

‘IDEAL’, ‘DEVIANT’, FEMALE:
“SEA-CHANGED” AND “IMPOSSIBLE” FEMININITIES IN THE
CONTEMPORARY MOMENT

by

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis project I explore economically disadvantaged young women's responses to notions of ideal and deviant femininity circulating within contemporary mass media. Specifically, I examine six young women's expressed accounts and critiques of particular forms of femininity in relation to their own experiences of social exclusion. Additionally, and drawing upon an experimental adaptation of Walter Benjamin's montage method, I assess the symbolic links between mass media representations of femininity and exclusion along classed and gendered lines. I use this adaptation of Benjamin's technique to historicize and contextualize dominant notions of ideal (deviant) femininity circulating in the contemporary moment and to engage in a "reflexive" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) analysis of my own entanglement with the norms and values which proliferate within mass media. The foundational thinking which directs my aims throughout this thesis explores the analytical possibilities of joining the complementary theoretical work of Hannah Arendt and Pierre Bourdieu within an interdisciplinary theoretical and methodological framework.

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DEDICATION

Very simply, I dedicate this effort to my grandparents, auntie and gran. I could see you smiling, grandpa, whenever I got to the end of *another* chapter revision.

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL GROUNDING

Introduction

‘C’mon, take control’. ‘Empower yourself’. ‘Transform yourself’. ‘Now you have the power’. ‘Reveal the goddess in you’. ‘[Be] the perfect mix of tough and girly’. ‘Be a crowd pleaser’. ‘Pamper yourself’. ‘Keep it real’. ‘Change your mind’. ‘Choose your outfit wisely’. ‘Choose your look’. ‘Dream it – Live it’. ‘Dare’. ‘Choose’. ‘Have it all’.¹

In the popular media of the ‘West’ much is made of the power of young women to choose to be authors of their own personal destinies despite the reality of restrictive social and material conditions. Such representations of powerful, unfettered feminine freedom represent an ideological fallacy, driven in part by currents of liberal and neo-liberal individualism with its attending popular rhetoric of choice, freewill and accountability. On one level the areas of choice presented to young women often fall within the private realm of the state (e.g., fashion, beauty, motherhood, personal relationships, housekeeping, entertaining, self-esteem) effectively presenting twenty-first century girls “in drag as powerful decision makers” (Fine, 2004, p. xv). On another level, gendered discourses of choice ignore (and so render invisible) the social and economic constraints which exist in the lives of many young women (see McRobbie, 2004a). Moreover, such disadvantage is often pathologized within popular media representations of femininity which conflate the *appearing Who* (see Arendt, 1958/1998; Kristeva, 2001) of a young woman with her social and economic circumstances thus underpinning exclusion along gendered lines (see Bullen and Kenway, 2004; Skeggs, 2005).

¹ All quotes taken from advertisements or articles in “Teen People” (2005), “Elle Girl” (2005), “The Swan” (2004-2005)

Although various mainstream media will refer to, and even offer debate on the possible significance of some of the more contentious or sensational media representations of femininity in the lives of young women, such media coverage rarely moves beyond limited and limiting gendered discourses of “empowerment” (see Griffin, 2004). Furthermore, larger ethical questions of societal inclusion and exclusion are rarely linked to such rhetoric. There is, however, a growing body of literature in the field of *girls’ studies* which seeks to complicate contemporary representations of femininity by positioning young women at what Harris (2004a) calls “the corner of feminism and neoliberalism” and by refusing to search for a final, regulatory definition of what it is to “be a girl” (p. xvii-xviii). In this thesis, I seek to both add to and extend the boundaries of girls’ studies by following the example set by scholars who draw upon strong theoretical traditions and interdisciplinary approaches in their research into gender, youth and social exclusion (see Adkins, 2003; Dillabough, 2004; Bullen and Kenway, 2004; Kehily, 2004; McLeod, 2005; McNay, 2000; McRobbie, 2004a, 2004b, 2005; Nayak & Kehily, 2008).

My specific investigative aims are threefold. First, I assess economically disadvantaged girls’ perspectives on issues of gender and gendered relations, in particular, how they think about popular images of femininity circulating in the mass media. Second, I propose to examine the relationship between young women's accounts and critiques of particular forms of femininity and their own social exclusion.² Finally,

² In electing to interview young women who live in a marginalized and disadvantaged area of a large city I aim to challenge popular representations which, along with sexualizing and fetishizing young women’s bodies, personalize and pathologize gendered experiences of social and economic disadvantage. As Bullen and Kenway (2004) note such depictions are not limited to the popular media. Within scholarly circles, there is a “dominant strand of underclass theory that argues the problem for the ‘underclass’ is not economic poverty *per se*, but an impoverishment of cultural and civic values” (Murray 1999 as quoted in Bullen and Kenway, 2004, p. 142). The authors move on to explain that once pathologized versions are

my desire to historicize such accounts, to contextualize the media samples used during the interviews and to engage in a *reflexive* analysis (see Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) of my own entanglement with such media (and that of my reader) set the terms for my third aim which is to reveal the *doxic* (see Bourdieu, 1998, 2001) symbolism of *symbolic/masculine domination* (2001) embedded within contemporary media representations of “ideal” and “deviant” femininity.

Therefore, and with reference to my third aim, in the fourth chapter of the thesis I engage in an experimental work which assesses the link between mass media representations of femininity and exclusion along gendered and classed lines using an adaptation of Walter Benjamin’s historically grounded *montage* technique (see Buck-Morss, 1989; Goodman, 2003). I suggest that montage presents an effective method for identifying and analysing doxic (Bourdieu, 1998, 2001) symbols of objectified, fetishized and sexualized femininity as such symbolism manifests in contemporary mass media representations of “ideal” and “deviant” young women. In so doing I argue that contemporary media representations of ideal femininity are both fluid *and* infused with the static structures of the social world which are themselves imbued with a long history of what Bourdieu (2001) calls symbolic/masculine domination.³ Therefore, ideal femininity necessarily delineates, implicitly and explicitly, the similarly mutable, contingent and symbolic boundaries of deviant femininity. In other words, media proliferated representations of the ideal young woman participate in the cultural

disseminated through mass media, they “become part of the popular imaginary [and] such theories tend to reinforce social exclusion” (ibid.).

³ Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic/masculine domination is discussed in detail later in this introductory chapter.

production of feminine deviancy.⁴ Moreover, the symbolism of ideal femininity is distinctly classed (see Bourdieu, 2001; Skeggs, 2005). The symbolic ideal is constructed using value systems of the middle and privileged classes and so deviant femininity is therefore linked to lower social and economic status. I therefore follow Bourdieu (1998, 2001) in my contention that economically disadvantaged girls, lacking the social, cultural and often familial capital of their more advantaged peers, are particularly and negatively affected by the pervasive and relentless social pursuit of the ideal female and the public consumption of ‘her’ image.

The media montage chapter thus stands as a kind of *fragmented*⁵ ‘iconography of the feminine’ which provides a context for a smaller sample of gendered teen magazine images and text and for the narrated experiences (of gender and exclusion) of six young women living in constrained social and economic circumstances in a deeply pathologized urban center in Canada. I now move forward to outline the foundational thinking which directs my central investigative aims.

Broadly speaking, I seek to follow Arendt’s directive to think “without a bannister” (1954/2006, p. xvi)⁶ as such an exercise might apply to thinking about the

⁴ Hereinafter I refer to “ideal” and “deviant” femininity as ideal (deviant) femininity except where I am discussing a specific representation of the feminine ideal or feminine deviancy.

⁵ Both Arendt and Benjamin reflected (separately) upon the potentially powerful insights (toward a better understanding of the past, present and future) gained through the observation and analysis of a “fragmented” history. For Benjamin in particular, such ‘fragmented’ glimpses of insight were grounded in cultural artifacts and the material “debris” of the marketplaces (see Arendt, 1968, 1971; Buck-Morss, 1989; Eiland, 2006 [Trans.] of Benjamin’s previously unpublished *Berlin Childhood around 1900*).

⁶ I refer here to Arendt’s “habit of thinking” which demanded that scholars “visit” important issues (and “new” historical/social/political phenomena) from as many perspectives as possible. I contend that such visiting requires an interdisciplinary approach to research.

Arendt’s former student recounts a vivid memory of Arendt’s exemplary ‘thought-habit’ of visiting:

Whenever I imagine to myself how Hannah Arendt – who was my teacher – might have judged some phenomenon and brought clarity to it for others, I hear her heavily German-accented voice carefully saying: ‘Vell, vell, on one hand...und den on another hand...Und look here, consider it this way...’ Then she pauses, and you can actually see in her face how much she is mentally

nature and effect of our contemporary media consumption in relation to such media's representation of "ideal" and "deviant" femininity, about how and why young women might reconcile such media, and finally, about whether (or not) young women who already live in disadvantaged circumstances are further "alienated" (see Arendt's concerns about "world alienation", 1954/2006) by the normalization of such idealized femininities. As such, I have developed an interdisciplinary theoretical and methodological frame through which I will explore: (1) the myriad media representations of femininity; and, (2) marginalized young women's "reconciliations" (see Arendt's discussions of "reconciliations with reality", 1954/2006, 1958/1998) of such media in the context of their geographic location and their particular social and cultural circumstances.

My theoretical lens explores the analytical possibilities of joining the complementary theories of Arendt and Bourdieu and is also influenced by a number of theorists whose work spans the disciplines (and interdisciplines) of sociology, history, feminism, cultural studies and youth cultural studies. Admittedly such a diverse borrowing of thoughts has the potential to cause confusion. Yet, I believe an interdisciplinary theoretical framework can also bring precision to analysis because its eclecticism best reflects the interwoven, history-laden "untidiness" (Baehr on Arendt, 2002, p.804) of life and of our public spaces. Moreover, I also contend that such a multi-layered approach will help to challenge my own "habits" of entanglement (see Bourdieu on the *habitus*, 2000) with the ubiquity and sheer ordinariness of deeply gendered media which perpetuates the "complacent repetition of 'truths' which have become trivial and empty" and which, according to Arendt, are "among the outstanding characteristics of our

enjoying what Kant referred to as the 'enlarged mentality' of opinion sharing, consulting, paying calls on other points of view: '*Aber sehen Sie mal!* [But look sharp!] Here is the other side, another perspective.' There were never any sound bites. (Young-Bruehl, 2006, pp.14-15)

time” (1958/1998, p. 5). However, I also keep in mind Arendt’s observation that “thought itself arises out of incidents of living experience and must remain bound to them as the only guideposts by which to take its bearings” (1954/2006, p. 14). As such I ground my theorizing in both selected samples of media representations of femininity (see chapter four) and in six young women’s experiences of such femininities in relation to their own accounts of economic disadvantage and marginalization within society (see chapter five). And so, in tying this investigation’s range of theoretical influences to the dual ‘guideposts’ of media samples or narrated experience I hope to mitigate the potentially disorienting effects of interdisciplinary scholarship.

In the following section I offer a summation of my central research questions, followed by their theoretical grounding. I then move forward to outline the larger theoretical framework which will guide this investigation. In the final section of this chapter I will outline the content of the chapters to follow.

Research Questions in Context

The central research questions framing this investigation are designed to assess how six young women (aged 15-16) who live, work and attend school in a deeply pathologized neighbourhood located within a Canadian city create and narrate experiences of exclusion and accounts of femininity which are meaningful to them⁷ in relation to public representations of ideal (deviant) femininity. As part of the interview

⁷ In *Common Culture: Symbolic Work at Play in the Everyday Cultures of the Young*, Paul Willis uses the concept of “symbolic creativity” to understand the consumption of media representations as a means by which youth produce and reproduce a unique and shifting youth culture (or sub-culture) that is *meaningful* to the young people who identify with both the (sub)culture itself and the signifiers of that culture (1990). Thus, my use of terms and concepts like ‘symbolic representations’ and young people’s ‘construction of meaning’ is grounded in both a larger (Arendtian) phenomenological understanding of meaningful experiences in shared public spaces or a sense of ‘belonging’ to the world, and, in Paul Willis’ extensive and specific studies of the construction of meaning in youth cultures.

protocol, young women were asked to respond to three representations of femininity drawn from two popular magazines marketed to young women (Elle Girl, 2005 and Teen People, 2005) and their responses were discussed alongside their own experiences of social and economic exclusion (see methods section in chapter three for full details). The questions are designed to facilitate an exploration of the links between female youth cultures, mass media and the, "...social and cultural processes of exclusion and its nuanced forms [and] their evolution across time" (Dillabough, 2002, p. 212) and are asked as follows.

How do contemporary media represent 'ideal' (and thus 'deviant') femininity and what symbolic connections do such representations have to the "historical structure of the masculine order" (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 5)? How do socially and economically disadvantaged girls draw upon such publicly disseminated symbolism to narrate both conformity and resistance to 'emphasized femininity' in a way that is *meaningful to them* and how might such actions be informed by their social and material positioning in the state? How do such young women *see themselves* positioned within their immediate material and social conditions? More specifically, what is the relationship between the social location of such young women and the reproduction of dominant notions of the 'perfect girl' or 'impossible femininity' throughout history? Finally, if young women see the need to subvert dominant representations of 'deviant' and 'ideal' femininity, what might be the means by which they challenge such notions? Or, to position this question within more provocative, theoretical debates which question the role of young people in subverting domination (see Bourdieu, 2001; Willis, 1977, 1990), how do such young

women account for some notion of a constrained yet “generative” (see Bourdieu, 1997/2000, McNay, 2000) agency⁸ in their everyday life?

The questions I have posed are most profoundly influenced by Arendtian philosophical discussions on the politics of public space. In broad terms, the research questions outlined here follow from Arendt’s assertion that all human beings “insert themselves into the world” through daily *action*, however mundane, and are “*of the world and not merely in it*” (1971, p. 22). Specifically, Arendt’s unique, phenomenologically oriented account of agonistic action in *plural* and mobile public spaces, and, in particular, her insistence on the need to *visit* such *in between* spaces, reflects the epistemological grounding of the questions which direct this project.⁹

Arendtian phenomenology argues that meaningful experience is contingent upon both public action and the corresponding observation of others who are ‘not like us’.¹⁰ Visiting is a hermeneutic tool which requires the researcher to engage in such agonistic spaces which live within what Arendt called the “existing web of human relationships” (characterized by the public enactment of “innumerable conflicting wills and intentions”) (1958/1998, p. 184). Such an engagement serves to expand our “horizons of experience” and protects against the development of the sort of collective forgetfulness (what Arendt called *holes of oblivion*) which feeds a denial of “human particularity” (see 1954/2006,

⁸ I use the term agency here with the understanding that all human action is conditional – that is to say it is never free from, nor entirely constrained by, the historical, cultural, economic or political realities of our social positioning in the world. Action, or agency, in this sense, is understood to exist somewhere in the mutable tension between “possibility and constraint” (McNay 2000). In the theoretical section of this chapter I offer a longer discussion on the difficult concept of defining ‘agency’ using ideas drawn from the work of Hannah Arendt, Pierre Bourdieu, Lois McNay and Paul Willis.

⁹ Phenomenology serves as a premise of this work in part as rejection of the liberal presupposition that independent or transparent knowledge of self and self in relation to society is possible (see Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* 2000, 2001). Such a perspective deliberately avoids a deterministic approach to understanding the relationship between the “social and cultural processes of exclusion” (Dillabough, 2002) and young women’s elaborations and theories of gender identity which form part of this study.

¹⁰ Arendt’s unique conceptualization of ‘otherness’ is taken up in detail later in this chapter.

1963, 1971). But, Arendt was also well aware that “habits of thinking linger” because our ways of understanding the world are linked to a past and thus “inside our heads [and] ingrained in our thinking” (see Young-Bruehl, 2006, p.10). Arendt argued that those who would think beyond such ‘habits of thinking’ must therefore identify and engage in all of the ways in which an issue or an idea has been thought about historically, then theorize new understandings (grounded in experience) and finally balance such new understandings with (and within) a perpetually shifting “reality” (ibid.). I move forward now to explore a Bourdieusian example of what such academic visiting might look like and how it might offer a fresh perspective on the material realities of gendered social exclusion as it might relate to low income girls and young women and the mass media.

Alongside the work of Hannah Arendt, I also argue that Pierre Bourdieu’s extensive ethnographic study of symbolic/masculine domination offers an example of academic visiting which is instructive on two levels in relation to this investigation (2001). Bourdieu asserts that the scholars and their works must take a “detour”¹¹ into “exotic tradition” (in his case, an extensive ethnography of the Kabyle tradition in Algeria) in order to, “[dismantle] the processes responsible for [the] transformation of history into nature, of cultural arbitrariness into the *natural*” (2001, p. 2). In general terms, I interpret Bourdieu’s use of the term ‘detour’ as an exhortation to deliberately explore different paths of understanding and analysis, particularly when deciding how to approach prolifically studied issues (i.e., media, popular culture, young women’s relationship to such social phenomena in relation to their social positioning within society). By traveling through more unfamiliar theoretical territory I might better identify the ‘arbitrary’ in seemingly ‘natural’ anecdotes, experiences and media representations.

¹¹ The concept of metaphorical detour is also taken up by Ricoeur (1992).

In other words, visiting experience by way of a deliberate detour better reveals both the historical roots and contemporary manifestations of exclusion in relation to masculine domination (Bourdieu, 2001).

In this light, ‘exotic traditions’ can be nothing more (and nothing less) than the actions of appearing in a living culture (see Arendt, 1958/1998; Bourdieu, 2001), produced daily by those who live (in) it. And so, while an extensive ethnography was impractical for a master’s thesis, I have attempted to employ a method (outlined in Chapter three) which adheres both to Arendt’s philosophical discussion on the vital importance of systematic, academic visiting and to Bourdieu’s experientially grounded instruction to expose the “arbitrary”, “culturally contingent” and “paradoxical” nature of exclusion (2001). Such a methodological approach presupposes that contemporary mass media is one of several “interconnected institutions” which Bourdieu (2001) identifies as participants in a “labour of eternalization”¹² which is “responsible for the *relative dehistoricization* and *eternalization* of the structure[s]” of exclusion (pp. vii-viii).

Theoretical/Philosophical Grounding: A framework for analysis

Man’s search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life.
(Frankl, 1985, p. 121)

I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! ... This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world.
(Camus, 1955/2005, p. 119)

Drawing from Arendtian notions of plurality in public spaces, the mutable, meaningful nature of all experience and *natality* (see 1958/1998, 1971) I proceed from

¹² Bourdieu also implicates “the family, the church, the state, the educational system...” in such ‘labours’ (ibid.).

the perspective that humans are, “embodied creatures whose...material engagement with the world is...one of world-constitution and world-creation” (Benhabib, 2000, p. 81). Such a perspective is inherently practical in its focus on meaningful action grounded in a social (and historical) context, particularly in relation to the meaning systems young women might derive from popular culture in relation to femininity. In other words, whether we act believing that there is an ultimate, external meaning inherent to living or, like Camus, believe that there is no external meaning attached to the world of human affairs, common to both perspectives is the fact that in living in the world every day we both *reproduce* and *change* it - often with little conscious knowledge of the effects of our actions (Arendt, 1958/1998; Bourdieu, 2001; Willis, 1977, 1990). In the following section I will outline the theoretical concepts employed throughout this thesis, beginning with the broad, unifying theory of Hannah Arendt.

Borrowing from Shakespeare, Arendt likens our world to a stage, “common to all who are alive” (1971, p. 21), on which we act out our life stories in and on the world. Such life stories, however, ought not to evoke a liberal understanding of ‘identity’ or selfhood. Arendt rejects the notion of static identity, arguing instead that our appearances in the world are shifting, transitory and dependent on the observation of others (pp. 36-37). Human identity is not understood to be a transcendent entity apart from the body and from the world, but instead firmly situated within the complex spaces of social relations (1958/1998). Our daily actions on the imagined world stage stand as continuous *beginnings* which are, ultimately, the, “...actualization of the human condition of natality” (p. 178). The ‘condition of natality’, as both fact and metaphor, compares all human action (“[every] word and deed [through which] we insert ourselves

into the human world”) to a “second birth” which is “stimulated by the presence of others...but...never conditioned by them” (p. 176). Moreover, our daily beginnings must occur amidst a *plurality of spectators* who perceive each story from *unique* and *distinct* perspectives while acting out their own stories on that same world stage (1971, p. 21). It is important to note that Arendt perceives a political significance inherent within the conditions of appearing. In contrast, dominant constructions of ideal feminine agency frequently tie legitimate citizenship to consumption (see Gonick, 2006; Harris, 2004a) and so act to limit young women’s popularly acclaimed “freedom of choice” to choosing between what Willis (1990) calls “feminine style-and-identity products” which are ultimately embedded within the private realm (p. 13). Moreover, young women without the financial means to participate in this dominant formulation of agency are excluded from such definitions of ideal femininity.

Arendtian thinking shifts the focus from such statically defined notions of individual identity. Titled variously an “ontology of display” (Curtis, 1999, p. 30) and an “anthropological universalism” (Benhabib, 2000, p. 80) Arendt’s philosophy is grounded in what she identifies as the universal human condition of plurality. Arendt notes that:

Nothing and nobody exists in this world whose very being does not presuppose a spectator...nothing that is, insofar as it appears, exists in the singular; everything that is is meant to be perceived by somebody. Not man but men [sic] inhabit this planet. Plurality is the law of the earth. (1971, p. 19)

It is important to note that in claiming plurality as the primary condition of human existence Arendt is neither ignoring nor implicitly engaging in the stratification of humans according to familiar normative categories of race, gender, nationality or socio-economic status. Arendt (1958/1998) links identification of the Other to a focus on the ‘what’ of humanity as opposed to the ‘who’ (see also Kristeva, 2001, chap. 4). When we

begin to identify the ‘what’ of another we, “...get entangled in a description of qualities he [sic] necessarily shares [and does not share] with others like him [sic]; *we begin to describe a type* or a ‘character’ in the old meaning of the word, *with the result that his* [sic] *specific uniqueness escapes us*” (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 181).¹³ I would argue that in the repetition of representations of ideal (deviant) femininity as a series of defining characteristics, media participates in creating social conditions which exclude particular female subjectivities in particular contexts. In other words, such media eliminates plurality as a condition within the popular spaces which purport to represent young women. Arendt critiques such categorization of humans on the grounds that we begin to become alienated from the world and from meaningful experiences within a common “web of relationships and enacted stories” (p. 183). So, although our appearances on the world stage rely upon the existence of others, otherness is typical of humanity and is therefore *not* invoked as a category distinct from the norm. Ultimately, Arendt argues that the drive to classify ourselves and others as other than¹⁴ exists because our dominant social and cultural ideologies fail to recognize that, “human distinctness is not the same as otherness”(1958/1998, p. 176). We simply do not recognize that plurality is our strength; it is the condition which makes us both *distinct* and *equal* within our common spaces (1958/1998).

Given the inherent mutualism which distinguishes the Arendtian concept of plurality it follows that we find in Arendtian theory a rejection of the “cult of individual life” (Kristeva, 2001, p. 7). Segregation within and from society is rejected precisely

¹³ Emphasis added.

¹⁴ Bourdieu calls this drive the “classification struggle” (2001).

because it negates the role of the *spectator*; the observer who is essential to the existence of meaningful public¹⁵ spaces of appearance and action. Canovan (1998) explains that:

At the heart of [Arendt's] analysis of the human condition is the vital importance for civilized existence of a durable human world...only the experience of sharing a common human world with others who look at it from different perspectives can enable us to see reality in the round and to develop a shared common sense. Without it, we are each driven back on our own subjective experience, in which only our feelings, wants, and desires have reality. (p. xiii)¹⁶

Such isolated notions of subjectivity negate what Arendt calls the *reconciliation with reality* which can only occur in our agonistic interaction with other distinct humans (1954/2006, 1971). Arendt notes that it is only “the presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear [which] assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves...” (1958/1998, p. 50). It follows, then, that Arendt is most concerned with the loss of shared spaces of action and speech which contributes to a kind of ubiquitous cultural memory loss. Furthermore, she cautions that the loss of the “revelatory character” of action (the shared observance of our daily beginnings) creates the world conditions of oblivion in which human particularity is denied (1963; also see Curtis, 1999). Reflecting on the modern condition of increasing world alienation Arendt observes that:

The tragedy began...when it turned out that there was no mind to inherit and to question, to think about and to remember. The point of the matter is that the ‘completion,’ which indeed every enacted event must have in the minds of those who then are to tell the story and to convey its meaning, eluded them; and without

¹⁵ From an Arendtian perspective the concept of the ‘public’ is very specifically linked to distinct and observed human action and speech within common spaces. The public, “...signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it” (1958, p. 52).

¹⁶ The entire Canovan quotation (including Arendt's own words) appears as follows:

At the heart of [Arendt's] analysis of the human condition is the vital importance for civilized existence of a durable human world, built upon the earth to shield us against natural processes and provide a stable setting for our mortal lives. Like a table around which people are gathered, that world “relates and separates men [sic] at the same time” (p. 52). Only the experience of sharing a common human world with others who look at it from different perspectives can enable us to see reality in the round and to develop a shared common sense. Without it, we are each driven back on our own subjective experience, in which only our feelings, wants, and desires have reality. (1958, p. xiii)

this thinking completion after the act, without the articulation accomplished by remembrance. there simply was no story left that could be told. (1954/2006. p. 6)¹⁷

I contend that the dangers of such a retreat into isolated subjectivity are readily apparent in the contemporary dominance of neo-liberal narratives of progress, hyper-individualism and self-invention which are manifest in media representations of ‘ideal’ femininity. Further, I use Arendt’s conceptualization of plural public spaces (and of the dangers of their obliteration) as a frame to examine the relevance of such representations to the daily experiences of young, marginalized women. In the following section I explore the Arendtian theories of *radical thoughtlessness* and *trauma narratives* which inform my analysis throughout this thesis. Both concepts address Arendt’s most fundamental concern: an examination of the socio-political structures and processes which assist in the creation of a void in public consciousness which in turn contributes to and obscures the dangers of “human superfluity” (1971). I suggest that mass media represents one such mechanism for anesthetizing the public imaginary through its repetition of pity-inducing and paralyzing representations of the deviant young woman which access deeply classed and racialised symbols of dependency and disgust (see McRobbie, 2005; Skeggs, 2001, 2005) and the ideal young woman as one who can improve her life via publicly legitimized regimes of physical and psychic self-invention through consumption. Harris (2004a) points out that “young people’s capacity to...make ‘consumer choices’ among the new social rights service providers depends entirely on their economic circumstances” (p. 165). Thus, economically disadvantaged young

¹⁷ In Kristeva, 2001, p.17. Full citation: Arendt (1968) *The Gap Between Past and Future*, Preface to *Between Past and Future: Eight exercises in Political Thought* New York: Viking University Press.

women are left with few popularly legitimized avenues for participation in public spaces (Griffin, 2004; Harris, 2004a).

Oblivion, Memory and Media: Disposable Femininity and Anesthetizing the world

The modern age, with its growing world-alienation, has led to a situation where man, wherever he goes, encounters only himself [sic]

In the situation of radical world-alienation, neither history nor nature is at all conceivable. This twofold loss of the world...has left behind it a society of men [sic] who, without a common world which would at once relate and separate them, either live in desperate lonely separation or are pressed together into a mass. For a mass-society is nothing more than that kind of organized living which automatically establishes itself among human beings who are still related to one another but have lost the world once common to all of them. (Arendt, 1954/2006, pp. 89-90)

The impetus to begin this thesis investigation originated, in part, from a chance viewing of Fox television network's reality plastic surgery program, *The Swan*.¹⁸ I was compiling the reference list for a term paper which used Arendt's discussion of the dangers of *trauma narratives* to analyse the media and international response to the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and I happened to glance up at the television as my partner was browsing through the channels. At first I thought I was watching the *Saturday Night Live* actors perform a comedy sketch satirizing the rising popularity of increasingly outrageous reality television. However, as I became aware of the program's content and intent, I began to draw parallels between the topic of my term paper and such popular programming. I began to wonder how young women (particularly young women living in disadvantaged circumstances whose lives are most often misrepresented,

¹⁸ *The Swan* presents women's tragic stories of social and economic disadvantage and "low self-esteem", tied (somehow) to physical imperfection, as entertainment. The female participants compete (by submitting to a battery of surgical procedures, a grueling fitness regime and quick-fix psychotherapy) for entry into a final beauty pageant. True to the obvious allusion in the program's title, the winner of the pageant is the woman most drastically 'transformed' from an "ugly duckling" into a "beautiful swan" (*Reality TV World*, 02/03/2004). Moreover, personal "happiness" and "self-esteem" are tied to such transformations.

sensationalized and pathologized by mass media and for whom the cost of plastic surgery prohibits its ‘reality’) might respond to, and make sense of, such a celebratory consumption of surgically altered female bodies sold as a means to a particularly gendered brand of “happiness”, “empowerment” and “self-esteem”. Moreover, as I thought about media representations of femininity more generally, I began to realize that such strangely Orwellian language was not confined to the ridiculous (and now defunct) program, *The Swan*. Symbolic representations of needy, tragic young women juxtaposed with their autonomous and empowered counterparts (or “easily” attainable alter-egos) abound in the marketplaces of mass media and popular culture (see McRobbie, 2004b). And although the means to such an empowered, legitimized happiness is certainly not always presented as surgical, media which is targeted specifically to young women reproduces individualistic, perpetual self “reinvention” and empowerment narratives (see Griffin, 2004; Harris, 2004a, Taft, 2004) which, like trauma narratives, obliterate the social conditions out of which such narratives arise.

Granted, it would be an enormous stretch to make the claim that proliferate media representations of normative femininity may be equated with mass murder and genocide and so I must clearly state that I am not attempting to make such a claim. Yet, a central question which had evolved from the term paper was startlingly relevant: how does mass media contribute to gendered exclusion and exacerbate the conditions of social and economic disadvantage within society? Or, to apply Arendtian language, how does mass media contribute to the creation of the conditions in which *human superfluity* flourishes while collective *memory* is obliterated, and how might it impact on low income young women living in radically transformed urban cities?

In this section, then, I link such questions to Arendt's concern with those conditions which create human superfluity and holes of oblivion (1958/1998, 1963, 1971). I will explain how I intend to use conceptualizations of *radical thoughtlessness*, *trauma narratives* (ibid.) and *symbolic/masculine domination* (Bourdieu, 2001) to explore the connections between mass media, gender and social exclusion. I believe that such connections constitute what Curtis calls the, "...active conditions that nourish oblivion on the part of *those who benefit* [from dominant norms] and the radical enclaving of *those who do not* (1999, p. 3).¹⁹

Radical Thoughtlessness and the Banality of Evil

It was this absence of thinking – which is so ordinary an experience in our everyday life, where we have hardly the time, let alone the inclination, to stop and think – that awakened my interest. Is evil-doing (the sins of omission, as well as the sins of commission) possible in default of not just 'base motives'...but of any motives whatever, of any particular prompting of interest or volition? Is wickedness...not a necessary condition for evil-doing?. (Arendt, 1971, p. 4)

Arendt notes that the denial of human particularity, the 'distinct but equal' status of each human life, may be achieved in many ways, not all of them necessarily intentional (1958/1998, p. 175). Furthermore, she characterizes all human action as being imbued with the unforeseen, or the element of surprise. In other words, the ultimate consequences or results of our daily "insertions" (see also beginnings) into the world cannot always be predicted: "It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started

¹⁹ Emphasis added. McRobbie (2004b) offers one clear example of such conditions in the following passage:

Middle-class women have played a key role in the reproduction of class society, not just through their exemplary role as wives and mothers but also as standard-bearers for middle-class family values, for certain norms of citizenship and also for safeguarding the valuable cultural capital accruing to them and their families through access to education, refinement and other privileges. (p.101)

which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before” (Arendt, 1958/1998, pp. 177-178). While such unexpectedness is imbued with inexhaustive optimism, or hopefulness²⁰, she argues that it also opens the door for a radical *thoughtlessness*. The mundane actions of living without thinking provides fertile ground for “evil” which is neither clearly identifiable nor hegemonic, but rather a phenomenon “impossible to trace” and pervasive throughout all levels of society (1971).

Arendt first recognized the “...fearsome, word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil*” (in Baehr, 2000, p. 365) during the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem and was to later extend her observation to note that such ordinary iniquity was evidence of a radical *thoughtlessness*, frightening in its ubiquitous yet unrecognized presence in the modern world (1963,1971). Of Eichmann, Arendt’s primary example of the banal rather than exceptional nature of evil, she remarked that:

I was struck by a manifest shallowness in the doer [Eichmann] that made it impossible to trace the uncontestable evil of his deeds to any deeper level of roots or motives. The deeds were monstrous, but the doer...was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous. There was no sign in him of firm ideological convictions or of specific evil motives, and the only notable characteristic one could detect...was not stupidity but *thoughtlessness*. (1971, p. 4)

Her observations during Eichmann’s trial eventually led Arendt to conclude that “thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together” (in Baehr, 2000, p. 379).

The import of Arendt’s concern with such *thoughtlessness* is particularly relevant to this investigation when viewed through the conceptual lens of Bourdieu’s discussions on masculine domination (2001). Like Arendt, Bourdieu was concerned with the

²⁰ Indeed Arendt explains that: “The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty; *the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle*” [emphasis added] (1958, p. 178).

habituation of thought and so his research both seeks to explain the process of such habituation and to turn a critical eye on the political/public and embedded personal reproduction of structural habits of thought (see 1998, 2000, 2001). Bourdieu labels masculine domination and its effect, *symbolic violence*, an “extraordinarily ordinary social relation” which is perpetuated through language, daily interactions and, importantly, through *symbols of domination* which are tied to a gendered social and political history which has been “transformed into nature” (p. 2). The complicated process whereby structural elements of society “inscribe” themselves onto the, “...dispositions attuned to the structure of domination of which they are the product” forms, according to Bourdieu, the basis of *symbolic violence* (p. 43). It is through the observation of the transformation of history into ‘nature’, Bourdieu argues, that we are made aware of the *paradox of doxa* (2001). Much like the phenomenon of *thoughtlessness*, the *paradox of doxa* operates such that “relations of domination” proliferate and are perpetuated, in part, because they remain unquestioned, unexposed and, frequently, normalized. In other words, the “most intolerable conditions of existence”, come to be “perceived as acceptable and even natural” (pp. 1-3).²¹

Accordingly, Bourdieu’s ‘paradox of doxa’ helps to explain why some of the most outspoken supporters of oppressive and historically laden representations of ‘ideal’ femininity are young women themselves (see Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, 2004 and McRobbie’s critique of such support, 2004a). Moreover, disadvantaged young women’s

²¹ Bourdieu’s full metaphor of the *paradox of doxa* is worth quoting in its entirety:

I have always been astonished at...the *paradox of doxa* – the fact that the order of the world as we find it, with its one-way streets and its no-entry signs, whether literal or figurative, its obligations and its penalties, is broadly respected; that there are not more transgressions and subversions, contraventions and ‘follies’...or, still more surprisingly, that the established order, with its relations of domination, its right and prerogatives, privileges and injustices, ultimately perpetuates itself so easily, apart from a few historical accidents, and that the most intolerable conditions of existence can so often be perceived as acceptable and even natural. (2001, p. 1)

processes and mechanisms of cultural reproduction and subversion of such media representations might also be understood through Bourdieu's conceptualization of such a paradox. In other words, Bourdieu explains what might seem to be such young women's complicity in reproducing and embodying the symbols of masculine domination as, "the dominated apply[ing] categories constructed from the point of view of the dominant to the relations of domination, thus making them appear as natural" (p. 35).

Thoughtlessness and Doxa in Media and Lived Experience

What I wish to argue here is that ultimately, and perhaps not surprisingly, thoughtlessness (Arendt, 1971) and the paradox of doxa (Bourdieu, 2001) are deeply manifest in popular culture and in the marketplaces of contemporary mass media. Media frequently acts as a primary contributor to the largely uncritical reproduction and dissemination of gendered cultural symbols whose historical roots are either veiled or completely concealed (see Bourdieu, 1998, 2001). Society's default acceptance of such suppression is part of the "doxic experience of the social world" (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 9). Doxic structures go largely unnoticed and unexamined because they form societal conceptions of what is 'normal'; they are elements of our social world which have remained static (or have altered only on the surface) despite the passing of generations (see Bourdieu, 1998, 2001). To be clear, I am not suggesting that individuals generally, or individual young women specifically, do not ever question, challenge or resist dominant media representations of ideal (deviant) femininity. Rather, I am arguing, following Bourdieu (1998, 2001), that taken as a whole, mass media and dominant culture is still tied to the division between public and private, and the gendered

symbolism tied to such divisions and symbolically embedded within media representations of femininity, is part of a normalized historical and cultural “inheritance” (Bourdieu, 2001). Bourdieu (1998) criticizes such media constructions of the ‘natural’ or the ‘common’, as being neither natural nor common in the sense that they somehow exist outside of a history of human constructs, consciously or unconsciously created and perpetuated. He argues that that which is un-reflexively accepted as ‘normal’ or the ‘status quo’ within society remains unexamined, other than from the dominant ideology of the time, and is therefore allowed to perpetuate through time.

Bourdieu’s argument is grounded in his notion of *habitus*, a practical and deeply unconscious knowledge of the body, characteristic to all humans and which incorporates the,

systems of schemes of perception, appreciation and action [that] enable [social agents] to perform acts of practical knowledge, based on the identification and recognition of conditional, conventional stimuli to which they are predisposed to react; and, without any explicit definition of ends or rational calculation of means, to generate appropriate and endlessly renewed strategies, but within the limits of the structural constraints of which they are the product and which define them. (2000, p. 138)

The concept of habitus recognizes that the, “...social order [literally] inscribes itself in bodies” through, “...the ordinary order of things...imposed by the material conditions of existence...” (2000, p. 141). Such an understanding of “bodily knowledge” extends to account for the reproduction of stratified social and material conditions (through the processes of *symbolic domination*) and to a theory of constrained agency, which accounts for the subversion of dominant structures.

Bourdieu theorizes that through the processes of symbolic domination all humans participate, to varying degrees, in the production and reproduction of the exclusionary categorization of normal which touches all aspects of our social world. Such norms

become so pervasive, in the structures of society and the symbols carried on our bodies, that we are largely unaware of them working through us. These symbols are contextual; that is to say, they embody a history. So, while their meaning is static, their symbolic manifestations may change, creating the illusion of change while the familiar pattern or oppressive meaning remains the same. Domination, then, is not reproduced and imposed from within one, hegemonic source (Bourdieu, 2001). Through symbolic domination each of us embodies oppression, manifested through symbols which represent the location of cultural, social and economic capital in any given time-period, in any given society (Bourdieu, 2001). Therefore, we all perform domination, to varying degrees, in our daily performances of culture (Dillabough, 2003/2004, course notes).

Media representations of femininities participate in the reproduction of the conditions in which constructions of female identity are circulated as *symbolic goods* or *symbolic capital* within society (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 45). Paradoxically, it is precisely the enormous volume of such representations which dulls their import. We are a society inured to the sexualized, fetishized and pathologized. This is what (Arendt, 1958/1998) refers to as the characteristic ‘what’ of femininity, rather than an “account of an unfolding who in the face of time” (Dillabough, 2008, forthcoming). In the myriad of magazine, television, bus stop poster and billboard representations of femininity we find no evidence of the distinct and equal ‘who’ (Arendt, 1958/1998) of each young woman. In fact we are hard pressed to distinguish one young woman from the next, especially when much of contemporary media offers up digitally and surgically altered ‘models’ of femininity as commodified ‘norms’. And it is through such a simultaneous lack of recognition together with our subliminal consumption of commodified symbolic violence

(Bourdieu, 2001) that the superfluosness of femininity in general flourishes undetected. Thus mass media's complicity in veiling the history of symbolic representations of girlhood might be understood as what Arendt describes as, "...tradition...reveal[ing] its full coercive force only after its end has come and men [sic] no longer even rebel against it" (1971, p. 19).

Veiling History through Narratives of Trauma and Triumph

Late-twentieth-century America is a "wound culture" marked by "the public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound. (Seltzer in Nelson, 2006, p.88)

While Seltzer is documenting the distinctly liberal/modern (and Western) absorption with the public consumption of 'woundedness' or human tragedy, Nelson moves on to note the paradox inherent within such a fascination:

On the other hand, postmodern culture has exhibited the well known "*waning of affect*" described by Fredric Jameson...(1991). We are left, then, with two extremes, one where pain supplies an overabundance of meaning or stimulation and the other where it fails to produce any affective response at all. (2006, p. 88)

Labelling such conditions the, "shakey ground between saturation and denial", Nelson moves on to explore McCarthy and Arendt's unique response to the fascination with trauma (ibid.). Most relevant to this investigation is McCarthy's observation of the "slightly canned-tasting misery" in the media stories of modernity (in Nelson, 2006, p. 97). Such mass produced narratives create a false intimacy between the viewer and the subjects of such narratives and lead to the paradox of public trauma, enthrallment, and oblivion. As Nelson explains, neither McCarthy nor Arendt was interested in the liberal project of coming "face-to-face with the Other" which is implicit within the public consumption of *trauma narratives*. They were concerned, rather, with, "...a

countertradition of ethical relation, one that seeks...to come face-to-face with reality in the presence of others” (2006, p. 88).

Arendt was particularly clear in her emphasis on the necessity of a certain ‘separateness’ in the public world and abhorred the cultivation of such pseudo intimacy. Her dislike, however, was not personal but political. As with her observations on the *banality of evil*, Arendt first offered a critique of the dangers of using victim trauma narratives, particularly in a theatre of justice, during the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem (1963). The thrust of Arendt’s argument is that in cultivating the mass consumption of historically disconnected trauma narratives (which position people within rigid categorizations of good or evil, victim or perpetrator, heroic or fearful etc.) for any purpose (including and especially, I would argue, for entertainment) we thoughtlessly retreat to the anesthetized comfort of oblivion, deny human particularity and create a community of victims who are not grounded in a context; in a history (Arendt, 1963). The existence of such thoughtless or unconscious mindlessness is the key to understanding how the “complacent repetition of ‘truths’ which have become trivial and empty” (1958/1998, p.5) perpetuates in popular ideology and through popular media. I would argue that pertinent examples of such ‘truths’ include popular conflations of girl power and agency, individualism and freedom or perpetual reinvention of the self and happiness.

Crucial to an understanding Arendt’s criticism of modernity’s fascination with the public consumption of stories of suffering and victimhood is her juxtaposition of such stories with the original function of ancient Greek theatre. Therefore, I first describe the origins of Arendt’s conceptualization of the importance of the Greek theatre to ethical

political engagements and then compare her understanding to the way gendered ‘tragedies’ are produced in contemporary media. Arendt’s invocation of Greek tragic drama is tied directly to her unique phenomenological perspective on the meaning inherent to human action and to such action appearing amongst a plurality of spectators. In the tradition of Greek dramatic tragedy empathy is built through dramatic elements of *pathos* and *tragos* and is fashioned through a *catharsis*, or, what Arendt called the “reconciliation with reality” between the audience and the narrative (1954/2006, p. 45). Pirro (2001) notes that, for Arendt, “...the achievement of emotional mastery in theatre contributes to the achievement of political efficacy...” (p. 133). A relevant passage from Pirro’s discussion of the importance of Greek tragic drama to an Arendtian notion of ethical politics clearly illustrates this point:

It is the combination of Greek tragedy’s imitation of the stories that arise from action in the plurality of human affairs and its conveyance of the intangible identities of individual characters through stage acting that establishes Greek tragedy...as ‘the political art par excellence’. Only in theater...‘is the political sphere of human life transposed into art’ (2001, p. 134)²²

Note Arendt’s observation that, “[w]e may see...in the poet’s political function the operation of catharsis, a cleansing or purging of all emotions that could prevent men from acting” (Arendt in Pirro, 2001, p. 133). Furthermore, Arendt cites Aristotle’s discussion of the political relevance of tragic drama to argue that, “...tragedy does not deal with the qualities of men [sic] but with whatever happened with respect to them, with their actions and life and good or ill fortune (see *Poetics*, 1450a15-18). The content of tragedy, therefore, is not what we would call character but action or the plot” (1958, p. 187, fn12). Through the revelation of ‘action’ and ‘plot’, elements of constraint within society are meant to be revealed through the unfolding of the dramatic narrative so that audiences

²² Arendt’s words within this passage are taken from *The Human Condition* (1958, p.188).

might gain a grounded and therefore meaningful understanding of the unfolding dramatic tragedy and, by extension, of their own social positioning.

In contrast, much contemporary popular media perpetuates individual and deeply gendered and classed narratives and representations of personal trauma (e.g., “low self-esteem”; difficulty attracting, or maintaining a relationship with, a male partner; being unfashionable or unfeminine or not (never) beautiful *enough*; or as “disgusting” or “lacking” (see Lawler, 2005a, 2005b; Skeggs, 2005)). Moreover, the equally individualized stories and representations of triumph which always attend such narratives are attributed to a young woman’s socially decontextualized and gender-specific transcendence out of such personal trauma.²³ Such stories and representations are prolific, easily forgotten and often offered as no more than an advertising sound bite. As such, they are essentially disposable and serve only as crude entertainment which conceals more than it reveals about the mechanisms of domination and oppression which persist throughout the social world (see Bourdieu, 2001).

To illustrate this point I will briefly revisit the particular case of *The Swan*, its descendents (see *Extreme Makeover*) and other television programming which now routinely offers up stories of personal trauma to the commercial alters of the entertainment marketplace (see *Oprah*, *America’s Next Top Model*, *What Not to Wear*, *Survivor*, *American Idol* and so on). Though not all of such television programming is targeted to teenage women, the media trend which feeds what Seltzer (in Nelson, 2006) describes as our modern ‘wound culture’ and its hunger for endless stories of personal

²³ For example, a young woman might “choose” to be happy by reinventing herself through fashion, makeup, personal relationships (see *Teen People*, 2005; *Elle Girl*, 2005) or by following “simple” steps to attitude adjustment and empowerment offered by pop-psychology or so-called self-help literature (see Rimke, 2002).

trauma is both dominant and ubiquitous (in Nelson, 2006, p. 88). Thus the essential signifiers of such narratives can be found in the stories, articles, quizzes and advertising of gendered youth media. Moreover, I argue that regardless of whether (or not) disadvantaged young women watch a particular program or read a particular magazine they must contend with the effects of the public consumption of gendered trauma and triumph narratives because they are embedded in the world and the symbolic structures of the world are thus inscribed within them (see Arendt, 1958/1998; Bourdieu, 2000, 2001). And so, if we compare such media to Arendt's discussion of the purpose and benefit of catharsis through the publicly shared 'plot' of a narrative we might see that rather than "purging" those "emotions which prevent men [sic] from acting", the 'dramas' played out in so-called reality and talk show television (see examples listed above) focus on creating pseudo-empathy with a seemingly interchangeable individual who is portrayed as having triumphed over personal suffering through her achievement of the current feminine ideals of beauty, confidence and a gendered version of empowered independence. Viewers are encouraged to either celebrate with individuals striving to achieve an ideal or commiserate with those whose momentum toward perfection has been impeded by personal setbacks. To further complicate (or, more to the point, obscure) matters, dominant neo-liberal ideology depicts critiques of this form of entertainment as a restriction or criticism of a woman's free choice to participate in projects of perpetual self-improvement which, we are given to understand, endows her with both self-esteem and a higher social standing (see Griffin, 2004; McRobbie, 2004a).

Building on the Arendtian theory described in this chapter, I argue that because trauma and triumph narratives are so proliferate, and ultimately so meaningless and

absurd, they offer no “reconciliation with reality” (Arendt, 1954/2006). We internalize such narratives and the sound bite discourse of such narratives *without thinking*, reproducing oppressive elements inherent within representations of femininity. Ultimately, the throwaway quality attributed to such decontextualized, individual representations nourishes a “radical world-alienation” in which, “...man, wherever he goes, encounters only himself [sic]” (Arendt, 1954/2006, p. 88). In other words, each disconnected narrative necessarily lacks a *spectator*; and therefore fails to offer the, “completion that takes place through *evoked memory*” (Kristeva on Arendt, 2001, p. 16) in a shared “web of relationships” (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 181). Such media generated and commodified stories remain disconnected from a contextualized history and, to use Arendt’s language, “...have no more meaning than is revealed in the finished product and does not intend to show more than is plainly visible at the end of the production process” (p. 180). Ultimately, such narratives become “seductive and paralyzing” (Dillabough, 2004, course notes) creating holes of oblivion (Arendt, 1971) which obscure the larger social structures and forces determining women’s and young woman’s social positioning. Consequently, the real existence of tragic social circumstances for entire communities is largely negated.²⁴ Moreover, decontextualized individual triumphs over personal tragedy are lauded as an attainable reality which all women ought to emulate. The implicit message that individual effort which follows deeply gendered formulas for self improvement and empowerment is the ideal solution to disadvantaged circumstances becomes ingrained within the habitus (Bourdieu, 2000).

²⁴ A phenomenon that Bourdieu identifies as the, “xenophobic discourse, which...has been working to generate hatred out of the misfortunes of society – unemployment, delinquency, drug abuse...” (1998, p.16).

Thus, on one level and from an Arendtian perspective, such media can become a trap wherein action can be perpetually preempted by overwhelming (and illusory) emotional intimacy. In addition, popular critique of such media's treatment of femininity and of its effects on young women is complicated by gendered discourses of empowerment which rest on positioning young women as powerful agents of choice in a commodified world who must empower and improve themselves in response to structural inequalities (see Gonick, 2006; Griffin, 2004; Harris, 2004a; McRobbie, 2004a). Because of the popular dominance of such problematic framings of gendered agency it becomes imperative for researchers to define their own understanding of the tensions and relationship between young women's actions and experiences and the social, structural and symbolically embedded "relations of domination" which operate within the world (see Bourdieu, 2001). Furthermore, if I aim to critique media proliferated 'relations of domination' on the grounds that their enduring but mutable presence in the lives of economically disadvantaged young women contribute to the "externalization of the structures of exclusion" (Bourdieu, 2001, p. viii), and thus to the closing off of public spaces of appearance to such young women (Arendt, 1958/1998), then I must offer a theoretical framing of my own understanding of action in public space. In the following section I explore theories of *action* (Arendt, 1958) and *generative agency* (see Bourdieu, 1997/2000; McNay, 2000) through which I frame and account for young women's experiences in the world and with which I critique the structures and processes that constraint their experiences.

Theories of Creative Action

It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before. This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings and in all origins.

[...]

With the creation of man [sic], the principle of beginning came into the world itself, which, of course, is only another way of saying that the principle of freedom was created when man [sic] was created but not before. (Arendt, 1958/1998, pp. 176-178)

On one level this thesis is concerned with how mass media representations of ideal (deviant) femininity might contribute to collective thoughtlessness (Arendt, 1958/1998) and to “world alienation” which is indicative of what Arendt calls the “atrophy of the space of appearance” (p. 209). On a second level, I seek to understand how young women living in economically disadvantaged circumstances (in other words, young women who already experience marginalization within a society framed by neo-liberal ideologies of economic citizenship and middle-class notions and values of “normal”) reconcile such media in relation to their own experiences of exclusion. In the following pages I outline the theoretical thinking which gives shape to my own understanding of action in public space. I begin with an excerpt from McNay’s critical and theoretical engagement with Bourdieusian theories of “gender, subjectification and agency” (2000).

McNay (2000) begins her discussion on *Gender, Subjectification and Agency* with the observation that,

one of the most pronounced effects of [...] macrostructural tendencies towards detraditionalization is the transformation of the social status of women in the last forty years and the restructuring of gender relations that it has arguably initiated. The effects of these processes of gender restructuring upon the lives of men and women are ambiguous in that they do not straightforwardly reinforce old forms of gender inequality; nor, however, can their detraditionalizing impact be regarded as wholly emancipatory. New forms of autonomy and constraint can be seen

emerging which can no longer be understood through dichotomies of male domination and female subordination. (p. 1)

With McNay's account of the changed and changing nature of gender relations (and thus notions of female 'agency' in the many spaces of such a 'restructured' society) in mind, I begin this section with a series of questions. How do we conceive of a theoretical space which allows for what Arendt calls the 'startling unexpectedness' of human action and where disadvantaged young women are not constructed as passive victims of normative and hegemonic ideals of femininity 'imposed' upon them by mass media? A space where we might avoid reproducing our society's contemporary neo-liberal focus on hyper-individualism which conceals the oppressive and repetitive aspects of dominant social structures and closes off our common spaces of appearance? And finally, a space where young women's experiences in difficult and disadvantaged circumstances might be acknowledged and taken into account without conflating the characteristics of such circumstances with the revelatory Who of each young woman (see Arendt, 1958)?

An ethical beginning might be to borrow from theorists whose notions of human action account for pre-existing constraints inherent within the stratified social order while at the same time positing space in which action to shift such constraints and creatively alter the meanings of representations of dominant ideals can occur within a particular cultural context (see Bourdieu, 2000, 2001; McNay, 2000, 2003; Willis, 1990, 2004). Moreover, framing such theories from an Arendtian perspective shifts the terms of discussion from what Arendt might have identified as the trap of gendered identity politics (which can immobilize action through a focus on the What traits of individuals) to a commitment to "representative thinking" (see the discussion of visiting offered earlier in this chapter) (Dillabough, 2006, course notes). In other words, I would posit an

interdisciplinary analytical lens (unified and guided by Arendtian philosophy) through which disadvantaged young women's narratives are positioned within an "unfolding", "changing" and "mobile social narrative" (ibid.).

I began this section with a quote from McNay because her discussions of "generative agency" (2000) reflect what Arendt (1958/1998, 1971) identifies as the "hopeful", "unexpected" and contingent qualities of human appearances in the world. There is a dialectical quality to McNay's notion of a "durable" self which nevertheless never ceases to change, in part, through encountering the other within its socially contingent time and place:

Through the temporalization of the process of subjectification, the generative model suggests that the self has unity but it is the dynamic unity of progress in time. In other words, the identity of the self is maintained only through a ceaseless incorporation of the non-identical understood as temporal flux. (p. 19)

Thus, building on Bourdieu's notion of habitus (see 2000, 2001), McNay posits a *generative* notion of agency situated between *possibility* and *constraint* wherein, through creative action, individuals form *coherent* and "*durable* but not *immutable*" gendered identities (2000, pp. 21-23). McNay's theories recognize the "deeply sedimented" and historically rooted nature of the reproduction of oppression while offering an explanation for how, "...when faced with complexity and difference, individuals may respond in unanticipated and innovative ways which hinder, reinforce or catalyse social change" (2000, p. 5). Thus, McNay frames agency in a "generative paradigm" which allows for "a creative dimension to action [that] is the condition of possibility of certain types of autonomous agency understood as the ability to act in an unexpected fashion or to institute new and unanticipated modes of behaviour" (pp. 22-23). Such a perspective

thus allows for a recognition of the enduring and shifting nature of the “relations of domination” which intersect with economically disadvantaged young women’s experiences in the world while also leaving space for identifying such young women’s agentic resistance to or “appropriation” of (Willis, 2003) dominant constructions of female subjectivities.

As previously noted, McNay’s understanding of the contingent, constrained and generative properties of agency is, however, built on Bourdieu’s broad explanation of human action as embedded within a social world. She builds upon Bourdieu’s identification of the “generative process”, constitutive in action, to form a theory of agency which focuses less on the aspects of domination that have been retained in generative actions of individuals, and with more emphasis on, “...how individuals are endowed with the capabilities for independent reflection and action...” (2000, p. 3). Consequently, the theory of constrained agency used in this investigation owes much of its construction to Bourdieu’s conceptualizations of individuals in society.

I begin with Bourdieu’s assertion that we literally embody the dominant structures of what I previously referred to as Arendt’s ‘world stage’. We act, he notes, in a constant tension between stasis and change, and in predominantly unconscious ways, to both reproduce and subvert the static scaffolding of the ‘stage’ (2000, 2001). Labelling the conditions of such embodiment our *habitus*, Bourdieu grounds notions of human agency in a constrained but not determined existence. He argues that inherent to the condition of *habitus* is the notion that in living our culture we both reproduce the static structural order and also *change it (cultural production)*. Thus a sense of mutability is attached to all notions of action. The changing of our world through cultural production is effected

through our engagement in a process of *symbolic subversion* (2001). Given the operation of habitus, symbolic subversion is not understood as a necessarily conscious act, thought or symbolic embodiment. It is instead an understanding of agency which combines both reproduction and subversion of dominance through the processes of cultural production. In Bourdieu's words, symbolic subversion describes the constrained human agency which both embodies, "...a generating, unifying, constructing, classifying power" and,

recall[s] that this capacity to construct social reality, itself socially constructed, is not that of a transcendental subject but of a socialized body, investing in its practice socially constructed organizing principles that are acquired in the course of a situated and dated social experience. (2000, pp. 136-137)

A similar notion of constrained and not entirely conscious subversion of dominant social structures is put forward in Paul Willis' classic study of youth culture, *Learning to Labor: how working class kids get working class jobs* (1977), and in his reflections on its relevance in the contemporary moment (1990, 2003, 2004). Willis offers a phenomenological understanding of human action in a stratified social world that is unique to an exploration of the meaning making practices in youth cultures and to their relationship with mass media. For Willis, any notion of human action must be firmly situated in the tension between culture and structure (1990). Unlike Bourdieu's broad and interdisciplinary oeuvre, much of Willis' work focuses specifically on youth cultures and their mechanisms of rebellion against (and reproduction of) dominant social structures. He notes that although, "...young people respond [to dominant structures] in disorganized and chaotic ways", they are also responding, "...with relevance to the actual possibilities of their lives as they see, live, and embody them" (2003, p. 391). Moreover, Willis (2004) notes that, "the whole point of [going to the field] is to try to understand how particular subjects are making sense of themselves and their situations in ways that

cannot be prefigured and that might ‘surprise’ you” (p. 173). Willis’ observation lends support to Arendt’s focus on the “revelatory”, unpredictable (in terms of outcome) and contingent character of action and appearance (see 1958, 1971) and of the necessity of grounding theories about such action in material experience (1954/2006). Although Willis’ original study of youth culture has been criticized for its primary focus on male youth (see McRobbie, 1980 in Willis, 1977/1981) his notion of *symbolic creativity* (1990) is not inherently gendered and is applicable to a study which seeks to understand how disadvantaged young women might respond to media representations of ideal femininity in unexpected and creative ways.

The concept of symbolic creativity (Willis, 1990) documents the “expressive mechanisms” in which youth engage as a means to address the imbalance of power within society (Dillabough, 2004/2005, course notes). Through the consumption of symbolic elements of material popular culture, reproduced through contemporary media, youth create mutable and contested cultural identities that serve to make meaning within the world. Specifically, Willis describes such appropriation of symbols from the dominant culture as, “...the processes and activities whereby human beings actively and creatively take up the objects and symbols around them for their own situated purposes of meaning-making” (2003, p.). Implicit within the concept of symbolic creativity is the idea that any notion of “agency” must be tied to the mundane actions of daily living. Willis (1990) argues that, “...there is a ‘grounded aesthetics’ in everyday practice whereby meanings are attributed to symbols and artifacts, now mostly commodities, in creative ways that produce new orders of symbolic meaning” (p. 402). Thus consumption becomes part of the production of a unique youth culture engaged in a dynamic and

dialectical relationship within dominant sociological constraints (Willis, 1990, p. 20). Similarly, we may understand the reflection of media representations of ideal femininity in young women's assertions of identity as both changing and reproducing such ideals, within the broader context of constraint, in an attempt to, "...express something about their actual or potential *cultural significance*" (1990, p.1).

While the recognition of both constraint and the idea that we are not necessarily aware of the full meaning inherent in our beginnings (Arendt, 1958), symbolic and generative subversions (Bourdieu, 2001; McNay, 2000) or our generative appropriation of popular culture symbolism (Willis, 1990, 2003) is common to Arendt, Bourdieu, McNay and Willis, Arendt's conceptualization of action also offers a unique combination of unbounded optimism and grave warning about socially cultivated thoughtlessness or "evil" (Canovan, 1998/1958). Moreover, questions of disadvantaged young women's "complicity" in reproducing the symbolism and structure of their own domination and "participating" in the *relations of (masculine) domination* (see Bourdieu, 2001) might be reframed from Arendt's perspective on the inherently unpredictable nature of action (1958). In other words, and to use Arendt's own phrasing,

in any series of events that together form a story with a unique meaning we can at best isolate the agent who set the whole process into motion; and although this agent frequently remains the subject, the 'hero' of the story, we never can point unequivocally to him [sic] as the author of its eventual outcome. (1958/1998, p.185)

For Arendt, then, identification of "complicity" must be framed as a social or universal condition of humanity which ought to spur us to think about larger examples of collective thoughtlessness. Thus, Canovan (1998/1958) notes that although a large body of Arendt's work reflects on the, "self-inflicted catastrophes" brought on by our lack of awareness

and our thoughtlessness in regard to the possible consequences of our actions” (p. xvi), Arendt asserts that we are not mere victims of necessity, that we can act in surprising and generative ways and that, ultimately, “[a]ction is, in fact, the one miracle-working faculty of man [sic]” (1958/1998, p. 246). In other words, we create our world anew with each public action and it is only through such public action that we might understand freedom.

It is on the grounds of an Arendtian definition of freedom and public action that I critique popular media representations of ideally empowered, reinventing and consuming femininities which, as Griffin (2004) notes, “operate to render the girl herself as an impossible subject” and stand in the way of economically disadvantaged young women’s access to more public, political and inclusive subjectivities (p. 42). Kohn (2000) notes that in Arendtian philosophy “...freedom, as the great and identifying gift of human existence, is manifest in the *activities* that distinguish human from other forms of life” (p. 115). This is not illusionary “Freedom” as defined by a neo-liberal ideology which serves, ultimately, to reproduce the stratified social order, but rather the freedom glimpsed when we engage in public life (see earlier discussion of Arendtian notions of the public). Therefore freedom cannot exist in individual isolation. Nor does it manifest in liberal identity claims. Indeed, an Arendtian argument would critique gendered liberal projects of self-improvement (through avenues of consumer choice), self-esteem and self-empowerment (which underpin representations of ideal (deviant) femininity) on the basis that such assertions of “free agency” are rooted in fallacious constructions of fixed individual identities. Furthermore, such gendered projects of “reinvention” (see Harris, 2004a) are private pursuits which occur outside of a political engagement within the public realm. And for Arendt, freedom through action manifests solely in the agonistic

“web of relationships” (1958/1998) and is always tied to a constrained social existence (1954/2006).

Summary of Chapters

Chapter One: Introduction and Theoretical Grounding

In chapter one I situate this investigation within the emerging field of girls’ studies and describe my own intentions in terms of an approach to further contribution to the field. I then present the central research questions which direct this investigation (and ground them in a brief philosophical and methodological orientation). I then move on to describe the interdisciplinary theoretical lens through which I will analyse both the interview and the media data. Finally, I conclude with a summary of the content of the chapters to follow.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Chapter two offers a review of recent girls’ studies literature. In this chapter I review the field in which I will position my own contribution to girls’ studies scholarship. In a desire to engage in Arendtian “habits of thinking” (Young-Bruehl, 2006, p.10) I look to past, present and (suggested) future scholarship to understand how we *have* interrogated, how we *do* interrogate and how we *might* best interrogate mass media representations of femininity in the context of exploring disadvantaged young women’s “reconciliations” of such media within their everyday experiences (Arendt, 1954/2006). As such, I begin this chapter with a brief description of the second and third wave feminist roots of girls’ studies. I then move forward to review the most recent literature which explores the intersections between young women and popular narratives of

empowerment and reinvention (see Gonick, 2006; Griffin, 2004; Harris, 2004a. Taft, 2004); young women, media constructions of femininity and consumption; and, female youth subjectivity and social class.

Chapter Three: Methodology

In chapter three I describe the methodological approach and its epistemological context which I intend to employ throughout this investigation. I begin with a clarification of the philosophical terms and concepts used to support my methods. I then offer a description of the Arendtian phenomenological and hermeneutical approach to research and analysis which guides this thesis. Finally, I move forward to describe Walter Benjamin's *montage* historiography and its specific application in presenting my media research and analysis in chapter four. In the final section of this chapter I first outline the methods of data collection used and then contextualize the investigation in terms of both the social/physical location of the respondents and the range and historical location of documents selected for this research.

Chapter Four: An iconography of exclusion: "Masculine domination", mass media and montage (see Bourdieu, 2001; Benjamin in Buck-Morss, 1989)

In chapter four I adapt and apply Benjamin's *montage* technique to an exploration of the long history of contemporary media representations of ideal (deviant) femininity. Although, to some extent, this chapter stands alone in terms of style and method it has both a reflexive and a contextual purpose (see Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Arendt, 1954/2006). Therefore, I justify such a break from a traditional style of analysis on the grounds that the montage chapter represents an attempt to follow Goodman's lead in adapting Benjamin's montage historiography so that images, text and analysis might be

juxtaposed in such a way as to awaken “flashes” of recognition, memory and insight (2003).²⁵

My argument for the necessity of such a chapter is based in two related lines of thought. First, and as McRobbie (2005) notes, mass media is popularly positioned as a highly disposable form of (consequently harmless) entertainment. Moreover, popular culture and popular media recursively and paradoxically reinforces the notion that contemporary young women are both *free from* the constraints of and *savvy to* the manipulative messages of media representations of objectified femininity. Thus the second point in my argument is based in theory which recognizes the embeddedness of individuals in a social world and which therefore insists on methods of analysis which, to some degree, might enable a purposeful “alienation” (Arendt, n.d. from *Action and the Pursuit of Happiness* [APH]²⁶, pp. 2-3) or “reflexivity” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) of the mind from the normalizing/socializing effects of socio-cultural submersion. In saying this I do not suggest that my analysis (or my readers’) can in any way transcend the “inscribed” “habits and dispositions” of the habitus (see Bourdieu, 2000). Rather I interpret alienation and reflexivity as the result of a purposeful jarring of the mind (see Goodman on the uses of montage, 2003, p. 159) which, in specific reference to chapter four, I hope to effect through Benjamin’s unique methodology.

²⁵ Calling such flashes “a pedagogical moment of awakening” Goodman (2003) describes her adaptation of Benjamin’s method and its unique and analytically significant application as follows:

I ‘brush’ theory and historical data against each other for the spark to ignite my understanding in a non-linear process that circles back and forth between data, historiography and theory. (p. 159)

²⁶ In *The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress* [HAPLC] (1923-1975) Essays and lectures---“Foreign Affairs in the Foreign Language Press,” essay---n.d. (Series: Speeches and Writings File, 1923-1975, n.d.).

Chapter Five: Young Women's "Reconciliations" of Ideal (Deviant) Femininity in Circumstances of Economic Disadvantage

In chapter five, I will present an analysis of the expressed positioning and cultural practices (see Bourdieu, 2001; Willis, 1990) of young women living in disadvantaged circumstances in a large, urban centre in Canada in relation to their engagement with contemporary media representations of ideal (deviant) femininity. Using the theoretical framework outlined in chapter one, I will explore: how tensions between culture and structure (i.e., the material realities of girls' everyday lives) are negotiated by these young women; their accounts of how they reconcile (Arendt, 1954/2006) dominant notions of ideal and deviant femininity; and their resistance to and reproduction of the symbolic/masculine domination embedded within popular female subjectivities in relation to their "appropriation" of such symbols of media culture in their assertions of an "identity" of "cultural significance" (Willis, 1990, 2003).

Chapter Six: Conclusion

The final chapter of this thesis project will be devoted to exploring both the global and specific ethical ramifications of the proliferation of media representations of ideal (deviant) femininity and their specific relevance in the lives of young women who already experience exclusion because of their constrained access to social, economic and (popular) cultural capital. I follow an Arendtian line of argument which suggests that the proliferation of such gendered, dehistoricized, doxic (and toxic) media contributes to the conditions which nourish societal apathy toward the reproduction of gendered forms of social and economic exclusion. I contend that such a collective apathy is, moreover, a form of dehumanization. In other words, and from a public and political perspective,

such apathy tacitly approves of the thriving and expansion of what Arendt calls *holes of oblivion* through which the public recognition of human particularity is either erased or ignored (see Curtis, 1999). Finally, beside such a global critique I explore the inherent, ever-present spark of possibility which is embodied within and tentatively revealed through the actions, appearances and insertions of the six young women who participated in this research. With these arguments in mind, I will consider possible ways and means through which social institutions (public schools, media, academia) which traditionally reproduce dominant ideology, might create spaces for an ethical (and evolving) critique of the exclusionary effects of representations of ideal femininities. Following Arendt, I imagine that in such spaces of evolving and adapting critique the diverse and mutable nature of humanity might be recognized in a public and political sense. And so we might begin to see a way to answer the challenge that Curtis has thrown down: “how to save human particularity, how to create a world in which it can appear and flourish, how to cultivate our passion for it” (1999, p.7).

Chapter Two

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In this chapter I review the research and arguments which support, critique and seek to complicate the associations between young women, popular culture, mass media and consumption. Specifically, I begin this chapter with a brief examination of the rise of girls' studies within what has come to be called feminism's 'third wave'.²⁷ I pay particular attention to how early work in this emerging field theorized and constructed notions of young women's relationship with popular representations of femininity within the media in terms of their identification (or not) as feminists. I then move forward to focus more specifically on contemporary girls' studies literature which examines the relational links between young women, popular culture, mass media and the subjectivities available to young women in the contemporary moment. In particular, I focus on studies which interrogate the most popular phenomena of *girl power*²⁸ and the *reinvention of the (female) self* (see Gonick, 2006; Griffin, 2004; Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2004a, 2005) predominating within contemporary media depictions of ideal femininity. I examine research which looks at the links between young women, consumption and essentialized,

²⁷ While my intent is not to wade deeply into the turbulent waters of "third wave" versus "second wave" feminist debates, I believe it is important to provide a summary discussion of third wave feminism in order to contextualize the girls' studies scholarship which I review here.

²⁸ The advent in the mid nineties of the British pop group *The Spice Girls* made girl power synonymous with a highly commercial, sexualized and fetishized version of "empowered" femininity (see Gonick, 2006; Jackson, 2006). Though all were adults (if young adults), each woman embodied "girliness" and "fun" femininity (see Baumgardner & Richards, 2004) and the characters of each "Spice Girl" represented a sexualized fetishization of stark stereotypes of young femininity: Baby Spice (blonde ponytails and a "sweet nature"), Posh Spice (White, middle-class and aloof), Scary Spice (Black and outspoken), Sporty Spice (the least attractive "girl"), Ginger Spice ("fiery", red haired and hyper-sexual). Dibben notes that in addition to such stark fetishizing of femininity, "a particular story is being told about the acceptability of different types of femininity according to class and race" (1999, p. 345 in Griffin, 2004, p. 34).

fetishized and sexualized representations of young women's bodies. I focus in particular on the work of those scholars who seek to interrogate the classed and racialised nature of such links (see Griffin, 2004; Levy, 2005; McLeod, 1998, 2003; McRobbie, 2004a, 2005; Reay, 2001; Skeggs, 1997, 2005; Weekes, 2004). Finally I explore research which offers a strong theoretical approach to examining the intersections between popular representations of ideal (and deviant) femininity, social and economic disadvantage and female youth subjectivity (see Bullen & Kenway, 2004; Griffin, 2004; McRobbie, 2004a, Skeggs, 2005).

The Roots of Girls' Studies

In the preface to her 1997 publication of *The Beauty Myth* Naomi Wolf observes that the beginning of the 1990s marked a “renewed conversation about feminism” which arose largely in connection to “mass culture” and the associated media dissemination of representations of young women (p.3). Such a ‘renewed conversation’ implies some historical context. It therefore becomes necessary to review, and acknowledge, the historical and social context of those concerns taken up in feminist scholarship since such new conversations began. Thus, I begin this chapter with what is really a very brief review of the origins of third wave feminist scholarship and girls’ studies place within such works.

Wolf and many others note (see Gonick, 2006; Rasmusson, 2004) that the early 1990s marks the generally accepted inception of the third wave²⁹ of the twentieth

²⁹ Though the designation ‘third wave’ is most frequently used in connection with American feminist scholarship, its inception date (early 1990s) and its strong ties to popular culture, mass media and concerns about female youth subjectivities in relation to consumption of media and cultural/racial/economic diversity etc. are common to the ‘renewed conversation’ amongst feminist/youth cultural/social scholars in

century's women's movement. In the eighteen years which followed, third wave feminist scholars have created a rich and vastly disparate body of literature which seeks to both "work with" and "talk back" to the work of feminists in the first and second waves (Rasmusson, 2004, p. 429). It is perhaps most important to note that the goals which define third wave feminism are far more diverse and difficult to reconcile than those of its earlier counterparts. Heywood and Drake (1997) contend that this is because "third wave feminisms are shaped by intersections of contemporary socio-political forces" and, consequently, contemporary feminist scholars must tackle an increasingly complex, "media saturated" society (p. 23). Yet, as Gonick (2006) points out, public and academic preoccupation with exploring the effects of such 'media saturation' on young women is not new. She notes that,

the changing social world produced by modernity was met with a profound ambivalence. Both women and youth became the symbols for expressing this concern. The figure of 'woman' was employed by cultural critics to express this unease by constantly drawing negative connections between mass culture and the feminine. (p. 4 citing Johnson, 1993)

And so it becomes important to recognize then that third wave feminist scholar's interest in the rise of popular culture and mass media is also strongly connected to their concerns regarding the exclusion of many women's experiences from first and second wave feminism. Indeed, much of the scholarship of the past two decades denounces second wave feminism's paucity of class, race, sexuality, disability or youth analysis.³⁰ And so, as Rasmussen observes, the "third wave can be seen as a push against all forms of discrimination simultaneously" (2004, p. 429) As a result, Rasmussen notes that "no

the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and Canada as well (see Bullen & Kenway, 2004; Griffin, 2004; McLeod, 2003; McLeod and Yates, 1997; Reay, 2001; Walkerdine et al, 2001).

³⁰ See Walkerdine et al, 2001; de Ras & Lunenberg (Eds.), 1993; Findlen, 1995.

large, distinctive activist mobilization of the third wave is occurring...activism is more local, specific, and private” (ibid.).

Yet such differences do not (arguably, cannot) represent a complete schism in feminist ideology and scholarship. For, although many third wave feminist scholars position their work as a critique of the two prior waves of the women’s movement, in doing so such scholarship necessarily draws into the contemporary moment the struggles, arguments and ideologies of past feminisms. Indeed, Gilley (2005) notes that contemporary feminist scholars “[do not follow] any unified stance” yet, “...define themselves as the third wave, an appellation that serves to distinguish them from the first and second waves of feminism while simultaneously marking them as a continuation thereof” (p. 188). Wendy Brown (2003) suggests that the phenomenon of contradiction and division which thus marks contemporary feminist studies is an example of, “bringing along what we are after even as we locate it behind us” (p. 3). In other words, in our “post-modern” (“post-feminist”, “post-structuralist” etc.) era we “live with” the ideas born out of first and second wave feminism while simultaneously locating such notions in the past. And, because such “living with’ is uneasy work”, feminist scholars find themselves working within a field where, “the identity that bore women’s studies into being has dissolved without dissolving the field itself” (ibid.).³¹ So, while many third wave feminist scholars might reject their second wave ancestors they must simultaneously ground their third wave writing in a rejection, reproduction or reinterpretation of second wave notions of feminism and feminist scholarship.

This brief historical explanation of the catalysts, inspirations and broad goals of the newest wave of feminist scholarship highlights the fact that girls’ studies has grown

³¹ For more along this line of thinking see McRobbie, 2004a; Rasmusson, 2004.

out of fertile thinking ground which, in relation to the diverse focus of third wave feminists, encourages an interdisciplinary perspective in this emerging field – a perspective I intend to engage in my own research. Moreover, the focus on popular culture, mass media and young women's consumption and reconciliations of such media-saturated culture in relation to their social and economic location within the world establishes the boundaries for the literature reviewed in this chapter. In the remainder of this chapter I explore some of the most recent 'conversations' taking place within such 'boundaries' of feminist and social thought.

Contested ground: Young women, popular culture and feminism

Popular constructions of media savvy youth cultures position young people at the centre of our pop culture dominated world. Of course, the idea that young people embody signifiers of popular culture in daily living is not a new development, nor is it unique to feminism (see Willis 1990); however, it seems that feminist scholars' interest in intersections between girlhood, feminism and popular culture is rapidly increasing (see Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, 2004; Gonick, 2006; Griffin, 2004; Harris, 2004a; Levy, 2005; McRobbie, 2004b, 2005; Taft, 2004). Rasmusson (2004) is perhaps justified in claiming that contemporary feminism is creating a "new cultural territory"; albeit territory in which the, "focus [is] on sex and pleasure, popular culture and the media, [and] activism is more local, specific and private" (2004, p. 429).

In this section I review literature which investigates how young women are positioned within popular culture and mass media. In relation to my own investigation of economically disadvantaged young women's reconciliations of media representations of

ideal (deviant) femininity I focus in particular on literature which examines such portrayals and provides a variety of critiques of the popular and academic use of female empowerment³² narratives to understand young women's relationship to such images. At the same time, I also seek to highlight scholarship which explores young women's reconciliation of such narratives from the perspective of such young women's social and economic location. I suggest that while there is much discourse analysis of girl power together with the spectrum of discourses which shift or oppose its assertions³³, much less attention is paid to the symbolic grounding of such discourses both in images of femininity and in young women's context-embedded embodiment of such symbolism. Therefore, in my own work, I seek to address this apparent gap by building on the work of those authors who engage with Bourdieu's theories of embodiment, symbolic/masculine domination and symbolic violence (see 2000, 2001) to explore how particular notions of class and gender come to be ingrained within media representations of femininity and inscribed on the bodies of women (see Bullen & Kenway, 2004; McRobbie, 2004, 2005; Skeggs, 2001, 2005). I review the work of these authors in the final section of this chapter.

³² "Girl Power" and "Riot Grrrl" are familiar monikers which have a high profile in both academic popular culture circles. Popular "girl power" is characterized by the British pop band, *Spice Girls* whose young, hyper-sexualized dress code and dedication to the concept of being a "girl's girl" marked popular young feminism of the early 1990s (see Baumgardner & Richards 2000, Griffin, 2004). While the term "Riot Grrrl" is not as easily defined (in part because its political message was subsumed by the more popular media use of 'girl power'), riot grrrl culture rose out of the punk music scene of the early 1990s. The movement rejected "passive girl" constructions and encouraged notions of girls as independent, combative and antiestablishment (Rosenburg & Garofolo, 1998).

³³ See Gonick's (2006) critique of Pipher's (1994) "Reviving Ophelia" positioning of women as passive "dupes" of mass media and popular culture and Taft's (2004) cautiously supportive analysis of the political possibilities inherent within girl power narratives.

Disputing the “power” of young women in popular constructions of femininity

There is a dangerous illusion that because feminine consumer culture now endorses the rhetoric of “girl power”, endlessly celebrating high-profile women, and because many women’s magazines take up equal-opportunities issues, feminine popular culture is no longer harmful to women. Because women are understood to be able to make their own choices about what they buy or how they want to look, it is thought that the powers of persuasion or manipulation have been eroded. (McRobbie, 2005b, final paragraph)

The concept of girl power has been the subject of much research on girls and popular culture. For example, Griffin (2004) has argued that research which seeks to explore young women’s relationship to representations of femininity within popular culture must at the same time focus a critical lens on how such relationships are depicted within popular culture *and* how they have been investigated, portrayed and explained within the academy. Similarly, Gonick (2006) identifies the seemingly competing and equally mutable and “multi-stranded” “Girl Power” and “Reviving Ophelia” narratives as the most popular “truth” discourses about young women circulating within contemporary popular culture (p. 1). As the name suggests, Gonick connects the Reviving Ophelia discourse (and its attendant positioning of young women as passive and vulnerable victims of mass media and popular culture) to Pipher’s (1994) popular text, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*. Girl Power (under which most gendered and celebratory “empowerment” narratives are subsumed) counters such fear-mongering with idealized and highly commercial representations of young women’s power and strength in the world. Although Gonick’s work examines these two narratives in terms of their similar constitution of a “neoliberal girl subject” (see discussion later in this chapter) I have briefly introduced her argument here in order to contextualize the contemporary debate about young women’s seemingly disinvested relationship with feminism in relation to their investment with the troublesome commercial notions of

feminine “empowerment” circulating in contemporary, popular marketplaces to which McRobbie (2005b), cited above, refers.

McRobbie (2004a) notes that the period of time which marks the dissolution of feminism’s second wave (the early 1990s) also marks a time when popular manifestations of feminism began to permeate mass media and popular culture. In response to what was read as young women’s unthinking embracement of popular feminisms which celebrated highly commercial forms of sexuality and “girliness” accusations arose which targeted young women’s seeming ambivalence toward (and recoil in response to) traditional feminist doctrine. In the early 1990s young women were widely reported as adhering to an “I’m not a feminist but...” argument when asked to describe their feminist or political standings (Jowett, 2004). Although Jowett notes that such arguments are part of a complicated and historically grounded “process[]of (dis) investment in feminist ideas” (p. 91) and Eisenhower (2004) argues that feminists must seek out understandings which “complicat[e] ...assumptions regarding young women’s lack of interest in feminism” (p. 79) popular responses to young women’s seeming disinvestment in feminism reduced such complex processes to a “moral panic” about young women’s flagging “self-esteem” (see Ward & Benjamin, 2004). At its most extreme, popular feminist work painted a desperate picture of contemporary young women as passive, “vulnerable and voiceless” pawns of mass media and popular culture (see Pipher, 1994 in Gonick, 2006, p. 2). And, as Gonick (2006) observes Pipher’s popular depiction of the “crisis” state of young, contemporary femininity was picked up in public education and educational psychology circles further entrenching it as a powerful, mass circulating “truth” about young women and young girls.

Against such charges of passivity, Gilley (2005) notes that while third wave feminism is inextricably intertwined with popular culture, it is grossly misleading to narrowly define young women as uncritical reflections of their representations in popular media (p. 187). In her review of the influential authors of American feminism's third wave Gilley calls attention to the work of Baumgardner and Richards (2000) and Findlen (1995) among others who initially sought to position young women's relationship with popular culture and mass media as one that is undeniably complicated but also unavoidable and potentially positive and "empowering" for young women. Baumgardner and Richards' (2000) popular *Manifesta* and Findlen's (1995) edited collection of young women's biographical narratives each offer a view into the "new" voice(s) of feminism which emerged in the 1990s. I link these works here because both texts have been referred to as "defining texts" within American girls' studies in terms of their respective stands against accusations of feminist apathy (Rasmusson, 2004). Importantly, both foundational texts present 'being a feminist' as a more individual, personal pursuit and both link such pursuits to emerging notions of female empowerment based on personal expression and within the context of popular culture and mass media.

Findlen's text is an edited collection of "consciousness-raising" feminist and deeply personal narratives which brings together a selection of new-generation feminists from diverse social, cultural and economic backgrounds and purports to represent the voices of young women who have 'found' feminism in the aftermath of the second wave. Findlen's collection focuses on deeply personal stories which often include young women's use of multi media as a vehicle for personal empowerment (particularly internet 'zines). Jensen (2000) notes that while such collections (she includes similarly

constructed texts by Heywood & Drake, 1997 and Walker, 1995 in her critique) seek to correct feminism's historical occlusion of women's differences (race, class, sexuality, religion, disability) they abandon theory and political argument in favour of "fetishizing contradiction" (para. 1-3). And so, while intriguing, such biographical accounts run the risk of creating a kind of analytical paralysis which precludes a larger theoretical understanding of the persistent yet shifting and paradoxical manifestations of idealized and denigrated femininity within mass media and popular culture together with young women's reconciliations of such images in relation to their own experiences within the world.

Baumgardner and Richards' first publication moves away from the biographical approach to feminist scholarship and explores, and claims an attempt to bridge, the generational divide existing between women of the second and third waves.³⁴ This text together with their later works (see 2003, 2004) celebrates individualized descriptions of young women "embracing girliness" and "consumerism" as an expression of what has come to be known as girl power (2004, p. 59). Such "girliness", the authors' argue is an updated version of feminism which itself ought to be viewed as not "about what choice you make, but the freedom to make the choice" (2003, p. 450). Thus, the authors argue that the feminist academy should neither disparage nor fret about young women who "choose" to embody the 'girly' and girl power symbols prevalent within popular culture. Moreover, the authors claim that such girly feminine power is tied directly to consumption, mass media and popular culture so, for example, "when little girls sing

³⁴ Jensen (2000) notes that while *Manifesta* in particular was advertised as a unifying feminist "call to arms", its authors rely on a "forced consensus" which falls short of offering a truly inclusive feminism for all women (para. 2 and 7). Though politically and historically motivated, Jensen argues that Baumgardner and Richards' work, "isn't adequate for comprehending much less galvanizing, the actual class, racial, sexual and political heterogeneity of American women" (para 9).

Spice Girl songs and...women...celebrate this season's premier of *Sex in the City* or host Madonna parties. it's a fierce, fun independence they're tapping into" (2004, p. 61).

But in declaring that "under the guise of helping girls and women keep their voices, the women's movement inadvertently mutes them" (p. 65) the authors seem to place any feminist scholarship which critically explores representations of femininity within popular culture and young women's relationship to such representations in the same camp as those who depict contemporary young women as passive vessels or uncritical dupes of popular culture. This is not, I would suggest, a particularly helpful or accurate conflation. Moreover, they fail to position notions of "choice" and "freedom" within economic, social and cultural constraints. Again, such positioning limits rather than expands our understanding of the many experiences of girlhood. But, the authors' work does highlight the important point that some young women do engage with the hyper-sexual and girly subjectivities which mark popular representations of girl power in ways that are meaningful to them. Therefore, I would argue that in addition to interrogating the gendered, classed or racial inequality inherent within such assertions of "choice" and "freedom" research in this area might be further informed by an investigation of the complexities of young women's symbolic embodiment (see Bourdieu, 2001; McNay, 2000; Willis, 1990) of popular girly feminism framed within a broader study of the reproducing and historical mechanisms of (*masculine*) *symbolic domination* (Bourdieu, 2001).

Having offered a general outline of the polarity existing within feminist research into contemporary young women's relationship with popular representations of femininity, I turn now toward a review of that research which seeks to complicate such

relationships whilst avoiding both the celebration and panic characteristic of more essentialized and popular debates. In the following sections I review the work of scholars who seek to interrogate the more uncomplicated popular depictions of young women “being whatever they want to be” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2004, p. 66) or, like Shakespeare’s pathetic Ophelia succumbing to the inherent fragility of their gender (see Gonick’s 2006 discussion of Pipher, 1994). In relation to the focus of my own work, I look specifically at the research and theoretical arguments of those authors who seek to interrogate the connections between popular culture, mass media, consumption and young women’s social and economic positioning within the state.

Consuming ideals and the idealization of (female) consumption

According to Anita Harris (2004a), the young woman as ‘consumer’ is now seen as a legitimate (and legitimately “participating”) citizen. Harris notes that, “consumption has come to stand in as a sign both of successfully secured social rights and of civic power” and that “girls above all...are held up as the exemplars of this new citizenship” (p. 163). But such constructions of the legitimate female citizen immediately exclude young women whose economic circumstances preclude their “participation” in our commodified world (see Harris, 2004a; McRobbie, 2004a; Walkerdine et al, 2001). Moreover, via girl power, sexualized and fetishized representations of young women’s bodies have been rendered ideal and empowered commodities. Griffin (2004) notes that the ideals of femininity marketed for young women’s consumption are, moreover, drawn largely from White, middle-class, Anglocentric notions of ideal and deviant femininity. And so, as Skeggs (2005), Weekes (2004) and others have pointed out, when popular

representations of femininity do draw upon traditionally “Othered” femininities (historically excluded from the ideal based on class, race, sexuality etc.) they are often fetishized, sexualized or deeply derogatory and so subjugation has simply been repackaged as a new and empowering commodity for young women (also see Lawler, 2005a on embedded signifiers of class-based “disgust”). Thus, Harris (2004a) argues that in our contemporary, media saturated world “‘liberation’ is sold to girls through the conflation of feminism and consumption” (p. 167). Such a conflation is perhaps most apparent in mass media and those feminist theories (see Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, 2004) which laud young women’s embodiment of highly commercial forms of deeply classed and racialised (hetero) sexuality as uncomplicated expressions of feminine power.

Levy (2005) challenges hyper-sexual representations of empowered femininity through research which examines the intersections between gendered female empowerment narratives, consumption and the popularity of what she identifies as the emergence of a hyper-sexual “raunch culture”. Levy interviewed female college students, teenage girls and those entertainment personnel (camera persons, directors and female stars) who are part of producing both “soft” and “hard” pornography. She integrates data from the interviews within a larger critique of popular media and dominant trends which reproduce representations of hyper-sexualized femininity as the ideal for adult women, teenage women and even young girls. In her analysis the popular HBO programme *Sex and the City* Levy examines what she identifies as its exemplar of contemporary media idealization and conflation of girl power with an emerging, popular and deeply gendered raunch culture. Levy calls particular attention to the “playboy bunny” and “mud flap girl” pendants that two of the “strong”, “independent” and

“modern” female *Sex and the City* characters wore (p. 186). Levy notes that dominant discourses lauding the “fun”, “sexy” and “sexually liberated” side of female empowerment were symbolized in *Sex and the City* by privileged White women who regularly bought \$400 shoes and who adorned their bodies with the iconic symbols of the porn industry (i.e., the playboy bunny and mud flap pendants). Expanding on this theme, Levy questions the troubling tendency for contemporary young women to embody symbols of “sex as a commodity” as a means to express their “girl power”:

The women who are really emulated and obsessed over in our culture right now – strippers, porn stars, pinups – *aren't even people*. They are merely sexual personae, erotic dollies from the land of make-believe. In their performances, which is the only capacity in which we see these women we so fetishize, they don't even speak. As far as we know, they have no ideas, no feelings, no political beliefs, no relationships, no past, no future, no *humanity*. Is this really the best we [feminists] can do? (p. 196)

Levy's research offers a revealing window through which we might view popular culture manifestations of hyper-sexualized femininities. But her findings suggest that there is a general enthusiastic consumption and embrace of what she calls “raunch culture” by young women. Moreover, Levy ends her analysis of the ‘rise of raunch culture’ with a somewhat cursory class critique; her main concern lies with feminist scholars who lay claim to the “liberating” choice of embodying symbols of pornography thus effectively ignoring the highly classed world of necessity which defines the pornography industry. Although she concludes that the mass circulation of such symbols can only lead to further stratification and exclusion in the social world, the research lacks a strong theoretical grounding which might complicate young women and girls’ seeming ‘embracement’ of raunch culture and could strengthen her arguments regarding media contributions to the reproduction of exclusion. As an example, I note the research

findings of both Reay (2001) and Weekes (2004) each of which offer, in different but complementary ways, more critical insight into how and why some young women, who are already socially or economically excluded from the popular norms of empowered and consuming femininity might access aspects of sexualized girl power as ambivalent forms of resistance to dominant notions of ideal femininity.

Reay's (2001) research in a primary classroom in London found that the brash and overtly sexual qualities of popular music group The Spice Girls were assumed by young, White working class girls as a way to "escape gender subordination from the boys" albeit along traditional, heterosexual lines of gender relations (pp. 160-161). Moreover, Reay cites Walkerdine's (1997) finding that such contemporary manifestations of popular sexuality provide a "space of power for little girls" which she acknowledges is also a "space in which they can be exploited...[and] subject[ed] to discourses of denigration" (p. 161). Moreover, and importantly, both Reay and Walkerdine note that young girls' and women's embodiment of highly commercial sexual or girly symbolism can be seen, particularly in relation to their own social positioning, as resistance to the inherently classed nature of dominant feminine ideals. But, and as Reay observes in her research, the "possibilities" for 'power' offered by such resistance are further complicated by a young woman's race and ethnicity (p. 160).

Weekes' (2004) research casts questions about the relationship between dominant consumer culture and young women's rejection of and identification with commercialized forms of femininity in terms of race and ethnicity. Specifically, I refer here to Weekes interviews with a sub-sample (from the main body of her research) of young African-Caribbean women in which she explored such young women's

relationship with popular “ragga” and “rap” music which positions young Black women as both sexual objects and (ideal/deviant) sexual agents. Weekes argues that media representations of hyper-sexualized femininity (positioned as always on the ideological line between deviant and ideal) are further complicated by racial stereotypes which pathologize Black, female sexuality (pp. 144-145). As such, Weekes found that although the young women in her study called attention to rap and ragga music’s hyper-sexual (and sometimes degrading and misogynistic lyrics) she characterizes their relationship with such music as “ambivalent”. She found that the young African-Caribbean women used the sexual elements of such popular music to subvert the structures of racism within society and within other popular media representations of ideal femininity. Therefore, Weekes’ findings suggest that popular concerns about young women’s seemingly uncritical consumption of highly commercial (and often derogatory) sexualized representations of femininity must be contextualized by an analysis of young women’s cultural practices of resistance in relation to their race and ethnicity *in addition* to class and gender. Finally, despite concluding that “the relationship [the young women involved in her research] have to the cultural product they consume is an active one”, Weekes ends her discussion with a warning about the increased ubiquity (and thus normalization) of hyper-sexualized media representations of femininity:

However, subverting music’s more complex gendered messages for the female MTV generation becomes increasingly hazardous the easier it is for these images to enter the public consciousness. (pp. 150-152)

Other feminist theorists have made similar observations. As Jowett (2004) (following Walkerdine et al, 2001) notes, the assumption of equality (gender, class, race) contained within girl power narratives closes off both the space for young women to

“speak about” real inequality and the opportunity to “feel a sense of social injustice” (p. 95). Jowett argues that widespread media representations of gendered empowerment which are imbued with the language and symbolism of girl power prevent young women’s political engagement with feminism. Moreover, during her research with young British White and Asian women she found that when experience or knowledge of inequality *was* acknowledged by the young women, such acknowledgment was countered with what Jowett calls “a sense of cheery inevitability” that social progress will eventually take care of such inequality (p. 95). Finally, following a similar vein of argument Taft (2004) observes that girl power narratives are problematic because of a popular conflation between “Girl Power which relates to girls’ political subjectivity” and girl power which has been co-opted by “popular culture and the mainstream media in a way that...excludes girls’ political selves” (p. 69). Taft argues that such exclusion manifests in popular representations of ideal young women who are engaged in deeply problematic ‘pursuits of happiness’.³⁵ Thus, popular depictions of girl power contain strong overtones of individualism and, by implication, “free will” which “describe the world as a meritocracy void of sexism, racism, classism, ableism, and heterosexism” (p. 73).

Taft offers a strong argument against feminism’s popular engagement with girl power on the grounds that it marginalizes experiences of femininity which are not White, Western and privileged whilst also “inhibit[ing] girls’ political engagement” (p. 70). But despite this argument Taft concludes with the suggestion that feminist theorists might (very cautiously) engage with narratives of girl power in their effort to help to “encourage

³⁵ See Gonick, 2006 and Rimke, 2002 on the gendered links between happiness, self-help literature and gendered individualization in our contemporary social immersion in the ethics of neo-liberalism.

girls' political activity" (p. 77). Similarly, Jowett (2004) argues that despite what she calls young women's "erroneous ideas about feminine freedom" (which she links to their engagement with popular constructions of hyper-sexual girl power femininity) such young women must not be positioned as "ideological dupes" (p. 99). Jowett concludes that, "given the space, young women will act as highly critical agents, challenging and contesting the discourses which they clearly imbibe in a nonetheless discriminating fashion" (p. 98). Moreover, there is little account in either text of how social class is both mutable and embedded in the everyday cultural experiences of young women.

It seems to me that in establishing a middle ground between positioning young women as 'ideological dupes' and openly celebrating the troublesome conflation of feminine power with consumption and a highly commercialized sexuality, many researchers focus on exploring the ways in which girl power or popular culture representations of feminine empowerment might be seen to be used by young women as a "toolbox" for "personal empowerment" and "self-esteem" (see Fritzsche, 2004, p.159) or "political activity", if only as such activity might challenge popular constructions of free and empowered femininity (see Taft, 2004, p. 77). I would side more strongly then with the work of such theorists as Gonick (2006) and McRobbie (2004a) who argue that the 'personal empowerment' and 'self-esteem' focus of some researchers "participates in the production of the neoliberal girl subject" (Gonick, 2006, p. 2). Moreover, I would argue that research which more cautiously endorses a "radical [and] sociological" feminist engagement with girl power narratives as a means to understand how young women might engage in "political activity" (Taft, 2004, p.77), might also consider whether we cut off the possibilities for young women's political and public engagement in social

spaces if we continue to define such engagements in terms of their relationship with representations of sexualized and fetishized feminine empowerment.

Therefore, to return to Weekes' point in the citation above, I intend to argue that the current mass proliferation of representations of femininity throughout all areas of public space has, to borrow Arendt's very specific use of the term, rendered such representations *banal* by virtue of their normalized status within the Western collective consciousness (see 1963, 1958/98). And so, I would follow McRobbie, 2004a who calls for research into young women's relationship with (and positioning as consumers within) popular culture which engages critically with social and political theory as a means to frame such research within a broader investigation of the social and political consequences of normalizing the conflation of sexualization with gendered empowerment. I believe that one consequence of such a conflation is a version of what Arendt calls "atrophy" in the public spaces of appearance (1958/1998). In the final section of this chapter, then, I explore the connections between popular media representation and positioning of female youth subjectivities and young women's circumstances of social and economic exclusion contextualized within sociological critiques of such connections.

Constructing the feminine in constraint: female youth subjectivities and "difficult circumstances"³⁶

In this section I review literature which has posed questions about popular culture and media constitutions of female youth subjectivities, particularly in relation to how such media accounts of girls shape real experiences of socially and economically

³⁶ Bullen & Kenway, 2004

disadvantaged young women. In particular I explore arguments and theories which critique mass media for its overwhelming failure to represent the social nature of what Bullen and Kenway (2004) refer to as the “difficult circumstances” of economic disadvantage and social exclusion. Moreover, I review social and cultural theories which seek to understand not only the discursive power of public constitutions of young femininity but also their symbolic and materially grounded existence in the lives and bodies of young women together with their symbolic existence and power over time (see Bullen and Kenway, 2004; McRobbie, 2004b; Skeggs, 2001).

Anita Harris (2004b) observes that in the contemporary moment, constructions of ‘ideal’ femininity are firmly situated in representations of young, beautiful, highly sexualized women whose girl (em)powered confidence and unremitting, “capacity for self-invention”, are linked to discourses of empowerment, “success” and hope for the future (pp. 6-17). Griffin (2004) argues that such constructions create the “impossible [female] subject” (p. 42) and notes that, “the girl subject is constituted in an uneasy and shifting location between competing external demands and pressures, and the obligatory expression of internal desires” (p. 40). In addition, Gonick (2006) suggests that though seemingly contradictory in their representation of young women, such ‘competing external demands’ must be understood as having the same end. That is, Gonick argues that the multifarious popular notions of “girlhood”, despite their outward differences, all “contribute to the ‘psychological knowledge’ constituting girlhood and can be seen to assist in the production of the new self-inventing, neoliberal girl subject” (p. 18). Finally, drawing upon (and critiquing) the theories of Beck et al (1994), McRobbie (2004a) further suggests that consumer culture, mass media and some popular feminist theories

position “young women as the ideal self-inventors in an individualized risk society” (in Harris, 2004a, p. xxi). Such positioning, she argues, is most “dangerous” because it constructs young women as powerful (and “equal”) agents of change whilst rendering invisible the very real social and economic constraints which still exist in their lives (see 1999, 2004a, 2005a also see Griffin, 2004).

Implicit within such contemporary celebration of the complex, mercurial and above all “empowered” young woman is the notion that her individualized reinventions are based in “choice” and that the processes of perpetual reinvention are progressive and necessary for the acquisition of personal happiness and empowerment (see Gonick, 2006; Harris, 2004b). This, Harris (2004a) argues is girl power, “constructed as a personal belief system that makes girls smart and confident: to be girl-powered is to make good choices and to be empowered as an individual” (p. 167). But, as Gonick (2006) points out, constructions of contemporary young women as passive, naïve and “at risk” in our commodified world also assert that society must help young women to “make good choices” and so there seems to be little difference in terms of an end result of what McRobbie (2004a) identifies as the “processes of female individualization” (p. 11).³⁷

It has been argued that girl power and the reinvention of the female self (using the commercialized subjectivities of girl power) presents young women with a variety of competitive choices in terms of empowering feminine identities (see Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, 2004; Fritzsche, 2004). But as many theorists have pointed out, equality of choice is a dominant and deeply problematic illusion perpetuated within what Bullen

³⁷ In her contribution to Adkin’s and Skeggs (2005) *Feminism After Bourdieu*, McRobbie describes “female individualization” as follows:

Female individualization is, then, a social process bringing into being new social divisions through the denigration of low class or poor and disadvantaged women by means of symbolic violence. What emerges is a new regime of more sharply polarized class positions. (p. 101)

and Kenway (2004) call the “popular imaginary” of our social world. And so the popular femininities sold to young women fail to account for young women’s diverse social or economic circumstances. Thus Griffin (2004) argues that,

the subject position of the consuming girl is not of equivalent relevance for all girls and young women: it is profoundly shaped by class, ethnicity, sexuality, and disability...My sense is that the discourse of Girl Power, for all the ambiguity of the subject positions that it appears to offer girls, has very different levels of connection with the lives of many girls and young women. (Griffin, 2004, p. 36)

Ultimately though, Griffin’s work reminds us that *how* scholars have chosen to critique popular representations of girlhood contributes to young women’s understanding of their own relationship to popular culture and the mass media representations which both sexualize them and position them as the ideal consumer (pp. 34-35 citing Skeggs, 1997).

I would like to finish this chapter, then, by taking a look at the work of McRobbie, Skeggs and Bullen and Kenway who each engage with elements of Bourdieu’s social theory in order to open new spaces for thinking about how young femininity is constructed and how such constructions intersect with social and economic disadvantage.

Citing a lack of political “feminist values” available within popular constructions of empowered femininity, McRobbie (2004a) argues that girl power narratives act in popular culture as a “trope of freedom” which relegates political versions of feminism to a “shadowed” past (pp. 5-6). Grounding her argument in an analysis of popular media McRobbie argues that feminism is actually negated and derided by girl power both through the “choices” presented to young women (sexualizing, objectifying, trivializing) and through its assertion that young women are already apparently “equal” (see 2004, 2005). In fact, McRobbie’s prevailing concern is with those strategies of popular culture and popular media (and the complicity of dominant scholarship with such popular

strategies) in which “feminism [is] taken into account”³⁸ as a means to separate contemporary young women from a more public and political engagement with critiques of media representations of femininity (2004a, p. 10). Through the application of such dominant theories to popular media representations of femininity McRobbie contends and concludes that,

this kind of sociology [post-structural theory] fits so well with current preoccupations, especially with those which focus on young women as a metaphor for social changes, and...this in turn gives rise to the danger of confirming the young female subject as one who has no need for feminist politics. (p. 11)

To guard against such confirmations, McRobbie (2005a) contributes a Bourdieusian analysis of what she calls the “new matrix of gender and class, articulated most clearly in and through the fields of culture and media” in which “new forms of class differentiation are being produced through processes of symbolic violence” (p. 106). In her exploration of the media phenomenon of ‘makeover’ television McRobbie ties new public tolerance for explicit “class antagonism” (pitched as entertainment) to new political models of “female individualization”. She observes that during a makeover program, class distinctions are purposely highlighted and literally inscribed on the bodies of both the female “victims” (participants) and their middle-class, female critics (hosts). She explains that, “the victim...presents...her class habitus (including home, family, friends and neighbours, and social milieu) for analysis and critique by the [middle class] experts” (p. 103). The (predominantly) young, female ‘victims’ are then “reinvented”

³⁸ This is a key concept for McRobbie and so I have included her full description below:

We have a field of transformation in which feminist values come to be engaged with, and to some extent incorporated across, civil society in institutional practices, in education, in the work environment, and in the media. This is what I mean by ‘feminism taken into account’” (2004a, p.5).

(via ideal middle-class feminine traits) as legitimate citizens of the neoliberal state. With wry humour, McRobbie notes that there is, “little space for the resolutely unimproved woman to stake a political claim to remaining shabby” (p. 107). More serious, though, is McRobbie’s contention that such media disseminates throughout the public consciousness and thus, the female body becomes naturalized as a site of deeply gendered class divisions. She calls this social process a “specifically feminine modalit[y] of symbolic violence” (p. 102).

McRobbie’s critical engagement with Bourdieu’s theories of habitus, field and symbolic violence explore what she identifies as the phenomenon of gendered “class rearrangement” in the contemporary moment. Her work opens space to think about how narrowly circumscribed social narratives (e.g., girl power, reinvention) operate in the lives of young women and how economically disadvantaged young women might be particularly marginalized within such symbolic and embodied narratives. Moreover, her research adds an understanding of how and why such young women might participate in what Kehily calls, “regulating gender-appropriate behaviour for [other] young women” (p. 209). But in this publication at least she seems to minimize masculine ‘modalities of symbolic violence’ and seems instead to argue that in the contemporary moment women have taken over the regulatory ‘male gaze’:

No longer defined in terms of husbands, fathers or boyfriends, women and in particular younger women have been set free to compete with each other, sometimes mercilessly. Public enactments of hatred and animosity are refracted at a bodily or corporeal level. (p. 100)

While I might agree that some popular media certainly represents the continued regulation of female subjectivity and the female body in this way, I would argue for a more nuanced perspective on what McRobbie presents here as a clear shift. In other

words, I would go back to Bourdieu (2001) to argue that it is possible to identify the operation of symbolic/masculine domination even within what McRobbie calls the new “girl against girl” (albeit with a class dimension) forms of symbolic violence. Moreover, and by her own admission McRobbie’s analysis focuses on social class to the exclusion of how race, ethnicity, sexual identity or diverse abilities are represented within the media she investigates.

Skeggs (2005) also remarks upon what she observes is the new media trend which celebrates the inscription of classed and gendered deviance on the bodies of young women. And, while she suggests that in the United Kingdom “anti-racist struggles have had a positive impact to momentarily defend black women from representational degradation” (p. 978) she also observes that a similar pathologizing, fetishizing and hyper-sexualizing of femininity takes place in North American media “in more race-inflected ways” (p. 966). Skeggs’ analysis looks at how neo-liberal social processes in the UK (driven in part by economic and political policy and a new “moral ambivalence”) intersect in the lived experiences of economically disadvantaged young women *and* in the media which claims to represent their ‘true’ identities through hyper-sexual, pathologized caricatures of femininity. Following a line of argument similar to McRobbie’s assertion of a new “class rearrangement” (2005a) Skeggs contends that “compulsory individuality” marks our contemporary moment wherein individuals are presented with a “plurality of forms of selfhood” but are then judged based on the public legitimacy of their “chosen” “repertoire of the self” (p. 973). Most important to this analysis is the recognition that such ‘choosing’ takes place on very unequal ground inscribed with the historically rooted symbolism of class, race and gender. Thus she notes,

Class relations seep into the very production and performance of supposedly private subjective construction, whereby access to resources, and the ability to propertize them, is one form that class struggle now takes. What is significant in the use of culture as a resource in self-making is *how different forms of subjectivity are made available to different groups*: subjects with and without value; different forms of subjectivity therefore constitute and display class differences. (pp. 974-975)

Referring to the contemporary sexualization of female subjectivities, Skeggs borrows Bourdieu's theories of symbolic capital (see 1987) to argue that in popular media (like Levy, 2005 Skeggs also uses HBO's *Sex and the City* as a reference) such inequalities in choice and judgment play out differently for "black and white middle-class women" whose bodies are inscribed with hyper (hetero) sexuality and "white and black working-class women" whose bodies "remain sexual objects; cleaved by respectability" (p. 969). Thus, though the *Sex and the City* characters are, as Levy (2005) notes, draped in the symbolism of the pornography industry, Skeggs argues that their status as upper middle-class career women enables them to embody the hyper-sexual subjectivity as valuable symbolic capital (pp. 969-971).

Skeggs analysis offers insight into how disadvantaged young women are more likely to experience exclusion based on their embodiment of the hyper-sexuality inherent within the girl power narratives which provide the most popular avenues of "empowerment" for young women. Moreover, in other publications (see 1997) Skeggs has noted that the subjectivities seemingly made available to young women through consumption are limited by their spending power (or lack thereof). Building on these insights, I would argue that in addition to recognizing how and why economically disadvantaged young women have limited access to "ideal" female subjectivities (and how their embodiment of such subjectivities might carry different meanings than for their

more privileged peers) an associated analysis of what Adkins (2004) identifies as the (Bourdiesian) “cultural and media field” (p. 7) which (re)produces such subjectivities is also necessary.

In their critique of contentious “underclass” theories Bullen and Kenway (2004) frame their argument through an analysis of the way the Australian media participated in “reinforce[ing] social exclusion” through their pathologization of economic disadvantage and through conflating this pathologization with one young woman’s expressions of grief in the wake of her son’s disappearance (pp. 141-142). The authors argue that popularly circulating characterizations of disadvantage as a mark of personal deviancy, though not in themselves gendered, are most often used to describe and to regulate disadvantaged female subjects. Thus, the authors propose an engagement with elements of Bourdieu’s social theory in order to move beyond what they describe as the similarly problematic ends of both “culturalist” and “structuralist” “underclass theory” which offers deeply problematic constructions of disadvantage in relation to young women.

Citing Skeggs (1997) Bullen and Kenway note that “femininity is always classed” and, therefore, young women “invest” in femininities which have been socially constructed as “respectable” as a means of acquiring cultural capital (pp. 147-148). Such an observation takes into consideration what Skeggs (1997) identifies as the “restricted value” of femininity generally, and which Bullen and Kenway note is particularly restricted in disadvantaged circumstances. The authors argue that such a lens,

allow[s] us to go beyond the version of underclass femininity that underclass theory constructs; beyond the polarized discourses of victim and perpetrator, beyond patronizing and pathologizing. (p. 146 citing Sayer, 2001)

Moreover, the authors highlight the importance of *contingency* in the lives of young women and emphasize a feminist theoretical lens which would recognize the “interaction” between structure and culture and view “social space [as] the ‘space of points of view’” (p. 147 citing Bourdieu et al, 1999). Their work thus situates young women as “similarly located”, geographically and/or socially (Dillabough, 2004) without constructing all disadvantaged young women as similar subjects. And so, the authors argue that Bourdieu’s theories of capital allow for an understanding of the inherent ambivalence ingrained within the subjectivities assumed by young women living in ‘difficult circumstances’.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reviewed literature which assesses the relationship between girls and representations of idealized femininity in popular culture. Broadly speaking, this work shows that contemporary mass media and popular culture predominantly represent the “ideal” young woman as a sexy, playful, powerful and consuming agent of change (see Harris, 2004a). But such representations most frequently present young women with private, personal and/or trivial channels of power (see McRobbie, 2004a). Perhaps more importantly, they often say little about the material and symbolic constraints which exist in the lives of economically disadvantaged young women (Griffin, 2004). Therefore, such constructions of power are illusory and their popular positioning as public “truths” contributes, I would argue, to the further exclusion of such young women. However, I would also insist that we must not fall into the trap of positioning young women either as wholly uncritical puppets of the discourses which permeate popular culture and media or

as perpetual victims of hegemonic forces of domination. Rather, I would suggest that research in this area explore the grounded, embedded and contingent nature of popular discourses which circulate constructions of femininity through an examination of the symbolic reproduction of such symbolically infused ideas over time. At the same time, I would argue that such an approach would need to explore the experiences of economically disadvantaged young women in relation to how such young women might engage with, reconfigure and, where possible, act to subvert the symbolic and discursive popular and scholarly narratives which seek to construct them.

Following the Bourdieusian framed theoretical arguments outlined in the last section of this chapter, I would argue that in the contemporary moment, idealized representations of empowered, perpetually reinventing femininity represent a form of what Bullen and Kenway (2004) call “respectable” capital (p. 147) for (some) young women. As I have reviewed in this chapter, such representations are problematic on many levels including: their conflation of ‘power’ and ‘liberation’ with a highly commercial sexualization of young women’s bodies; their focus on hyper-individualized subjectivities and consumption as the only legitimate forms of citizenship; their symbolic links to historical class and racial division; and, their marginalization of any young woman whose social, cultural and economic circumstances or personal comfort level (with the “girly” or “sexy” female subjectivities) prevent their engagement with such ideals (see Griffin, 2004). I would note that the utterly *banal* existence of (girl) empowered, endlessly reinventing femininity as not only “ideal” but more importantly “normal” closes off spaces of political engagement for socially and economically disadvantaged young women even as they sermonize about young women’s seeming

power and equality in the world. And so I would argue that research into economically disadvantaged young women's reconciliations of such representations be matched by a critical theorizing of the thought-occluding effects of such representations on the public consciousness (see Arendt, 1963, 1958/98).

I would suggest, then, that the real strength of feminist research into the connections between young women, young women's social and economic positioning and popular culture which engages critically with broader social theory is that, to borrow from Adkins, it "refuses an easy storyline of women's resistance to gender norms" and remains open to recognizing new forms of division and exclusion within society (see Adkins, 2005) even while the doxic (see Bourdieu, 1998, 2001) nature of such division and exclusion is investigated.

I move forward now to the methodology chapter in which I outline my own Arendtian ontological approach to examining the symbolic manifestations of what Bourdieu (2001) calls *masculine domination* in contemporary media representations of ideal (deviant) femininity in relation to socially and economically disadvantaged young women's reconciliation of such proliferate representations with their daily and meaningful experiences of reality. And, because I follow both Arendt's and Bourdieu's related cautions about our essential embeddedness in our social world (which is also, consequently, ingrained within each of us) I offer as part of the following chapter a description of the method I have elected to use as a form of context-producing media analysis in chapter four. Specifically, I delineate my rather experimental adaptation of Benjamin's *montage* method of analysis in order to bring about a crystallization (see Arendt, 1958/98) and recognition of the doxic but shifting forms of symbolic/masculine

domination in contemporary media representations of femininity (see Bourdieu, 2001).

Finally, I describe the geographical and social location of this research and explain my method of data collection and analysis together with an outline of my interview approach.

Chapter Three

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter describes the methodological design of this thesis investigation, including data collection and data sources. I also outline the methods used to bridge the historical and contemporary documents with the interview data emerging from research interviews with the young women who participated in the study. I draw upon an Arendtian understanding of phenomenological hermeneutics in order to suggest that an adaptation of Benjamin's *montage* method might be used to trace doxic notions of the feminine in contemporary media representations of ideal (deviant) femininity (see Bourdieu, 2001). I argue that the montage technique offers a unique *reflexivity* (see Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) in that, "the juxtaposition of images and text is meant to produce a cognitive experience in readers, who can *see* the theoretical point in a certain way" (Buck-Morss, 2002, p. 326) and in a certain *temporal moment* (Dillabough, 2008, forthcoming). Before outlining my interpretation of Arendtian phenomenological hermeneutics and the montage method it is first necessary to ground such methodology within its philosophical and epistemological orientations. Therefore, in the first section of this chapter I explore both phenomenology and hermeneutics before moving forward to outline the specific application of such traditions within my own work. Following the explanation of the montage technique that will be used in this thesis I describe my data collection and data sources.

Philosophical and Epistemological Orientation to Methods

My research approach can best be described as a critical, hermeneutic inquiry which offers a phenomenological understanding of the relationship between female youth culture, mass media and social exclusion. Furthermore, I ground my research in a historically informed analysis. Broadly speaking, then, the methodology for this thesis investigation is informed by two complementary philosophical traditions: phenomenology and hermeneutics. I link these two fields and employ them from within an Arendtian theoretical framework as outlined in the first chapter. Furthermore, I defend such linking based on a Ricoeurian understanding of their relationality. Against the argument that hermeneutics “ruined” phenomenology, Ricoeur illuminates the “mutual belonging” which exists between phenomenology and hermeneutics (1975). He describes their dialectical relationship as follows:

On the one hand, hermeneutics is built on the basis of phenomenology and thus preserves that from which it nevertheless differs: *phenomenology remains the indispensable presupposition of hermeneutics*. On the other hand, phenomenology is not able to establish itself without a *hermeneutical presupposition*. (1975, p. 85)

Simply put, the phenomenological and hermeneutical line in this investigation operates through the concept of interpretation as an attempt to reappropriate some meaning of female exclusion through the interpretation of young women’s material experience in relation to a historically and theoretically informed social and political context. In what follows I will briefly discuss the roots of both phenomenology and hermeneutics and then move on to outline the philosophical grounding for the historical methodology of this thesis.

Phenomenology

In general terms phenomenology may be understood as the grounding of academic notions of meaning in raw, unprocessed experience. Simply put, phenomenology aims to understand the “lived structures of meanings” (van Manen, 1990, p. 4). Such a general description, however, is limited in so far as it fails to offer a nuanced characterization of the phenomenological discipline both as a research method and as a philosophical outlook. Janicaud notes that since its establishment as a discipline phenomenology “has taken on many forms and has never been reducible to the formal application of rules” (1996, p. 53). Characterized by Husserl as “the only way of elevating philosophy to the status of a rigorous [rational as opposed to empirical (1929, p. 16)] science”, phenomenology took the form of a philosophical method through which human experience might be observed and understood (in Gadamer, 1977, p. 130). Husserl labelled the emerging discipline of phenomenology as a “repudia[ti]on of every philosophical ‘renaissance’”, which would “transpose” philosophical “intuition” onto “the firm ground of concrete research” (ibid.).

Nearly a full century prior to Husserl’s establishment of phenomenology as a discipline, Hegel connected meaning to experience but emphasized both the “mediated” nature of experience and the dialectical nature of existence. The former contention insists that meaning not be absolute while the latter refers to Hegel’s related notion that the “truth” of existence is transitory and contains within it its own negation. If Husserl’s pursuit of a rigorous methodology is considered in conjunction with Hegel’s assertion that, “change...lies within the very nature of existence” (in Weiss, 1974, p. 8) phenomenological inquiry might then acknowledge (and reflect methodologically) the

mutable nature of experience, meaning and understanding. What does this mean in terms of a working definition for phenomenology? French phenomenologist Merleau-Perly, offers the following:

What is phenomenology? ...It is...far from being answered. Phenomenology is the study of essences, and, according to it, all problems amount to defining essences: the essence of perception, the essence of consciousness, for example. But phenomenology *is also* [emphasis added] a philosophy which relocates essences within existence, and does not think that one can understand man [sic] and the world otherwise than by starting from their 'facility'. (in Janicaud, 1996, p. 53)

Phenomenology, then, is perhaps best understood as having the twofold character of a scholarly methodology and a philosophical orientation. While, “phenomenology practices...a highly reflective attentiveness to the concreteness of the ordinary things of our world” it must simultaneously acknowledge that such concrete experiences are never static, objectively constituted “truths”. For, “even the most ordinary of human experiences soon turn enigmatic – and ultimately allusive – under this reflective phenomenological gaze” (van Manen, 2002, p. 5). As such, the non-linear, dialectical nature of hermeneutical inquiry is uniquely suited to a phenomenologically oriented investigation. It is to the radical orientation of hermeneutics and its capacity for revealing elements of young women’s experiences in relation to wider circulating forms of particular ideal (deviant) femininities to which I am committed. In the following passages I explore the hermeneutical tradition (and its suitability to a phenomenological approach to research) in general terms and then move forward to outline the Arendtian framing of phenomenology and hermeneutics which will be used in this thesis.

Hermeneutics

Where, “phenomenology describes how one orients to lived experience. hermeneutics describes how one interprets the ‘texts’ of life” (van Manen, 1990, p. 4). Hermeneutical inquiry is an open-ended, continuous interpretative process which is limited neither to cognitive processes (human activity is always implied) nor to the search for an “absolute” interpretation (Rorty, 1982). It assumes that human experience can never be reproduced (replicated) under identical circumstances and therefore argues that no one interpretation can be generalized as ‘fact’ or ‘truth’. Furthermore, hermeneutics presupposes that all human actions/experiences are grounded in, and reflect, a history. Gadamer notes that hermeneutics is the practise of “...interpreting the context which makes something meaningful...”, and specifically that, “[i]t is not [a] fact but just the context which defines the meaning and significance of a fact...” (1979, p. 76). As such, although hermeneutics is now widely characterized as a general philosophical system of interpretive analysis (Gallagher, 1997), its contemporary manifestation is situated in a history which demands an explicit, if only summary, review.

Originally a method applying interpretive analysis to religious texts, contemporary hermeneutics has deep (and contested)³⁹ roots in Hegelian philosophy. Hegel viewed history as a continuous and fluctuating cycle of thesis-antithesis-synthesis (the *Hegelian dialectic*), with each era giving rise to its own ‘opposition’ (in Weiss, 1974). While an ideology of historical progress seems implicit to the *dialectic*, Hegel

³⁹ While the nature of Hegel’s contribution to contemporary hermeneutics is hotly contested, the link (‘deep roots’) to Hegel is not. See the hermeneutically related criticisms of Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, Derrida, Habermas (summarized in Gallagher [ed.], 1997). I do not explore the arguments which exist in the philosophical hermeneutical community with regard to Hegel’s positive or negative contributions to the field. I rely instead on Merleau-Ponty’s observation that, “all of the great philosophical ideas of the past century...had their beginnings in Hegel”, and, Habermas’ similar reflection that, “Hegel inaugurated the discourse of modernity” (in Gallagher, 1997, p. 1).

was more concerned with progressions of understanding (a flux of ideas) which might ideally result in “full transference” of phenomena under study (Gadamer, 1979, p. 76). Interestingly, the spirit of dialectical interpretation has been retained by hermeneutics to the present day yet contemporary hermeneutics is linked more often to Heidegger’s *hermeneutic circle*⁴⁰ (see also Gadamer, 1975; Ricoeur, 1995; Rorty, 1982) than to the Hegelian dialectic. Such a distancing is perhaps partly explained as a divergence on ontological grounds. Whereas Hegel believed that the dialectical process would eventuate in a spiritual realization (the *absolute*), later hermeneutics denounced both the seemingly mystical and deterministic implications of Hegel’s philosophy. Instead, ‘popular’ hermeneutical inquiry became synonymous with a post-modern focus on the “essentially linguistic” nature of human experience (Gadamer in Rorty, 1982, p. 3).⁴¹

Twentieth century philosophers (see Foucault, Heidegger, Derrida) rejected Hegel’s metaphysical thinking (see Hegel’s *Science of Logic*) and argued that in the Platonic quest for ‘absolute’ or ‘perfect’ forms, reason became simply a “surrogate” for an omniscient presence, or ‘God’ (Rorty, 1982). Furthermore, Hegel’s “system of pure reason” (in Weiss, 1974, p. 86) was criticised on the grounds that it lifted thought out of its experiential context, effectively providing a “view from nowhere” (Gadamer in Redding, 1996, p. 49). In such a reading, “Hegel the hermeneutic philosopher is usurped by Hegel the dogmatic metaphysician” (Redding, 1996, p. 49); a ‘usurpation’ which serves to obfuscate the importance of Hegel’s contribution to the field of hermeneutics. Indeed, I would argue that we might refute the characterization of Hegel as a philosopher

⁴⁰ The *hermeneutic circle* refers to the dictum that, “we have to refer to the whole to understand the parts and the parts to understand the whole” in terms of scholarly interpretation (Marshall [Ed.], 1998, p. 327).

⁴¹ I depart from Gadamer, Foucault et al with the assertion that such linguistic analysis is necessary but not sufficient.

concerned only with the abstract (and thereby establish the essence of Hegel's hermeneutical phenomenology as a valid point of departure for bringing theory to bear on the material study of girlhood) by turning once again to his phenomenological writings.

In *The Phenomenology of Mind* (1807) Hegel speaks at length to the imbalanced separation which exists between concrete experience and abstract theory:

Time was when man [sic] had a heaven, decked and fitted out with endless wealth of thoughts and pictures. The significance of all that is, lay in the thread of light by which it was attached to heaven; instead of dwelling in the present as it is here and now, the eye glanced away over the present to the Divine... The mind's eye had to be directed under compulsion to what is earthly, and kept fixed there; and it has needed a long time to introduce that clearness, which only celestial realities had, into the crassness and confusion shrouding the sense of things earthly, and to make attention to the immediate present as such, which was called Experience, of interest and of value. Now we have apparently the opposite of all this; man's mind and interest are so deeply rooted in the earthly that we require a like power to have them raised above that level. (in Weiss 1974, Introduction).

Although couched in admittedly provocative, spiritual language, Hegel's thinking notes quite clearly the limitations of either a purely abstract or wholly experiential philosophy. Far from providing a "view from nowhere" (Gadamer in Redding, 1996, p. 49), Hegel seems to regret the lack of philosophical middle ground. Indeed, Arendt observed that the "reconciliation" between thought and human experience (the "Divine" and the "secular" in Hegelian terms), "is at the center of the whole Hegelian system" (1971, II, p. 46). Hegel would have philosophical inquiry ground meaning in moments of experience *and* reflect the, "...equal necessity of all moments [which constitute] alone and thereby the life of the whole" (Hegel in Weiss, 1974, p. 7).⁴² Such a reflection would necessarily

⁴² This quotation is taken from the concluding lines of an analogy drawn from Hegel's preface to his work, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) as found in Weiss, 1974. I have included the entire metaphor here:

The bud disappears when the blossom breaks through, and we might say that the former is refuted by the latter; in the same way when the fruit comes, the blossom may be explained to be a false

entail a strong hermeneutical approach to research informed by both a theoretical and a historical lens. In the following section I explore an Arendtian pairing of phenomenology and hermeneutics which reconciles the theory/experience dichotomy and provides the philosophical foundation for this thesis investigation.

Arendtian Phenomenological Hermeneutics

Arendtian phenomenology is distinctive in that it carries within it the assumption of *natality* which, "...is the condition through which we immerse ourselves into the world..." (Benhabib, 2000, p. 81). Arendt would "free" the study of human experience (action) from determined, causal or progressive analysis through a recognition of the "startling[ly] unexpected[]" nature of experience (1958/98, pp. 175-178). She argues that such "unexpectedness" has a dual nature of inexhaustive hopefulness and "supreme thoughtlessness" (ideas explored in the first chapter). Moreover, what Arendt titles "the human condition of plurality" is firmly rooted in her phenomenological method (1958/98). She directly links the meaning inherent in experience (common to all phenomenology) to the *condition of plurality*. Indeed, in an Arendtian phenomenological analysis, meaningful experience presupposes plurality. In her own words:

Action...corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man [sic], live on the earth and inhabit the world...,

and further;

Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live. (1958/98, pp. 7-8)

form of the plant's existence, for the fruit appears as it true nature in place of the blossom. These stages are not merely differentiated; they supplant one another as being incompatible with one another. But the ceaseless activity of their own inherent nature makes them at the same time moments of an organic unity, where they not merely do not contradict one another, but where one is as necessary as the other; and this equal necessity of all moments constitutes alone and thereby the life of the whole (p. 7).

Arendtian phenomenology, therefore, seeks to rectify the philosophical tradition of the subordination of lived experience. In my own research this meant that if I wanted to theorize about the potential effects of media representations of ideal (deviant) femininity on economically disadvantaged young women I must first investigate how such young women position themselves in relation to popular notions of femininity and to their own social location. However, Arendt would not have scholars abandon all theoretical pursuits. Arendt's search for the "originary character" of experience (the fact of *natality*) does not position theory before experience or vice versa, but rather uses theory to open space for thinking about experience.

Arendt sought to 'dismantle' philosophical traditions which subordinated lived experience (*vita active*) to purely theoretical musings (*vita contemplative*)⁴³ without also engaging in a problematic rejection of abstract philosophical thought (1958/1998). Speaking to the connection between theory and experience she observes that "...no matter how abstract our theories may sound or how consistent our arguments may appear, there are incidents and stories behind them which, at least for us ourselves, contain as in a nutshell the full meaning of whatever we have to say..." (Arendt, n.d. from *Action and the Pursuit of Happiness* [APH]⁴⁴, p. 3). Arendt would have scholars 'visit'⁴⁵ such 'stories' from multiple angles in a historicized context which, "...does not inspire or exhort us to specific deeds" (Kohn, 2000, p. 115). Rather, 'visiting' recognizes that,

⁴³ In *The Human Condition* Arendt credits Plato with this philosophical 'error' of hierarchical categorization. See Arendt's analysis of Plato's "Myth of the Cave" (1958/98, pp. 20-21).

⁴⁴ In *The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress* [HAPLC] (1923-1975) Essays and lectures---"Foreign Affairs in the Foreign Language Press," essay---n.d. (Series: Speeches and Writings File, 1923-1975, n.d.).

⁴⁵ A more thorough discussion of *visiting* is taken up in chapter one.

thought itself...arises out of the actuality of incidents, and incidents of living experience must remain its guideposts by which it takes its bearings, if it is not to lose itself in the heights to which thinking soars, or in the depths to which it must descend. In other words, the curve which the activity of thought describes must remain bound to incident as the circle remains bound to its focus. (Arendt, APH, p. 3).

What's more, human experience also presupposes a historical context; or, to use Arendtian language, "[a]ction...creates the condition for remembrance, that is, for history" (p. 9). Thus, the media montage (see Buck-Morss, 1989 on Benjamin's montage technique) in chapter four (described in full later in this chapter) represents, I suggest, an example of historicized visiting – a suggestion which is explained in the next few paragraphs and fully described in the section which follows.

Speaking to the *way in which* we seek to study human experience in relation to history, Arendt turned to the hermeneutical impulse to "go back to the sources themselves" (Arendt, n.d., APH, p. 3). While Arendt acknowledged the limitations⁴⁶ manifest in the increasingly popular hermeneutical inquiries of her time, her approach to philosophical analysis is hermeneutical in its design. Arendt equated the hermeneutical process of analysis to the, "artificial alienat[ion] [of] our minds" from the study of "ordinary", "everyday" experiences (ibid.).⁴⁷ Such alienation, she argues, must occur in order to, "repeat the wonder and surprise with which the common, which we constantly and inevitably tend to overlook because of its familiarity, must strike us to assert its true

⁴⁶ See Arendt, n.d., APH

⁴⁷ Indeed, Kohn notes that, "...the faculty of judgment, with which [Arendt] ultimately hoped to resolve the most fundamental problems of action arising from her political thought – the judgment she had long since practiced but only turned to examine and analyze at the end of her life – *depended* on a degree of separation, on being situated at a certain remove from the world and its events" (2000, p. 117). Moreover, as Nelson notes, Arendt both advocated and lived a life of periodic 'artificial alienation'; she positioned herself as "alone" and "on the same side" as others in order to "embrace the discomfort of uncertainty and the anxiety of unpredictability" which is a "precondition" for ethical, political analysis and social change (2006, pp. 86, 89).

significance” (ibid.; also see Bourdieu, 2001 on the *paradox of doxa*).⁴⁸ The media montage in chapter four attempts to effect an ‘artificial alienation’ of the reader’s mind from its embeddedness within “commonplace” assumptions (see *habitus*, Bourdieu, 2000, p. 138) about media and about how media depicts particular kinds of femininity. I suggest that the media montage will provide a better position from which to explore and understand how the young women who were involved in this research might make sense of, or “reconcile” media representations of ideal (deviant) femininity within the context of their own lives. It is important too, to note that while Arendt’s hermeneutical method of ‘alienation’ might appear to be in conflict with her phenomenological impulses, Canovan argues that a study of Arendt’s metaphor of *crystallization* (discussed below) serves to reconcile the seeming conflict (1992). I take up this metaphor in chapter four and use it as a frame for understanding how Benjamin’s montage method might aid in the retrieval of memory “lost” through our ‘commonplace’ acceptance of the order of the world.

Arendt’s Metaphor of “Crystallization”

Arendt compares the complex, dialectical relationship between concrete human experience, theory, historical context and hermeneutical analysis to the process of crystallization. Her analogy at once recognizes the multi-faceted and mutable nature of interpretation of experience *and also* allows for momentary, situated clarity (solidification) of analysis, however fragmentary. The metaphor itself is built on a passage from Shakespeare’s *Tempest*:

Full fathom five thy father lies,
Of his bones are coral made,
Those are pearls that were his eyes.

⁴⁸ For discussion on McCarthy’s understanding on the necessity for “self-alienation” see Nelson (2006).

Nothing of him that doth fade
but doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange. (I, ii, in Arendt, 1971, p. 212)

Canovan notes that the, “pearl diver [scholar]...fishes in the depths of the past for remains that have suffered a ‘sea-change’”, in order to, “...pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths’, guided by the belief that ‘the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization’” (Canovan, 1992, p. 4).⁴⁹ Arendt would have the work of contemporary scholars “fed” by, “a *fragmented* past, which has lost its certainty of evaluation” (1971, p. 212). Such scholarship does not search for an absolute. Instead, it is research which recognizes that,

the only gain one might legitimately expect...is not a result, such as a definition, or the attainment of a goal, such as a theory, but rather the slow, plodding discovery and, perhaps, the mapping survey of the region which some incident had completely illuminated for a fleeting moment. (Arendt, n.d., APH, pp. 1-3)

It is the necessarily fragmentary nature of knowledge which Arendt addresses within the crystallization metaphor. Canovan elucidates and extends the analogy, musing that, “...while it may be possible to see through a crystal to the ground in which it is embedded, it is in the nature of the same crystal to have many facets, reflecting light from different sources and glittering with inexhaustible significance” (1992, p. 5). Thus, the metaphor of crystallization incorporates both Arendt’s hermeneutical argument that “alienated” reflection on experience might “completely illuminate[]” the meaningfulness of an experience “for a fleeting moment” (Arendt, n.d., APH, p. 3) and her phenomenological focus on “recovering raw experience” (Canovan, 1992, p. 5). Arendtian phenomenological and hermeneutical analysis is, then, “...thinking, fed by the

⁴⁹ For the passages quoted within the Canovan (1992) quotation see Cape, Jonathan (1970) “Walter Benjamin 1892-1940” in *Men in Dark Times* (London: 205-6).

present, work[ing] with the ‘thought fragments’ it can wrest from the past and gather about itself” (Arendt 1968, p. 51).

In chapter four I attempt to enact such an artificial ‘alienation’ of my own thinking and that of my reader through an adaptation of Benjamin’s montage technique (see Buck-Morss, 1989). I juxtapose contemporary media (described later in this chapter) with visual and textual samples drawn from literature and historical media. I suggest that such a juxtaposition might open space for an expanded and “temporal” (Dillabough, 2008, forthcoming) account of the signifiers of *masculine domination* embedded within contemporary media representations of ideal (deviant) femininity. In chapter five, I suggest that we might use Arendt’s metaphor of crystallization to understand young women’s similarly ‘temporal’ and mutable but also inherently meaningful experiences of their reconciliation of mediated notions of femininity in relation to their own constrained socio-economic circumstances. I explore an Arendtian understanding of phenomenology’s experientially grounded approach together with the essence (if not the total philosophy) of Hegel’s observation of the dialectical nature of all existence; particularly that of human experience. I will argue that such an approach might allow us to observe both the multi-faceted, crystallized experiences of young women and the shifting, ‘temporal’ ground in which such experiences rest. Thus, Arendt’s metaphor of crystallization forms the philosophical base for the following exploration of a historical method (montage) which seeks to illuminate the present through a “dismantling” of traditional historical representations of idealized femininity. I begin with a description of the method itself and then offer my own interpretation and adaptation of montage as it

will be applied to my exploration of media representations of ideal (deviant) femininity and to economically disadvantaged young women's relationships with such depictions.

Historical method

Introduction

As I have already outlined, this thesis employs a hermeneutical inquiry method in which cultural phenomena are understood to be contingent within not only their contemporary but also their historical⁵⁰ context. In a discussion linking hermeneutics and historical methodology Ricoeur noted that, "...historical transmission needs to be thought of differently than as succession as it is conceived by the natural sciences, and historical method must accordingly differ from the method used in these sciences" (1976, p. 688). Ricoeur goes on to clarify, arguing that it is "history's misfortune", rather than its "primordial constitution", that, "...human relations throughout history are, to a considerable extent, reified to the point that the course of history is no longer distinguished from the flow of things⁵¹ ..." (pp. 688-689). In other words, rather than recognizing our dialectical and necessarily fragmented understanding of history, traditional historiography has worked from within a linear, progressive concept of history. Ricoeur reminds us that "one consequence" of being "...separated in time from our predecessors...is that history is knowledge by means of "traces" and the past is accessible to us only through marks, inscriptions, documents, archives and the monuments of all kinds that play the role of "facts" for historical inquiry" (1976, p. 691).

⁵⁰ I use history both as an analytical tool and as a part of the theoretical grounding of this thesis but make no claims to offer a comprehensive history of social exclusion or of young women's historical relationship to socio-cultural representations of femininity.

⁵¹ Ricoeur is building on Kant's analogy of a "ship descending a stream" through which "human events are interwoven within the flow of things...descend[ing] the stream along with it" (1976, p. 687).

I contend that Benjamin's *montage* historiography offers an approach to research which serves to illuminate the fragmentary nature of the "facts" of history to which Ricoeur refers. In order to disrupt linear (and causal) conceptualizations of history as such notions are manifest within contemporary media representations of femininity, I employ a strategy of montage historiography borrowed from the work of Benjamin and inspired, philosophically speaking, by the writings of Hannah Arendt. Through montage historiography I am able to juxtapose selections of historical and contemporary media with interdisciplinary theory to create both a reflexive analysis and a context for the empirical research collected from my interviews with six young women. I am able to, in Benjamin's words, "brush history against the grain" (1968, p. 257) in order to reveal the mechanisms and processes by which ideologically laden historical "documents"⁵² inform young women's experiences of gender and exclusion in the present.

Montage as context

Walter Benjamin...took seriously the debris of mass culture as the source of philosophical truth...it was precisely Benjamin's point to bridge the gap between everyday experience and traditional academic concerns, actually to achieve that phenomenological hermeneutics of the profane world which Heidegger only pretended (Buck-Morss, 1989, pp. ix - 3).

Benjamin offers a unique, nonlinear⁵³ reading of history that that operates through the arrangement of fragments of the past and present alongside each other (*collage*) in order to offer a contextualized understanding of conditions in the contemporary moment

⁵² I use here, and throughout this thesis, the term "document" according to Benjamin's historical materialist notion of "documents of barbarism" as described in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1968) and elaborated in detail further in this chapter.

⁵³ Buck-Morss (1989) notes that, "Benjamin was ... convinced of one thing: what was needed was a visual, not a linear logic: The concepts were to be imagistically constructed, according to the cognitive principles of montage. Nineteenth-century objects were to be made visible as the origin of the present, at the same time that every assumption of progress was to be scrupulously rejected" (pp. 218, 71).

(*montage*). Shanks offers the following characterization of the differences between collage and montage:

Collage...is direct quotation, literal repetition or citation of something taken out of its context and placed in another. Montage is the cutting and reassembling of these fragments of meanings, images, things, quotations, borrowing, to create new juxtapositions. Collage is a simple questioning of the notion of representation as finding some correspondence with an exterior reality. ...The aim is to construct something new out of old, to connect what may appear dissimilar in order to achieve new insights and understanding. ...”(1992, 188-90).

Whereas collage describes the result of fragmented texts and images coming together to form a ‘new’ whole, montage reflects the method of the researcher who seeks to “illuminate” contemporary phenomena in an historical context. The montage method allows a dialectical linking of contemporary and historical data to an overarching theoretical framework. To use Benjamin’s colourful, metaphoric language, the scholar who adopts a montage method,

stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead he [sic] grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he [sic] establishes a conception of the present as the “time of the now” which is shot through with chips of Messianic time. (1968, p. 263)

While the effectiveness of the montage method may be “to suggest multiple and singular temporalities that discursively unite past and present moments” (Curthoys, 1999), it is important to note that such moments are not tacitly neutral. In other words, inherent to the montage method is the assumption that all such moments and documents of history are embedded with cultural symbols of oppression.⁵⁴ Like Arendt, Benjamin’s work is committed to establishing a political ethic and is therefore both concerned with

⁵⁴ While Benjamin would not have described himself as a cultural historian, his work reflects a “concern with the symbolic and its interpretation” which Burke identifies as “the common ground of cultural historians” (2004, p. 3)

the transmission of culturally embedded symbols and informed by his own historical materialist perspective.⁵⁵ The montage method was meant to “awaken the political consciousness” of his generation (Buck-Morss, 1989, p. 336) rather than to offer yet another history of the class struggle (Benjamin, 1968). To that end, Benjamin argued that while employing the montage method historians must recognize that “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (p. 256). As I have applied the concept, *documents of barbarism* both to texts analysed in this thesis and to ideological symbols embedded in all observed social phenomena it is important to briefly define its central meaning.

Benjamin argues that all celebrated social phenomena (e.g., architecture, literature, ideology, philosophy etc.) represent “documents of barbarism” (1968). That is to say, traditional history is the story of those who triumphed – those who produced, reproduced, represented and continue to benefit from the dominant ideology and social capital of any given era. Traditional historicism “empathizes...with the victor” and, Benjamin argues, perpetuates the dominance of the privileged “rulers” over those ignored and marginalized within society. Building on a metaphor of war Benjamin writes:

all rulers are the heirs of those who conquered before them. Hence, empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers... Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures... They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. (p. 256)

⁵⁵Also like Arendt, Benjamin was concerned with the dangers of disconnecting the present from its past and warned that, “[f]or every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (1968, p. 255). Such lack of recognition, he argued, was evident by, “[t]he current amazement that the things we are experiencing are “still” possible in the twentieth century”(p. 257). I take up these ideas in the Theoretical Framework outlined in chapter one under the sub-heading *Thoughtlessness*.

Furthermore, Benjamin reminds us that, “just as such...document[s] [are] not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which [they were] transmitted...” (p. 256). Through historical montage Benjamin seeks to avoid the reproduction of barbarism via traditional historiography and chooses instead to “blast open the continuum of history” in order to illuminate static elements of dominance inherent in all historic and contemporary material (p. 262). Such a methodology represents a shift out of traditional historicism which can, by accident or by design, privilege tales of victory over and above tales of “anonymous toil” (ibid.). By detaching such documents from their regimented place in a linear history of progress we might observe the, “...concrete, ‘small, particular moments’ in which the ‘total’ historical event’ was to be discovered...in which the origins of the present could be found” (Buck-Morss 1989, pp. 218, 71).

Taking Benjamin’s notion of oppression-laden historical documents as a starting point, I adopt the montage method to observe that which has been obscured by dominant representations of unfettered, powerful feminine “freedom” in the 21st century. More specifically, I employ an Arendtian framing of montage historiography to build a contextual chapter (chapter four) which will then inform the following chapter’s exploration of the relationship between the social location of the young women involved in this study, their own meaningful and complicated embodiment and rejection of symbolic representations of femininity and the reproduction of such symbols throughout history. Broadly speaking, montage allows an examination of the data collected in relation to larger issues of social exclusion. Specifically, montage analysis allows enduring and mutable symbols of femininity to be traced through time without assigning a static interpretation of such symbols. Embedded cultural symbols in documents from

the past will be juxtaposed against both those of the present and then followed through to their manifestations in the lived experiences of the young women interviewed for this study. Furthermore, the dialectical nature of the montage method not only rejects progressive historicism but also guards against deterministic interpretations of contemporary data. In other words, while doxic and oppressive elements might be recognized in contemporary representations of ideal femininity, young women will not be portrayed as “trapped” or “helpless” victims of a stagnant, hegemonic history. Instead, I expand upon Walkerdine et al’s specific observation that, “...class still insists upon its presence even in the midst of its remaking” (2001, p. 4) to assert that I might observe evidence of embedded symbols of social exclusion which continue to ‘insist on their presence’ even as they are ‘remade’ in the contemporary moment. As Lindroos (2003) notes, Benjamin’s montage method examines, “...how the heterogeneity of historical knowledge forms an active background for constituting political knowledge” (p. 234). Thus, through a montage analysis of historical and contemporary media we may begin to recognize the stratifying and exclusionary socio-political practices which continue to be both powerful and present in the lives of young, disadvantaged women in the contemporary moment without positioning such young women as submissive prisoners of history.

Data Collection

Working from within the theoretical framework explored in chapter one I employ two hermeneutic devices (qualitative interviewing and multi media analysis) in order to explore the relationship between disadvantaged young women and media representations

of femininity. Specifically, two primary sources of data were used during the course of this thesis study:

- i) semi-structured interviews with six young women attending high school in an urban centre in Canada together with research field notes and,
- ii) a wide variety of media documents including television programming and advertising; newspaper and magazine advertising, images and articles; online articles, blogs, advertising and websites. In particular I examine: *Maclean's* magazine January, 1, 2007, front cover; *Marie Claire* magazine March, 2005, "Married with Accessories" fashion photo array; *Vancouver Sun* articles November, 18, 2000, A1 & November 21, 2001, B1; *The Swan* and *Extreme Makeover* selections of text from official web sites.

Interview Respondents and Context

This thesis investigation extends from a portion of a study conducted by Dr. Jo-Anne Dillabough titled, "Social Change and the Study of Economically Disadvantaged Youth in Canadian Schools", by including specific questions related to issues of femininity and the media. Interview data was collected from a sub-sample of six young women drawn from a larger sample in the named study. The young women were located across a range of ethnic, cultural and familial positions including "migrant" and "first generation" Canadian Cambodian/Islamic, Chinese, First Nations, Polish and Vietnamese communities; and, "single parent", "blended" and "extended" family units which might be identified as economically disadvantaged. At the time of the interviews the young women ranged in age from 15-17 and all attended one particular high school in an urban, inner-city community. The school has an ethnically and culturally diverse population of students and is the oldest in its urban centre. It is a self-described "community school" which offers kindergarten to grade twelve education and shares property with a busy public library and community centre. Because of its close association with an area of concentrated poverty, the school has an undeserved and external reputation for being

“dangerous” (defined as permeated with drugs and violence) and for providing sub-standard education.⁵⁶

Geographically, the school property flanks the boundaries of the most marginalized, pathologized and culturally diverse community in its city and many of the students live in the more affordable housing offered within this adjacent community. At this point it must be noted that in using the broad term community it is not my intention to ignore the particularity of humans, nor to collapse the boundaries of the unique neighbourhoods with their complex, shifting relationships which exist within this geographical region. I employ the term for the sake of expediency (to refer to a geographical area) and I recognize that such language (if left unqualified) risks reproducing the highly classed stigma of social deviance which is attached to such areas of concentrated poverty. With this qualification in mind, then, in choosing to interview young women who attend school in a deeply pathologized and economically disadvantaged urban location I hope to explore exclusion as it relates to class as well as to age and gender while also noting Madeleine Jowett’s observation that “social class is notoriously difficult to categorize” (2004, p. 92).

Process

The research questions posed to young women in this thesis project were drawn from six of the “Interview Topics For Case Study Sites: Youth (14-18)” from Dr. Dillabough’s original study. Under section #3 I added specific subjects to be addressed

⁵⁶ This statement reflects opinions offered by staff and students and taken from interviews conducted within Dr. Dillabough’s larger investigation as well as from the interviews with the six young women.

which extend the original topic, “Social Conditions and Issues of Exclusion Beyond Schooling”. The additional topics are as follows:

- issues related to gender, race, class and urban life.
- questions about media, popular culture (fashion, music, technology, television, film) and young women’s understandings of themselves and their future,
- perceptions of femininity and race and class and their links to cultural/national identity and inclusion in schools.

Each young woman was interviewed in a private room within the school or, in one instance, in her own home at her request and with the written permission of her parent. The interviewer began each interview with a brief discussion dealing with confidentiality, the voluntary nature of both the interview itself and each question presented. The young women were then asked a series of questions framed from the larger study’s interview protocol. As part of the protocol, the interviewer presented each young woman with three pages taken from magazines marketed to teenage girls and drawn from the larger sample of documents collected and analysed in this thesis (see chapter four). The interviewer initially asked each young woman to respond to the symbols of femininity represented on the magazine page. Then a range of questions were asked including:

- what is your definition of a “normal” (or “perfect” or “ideal”) girl?
- what is your definition of an “abnormal” (or “deviant”) girl?
- what influences your ideas about such definitions?
- how does your definition compare to what you might have seen/read about in media (generally) and to the sample magazine documents we are looking at here?
- what do you think or how do you feel about the way young women are being portrayed in the sample magazine documents we are looking at here?

As in Dr. Dillabough’s study, questions related to the additional thematic strands were asked in an open-ended manner and were asked as an extension of the interviewing procedures for and questions related to the larger study. Because of the

open-ended design of the interview protocol, discussion about popular culture, media, femininity and exclusion was moved forward with questions which were drawn from the young women's responses.

Such questions (and the open-ended way in which they were posed) draw their underpinning purpose from both theories of cultural production and young people's engagement with popular culture, media and consumption which arise out of ethnographic studies of youth culture (see Willis, 1977, 1990); and, the previously discussed Arendtian imperative to ground thinking in actual experience and to understand that experience (and thus also the associated theorizing) is mutable. While my own project was not a true ethnography, I attempted to ask questions which helped me to "get the inside story" (Willis, 2003, p.393) on how these six young women make sense of their world in relation to how media represents their world and their age, gender, social location and economic circumstances. Moreover, the purpose behind the questions was further informed by Bourdieu's theories of *habitus* and *symbolic/masculine domination* (2000, 2001) in terms of the embeddedness of such symbolism and of Bourdieu's perspective on young women's participation in the "relations of domination" (see 2001). And so I understand the young women's answers to such questions as contingent and particular moments related to the 'inside story' rather than as static "truths" which imply a "correct" interpretation of an isolated account. The interaction between the interviewer and the young women constitutes such moments of appearance, of observation and insight and moments of *semblance*⁵⁷ which hang together in the common spaces and agonistic tensions of larger unfolding social narratives.

⁵⁷ Arendt's concept of semblance accounts for the "errors" of observation and interpretation which "correspond" with the "perception" of appearance. Arendt explains,

Documents

The documents analysed in this thesis are drawn from a range of media (including magazines, internet and television) which represent an approximate span of 200 years. I follow Driscoll (2002) in choosing to consider media within this time period (the modern to late modern Western world) as it represents a “period of Western history that focuses on ‘the person’ as the knowing centre of the world” and also a period when “girls and young women seem to have become increasingly visible in public life and taken increasingly diverse public roles” (p. 2). Furthermore, this time period also encompasses a shift in Western ideology, again from a social to an individual focus and, most recently as social imperatives of hyper-individualism borrowed from neo-liberal economic theories (see Bourdieu, 1998). Thus it becomes important to consider the intersections between the lives of young women, mass media and critical social theory in relation to such a social shift (see theoretical discussions of such intersections in chapters one and two).

Within the media montage in chapter four the following media were examined: advertising and articles from issues of *Marie Claire* (2005) and *Maclean's* (2007) magazines; newspaper articles from *Vancouver Sun* (2000, 2001); a selection of popular and contemporary “self-help literature”; internet discussion blogs (2004-2008), official websites and television programming for *The Swan* and *Extreme Makeover*; and, advertisements from issues of *Chatelaine* magazine (1949) and *Ladies Home Journal*

Semblance is inherent in a world ruled by the twofold law of appearing to a plurality of sensitive creatures each equipped with the faculties of perception. Nothing that appears manifests itself to a single viewer capable of perceiving it under all its inherent aspects. The world appears in the mode of it-seems-to-me, depending on particular perspectives determined by location in the world. (1971, I, p. 38)

(1938)⁵⁸. Where applicable references to representations of dominant notions of femininity in the novels *1984* (Orwell, 1949), *The Penelopiad* (Atwood, 2005), *Lolita* (Nabokov, 1970/91) were juxtaposed with the samples drawn from mass media. Such texts have been selected for their symbolic representations of, or textual references to, ideal and deviant femininity as well as for their mass production and consumption within their particular time period.

Arrangement and analysis of Documents

The arrangement of such a vast array of media documents using Benjamin's montage methodology constitutes what Goodman (2003) refers to as an "experimental form of writing" (p. 157) which follows the work of an author whose own experimental montage was never completed. Within the montage I do not engage in a straight-ahead, in-depth analysis of each document. Contemporary representations of femininity sit alongside historical documents which seem to be part of an outmoded past until they sit beside their recycled or reproduced contemporary counterparts. Such 'sitting beside' is meant to bring about the "dialectical thinking" which best perceives the "superimposition" or "embeddedness of the present in the past – or the vibration of the past in the present" (Eiland, 2007, p. 126). Thus, I arrange such documents according to Benjamin's desire to create the "critical stops and jarring interruptions" (see Goodman, 2003, p. 159) which best facilitate new thought or insight and then employ Arendt's

⁵⁸ All contemporary images reprinted with permission. Although I attempted to receive permission to reprint the two advertisements from the mid-twentieth century, one company is no longer active and the other no longer makes the product as advertised. I will not reprint these two images beyond this thesis for that reason.

hermeneutical and phenomenological approach to theorizing (discussed previously in this chapter) the relevance of such arrangements.

Although we cannot know what the final draft of Benjamin's unconventional cultural study might have looked like, I have relied upon and been guided by his discussions on the fragmented and non-linear nature of history, of the need to "brush history against the grain", and of the embedded symbols of oppression and domination (see 1968) which exist within even the smallest and seemingly most insignificant "debris of mass culture" (see Buck-Morss on Benjamin, 1989, p. ix). Moreover, I considered the work of Buck-Morss, 1989, Eiland, 2007 and Szondi, 1961 who suggest interpretations of Benjamin's intent and purpose in the Arcades project and possible applications of montage as a method of analysis. At this point, then, it seems best to move into the montage chapter itself and thus begin the analysis stage of this research.

Chapter Four

AN ICONOGRAPHY OF EXCLUSION: “MASCULINE DOMINATION”, MASS MEDIA AND MONTAGE

Introduction

In the previous chapter I outlined Walter Benjamin's *montage* technique and argued that his experimental approach to studying mass culture might offer a useful method for tracing doxic notions of the feminine in contemporary media representations of ideal (deviant) femininity (see Bourdieu, 2001). Furthermore, I called attention to Benjamin's treatment of the cultural “debris” of society as “documents of barbarism”, that is, as documents inscribed by a long history of class oppression (1968, p. 256). I indicated that such a conceptualization informed my own intention to adapt the montage method in order to uncover the gendered and classed symbolism of a seemingly distant past as it has been “remade” (Walkerdine et al, 2001) in the contemporary moment through media representations of ideal (deviant) femininity and obscured by gendered narratives of empowerment (see discussion of girl power discourse and symbolism in chapter two). My key argument here, as it has been throughout this thesis, is that such embedded and obscured symbolism contributes to the conditions in which social exclusion along gender and class lines is perpetuated even as the social nature of such exclusion is obscured by gendered narratives of individualism, free choice and personal accountability.

In this chapter I examine how a selection of contemporary mass media (drawn from mainstream magazines, newspapers and television) depict femininity, and I explore the symbolic connections such representations might have to the “historical structures of the masculine order” (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 5). I use the technique of montage to offer a

critical exploration of visual, textual and discursive media representations of ideal (deviant) femininity circulating in the contemporary moment.⁵⁹ Although there are undoubtedly many more themes which could have been drawn from the media samples I have selected, I have divided this chapter's montage into the following two thematic sections: (1) Sexualizing and fetishizing the feminine; and. (2) Constructing ideal and deviant gendered need through private trauma. Each section begins with a collage in which I position samples of contemporary media against fragments of historical and contemporary literature, and/or against a historical image from one of two mid-nineteenth century women's magazines. "The juxtaposition of images and text is meant to produce a cognitive experience in readers, who can *see* the theoretical point in a certain way" (Buck-Morss, 2002, p. 326). I then move forward in each section to analyse a contemporary media sample through the theoretical lens drawn up in chapter one.⁶⁰ The aim of such purposeful juxtaposition is to provide a "jarring" of the mind (Goodman, 2003, p. 159) which is, I would argue, a necessary condition of "reflexivity" or the intentional "alienation" of analytical thought from what Bourdieu (2001) calls the *paradox of doxa*.⁶¹ In other words, I use the juxtaposition of multi-media images,

⁵⁹ In order of appearance in the chapter the media samples are as follows: *Maclean's* magazine front cover, January, 1, 2007; *Marie Claire* magazine "Married with Accessories" photo series, March, 2005; *The Vancouver Sun* articles on "Sherry Cowx", November, 18, 2000 & November 21, 2001; textual references to *The Swan*, 2003-2004 and *Extreme Makeover*, 2003-2006.

⁶⁰ My inspiration for this adaptation of Benjamin's method comes from Goodman (2003) who describes her use of montage as, "'brush'[ing] theory and historical data against each other for the spark to ignite my understanding in a non-linear process that circles back and forth between data, historiography and theory" (p. 159). Although obviously not a historiography, this thesis chapter does attempt to 'brush' theory, data and historical media and literary observations against each other in order to 'ignite' the same sort of critical 'spark'.

⁶¹ For "reflexivity" see Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992 and for intentional and analytical "alienation" (as distinct from her discussion of "world alienation") see Arendt, n.d. from APH in HAPLC (1923-1975), pp. 2-3. As I stated in an earlier description of this chapter (see Chapter one, Section III "Summary of Chapters", Chapter four), it is not my intention to suggest that the montage method can in any way remove analysis or knowledge from our deeply embodied (Bourdieu, 2000) understanding of the world. I suggest only that montage can help to disrupt such "habits of thinking" (Young-Bruehl, 2006, p. 10 on Arendt's

discourses and texts to call attention to particular markings of gender and social status/location as they manifest in new ways within particular samples of contemporary gendered media.

Thus the montage in this chapter serves two interrelated purposes. First, it provides an analysis of doxic symbolically embedded notions of gender, of how historical class divisions are frequently inscribed through gender (see Lawler, 2005a, 2005b; McRobbie, 2005b; Skeggs, 2001, 2005) and of how our awareness of such repetition is transformed into “acceptance” (see Bourdieu on the *paradox of doxa*, 2001, pp. 1-2). Secondly, this chapter contextualizes and historicizes the smaller sample of gendered youth media which was used during the interviews with the six young women involved in this research. Finally, and in relation to the key argument that I wish to make in this thesis, I note that the fundamental importance of historical memory underlies both purposes and is Arendtian in its foundation. That is to say, I tie Arendtian concerns with radical *thoughtlessness* (as such thoughtlessness can render otherwise intolerable notions *banal*), social conditions within which humanity becomes *superfluous*, and *world alienation* to what I suggest are the potentially anesthetising effects of the ‘piling-up’⁶² in

concerns with *how* we think about issues and events in the world). And so, with specific reference to this investigation, such disruptions in thinking might help us to identify those notions of femininity which we might otherwise accept as natural or normal.

⁶² In his discussion of the world’s collective desensitization to violence in the media reporting on the 1994 genocide in Rwanda Philip Gourevitch (1998) notes that:

“[t]he *piled-up* dead of political violence are a generic staple of our information diet these days, and according to the generic report, all massacres are created equal...except for the names and the landscape, it reads like the same story from anywhere in the world...These stories flash up from the void and, just as abruptly, return there. The anonymous dead and their anonymous killers become their own context. The horror becomes absurd (p.187)

His phrase, “piled-up” stuck with me as did his description of the “void” (void of thought, void of feeling, void of context and therefore void of connection to reality) to which such “piled-up” media images return. Although the phrase literally describes piles of human bodies as well as an allusion to the parallel ‘piling-up’ of related media reports I have used it here because it so effectively suggests the making of our public and collective desensitization to horrific or offensive/oppressive media images.

public memory of sexualized, fetishized, pathologized and deeply class-inscribed media representations of femininity.

My understanding and use of Arendt's conceptualization of historical memory and its relationship to the notions I have just mentioned requires some explanation. Therefore, I begin this chapter with a brief discussion of the notions outlined above (and their connection to Arendt's articulation of the importance of collective memory) in relation to their particular relevance to this thesis investigation of economically disadvantaged young women's reconciliations of media representations of ideal (deviant) femininity. I then move on to explain the connection between such Arendtian concerns with public memory and Benjamin's theoretical understanding of the inherently recollective nature of the montage method. Following the discussion on 'remembering' in public spaces, I move into the main body of the montage itself.

On memory, the "paradox of doxa" and combating "human superfluity"

[T]he path paved by thinking, this small track of non-time which the activity of thought beats within the time-space of mortal men [sic] and into which the trains of thought, of remembrance and anticipation, save whatever they touch from the ruin of historical and biographical time (Arendt, 1954/2006, p. 13).

My central point in this thesis is that doxic "social relations of domination" (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 8) embedded within ubiquitous contemporary media representations of ideal (deviant) femininity (together with dominant discourses of gendered empowerment which frequently underpin such representations) contribute to the social conditions which negate *human particularity* and in which the "distinct and equal" status of all humans fails to be recognized within plural, public spaces (see Arendt, 1963, 1958/2006 and Curtis on Arendt, 1999). These are the conditions, I suggest, that

reproduce exclusion along the interconnecting lines of gender, social location and economic status. In Arendtian terms, these are the conditions of a radical and collective *thoughtlessness* which is connected to a kind of cultural memory loss (see 1971, pp. 3-16).

I proceed from the argument that we might understand the now entirely ordinary media proliferation of representations of sexualized, fetishized and pathologized femininity as contributing to the rendering of femininity *superfluous* in public spaces (see Curtis on Arendt, 1999). Furthermore, I would argue that the thoughtless or *banal* “acceptance” (see Bourdieu on the *paradox of doxa*, 2001, p. 1) of such representations in mainstream culture belies the significance of the continued reproduction of such images within the world. Moreover, I would suggest that the banal ubiquity of such representations is of particular significance to young women whose daily experiences in circumstances of economic disadvantage are enmeshed with popular discourses which conflate consumer choice with gendered empowerment and freedom (see Gonick, 2006; Griffin, 2004; Harris, 2004a; McRobbie, 2004a). On one level, the prolific and often contradictory media representations of femininity can mark such representations (within the public imaginary) as disposable forms of innocuous entertainment (see McRobbie, 2004a). In addition, dominant discourses of gendered empowerment paradoxically suggest that prolific media representations of doxic femininity are alternately harmless or empowering to a media-savvy generation of young women who have grown up under the (problematic) aegis of girl power or are evidence of young women’s status as equal citizens (Griffin, 2004; McRobbie, 2004a). From an Arendtian perspective, the real

conditions of exclusion, of the rendering of some humans superfluous in public space, are thus forgotten.

Arendt would have us ‘pave a path’ through such spaces of occluded awareness by way of “thinking [which] delves into the depths of the past” in order to see how fragments of the past appear or “crystallize” in the present (1968, p. 38-51). As I discussed in chapter three, Arendt’s metaphor of *crystallization* explains how a dialectical engagement with the complex relationship between experience, theory, historical context and hermeneutic analysis might briefly illuminate a crystallization of the past in the present (ibid.).⁶³ Thus, from an Arendtian perspective the ‘fragmented’ recollection effected through montage might open interesting spaces for thinking about the potential consequences of the symbolic reproduction of doxic ‘relations’ of masculine domination (Bourdieu, 2001) in media representations of ideal (deviant) femininity in particular relation to the experience of young women living in difficult social and economic circumstances. Therefore, following Buck-Morss (1989), I would argue that Benjamin’s “reconstruct[ion] [of] an experiential world through the montage method offers the possibility for “a coherence of vision necessary for philosophical reflection” (Buck-Morss, p. 23).

⁶³ I have quoted more of the passage here for reference:

“...this thinking, fed by the present, works with the ‘thought fragments’ it can wrest from the past and gather about itself. Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths, and to carry them to the surface, this thinking delves into the depths of the past – but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages. What guides this thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of the time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things ‘suffer a sea-change’ and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements...” (Arendt, 1968, pp.50-51).

Buck-Morss (1989) notes that “the allegorical mode allows Benjamin to make visibly palpable the experience of a world in fragments, in which the passing of time means not progress but disintegration” (p. 18). Speaking of his own desire to ‘reconstruct an experiential world’ through montage, Benjamin wrote: “*the eternal is in every case far more the ruffle on a dress than an idea*” (in Buck-Morss, 1989, p. 23). For Benjamin, the ‘ruffle’ stands as a metaphor - a symbol in which traces of our fragmented histories and ideologies are embedded. Accordingly, his methods rest on the supposition that that an examination of such concrete and transient cultural items disrupts the sense of progression common to a traditional academic study of “ideas”. Thus montage seeks to ‘remember’ (or locate) the collectively forgotten past in the present and also, importantly, the future. In other words, in reclaiming such forgotten fragments of the past Benjamin’s method is able to tease out and pull forward those threads of historically repeating oppression (as they appear in material ‘documents of barbarism’ or media representations of ideal (deviant) femininity) which otherwise weave unremarkably through the larger patterns of the world’s perceived history.⁶⁴

Although the montage presented in this thesis has been (necessarily) adapted, I believe it follows Benjamin’s essential intent to recognize and reveal “fragmented” glimpses of the “eternal” and enduring in contemporary social moments of experience and representation (see Buck-Morss, 1989). To use Bourdieu’s sociological language, I use montage, with its purposeful cutting and juxtaposition of the past and the present, to

⁶⁴ Buck-Morss describes the practical application of Benjamin’s method as it appears in his essay, “Naples”:

[In the essay] an experiment is underway, how images, gathered by a person walking the streets of a city, can be interpreted against the grain of idealist literary style. The images are not subjective impressions, but objective expressions. The phenomena – buildings, human gestures, spatial arrangements- are “read” as a language in which a historically transient truth (and the truth of historical transiency) is expressed concretely, and the city’s social formation becomes legible within perceived experience. (p. 27)

“spark” (Goodman, 2003, p. 159) an analytical recognition of *doxic* femininities as they are symbolically reproduced, naturalized and rendered disposable in the world and as part of the world’s “inheritance” of *symbolic/masculine domination* (2001). Finally I suggest that with this chapter’s montage operating as a contextual backdrop, our own ‘memories’ of progress might be disrupted so that in the following chapter we might identify seemingly outmoded femininities appearing in contemporary media even as they are ‘remade’ (Walkerdine et al, 2001) in contemporary culture and “appropriated” (Willis, 2003) by the young women who participated in this research. I now move forward into the first thematic section of this chapter.

Sexualizing and fetishizing the feminine: the banality of (symbolic) violence

Time deepens definition and contrast. but the imprint of the image has been there from the start (Buck-Morss on montage, 1989, p.7).

In this section I explore two primary media depictions of femininity which reflect and reproduce what I suggest is a historically significant, contemporary social trend to sexualize and fetishize femininity and the female body (see McRobbie, 2004a). I draw upon Bourdieu's work in *Masculine Domination* (2001) and the related work of McRobbie (2004, 2005) and Skeggs (2001, 2005) in order to trace the "symbolic dimension of male domination" in the social field of media (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 3) and to observe contemporarily "rearranged" class divisions symbolically ingrained in media representations of particular ideal (deviant) femininities (also see Lawler, 2005a, 2005b; McRobbie, 2005a; Skeggs, 2001, 2005). In addition, I argue that the two media depictions which I have chosen to explore in this section seem to reflect an increased social tolerance toward (or obliviousness to the effect of) images of gendered violence.⁶⁵ I suggest that the fact that representations of sexualized/fetishized femininity (marked by violence) are "still possible" (Benjamin, 1968, p. 257) and are perpetuated through mass media can be understood as an example of what Bourdieu (2001) calls the *paradox of doxa* or,

the fact that the order of the world as we find it...is broadly respected...that the established order, with its regulations of domination, its rights and prerogatives, privileges and injustices, ultimately perpetuates itself so easily. (p.1)

Furthermore, I connect Bourdieu's notion of this 'paradox' of our social condition to Arendt's concerns with *thoughtlessness* and the potential effects of our unconscious

⁶⁵ I base this argument on the location of both the *Maclean's* magazine (2007) image (see fig.1) and the *Marie Claire* magazine (2005) series of images (see figs. 3-7) in popular, mainstream magazines.

acceptance of the now *banal* (see 1963, 1958/1998) saturation of our public spaces with ‘doxic’ and essentially *superfluous* images of the sexualized and fetishized female form (see 1963, 1958/1998 and Curtis, 1999). Finally, following McRobbie (2004a), I call attention to how elements of contemporary discourses of gendered empowerment underpin particular representations of ideal (deviant) femininity and operate to set the ideal or deviant terms through which young women are seen to respond to such depictions (see Gonick, 2006; Harris, 2004a; McRobbie, 2004a).

I begin the first section of this theme with a visual collage of text and image within which text taken from Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1970/1991), and Atwood’s *Penelopiad* (2005) is “brushed against” (see Benjamin, 1968) a 2007 *Macleans*’ magazine cover photo (fig.1). I then move into the main discussion for this section. Following the discussion, I introduce the second section of this theme with the juxtaposition of an advertisement from a mid-twentieth century *Chatelaine* magazine (fig. 2), selected images from a 2005 *Marie Claire* magazine fashion photo spread (figs. 3-8) and text taken from Atwood’s *Penelopiad* (2005) and from a translation of the epic poem *The Odyssey* (Lattimore, 1967).

Kiddie Mourn, A Lament by the Maids:
 We were told we were dirty. We were dirty. Dirt was our concern, dirt was our business, dirt was our specialty, dirt was our fault. We were the dirty girls. If our owners or the sons of our owners or a visiting nobleman or the sons of a visiting nobleman wanted to sleep with us, we could not refuse...if we were pretty children our lives were worse...we would never have a wedding feast of our own, no rich gifts would be exchanged for us; our bodies had little value...

The Penelopiad (Atwood, 2005, p.13-14)

**Another, fanciful Lolita
 perhaps more real than Lolita;
 overlapping, encasing her...
 and having no will,
 no consciousness –
 indeed,
 no life of her own.**

Lolita (Nabokov, 1970/1991, p. 62)

By challenging Humbert's mythical and literary interpretation(s) of Lolita's sexual awakening, Nabokov, like contemporary feminist critics, rewrites and reinterprets myths about female sexuality, "deviance," and "normalcy."...Nabokov shows how the arbitrary concepts of "deviance" and "normalcy" can be used as a means of manipulation-and exploitation. (Goldman, 2004, pp. 101-102)

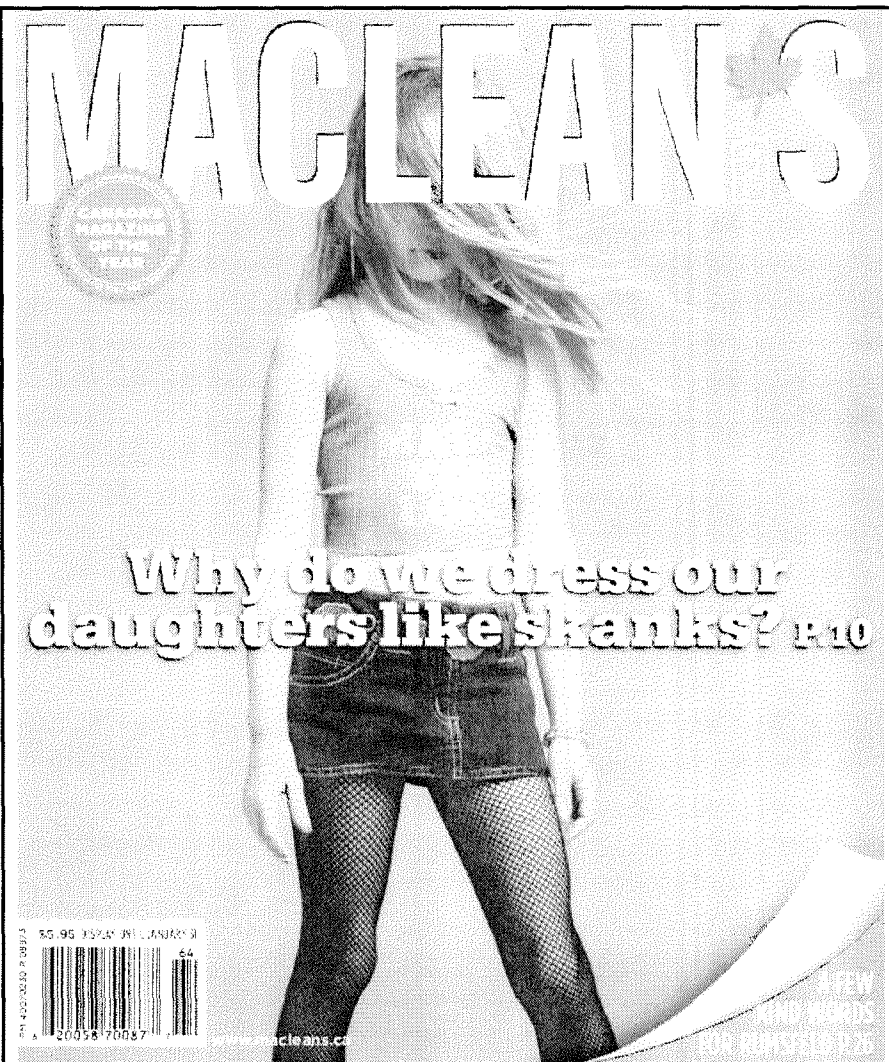


Figure 1. *Maclean's* magazine front cover, January 1, 2007 (used with permission)

Girls' bodies as fetishized and pathologized "bait"

The horror, the horror...this was the expression of some kind of belief; it had candour, it had conviction, it had a vibrating note of revolt in its whisper, it had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth-the strange commingling of desire and hate. (Conrad, 1999, p. 88)

Nayak and Kehily (2008) note that "a feature of consumer culture is the increased hyper-sexualization of girls; soft porn images, playboy logos and lewd slogans exist alongside 'girl power' messages and feminist themes" (p. 68). In this section I analyse a representation of hyper-sexualized femininity and I note that the image reproduces the commercial hyper-sexualization and fetishization of femininity which its headline (and the article which accompanies it) repudiates. First, I attempt to account for the tension which exists between the article's intention to critique the commodification and sexualization of very young femininity. I then examine what I propose are the fragmented, symbolic and doxic markings of gender and class embedded within the image and text. I suggest that through an examination of such symbolism we might begin to see how media representations of sexualized, fetishized and pathologized femininity come to stand as 'true' representations of particular femininities in the public imaginary and thus the 'regulations of domination' of 'the established order' are perpetuated (Bourdieu, 2001, p 1). Following Arendt, I would argue that representations like the one found on the front cover of a national news magazine (fig. 1) (and the text which accompanies the image) contribute to "the ongoing circulation of 'truth cults' or forms of 'mere appearance'" in relation to particular femininities (Dillabough, 2008, forthcoming on Arendt). Over time, the 'mere appearances' become static and banal – rendering particular femininities superfluous in public space (Arendt, 1963, 1958/1998).

On January 1st, 2007 Canada's dominant national newsmagazine, Maclean's, ran the cover headline, "Why do we dress our daughters like skanks?" across a disturbing photograph of a pre-pubescent female model (fig.1). Her long hair is tousled and partially obscures her face. She is posed with her legs spread, clothed in fishnet stockings and a denim mini-skirt. Her cropped, hot pink tank top says, 'made you look'. In the photo which accompanies the article inside, the tank top has changed: it reads, "jailbait". A selection from the text which accompanies the cover photograph declares:

The eroticization of girlhood-once the stuff of Russian literature, Atom Egoyan films, Japanese comic books and good old-fashioned American porn-has been seeping ever more into the larger culture. Now it is one of our dominant aesthetics. In a Lolita-tinged culture, whether the sell is "my body is underdeveloped, but I am precocious" or "my brain is underdeveloped, but I am stacked," the message is the same: exploit me. (George, 2007, p.36)

On one level it might be noted that although the author of the article directs a strong critique against media marketing strategists who capitalize on the commercial power of hyper-sexual young femininity, in dressing a very young girl in clothing and accessories which are symbolic of the pornography industry and placing her on the front cover next to a stark and sensational headline, Maclean's magazine itself has participated in such exploitation in the name of selling magazines.⁶⁶ Moreover, the symbolic references within the image and the text draw upon discourses of "moral panic" (see Gonick, 2006) to describe the dangers of 'dress[ing] our daughters like skanks'. As Pomerantz (2006) notes the moral panic over hyper-sexual feminine fashion and style

⁶⁶ According to *Canadian Magazines* review website, Maclean's January 1, 2007 magazine "had one of its best single copy sales". As Pomerantz (2006) points out, such images, accompanied by headlines which fuel "moral panic" over girls' dress frequently play out on the front pages of mainstream newspapers and magazines and have prompted some Canadian schools to adopt dress codes which seek to regulate young women's clothing (p. 1-5).

frequently plays out on the front pages of mainstream newspapers and magazines.

Bourdieu (1998) identifies the increasing tendency for political and intellectual news media to advance an agenda of “self-serving, attention seeking...headline grabbing” ahead of an “unspectacular devotion to the collective interest” as part of a dominant ethos of neo-liberal individualism (p. 4). Sex, as ‘they’ say, sells and the market is ruled by a “moral Darwinism which...establishes the struggle of all against all and *cynicism* as the norm of all practices” (p. 102). What I find most interesting, though, is that although the journalist is clear in her condemnation of the permissive extension of our Western culture of commodification to the sexualization and fetishization of very young girls, she adopts what I would call misogynistic tones when she describes the young girls who embody the ‘Lolita-tinged culture’ of female fashion.

In the sample from the article cited above, young girls who consume and embody the symbolism of the pornography industry are ‘precocious’ ‘skanks’, their bodies are ‘stacked’ and present dangerous ‘bait’ for an unwary consumer of such fetishized images (‘jailbait’) (pp. 37-39). Later in the article and as part of a strong condemnation of companies that fetishize and sexualize girlhood to market their products, the author suggests that marketers are “grooming [young girls] to be promiscuous consumers” (p. 40). I suggest that taken together, the language and the photographs in this article create the impression that young girls who embody the hyper-sexual symbolism popular in the contemporary moment (and perpetuated by mass media) are asking to be exploited (‘exploit me’, p. 37). Those young women who resist such fashion trends are implicitly framed as “empowered”, as having built up enough “self-esteem” or as having parents who have the moral fortitude to resist such fashion trends (pp. 39-40). Though,

paradoxically, the success of “twenty years” of gendered “empowerment programs” and young women’s “empowered” sexuality is also implicitly implicated in the “surfacing” of the “Lolita moment” in contemporary consumer culture (p. 40). By comparison, the author’s initial reference to the pornography industry seems rather benign. ‘Good old-fashioned American porn’ is positioned beside references to arty films and a well-known (if controversial) work of literature. A work of literature, incidentally, whose initial critics were also divided between understanding Lolita as either a desperate victim or “an abnormal sexual deviant deserving or inviting exploitation” (Goldman, 2004, p. 103).

Following Skeggs (2004), Nayak and Kehily (2008) note that “categorizations of class, gender and race” are best understood as cultural “processes [which] work at the level of the body to produce cultural characteristics that fix and constrain some social groups, while enabling others to become resourceful and mobile” (p. 131). Moreover, the authors note that symbolic signifiers of “feminine excess” or “excessive sexuality” are connected to the bodies of working-class women (ibid.). But as Lawler (2005b) notes, within media representations of “pathologized” femininities class divisions are not always invoked as “explicit[]...signifiers of class...but [can be] a kind of second-order signifier that invokes an innate atavism, ignorance and lack” (p. 124). She explains:

The drawing of class divisions is displaced and individualized. It is displaced onto individuals (or families) who are approved or disapproved, normalized or pathologized. [...] Gender is central here, as one axis around which class divisions are drawn and maintained (and, of course, vice versa). (ibid.)

And so, in the Maclean’s article we come to understand a particular category of young woman, one with “strong” (good) parents or for whom “empowerment programs” ‘worked’ (but not *too* well), and one who is implicitly and symbolically marked as ideal or legitimate via a middle-class judgment of normal (see McRobbie, 2005a; Skeggs,

2005). Though class is never mentioned within the Maclean's article, I suggest that in the symbols inscribed on the body of the model and in the language and tone used to describe young women who adopt such fashions we can observe a thoughtless (Arendt, 1958/1998) or doxic (Bourdieu, 2001) invocation of "an overly abundant and unruly sexuality that places them dangerously close to the reviled figure of the prostitute" (Nayak & Kehily, 2008, p. 132). And, following Lawler (2005a), I would argue that readers are meant to feel "disgusted" by the notion that the "other" (the 'skank') has entered dominant culture to become "the little deadly demon among the wholesome children" (Nabokov, 1970/1991, p. 17). Thus, we can see how the "social relations of domination" (Bourdieu, 2001) come to be perpetuated in the public imaginary even through media which positions itself as critical of the sexualization and fetishization of young femininity and which is not, ostensibly, addressing issues of "class".

As I have shown, media representations of ideal (deviant) femininity can operate as (implied) narratives of exclusion signified by 'normalized and pathologized' feminine identities which are embedded in class divisions (see Lawler, 2005a, cited above and Bourdieu, 1986). In other words, through such representations we come to know 'what' is ideal and 'what' is deviant (see Arendt, 1958/1998 on the difference between 'what' and 'who'). The problem from an Arendtian perspective is that, over time and through repetition, fixed (and socially constructed) characteristics of ideal and deviant femininity come to elide the "unfolding 'who'" (Dillabough, 2008, forthcoming). We become habituated or accustomed to the fetishizing of the female form and begin to conflate femininity with a series of static, sexualized and pathologized images. Moreover, such constructions of female identity come to circulate as "symbolic goods" (Bourdieu, 2001)

which, in this case, are used to sell a particular idea about young girls (moral panic, excessive sexuality, threats to middle-class values) and to provide a competitive edge in the business of selling magazines. At one point in the article the author asks, “what does it mean for little girls when the very things of their lives - kilts, puppies, angels, pink, princesses - become fetishized to the point of rendering them obscene” (George, 2007, p.36)? I would answer that femininity itself is rendered banal – or superfluous (Arendt, 1958/98); that we come to act as though “it may be possible to treat [femininity] as one treats other ‘material’” (p. 188) and that, ultimately, the commercialized and sexualized fetishization femininity reinforces the “elision of the person behind the sexuality” (Goldman, 2004, p. 102).

In the following passages I move forward to explore a series of images taken from a mainstream women’s magazine (*Marie Claire*, 2005) in which a similar ‘elision of the person’ and inscription of class divisions on female bodies occurs throughout the representation. In a nine page fashion photo series, material goods (clothing, accessories, cleaning products) and symbolic goods (the female body, a particular kind of femininity leading a particular lifestyle, children as accessories of lifestyle “choice”) combine to form a sexualized and fetishized image of femininity which is explicitly inscribed with a crude violence, emblematic of an ancient misogyny. I begin this segment of analysis with a collage in which I juxtapose: one of nine images from a fashion photo array titled, “Married with Accessories” (*Marie Claire* magazine, 2005); a dish towel advertisement titled “HUSBAND BEATS WIFE with this fast drying dish towel”⁶⁷ (*Chatelaine* magazine, 1949); and, passages taken from Atwood’s reframing of Homer’s *Odyssey* (*Penelopiad*, 2005) and Lattimore’s (1967) translation of the *Odyssey*.

⁶⁷ Font differences in the original.

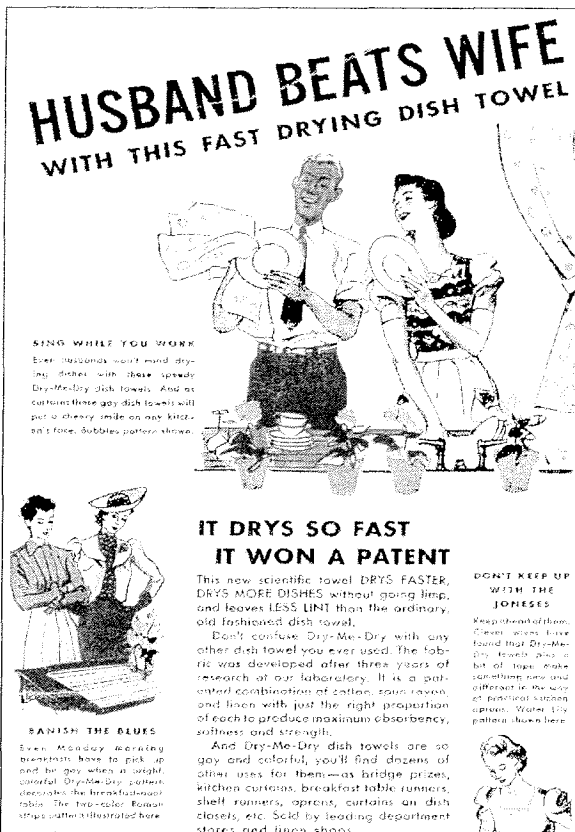


Figure 2. *Chatelaine* magazine, 1949 “Husband Beats Wife” Dry-Me-Dry dish towel advertisement



Figure 3. *Marie Claire* magazine, spring 2005, “Married With Accessories” fashion photo series (used with permission)

*we are the maids/the ones you killed/the ones you failed
we danced in air/our bare feet twitched/it was not fair
with every goddess, queen, and bitch/from there to here/you scratched your itch
we did much less/than what you did/you judged us bad
you had the spear/you had the word/at your command
we scrubbed the blood/of our dead/paramours from the floors, from chairs
from stairs, from doors/we knelt in water/while you stared
at our bare feet /it was not fair/you licked our fear
it gave you pleasure/you raised your hand/you watched us fall
we danced on air/the ones you failed/the ones you killed.
The Penelopiad (Atwood, 2005, pp. 5-6)⁶⁸*

⁶⁸ **Odysseus:** “...lead all the maidservants out of the well-built palace...and hew them with the thin edge of the sword...” So he spoke, and the women all in a huddle came out with terrible cries of sorrow, and the big tears falling. First they carried away the bodies of all the dead men...Odysseus himself directed them and hurried them on. They carried the bodies out. They had to. Then, after they had done this, the women washed the beautiful chairs and tables clean...

Now the thoughtful Telemachos began speaking among them” “I would not take away the lives of these creatures by any clean death, for they...have slept with the suitors” So he spoke, and taking the cable of a dark-prowed ship...the sleep given them was hateful; so their heads were all in a line, and each had her neck caught fast in a noose, so that their death would be most pitiful. They struggled with their feet for a little, not for very long.” (Lattimore, 1967, p. 332)

Women's bodies rendered "superfluous"

Figure three (see collage above) is part of a series of photographs⁶⁹ which showcase the latest accessories for the spring 2005 fashion season (*Marie Claire*, 2005). In each of the photographs a woman's body is dressed in expensive designer clothing, ornamented with even pricier accessories and posed carrying out a domestic task (laundry, dishes, gardening, sweeping etc.). Three enormous gold and turquoise rings adorn the impossibly manicured hands of a woman who, we are meant to believe, is scrubbing the bathroom floor on her hands and knees whilst wearing a short, tight skirt and an equally tight low cut tank top ("top, \$575. skirt, \$650...St.John"). She has been posed so that her right breast is exposed and her neck and back arch unnaturally. Her head has been cut out of the frame of the photograph. In the following image we see another example of the stiltedness which marks all of these images:



Figure 4. *Marie Claire* magazine, March 2005, "Married with Accessories" (used with permission)

⁶⁹ Most of the photographs from this series appear throughout this section

In one of two photographs which are not marked by a commercialized sexualization (see Levy, 2005) of the female form, the model's stiffly posed body is wedged between two laundry appliances (fig. 4). Her positioning bears little resemblance to the experience of 'doing' laundry. As in all of the images, she is a headless mannequin for the clothing (and cleaning products) on display. The images seem to treat people as "symbolic goods" (Bourdieu, 2001) to be accessorized (the female model) or to accessorize a lifestyle (the children in the images). In the next image (fig. 5) three little boys stare past their headless mother – their own heads displayed on a window ledge like pearls on a string.



Figure 5. Marie Claire magazine, March 2005, "Married with Accessories" (used with permission)

In most of the images, spring 2005 fashion trends adorn a headless female body which is posed in a parody of sexual pleasure (neck and back arched, legs spread unnaturally) or from the perspective of an 'absent' voyeur (camera angles shot 'up' the skirts the model wears). The model's body becomes the visual embodiment of

Benjamin's "gaily decked-out corpse" (in Buck-Morss, 1989, p. 101) and the "life force of sexuality" is transferred onto a stylized image of a headless 'wife' symbolically reproducing a commodified and "inorganic" illusion of sexuality.

The overt sexuality embedded within these images seems to be indicative of what Nayak and Kehily (2008) have observed is a contemporary "re-valuation and re-coding of the relationship between morality and the feminine" (p. 69). Levy (2005) calls attention to what she calls our contemporary fascination with "raunch culture" which is marked by the rise of mainstream fashions and trendy activities which co-opt the symbols of the pornography industry (e.g., playboy bunny pendants, stiletto shoes, pole dancing classes) and by a message that celebrates a woman's "right to look at *Playboy*...to get Brazilian bikini waxes [and to] no longer worry about objectification or misogyny" (p. 4). Hyper-sexual commercialized femininity thus labels feminism irrelevant by normalizing the objectification and sexualized fetishization of femininity (see McRobbie, 2004a, 2005a). We might observe, then, that this fashion photo array taps into the 'raunch culture' sensibilities of the marketplace through which "the repudiation of feminism is invoked only to be summarily dismissed" (McRobbie, 2005a, p. 259).⁷⁰ McRobbie (2005a) explains:

The shadow of disapproval is introduced...only to be instantly dismissed as belonging to the past, to a time when feminists used to object to [exploitive] imagery...objection is pre-empted with irony...feminism is invoked so that it might be undone; for male viewers tradition is restored...while for girls what is proposed is a movement beyond feminism, to a more comfortable zone where women are now free to choose for themselves. (p. 259)

⁷⁰ In several discussions which address the objectification of women in media advertisements and such advertisements' implicit dismissal of feminism, McRobbie explains that just as rising popular knowledge of leftist social and political critiques of oppression has been mistaken for their irrelevance, so has the mass production and consumption of hyper-sexualized femininity been conflated with the 'empowerment' of women (1999, 2004, 2005).

Thus any critique of the violent subjugation of femininity and feminine sexuality on display in the “Married with Accessories” photo array can be ‘pre-empted with irony’. Implicit within these commercial images of a sexualized female body on her (its) knees, scrubbing floors is the assumption that the modern, empowered woman is free – no longer a slave, real or metaphorical. But if, as Nayak and Kehily (2008) suggest, dominant culture is experiencing a ‘re-coding’ of sexual norms and values in mediated, popular spaces, such ‘re-coding’ also (as the authors point out) works to reproduce class divisions along gendered lines (see Lawler, 2005a, 2005b; McRobbie, 2005a; Skeggs, 2001, 2005).

Like the image of “deviant” femininity discussed in the first section of this theme (see fig.1), the body of the *Marie Claire* magazine (2005) model is marked by classed and gendered symbolism which invokes the “reviled figure of the prostitute” (Nayak & Kehily, 2008, p. 132) through “excessive sexuality” (Skeggs, 2004, 2005). Skeggs (2004) explains how media marks the bodies of women in particular ways which invoke or “give[] symbolic shape to the meanings of class” (Nayak & Kehily, 2008, p. 132):

Understanding representations is central to any analysis of class. Representation works with a logic of supplementarity, condensing fears and anxieties into one classed symbol...The proliferation and reproductions of classed representations over such a long period of time demonstrates the understated ubiquity of class, showing how it is continually references, even when not directly spoken. (2004, p. 117 in Nayak & Kehily, 2008, p. 132)

In most of the images, the model is posed in a caricaturised representation of prostitution (i.e., with her legs spread, back arched unnaturally, breasts partially covered and thrust out by the arching back). In all of the images her body is ‘accessorized’ with symbols of gendered domestic labour (brooms, mops, rubber gloves, cleaning appliances, small gardening tools and young children). In the following image, the model is positioned, as

in the collaged image (fig. 3), on her knees (this time to sweep). One hand grasps her ankle so that her back curves awkwardly and one partially exposed breast is presented for the viewer's consumption alongside the "\$515 Sonia Rykiel pumps"(2005, p.177).



Figure 6. *Marie Claire* magazine March, 2005, "Married With Accessories"
(used with permission)

"Narciso Rodriguez (\$580)" stiletto heels adorn the feet of the woman in figure seven. She rests her foot on an open dishwasher, arches her back and bends over to the kitchen counter affording the viewer a partial view up her full, "\$3500" skirt.



Figure 7. *Marie Claire* magazine March, 2005, "Married with Accessories" (used with permission)

The same upward angle is used in figure eight so that the image offers another partial view up the back of the model's skirt as she poses in high-fashion, high-heeled shoes, a short skirt, hedge shears and a purse full of gardening tools.



Figure 8. *Marie Claire* magazine March, 2005, "Married with Accessories" (used with permission)

So, while social class is not the stated subject in this photo spread, the symbolic references inscribed on the body of the model "...rely[] on the process of interpretation to do the work of association" (Skeggs, 2005, p. 965).

But if these symbolic references to gendered forms of class division are open to 'interpretation' then the text on the first page of this fashion photo array leaves little room for doubt:

Good help may be hard to find, but spring's crop of acid bright accessories aren't. Glossy handbags...candy-coloured sandals and day-glow jewellery have landed in suburbia and beyond. There goes the neighbourhood. (*Marie Claire*, 2005, p. 174)

The first sentence conjures up anachronistic aristocratic complaints about the 'inept' domestic servant. We are given to understand that the well-dressed woman in this photo array is cooking, cleaning, gardening and mothering because she has not found domestic labour which meets her 'superior' standards. The symbolism of a select society closed to 'undesirable' or "disgusting" Others (see Lawler, 2005a) is reinforced in the second line which locates the photo shoot within 'suburbia' and invokes the fear of 'less desirable' elements of society 'invading' the enclaves of middle-class:

[fashions portrayed as slightly vulgar and definitely garish] have landed in suburbia and beyond. There goes the neighbourhood. (*Marie Claire*, 2005, p. 174)

Thus, these transparent references to traditionally marginalized populations are "superimposed" (Buck-Morss, 1989) onto the accessories on display - the symbolism of what were once freely called the "dangerous classes" (Frégier, 1840) both co-opted for their forbidden allure and, by implication, presented as deviant to the normative ideals of the privileged classes. We understand that while the gaudy colours and fabrics described

may be ‘beneath’ the women in this suburban neighbourhood they are also the height of spring 2005 fashion and are therefore, briefly, legitimated. The model might be wearing expensive, ‘couture’ clothing but her body is draped in a highly classed (and contemporarily commercial) “excessive sexuality” (Skeggs, 2004, 2005), worn for its fashionable titillation and as easily discarded once spring 2005 fashion madness has passed. And so deeply classed forms of exclusion are ‘given symbolic shape’ in this idealized representation of “middle-class women...who retain the ability to appropriate and transform working-class style at the expense of working-class women who remain fixed by their class position and the negative associations of earlier meanings” (Nayak & Kehily, 2008, p. 69). Curtis (1999), drawing on Arendt, describes such processes of exclusion, memorably, as the “active conditions that nourish oblivion on the part of those who benefit and the radical enclaving of those who do not” (p. 3).

Following on this notion of ‘oblivion’, I would argue that *Marie Claire* magazine’s (2005) representation of the fashion (and fashionable ‘appropriations’) for ‘spring 2005’ is an example of what Bourdieu (1998) calls the “labour of symbolic inculcation” through which “real belief[s]” are forged out of dominant ideologies and mythologies (p. 29). In the “Married with Accessories” fashion series, the “safe” enclave of middle-class ‘suburbia’ (see Curtis, 1999 on the “radical enclaving” of society) and of gendered and idealized domesticity intersects with both “the reiteration [of] one particular – and particularly commercial-shorthand for sexiness” and explicit symbolic markings of brutality. Violence is repackaged and sold as sexy and so the images evoke both horror and fascination - a “fascination [with] the abomination” (Conrad, 1999) – whilst the appeal to irony obscures our ‘recollection’ of gendered violence as

contemporarily relevant. Furthermore, class divisions are explicitly and implicitly invoked, 'remade' (Walkerdine et al. 2001) and inscribed on the body of the female model through the symbolism of 'dangerous' or 'excessive' sexuality (Skeggs. 2004, 2005).

Finally, I note that Benjamin's fascination with the "metaphysics of transiency" inherent to fashion was an acknowledgement of the "true face" of fashion as both a "...reified, fetishized commodity and as a class ideology" (Buck-Morss on Benjamin, 1989, p. 23). Fashionable representations of the 'powerful' and 'unfettered' woman thus make a paradoxical claim to progressiveness whilst maintaining a social status quo. Ultimately, this dichotomy renders the representation of fashionable signifiers (the newest 'look', the trendy 'attitude' or 'lifestyle') as "objective expressions" of our stratified social order (Benjamin in Buck-Morss, 1989). In Bourdieu's language, we can 'see' the 'social relations of domination' inscribed on the accessories and clothing, and on the body of the model in the *Marie Claire* magazine (2005) fashion spread. Over time, the proliferation of such representations reinforces the stratification in the social world. I would argue that through these images the subjugation and sexualization of 'real' women comes to be both fetishized and forgotten. Thus, media proliferation of commodified images of femininity begin to render such deeply gendered 'relations of domination' (Bourdieu, 2001) *banal* (Arendt, 1958/98). In the second thematic section of this chapter I build on this argument by exploring two examples of mainstream news and entertainment media in which dichotomous constructions of gendered dependency reveal our prevailing notions about 'what' (in the Arendtian sense, 1958/98) kinds of femininity

are ideal and thus included in legitimate society or deviant and therefore rendered illegitimate and excluded.

Dichotomous dependency: legitimate and illegitimate constructions of gendered ‘need’ through private trauma

The second theme of this montage explores media representations of female dependency. I suggest that such depictions are framed as either ideal or deviant female subjectivities via the popular rhetoric of individualism, choice and self-improvement and symbolic references to archetypal divisions between public/private, masculine/feminine and good/bad ways of *being* female within such divisions. As in the first section of this montage, I draw upon the related theoretical work of Bourdieu (2001), McRobbie (2004, 2005) and Skeggs (2001, 2005) to observe how, within the media samples to follow, seemingly outmoded class divisions are reinscribed on female bodies and reproduced through the *traumatic narration* (Arendt, 1963) of young women’s experiences. Furthermore, I apply Arendt’s concerns regarding the potentially anesthetising (or collective memory obliterating) effects of the repetition of decontextualized and privatized accounts of trauma in public spaces (1963) to these sociological observations. On one level the proliferation of media representations which connect particular socially constructed markers of class to traumatic narrations of “deviant” feminine dependency renders such connections “natural” in the public imaginary through the operation of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 2001; Bullen & Kenway, 2004). Thus the essential Who of young women living in disadvantaged circumstances comes to be publicly conflated with media constructed What characteristics (see Arendt, 1958/98) and the structures of the “social relations of domination” are rendered invisible (Bourdieu, 2001). On another level, I put

forward the argument that because such trauma accounts are not (generally) positioned within a corresponding political and social context⁷¹ they become disposable or *superfluous* in public space (see Curtis on Arendt, 1999). Finally, I call attention to recent work in feminist and youth cultural theory which, among other observations, notes that,

[in] contemporary [media] constructions of new femininities [...] women are presented with the need for transformation and self-improvement in order to be successful in personal relationships...autonomous selfhood is produced as a project of self-transformation and personal development...[and] the psychopathology of contemporary femininities is culturally produced...by presenting women's experiences as dilemmas that can be resolved through personal development. (Blackman, 2004 in Nayak & Kehily, 2008, p. 144-145)

I suggest that through an examination of the two examples of contemporary media which will be analysed in this section (Vancouver Sun, 2000/2001 and *The Swan/Extreme Makeover*, 2004/2005) we might observe how different media sources with seemingly divergent aims participate in the reproduction of naturalized notions of ideal and deviant feminine dependency and are informed by gendered discourses of empowered, 'autonomous selfhood'. My intention in both discussions is to reveal the contemporary relevance of seemingly outdated notions of femininity as a private, dependent subjectivity and to connect such observations to the theoretical and ethical concerns outlined above.

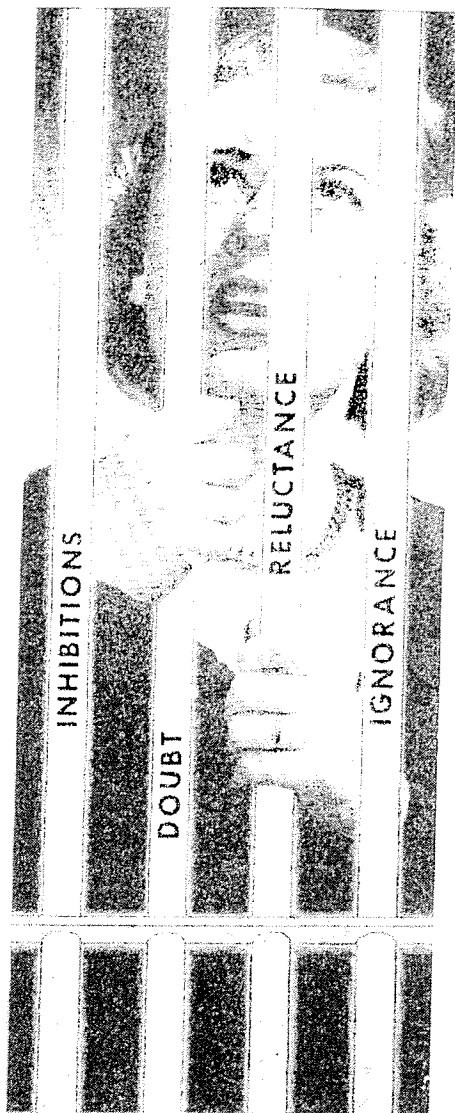
I preface this thematic section with only one collage⁷² of visual and textual images which are (I believe) embedded with doxic symbolism relating to a theme of female dependency. I 'brush' a contemporary Vancouver Sun newspaper photograph, accompanying headline (fig. 9) and text taken from official online advertising for ABC and FOX television network's respective reality makeover programs, *Extreme Makeover*

⁷¹ See Bullock, Wyche & Williams (2001)

⁷² Although this second theme has one collage, I refer to other sample texts and images throughout the analysis as in the first thematic section.

and *The Swan* ‘against’ an advertisement in a 1938 edition of *Ladies Home Journal* (fig. 10). I then move into the first discussion of this thematic section.

BEFORE LOVE BECOMES MERELY ... A MEMORY



Check these facts with your doctor



Many doctors recommend "Lysol" brand disinfectant for feminine hygiene. Non-caustic, "Lysol" is non-injurious to delicate membranes. Its clean, delicate odour quickly disappears. Highly concentrated "Lysol" is economical in solution. Follow easy directions for correct douching solution.

WHY 4 OUT

It's safe. For had the ace fession ... at wives, too. It modern hosp its continued the confiden doctors. No o disinfectant or is so wide

Figure 9. *Ladies Home Journal* magazine, 1938, 'Lysol feminine hygiene' advertisement

A fix for Sherry

Can Vancouver get its act together to help this drug addict?

As Mayor Philip Owen gets ready to unveil a controversial action plan, our special report looks at the Downtown Eastside, his city's disgrace.

"Lysol" to kill a cleanse presene "Lysol" like son Appeli cause odours i

Sherry Cowx is a beautiful young woman, and she looks her best — relaxed and radiant, as you can see from this picture — in the minutes after she has injected herself with heroin. She does this, or makes her last stand, several times a day. You may find you like Cowx. Certainly you will grow to know her. She is one of 10 Downtown Eastside residents and managers who, over the past several weeks, have allowed Vancouver Sun reporters complete access to their lives. Over the past decade the Downtown Eastside has fostered and festered; it spreads and perhaps suppresses life.



Figure 10. *The Vancouver Sun*, Chris Nuttall-Smith, November 18, 2000 (used with permission)

Why do you deserve the Extreme Makeover? How will it change your life? Besides altering your appearance, what is your biggest dream? Extreme Makeover, 2005

Sherry Cowx is a beautiful young woman, and she looks her best - relaxed and radiant, as you can see from this picture - in the minutes after she has injected herself with heroin. (Nuttall-Smith, 2000, A1)

After years of floating aimlessly and being thrown life's crumbs, a gaggle of self-proclaimed "ugly ducklings" will swim upstream to be transformed into a bevy of graceful beauties. THE SWAN, the new series that turns a fantasy into reality by mirroring the classic fairy tale, premieres Wednesday, April 7. *The Swan*, 2004

“Deviant” need and gendered “hope”: “Fixing” Sherry Cowx⁷³

About a year ago, Sherry Cowx could hardly get up without a flap of heroin. She knew then, as she must know now, that she had no education, few job skills, no hobbies, few usable social skills. She knew that if she hoped to clean up and to stay clean, she would have to change all that. She knew she would fail sometimes, and sometimes she has. But Sherry Cowx is cleaning up her act (Nuttall-Smith, 2001, B1, “Sherry has Hope”).

In this section I begin with an analysis of the manifestation of dominant notions of female deviancy and dependency which I identify as embedded within the imagery and text of the two *Vancouver Sun* (Nuttall-Smith, 2000, 2001) media reports which claim to present the life story of Sherry Cowx. I suggest that within these two media representations of gendered “deviance” and “dependency” we might observe the “*dehistoricization and eternalization*”⁷⁴ of classed and gendered “relations of domination” (Bourdieu, 2001) and the conflation of geographic space and personhood (see Dillabough, 2004; Massey, 1994; Wright, 1997). Moreover, I call attention to how the article frames Sherry Cowx’s life story through archetypal divisions of good and evil (or good/bad) which “give symbolic shape to the meanings” of gender and “class” (Nayak & Kehily, 2008, p. 132). Finally, I discuss the *Vancouver Sun* articles using Arendtian political concerns about the potential consequences of a repetition of decontextualized traumatic narratives (infused with individualizing choice rhetoric) in public spaces (see 1963, 1971).

“Sherry Cowx is a beautiful young woman, and she looks her best—relaxed and radiant, as you can see from this picture—in the minutes after she has injected herself with heroin” (Nuttall-Smith, 2000, A1). The photograph which accompanied this text

⁷³ This image and some of the analysis was part of a joint presentation put together and delivered with Dr. Jo-Anne Dillabough at the Canadian Association of Geographers conference (2005) in London, Ontario, Canada.

⁷⁴ Italics in original.

(fig. 9) was reproduced again in the 2001 follow-up article. On one level we might observe that, taken together, the image and the text seem to paradoxically tie idealized beauty to dependency. In this case, a drug dependency which, from a dominant social perspective, is a mark of deviancy (see Graham, 2007). But, we are told, her neediness makes her beautiful which lends mainstream legitimacy to the otherwise deviant, non-citizen status bestowed upon her by virtue of her “unclean”, ‘drug-dependent’ homelessness. As the articles progress, symbolic references to dependency and deviancy are repeated and “rearranged” (McRobbie, 2005a) as doxic (Bourdieu, 1998, 2001) gendered, classed and personalized commentaries on Cowx’s homeless circumstances.

In large, bold font the first lines of the introductory “A Fix for Sherry” (2000) article label Cowx a “drug addict”. We are told she has a “beggar’s voice”, “rotted teeth”, “festerings sores” and an abandoned son. She “uses” and “shoplifts”, engages in “petty crime” and sleeps in “flophouses”. She once “fenced her mother’s [belongings and] trust” and wears “bubblegum press-on nails” (2000, 2001). On the street she is surrounded, not by other humans, but with “an old junkie”, “a strung-out man with greaseball hair and scars on his face” and a “crowd of the desperate, the coked-up, the strung-out” (2001). Such descriptions lift the Who (Arendt, 1958/98) of Sherry Cowx (and those in her community) out of any contextual social/historical framework and simultaneously conflate her body with the characteristics of urban streets described as “fetid with the animal stench of urine” (2001). Thus, the social structures of poverty and homelessness are obscured by a litany of “crude” words ingrained with a history of stereotypic notions of gender, class and homelessness (Dillabough, 2008, forthcoming). Moreover, through such imagery, Sherry Cowx’s body becomes a site of contagion,

disease and degraded morality. As such, the classed and gendered “disgust-producing register” to which Skeggs (2005) refers is invoked and “attached” to the representation of Cowx (p. 966; also see Lawler, 2005a, 2005b). And so, Cowx, and those with whom she shares the visible spaces of the urban streets are, on one level, conflated with those spaces and on another level we might observe the operation of the language of class division as it is inscribed through the ‘disgust-producing’ body of a young homeless woman.⁷⁵

With unsubtle allusion to archetypal divisions of good and evil (or good/bad) Nuttall-Smith writes that “[t]he sun shone on the litter-strewn street” on the day the reporter learned of Sherry Cowx’s “rebirth” into a “clean” life (2001). Her “rebirth” is marked by a blending of the imagery and language of the private realm with symbolic references to a market ‘meritocracy’; Cowx’s personally earned worth through good (though deeply gendered) choices. In the second article, Sherry Cowx is positioned as a young woman learning to make such good choices. At one point the reporter observes that she has “put all of her energy...all of her hope, into her man” (2001). Motivated by “her own disgust” and by her “hope” to be reunited with her son and to find “a man who could love her” we are told that Sherry Cowx acquires “pride”, sheds her street identity, and decides “go[] home”. In other words, the ideological assumption is that Cowx deserves to be ‘reborn’ (but to a private, not a public life) by virtue of her passivity,

⁷⁵ I would like to note that such attachments of ‘disgust’ (based in class divisions) to female bodies are not limited to media representations of female homelessness. Although space constraints prevent a full comparison in this context, I will briefly refer to data I collected on media representations of pop music icon, Britney Spears. Regularly described as “trashy” (“white trash” and “trailer trash” are the nastiest epithets used), Spears is frequently vilified along gender and class lines. Moreover, and in comparison to the ‘disgust-producing’ language used to describe Sherry Cowx, there seems to be an obsessive photographic and textual media documentation of Spears’ personal hygiene. As just one example, following a list of Spears’ activities during the week of a music awards show, US magazine observes, “[Britney] dipped her unwashed hand in a plate of bathroom mints”(2007). I suggest that as is the case with the media representation of Sherry Cowx, such references operate as a metaphor for Spears’ contamination of public space; her body is presented as a site of ‘disease’ and, as such, invokes collective ‘disgust’ (Skeggs, 2005).

beauty, contrite maternal feelings and, importantly, through the strength of her “hope for a man who could love [and thus redeem] her”. Thus, the inscribed order of masculine domination (Bourdieu, 2001) is revealed in this construction of *freedom from* one private need (a socially unacceptable drug dependency) to *freedom through* another manifestation of gendered dependency (the love and protection of a man). Moreover, readers are left to believe that Sherry Cowx is only able to leave the streets and attain a measure of “legitimacy” and “public” status because of her personal desire to “clean up her act” (see Dillabough & VanDerMeulen, 2006).⁷⁶

The presentation of the conditions of ‘homelessness’ as a series of individual good and bad choices (removed from any social/historical context) renders the subject of such representations either deserving or undeserving of public interest, approval, pity and consideration. Through language which presents a sensational lament to, and celebration of, ideal femininity (beauty, maternity, love) readers of the Sherry Cowx story are encouraged to be fascinated by the personalized tragedy (and possible triumph) of an individual over her circumstances. Moreover, because the social/historical conditions of homelessness are removed from the narrative, readers come “face-to-face with the Other” rather than “face-to-face with reality in the presence of others” (Nelson on McCarthy and Arendt, 2006, p. 88). Thus, an individualized, traumatic (Arendt, 1963) (and deeply gendered) account of homelessness, attended by a corresponding narrative of ‘triumph through hope’, is presented for public consumption. In the final passages of this section I

⁷⁶ Dillabough and VanDerMeulen (2006) note that “...reproductive codes are entrenched in an *ontology of the subject* or, to put this more literally, in images of helpless impoverished mothers who must essentially ‘clean up’ in order to enter the public realm as legitimate citizens of the state” (p. 15).

ask what might be the effects of such media accounts⁷⁷, particularly as they accumulate in the public imaginary over time.

Arendt once warned that, "...with populations and homelessness everywhere on the increase, masses of people are continuously rendered superfluous if we continue to think of our world in utilitarian terms" (1966, p. 459 in Kristeva, 2001, p. 5). Rather than calling attention to the "insult of oblivion" (see Curtis on Arendt, 1999, p. 86) which marks such a rendering, the repetition of decontextualized personal trauma in public spaces has the potential to numb or mute our embodied sense that young women like Sherry Cowx are "people like us" (Bourdieu, 1998).⁷⁸ 'People', in other words, who share a common world but neither an in-common positioning within, nor perspective on, that world (Arendt, 1958/1998). Therefore, media which offers personal stories of tragedy and trauma whilst failing to stimulate a critical engagement with the social and political structures of the state feeds the conditions for a social or collective ethic of *thoughtlessness* (Arendt, 1958/1998). In other words, the "human particularity" (Curtis, 1999) of Sherry Cowx, a young woman who is homeless, is lost amid traumatic images of 'fetid', 'dangerous' streets and 'desperate', 'strung-out', 'coked-up' 'junkies' with 'rotted teeth' and 'festerings sores' (Nuttall-Smith, 2000, 2001). In addition to the stark ugliness of the words themselves, the language used to describe Sherry Cowx and her environment is ingrained with the 'relations of domination' which mark the dominant hierarchical structures of our world. Bourdieu (1998) argues that mass media has become

⁷⁷ Though I have drawn here from only two media samples, research suggests that news media is marked by a consistent lack of focus on the social and economic structures of impoverished circumstances (see Bullock, Wyche and Williams, 2001 on the "context and political function" of "stereotypic media images of the poor" in the United States).

⁷⁸ Bourdieu attributes this "extra-ordinary", "exceptional" and reflexive comment to a Paris metro driver who, following a bombing connected to the Parisian-Algerian community, "...warned against the temptation to take revenge on the Algerian community. They are, he said simply, people like us" (p. 22).

complicit in reproducing these structures through sensational reporting which essentializes and dichotomizes “problems of society” (p. 22) and fails to contextualize public issues and debates. Furthermore, he suggests that “ordinary citizens” “passively” participate in the exclusion of Othered citizens from material and symbolic spaces of legitimacy, particularly through the consumption of mass media (pp. 6-9, 29). Bourdieu explains,

historical realities are always enigmatic and, while appearing to be self-evident, are difficult to decipher...it is infinitely easier to take up a position for or against an idea, a value, a person, an institution or a situation, than to analyse what it truly is, in all its complexity. People are all the quicker to *take sides* on what journalists call a ‘problem of society’...the more incapable they are of analyzing and understanding its meaning...” (pp. 22-23).

And so, as “‘absent-minded’ examiners” in a media saturated world we often receive media in a “state of distraction” (Schwartz, 2001, p. 1735). Thus, without reference to what Bullock et al (2001) call the “social and economic structures...the antecedents and consequences of poverty” (p. 242) we might slide thoughtlessly into recognizing Sherry Cowx (and similarly positioned young women) only as the sum of her pathologized and sensationalized traumas and hopes. For example, we learn to recognize dependency as a feminine quality and particular forms of constructed dependency as either deviant (poverty) or ideal (that which leads to beauty or reliance on a heterosexual relationship) personal traits. We might ‘absently’ accept the class-based “taste” bias (see Lawler, 2005a, 2005b; Skeggs, 2001 on Bourdieu, 1986) inherent within the derogatory descriptions of Sherry Cowx’s appearance (‘bubble-gum press-on nails’) (Nuttall-Smith, 2001). And finally we understand that a young woman who lives in economically disadvantaged circumstances will succeed or fail on her own merit as a worthy or an

unworthy citizen amidst a mass of other individualized citizens who are “free to choose” a good or bad lifestyle. When these ideas about young women and about gendered circumstances of disadvantage become entrenched and naturalized within the public imaginary, exclusion along class, gender and economic lines is perpetuated (see Bullen & Kenway, 2004). We create the conditions, in Arendtian terms, in which some people are rendered superfluous to society, or at least to the public and political realms of society (see Curtis, 1999).

From an Arendtian perspective, then, media which seeks to move its audience to “compassion” must also do the work of “publicly fram[ing]” stories like that of Sherry Cowx “in terms...of ‘the relationship of men [sic] to their world’” (Arendt, 1955, p. 29 in Curtis, 1999, p. 91). Arendt cautions that “compassion”, although very important in a personal sense, “is politically pernicious if it becomes the foundation of politics - and takes the form of pity” (ibid.). In other words, the pity invoked for Sherry Cowx’s traumas (or joy for her triumphs) is framed in isolation, outside of the appearing/observing reality of plural public space (Arendt, 1958/1998). Accordingly, “suffering from the insult of oblivion is eclipsed” and pity becomes, instead, “an emotion-laden insensitivity to reality” (in Curtis, 1999, pp. 86-87). In other words, the ‘piling up’ (see Gourevitch) of media representations which present decontextualized traumatic narratives of gendered social and economic disadvantage can have an anaesthetic effect on the public imaginary. Thus media stories of personalized and pathologized trauma offer their readers no way to engage publicly with the narration. On its own, ‘compassion’ (though important) does nothing to alter the dominant structures which perpetuate gendered social exclusion. Arendt suggests that these are the conditions

of a radical “world alienation” in which we begin, as Arendt notes, to “encounter only ourselves” (1954/2006, p. 45).⁷⁹ I now move forward to document another media example in which the repetitive baring of private “wounds” (see Seltzer, 1998 in Nelson, 2006 on contemporary “wound culture”) in public spaces, in order to both “fix” and reproduce gendered dependency along new lines, forms the central purpose of the programming.

“Traumatic” narratives of need: self-help and self-invention through surgery

Women have long been invited constantly to remake themselves as the (changing) object of male desire...women have long had to face the recognition that the unitary subject is a fraud and that constant and perpetual self-invention is necessary. (Walkerdine et al, 2001, p. 9)

Kerra is a dedicated wife to a Special Forces hero and loving mother of three sons. Bitten by a poisonous spider that came from her husband's duffle bag, she -- rather than him -- bears the deep facial scars of war. As her husband fights in extreme conditions overseas, she undergoes extreme surgery and laser and chemical treatments as well...Dr. Ava Shamban performs her most challenging case yet, as she teams with plastic surgeon Dr. Harvey Zarem and attempts to restore Kerra's former beauty and self esteem. Will she be successful?⁸⁰

After years of floating aimlessly and being thrown life's crumbs, a gaggle of self-proclaimed “ugly ducklings” will swim upstream to be transformed into a bevy of graceful beauties. THE SWAN, the new series that turns a fantasy into reality by mirroring the classic fairy tale, premieres Wednesday, April 7.⁸¹

The Swan (Fox Television Network) and *Extreme Makeover* (ABC Television

Network) are two of the most radical examples of what Nayak and Kehily (2008) call

⁷⁹ The 2001 article on Sherry Cowx did convey a strong sense of the “desperate, lonely separation” (alienation) which exists, Arendt argues, when we lose the “common world which would at once relate and separate [us]” (1954/2006; 1958/1998). The Vancouver Sun reporter captures this sense of loss (though whether this insight is deliberate or accidental is unclear) with the final comment that in leaving the street Sherry Cowx because less visible in the world. Nuttall-Smith (2001) writes that a friend notes that Cowx “stays homes when her boyfriend goes to work...she doesn't come to the phone” (B1).

⁸⁰ From 2007 Season 4, Episode 1 *Extreme Makeover* ABC promotional website, “patient bios” (<http://abc.go.com/primetime/extrememakeover/bios/115680.html>)

⁸¹ From 2004 Promotional Press Release for FOX Television's reality television programme, *The Swan* (<http://ilovereality.com/Shows/theswan.html#Video>).

“gender makeovers” or the contemporary trend of “reality television programmes specializing in the personal ‘makeover’” (p. 70). In this section I begin with a brief description of the premise of each program. I then move forward to suggest that such programming participates in the reproduction of gendered social exclusion through the symbolic division of “legitimate”, middle-class “ideally” dependent femininity from the “deviant” dependence of subordinate(d) classes (see McRobbie, 2005a; see previous discussion in the section above). I argue that in invoking doxic classed and gendered symbolism as the basis for exclusion ‘gender makeovers’ create what Bourdieu (1998) calls a “deliberately fostered...sense of unworthiness” (p. 99). This ‘sense of unworthiness’ thus becomes fertile ground for discourses of self-help which “enlist subjects in the pursuit of self-improvement and autonomy” (Rimke, 2000). Finally, I contend that such programming embodies contemporary Western culture’s uninhibited fascination with stories which render human pain a private (politically disconnected) affair even as such traumatic narratives (Arendt, 1963) are presented for very public consumption (see Nelson, 2006).

Imbued with the sermonizing and the moral rhetoric of meritocracy, *The Swan* called its participants “contestants” and in each episode pitted two women against each other who were described as “finally” and “bravely” choosing to seek a better life through plastic surgery. In the initial press release announcing the premiere of *The Swan*, Fox network proclaimed,

Two women will be featured in each episode, but only the most beautiful and transformed one will be selected to compete in the Swan Pageant and further her chances of being crowned ‘The Swan’.⁸²

⁸² <http://ilovereality.com/Shows/theswan.html#Video>

An exaggerated ‘Barbie’ doll beauty (large breasts, very long hair, heavily made-up eyes and lips) and total reinvention of the self paved the only avenue to successful “transformation”. Thus each episode focussed on the competitor’s dedication to her surgical and psychological alterations, commitment to an imposed fitness routine and willingness to live in isolation from her friends and family. In fact, each woman’s ‘psychological transformation’ was explicitly linked to such isolation. Finally, the joyfully emoting “winner” of each episode was put forward to compete in the season finale beauty pageant while the distraught “loser” was portrayed as ultimately too weak in her ambition and will to reinvent herself. She had, the audience was given to understand, “chosen” to fail and therefore did not deserve to move forward in the competition.

Like *The Swan*, the theme of bestowing ‘happiness and self-esteem through plastic surgery’ to deserving (largely) female participants forms the premise for *Extreme Makeover*.⁸³ On the front cover of the *Extreme Makeover* application form potential candidates are instructed to create a video which answers the question, “Why do you deserve the *Extreme Makeover*? How will it change your life?” (2005). Further instructions follow:

Go from head to toe explaining what you would like changed. You do not need to know the exact procedure, just tell us what you don’t like about your current features...Please watch the video after to make sure the lighting is good and we can accurately see your problem areas...Besides altering your appearance, what is your biggest dream? (ibid.)

The language used in this application form positions potential participants as abnormal by default and asserts a thinly veiled implication that the most victimizing accounts will be

⁸³ Where *The Swan* maintained its focus on women exclusively, *Extreme Makeover* expanded its audience and offers makeovers to entire families, children included.

deemed the most deserving. Participants are thus encouraged to divulge their ‘deepest’ heartbreaks and desires in an environment of intense false intimacy (see Nelson, 2006 on Arendt).

In paradoxical fashion, the selection of deserving candidates is based upon their own expressions of ‘unworthiness’ invoked through symbolic references to naturalized doxic notions of gender and class (Bourdieu, 1998, 2001). At the beginning of each program, the young female participants are cast as needy, tragic women trapped (like the mid-twentieth century woman in the Lysol advertisement, fig.10) by (physical) feminine “deviance”, ‘ignorance’ and unhappiness. Although the women participating in the makeovers perform these characteristics for the camera, I do not believe this is evidence of an “unfettered” (McNay, 2000) “choice” made by these women. Rather, I turn to Bourdieu’s explanation of “self-depreciation” and “self-denigration” as markers of symbolic violence wherein we can observe how “the dominated apply categories constructed from the point of view of the dominant to the relations of domination, thus making them appear as natural” (2001, p. 35). Moreover, the format of the programs and the procedure/conditions for becoming a participant reinforce a sense of personal ‘unworthiness’ (Bourdieu, 1998) which is later positioned against the “new” woman’s triumphant “chrysalis-style rebirth” (Nayak & Kehily, 2008, p. 71).

Bourdieu’s observations on the mechanisms of symbolic violence work as a critique of classed symbolic domination as well. As Bullock et al (2001) note, those who live in disadvantaged circumstances (particularly women) are disproportionately represented in ‘reality’ media which has as its premise the exposure of “deviance” and “dysfunction” (pp. 231-232). ‘Deviance’ and ‘dysfunction’ thus come to be associated

with a particular (gendered) social location in the public imaginary (see Bullen & Kenway, 2004). So, where the woman in the Lysol advertisement overcomes her feminine deviance by submitting to the authority of her doctor and the sensibilities of her husband, participants on *The Swan* and *Extreme Makeover* often are additionally positioned as having to “overcome” the disadvantages of their class positioning and economic circumstances through a personal transformation. Thus their bodies become sites where class divisions are reinscribed through the gendered habitus (see McRobbie’s use of Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic violence (2001) in 2005a; also see Skeggs, 2001).⁸⁴ And so, as in the media story of gendered homelessness (see “Sherry Cowx” in the previous section) female dependency is naturalized, and classed and gendered “relations of domination” are reproduced without reference to their social/structural origins (Bourdieu, 2001). Personal transformation becomes the only publicly legitimized avenue for “happiness”.

In ‘gendered makeovers’ expressions of feminine unhappiness are linked to low self-esteem (see Gonick, 2006) and so the assistance marketed to women in *The Swan* and *Extreme Makeover* draws upon self-help discourses of reinvention (also see Nayak & Kehily, 2008). Rimke (2000) notes that,

self-help is an activity presumed to be voluntary and individualistic. Based upon notions such as choice, autonomy and freedom, self-help relies upon the principle of individuality and entails self-modification and improvement. (p. 62)

In both programs, plastic surgery is held out as a means to achieving isolated, personal happiness through empowerment, self-esteem and a resultant (and paradoxical) social acceptance. In fact, in its allegorical title *The Swan* forges a direct link between

⁸⁴ Skeggs (2001) also notes that sometimes “feminine appearance may be a ‘solution’ to lack of access to other routes of material security, or a means of deflecting class pathology”. But she notes that such a ‘solution’ “can only be used by certain women” (p. 298).

the ideal appearance, acceptance within legitimate culture and, most importantly, a resultant, private happiness. And, like the media depiction of Sherry Cowx, success and failure are defined in individual, personal terms, completely removed from a social context. I would argue, then, that the most damaging aspect of these representations of markedly feminine forms of unhappiness and dysfunction *is* their disconnection from a historically grounded reality. Both *The Swan* and *Extreme Makeover* sensationalise unhappiness and sell particular kinds of gender and class-inscribed suffering as entertainment.

With the premise of both programmes resting on themes of ‘self-improvement’ and the acquisition of ‘self-esteem’ a large portion of each episode was dedicated to presentations of the pain, suffering and desperation of its participants. Like the deeply gendered and class inscribed media representation of Sherry Cowx, such programs cultivate a pseudo-intimacy (abhorred by Arendt for its anaesthetic effect on an awareness of reality within public spaces) between victimized, traumatically portrayed young women and the viewing public. The representations of the women who appear on the show become interchangeable. Their essential appearing and unfolding ‘Who’ rendered superfluous to the repetition of a (now familiar) storyline of tragic need, willing dependency on the surgery and lifestyle “experts” and final, personal triumph over deeply class and gender inscribed “failings”. Thus viewers are given to understand that ‘successful’ participants are those who have ‘chosen’ to be unaffected by their tragic circumstances even as such circumstances are used as a foil for their final triumph. Viewers are encouraged to either celebrate with individuals striving to achieve an ideal or commiserate with those whose momentum toward perfection has been impeded by

personal setbacks. To further complicate (or, more to the point, obscure) matters, dominant neo-liberal ideology depicts critiques of this form of entertainment as a restriction or criticism of a woman's free choice to participate in projects of perpetual self-improvement which, we are given to understand, endows her with both self-esteem and a higher social standing (see Griffin, 2004; McRobbie. 2004a).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have drawn upon Benjamin's montage method in an attempt to create a fragmented, but nevertheless interconnected series of snapshots of media representations of ideal and deviant femininity. This adaptation of montage is inspired by an Arendtian impulse to think fundamentally *differently*, and through a historically informed lens, about the nature and significance of what I have described as the 'piling up' of proliferate and particular images of femininity in the public consciousness. Saul (1992) remarks that, "[m]emory is always the enemy of structure. The latter flourishes upon method and is frustrated by content" (p. 14). Accordingly, the 'content' of this chapter was selected and deliberately arranged to interrupt normalized mythologies of ideal (deviant) femininity. Following Benjamin's lead, this chapter interpreted symbolic representations of femininity found in contemporary media "against the grain" (1968) of history, literature and the dominant social and political rhetoric which so often (and so successfully) veils the processes and "relations of domination" (Bourdieu, 2001). The collected fragments of text and image which formed the basis for analysis in this chapter were arranged to do the work of Arendt's metaphorical 'pearl diver' by salvaging and 'dismantling' elements of the past in their present 'crystallization'. In other words, this

chapter is wholly concerned with both an analysis of the gendered symbolism embedded in media samples from ‘Now’ and ‘Then’ and, moreover, in a *recognition* of ‘traces’ (Benjamin) of the ‘Then’ in our ‘Now’ (Arendt, 1971, pp. 202-213).⁸⁵ In practical terms, contemporary media constructions of femininity were read against selections historical representations of femininity, theory, literature and poetry. The intent of such a juxtaposition was to reveal what Bourdieu calls the “*dehistoricization* and *eternalization* of the structure of the sexual division and the corresponding principles of division” (2001, p. viii). Moreover, through such a juxtaposition the deeply pathologized symbols of class manifest through the ‘sexual division’ inherent within media representations of ideal (deviant) femininity were also revealed.

The montage relies on an analytical framework which draws upon scholars and writers whose work opens new spaces in which to think about the broad (and broadly studied) topic of women, popular culture and media. The chapter, therefore, stands as a hermeneutical navigation within such newly created spaces of thought. Finally, it forms the backdrop for the next chapter in which young women’s experiences in the world are read alongside the symbolism of those socially constructed (and historically relevant) norms, values and ideas which exclude or “alienate” (Arendt, 1958/1998) young women who fall outside such normative distinctions. For Arendt, such alienation becomes a catalyst for “...the atrophy of the space of appearance...” (1958/1998, p. 209).

⁸⁵ For a full elucidation of Arendt’s concepts of the “Now”, the past, the future and the particulars of the relations between these conceptualizations cf. 1971, specifically *IV. Where Are We When We Think? “The gap between past and future: the nunc stans”* and 1961.

Chapter Five

YOUNG WOMEN'S "RECONCILIATIONS" OF IDEAL (DEVIANT) FEMININITY IN CIRCUMSTANCES OF ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGE

Introduction

In this chapter I explore the data collected from interview questions which were posed to a sub-sample of six young women during the larger interviews conducted (and with reference to the field observations made) during the course of Dr. Jo-Anne Dillabough's SSHRC funded ethnographic research, "Social Change and the Study of Economically Disadvantaged Youth in Canadian Schools", involving young people who live, work and attend school in an urban location in BC., Canada. I begin with a brief review of the elements of feminist social theory which offer a particular frame for the findings and arguments which will be explored and made here. I then review my central arguments from chapter four. I then move forward to provide an outline of the structure, central arguments and theoretical framing of this chapter and then move into the content of the chapter itself.

Review

Social structures and cognitive structures are recursively and structurally linked, and the correspondence that obtains between them provides one of the most solid props of social domination (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 14).

In chapter two I explored the work of feminist theorists who draw our attention to the dominant gendered discourses at play in contemporary young women's lives (girl power, reinvention) whilst also connecting such discourses to larger prevailing ideologies of neo-liberal individualism (and individualization) and its construction of the ideal,

consuming and “choosing” (female) citizen. Furthermore, I highlighted how the more sociologically oriented work of Bullen and Kenway (2004), McRobbie (2004, 2005) and Skeggs (2001, 2005) links class positioning (and a contemporary “rearrangement”⁸⁶ of historical class values and structures) to all such “readings of the feminine” (Skeggs, 2001, p. 305). Finally, I also argued that dominant media representations of idealized femininity regulate and reproduce gendered exclusion along class lines in the following two ways: first, in its representation of ideal femininity (and thus legitimate feminine citizenship)⁸⁷ as perpetually capable of reinventing girlhood in sexual ways through consumption and (narrowly circumscribed) choices, such media alienates young women whose economic⁸⁸ circumstances constrain her ability to engage in such neoliberal projects of reinvention; and secondly that media reflects the dominant trend to “read” disadvantaged circumstances “as a value of personhood” (Skeggs, 2001, p. 295).

In chapter four I used an adaptation of the *montage* method (see Buck-Morss on Benjamin, 1989) to analyse and expose the classed, gendered and historically relevant symbolism embedded within contemporary media representations of ideal and deviant femininity. In so doing, I sought to expose the “durable”, “arbitrary”, “paradoxical” and “contingent” structures, symbols and mechanisms of *masculine domination* (Bourdieu, 2001, pp. 1-5) which live on within such media representations (despite ideological denials to the contrary) and I attempted to reveal examples of such longevity through a

⁸⁶ McRobbie, 2005a

⁸⁷ See Gonick, 2006; Harris, 2004a; McRobbie, 2004a.

⁸⁸ I want to call attention here to Griffin’s (2004) argument that such constructions of ideal femininity also alienate and thus operate to exclude young women whose race, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, diverse ability and/or personal comfort level constrain their ability or desire to achieve such ideals. And so, while I don’t suggest that I explore all aspects of, for example, race or disability theory in relation to feminist critiques of gendered media, I do, where possible and appropriate, make note of such distinctions in relation to each participating young woman’s location and positioning as a young woman living in disadvantaged economic circumstances.

modified montage which combined contemporary media samples, theoretical analysis with the juxtaposition of a small sample of relevant historical media. I also used an Arendtian theoretical perspective to further and broaden my thinking about *how* and *why* and *with what result* such media proliferates within our common spaces. Finally, I used such Arendtian thinking to argue that the mass dissemination of popular media representations of ideal (deviant) femininity (viewed as embedded with *doxic* but contemporarily ‘rearranged’ and ideologically laden gendered and classed symbolism)⁸⁹ itself combines to create the conditions in which the following ideas about femininity might be revealed and exposed: first, that femininity is rendered *superfluous* (see Curtis on Arendt, 1999); second, that young women’s exclusion along classed and gendered lines is naturalized and normalized to the point of public obliviousness⁹⁰; and, third that public consciousness of such a rendering and naturalization is often occluded by gendered narratives of empowerment which, through their affiliation with neo-liberal notions of individualism and choice operate to personalize the symbolic markings of such exclusion (see *holes of oblivion*, in 1971 and in Curtis, 1999).

In this chapter I move forward to suggest that the very preliminary field research⁹¹ I conducted drawing upon Jo-Anne Dillabough’s research on youth and social exclusion might reveal the presence of the following two emergent but significant themes in the lives of economically disadvantaged young women in relation to their reconciliation of

⁸⁹ See Bourdieu, 1998, 2001 and the discussion of the *paradox of doxa* (2001) in chapter one of this thesis.

⁹⁰ See “repetition of truths” (Arendt, 1958/98, p. 5) and the “doxic experience of the social world” (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 9).

⁹¹ Because this research takes its data from a very small sub-sample (N=6) of young women who were asked more specific questions about ideal and deviant femininity during and the larger study’s (Dillabough, forthcoming) interview protocol (see chapter three for full explanation of methods) I suggest that this chapter displays themes which emerged from the data as preliminary findings. In other words, while the data findings are insightful they are also suggestive in nature and so point to areas of research which could be further explored. I take up this line of thought at the end of this chapter and more thoroughly in the final chapter of this thesis.

media representations of ideal (deviant) femininity: (1) young women's ambivalence, identification and creation of meaning in pathologized neighbourhoods; and, (2) young women's reconciliations of mass media, consumption, and notions of the "impossible girl" (Griffin, 2004) in circumstances of socio-economic disadvantage.

Within both thematic sections I suggest we might observe the resilient presence of structurally inscribed and symbolically embodied forms of *symbolic/masculine domination* and its effect, *symbolic violence* (Bourdieu, 2001, described in the theoretical framework in chapter one). Moreover, I suggest that we can identify fragmented but significant "flashes" (Goodman, 2003, p. 159)⁹² of gendered empowerment and individualization narratives (e.g., girl power, reinvention) as they manifest in young women's reconciliations of popular notions of ideal (deviant) femininity in relation to their own economically disadvantaged circumstances and as such circumstances intersect with their specific social and cultural location(s). Furthermore, I suggest that such dominant social narratives also provide the young women involved in this research with what Willis (2003) identifies as "an instant social and cultural imaginary for resistance" to the various social judgments, injustices and constraints they experience in relation to economic disadvantage and to their location within a publicly pathologized urban space. Finally, I link the presences of such 'flashes' or dominant narratives to a theoretical exploration of the processes of exclusion using Bourdieusian theories of the specifically gendered and classed operations of *symbolic/masculine domination* and *symbolic violence* (2001) which I connect to larger Arendtian concerns with isolation and *reconciliation* (see "reconciliations with reality", 1954/2006, 1958/1998), the

⁹² See the discussion of "'flashes' of recognition, memory and insight" in chapter one of this thesis (chapter four outline).

significance of *appearing* in [and the dangers of closing off] public, agonistic space (see 1954/2006, 1958/1998)).

More specifically and guided by Arendtian political concerns I engage in a sociological critique of *how* such spaces are closed to these young women because of the relationship between their gender and social/economic location and the popular mass media which claims to represent and empower them. I would argue that social, cultural and political theory opens space to think about the ideological and structural forces at play in young women's daily lives. And so I first note that in our media saturated moment in history we (largely unconsciously) construe so many of our "judgments"⁹³ as 'true' depictions of 'the everyday' when in fact (through the workings of the habitus) they are infused with the values of dominant society which feed recursively through the popular media (see Bourdieu, 1998, 2001). Therefore, I suggest that a discussion which explores young women's descriptions of *where* their daily experiences occur in relation to how such young women draw upon dominant symbolic narratives embedded within mass media as they seek to reconcile such experiences *also* stands as a critique of those media representations which most often pathologize, sensationalize and personalize disadvantaged circumstances.⁹⁴ Finally, although my central aim is to both highlight the social processes which underpin popular perceptions of gender and gendered economic disadvantage as the embodiment of personal choices and the possible political consequences of such processes and confluences, I ground this aim in an exploration of

⁹³ I refer here to particular characteristic of judgment as dominantly equated and conflated with dogmatic 'truths' which Arendt calls to our attention. Arendt argues that in order to combat exclusion in all of its forms we must separate our concept of judgment from any notion of truth and at the same time recognize that judgment is best revealed in an agonistic, public space so that the blinders which render such judgments as 'natural' or 'true' might better be removed (see 1971).

⁹⁴ See Bullen and Kenway (2004), McRobbie (2005) and Skeggs (2001, 2005) who contend that such economically circumstances are always deeply gendered as well as classed and racialised.

six young women's real and contingent experiences and reconciliations of gender norms and the social, cultural and material conditions of economic disadvantage.

Willis (1990) suggests that those seeking to understand youth cultures "try to understand the dynamic, precarious, virtual uses of symbols in common culture, not understanding the everyday through popular representation but understanding popular representation through and in the everyday" (p. 6). Moreover, he argues that for young people the "appropriation" of popular representation reflects their need to "matter culturally" and to be "visible" within the larger social realm (2003, p. 404). Following Harris (2004a), I would argue, in relation to young women, that 'visible' legitimacy within contemporary society is tied to gendered forms of consumption and to adherence to dominant narratives of gendered empowerment. And so, I read the experiences, expressions and responses within these narratives as young women's "active process[es] of 'meaning-making' [of] 'making sense'" of their world and their place in the world in relation to both dominant media constructions of ideal (deviant) femininity and to "their [own] economic positions and relationships" (Willis, 2004, p. 171).

Lives in context: young women's ambivalence, identification and creation of meaning in pathologized neighbourhoods

[The neighbourhood] is what some people would describe as the sinful place. You got the prostitutes, the drugs, you got stealing, beating, whatever you can think of, it's there. I've been on Main and Hastings at one in the morning coming back from a rock concert, not always the best feeling, you're trying to keep yourself to yourself, most important thing you have to worry about when you're walking down the street. If there is some drug dealings going on, just ignore it, just walk right by. If you get your nose stuck in it, they will be pissed. [...]

[...] Do you want to live somewhere else?

No, maybe deeper into [the neighbourhood], but other than that I love it there [...]
(Anne, age 16)

The young women who participated in this study live, work and attend school in a neighbourhood which abuts and blends into Vancouver's downtown eastside - one of the most pathologized urban spaces in Canada. Arendt argues that constructions of subjectivity must be understood as "unfolding" (Dillabough, 2006, course notes) and situated within complex and inherently *social* relations (1958/98). Moreover, Walkerdine et al (2001) remark that, "[i]t is the *situated* and *specifically local* character of how people live and transform their lives that is important" (p. 15).⁹⁵ With these words in mind, I begin this exploration of the narratives of the young women involved in this research.

I suggest that in the text cited at the beginning of this section we can see how dominant understandings of (gendered) disadvantaged circumstances can take shape as imaginary 'truths' embedded within the habitus of the young women who share such media pathologized urban spaces⁹⁶ with those who have been pushed to the margins of society. Cara's account of her daily experiences in her neighbourhood was similar to Anne's,

Int.: Do you like your neighbourhood?

Cara: No! [...] It's kind of dangerous, well scary 'cause I live near [street name] in the project area.

[...]

Yeah, like prostitutes are around the corner and sometimes I'm embarrassed to tell people where I live too.

[...]

But it's ok because quite a few of my friends live around there too.

[...]

It's just dangerous to walk at night but during daytime it's alright. (age 15)

⁹⁵ Emphasis added.

⁹⁶ In the montage chapter I thoroughly discuss one such media representation of the downtown east side and of a young woman who lives there. See pp.133-140.

In both narratives, prostitution is linked to personal morality without reference to those social forces which both normalize and necessitate the literal commodification of the female body. Another young woman sought to distance her own connection to a Chinese heritage from the “bad citizenship”⁹⁷ she has observed in her neighbourhood by drawing upon dominant representations of gendered deviance as they intersect with dominant racialised narratives of deviance:

Val: [...] these single mothers they lied and they get extra money, those money come from us, not a good citizen.

Int.: Welfare fraud.

Val: yes [...] some of them keep on having babies to get more money, they get \$200 for a baby until they are 15 or 16, especially people from China, they have a bad reputation. (age 15)

Here we see the intersection between racialised narratives of deviance and dominant “processes of class differentiation now thoroughly projected onto and inseparable from the female body” as a “specifically feminine modalit[y] of symbolic violence” (McRobbie, 2005a, pp. 101-102). Moreover, and in relation to all of the examples of gendered distancing from the publicly pathologized Other, Skeggs explains that when sexualization of the female body intersects with disadvantaged economic and social circumstances, a “moral limit” is enacted and old class stereotypes are (re)confirmed.⁹⁸ And so historical class hierarchies are legitimated through the back door as young women struggle to assert an individualized identity which might separate them from the publicly de-legitimized and gendered Others with whom they share their urban space.

⁹⁷ The phrase “bad” or “good citizen” is used in this selection of data during a discussion of an activity conducted by Dr. Dillabough as part of the larger ethnographic study which asked the young people involved in the research to write about and draw a representation of “good citizenship”.

⁹⁸ For example, while representations of privileged female bodies draped in the adopted symbolism of prostitution (skimpy clothing) can be heralded as exemplars of ‘empowered’ femininity, the same symbolism marks a female prostitute’s body as deviant and confirms her as ‘immoral’ in the public imaginary through a conflation of her social/economic positioning with her worth as person.

It would seem then that the language the young women use to describe their neighbourhood is drawn from symbolic and discursive media representations which pathologize this urban space and the people who are most marginalized within it. In fact, when asked to describe their neighbourhood all of the young women who participated in this study made use of media disseminated language of “deviance” (e.g., “ghetto”, “hobo”, “dirty”, “scary”, “disgusting”, “sinful”). Moreover, such terms also reflect young women’s embodiment of social and economic forces as personal “bad choices” (see Skeggs, 2005) and bad subjects as can be best observed in Cara’s personalization of her social location: “I’m embarrassed to tell people where I live” (age 15). I would argue, then, that disadvantaged young women *in particular* might seek to distance themselves from those whose bodies and essential personhood are most often represented as deviant and conflated with the pathologized spaces in which they live. As Skeggs (2001, 2005) (extending Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital and “taste”⁹⁹) notes, the language of gendered deviance draws upon class-inscribed expressions of “disgust” and allows individuals who live in difficult economic circumstances to gain cultural capital by describing such deviance as separate from themselves. Following this line of argument, I suggest that the young women’s use of such language to distance themselves from the visible signs of poverty and necessity in their neighbourhood signifies their desire to reject an associated judgment of their own bodies and lives as deviant.

At the same time I also want to posit that we might read such a distancing as young women’s unconscious embodiment and personalization of the “historical association [of pathology] with the term class” or as a class denial which Skeggs (2005)

⁹⁹ See Bourdieu, 1986. Citing Bourdieu (1986), Skeggs notes that “historical class positioning is read as individualized volition, a matter of taste” (2001, p. 303).

argues is “re-circulated” within media even when such media claims to be addressing the “problem” of pathologization (pp. 966-967; also related discussions of media complicity in Bourdieu, 1998). I call attention here to the work of Bullen and Kenway (2004) in order to examine the role of media representation of gendered disadvantage in shaping the publicly imagined deviance which these young women are seeking to reject. The authors note that media depictions of marginalized women as a “threat to social, economic and moral order”, reflect and recursively garner popular support for public policies which subject disadvantaged women to either vilification or pity (pp. 142-143). The economically disadvantaged are thus constructed on one hand as entirely responsible for their circumstances and on the other as helplessly dependent victims of the dominant order. In either case, the authors note, “the ‘underclass’ is constructed as a ‘moral category’” (p. 144 citing White, 1996, p. 132). Blame is attached to the individual who is judged to have deviated from the moral ‘norm’ whilst the dominant structures of our social world are bestowed with a naturalized veneer of moral superiority. Popular media thus circulates the dominant perspective that the prostitution, homelessness, theft and drug use to which the young women refer are inherently “cultural and moral rather than economic” in nature (p. 143 citing Murray, 1999). And so we can observe how the symbolic violence of media disseminated pathologization and personalization of the social structures of economic disadvantage is reproduced at the cultural level as these young women attempt to classify themselves as not deviant and thus *different* and *separate from* the “sinful”, “embarrassing” prostitutes who are marked as morally deviant. The dominant public representation of prostitution is thus reaffirmed as a

personal, sinful “bad choice” made by a classed and racialised body (see Skeggs use of Bourdieu’s theories of taste and embodiment, 2005).

Such notions of personal deviancy and pathology, which, through media proliferation have come to stand as ‘truths’ about the people whose lives are played out on the streets of beleaguered neighbourhoods permeate public consciousness as a whole. Such imagined truths, then, also exist outside of young women’s embodied consciousness and manifest as measurable consequences in the lives of those young people who live in pathologized neighbourhoods. Note one young woman’s response to a question about the reputation of her school:

Anne: In elementary school we had a problem with substitutes or student teachers ‘cause they won’t want to come to an eastside elementary school, they are young hooligans, they are starting their life of drug addicts, I find it very insulting because it was not like that [...]. (age 16)

We see here an example of an account of the particular conditions of exclusion through which students in school were denied access to important educational resources which, we can assume, would not have been denied to those students who attend schools in neighbourhoods which enjoy a better reputation in the public imaginary. Moving forward, I suggest that this passage also reveals this young woman’s frustration, often expressed by others during the interviews, of being associated with the perceived “dangers” (sensationalized and connected within popular media to the visibility of drug use and crime) in her neighbourhood.

But though in this passage Anne rejects the public representation of her peers as dangerous and deviant, she and the other young women identify and account for how they contend with both media depictions of their neighbourhood’s sensational

“dangerousness” and the very real and gendered risks encountered whilst traveling the streets of their neighbourhood alone or at night (“it’s kind of dangerous, well, scary” Cara, 15). I suggest that their accounts reflect a certain ambivalence which, in the contemporary moment is part of the “psychic cost of navigating urban space” (Dillabough, 2008, in conversation). Furthermore, I suggest the young women’s expressed ambivalence also relates to their entirely human need to derive meaning from everyday experiences which intersect (usually below the level of consciousness) with those social, political, economic and ideological forces over which they have little control.

In relation to such expressions of ambivalence I now move on to explore several accounts of actual and perceived gendered violence which emerged during the interviews. I discuss the young women’s comments about how they reconcile both the real and publicly ‘naturalized’ and sensationalized risks associated with those they (might) encounter in the spaces they inhabit. Borrowing from Arendt (1954/2006) I argue that media which sexualizes and fetishizes young femininity ultimately alienates us from the essential humanity of all young women¹⁰⁰ and thus contributes to creating the conditions in which such imagined gendered risk becomes (more) real. Following this thematic section on context and urban space I move forward to document a sample of such representations together with young women’s specific responses to the sampled media and their more general reconciliations of media(ted) representations of ideal femininity with their own lives.

¹⁰⁰ Arendt likely would have said “all humans” instead of ‘all young women’ as her perspective was much broader than mine is here. Having said that, I would argue that Arendt’s central concern with *how* the rendering of humanity superfluous occurs is particularly relevant to this discussion of gendered violence (see 1958/1998, 1963, 1971; also see Kristeva, 2001; Curtis, 1999).

Acquired invisibility: young women navigate and reconcile public spaces marked by (sexual) violence

In this section I explore how the young women involved in this study account for and reconcile both their material experiences of sexualized violence and their heightened sense of threat of sexualized violence which, as I have previously documented (see analysis of “Married with Accessories” in chapter four), is sensationalized within popular culture and the public imaginary and so becomes an “extraordinarily ordinary” (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 2) part of our social world. Furthermore, I have suggested that we might read the ‘extraordinarily ordinary’ commodification of the female body has having led to its being rendered banal (see Arendt, 1963, 1958/1998). Therefore, in this section I argue that we might observe the results of such a rendering in young women’s strategies for reconciling their ‘fears’ and experiences of such violence. Furthermore, I suggest that young women’s accounts of remaining invisible are a key element of their strategic navigation of their spaces and that such strategies might be read as a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2001) which reveals the banality of objectified femininity and the resulting superfluity of feminine bodies in public spaces (Arendt, 1963; Curtis on Arendt, 1999). I begin by recounting the young women’s stories which I have separated into two sub-sections: *imagined dangers* and *reconciling acts of gendered violence*. Although I have separated the young women’s accounts of a sense of violence and experiences of violence into these sub-headings I have done so for ease of analysis.

Reconciling (imagined) dangers on the streets

Note Kate's instinctual expression of the deeply gendered "rules" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) which govern the streets of her neighbourhood.

Kate: This neighbourhood is not that good. It's kind of ghetto, but not really. There is lots of scary people at night. You can't wear a skirt in the summer and come home alone. You always have to be with a friend or else guys will drive around in a truck and pick you up. People will deal drugs. If you walk by they offer you some.

Int.: Is that frightening?

Kate: I'm used to it. (age 16)

Cara expressed much the same sort of mental shrug of acceptance when asked to elaborate on her characterization of her neighbourhood as "dangerous", "scary" and "embarrassing": "it's ok because quite a few of my friends live around there too [...] it's just dangerous to walk at night but during daytime it's alright" (age 15). But she also observed the 'rule' that precludes being female on the street at night and alluded to Kate's more explicitly conveyed understanding that belonging to a friendship group offers protection.

With a similar display of acceptance, Anne qualified her initial description with her discomfort with walking home at night ("not always the best feeling") with the reflection that she is able to "be relaxed" because she is both accustomed to the "danger" and has acquired the symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 2001) of "street smarts" and thus, "know[s] what's going on" (age 16). She described her knowledge of the 'rules' of the street as follows: "you're trying to keep yourself to yourself, most important thing you have to worry about when you're walking down the street"(ibid.).

Implicit within each of these accounts is that such risk-generated 'rules' are both part of the naturalized order of the "dangerous streets" and entirely ordinary in their

necessary existence (“Is that frightening?”: “I’m used to it”; “it’s ok, it’s alright”; “[I] know what’s going on”). I suggest that the most important rule seems to be, for these young women at least, to acquire what I think of as a *gendered invisibility* achieved by avoiding the streets altogether at night, knowing to never wear a skirt when alone on the streets, traveling in a group or ‘keeping yourself to yourself’. I suggest that all of these strategies are underpinned by the imagined “truth” that the female body (particularly the class inscribed female body, see Skeggs, (2001) is a superfluous (see Curtis on Arendt, 1999) commodity and, as I have argued throughout, I would connect such superfluity to its publicly degraded, traded and proliferated image in mass popular media. And finally, I would argue that from a sociological perspective we can observe (in these young women’s acquisitions of invisibility) the basis for symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2001) whereby the publicly imagined superfluity of classed and gendered bodies is inscribed on the habitus of such young women or, to use Bourdieu’s words, inscribed on their, “...dispositions attuned to the structure of domination of which they are the product” (2001, p. 45).

Reconciling (normal) acts of gendered violence

Describing an otherwise peaceful protest she attended one young woman recalled an incident where another young woman was sexually assaulted in front of a large gathering of people on the steps of a public building:

Anne: [...] It never becomes violent. I mean like other than one guy who grabbed some other girl’s tits. Her guy friends are going to get pissed off, obviously.

Int.: Her guy friends got...?

Anne: Yeah. Yeah. Her guy friends would get mad and be like what did you just do and you know, there’d be a fight. But that would happen at any place, too, right? [...] (age 16)

Anne's question here was rhetorical and so I suggest that it reveals the extent to which, in her experience, gendered, sexualized violence has become normalized within dominant culture.

I suggest that Anne's unconscious embodiment of such normalization (as a form of symbolic violence) is at play in her depiction of a passive female 'protected' from one male by another group of 'guy friends' as implicitly 'normal'. Thus, the embedded, structural and *habitual* nature of symbolic/masculine domination (Bourdieu, 2001) accounts for such instinctual subordination of femininity by a young woman who, in other sections of the interviews seems to embody elements of popular narratives of gender equality and female empowerment. But, as many feminist theorists point out, such popular narratives problematically present gendered empowerment as a return to 'girliness' or compulsory (hetero) hyper-sexuality (see McRobbie, 2004, 2005b) and thus reinforce the structures and dominance of masculine domination (Bourdieu, 2001). And so, I suggest that in such a seeming paradox we find evidence of the complicity of dominant, media proliferated narratives of female empowerment in nourishing young women's unconscious sense of being "at home in [a] world" in which males (and the masculine social order) might have a proprietary relationship with the (commodified) female body (Bourdieu, 2000). Borrowing from Arendt, I would suggest that the normalization of such acts further reflects the superfluity of the increasingly commodified female form and thus reinforces such superfluity within the popular imaginary. Keeping this perspective in mind I now describe another young woman's reconciliation of an experience of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2001) which played out in a public, seemingly safe space and in the presence of many other people.

In the cultural “field” of the classroom (see Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) it was observed that male ‘teasing’ was often distinctly sexual in nature. Though the young women in the classroom never engaged in these periodic bouts of sexualized/gendered taunting, on one occasion it was observed that Sarah was the subject of explicit, sexually aggressive remarks directed at her by an outspoken male leader in the classroom.¹⁰¹ Using stark sexual language he asked Sarah several times to confirm another (absent) young man’s boast that she had “let him [do something sexual]” to her. Sarah looked mortified and grew flushed but gave no verbal response. She kept her eyes focused on the ground, her head down and left the classroom with her female peer group.

When asked (in very general terms) about the interviewer’s and field note observations of the sexual nature of classroom pestering Sarah responded with a dismissal of such derogatory, sexualized comments as normalized bids for “attention”:

Int.: There’s a lot of sexual name calling in the classroom [...] and references to girls with their boyfriends. What do you think about that stuff? That can be a form of exclusion for some kids too.

Sarah: Most people do that for attention, they say things like that so that they can have attention to themselves, that’s what I think.

[...]

I have noticed a lot in this school, but not in other schools, usually the guys act tough but not think tough. [...] (age 15)

Although it is unclear what Sarah perceived as the difference between ‘acting tough’ and ‘thinking tough’ (as she did not elaborate in this section of the narrative) in an earlier conversation she remarked,

¹⁰¹ My intention in relaying this experience is in no way to judge the behaviour of the young man involved. And, although an analysis of young male embodiment of *symbolic/masculine domination* falls outside the scope of this investigation I note Arnot’s (who cites Nayak and Kehily (2001)) observation that such aggressive and sexually charged ‘teasing’ “reinforces hypermasculine egos” and suggest further that it is an unconscious and bodily-recognized part of the normalized dominance of “heterosexual masculinity” (2004, p. 31). Moreover, I cite Bourdieu’s explanation that the perpetuation of such essentially ritualistic behaviour is *also* part of our inheritance of *masculine domination* in which the condition of being a man must be “*felt* before others” and “validated by other men” (2001, p.52).

Sarah: [...] people in the group that I was in we usually name call each other as fun, we know we are all joking around because we are all friends, it doesn't bother us.¹⁰² (age 15)

I believe that if we analyse Sarah's experience together with the previous accounts of young women's reconciliation of the distinctly sexual forms of immanent and actual violence I would argue that Sarah's public dismissal of this incident is part of a more generalized ambivalence resulting from a need to reconcile her location within a deeply pathologized urban space and to living in a world where media images of (sometimes) violently sexualized femininity pass largely unremarked upon within public spaces (see Arendt on *thoughtlessness*, 1958/98). Moreover, I call attention to the field note observations of this young woman's body language as she left the classroom and suggest that the effects of symbolic violence might be "measured" in her attention to the previously discussed 'rules' of gendered invisibility. Moreover, in the field notes taken during the course of the larger study there are frequent references to sexually charged innuendos and jokes about sex and sexuality that circulated amongst the young men in the classroom. Importantly, for this discussion, I call attention to the fact that young women did not participate in these exchanges.

Finally, I note that of the six young women interviewed, Sarah, who had only recently moved to this neighbourhood from a smaller Canadian city following the breakup of her parents, most frequently accessed the language and embodied symbolism

¹⁰² Taken together, these statements might indicate that the sexual aggression observed in the classroom is part of the instinctually understood rules of relation within Sarah's group of friends (research not undertaken here). Moreover, Willis (1971) and Cohen (1999) both identify such hyper-masculine 'teasing' as a particular form of class-based, youth sub-cultural subversion of the constraints of the dominant social order. It might also be observed that within the context of her belonging to the self-identified 'popular' peer group, Sarah interprets such actions as 'teasing' perpetrated by those peers who 'want attention' (particularly her attention) from a more popular peer. And so I acknowledge that perhaps all of these perspectives do constitute partial explanations but I do not take them up in this thesis.

of social narratives of gendered empowerment¹⁰³ which call upon the “sophisticated”, contemporary young woman to dismiss examples gendered objectification and subjugation as “ironic”, harmless and amusing (see McRobbie, 2004a). I further note that she identified herself as having had a more middle-class experience of the world before moving to her new neighbourhood. In other words, it might be argued that Sarah’s class positioning intercedes in her dismissal of this experience because such positioning is more closely allied with popular notions of an empowered, ideal girl (see Gonick, 2006; Griffin, 2004; McRobbie, 2004a). And so, on one hand it might be argued that Sarah is able to publicly subvert the relevance of such aggressive sexual attention from her male peers via the symbolic embodiment of empowered female independence. On the other hand we might also observe the powerful silencing effect such narratives have.

Indeed, observing that gendered empowerment narratives, “call upon [the new female subject] to be silent, to withhold critique in order to count as a modern, sophisticated girl” (McRobbie, 2004a, p. 9). Silence in the face of objectification has become a signifier of the ideal girl and such silencing is, I would argue, reinforced by the barrage of media representations of sexualized, fetishized and pathologized femininity which render objectification banal. Moreover, such representations are often underpinned by the discourses and signifiers of gendered empowerment which further complicate the notion of a ‘normal’ or ‘ideal’ response to actual experiences of sexualization. McRobbie (2004a) notes,

¹⁰³ I refer the reader to the discussions of “girl power”, “feminine individualization” and the “reinventing self” found in chapter two (see Gonick, 2006; Griffin, 2004; Harris, 2004a, 2004b; McRobbie, 2004a)

[t]he media have become the critical site for defining emergent sexual codes of conduct. They pass judgment and establish the rules of play. Across these many channels of communication feminism is routinely disparaged. (p. 7)¹⁰⁴

The strategic ‘disparagement’ of feminism to which McRobbie (both here and in more detail in her other works, see 2005a, 2005b) refers has been identified by other feminist theorists as a mechanism for closing off young women’s access to political action and activism and to an awareness or knowledge, even, of the ideologies and discourses of (feminist) public critique (see Gonick, 2006; Griffin, 2004; Jowett, 2004; Levy, 2005; Taft, 2004 among many others).

It is at this juncture that I wish to conclude this section with a return to Arendtian theories of human engagement within public space. If we read such feminized silence and what I have observed here as these young women’s effort at acquiring a kind of gendered invisibility in public space from an Arendtian perspective I would argue that the social conditions which necessitate such acquired invisibility also act to prevent economically disadvantaged young women from appearing as legitimate, political beings in common public spaces (see 1958/1998). In other words, I would argue that we can observe the processes of deeply gendered forms of social exclusion at work in these young women’s navigation of their pathologized and thus publicly feared and shunned neighbourhood and in their (*masculine domination* inscribed) normalizing of experiences of sexualized forms of violence (see Bourdieu, 2001). Through such an analysis I would follow McRobbie (2005a) in implicating mass media (and its representation of ideal and

¹⁰⁴ Such a ‘disparaging’ of feminism is seen in its most obvious form in the ‘new’ media trend which commits violence on the female body as a form of commercialized entertainment (see discussion of such media in chapter four) and in a description from one young woman in Appendix B. Moreover, as Levy (2005) notes, the symbolism of the pornography industry is not only part of normal programming and representation in mainstream media, it is also frequently publicly defended (sometimes by feminist scholars) as ‘empowering’ to contemporary young women.

deviant femininity) in the “feminization” and “widening” of existing social divisions (in Adkins, 2005, p. 4) and reformulating such social exclusion using the symbolism and rhetoric of female empowerment.

To summarize this section, I have argued that the young women’s narratives simultaneously communicate the everyday, ‘real’ experiences of living in a disadvantaged, marginalized neighbourhood and their unconscious embodiment of the normalized, symbolic/masculine domination inscribed within and through the moral judgments of dominant society (see Bourdieu, 2001). Thus they often describe their experiences using language which connotes deviance and pathology (“ghetto”, “bum”, “dirty”) or reflects an embodied symbolic violence through “bodily emotions” (p. 38) like self-consciousness and embarrassment when describing their neighbourhood spaces and the people with whom they share such spaces. Finally, I noted the symbolic violence revealed in each young woman’s varied expression of a sense of normalized “worry”, fear and instinctual caution which attends the possibility of deeply gendered threats to them, *as young women* who live in such a pathologized public space.

But, though the streets which form the boundary within which these young women live, work and attend school are described variously as ‘embarrassing’, ‘dangerous’ and ‘scary’ the young women do not describe uncomplicated experiences of being fearful. I have suggested that such ‘complicated’ or ambivalent feelings toward both real and imagined risks might be due to a need to create meaning in constrained and pathologized spaces *and* to their embodiment of the public rendering of such gendered risks banal (see Arendt) by virtue of their representative saturation of the public consciousness via the mechanism of mass media. In the following section I move on to

explore three thematic strands which emerged in relation to young women's responses to examples of such media shown and questions about ideal (deviant) femininity asked during the interviews.

Reinventing Freedom in (as) Constraint: mass media, consumption, economic disadvantage and the "impossible girl" (Griffin, 2004)

There is a dangerous illusion that because feminine consumer culture now endorses the rhetoric of "girl power", endlessly celebrating high-profile women, and because many women's magazines take up equal-opportunities issues, feminine popular culture is no longer harmful to women. Because women are understood to be able to make their own choices about what they buy or how they want to look, it is thought that the powers of persuasion or manipulation have been eroded. The censorious feminist who still speaks about gender inequalities and about the damage caused by the bodily obsessions of the magazine sector will find few supporters among young women today. And the stark facts of the underrepresentation of women, and in particular black and Asian women, in key political positions gets obliterated in the buzz... (McRobbie, 2005b, final para.)

Willis (2003) argues that researchers who wish to work with young people must first, "grant the freedoms of consumption that pedagogists begrudge, political economists deride, and antihumanists deny, but we must locate them at material and social interconnections and historical conjunctures that constrain and channel these freedoms in all kinds of ways" (p. 404). Popular contemporary media representations of femininity position the ideal young woman as an appearance conscious¹⁰⁵, self-(re)inventing consumer in modern marketplaces of commodified, individualized and feminized "choice" (see Gonick, 2006; Griffin, 2004; Harris, 2004a, 2004b; McRobbie, 2004a). Moreover, gendered empowerment narratives (symbolically embedded within such

¹⁰⁵ This is a complex phrase which requires explanation. On one hand, and as many feminist/social theorists note, the ideal appearance is almost always represented as White, slim, overtly (hetero) sexual and in accordance with middle-class notions of aesthetic 'good taste' (see Bourdieu, 1986; Griffin, 2004; McRobbie, 2005; Skeggs, 2001; Weekes, 2004). Additionally, the "girl (em)powered" sexualization sold as liberation from and subversion of such middle-class values is itself inscribed with a long history of class, race and gender domination (see Bourdieu, 2001; McRobbie, 2004, 2005a; Skeggs, 2005).

representations) encourage young women to “liberate” themselves by paradoxically conforming to an individualized and conscious interpretation (assimilation or rejection) of such characteristics of ‘ideal’ femininity. Thus, as Willis (2003) observes:

Once penetrating the realm of culture and consciousness, a market economy of commodity relations...brings in an avalanche of commodity goods for consumers constituted as citizens (so long as they have money) who are free to choose and consume as they wish – now with their spirits as well as their bodies. (p. 402)

In this section I seek to explore how economic disadvantage intersects with dominant ideologies of femininity and the (legitimate) consuming female subject in relation to both the young women’s responses to contemporary gendered media images (see figs. 9 and 10) and the discussions which arose from questions about how they might define ideal (deviant) femininity.

Theoretically speaking, I suggest the following: (1) popular discourses and symbolic representations of liberated, individualized and/or empowerment femininity are marked by social “relations of domination” (gender, class, race etc.) which, through the habitus become “a somatized social relationship, a social law converted into an embodied law” (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 39) and so; (2) young women’s embodied relationship with such discourses and representations cannot “be suspended by a simple effort of will, founded on a liberatory awakening of consciousness” (ibid.); and, 3., that such discourses and symbolic representations (quite apart from, or in addition to, their ingrained ‘relations of domination’) offer an absurd definition of ideal femininity which cannot hope to be achieved by any young woman but is most especially unattainable for a young woman without the financial, cultural or social capital to participate in the “liberated” and “liberating” consumption stipulated by gendered projects of empowered reinvention (see Griffin, 2004; McRobbie, 2004a). Griffin (2004) argues that such conflicting social and

cultural forces create an “impossible girl” (p. 42) and it is in this recognition of the ‘impossible’ positioning of disadvantaged young women through popular notions of legitimate femininity which I connect to Arendt’s concerns with forms of social exclusion which cause an identifiable “atrophy in public spaces of appearance” (Arendt, 1958/98).

Drawing upon this framework, I suggest that many of the contradictions which become apparent in these young women’s accounts of their own and others femininity reflect a struggle to come to terms with their embodiment of gendered and classed ‘relations of domination’, their need to distance themselves from the banal superfluity (Curtis on Arendt, 1999) of femininity in mass media (and media saturated popular culture) and the elusory power offered by gendered narratives of individualization and commercialized autonomy (Dillabough, 2008, in conversation). Finally, notions about, and young women’s reconciliations of ideal (deviant) femininity are complex. Consequently, the remainder of the chapter outlines the most predominant sub-themes emerging from young women’s reconciliations to media representations of ideal (deviant) femininity in terms of: impossible bodies; empowerment, consumption and the economies of fashion; and, impossible freedoms.

Impossible bodies

Everything in the genesis of the female habitus and in the social conditions of its actualization combines to make the female experience of the body the limiting case of the universal experience of the body-for-others, constantly exposed to the objectification performed by the gaze and the discourse of others (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 63).

Nowhere is a woman’s body more a ‘body-for-others’ than in the high-gloss pages of the magazines which project fashionable (and often paradoxical) images of ‘ideal’ femininity. The following selections from the interviews are taken from the young women’s responses to an advertisement taken from *Elle Girl* magazine (June/July, 2005).

In the image, two tanned, slim young White women are dressed in clothing which reveals (emphasizes) their legs, arms and breasts and they are taking a photo of themselves in what looks like a public place:

Int.: What's going on here?

Cara: Girls trying to look good with their tans and their skinny bodies and their mini-skirts [...] More like girls in LA or California kind of girls.

[...]

Usually nowadays girls have to look certain way like how they have to be fit and in style, in clothing [...] It seems like everyone wants the girls to look that certain way, you know, the supermodel type? (age 15).

Anne: It's an ad for one thing, just don't buy into it. I really don't care. Two girls, looking like they're clubbing, taking pictures of themselves, designer shoes, it's the ideal girls [...] I don't know, they all look the same to me (age 16).

Sarah: they don't look much older than my age, still in school, their shirts are really low [...] (age 15)

Kate: I think they are pretty, obviously they are air brushed to make them look extra pretty. Some girls don't know that, it's common sense that no one looks that beautiful. Anyone would want to look like that but then everyone has their own sense of beauty. (age 16)

Thus we see that young women are consciously media savvy; they know and can readily identify the commercial aims of gendered media and advertising and they acknowledge the ubiquitous presence of such media in their lives. In fact, one young woman's response to a question about where feminine ideals originate was: "obviously from the media. I mean, where else are you supposed to get it?" (Anne, age 16). But I suggest that their embodied, deeply unconscious knowledge (Bourdieu, 2001) is touched by both the rendering of femininity banal in public spaces (Arendt, 1958/1998, 1963) and the operation of popular social narratives which cast all young women as equal and as having already achieved universal equality and power within cultures of consumption (see Gonick, 2006; Griffin, 2004; Harris, 2004a; McRobbie, 2004a).

The symbolic violence which Bourdieu argues results from the embedded circulation of symbolic/masculine domination is perhaps most evident in the young women's narrated experiences with issues of 'beauty' as the term is used to describe (and monitor) the female body shape and weight. Despite their derision of media representations of "skinny" girls, there are always emerging signs of the 'impossible girl' (Griffin, 2004). The young women's narratives reveal their largely unconscious, embodied acknowledgment of normative notions of the ideal female form. Note one young woman's unconscious expression of her embodied understanding of female body weight as a normative site of judgment and of evaluating personal worth:

Val: He [a male classmate] was really mean to this specific girl, another girl in the class, chubby.

Int.: So she was being harassed.

Val: No, he just didn't like her (age 15).

Bourdieu (2001) suggests that such unconscious expression is an embodied knowledge which reveals an individual's awareness of the "verbal or non-verbal cues which designate the symbolically dominant position" (p. 34). The 'symbolically dominant position' for femininity is slimness (as judged through a masculine lens) and so from the (embodied) dominant perspective being 'chubby' provides a reasonable explanation for why the young woman described in this passage might have been disliked by her classmate.

In the following selections I suggest that we can observe the structures of masculine domination operating through young women's perspectives on female body shape and weight as such perspectives come together in tension with their similarly embodied engagement with popular gendered empowerment discourses and their cultural experiences of being explicitly judged as deviant from the ideal:

Int.: [...] is there an ideal beauty that you think you should be striving for, as a girl in school?

Kate: Each person has a different perspective about beauty, in my case beauty for me is not too skinny, but flat tummy, wear[ing] nice clothes.

Int.: Where does that pressure come from?

Kate: Guys. Some of your friends are naturally beautiful, they don't have to try to make themselves look beautiful, other people do, and they use makeup with that. When we go out with a friend someone who is naturally beautiful you'll see those friends getting hit on by the guys, and then attracting all the guys, then they would say you are not beautiful, we don't like you.

Int.: How does that make you feel?

Kate: Makes me feel I am not beautiful, I am not wanted. (age 16)

Anne: I think anyone can be beautiful, doesn't matter, if you think you yourself inside is gorgeous then you are, nobody can stop you, nobody can say anything against you, there are a lot of this problem [sic] at school – they would say 'go away, you're so ugly', well [I say] my boyfriend doesn't think so.

Int.: Do people say that?

Anne: Yes, they do and it's ridiculous. I have really good looking girlfriends who are maybe becoming models [...] they don't tease them as they tease me. They sure make fun of me more, and it hurts me more [...]. (age 16)

Gendered empowerment narratives position young women as autonomous agents who, because of their liberated status and media savvy, can consciously choose to remain unaffected by media proliferated representations of “perfect” (often surgically or digitally altered) female bodies; representations which themselves are underpinned by the symbolic discourse of gendered empowerment (see McRobbie, 2004a). And so, on one hand ideal femininity is ubiquitously presented as an ‘impossible’ body and on the other hand association with ideal femininity is formed through the conscious affirmation of the parity of all female bodies. Such contradictions are difficult to reconcile and I suggest that in seeking to distance themselves from the public sexualization and fetishization of femininity through mass media proliferation of such representations (what Arendt might have called the banal rendering of femininity superfluous in public spaces) young women express the structural paradox as a personal inability to achieve the similarly idealized

feminine quality of detachment from such media pressures; that is to say, of feeling empowered.

Moreover, the young women's personal embodiment of this social/structural paradox was often revealed through their imagined perceptions of external judgment of their body shape and weight. One young woman noted that in elementary school she was labeled "fat and ugly" and now in high school, though part of the "popular" female group, she "still has that feeling that other people think [she's fat] – like guys and other stuff..." (Cara, age 15). Cara relayed this information in the context of identifying as a young woman with Asian heritage in an "Asian school" (ibid.). She identified the stereotypical norm for Asian women as very slim and then compared herself unfavourably to her "somatic" personalization of dominant constructions of normative, racialised femininity (Bourdieu, 2001). Another young woman's response to the question of defining deviant femininity reflected a similar critique of her body against dominant social norms as well as her embodiment of gendered empowerment narratives which demand that she "own" her anxiety about such imagined judgments:

Int.: What's the 'abnormal' girl?

Anne: Fat, probably, deformed, these are people that guys tend to stay away from. I consider myself a little chubby but that's in my own opinion, that's not other people's.

[...]

I'm not very overweight but I do have...my insecurity issues, right? Because I'm taller than most girls and I'm quite a bit bigger than most girls [...] (age 16)

And so, in one example we can observe the intersections of stereotypes of race and gender in the creation of a normative feminine ideal and on another level we might note that in both examples we see that the imagined feeling or sense of being judged as

‘deviant’ in terms of body shape or weight is as relevant a (symbolic) violence as is the actual experience of judgment.

Bourdieu (2001) notes that the embodiment of masculine domination reveals itself through the “apparent arbitrariness of an inclination” despite the presence of conscious thoughts and expressions which would seem to contradict such inclinations (p.36). Moreover, he argues that “acts of cognition are acts of practical recognition, doxic acceptance, a belief that does not need to be thought and affirmed as such, and which in a sense ‘makes’ the symbolic violence which it undergoes” (p. 34). I suggest the young women’s contradictory references to what “guys” think, say or want, to their feelings of imagined judgment and to the ‘truth’ of all beauty being equal represent a form of ‘practical recognition’ which reflects the deeply paradoxical social notions of gendered individualism and ideal beauty which operate (through the *habitus*) to exclude young women from the category of ‘ideal girl’ whilst simultaneously rendering such exclusion a personal thought or feeling.

Following Bourdieu, then, I would argue that the symbolic violence evidenced in these young women’s feelings of “hurt” and rejection (based on their similar experiences of being “not beautiful (slim) enough”) is ‘remade’ through their embodiment of the girl power discourse which operates to require young women to express their individuality by “owning” or personalizing social notions of feminine beauty. Finally, I suggest that the contradictions we are seeing in these young women’s narratives of gender and beauty reveal the “durability” of the “relations of domination” despite (or perhaps because of) popular ideologically driven discourses which regularly announce the demise of such “outdated” relations.

To summarize what I have argued thus far, I note that the seeming ease with which these young women initially assess and dismiss media representations of ‘ideal’ femininity might suggest that the prolific reproduction of such images has little effect on contemporary, media savvy young women (see Baumgardner & Richards, 2000). But, as McNay (1999) argues, popular claims which laud young women’s “conscious” rejection of popular media ignore “the fact that individuals do not straightforwardly reproduce the social system is not a guarantee of the inherently resistant nature of their actions (p. 105). Furthermore, Willis (2003) argues that despite the media savvy now comfortably displayed by most young people “we should not underestimate the cultural offensive of capitalism against the young consumer (p. 401). Such cautions require that young women’s dismissal of the effects of domination not be reproduced analytically as an uncritical testament to popular empowerment rhetoric. Moreover, whether they elaborate or not, all of these young women make at least one (un)conscious remark which indicates their embodied understanding of a very traditional and deeply gendered equation: slim = beautiful = desirable to men = ideal female; an equation which is reproduced en masse in popular media and is thus reinscribed on the habitus of young women. And so, despite a conscious recognition of “airbrushing”, a dismissal of such images because the models “all look the same”, an acknowledgment of the commodification of the femininity displayed (“it’s an ad for one thing, just don’t buy into it”), or an oblique critique of such femininity (“trying to look good with their tans and their skinny bodies and their mini-skirts”, “low [cut] shirts”) we can also observe the symbolic violence revealed in the young women’s later comments about beauty, body size, weight and shape. Moreover, I have argued that the empowerment narratives which underpin images of slim, beautiful

and powerful young women *also* insist that young women affirm “true” equality of all shapes and sizes of feminine beauty (see McRobbie, 2004a, 2005a). And so, young women experience symbolic violence as an unconscious trap which positions them between their need to resist the public superfluity of femininity (Arendt) and their use of deeply contradictory empowerment narratives which, ultimately, personalize a young woman’s inability to measure up to (or to ‘not care’ about not measuring up to) the feminine ideal.

In the next section I expand upon this theme to explore young women’s ‘impossible’ economies of fashionable consumption. I begin by interpreting young women’s responses to a media sample which equates consumption with feminine power using the sexualized body of a young female model.

Empowerment, consumption and the economies of fashion

“Now You Have the Power” – Young women “in drag as powerful decision makers”
(Fine, 2004, p.)



Figure 11, *Elle Girl* magazine, V05 advertisement, June/July 2005 (used with permission)

A V05 hair-styling product advertisement which appeared in the 2005, Jun/July edition of *Elle Girl* (a fashion magazine targeted to teenage young women) declares.

Now you have the Power! Show your style who's boss! New V05 power control styling gel puts you in control...it creates a healthy, lively style that does what it's told...C'mon, take control. (fig. 11)

The text appears beside the stylized image of a young woman standing with her legs spread wide beneath a leather (possibly 'pleather') mini-skirt which appears to be splashed with the advertised gel. Her jacket of the same material is cropped to expose her belly. Such overt sexual characterization of 'powerful' 'in control' femininity was not remarked upon when it was shown during the interviews. In fact, in relation to the first magazine sample this V05 advertisement was received as a positive depiction of female individuality and power. Note the following selections taken from the interviews:

Sarah: She has her own style, I see that right away, she has her hair the way she likes, she has cool earrings, the clothes she is wearing look like leather, but it's cool because it's her own kind of style.

[...]

...her hair looks so cool, it's flipped out really cool, if I were some younger girl not knowing what I wanted to be, how I wanted to look, I'd be oh her hair is so cool, I would cut my hair just like that, style my hair just like that and buy her clothes. (age 15)

Cara: More punky style. Like her own style...like she can do whatever she wants type of thing.

[...]

I think this girl – she's wild, like she can do...like she won't take people's stuff, like if people tell her what to dress like she'll say 'no'.

Int.: Right. She might be more of an independent thinker.

Cara: Yes. (age 15)

Anne: That one is a bit cooler [than the other images shown]. It just seems to be much fun, it tends to grab your attention. It looks like they did editing which they obviously did to make her look like she was formed out of water which is interesting [...] (age 16)

Although the young women displayed a high degree of critical media acumen when faced with advertising which draws upon more stereotypical versions of ideal femininity (White, blonde, very slim, consuming and sexy but passive) the addition of the language and symbolism of girl power to a very similar advertisement operates through their habitus to get in the way of their conscious critique of a similarly stereotypical representation of femininity. None of the young women remarked upon this representation's adherence to a dominant standard for feminine beauty: a laughing, happy *young* White woman with a very slim but curvy body which is encased in revealing clothing and posed in an overtly sexual manner. In fact, though at different points during the interviews each young woman offers general criticism of media images which present models in "skimpy clothing", cropped shirts and "mini-skirts" none of the young women remarks upon the very short skirt or cropped, tight jacket worn by the model in this advertisement.

We might understand this oversight through the operation of the habitus as it is both inscribed with the "relations of [masculine] domination" and as it operates to predispose us to value particular appearances and ways of appearing within a particular field or set of overlapping fields (Bourdieu, 2001; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). As a social field contemporary media is rife with representations of the sexualized female form. Thus it might be argued that the operations of habitus render mundane a certain level of explicit sexualization of femininity by media. But this explanation is incomplete as it does not account for these young women's deft identification of the commodification of feminine (hetero)sexuality in one image but not the other. I turn, then to McRobbie's observation which suggests that critiques of overtly sexualized media

representations of femininity are obstructed by gendered empowerment narratives which construct an ideal female subject who unconsciously *knows* women cannot be objectified because they are already “equal” (see 2004a, 2005a, 2005b).

I suggest, therefore, that the young women’s positive acceptance of the second media sample (fig. 11) reflects their embodiment of mass media’s paradoxical reliance on popular gendered empowerment narratives to prop up representations of ideal femininity which might otherwise be critiqued on the grounds of their sexualization and objectification of femininity. In this context, I suggest that the young women read the model’s clothing and strong body language as a form of empowered individuality (“she has her own style, I see that right away”; “she can do whatever she wants...she won’t take other people’s stuff”). The second media sample’s (fig. 11) commercialized expression of sexualized femininity is thus rendered legitimate (“cool”) by virtue of its reliance on the discourse and symbolism of popular gendered empowerment.

Feminist defense of young women’s embodiment of the sexualized popular culture signifiers of femininity positions such embodiment as a feminist assertion of a woman’s ‘choice’ (see Baumgardner and Richards, 2004). But, as Griffin (2004) notes, popular feminist and media constructions of the embodiment of such signifiers as a measure of ‘girl-power’ immediately excludes any young woman who is restricted from ‘choosing’ to display her femininity through sexually charged fashions by virtue of her culture, religion, economic status or personal comfort level. In other words, when a certain degree of overtly displayed sexuality becomes part of the dominant cultural definition of ‘ideal’ femininity (regardless of whether such a definition positions women as either a passive objects or an empowered subjects) ‘sexiness’ begins to define the

boundaries of gendered exclusion. I now move forward to explore the conditions of such exclusion with particular reference to the young women's constrained economic circumstances.

Young women's consumption of media-driven fashions cannot be discussed without an understanding of how economic status intersects with and complicates the social directive to achieve "freedom" and public legitimacy through consumption (see Gonick, 2006; Harris, 2004a; Willis, 2003). Although all of the young women call attention to the tension between their constrained economic circumstances and popular gendered mandates of fashion(able) consumption, the narratives reveal that they each reconcile such tensions in varied ways. Such variation, I would argue, can be attributed, in part, to their identification within particular school peer groups and to their relationship with particular narratives of social class and race. Finally, I note each young woman's in-common use of the symbolism and discourse of popular gendered empowerment narratives in her explanation of her relationship to fashion and to the fashionable drive to consume.

The following passages highlight some of the young women's responses to fashion and to their reconciliations of their own financially constrained circumstances within the dominant pressure to consume as a measure of ideal femininity:

Cara: [...] And it [a suburb of the city] was more of a rich city and my sister would always tell me how sometimes she feels pressured to be part of the rich group.

Int.: You mean out there or just in general?

Cara: In general like with her friends.

[...]

Int.: And what style and stuff – what's the 'certain look'? Can you describe it for me?

Cara: Just type of clothing. Like most girls now buy those really expensive clothing. Like one sweater is just a hundred something.

Int.: Like name brand?

Cara: Yeah.

[...]

Int.: Where do you think those images come from?

Cara: Well mostly t.v. yeah the publicity and everything. [...]

[...]

Cara: If they [other girls] see you based on what you wear they know you're the rich type and you can afford that kind of clothing.

Int.: Ah, ok, so there's also a money factor in all of this too. You have to be able to afford to look like this, is that what you mean?

Cara: Yeah, yeah (age 15).

Sarah: I just want to be acting myself and acting normal

Int.: Do you mean you don't want to be under pressure?

Sarah: Just be yourself, if this is the way you act, don't change it for anybody. In style, just make up your own style, that's just as cool, that's beauty, that's what I do. You buy pants and you do something with your pants. Me and my friends we like to glue stuff we just make it our own and we just switch back and forth because we are the same size. That's what I think is beauty style (age 15).

Int.: What group are you in?

Kate: For grade 10, my grade, the popular group we actually care about school, I am in the school oriented group, fashion too.

Int.: Tell me about the fashion part.

Kate: Our friends will look into the magazine and we will actually copy it and find something similar. Nowadays the fashion is chandelier earrings, they will go buy long earrings.

[...]

Kate: Most of my friends they go for the punky, stylish look. They like to wear dramatic colours, paint their nails black. Different, pretty, unique. But for me I like the unique shirt, how they are designed differently, different cuts and folds. (age 16)

Significant in each of these accounts is the assertion of a particular feminine identity through style. Also significant is that each of these young women identified as belonging to or "sometimes hanging around" (Cara) the "popular group" (Kate, Sarah, Cara and several other young women not involved in the study) for her grade. In general the young women in the popular group most often identified the cost of fashion as problematic within the context of trying to subvert such constraints through the "active appropriation" (Willis, 2003; also see *symbolic creativity*, 1990) of particular styles (displayed in media)

through which they asserted their identity as “stylish”, “pretty”, and “unique” young women. And, although each young woman in the ‘popular group’ described her own particular notion of ideal style, the language used by each young woman was remarkably similar. Their experiences with fashion were most often infused with the symbolism of popular ‘empowerment’ and ‘reinvention’ narratives (“just make it our own [style]”, “don’t change for anybody”, “different, pretty, unique”) which problematically equate collective reinvention within narrowly defined territories of ‘ideal’ feminine style. Thus for the ‘popular’ peer group the ability to reinvent the female ‘self’ through fashion becomes a mark of socio-economic status and a site of peer monitoring of an implied acceptance (or rejection) within the dominant group. The young women who ‘belonged’ to this group were able to subvert the issue of being labeled unfashionable (due to economic constraint) in a way that reinforced their high social status as ‘ideal’ or popular females within the school context. But, as Willis (1999) notes “human consumption does not simply repeat the relations of production – and whatever cynical motives lie behind them. Interpretation, symbolic action and creativity are *part* of consumption” (p. 21). And so, although these young women subscribe to more traditional modalities of femininity through their appropriation of fashion trends to suit their more constrained circumstances, I note that McNay’s theory of “generative agency...explain[s] the elements of variability and potential creativity immanent to even the most routine reproduction of gender identity” (1999, p. 101).

On the other hand, those young women who did not identify as ‘belonging’ to the popular group made sense of dominant narratives of reinvention through fashion through a disassociation of such narratives from their understanding of ‘practical’ reality and by

positioning themselves in opposition to other young women who invested in fashion. And so Val, who identified with a group of young women who were largely ignored within the classroom said that she and the other young women within her group used the term “hard-core” to classify “girls” who they felt used “appearance” to get attention: “some rely on physical appearance...they dress nice, they have money” (age 15). She also suggested that such interests are antithetical to a commitment to school work and so resists the imperative to ‘reinvent’ through fashion via a complicated assertion of her academic commitment as different from ‘other’ young women’s lack of academic sensibilities. Moreover, she tied such an imagined lack to her peers’ appearance-conscious bids for attention which she later set against her own ‘choice’ to distance herself from such attention-seeking appearances: “I don’t like the attention” (ibid.).

Another young woman reconciled her disinvestment from fashion and fashionable reinvention narratives by describing her attitude toward fashion in practical terms. Following an earlier discussion wherein she expressed her “frustrat[ion]” with “all the skinny bimbos running around trying to be Paris Hilton”¹⁰⁶ Anne situated her own lack of interest in fashion in opposition to other young women’s financial freedom to consume (her definitions are based upon having attended a school in a privileged area for six months):

Int.: [...] does it make a difference depending on whether you’re in a higher economic bracket or a lower one or, you know, if your school is on the downtown east side or if it’s on the upper west side?

Anne: I think it does make a lot of difference. Because my mom has gone through money trouble, right? And I see it because she’s like, Anne, you know

¹⁰⁶ Paris Hilton is a pop culture celebrity who styles herself as a fashion icon and whose initial fame came about as a result of the “accidental” mass production of her private sex video. In some popular circles she is praised for her business acumen and “liberated choice” to sensationalize her sexuality as a means of power.

what? We can't spend much money this month [...] But when you're on the west side and you have lots of money you don't even have to worry about it [...] Because on the west side there'll always be food in their fridges. But when you come on the east side you know that people are low on money [...]. There's not enough money to buy food, which is an essential part of living. [...]

Anne: Yeah. And for me, I'm just like, I have clothes since a long time ago [laughing]. I've been wearing this shirt for like so many months because I love it [...] (age 16).

Here and elsewhere in the interviews Anne, like Val, implicitly framed fashion and gendered fashionable reinvention as of interest to those who must have no other (practical) concerns. And again, such concerns are expressed as deeply personal and embodied understandings of social realities. And so, although all of these young women express their experience of similar financial constraints those young women whose appearances did not fit within the dominant popular group mitigated their exclusion from the normalized feminine 'ideal' within the school and validated their own worth by drawing upon what McRobbie (2005a) observes is a contemporary media form of "female symbolic violence" as a process of "class differentiation" based on taste and particular investments in appearance (pp. 99 & 102). And, as Willis (2003) argues, it is against popular groups within the school culture that those who do not belong to such high status groups "are likely to seek justifications for their own positions in relation to the dominant popular in the magnification of the mappings of distinction that are beneficial to them" (p. 407). And so again, the social conditions of exclusion based on economic constraints which block access to the most popularly disturbed means of power for young women remain largely invisible as the dominant conflation of the consumption of fashion, self-reinvention and a hyper-sexual version of female power plays out in the

cultural field of the school as a series of “choices” and ‘distinctions’ which are framed as personal judgments of value.

Impossible Freedoms

Advertising marketed to young women presents such young women as powerful leaders with the ability to act freely as individuals in an unconstrained world of unlimited possibility. Although the samples are limited to what Willis (1990) refers to as “style-and-identity products”, such language is largely representative of the language and symbolism ubiquitous within media which targets young women and offers idealized representations of young, female subjects. Moreover, such gendered media suggests that ‘lifestyle’ choices translate into a sort of generalized freedom of choice and acquisition of power. In reality, the narratives of young women who live in disadvantaged circumstances reveal the social, economic and symbolically embodied constraints which mark their everyday experiences and their plans for the future. In this last section of the chapter I compare gendered empowerment narratives’ representation of young women as constrained only by their personal ambition and drive to the actual *lived* circumstances of young women’s lives and with their projected plans for the future.

All of the young women involved in this research expressed a desire to (at least for a time) leave their neighbourhood in order to travel, attend university or college, to have a career and in one instance to avoid her parents’ plan to “arrange” a marriage immediately post high school. Yet their expressed desires to build a career and to attend post secondary school are often juxtaposed with descriptions of a future in which they position themselves as the main caretakers of children, husband and home. Indeed, for

most of these young women, the care of younger siblings, concern about family finances and the preparation of family meals is already part and parcel of their everyday life.

Although she has an older male sibling, one young woman was responsible for her younger sibling on weekends and organized alternate child care from her peer group when she was scheduled to work a weekend shift at her part-time job (Kate, 16).

Another, who also had an older brother living at home, was expected to leave school early to care for her younger sibling when he was too young for day care,

Cara: Yeah, my mom would make me come home early [from school] to take care of him [younger brother]. But now I come home right after school so he's just alone for a little while (age 15).

Such responsibilities are best understood in terms of their relationship to *both* socio-economic status and gender. While these young women partially attributed their responsibility for domestic and economic duties to living with a single parent and/or their parent having “no choice” but to work long hours for little compensation they also often observed their own place as young women in more traditional divisions of gendered labour. I suggest that such acceptance reveals their unconscious embodiment of the social operations of masculine domination and, furthermore, calls attention to what Bourdieu (2001) labels the “durable effects” of the ‘relations of domination’ even in the face of popular narratives of empowered femininity which position young women as agents of choice and change (see Gonick, 2006; Griffin, 2004; McRobbie, 2004a).

The relations of masculine domination are just that, relations; and so the ‘durable effects’ of such domination are best revealed in the contrasts between male and female roles, duties and responsibilities to which the young women often referred. One young woman noted that her older brother lives in the family home, arrives home late in the

evening and then leaves early in the morning for work while she stays home before and after school in order to help her mother with domestic duties (Cara, age 15). Another young woman described the different activities of her male and female peers and drew such comparisons along class lines in relation to her recent experiences in a school in a more privileged neighbourhood:

Anne: The guys...I think the goal of a lot of guys [on the East side] is...to get their own place, to try and not get someone pregnant, and to keep on working...have a decent job so they can have their luxuries.
[...I find that girls would probably want to be able to support their families more...Because they've seen their mother do that for so long that they probably want to help out with the house. I mean, that's what I do. I stay home and do dishes one day so my mom can keep going to work and stuff, right?
[...]
And there's this other girl that I know and she's from Mexico and her mother's from Mexico and her mother just had a kid, but the father's still in Mexico. And she's getting a job right now and helping her mom look after her new baby brother. And that's just that family commitment that that girl has to her family is really strong on the east side. And I find that on the west side a girl will just drop her shit, get it all together and like, just leave. And will feel nothing. No sense of guilt or anything for doing that (age 16).

Apart from what I would suggest is evidence of the clear relevance of Bourdieu's insistence on the resilience of masculine domination in contemporary society I would like to call attention here to Anne's awareness of the operations of class and economic disadvantage in young women's plans for the future, although she attributes such differences in social access to personal characteristics. Access to higher education and career together with the freedom to focus on such aspirations to the exclusion of domestic responsibilities ("drop her shit, get it all together and just leave") is directly dependent upon economic and social capital. I suggest that Anne's narrative account of the differences between east and west side domestic responsibility reflects a complex process of conscious and unconscious engagement with traditional feminine norms of private

power (see Bourdieu, 2001). She reconciles both economic necessity and the structural operation of masculine domination which demands that young women in constrained social and economic circumstances take on traditional domestic duties by identifying the shouldering of such duties as a personal attribute rather than the embodiment of a deeply historical class/gender order. Meaning is thus created out of necessity as fragments of contemporary manifestations of masculine domination are subverted by the reproduction of traditional symbols of ideal femininity. More specifically, this young woman generates meaning within her constrained social and economic circumstances by subverting popular constructions of the empowered, self-focused thus ideal young women via an embodiment of the more traditional symbolic language of the selfless, ideal female homemaker.

As Willis (1990) notes, traditional narratives of femininity seem to retain stronger ties within working class and lower socio-economic communities. Walkerdine et al (2001) also remark that in their study of young working class women, “class as an indicator of social difference...[was] a reliable predictor of the different life paths and chances of the young women who took part in [their] research” (p. 6). In relation to the media and to media’s reproduction of the dominant structures of the social world, young women’ experience of marginalization and disadvantage is particularly marked by static historical and gendered hierarchies. Willis (1990) elaborates,

On one hand [economically disadvantaged young women] are a target group for many home commodities as well as for feminine style-and-identity products. On the other hand, and with no money recompense and no real power in the consumer market, they may be making partial, early and exploited ‘transitions’ (often in an imperceptible extension of childhood domestic chores ‘naturally’ expected of girls but not of boys) into domestic roles of care and maintenance. (p. 13)

And so we might begin to see how masculine domination operates along both classed and gendered lines in the lives of these young women.

I turn now to one young woman's account of what, in terms of this research, became the most obvious example of the resilience of traditional forms of symbolic/masculine domination in contemporary times. Moreover, her experiences of economic disadvantage in relation to dominant representations of ideal and ideally empowered femininity are further complicated by her desire to distance herself from the ethnic and religious ties of her parent's culture. I have included a great deal of her narrative here as her own words express the complexity of her situation better than any explanation I could offer:

Cara: [...] Because we're Muslim we have a tradition how we get an arranged marriage. Yeah, I don't feel comfortable with that 'cause my mom she has a crazy idea that she wants me to marry my cousin. And I think it's really disgusting.

Int.: Have you been able to tell her that?

Cara: Yeah, I yelled at her [...]

Int.: Does it work out ok with your family when you're trying to say to them that this isn't going to be?

Cara: I'm worried in the future when I do end up getting married 'cause they really want me to marry another Muslim relative. Maybe not by blood but still I don't feel comfortable with that.

[...]

it's like my family in Cambodia. It's what my parents want me to do too, get an arranged marriage right after I graduated and just be a stay at home mom, stuck there for the rest of my life. And I don't want to because I want a career ahead of me too.

[...]

But I worry that if I do kind of go my own way my parents won't be in my life in the future.

Int.: Is that right? Have they said that to you? [...]

Cara: Yeah, 'cause they really, 'cause all of my relatives on my dad's side they've done it the traditional way. And one time he talked to my brother about it and he said he doesn't, and he really wants one of us to at least be part of that...he feels it was a mistake to raise us in Canada 'cause he thinks we're all corrupted now. (Cara, 15)

Cara's desire to resist her family's tradition of arranged marriage was not without complication. She was pressured by concerns about the possible consequences of such subversive action and her fears are based in experience. Cara observed her older sister's period of familial isolation and now strained familial relationship which came about following her older sister's resistance to an arranged marriage:

Cara: [...] 'Cause my mom tried to do that [arrange a marriage] to my sister too and she got really mad and said...she kind of went wild and left the house [...]
[...]

Int.: But does she have contact with your parents?

Cara: Before when she left the house she barely visits but now she at least visits once or twice every month.

Int.: And is it ok?

Cara: Yeah, she still calls sometimes.

As Cara's words indicate, the decision to resist such cultural norms is not, as media representations of fun, fearless and empowered young women project, as easy and uncomplicated as "abandoning" the "latest trend" (Elle Girl, 2005, *CocaCola* advertisement) or "taking control" of a hairdo (see fig. 11). The gendered and symbolic language of media often implicitly conflates fashion, beauty and 'lifestyle' choices with a generalized freedom to be, to feel or to act in all areas of life (see McRobbie, 2005a). Cara's experiences clearly conflict with popular media suggestions that contemporary young women are free to choose to either embrace or abandon femininities, seemingly at whim. Yet the language she uses to express her desire to subvert her family's tradition of arranged marriage ('go my own way') is infused with the empowerment symbolism of the unconstrained choices of a 'free' individual. And though she expresses her strong antipathy for her parents' cultural tradition of arranged marriage, in other sections of the interviews she asserts a strong desire for marriage on her own terms. Thus we can see

that young women's resistance to and reproduction of larger social structures are particularly infused and thus constrained by the operations of symbolic/masculine domination (Bourdieu, 2001) and discourses of gendered empowerment. Cara's narrative reveals the depth of the conflict between popular representations of independent, 'empowered' women and the complicated and constrained circumstances in which young women actually live.

The possible repercussions within Cara's family for her subversion of the tradition of arranged marriage are real and have significant meaning for her and for her plans for the future. As she remarked, her father is very sensitive to any perceived expressions of gendered 'empowerment' because of his preexisting concerns about the challenges to his own cultural heritage which have risen out of the family's move to Canada. Thus, for Cara access to problematic gendered expressions of empowered femininity is constrained not only by her economic circumstances but also by the norms and values of her familial culture and religion. The popular imperative to 'be an individual' carries with it the heavy burden of possible isolation from familial and cultural networks of support. On the other hand, should she acquiesce to her family's wishes or indeed embrace the practice of arranged marriage, Cara faces exclusion from her Canadian peer group. As we see here, she has already experienced exclusion related to her Cambodian-Muslim cultural heritage:

Int.: [reads from a classroom exercise in which Cara reflects upon personal experiences with exclusion] '...harmful, excluded from others, used to be made fun of, arranged marriage, can't eat pork...' it's a very good summary of what you've already been talking about. So in a way being Muslim is presenting all these problems in the Canadian context [...]

Cara: mm hmmm [in agreement] Yeah. (age 15)

Though dominant Canadian socio-cultural structures are infused with a long history of *masculine domination*, the same structural mores identify arranged marriage as outside the ‘norm’ for ‘ideal’ young women. Thus Cara’s connection to the practices of arranged marriage (as well as other aspects of her cultural and religious heritage) set her apart. In this context, arranged marriage, also part of the heritage of masculine domination (Bourdieu, 2001), isolates her experiences from those of her peers and so she is caught within what Griffin identifies as the “double marginalization” which occurs when a young woman’s particular ethnic background is devalued within public space (2004, p. 36). Thus Cara’s narrative reveals her unique experience of exclusion as gender and social/economic location intersect with religion and culture in a particular national context.¹⁰⁷

When positioned within their social/historical context, Cara’s actions and ‘choices’ cannot be construed as free. Cara, like all of us, is inextricably connected to both the norms and values of her parents’ cultural and religious heritage and to the dominant norms which operate within a Canadian high school in an urban, inner-city context. In other words, to interpret Cara’s expression of resistance as the desiring act of a ‘free agent’ ignores the obvious and hidden, conscious and unconscious social constraints inscribed on her body through the habitus (Bourdieu, 2001). Though her expressed desire to avoid a marriage arranged by her parents subverts (in a particular and contingent moment) hetero-dominant social norms of marriage, childrearing and domestic arrangements her act of resistance is bracketed within the interwoven fetters of her position within her family and her social location within a particular state.

¹⁰⁷ Although I end my analysis here it is certainly possible to extend an analysis of Cara’s narrative to include discussions of nationalism, identity and exclusion. See Nayak, 2003, Brown and Halley, 2002, Bourdieu, 1998 among many others.

If, as Skeggs (1997) argues, “femininity is always classed” (in Bullen and Kenway, 2004) then I suggest that on one level we can read young women’s “investment” with more traditional femininities as the acquisition of the cultural capital of “respectability” in constrained economic circumstances (pp. 147-148). In some ways it might be argued that Anne’s and her friend’s ‘investment’ in traditional femininities represents disadvantaged young women’s resistance to the contemporary feminine ideal of reinvention through compulsory consumption of fashion and of ideologies of feminine psychology and appearance. But if we do argue that these young women are resisting dominant notions of ideal femininity we must recognize that such resistance is also born of necessity and so we must take care to avoid casting such resistance as the liberated act of a socially and politically free young women. Moreover, such resistance is rooted in the private realm and so loses the (albeit problematic) status of legitimate citizenship publicly bestowed on young women whose economic circumstances allow them to participate in such gendered consumption. In this way the identities of feminine disadvantage are rendered superfluous within the public realm and despite their resistance these young women are still struggling to contend with the social structures which render them Griffin’s “impossible subjects” (2004, p. 42).

Conclusion

The young women interviewed in this study are not unwitting “victims” of media domination. They do not mindlessly ape the ideal fashions, “lifestyles” and body shape/weight reproduced in the thousands upon thousands of media images which saturate our public spaces. In fact, as I have shown in this chapter, the young women

often provided adept critiques of media-driven images of ideal femininity. Moreover, their fashion “choices” (though made in constrained economic circumstances) reflect a generative and creative (see McNay, 2000; Willis, 1990) effort to “appropriate” (Willis, 2003) and thus alter popular fashion and ideas about fashion to fit with their own meaningful expressions of selfhood. And yet, the young women’s narratives also testify to the fact that the effects of mass media representation of (often contradictory) ideal (deviant) femininities is felt as a form of *symbolic violence* (Bourdieu, 2001). So, for example, while these young women might easily criticize unrealistic representations of feminine body weight and shape or mediated notions of feminine sexuality *they also* express painful feelings of being ostracized and objectified (“I have my insecurity issues”, “they say go away, you’re so ugly...and it hurts me” Anne, 16; “makes me feel I am not beautiful, I am not wanted” Kate, 16). Moreover, I have argued that because media representations of idealized gendered empowerment and reinvention imply that young women are ‘free to choose’ to be, to act, to speak and to think in ways limited only by their conscious imagination, such feelings become reinscribed on their *habitus* as personal, internal deviations from the ideal of independent feminine power and so act as another form of *symbolic violence* (Bourdieu, 2001).

Importantly, and as Walkerdine et al (2001) note, narratives of gendered empowerment are closely allied with what Rose (1992) describes as the contemporary global ascent of neo-liberal economics within the social sphere which carry the personalized imperative to “render...life meaningful, as if it were the outcome of individual choices made in the furtherance of a biographical project of self-realization [and] ...however apparently external and implacable may be the constraints, obstacles

and limitations” (p. 12 in Walkerdine et al. 2001, p. 2). Moreover, there is an Orwellian quality to the way in which gendered empowerment narratives effectively remove the language which might be used to critique media representations of ideal (deviant) femininity and to describe the distinctly social nature of economic constraint and exclusion based on social and cultural circumstances (see McRobbie, 2004a, 2005a; Taft, 2004). Under such social influences, young women who are “doubly marginalized” (Griffin, 2004, p. 36) are left with little choice but to (largely unconsciously) internalize their “failures” to reconcile ‘impossible’ femininities.¹⁰⁸ As I have argued, the personalization of social processes results in the social and cultural reproduction of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2001). Moreover and from an Arendtian standpoint, our contemporary norm of embodying any recognition of the social as personal means that “we are each driven back on our own subjective experience, in which only our feelings, wants, and desires have reality” (Canovan in Arendt, 1958/98, p. xiii). Arendt observes that the ideological imperative to “attempt to reduce all experiences, with the world as well as with other human beings, to experiences between man and himself [sic]” results in “world alienation” (1958/98, p. 254). Through such ‘world alienating’ social imperatives and processes young women who live in economically disadvantaged circumstances are left with few avenues to political or public legitimacy. Those paths which might lead to potential political “insertions” within common spaces of action and appearance (1958/98, pp.175-247) are obstructed not only by problematic (see the ‘durability’ of symbolic/masculine domination, Bourdieu, 2001) and increasingly

¹⁰⁸ The gendered self-help discourse which underpins media makeover projects (see chapter four and McRobbie, 2005a) uses the market language of ownership to encourage such personalization of external constraint.

superfluous representations of (girl)empowered femininity¹⁰⁹ but also by their financially (and sometimes culturally) constrained ability to “be” the empowered, reinventing, consuming ‘girl’ (see Harris, 2004a).

And so while I would argue that while sites of young women’s reflection do exist, larger social narratives of individualized and gendered empowerment and consumption get in the way of more politically active resistance to idealized femininities. Finally, I would like to again recognize that this research is very preliminary and so, while there were individual accounts which might indicate stronger forms of resistance and which might have developed into suggestive themes within a larger analysis, I could not suggest here that they in any sense formed an emerging theme. They might, however, point to important areas for further research in this field. In the final chapter I explore what I believe to be fruitful areas of further study and I frame such explorations within a discussion of the combined findings of this thesis and of the ethical and political ramifications of these findings.

¹⁰⁹ I am referring here to both the sexualized, fetishized and “girly” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2004) aspects of “girl power” and to the discourses which connect such power to notions of a reinventing, consuming and individualized legitimate citizen (see Harris, 2004a; McRobbie, 2004a).

Chapter Six

CONCLUSION

The tragedy is that what is sometimes called the anesthetization of experience does not actually change the material relation between freedom and necessity, between the chosen and the determined. [...] We must not overlook that the super-abundance of images and imaginary possibilities of apparently free-floating and classless forms of consumption intersect with materially worsening conditions for large sections of the [subordinate classes]. (Willis, 2003, p. 408)

My abiding concern in this thesis has been to open new spaces for thinking about the conditions and potential effects of the mass production and consumption of media representations of ideal (deviant) femininity in relation to economically disadvantaged young women's reconciliations of such depictions and their own accounts of social exclusion. Broadly speaking, in this final chapter I use Arendtian lines of thinking to explore how we might respond ethically and practically to two "ideological[ly] tinged" questions asked by Willis (2003) in particular relation to how femininities are constructed, commodified and consumed in the world. First, "where are the means for the majority to find a collective place in the sun free from ideological straightjackets" (p. 409)? And secondly, "where are the means for the democratic production of new symbolic and informational goods" (ibid.)? In other words, how and where might we begin to imagine and create spaces in which female subjectivities might be framed in more public, political and inclusive ways?

I begin with a summary of my central arguments throughout this thesis and then move forward to discuss the possibilities for change or resistance inherent within the fields of media, education and academic scholarship (see Bourdieu, 1998, 2001; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). I pay particular attention to research which explores and suggests new forms of school based engagements with popular culture and mass media (see

Poyntz, 2006; Stack and Kelly, 2006). I also note that up until this point, this thesis has primarily concerned itself with the relationship between young women who live in disadvantaged economic circumstances and the deeply gendered and classed media which purport to represent them. But I would argue that maintaining such a singular focus in the final discussion risks positioning young women's responses to media in another contextual vacuum.¹¹⁰ As Reay (2001) notes, "femininities can only be understood relationally" (p. 153). Therefore, in this final chapter I expand my focus in terms of exploring how schools might foster conditions in which young people (and the educators, parents and guardians in their lives) might become engaged in politically oriented and context embedded critiques of media representations of ideal (deviant) femininity. I conclude by revisiting Arendt's ethically oriented concerns regarding the necessity for inclusive public spaces of political engagement and debate which recognize the essential plurality of humanity (see 1958/1998). Finally, within this closing chapter I also refer, where appropriate, to tentative findings which emerged from the interviews with the young women who were involved in this research and which suggest the "possibility" (see Arendt, 1958/1998) of "generative" (Bourdieu, 1997/2000; McNay, 2000) forms of resistance to such dominant and ubiquitously visible notions of femininity.

Summary of arguments and findings

Media stories in which representations of femininity are grounded in a history and in the recognition of "human particularity" (without conflating such particularity with

¹¹⁰ Furthermore, I suggest that if my conclusions and suggestions for sites of possible change were to focus entirely on young women who live in economically disadvantaged circumstances then I would be reproducing the conditions in which the social effects of deeply classed and gendered media are ascribed as a series of limiting and personalized What character traits (see Arendt, 1958/1998) to the "unfolding" Who of such young women (ibid.; also see Dillabough, 2008, forthcoming).

Otherness or individualization) are few and far between (see Curtis on Arendt, 1999). Popular depictions of femininity simultaneously objectify, sexualize and fetishize young femininity (often using the doxic symbolism of class, race, gender stereotyping) and present young women as powerful and self empowered free agents who must perpetually reinvent themselves in the direction of an increasingly “impossible” ideal (see Griffin, 2004). I have argued that “relations” of *symbolic/masculine domination* continue to be “durably” but mutably embedded within contemporary media (Bourdieu, 2001) and that seemingly “resolved” gendered class divisions are “remade” (Walkerdine et al, 2001) in new forms through media representations of the deviant young woman (also see Lawler, 2005; McRobbie, 2005a; Skeggs, 2005). I have examined samples of such media which, at its most extreme, presents surgically, digitally or traumatically reinvented femininity as a “normal” ideal (see chapter four). I have suggested that such norms eventually become embedded, naturalized and rendered “acceptable” within the popular imaginary (see Bourdieu’s conceptualization of the *paradox of doxa*, 2001) and so contribute to the *thoughtless* (Arendt, 1963, 1958/1998) proliferation of sexualized, fetishized and pathologized versions of femininity in public spaces. All the while, the social and economic structures which constrain and oppress the lives of many young women are ignored, obscured or misconstrued and misrepresented by popular media as being part of the personal “character” of such young women (see Arendt, 1958/1998 on the conflation of What and Who). Thus, the mass proliferation of illusory, objectified and commodified femininity operates, I have argued, to render the private feminine irrelevant or *banal* within public space (Arendt, 1963, 1958-1998, p. 50-52 & pp. 181-188).

In relation to Arendt's concerns with creating the possibility for young women to appear in public space, I have followed the work of those feminist theorists who critique discourses of gendered empowerment which frequently underpin media representations of ideal (deviant) femininity on the following grounds. First, gendered empowerment narratives often paradoxically declare contemporary young women "free" from hypersexual, fetishized and pathologized media images (by virtue of their media savvy and apparent social and political "equality") *and* "free" to "choose" to emulate such representations *as* expressions of feminine power (see Gonick, 2006; Griffin, 2004; McRobbie, 2004a). In my interviews with young women, I observed how such contradictory messages could result in the reproduction of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2001) as the young women personalized and individualized occurrences of gendered social exclusion based on dominant notions of ideal female appearance, body shape and weight. Further, I found that though each young woman was relatively adept at critiquing media images of idealized femininity they frequently attributed their feelings of inadequacy and pain in the face of gendered exclusion based on media promulgated ideals either to their own inability to "measure up" to the feminine ideal or their personal "self-esteem/self-confidence" deficiencies (see chapter five).

On a second level, popular gendered empowerment discourses construct the ideal young woman as one who exercises legitimate and legitimating powers of consumer choice (see Harris, 2004a; McRobbie, 2004a). Harris (2004a) notes that as an empowered consumer in a commodified world the legitimately participating girl engages in projects of perpetual reinvention and self-improvement which are positioned outside public spaces of engagement. It thus follows that any young woman who, because of

financial constraints, cannot engage in such consumption practices is cut off from the (albeit generally problematic) publicly legitimizing projects of reinvention through consumption. The findings from the interviews show that although all of the young women who I interviewed account for the pressure to consume particular fashions, styles and trends in relation to their own constrained financial circumstances, their reconciliations of such tension were marked by their contingent social and cultural circumstances. But regardless of these contingent differences, I also found that the young women drew upon dominant notions of individualism to either assert subjectivities of independence in relation to the pressure to consume (“I really don’t care” [Anne, age 16]; “Some [girls] rely on appearance...they dress nice, they have money...I don’t like the attention” [Val, age 15]) or to participate as consuming/reinventing subjects by “appropriating” (Willis, 2003) commercial fashions in less costly, more creative ways (“we actually copy [a style] and find something similar...different, pretty, unique” [Kate, age 16]; “just make up your own style...you buy pants and do something with your pants” [Sarah, age 15]).

Thus, from an Arendtian perspective, popular gendered empowerment narratives, with their strong ties to commercialized sexuality and to individualism and consumption as a primary mode of legitimate citizenship, do not open political spaces of appearance for any young woman and particularly not for young women who might be excluded based on their economic, social or cultural circumstances (1958/1998; also see Griffin, 2004; Taft, 2004). And so, we might begin to see how ubiquitous media representations of sexualized, fetishized and pathologized femininity which are frequently underpinned

by narratives of gendered empowerment act to “doubly marginalize” young women who already experience exclusion based on their positioning within society (Griffin, 2004).

In the following section I ask how we might begin to shift these conditions of ‘double marginalization’. To borrow Willis’ (2003) colourful phrasing (cited in the opening paragraph of this chapter), the following pages explore how we might begin to loosen the ‘ideological straightjacket’ which binds dominant thinking about young women, exclusion and mass media within limited (and limiting) frames of “for or against” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 22). Toward that end, I explore the possibilities of a pedagogical engagement with popular culture and media in schools (with reference to post-secondary teacher education programs) as avenues to opening up discussions about popular, mediated femininities and to place such discussions within a larger social and political context. I also call attention to what Bourdieu variously calls the “duty”, the “role” or the “immense historical responsibility” born by “public intellectuals” to regularly attempt to *insert* (Arendt, 1958/1998) their research into the public realm in order to “break[] the appearance of unanimity which is the greater part of the symbolic force of dominant discourse (1998, p. viii). I begin with a brief discussion of Bourdieu’s understanding of the potential nature of, and sites for, social change because although (I believe) he accounts for the potential or the possibility for change in the world, the overarching message inherent within his thinking reminds us that we cannot think about change outside of our embodiment of the structures of our social world (also see Lawler, 2005b).¹¹¹ I would argue that this is a particularly important perspective to keep in mind

¹¹¹ In her concluding remarks about the potential for change in Bourdieu’s theory, Lawler (2005b) suggests that Bourdieu is “pessimistic” but not “deterministic” in his theorizing of the “relations of domination” (Bourdieu, 2001). She connects this assertion to a reflection on Gramsci’s understanding of “pessimism of

if we consider how the dominant discourses which claim “freedom” and a “voice” for young women also frame social issues of economic constraint, gendered and social exclusion as individual problems with personalized solutions (self-esteem, self-improvement, reinvention).

**Potential sites of “possibility” and change
(Arendt, 1958/1998)**

Consciousness and structure are two intertwined poles of continuous cultural processes. If consciousness has to change, so does structure (Willis, 2003, p. 409).

A recurring critique of Pierre Bourdieu’s work suggests that in his focus on the “durability” of “relations of domination” he closes off the possibility of change (see Adkins, 2005, introductory comments). While I would agree that Bourdieu encourages his readers to recognize and account for the embeddedness of historical structures within our multiple social fields and in our habitus, I would also argue that his sociology allows for the possibility of recognizing (and thus altering) the processes and “mechanisms” of the naturalization and “eternalization” of domination (in 2001 also see 1998; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Moreover, at different points in his work, Bourdieu identifies schools and media as sites or fields where structures (of the “masculine order” and the “whole social order”) are reproduced (2001, p. 117). In particular, he criticizes those “who write the newspapers, intellectuals...who are rather too quick to bury the public’s interest in the public interest” (1998, pp. 6-7) and he takes aim at media representations which reflect a political ethos of “submission to the values of the economy” in terms of asking individual citizens to engage in “self-help” as a means to mitigate the effects of structural processes of domination (ibid.).

the intellect [as] the motor for change [because] it demands that we pay attention to inequalities and injustices” (p. 124).

But if the fields of media and the education system reproduce the structures of masculine domination and the ‘social order’, they are also possible sites of change. In his own words,

if we grant that symbolic systems are social products that contribute to making the world, that they do not simply mirror social relations but help constitute them then one can, within limits, transform the world by transforming its representation.
(Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.14)

Further, Bourdieu argues that ‘transforming’ the representations of ‘the world’ must take the form of,

political action that really takes account of all the effects of domination that are exerted through the objective complicity between the structures embodied in both women and men and the structures of the major institutions through which not only the masculine order but the whole social order is enacted and reproduced.
(2001, p. 117)

In other words, he maintains that only a broad and politicized focus on the structures and mechanisms of domination will “contribute to the progressive withering away of masculine domination” (ibid.).

In the following paragraphs I explore possible avenues and engagements with mass media through which we might begin to challenge the way representations of ideal (deviant) femininity (and young women’s responses to such representations) are framed and critiqued in public space. I begin by addressing a concern raised by Stack & Kelly (2006). The authors note that “the focus of public debates about the effects of media revolves around children and youth [but] left largely unexplored is the way media influence how adults come to understand children and youth” (p. 8).¹¹² In relation to this observation, I call attention to Bourdieu’s understanding of the roles and responsibilities of scholars to come together as “collective intellectuals”¹¹³ in order to engage in public

¹¹² The authors cite the exception of Gilliam & Bales, 2001.

¹¹³ I cite another passage where Bourdieu (1998) defines this term from a broader perspective:

resistance to structural forces of domination and to intervene in popularized media debates constructed around “social issues” (1998, pp. viii-10). I then move forward to explore how schools, educators and young people might work with media and popular culture to create and insert (Arendt, 1958/1998) critically and politically informed alternative media into the public domain.

Between 2000 and 2001 the Vancouver Sun ran a series of articles about homelessness in Vancouver which included two stories about Sherry Cowx; a young woman constructed as pathologically needy but beautiful, drug dependent but determined to improve herself (Nuttall-Smith, 2000, 2001). In 2007 the front cover of Maclean’s presented a provocatively posed, scantily-clad young girl under the banner headline, “Why are we dressing our daughters like skanks?” (George, 2007) (see analysis and discussion in chapter four). These are just two examples of a contemporary proliferation of media which present hyper-sexualized, fetishized and pathologized femininity as paradoxically ideal and deviant, depending upon related symbolic markers of class, race, economic status, ethnicity, sexuality and/or diverse ability and according to the public trends in a particular moment.¹¹⁴ If “the media are the primary vehicle through which we come to know ourselves and others” (Stack & Kelly, 2006, p. 20) then it is important for researchers to begin to focus on how adults, particularly those in positions of political or

I would like writers, artists, philosophers and scientists to be able to make their voice heard directly in all the areas of public life in which they are competent. I think that everyone would have a lot to gain if the logic of intellectual life, that of argument and refutation, were extended to public life...it would be a good thing if the ‘creators’ could fulfill their function of public service and sometimes of public salvation. (p. 10)

¹¹⁴ Bullock et al (2001) document the classed and racialized references and symbolism in mainstream gendered media representations of deviancy and pathology; Pomerantz (2006) traces the “moral panic” surrounding young women’s sexuality to proliferate representations of hyper-sexualized images of femininity in dominant media; Stack & Kelly (2006) note that notions of criminality and/or anxiety about media influence on young people are dominant within popular media rather than stories of the “participation of youth in civil society” (p. 8); and, Griffin (2004) calls attention to “Anglocentric” media and feminist critique of such media which presents young women as a series of “impossible” subjectivities.

structural power (i.e., legislators, magazine and newspaper editors, educational policy makers and educators, police, and front-line service providers etc.) come to understand and position young women and young women's engagement with popular culture and mass media.

Bourdieu notes that (some)¹¹⁵ academics possess the “strong cultural capital” (2001, p. 124) necessary to engage in critical, public interventions within popular media (also see 1998). And so, like Arendt, who conceives of “freedom” only in the sense of observing the appearances of others (and being observed) within an agonistic space of political, public engagement, Bourdieu insists that the “possibility” for social change is inherent within the public (and publicly accessible) work of “critical intellectuals” (1998, pp. vii-10). In fact, in one of his own most accessible texts, Bourdieu is clear in his call to ‘intellectuals’ to join him in publicly questioning and challenging the “profoundly political submission implied in the unconscious acceptance of *commonplaces*” which are perpetuated in mainstream media (p. 8). But as Kelly (2006) warns, academics who “are sought out by the media to offer their views [on issues related to young people] would do well to be wary of merely being edited to fit the youth-stigmatizing themes too often favored by mainstream media” (p. 42). I would argue, therefore, that researchers who engage critically with issues related to young women, mass media, economic disadvantage and social exclusion must find a way to make their arguments and findings palatable within popular public forums whilst avoiding reducing their work to dichotomous frames of debate. I turn now to an exploration of the way schools might

¹¹⁵ Bourdieu calls attention to the “obstacles...to the constitution of a collective intellectual” by relaying his own experiences with publishing articles within the popular press. Often, he notes, particular authors are marked with substantially more “symbolic capital” than others and so newspaper and magazine editors will “remove names they do not recognize” (1998, pp. viii-ix).

operate as sites of critical and “generative” (Bourdieu, 1997/2000; McNay, 2000) engagement with media representations of ideal (deviant) femininity. I draw upon two examples from my own research to illustrate possible strategies through which educators and young people might insert (Arendt, 1958/1998) “counter narratives” (Stack & Kelly, 2006, p. 20) of femininity into the public realm.

Nayak and Kehily (2008) argue that “popular culture [ought to be taken] seriously as a dynamic relationship and central locus through which young people’s social worlds are formed” (p. 34). In relation to my own research I would argue that educators must seek out ways to engage students (and themselves) in generative critiques of the way media frames female subjectivities in relation to mediated messages of gendered empowerment. I believe that at the heart of such critiques must lie an intention to break open dominant dichotomous framings of so-called girl issues so that classroom debates and discussions might avoid falling into arguments such as whether or not particular fashions/styles/subjectivities are empowering (or not) for young women. Furthermore, based on my own experiences with teacher training, I would argue that we need to look closely at how teachers and school administrators are educated in relation to their access to critiques of gendered “relations of domination” (2001) and the structural mechanisms (e.g., media, education policy) through which such relations persist. As Bourdieu (2001) observes, “the education system [is] responsible for the effective reproduction of all the principles of vision and division [of masculine domination], and [is] itself organized around analogous oppositions” (p. 117). If we are to open space for shifting critiques of media representations of ideal (deviant) femininity in the school

setting, then the leaders within educational institutions must be given access to the symbolic capital (see Bourdieu, 2001) of the language and strategies of social critique.

Stack and Kelly (2006) note that research into the “central role [education plays] in providing people with the ability to denaturalize everyday media narratives” and the possibilities for “engaging with the media system, critiquing it, and creating counter-narratives” is increasing (p. 20; also see Poyntz, 2006). In chapter four of this thesis I draw upon the ‘counter narrative’ work of Margaret Atwood’s *Penelopiad* (2005), a contemporary retelling of Homer’s *Odyssey* from the perspective of the female characters, and ‘brush’ (Benjamin, 1968) its alternate historical perspective against contemporary media images of femininity. Moreover, there are a number of other feminist authors who engage in such rewritings of dominant mythologies which are inscribed with the historical divisions of symbolic/masculine domination (Bourdieu, 2001; see Bayam, 1985; Powers, 1991; Heller, 1990 as cited in Goldman, 2004 for feminist retellings of ancient stories). Through an analysis of how these authors (for example) *visit* (Arendt, 1958/1998; also see description of the concept of *visiting* in chapter one) alternate historical perspectives and imagined realities, educators can open ground to talk about how the symbolism and markers of historical classed and gendered social divisions and stereotypes come to be perpetuated and accepted in mass media and popular culture. Furthermore, I suggest that such exercises in visiting might be easily reproduced in a classroom setting using curricular texts in the language arts and social sciences. And so, in addition to media studies classrooms, we might see how alternate pedagogical settings offer a potentially powerful site for rewriting and reinterpreting media representations of ideal (deviant) femininity and for breaking open the dichotomies

which seem to manifest in discussions of contemporary femininities (see Gonick, 2006 on the dichotomous framing of female youth subjectivities).

I now draw upon an example from my interview data to show how researchers and schools might work together to create spaces of informed critique of dominant media and to engage adults and young people in creating media which challenges the structures and 'relations of domination' (Bourdieu, 2001). I begin with an excerpt from the interviews and then move on to extend and discuss its relevance to developing potential strategies for inserting (Arendt, 1958/1998) alternate notions of femininity into public space.

In this interview excerpt one young woman addresses the way dominant media representations of her neighbourhood pathologize its spaces and its inhabitants. She draws upon discussions and exercises which occurred during Dr. Dillabough's ethnographic research in her school (2004-2006; see description of research in chapter three under data collection) and suggests ways to create counter narratives (Stack & Kelly, 2006) of her (mis)represented space.

Anne: [...] I don't think that people actually go into the east side and get to know the people on the east side and stuff. And that's something I wanted to do, actually, a project. I wanted to do a photo project of the east side.

[...]

Anne: Of places on the east side. Because like there's this place down in Chinatown called [name of place] gardens and it's so gorgeous there. They have koi fish everywhere and frogs and bamboo and everything and it's a really, really pretty place that you obviously want to see on the west side but it's here on the east side. It's [a] sort of tranquil, outside place, which is really peaceful.

Jennifer: And that's not the perspective that the media...?

Anne: No. [...] lately on the news the only thing they talk about is cleaning up the hobos and the safe injection site and so on and so forth, right? (age 16)

First, I want to suggest that Anne's desire to create a photo project of her neighbourhood which would counter its public reputation for "danger" and "moral depravity" might be read as an act of *generative* (Bourdieu, 1997/2000; McNay, 2000) or *relational agency* (Kennelly, 2008a). Building on theories of "agency" drawn from the work of Bourdieu, McNay and Lovell, Kennelly (2008a) posits a theory of relational agency which accounts for "the genesis of...an original act" (2008b, forthcoming) and locates such acts within a "web of relationships" (Arendt, 1958/1998 in Kennelly, 2008b). As mentioned above, Anne was part of the larger ethnographic study in which Dr. Dillabough engaged all of the young people in creating photo narratives of their lives and their neighbourhood. The photo narrative project came toward the end of the research period spent in the classroom and, importantly, after the young people had spent a significant amount of time looking at how homelessness and other visible signs of economic disadvantage are represented in the popular media. It is also important to note that Anne participated in more than one interview and that this passage is taken from her final interview. In other words, I seek here to recognize that a shift in *social and cultural* experiences (her participation in the research, her extended discussions with researchers and her introduction to the concept of photo narratives) helped to give Anne access to the political language (which Taft (2004) and others have argued is erased through neo-liberal narratives of individualization) necessary to critique dominant representations of her space.¹¹⁶

I call attention to this interview excerpt to suggest that it offers a practical strategy for "counter public" media engagement (see Downey & Fenton, 2003) which also

¹¹⁶ Such a reading does not mean that I position Anne as an agent who is able to remove herself from the constraints of her social world. Nor does it mean that such a photo project would itself be free of deeply embedded "relations of domination" (e.g., 'cleaning up the hobos') (see Bourdieu, 2001).

recognizes the contingent and relational (Kennelly, 2008a) nature of agency. We see a way for young people to engage in more political challenges of media representations of the world and their place in the world. And, I suggest, we can extend this example to understand how media representations of ideal (deviant) femininity, which I have argued contribute to what Arendt calls our “growing world alienation” (Arendt, 1954/2006, p. 89-90), might be challenged and publicly countered. Thus, we might see a way through our commonplace acceptance (Bourdieu, 1998, 2001) of sexualized, fetishized, pathologized (and ultimately superfluous) femininities to begin to recover a “sense of the real” (Curtis, 1999).

I suggest that from these two examples of possible critical and political forms of engagement with media we might begin to conceive of ways in which inherited and habitually known meanings (Bourdieu, 2001) of gender, class and the conditions of economic disadvantage might be destabilized, exposed and thus judged and examined in new ways. Such an approach to media engagement and critique does not seek a definitive “truth” about the nature and effects of media representations of ideal (deviant) femininity but rather a plurality of politicized perspectives (Arendt, 1958/1998) which might engage in “a labour of symbolic destruction and construction aimed at imposing new categories of perception and appreciation” (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 123).

Concluding remarks

Contemporary representations of girlhood...operate to marginalize or render invisible many other possible ways of being a girl...girlhood itself is constituted as ambiguous in a way that renders certain ‘girl’ subject positions as unsupportable, incomprehensible, or incompatible with ‘normal’ girlhood. (Griffin, 2004, p. 42)

“For authentic politics to be possible, ordinary people must be able to make sense of their situation and give their sensible opinions” (Kateb, 2000, p. 133). As Griffin (2004) points out, contemporary media constructions of empowered and idealized femininity are deeply contradictory and “operate to render the girl herself as an impossible subject” with little access to politically relevant subjectivities (p. 42). I have argued that media representations of girlhood are grounded in hyper-sexual subjectivities and promote personal efforts at self-improvement and reinvention through consumption over more political forms of engagement within the state (see Gonick, 2006; Harris, 2004a); young women are thus encouraged in private, rather than public, pursuits of happiness (see Arendt, 1958/1998). Under such gendered “commonplaces” (Bourdieu, 1998) ‘making sense’ of one’s ‘situation’ in a political sense becomes a difficult task, especially from the social position of economic disadvantage. Therefore, I maintain that if we fall back on discourses of gendered empowerment as part of our effort to “challenge[] the depoliticizing meanings” (Taft, 2004, p. 77)¹¹⁷ inherent within such popular gendered narratives, we risk reproducing the notion that a focus on the self and on improving self-esteem through media critique will somehow change the structures of masculine domination (Bourdieu, 2001) which are symbolically embedded within media depictions of femininity. The reproduction of the private pursuits of self-improvement and self-esteem (no matter how seemingly important or empowering) can only “lead an uncertain shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance” (Arendt,

¹¹⁷ Though Taft (2004) is clear in stressing the need for feminists to exercise ‘caution’ when engaging in the language of particular gendered discourses (girl power) she also notes that in “challenging [its] depoliticized meanings” feminists might find avenues for “encourage[ing] girls as agents of social change” (p. 77).

1958/1998, p. 50). Therefore, I would argue that we must find ways to construct inclusive female subjectivities and to unblock structural and ideological avenues of young women's political participation which might then open space for economically disadvantaged young women to "disclose" and "distinguish" themselves in the public spaces of the world (see Arendt, 1958/1998 on *plurality* and "the disclosure of the agent", pp. 175-184).

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APPENDIX A

The following is a copy of the interview protocol titled, "Interview Topics For Case Study Sites: Youth (14-18)" from Dr. Dillabough's original study. Additions to the original interview protocol are in bold type.

1. Basic Information/Background

- basic background information
- educational history

3. Young Peoples' Experiences of Exclusion (educational/social exclusion)

- problems and forms of exclusion encountered over time in schools and educational settings (examples)
- social conditions and issues of exclusion beyond schooling
 - **issues related to gender, race and class and urban life**
 - **questions about media, popular culture and students' understandings of themselves and their future (fashion, music, technology, television, film)**
 - **perceptions on femininity and race and class and their links to cultural/national identity and inclusion in schools***
- impact poverty and their current social provision have on young people's experiences of school/social exclusion.

4. Youth and Education/Educational Programs

- school/social conditions/spaces in which they live and perspectives they believe teachers/youth workers maintain about impoverished youth with a particular reference to their own circumstances

An additional change involves the use of print media materials drawn from magazines marketed to youth ages 13-18, which will be used as visual elicitation material to expand discussions on "femininity" in the interview. Media material will be chosen for its representation of trends (eg., fashion, career/vocation, life goals) relating to images of "ideal" and "deviant" femininity. During the course of the larger interview, youth will be asked to respond (i.e., perceptions, concerns, relationship to own experiences of media) to these print materials. All materials chosen will be age appropriate (e.g. "Seventeen magazine", "Vancouver Sun", "Teen People", "Macleans") and will not portray nudity, violence, alcohol or drug use.

***Sample questions that extend outward from these additional thematic strands are:**

- 1. What is your definition/description of a "normal" (or "perfect/ideal") girl? Of an "abnormal" (or "imperfect/deviant") girl? Take a moment to think about where your definition/description comes from. In other words, how does your definition/description compare to media images, ideas you hear in school/out of school etc.?**
- 2. How do your definitions/descriptions compare to the following images (see attached print images)?**

3. **What do you think about the idea of femininity that is being represented in the following images (see attached print images)?**

APPENDIX B



The University of British Columbia
Office of Research Services and Administration
Behavioural Research Ethics Board

Certificate of Approval

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR Dillabough, J.		DEPARTMENT Educational Studies		NUMBER B03-0511	
INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT					
CO-INVESTIGATORS Muir, Jennifer, Educational Studies					
SPONSORING AGENCIES Social Sciences & Humanities Research Council					
TITLE : Social Change and the Study of Economically Disadvantaged Youth in Canadian schools					
APPROVAL DATE 03-12-19 <small>(y1/mo/day)</small>		TERM (YEARS) 1		AMENDMENT Oct. 25, 2005, Contact letter / May 14, 2005, Co-Investigators / Interviews	
				AMENDMENT APPROVED OCT 31 2005	
<p style="text-align: center;">CERTIFICATION</p> <p style="text-align: center;">The protocol describing the above-named project has been reviewed by the Committee and the experimental procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.</p> <div style="text-align: center; margin-top: 20px;"> </div> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Approval of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board by one of the following:</i> Dr. Peter Suedfeld, Chair, Dr. Susan Rowley, Associate Chair</p> <p style="text-align: center; margin-top: 20px;">This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above term provided there is no change in the experimental procedures</p>					

APPENDIX C

One young woman linked two forms of media entertainment, popular amongst her peers, to what she observed as her experiences with some of her young male peers “lack of respect” for women. The sample which follows began as part of a discussion in which Anne expressed her experience with more privileged male peers who seem to her to be “less respectful” to women than do the young men in her east side neighbourhood:

Int.: So where are west side guys then getting their vision of what a woman is?

Anne: Obviously from the media. I mean, where else are you supposed to get it? I mean, *Grand Theft Auto*, like video-games? They have hookers on the street corners to go pick up. They’re in the game. [...] And it’s like, that and like watching, you know, even music. Like in a lot of rap music they have like I’m going to fuck that bitch and shit. You know what I mean? It’s just like, they have no respect for women anymore. And it’s like there are artists out there who do have respect for women and they listen to those too but they don’t hear it as much as they would with the rap songs or whatever.

[...]

But I think that the west side guys take it more literally than the east side guys do.

Int.: I wonder why?

Anne: I don’t know. I think it just has to do with, ah, everybody’s like...because if you’re on the east side you don’t actually see all this stuff happening. So when they talk about it in the rap songs you’re kind of just like, well that’s not true. You know what I mean? Like...[laughs] you can’t get a girl that easy.

[...]

Well they [the media] portray it [downtown eastside] not as it is. Um, I’m afraid when I go to suburbia. [...] none of my close friends has been hurt on the east side. None of them, nobody, not like even that much has happened on the east side because everybody is too cracked up to know what’s going on...I find that I’ve never seen like any knifing or fights or anything on [street] but yet if I go to the suburbs I will see that.

Int.: you see aggression?

Anne: I see aggression because they’re the ones trying to live up to Eminem (popular rapper), who’s the white kid who grew up in the suburbs and now carries a gun everywhere. And like, suburb people are scared of the east side because they think like it’s what’s the rappers talk about. There’s like guns and violence and everything,. I mean, you will find that in some cases around the east side but like, I in my life have never been around that and I’ve had friends who’ve like been in gangs and stuff like that. But I’ve never actually seen them shoot because they always go to a suburb, to the suburbs, with their gangs. They don’t hang around the east side because that’s just stupid.

Int.: Right.

Anne: Because they might run into their mother. [laughs]

Grand Theft Auto is a popular video game which simulates auto theft, high-speed police chases and allows players to perpetrate massive amounts of property damage all within the ‘safe’ spaces of virtual reality. Though assuredly fodder for interesting theoretical

discussions this particular medium would be irrelevant to my investigation were it not for the fact that it also allows 'players' to rob, molest, attack and/or kill prostitutes as a routine part of the virtual 'fun'. Simply put, the brutal forms of violence that might be perpetrated on a woman are rendered entertainment. The similarly misogynistic properties of much of popular rap music are widely commented upon¹¹⁸. Eminem, the rapper to whom Anne refers, gained notoriety (and an equivalent popularity within youth culture and sub-culture) for songs which, as part of a general anti-authority theme, narrated the maiming, raping and killing of his real life female partner and mother of his young daughter¹¹⁹. Such harsh, brutally sexual lyrics actively subordinate the feminine to the masculine 'ideal' of virility in all its forms (physical/sexual/financial power). Moreover, such subjugation occurs in direct relation to the depiction of a tough, street-wise and exaggeratedly virile masculine figure.

Thus popular forms of entertainment which glorify the subjugation of the feminine are marketed specifically to a young male audience. What is more, both this video game and rap music generally are positioned within virtual and symbolic spaces of social and economic disadvantage. Indeed, symbolic narratives of hyper-masculinity are tied to identities of social and/or economic disadvantage (see Weekes, 2004; Willis, 1977). Yet media both glorifies and personalizes such contingent and essentially mutable ties. Moreover, such media reinforces deeply ingrained class-based 'myths' which mark disadvantaged women as morally deficient in comparison to middle class "respectable" femininity (see Skeggs, 2001). And so we note Anne's observation that, "...west side guys take it more literally than the east side guys do" from the perspective that the lived experience of 'east side guys' exposes the hyperbolic, often misogynistic glorification of 'street life' inherent to rap music and violent video games. In other words, the experience of being an 'east side guy' (or girl) allows for the phenomenologically grounded knowledge (or instinct) that 'you can't get a girl that easy'. Yet still, we see that this young woman eventually returns to an understanding which seems grounded in male/female relations:

[...] maybe at one point they [east side male peers] tried to have that like no respect for women thing and it really didn't work for them [laughs].

¹¹⁸ Weekes (2004) observes that,

Hip-hop or rap, like raga music, gives primacy to Black masculinized discourse and speaks to a largely masculine audience [...] However, rap is a broad genre, and West Coast gangsta rap embraces discourses of sex and sexuality which have been criticized for their misogyny. (p. 144)

Noting that, "[t]he academic response to this imagery has been diverse" Weekes goes on to cite, among others, the work of West (1992), Ransby and Matthews (1993), Williams (1992), Back (1996) for their contributions to the exploration of misogyny in rap music.

¹¹⁹ Even the less explicitly sexual/violent lyrics reproduce obvious forms of *symbolic/masculine domination*. Note a sample of the significantly less explicit lyrics to a popular rap song which enjoyed mainstream radio-play in 2003. The song describes the loyalty and respect the artist has for his (real life) partner:

All I need in this life of sin is me and my girlfriend/The problem is, you dudes treat the one that you lovin'/Wit the same respect that you treat the one that you humpin'/[...] I don't be at places where we comfy at/With no be-atch; oh no you won't see that/And no I ain't perfect[...]But girlfriend, work wit the kid/I keep you workin' that Hermes Birkin bag[...] (Jay-Z, *Bonnie and Clyde*)