adolescent.

2. "Any student or non-student found guilty of carrying a firearm on a school campus or school bus shall be imprisoned at hard labor for up to five years." How do you feel about this sign? What message does it send?

3. How does the school deal with the following:

   DRUG ABUSE

   TEENAGE PREGNANCY

   PREJUDICE

   SEX DISCRIMINATION

   VIOLENCE

4. Do you think the school should deal with those things above. Explain.

5. Do you think school will make your life better in any way in the future. Explain.

6. Do you think your experiences at Foster Middle School will prepare you for adulthood in any way. Explain.
APPENDIX C

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ABOUT FOSTER MIDDLE SCHOOL

Year Established 1967

Total Enrollment 795

Breakdown of enrollment by race
# of Black students 584
# of White students 211

Breakdown of enrollment by gender
# of female students 358
# of male students 437

Total Number of Teachers 42

Breakdown of faculty by race
# of Black teachers 17
# of White teachers 25

Breakdown by gender
# of female teachers 34
# of male teachers 8

Breakdown of faculty according to certification
# of elementary certified 20
# of secondary certified 22

Percentage (or number) of students receiving free or reduced lunches 53% (423)
APPENDIX D

COPIES OF GIRLS’ POSTERS DEPICTING THE IDEAL WOMAN

Poster one  India
Poster two  Kerry
Poster three  Trisha
Poster four  Nicole
Poster five  Mia
Poster six  Chasity
Poster seven  Oleatha
Poster eight  Alexandria
Poster Two

We think they're the most beautiful women in America.
Poster Three
Poster Five

Poster Five

my best friend

my sister's boyfriend

within two years

my other sport car

my sport car

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DO YOU THINK YOU WILL EVER BECOME THE IDEAL WOMAN?

Kerry: Yes I think I will become the ideal woman. Why? Because I am the ideal girl. I am sweet, nice, pretty, fine, sexy and have plenty of guys.

India: Yes, because the ideal woman can achieve any goal that she wants. I know that I can do it.

Trisha: No, because I will always be a tomboy and be rough.

Oleatha (African-American female): I think some day I will become the ideal woman if I pass all the goals that I set for myself. The only goal I am not sure about is find the right man. I think the reason for this is that I think all the men gone to jail or dead or in a gang.

Mia (African-American female): I think I will become my ideal woman soon. The ideal woman is a person that is pretty and that has pretty hair and face.

Alexandria (White female): No, I’m not pretty enough. I don’t have a perfect body. I might be cute but not beautiful.

Chasity (White female): I don’t think that I will ever become the ideal woman because I set my standards too high.

Nicole (White female): I really don’t think so. Because my ideal woman is very pretty – I’m not. She is also a person who has a good job and nice expensive clothes and cars – I don’t think I’ll ever be like that. I’m sure I’ll have a good life and all but I don’t think I’ll ever be an ideal woman. My ideal woman is very fashionable and married. I want one child and a good working husband. I hope I get a good husband and a good child, but I don’t think I’ll have time to do all I want.
VITA

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DOCTORAL EXAMINATION AND DISSERTATION REPORT

Candidate: Natalie G. Adams

Major Field: Education

Title of Dissertation: "A Proper Little Lady" and Other Twisted Tales of Adolescent Femininity

Approved:

[Signatures]

Major Professor and Chairman
Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

[Signatures]

Date of Examination:
May 17, 1994

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