DRESSING THE PART: GIRLS, STYLE & SCHOOL IDENTITIES

by

SHAUNA POMERANTZ

B.A., York University, 1993
B.Ed., The University of New Brunswick, 1997
M.Ed., The University of New Brunswick, 1999

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
(Educational Studies)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

November 2005

© Shauna Pomerantz, 2005
Abstract

In the early 21st century, girls are represented as in-trouble and out-of-control through a variety of discourses that position them at the centre of crises, syndromes, and catastrophes. But these portrayals often ignore how girls use cultural practices to make sense of the world around them and how such practices take on a life of their own within a given context. This research thus focuses on one specific cultural practice—style—and how it was used by girls as a tool for identity negotiation within one particular school.

I conducted a year-long ethnography at a multicultural, urban, and largely working-class high school in Vancouver's east side. I interviewed, observed, and hung out with twenty girls of varying races, ethnicities, classes, and curricular tracks in order to trace the school's symbolic economy of style and highlight the significance style had within the school’s postmodern social world.

My findings suggest that style functioned as “social skin,” or an extension of the body that made girls socially visible. As social skin, style acted as one of the most accessible and malleable ways for girls to indicate subjectivity and belonging. It also acted as a form of agency, where girls understood how they were positioned within discourses of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality, and used style as a means to re/position themselves.

By situating this research at the fruitful crossroads of feminist sociology of education and girls' studies, I link a sociological understanding of girlhood as it is constructed within the institution of the school to the texts of girls' culture as they are used by girls to negotiate that construction. As well, this research seeks to highlight the complexity of girls' identity negotiations in order to counteract current representations of girls as drowning victims and cultural dupes. Finally, this research aims to make connections between style and the
broader social projects of education and feminism, two fields that must become more fluent in girls' cultural practices in order to combat the current backlash against girls' newfound social visibility.
Table of Contents

Abstract ii
Table of Contents iv
Acknowledgements vi

CHAPTER ONE 1
FROM INCITEMENT TO IDENTITY: THE MISSING LINK IN THE DEBATE ON GIRLS' STYLE IN THE SCHOOL 1
The “Slut” Look: Girls’ Style as an Incitement to Discourse 1
Drowning Victims and Cultural Dupes: Discursive Constructions of Girls and Girlhood 9
Fertile Crossroads: Girls’ Studies Meets Feminist Sociology of Education 20
“Because That’s How You Are At School”: Identity, Subjectification, and Temporary Attachments 24
Embodied Dispositions: Investigating Identity Categories 29
Social Skin: Style as Embodied Subjectivity 34

CHAPTER TWO 41
“What Are You Doing Here, Anyway?”: TOWARD A GENERATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY OF GIRLS 41
Not a Girl, Not Just an Ethnographer: Questions of Purpose and Presence 41
What Are You Doing Here, Anyway?: Questions of Ethnography 45
What Are You Doing Here, Anyway?: Questions of Negotiating the Field 58
What Are You Doing Here, Anyway?: Questions of Epistemology and Generativity 66

CHAPTER THREE 70
“RULE THE SCHOOL”: SITUATING IDENTITY WITHIN THE SOCIAL WORLD(S) OF EAST SIDE HIGH 70
“It’s Not Like the Movies”: East Side High as Postmodern School 70
“It’s Our Reputation”: East Side, West Side, and the Discursive Space In Between 79
“Our School Lets Us Be Diverse”: Social Landscapes and School Programs 83
Regular 86
CHAPTER FOUR

"IF YOU DRESS LIKE THIS, THEN YOU'RE LIKE THAT": STYLES, SUBJECT POSITIONS, AND GIRLHOODS

Identification and the Process of Subject Positioning

"Dressing Like a Girl": Preppy, Sexy, and Popular

"I'm Nothing Like You": Alternative, Goth, and Punk (Ass)

"Show Class, Not Trash": Comfortable, Appropriate, and Dressy

"Not Too Fancy": Sporty, Skater, and Tom-person

CHAPTER FIVE

"I DRESS THE WAY I FEEL": IMAGE AS AN EXPRESSION OF AGENCY

"I think that Image is Really Important": Discourses of Fixity and Fluidity in the School

"Not Just Another Number": Fashioning an Image to Remember

"Nobody Starts Shit With Us": Fashioning an Image of Power and Authority

"Different Little Identities": Fashioning Multiple Images at School

CHAPTER SIX

JUST STYLE?: IDENTITY, FEMINISM, AND EDUCATION

Upstairs/Downstairs: Style as a Membrane of Permeability

The Limits of Identity

A Backlash Against Girls: Where is Feminism?

Dress codes: Ad/dressing Educational Policy

"Britneys," "JLos," and, "Researchers"

BIBLIOGRAPHY
Acknowledgements

It is a wonderful feeling to be able to acknowledge those who have made the writing of this dissertation possible. First and foremost, I thank my supervisor, Dr. Deirdre Kelly, who provided me with superb editing, invaluable feedback, and rich conversations. I thank Deirdre for helping me to find my own style as a writer and an ethnographer, for cleverly knowing how to advise me in a manner that best suited my personality, and for setting such an extraordinary example. In watching Deirdre, I have come to know the kind of teacher, researcher, and mentor that I would like to be. I thank her for all of this plus her warm friendship, her knack for having fun, and her insightful critiques of teen flicks. All PhD students should be so lucky.

I thank Dr. Dawn Currie, who mentored me from day-one at UBC. It was in Dawn’s feminist methodologies class that I wrote my first paper on girls’ style in the school, and where I first encountered her unwavering support, intellect, and generosity of spirit. As well, Dawn offered me a research experience that proved to be crucial to my journey as a feminist, qualitative researcher, and writer. She placed a great deal of confidence in me, and I never wanted to let her down. I thank Dawn for the opportunities that she has offered me, for her friendship, and for the many times she has infused me with a sense of confidence and a desire to succeed.

I thank Dr. Bonny Norton for pushing me to finish this project, for offering me useful advice whenever possible, and for agreeing to be a part of my committee when her dance card was already full. I am grateful for the feedback she has given me over the years.

I thank my amazing friends, who never let me go too long without a laugh, a beer, a burger, a trip to the mall, a good phone chat, or a Friday night dinner party. For their

I thank my family in the far-off land of Toronto: Hart Pomerantz, Nancy Pomerantz, Bill Pomerantz, Jennifer Pomerantz, Gail Morgenstern, Erik Goldsilver, Adam Pomerantz, Amanda Pomerantz, and Josh Pomerantz. My parents, Hart and Nancy, rooted for me from the get-go. They encouraged me to do my best, to have some laughs, to go outside, and to enjoy this curious and interesting time in my life. I thank them for all of these things plus their unconditional love and encouragement. I would also like to thank my new family, Roger and Lorraine Field, Toby, Sarah, and Anna Field, Ellen Field, and Maggie Body for their words of wisdom and their wonderful way of viewing the world.

I owe a huge shout-out to the many cool and interesting girls I came to know at East Side High. Thank you for your time, patience, stories, and styles. As well, I would like to thank the many teachers who allowed me to sit in on their classes day after day, especially Ms. Mackenzie, who offered me my very first seat in an ESH classroom.

And finally, I thank Jon Eben Field, who read this dissertation with the utmost care, who “got” the project, who took me out, who cooked the most elegant Chinese dinners, who kept me up to date on HBO dramas and alternative rock, who believed in me like nobody’s business, and who made this whole process palatable. For your ideas, your intellect, your editing, your patience, your empathy, your ability to listen, and everything else that you have done to make me feel comfortable, confident, and loved, I dedicate this dissertation to you.
"It's like if you're going to dress the part, you know, you might as well play it.”
-Zeni, 15, “casual/sporty” style

“For everyone, clothes are compulsory.”
-Elizabeth Wilson (1985)
Chapter One

FROM INCITEMENT TO IDENTITY: THE MISSING LINK IN THE DEBATE ON GIRLS’ STYLE IN THE SCHOOL

“Yeah, the low jeans are very cool. And you gotta show your thong.”
- Ratch, 15, “punk” style

“If you’re wearing retro and retro’s out and it’s going to be in tomorrow, you’ve basically lost. There are very few people who can stay on top of style.”
- Mina, 14, “grungy” style

The “Slut” Look: Girls’ Style as an Incitement to Discourse

Blame it on Britney. As teens across the country negotiate the sexually charged territory of high school, more and more of them are doing so in cleavage-baring crop tops and ultra-low-rise pants that show off their pelvic bones. Clothes for girls have never been so skimpy.
- Deborah Fulsang (2002)

To begin this discussion of girls’ negotiation of identity in the school, I must acknowledge and, thereby, become complicit in the “incitement to discourse” that girls’ style has become in the early 21st century. Throughout history, certain topics have made themselves visible as “scandals” and “insults” to social sensibilities. Currently, girls’ style in the school is one such topic, having received more press coverage than perhaps any other issue facing schoolgirls since 1999. For Michel Foucault (1978), the incitement to discourse over sex from the eighteenth century onward was produced by “an institutional incitement to speak about it..., a determination on the part of the agencies of power to hear it spoken about, and to cause it to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail”

1 Another topic that has become an incitement to discourse for girls is bullying and meanness (Simmons, 2001; Glazier, 2004; Harmon, 2004).
2 1999 was the year girls’ style became a mainstay in the press. Not coincidentally, it was the same year that Britney Spears hit number one on the Billboard chart with her first album, ...Baby One More Time (Jive Records). The single that propelled her album to number one was not renowned for its vocal style, but rather for the style of Britney herself. The video for the title track featured Spears in a schoolgirl uniform, but with a twist. She knotted her white blouse just under her breasts to reveal her midriff and proceeded to dance down the hallway into infamy. The exposed midriff also owes much to Britney’s forerunners, Madonna and the Spice Girls, who did their part to glamorize midriff baring clothing.
In the case of girls' style, a similar, and not unrelated determination existed on the part of the press to sustain attention over what girls are wearing "these days." Where once girls' style might have been only a footnote in the fashion section during a back-to-school instalment, it is now a "hot" topic. But more than just fashion news, it is front page news—the kind that provokes fear and apprehension among administrators, teachers, parents, and the general public.

The talk surrounding girls' style is what gave rise to this research and what propelled me to look at modes of dress in a more complex way than the press had to date. Reporters have neither the time nor the print space to devote to coverage that explores the multifaceted ways in which identity is negotiated for girls through style as a particularly accessible and significant form of embodied subjectivity. But as a feminist sociologist of education, I felt that the "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of ethnography was the best way to approach the complexity of the issue and, perhaps, the only way to make links between style and intersecting identity categories, such as race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and gender. And so it is here, in the midst of a "hot" topic, that my exploration into girls' identity negotiation in the school necessarily begins.

The incitement to discourse surrounding girls' style relates to one particular trend. Though the look is most certainly not homogeneous, press coverage fashioned a standardized image of girls engaged in what *The Washington Post* dubbed the "Whore Wars" (Stepp, 2002). The "Whore Wars" revolves around a style that is often referred to as the "Britney look," so-called for its similarity to and influence by white pop star Britney Spears. The look has been labelled "skanky," "ho wear," "the tart look," "hooker wear," and "the teenage strumpet look" (Trebay, 2003). The style causing this discursive explosion includes midriff-
and cleavage-revealing shirts, mini skirts, exposed bra straps, and form-fitting tank tops accessorized with thick-laced sneakers, big hoop earrings and wide belts layered with studs or grommets. Perhaps the most “scandalous” part of this look is form-fitting, low-rise jeans—jeans that sit on the hip bones or lower and occasionally expose an inch or so of underwear (or thong). Further, the jeans are skin-tight and reveal the entire outline of a girl’s lower body. In fact, the sexual suggestiveness of these jeans prompted one national Canadian columnist to write,

The trend toward spandex tops was not so stressful for me; nor was the exposure of the navel and its attendant cute piercings. But trousers cut so low as to reveal the jutting hip-bones, the descending V of the groin and the top of the pubis are, I must admit, honestly shocking. (Smith, 2002, p. R6)

Press coverage of the Britney look focused on how “inappropriate” it was for girls to show their bodies without shame or understanding of the dangerous sexual situations these outfits might generate. Article after article lamented this “slut” look, accompanied by photographs of girls positioned to look like the cast of popular, white, upper-middle class teen dramas, such as *The O.C.* or *Beverly Hills, 90210*, with their hands in a “cat scratch,” or posed suggestively with glossy lips parted and hips thrust out. A full-page colour photo in one of Canada’s national newspapers featured a very skinny teenage girl outfitted in red fishnet stockings, cut-off jean shorts, a purple bikini top with silver glitter, and a large heart-shaped tattoo between her breasts. Her face is obscured by a mass of hair that makes her look wild, untamed, and almost animal in her wilful attempt to wear what she wants at any cost to her own personal safety and the mores of decent society. The panic-inducing headline next to the photograph read, “Mom, I’m ready for school!” (Fulsang, 2002, p. L1).
The persistent news coverage that the Britney look received across Canada and the U.S. worked to construct a moral panic concerning the well-being of teenage girls. Girls were framed as both “victims” and “seducers” of men and boys, as both the naive dupes who did not realize they would become sexual “prey” and as the “sluts” who got just what they seemed to be asking for. As Foucault (1978) notes in regard to the rise in talk around sex, the issue was thus “taken charge of, tracked down as it were, by a discourse that aimed to allow it no obscurity, no respite” (p. 20). Through constant reiteration, the discourse on girls’ style was thus transformed into a justifiable prohibition on the Britney look in North American schools.

Fear and worry from parents and teachers over the dangers, as well as the social affront caused by “scantily clad” female students translated into the banning of certain items of apparel from many Canadian and U.S. high schools. Administrators reacted swiftly to the seemingly indecent style by instituting dress codes that specifically targeted girls for their own good and the good of the school, prohibiting exposed midriffs, low-rise jeans, visible underwear, cleavage, spaghetti-strapped tank tops, and mini skirts above a certain length (Stepp, 2002). Under the guise of social order, dress codes made girls accountable for a school’s “moral community” (Fine, 1990), framing them equally and contradictorily as the

---

3 The expression “moral panic” comes from British Cultural Studies and the Birmingham School of thought. It describes a manufactured, media-driven crisis. Stan Cohen (1972) uses the phrase to criticize the media’s vilification of “folk devils,” or working-class youth subcultures, such as mods and rockers. Stuart Hall (1978) expands the term to indicate a constructed social problem that appears to demand legislation, such as the mugging “crisis” in England. A moral panic reinforces power relations within society, signifying “who are virtuous and useful and who are dangerous or inadequate, which actions will be rewarded and which penalized” (Edelman, 1988, p. 2). Moral panic, as I employ the term here, is a frenzy perpetuated by the media that constructs girls as “in-trouble” or “out-of-control.”

4 I use the word “discourse” to refer to the ways in which knowledge is produced about girls and the normalizing effect this knowledge production institutes. Discourse, deployed in this way, comes from the work of Michel Foucault (1980) and is often used within feminist poststructural analyses to indicate a frame of intelligibility or a constructed worldview that is a product of “historically specific, socially situated, signifying practices” (Fraser, 1992, p. 185). A deeper discussion of girlhood as a discursive category follows shortly and a more general discussion of discourse in relation to feminist poststructuralism follows in chapter two.
gatekeepers of goodness, as the temptresses who led boys and male teachers astray, and as the naïve victims of male sexual aggression. Girls' style, given no respite in the press, was thus constructed as “unsafe” without further thought to its use as an intricate and shifting system of signs that could offer insight into girls’ negotiations of identity in the school.

Aside from placing the female student(s) body under surveillance, paradoxically framing girls as both sexual victims and sexual predators, and the ridiculous assumption that covering girls up is tantamount to solving the problem of sexual harassment in the school, other, more subtle problems existed in the discourse surrounding girls’ style. Only one version of female youth was represented in the accounts offered by the press, creating a standardized form of girlhood that came in one shape, colour, and outfit. Roland Barthes (1983) shows how organized images generate a permanence that defies doubt. Through repetition of the image, a “single certainty” (p. 13) is cast where meaning is frozen outside of social, cultural, and historical processes, or outside of discourse’s effect. The repetition of girls’ style in the press created a permanence based on random images strung together to make a “whole.” Dorothy Smith (1988) observes a similar occurrence in the repetition of images in magazines that create and define “normal” femininity. Femininity is seen to be made of “determinate and unitary phenomenon,” rather than an “extended collection of instances” (p. 37).

Aside from the manufactured permanence that was created by images in the press, accounts of girls’ style offered the public a literal reading of girls’ cultural practices. But as Tony Jefferson (1975) suggests, cultural objects “do not mean any one thing. They ‘mean’ only because they have already been arranged, according to social use, into cultural codes of meaning, which assign meaning to them” (p. 55). In her study on girls’ readings of teen
magazines, Dawn Currie (1999) also warns against analyzing cultural objects as stable facts, an assumption that makes it seem possible to read the “truth” about girls from their everyday activities. Instead, Currie challenges us to transcend the “immediacy of the text as a self-contained, available system of signification” (p. 13) through an exploration of the discursive processes that structure how and why girls engage with cultural objects.5

By forcing a single certainty where none existed, the press created a view of girlhood that was made to “cohere in contradiction” (Hebdige, 1979, p. 85). Long after I had completed my research, articles on girls’ style continued to maintain this coherence. As I clipped them out for insertion in an already overflowing file folder, I thought of the variety of girls and styles I had come to know and see during a year-long ethnographic study at an east Vancouver high school that I call East Side High (ESH). Certainly, there was the Britney look, but this look, one of the acknowledged “uniforms” at ESH, took on more complicated significations than the press had recognized. In one class, I was struck by a group of thin, white girls in the back corner sporting the Britney look. At first, they all seemed to look the same: tight, low-rise jeans, skater shoes, midriff-revealing t-shirts or tank tops, square earrings, glossed lips, and long, blonde hair. But during my time at ESH, I came to learn the markers of distinction that existed among them, such as who could afford to wear labels, who wore “too” much makeup, and who was considered “too” sexy.

5 An example of reading the “truth” off of bodies is the classic yet much critiqued work of Dick Hebdige (1979). Hebdige discerns “the hidden messages inscribed in code on the glossy surfaces” (p. 18) of the styles of teddy boys, rockers, mods, skinheads, and punks. Though Hebdige never interviews those whom he observes, he assigns meaning to their styles, calling it “semiotic guerilla warfare” (Eco, as quoted in Hebdige, p. 105) and “the sartorial equivalent of swear words” (p. 114). Hebdige, however, does not ask the young men about these practices as he feels such resistances are “conducted at a level beneath the consciousness of the individual members of a spectacular subculture” (p. 105). But as Leblanc (1999) explains, Hebdige’s lack of interview data renders this reading suspect, as “any mode of dress was resistant, it seemed, when worn by the right (or rather, the wrong) person” (p. 15). In other words, Hebdige romantically imputes resistance to any working-class male youth who is viewed as dressing against the grain.
Further, as dominant as the Britney look was, it was by no means the only uniform at ESH. There was also the JLo look, so-called for its Jennifer Lopez influence, worn by many Asian, Italian, Hispanic, and, to a lesser extent, white girls. The style was defined by a matching tracksuit made of velour. The “suits,” as they were called, had low-rise bottoms and were considered sexy due to their tightness and the way they showcased a girl’s figure. Though, this uniform was also not homogeneous. Some girls wore label or “name-brand” suits from Aritzia, an expensive chain store in malls that caters to teenage girls, while others wore “no name,” knock-off versions, reflecting a girl’s class location. In short, not all uniforms in the school were created equally and each seemingly categorical style was also open to myriad shifting interpretations based on who was doing the seeing and who was being seen.

Aside from the two acknowledged uniforms at ESH, girls also described their styles as “comfortable,” “sporty,” “goth,” “punk,” “alternative,” “regular,” “casual,” “weird,” “skater,” “random,” “hip hop,” and various hybrids of each look. Even within these already fluid categories, distinctions across racial and ethnic groups, as well as economic classes overtly and covertly marked girls. For example, a pair of regularly worn striped socks brought Abby fame within the school. Admittedly somewhat unpopular, her trademark socks put her on the map. As she put it, people would say, “Uh, who’s Abby again?” ‘Um, yeah, the girl with the striped socks’.” More to the extreme, Ratch, a punk, cultivated a look that separated her from almost everyone at ESH. One day she walked into English class wearing an orange crinoline tutu that she had picked up second-hand at Value Village. The rest of the outfit was characteristic for Ratch: ripped fishnets, black converse sneakers covered in cryptic writing, and a Sex Pistols T-shirt. The tutu, however, set her apart from her usual
look, which already set her apart in the school. And there was Xiu, a self-described “quiet” Chinese girl. Occasionally working to neutralize her studious standing in the school, she would wear black in order to give her style “a little kick,” a distinction that would only have been recognizable among her group of friends.

The single certainty that was represented in the press could not incorporate these and innumerable other differences among girls based on their styles. Reading the “truth” off girls’ bodies eliminated any meaning-making practices in which girls were engaged and erased the “symbolic economy” that style formed within the context of the school. In her study of Mexican-American and white working-class girls, Julie Bettie (2003) locates a “symbolic economy of style,”

that was the ground on which class and racial/ethnic relations were played out. A whole array of gender-specific commodities were used as markers of distinction among different groups of girls, who performed race-class-specific versions of femininity. Hairstyles, clothes, shoes, and the colors of lipstick, lip liner, and nail polish, in particular, were key markers in the symbolic economy that were employed to express group membership as the body became a resource and a site on which difference was inscribed. (pp. 61-62)

But as a result of the moral panic propagated by the press, a girl was simply a “slut” because she showed her midriff. The press rarely incorporated the possibility that styles and their shifting meanings varied from city to city, neighbourhood to neighbourhood, and school to school, or that styles carried markers of distinction among racial and ethnic groups, or that styles, particularly the ability to afford labels, carried class distinctions between middle-class, working-class, and working poor girls. These contexts are often ignored in the snap judgements made about girls, even though they are the very “stuff” out of which girls make “forced choices” (Davies, 1990, p. 46) about how they want to look in the school.6

6 I use Bronwyn Davies’s (1990) expression “forced choices” as a way of suggesting that while girls enacted agency in their choices of style, they were also positioned by economic and cultural discourses that
Dressing the Part aims to situate girls' style within the context of an urban, culturally diverse, and largely working-class high school in east Vancouver. It is also an attempt to reconceptualize style as a significant tool for identity negotiation within the school, where it becomes a "particularly powerful social marker" (Eckert, 1989, p. 62). As Catharine Driscoll (2002) suggests, while style is "subject to regulation (school roles and public laws, for example) and limitation (available finances, for example)...it is also always an articulation of girls' cultural identities" (p. 245, emphasis added). But in order to further understand this articulation, girls' style must be situated within broader social relations that construct particular kinds of knowledge on girls. The moral panic on girls' style is a product of and a contributor to these discursive constructions. Before moving on to a discussion of identity negotiation in the school, then, I first outline two relevant discourses on girlhood and how they have influenced and are influenced by the moral panic on girls' style.

Drowning Victims and Cultural Dupes: Discursive Constructions of Girls and Girlhood

"...girls and women have always been located nearer to the point of consumerism than to the ‘ritual of resistance’,"
-Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber (1991 [1978], p.6)

One grey and wet January day, I could see Mina bounding through the courtyard that linked the various buildings at ESH. "Shauna! I have something I think you'll want to see!" Mina called herself a Witch (which, she constantly reminded me, was different from being a Wiccan) and wore an ankh around her neck that she was charging with "positive energy" for a friend. As she flew across the courtyard, her trademark black trench coat was blown wide open to reveal baggy jeans that always dragged beneath her shoes and a dusty pink tank top often meant they could not buy anything and everything they wanted. I take up the complex topic of agency in chapter five.
under a long-sleeved shirt that was reminiscent of the Seattle grunge scene. Mina was unpredictable, even volatile in her bodily comportment. She often physically fought with boys, most of whom, it seemed, never really knew if they should fight back. Though her purposefully unkempt, pinkish-brown hair obscured her vision, I watched her move across the courtyard with extended, bouncy strides.

"You need to see this book," she said, a little out of breath. "It's about your study." Mina showed me Lauren Greenfield's (2002) photograph collection, *Girl Culture*, a book I had read about in the newspaper. The headline read: "Lauren Greenfield's portraits reveal the disturbing hunger, the need to be desired, even objectified, that typifies the lives of ordinary girls" (Woodend, 2002, p. H8). I took the heavy coffee-table book from Mina and paused for a moment over the photograph on the cover, arguably the most provocative picture in the collection. It portrayed two 15-year-old girls in a department store change room. Sheena is scrutinizing her cleavage by squeezing her breasts together in a shirt-cum-bra. She is unhappy with how she looks. Amber sits on the floor of the change room looking on.

Flipping through the book, I saw a picture of a 13-year-old girl in her “before” photo taken at weight-loss camp. The camera squares her off as she stands in her hot pink bathing suit—legs spread wide, eyes slightly glazed, like a deer caught in headlights. Another shows an anorexic girl being weighed at an eating disorder clinic in a gossamer hospital gown. Her expression is tired, drained, alone. Another features four girls in grade 7 preparing to go to a party. The girls, all blonde, have similar hairdos that flip up at the end and wear matching blue and black dresses; they work the camera angle like pros. Page after page stacked up to a definitive portrait of girlhood that is devastating and, in the words used by Joan Jacob
Brumberg (2002) in her introduction to the photo collection, “tentative, diffident, even desperate.” I closed the book and thanked Mina for showing it to me. “Whatever,” she said as she drifted into the matrix of hallways that meandered through the school.

Greenfield’s photographs are part of a way of looking at girlhood that I have come to think of as the “Ophelia” genre, named after Mary Pipher’s (1994) successful book, *Reviving Ophelia*. The Ophelia metaphor Pipher uses is based on the Shakespearean heroine who drowns herself over the loss of Hamlet’s affection and her father’s constant disapproval. Driven to self-hatred, Ophelia goes mad and commits suicide. Like the tragic character in *Hamlet*, and the tragic characters Greenfield represents in her photographs, Pipher views teenage girls as helplessly tossed about by external forces, such as “junk culture,” peer pressure, and developmental changes that turn “normal” and “happy” girls into monsters and victims. Telling stories from her own psychotherapy practice, Pipher weaves together a portrait of girlhood that is “overwhelmed and symptomatic” (p. 13). Preadolescent girls, she writes, are “marvellous company” (p. 18), but the “true” selves of girls are cracked by “the chaos of adolescence” (p. 20), leaving girls with shattered and fractured identities.

There have been numerous critiques of the Ophelia genre from feminists seeking to challenge the authority of an essentialized girlhood (Driscoll, 2002; Bettie, 2003; Gonick, 2003; Schilt, 2003; Harris, 2004a). But the impact of the Ophelia genre marks it as a discourse in need of constant patrolling. Getting its start in the widely cited work of Carol Gilligan (1982), the Ophelia genre is premised on her theory that women and girls speak in a different voice due to a uniquely female socialization that favours sharing, talking, and collaboration. This relational style, different from the independent style of men and boys, is devalued in the public sphere. As a result, girls learn to sublimate their “natural” voices and
become socially invisible. This recipe for low self-esteem fortifies the idea that the teenage years bring a "crisis of connection in girls' lives" (Gilligan, Lyons, & Hanmer, 1990, p. 25). Based on Gilligan's success, as well as the 154-week reign of Pipher's study on *The New York Times* best seller list, a deluge of books were published on girls that focused on what Peggy Orenstein (1994) calls "the confidence gap" (see also American Association of University Women, 1992; Brumberg, 1997; Brown, 1998). This collective body of knowledge produced a discourse on girls as drowning victims and constructed a moral panic over their safety and wellbeing.  

A mood of wistfulness for better, easier times defines this discourse, setting up a normative developmental model from which modern-day girls have deviated. As Pipher nostalgically writes, "[w]hy are girls having more trouble now than my friends and I had when we were adolescents? Many of us hated our adolescent years, yet for the most part we weren't suicidal and we didn't develop eating disorders, cut ourselves or run away from home" (p. 12). Joan Jacob Brumberg's (1997) *The Body Project* works on a similar premise. As a historian with an interest in developmental psychology, Brumberg focuses on girls' diaries through the 19th and 20th centuries in order to chart what she perceives to be a current obsession with the adolescent female body. The body, she writes, has been made into "an all-consuming project" (p. xvii) for girls today.

A century ago, American women were lacing themselves into corsets and teaching their adolescent daughters to do the same; today teens shop for thong bikinis on their own, and their middle-class mothers are likely to be uninvolved until the credit card bill arrives in the mail. (pp. xvii-xviii)

---

7 The Ophelia genre also thrives in popular culture, as is evidenced by the critical and box-office success of the Fox Searchlight film *Thirteen* (2003), directed by Catherine Hardwicke. *Thirteen* chronicles the descent of a "good girl" named Tracy into a world of crystal meth, blow jobs, stealing, and cutting, all signified by a shift from jeans and t-shirts to an extreme version of the Britney look, replete with tongue piercing and a naked midriff. A less hard-hitting version is the Paramount film, *Mean Girls* (2004), directed by Mark Waters, a box-office smash that showcases the idea that girls are all "naturally bitchy" and willing to stab each other in the back for the slightest provocation.
The idea that things are getting incrementally worse for girls drives the book, as Brumberg chronicles the shift from “good works” in the 19th century to “good looks” in the 20th century, mourning the advent of the latter and yearning for the innocence of the former.

The Ophelia genre charts many significant problems girls face as they enter adolescence: date rape, eating disorders, suicide, sexual harassment, and depression. I agree with Pipher’s (1994) pronouncement that our society is a “girl-destroying place” (p. 44), but I met girls at ESH who knew how to combat this destruction by talking back to boys, defending themselves against sexual harassment, and making their voices heard. As Kristen Schilt (2003) wonders in her study on girls’ resistance through zine production: “Is the situation really this desperate for adolescent girls” (p. 72)? Schilt acknowledges that adolescence is a time of trauma, but questions a methodology that only intersects with those who are in therapy. She argues that “these research methods may miss girls who do not seek out researchers” (pp. 72-73), thus offering a very limited understanding of girls who are already labelled in-trouble. Further, as Bettie (2003) notes, Pipher’s representation of girls lacks “any consideration of the effect of social structural forces on individual lives” (p. 5). Made to look inevitable, a girl’s development is judged to be either “right or “wrong” based on her ability to conform to and successfully complete tasks that mark her maturation process as “normal” (Harris, 1999), a normalcy that is measured by her ability to perform a white, middle-class femininity.

While the Ophelia genre constructs girls as drowning victims of low self-esteem, another, closely related discourse also works to construct girls as victims, this time of false consciousness. In this discourse, girls are cultural dupes who are portrayed as the “clueless” consumers who keep marketers rich and capitalism swelling. This trope has become so
powerful, in fact, that the mainstream, itself, is viewed as “feminine” and “feminized” (Thornton, 1997, p. 205), linking girls “to the rise of mass culture” (Driscoll, 2002, p. 11) and viewing them as the main supporters of the culture industry. From the Frankfurt school, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1993 [1944]) theorize the culture industry as the commodification of culture itself, where culture becomes an item for purchase through the industrialized techniques of mass production. Mass culture is thus the ability to produce any artefact for purchase in large quantities and has come to represent one of the worst aspects of capitalist society—the assemblage of tasteless items for arbitrary consumption.

Characterized by a lack of creativity, originality, and quality, mass culture “now impresses the same stamp on everything,” confirming “the absolute power of capitalism” (p. 30). According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the culture industry is the death of imagination, selling a chimera of individuality to “unconscious” mainstream shoppers who are willing to buy an “identical lifestyle based on an artificial framework” (p. 30).

Typified by its “passive, uncreative and essentially homogeneous ‘mass culture’,” the culture industry is said to be sustained predominantly by teenage girls, who are attracted to its “pseudo-individuation” (Hodkinson, 2002, p. 13). The majority of what Lisa Lewis (1989) calls “consumer girl culture,” including “fashion, shopping, and personal style” (p. 90), has been thrown onto the “scrap heap of mass culture” (Driscoll, 2002, p. 186) and viewed as false consciousness.⁸ False consciousness is a “system of false needs” (McRobbie, 1997, p. 192) that girls are seen to buy into but do not critically evaluate or understand.⁹ As Mary

---

⁸ Ironically, while girls are condemned for indiscriminate consumption, shopping has been “reclaimed” as a useful and fun pastime for women within the field of feminist cultural studies. Shopping, it is suggested, offers women the chance to bond with each other, unwind, engage in fantasy, and flirt with desire and sexuality (Smith, 1988; Young, 1990).

⁹ Marx and Engels note that ideology is how “the capitalist economic structure...is hidden from the consciousness of agents of production” (as quoted in Hebdige, 1979, p. 11). False consciousness is thus what enables the ruling class to continue to exploit the working class. By hiding the “true” economic structure from
Celeste Kearney (1998) notes, girl consumers are often regarded as “passive victims of false consciousness caught up in the allegedly deceptive, alienating, and exploitative relations of commodity consumption” (p. 287). And just as the mainstream is derided for being feminine and feminized, so too are girls derided for being mainstream, their cultural practices emptied of meaning and made hollow in the face of other, more seemingly productive modes of culture (Carter, 1984; Lewis, 1989; McRobbie & Garber, 1991[1978]; Thornton, 1995; McRobbie, 1997; Kearney, 1998; Driscoll, 1999, 2002; Muggleton, 2000; Hodkinson, 2002).

While mass culture is viewed by Adorno and Horkheimer as submissive and empty, popular culture has been signified by early cultural studies theorists as the arena for creative cultural forms and resistance to the “official” culture of the dominant class (Cohen, 1972; Hall & Jefferson, 1976; Willis, 1977; Hebdige, 1979). Popular culture is where items of mass culture are converted into “maps of meaning” for individuals or groups (Hall & Jefferson, 1976). As Stuart Hall (1981) notes, the realm of popular culture matters because it “is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured” (p. 239). But, significantly, popular culture has been coded as male, while mass culture has been coded as female. Boys engage in subcultural resistance; girls engage in conformist consumption. Boys engage in the meaningfulness of bricolage and style; girls engage in the meaningfullessness of fashion and shopping. Boys are purposeful agents; girls are “clueless” consumers. As Erica Carter (1984) points out, these distinctions are entrenched by binary oppositions: “conformity and resistance, harmony and rupture, passivity and activity, consumption and appropriation, femininity and masculinity” (p. 185). Such binaries continue to plague girls’ access to popular culture, and, instead, leave them

the working-class, a “false” consciousness is perpetuated that keeps the working class from understanding their own participation in their oppression.
stranded inside the culture industry, where they are treated as "passive and docile creatures" of "mass cultural domination" (Pipher, 1994, pp. 19, 26).

The ethnographic work on subculture from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham standardized the idea that "youth" meant "male youth" (McRobbie, 1991 [1980]). Girls and women are described as followers, hangers-on, and "slags" or "whores," rather than cultural producers in their own right. The assertion that girls are missing or silent from these groups suggests "the redundancy of women in most subcultures" (McRobbie, 1991 [1980], p. 25). Male subcultures, however, are richly explored, and include the teddy boys, mods, rockers, punks, rastas, skinheads, and schoolboy "lads" (Cohen, 1972; Hall & Jefferson, 1976; Willis, 1977; Hebdige, 1979; 1988). Hebdige (1979) defines subculture as "a form of resistance in which experienced contradictions and objections to [the] ruling ideology are obliquely represented in style" (p. 133, emphasis added). For Hebdige, style thus becomes a raised middle finger, "a form of Refusal" and "noise" (pp. 2, 133) for its working-class, male participants.

But these classic subcultural studies do nothing to highlight the cultural practices of girls; and when girls make an appearance, it is "in ways which uncritically reinforce the stereotypical image of women...or else they are fleetingly and marginally presented" (McRobbie & Garber, 1991 [1978], p. 1). These derisive portrayals prompted McRobbie (1991 [1977]) to ethnographically explore working-class girls’ experiences of culture.10 She

10 Though, as McRobbie (1991 [1982]) writes, her analyses of working-class girls' culture may have failed to acknowledge the realities of girls' lives by making class a more central feature than did the girls themselves. She writes, I felt that somehow my 'data' was refusing to do what I thought it should do. Being working-class meant little or nothing to these girls—but being a girl over-determined every moment. Unable to grapple with this uncomfortable fact, I made sure that, in my account anyway, class did count. If I had to go back and consider this problem [of working-class girls' culture] now, I would go about it in a very different fashion. I would not harbour such a monolithic notion of class, and instead I would investigate how relations of power and powerlessness permeated...
found “subtle” forms of resistance in the private spaces of the youth club, the home, and the school. As opposed to the overtly anti-authoritarian practices of Willis’ (1977) “lads,” McRobbie found that working-class girls “gently” resisted school culture, and that this resistance was linked to clothing, makeup, and fashion. Being “fashionable,” McRobbie suggests, was in direct opposition to dominant school culture, as girls indicated “that they did not recognise the distinction between school and leisure. Symbolically at least, the school was transferred into an extension of the social life” (p. 44).

McRobbie and Garber (1991[1978]) continued to research female youth in the face of sexist or missing representations of girls in subcultural texts. Teenybopper culture, they suggest, is an example of “distinctive” girls’ culture, “based round an endless flow of young male pop stars in magazines and pin ups” (p. 11). Similarly, Simon Firth (1981) locates a distinctive “female” cultural practice in the form of “bedroom” culture. Bedroom culture exists in the private space of a girl’s room, where she and her friends engage in heterosexual fantasies and beauty practices. Yet, as Kearney (1998) points out, both teenybopper and bedroom cultures “did not involve an investigation into other productive practices undertaken by female adolescents, and therefore ultimately reproduced the dominant notion that girls are capable only of cultural consumption” (p. 285). As well, for Holland and Eisenhart (1990), such uniquely “feminine” cultural forms show how girls are “educated in romance” in order to fulfill their “natural” role as mothers and wives. McRobbie and Garber (1991 [1978]) also

the girls’ lives—in the context of school, authority, language, job opportunities, the family, and community and sexuality. (p. 65)

Anita Harris (2001) revisits the idea of “bedroom culture” and locates the bedroom as the “new” space for girls’ political engagement. In order to avoid the surveillance that has recently descended upon girls in the public sphere, Harris theorizes that girls have ‘gone underground.’ Bedroom culture has thus shifted from Firth’s (1981) understanding of romance and beauty rituals to a space where girls can enact politics through the Internet, including zines (on-line magazines), “gURL” webpages, and alternative music.
suggest that the distinction between female and male sub/culture is "its commercial origins. It is an almost totally packaged cultural commodity" (p. 11).

The trope between girls and cultural dupedom is born of such representations, both in the masculinized versions where girls are voiceless and in the feminist versions where girls are seen to exist predominantly within the realm of mainstream commodity consumption. As a result of girls' lack of access to the streets, as well as their socialization as wives and mothers, girls' subjectivities were fostered within "girl" sanctioned spaces: the home, the school, the shops, and the clubs where they hung out. Girls' leisure activities were thus generally focused around "the female body itself" (Carter, 1984, p. 205)—including those aspects that are seen to make up consumer girl culture. But the derision of these activities as "exemplary of mass-cultural identity" (Driscoll, 2002, p. 243) is the derision of girlhood itself. If girls "become visible at the point of consumption" (Carter, 1984, p. 197, emphasis added), then to treat girls as cultural dupes operating under false consciousness is to render them invisible in the social world.12

Though many girls choose to abstain from mass cultural consumption and the "trappings" of the culture industry through DIY activities and underground or subcultural practices,13 an attachment to mainstream commodity consumption does not render girls'  

12 A recent example of how girls are rendered invisible at the point of consumerism is Spice Girls fandom. Spice Girls' fans, mainly girls under the age of sixteen, were routinely criticized in the academic and popular press for being easily duped by the "faux feminism" message of "girl power." Seen to be victims of false consciousness, the fans were viewed as "clueless" consumers who did not realize the "glossy prepackaged commodity" that marketers had created (Driscoll, 2002, p. 272, see also Wald, 1998; Riordan, 2001). Not only were the fans easily dismissed for being girls, but according to Driscoll (2002), the Spice Girls were similarly dismissed for "being perceived as a girl thing" (p. 273).

13 DIY stands for do-it-yourself and is a part of punk philosophy. A recent example of DIY within a female oriented subculture is the riot grrrl punk movement of the early 1990s. Riot grrrl was a conglomeration of bands with a feminist ethos focused specifically on girls and young women. Providing an outlet for their frustrations, riot grrrl created a safe cultural space for the expression of rage and the formulation of political action (Kearney, 1997; Leonard, 1997; Wald, 1998). Girls were encouraged to avoid mainstream consumer culture by producing their own cultural forms, including style, music, zines, and networks to fight sexual
cultural practices meaningless. To suggest as much is to disregard the majority of girls’
activities, experiences, and “maps of meaning.” And though girls are continuously
constructed as “clueless,” the girls I met at ESH were certainly not oblivious to marketing,
media, and global capitalism. They articulated how trends came into existence, how labels
were “bullshit,” how the media makes you “feel bad,” and how pop stars are “fake” and “told
what to say.” Some of the girls I met were boycotting certain products, such as Coca Cola.
Others refused to wear anything mainstream at all, because if everyone has it, “what’s the
point?” And girls who dressed in trendy or mainstream fashions, including the Britney and
JLo looks, often commented on the pressures they felt to look and be a certain way,
highlighting gendered discourses of normativity and compulsory heterosexuality in which
they felt trapped.

Constructing girls as drowning victims and cultural dupes creates space for the moral
panic on girls’ style, enabling it to slip easily and naturally in mainstream consciousness like
an idea that has already been thought. As drowning victims, girls wear the “slut” look in
order to act out their low self-esteem, their desire to be loved, and their insatiable hunger for
male sexual attention. A modern-day Ophelia in low-rise jeans adds weight to the idea that
girls today are “in trouble” and “out of control”—their metaphorical suicides writ large on
their descending waistbands. And as cultural dupes, girls wear the “slut” look because they
are operating under false consciousness, because they are the sustainers of the culture
industry, and because they are naturally linked to “clueless” consumerism. Either way,
girlhood is essentialized as an immutable social state with an inherently “right” and “wrong”

harassment and violence against women. The cultural production of riot grrl fans is often juxtaposed to the
cultural dupedom of the Spice Girls’ fans.
way to be. And either way, girls’ style is disregarded as a passive and hollow signifier that is easily ignored and/or roundly critiqued.

**Fertile Crossroads: Girls’ Studies Meets Feminist Sociology of Education**

“What is the future of feminist inquiry into the lives of young women?”
-Anita Harris (2004a, p. xviii)

The discourses outlined above contribute to the discursive construction of girlhood, a construction that the field of girls’ studies works to make visible. Gayle Wald (1998) calls girls’ studies a “subgenre of recent academic feminist scholarship that constructs girlhood as a separate, exceptional, and/or pivotal phase in female identity formation” (p. 587). Drawing on cultural studies and its interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives, girls’ studies is concerned with how girls have taken up the “texts” of girls’ culture in order to create and negotiate diverse and alternative subjectivities for themselves (Driscoll, 1999, 2002; Harris, 2001; 2004a; Inness, 1998a; 1998b; Kearny, 1998; Mazzarella & Pecora, 1999; Wald 1998; Walkerdine, 1990, 1993; Pomerantz, Currie & Kelly, 2004; Kelly, Pomerantz & Currie, in press). As Alison Jones (1993) suggests, if “girls become ‘girls’ by participating within those available sets of social meanings and practices—discourses—which define them as girls,” then the project of girls’ studies is to recognize that there “is no one way in which girls as a group, or as individuals, can be fixed in our understanding” (p. 159). In exploring girlhood as a social and cultural construction, girls’ studies goes beyond psychological and developmental prescriptions by asking, “how and why are girls what they appear to be at a particular moment in a given society” (de Ras & Lunenberg, 1993, p. 1)?
Girls' studies has, for the most part, focused on analyses of popular culture as a way of exploring girls' resistances to “emphasized femininity” (Connell, 1987), including subcultural and underground forms of girlhood. These forays into girls' engagement with cultural texts have been influenced by cultural studies, a field that is marked by the interdisciplinary features of textual analysis, representation, poststructuralism, postmodernism, psychoanalysis, and the cultural production that is often associated with youth subcultures and resistance. But as McRobbie (1996) notes, cultural studies has been criticized for being overly concerned with texts. From a sociological perspective, cultural studies can seem indifferent to the ways in which social worlds are organized and how meaning-making is made possible through such organizations. Cultural practices are often analyzed independently of the people, places, and social formations that make these practices possible.

Conversely, sociology has been critiqued by proponents of cultural studies. Focused on ethnographic research that often seeks access to “true” voices, sociology has been accused of ignoring poststructural understandings of discourse, subject formation, and the crisis of representation brought on by the “linguistic turn.” Sociology is marked by investigations of group interactions within institutional organizations, such as the school and the family, as well as qualitative methodologies that seek to paint an “honest” portrait of social life by presenting the voices of those in it as “transparently meaningful” (McRobbie, 1996, p. 32).

---

14 According to Connell (1987), emphasized femininity is when women and girls willingly subordinate themselves to hegemonic masculinity by attracting boys through heteronormative modes of sexuality and beauty. As noted earlier, this kind of femininity is equated with white, middle-class, and heteronormative values.

15 Examples of such analyses include girls and zines (Schilt, 2003; Harris, 2001), girls and music, particularly the Riot Grrrl punk scene of the early 1990s (Kearney, 1997; Leonard, 1997; Wald, 1998), girls and technology (Gilbert & Kile, 1997; Garrison, 2000; Harris, 2001; Reid-Walsh & Mitchell, 2004; Kelly, Pomerantz & Currie, in press), girls and teen magazines (Carrington & Bennett, 1996; Currie, 1999), girls and popular culture (Inness, 1998a, 1998b; Driscoll, 1999; Mazzarella & Pecora, 1999; Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2005), and fictional representations of girls (Owen, 1999; Early, 2001; Havrilesky, 2002).
The difference between cultural studies and sociology is centred on the difference between the “cultural” and the “social,” where the former “refers to objects and practices which engage girls in meaning-making” and the latter refers to the materiality of girls’ lives and their “lived” realities (Currie, 1999, p. 284).

Cross pollination within these disciplines over the last two decades has caused Michèle Barrett (1992) to observe a “turn to culture” in feminism, based on a shift from sociological “things” to the “words” of cultural texts. For Barrett, the kind of feminist sociology that has been gaining attention has “shifted away from a determinist model of ‘social structure’ (be it capitalism, or patriarchy, or a gender segmented labour market or whatever) and deals with the questions of culture, sexuality or political agency” (p. 205). A feminist sociology of education has the potential to push this cross pollination further by linking these issues to the gendered institution of the school, where dominant notions of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality are reified in power relations, such as an oppressive curricula, classroom practices, and bodily discipline. As Deirdre Kelly (2000) notes in her study of teen moms and the politics of inclusive schooling, while “there is no unified feminist perspective,” a feminist stance “typically indicates at a minimum, a focus on gender—an oppressive, ideological structure that is socially produced through unequal relations of power” (p. 9). Feminist sociologists of education, particularly critical feminists who are working toward social change (Fine, 1992; Luke & Gore, 1992; Gore, 1993; Kenway & Willis, 1998; Fine & Wise, 1998), emphasize the school as a primary site of unequal relations of power that are played out in myriad ways.

But for the most part, a feminist sociology of education does not link the “pedagogical regimes” (Luke, 1996, p. 8) that construct girlhood in the school with the cultural practices
that are central to girls' culture. Typically, a feminist sociology of education stops short of analysing the meaning-making practices of girlhood and focuses, instead, on the gendered pedagogy of the classroom or the gendered structure of the school as an institution. However, as Carmen Luke (1996) points out, pedagogy cannot be contained as an "isolated intersubjective event" (p. 1). Luke expands pedagogy to mean "the many pedagogical dimensions of everyday life implicated in the constructions of gendered differences and identities" (p. 4). Her extended view of pedagogy pushes beyond curricula and reaches into the hallways, lockers, bathrooms, parking lots, and smoking areas—school spaces that are gelled together by girls' engagement with cultural texts.

There is a disconnect between sociological analyses of gender in the school and the textual investigations of girls' studies. It is for this reason that I wish to situate Dressing the Part at what I see as a very fertile crossroads between girls' studies and a feminist sociology of education. This intersection of disciplines facilitates a sociological and ethnographic understanding of girlhood as it is constructed within the institution of the school, while at the same time engages with the texts of girls' culture as they are used by girls to negotiate that construction. Working at this crossroads enables me to engage with the cultural texts that girls take up as they perform and negotiate their identities, while focusing on the school as a constituting institution that positions girls in particular ways.

As a product of discursive processes, girlhood is slotted into models of intelligibility that render it the "passive object and neutral product of larger and more important historical changes and voices" (Driscoll, 2002, p. 4). With Driscoll's words in mind, I know that I am part of the process that produces and perpetuates knowledge on girls. I began this chapter by

---

16 For exceptions, see Bettis & Adams, 2003; Gonick, 2003; Kelly, Pomerantz & Currie, 2005; Pomerantz, 2005.
acknowledging that I am now complicit in the incitement to discourse that girls' style has become—and through this complicity, I am also contributing to the larger moral panics that swirl around girls and their general wellbeing. As Kearney (1998) points out, researchers always “contribute to the established story of a girl’s life” (p. 306). But the aim of this study is not to prescribe how girls “should” be. The aim of this study is to explore how girls are positioned and position themselves within the school, and how these positionings necessitate an engagement with girls’ cultural practices—specifically, style. And so it is to identity that I now turn, and how it is shaped within the physical and discursive space of the school.

“Because That's How You Are At School”: Identity, Subjectification, and Temporary Attachments

“It's pretty much an 'in school' thing. You know what I mean?”
-Isabel, “dressy” style

“Making sense of ourselves is what produces identity.”
-Spivak (1993, p. 179)

I have chosen to use the word “identity” because, as Stuart Hall (1996) suggests, identity is a useful and necessary concept. But Hall also reminds us that if identity is to be considered at all, it should be considered under erasure, hovering, as it does, “between reversal and emergence; an idea that cannot be thought in the old way, but without which certain key questions cannot be thought at all” (p. 2). The “old way” of thinking about identity is that which is permanent in the self. This conception highlights a “conscious, stable, unified, rational, coherent, knowing, autonomous, and ahistoric individual” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 500). In these terms, identity promises what Derrida (1978) calls presence, or that

---

17 The Derridian concept of erasure (sous rature) relates to the instability of language and suggests that a word both exists and does not exist at the same time. Spivak (1974) notes that “since the word is inaccurate, it must be crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible” (p. xiv). I take up this poststructural understanding of language and meaning in chapter two.
which holds the centre in place, and is derived from humanist discourses that were “initially liberatory in their original intention,” but have come to be seen as constraining “each person to constitute themselves as rational, unitary, and non-contradictory, and as if they were distinct and fundamentally separate from the social world” (Davies, 1993, p. 10). In short, an individual with complete “mastery and control” (Smith, 1987, p. 66) has become unfeasible in the wake of poststructural theorizing.

In poststructuralism, the term “subject” is meant to indicate someone who is constructed within and not prior to discourse. This shift, Davies (1997) explains, “entails a move from the self as a noun (and thus stable and relatively fixed) to the self as a verb, always in process, taking its shape in and through the discursive possibilities through which selves are made” (p. 274). The subject is thus characterized by this lack of presence and denotes a self that is always in process, non-linear, and subject to change. Whereas the humanist individual is stable, the poststructural subject is, as Butler (1997) notes, a “linguistic category, a place-holder, a structure in formation” (p. 10). The subject is, therefore, capable of being multiply located, occupying various and contradictory subject positions at the same time. Subject positions, or what Davies and Harré (1990) refer to as storylines, provide us with a frame of meaning or “way to be” in the social world. These ways of being are represented by the term subjectivity,¹⁸ or the conglomeration of storylines in which we are both positioned and position ourselves.

¹⁸ Not all subject positions are granted “normal” status, however. For example, a girl who is viewed as deviating from the “normal” activities and attributes of girlhood may be considered abnormal, in-trouble, or out-of-control. Butler (1997) thus suggests that the expression “bad subject” is oxymoronic because “to be ‘bad’ is not yet to be a subject” (pp. 118-119). Following this logic, Davies and Laws (2000) note that in the school, “the idea of a bad or unformed subject is the starting point of subjection: each person has to constantly achieve themselves as ‘not bad’ in order to be recognized as an acceptably formed subject” (p. 50).
For Hall (1996), identity can never be that which is considered essential or permanent, but is, instead, a way of understanding how we have come to be subjects who are constituted within the discursive process. Identity viewed in this manner incorporates "how we have been represented" through discourse, "and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves" (Hall, 1996, p. 4). "Who" we are is not a matter of a singular, linear account, but is instead a fluid understanding of the intersecting forces that position us as "multiply marked subjects" (Chang, 1994, p. 100) and, through which, we (re)position ourselves. This conceptualization of identity incorporates a subject who has been positioned by discourses that mitigate his or her choices for taking up subject positions. But within this range of available storylines, the subject can create a temporal and contextual identity. Hall thus defines identity as "the point of suture" (p. 5) between the discourses that initiate us as subjects who are "spoken" into social existence and the subjectivities that are produced as a result of this initiation.

Seen as concurrent and imbricated processes, both discursive production and subjectivity are simultaneously enacted through what Foucault calls subjectification, or a twofold occurrence that both constitutes the subject and enables the subject at the same time. Subjectification simultaneously creates and enacts the subject, allowing for what Gonick (2003) calls a "double movement between a subject speaking/writing her way into existence by using the stories or discourses that are made available and in the moment of doing so, also subjecting herself to the constitutive force and regulative norms of those discourses" (p. 10). This double movement incorporates the concept of agency, for as Davies (1990) suggests, agency is

never freedom from discursive constitution of self but the capacity to recognise that constitution and to resist, subvert and change the discourses
themselves through which one is being constituted. It is the freedom to recognise multiple readings such that no discursive practice, or positioning within it by powerful others, can capture and control one’s identity. (p. 51)

Subjectification thus enables subjects to “read the texts of their own ‘selving’” (Davies, 1997, p. 274). Conceived in this way, the subject is no longer a coherent and stable “I,” but is rather a product of “multiple layers of contradictory meanings” through which the self comes into being (Davies, 1993, p. 11).19

Through the lens of subjectification, identity is reconfigured as “points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us” (Hall, 1996, p. 5). The temporary attachments that we feel as identity are constructed within constituting institutions, such as the school, and feel very real in their consequences. In fact, as Bettie (2003) notes, “although postmodern theory tells us there is no real self, people tend to feel they have one. That is, social actors routinely understand and explain themselves (though not exclusively) in essentialist ways” (p. 52). Girls’ identities at ESH were often articulated as stable, but this feeling was a product of the “intimate” relationships they had with their discursive positionings and how girls made these positionings “their own” (Yon, 2000, p. 3). Yon (2000) explains that identity “offers coherence and completion to relationships between the subject and the social world” (p. 13) because these identifications construct and situate subjects “within narratives” that “anchor the subject in the social world” (p. 14).

Girls at ESH thus experienced their identities as fixed in that they saw themselves in ways that enabled them to fit in, be a part of something, and recognize themselves in others.

19 Davies (1993) describes this layering effect through the metaphor of the palimpsest, or an ancient writing surface that never fully erases that which has been written on it before: “One writing interrupts the other, momentarily overriding, intermingling with the other; the old writing influences the interpretation of the imposed new writing and the new influences the interpretation of the old. But both still stand, albeit partially erased and interrupted” (p. 11).
But they also experienced their identities as fluid in that they often articulated the power they had to be “different” and to make “changes” in how others saw them. I use the expression “school identities” as a way of getting at this notion of fixity and fluidity. Identity is (re)produced within institutions, each one requiring a specific performance and entailing a contextual understanding of how to “be” a girl. Girls sometimes expressed this contingency when they spoke of their lives outside of the school. Once outside the school, identities that felt fixed could, and often did, shift to incorporate different subjectivities. Jamie, who defined her style as “out-there, but socially acceptable,” articulated this contingency:

At school you put on a certain hat. You are a certain way. You dress a certain way. You’re spoken to a certain way. You speak to other people a certain way, because that’s the way you are at school. At home, you’ve very different.

For Jamie, school was the site of a particular performance of identity, one based on the temporary attachments that granted her subjecthood within its social world. But at home, she understood that those attachments would necessarily shift in relation to how she was positioned and how she positioned herself in that particular context.

Girls felt their school identities as authentic because identity categories, such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality had specific penalties and rewards. As Bettie (2003) explains, while identity categories are theorized as “shifting and fluid,” they still create “a temporal fixity, bound by the context of history and culture” (p. 53). Below, I explore why identity categories are both fixed and fluid in the sense that they are both social constructions and the basis for oppression, hatred, and power in our society. These identity categories are also key to an understanding of girls’ negotiations of school identity, how they wanted to be seen, and how they were seen by others.
"I think we're a working-class family. We're not rich, nothing. But we've been really blessed. Because of my parents, how much they've worked. Because I've seen them work. And it's hard."
-Isabel, 16, “dressy” style

The terms “middle-class,” “working-class,” and “working poor” are descriptors that I use to ethnographically represent girls in the study. I use them in order to make connections between class and school identities as they are negotiated through style. Unlike a traditional Marxist definition of “class,” which positions people in relation to the means of re/production (Ng, 1998), my conception of class comes from poststructural reconfigurations of identity categories (Scott, 1988). As Sherry Ortner (1998) notes, class is “a culturally and historically constructed identity” (p. 3). Looking through a poststructural lens, Ortner shows that “cultural constructions are always ‘ideological’, always situated with respect to the forms and modes of power operating in a given time and space” (p. 4). In other words, class is contextual. For Bettie, class is a “culture,” rather than an automatic designation. Like the British cultural Marxists of the CCCS, Bettie (2003) locates class consciousness as a “learned position” (p. 42). She argues that “class identity comes to be known equally by markers that exist outside of discovering one’s position in paid labour, as an identity lived out in private life and personal relations—in short, class culture” (p. 42). Class is thus an identity category that is understood through our relationships to people, institutions, and through our affiliations with popular culture, consumerism, and the everyday activities in which we engage (McRobbie, 1994).

In Canada, if economic categories are discussed at all, they are discussed using the language of poverty rather than class. While there is no designated “poverty line,” or level of income that definitively signifies who is living “in” poverty, there is a low income cut-off...
(LICO) that is used to calculate the “working poor” families in Canada. Being classified as “working poor” is the result of a specific formula that takes into account what percentage of a family’s income is spent on food, shelter, and clothing in relation to where the family lives (Statistics Canada, 2001). In this study, I designate girls as working poor if they came from families that received some form of government assistance and/or lived in government housing, or what girls commonly referred to as “the Projects.” These girls most often lived in apartments with their single-mothers, shared rooms with other siblings and did not receive any financial support from their fathers, if they knew who or where he was. Their mothers earned minimum wage at shift or part-time work, such as phone solicitation, waitressing, and office assistant, or were sometimes unemployed and receiving welfare.

Working poor girls often described their families as “struggling” or “surviving,” as opposed to the working-class girls, who often saw themselves as doing “pretty well” or “just fine.” The parents of working-class girls did jobs that presented more security than did the jobs of working poor mothers, such as hairdresser, flower arranger, house painter, store clerk, cook, construction worker, and delivery person. These jobs offered salaries that were higher than minimum wage, stable working hours, and sometimes included benefits through union membership. Working poor and working-class parents did not go to university or college and sometimes had not finished high school. Though, if the parents were immigrants, it was likely that they had more prestigious jobs in their home countries and were forced to start over when they were de-credentialized upon entering Canada (Man, 2004). The parents of middle-class girls in the study were university educated and had careers, such as lawyer, professor, teacher, business owner, nurse, and computer technician.

---

20 For example, a family of four who earns less than $31,424 and lives in an urban area with a population of more than 500,000 in 2001 is considered “low income” (Statistics Canada, 2001).
Because class is taken here to mean one’s relationship to cultural practices, class locations become embodied performances that signify girls’ access to various cultural materials. I employ Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of habitus in order to explore this embodiment in the school. As Bourdieu explains, habitus forms our matrix of perceptions through a structured system of “durable, transposable dispositions” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72) that we acquire through family and social experiences. These experiences occur as a result of economic and cultural capital. Economic capital is material wealth; cultural capital is the status one gains through material wealth, translating into the “knowledge, disposition, and skills that are passed from one generation to the next” (MacLeod, 1995, p. 13). Cultural capital is the level of mastery one has in the language of high culture or in the cultural practices that are prized by those in power (Bourdieu, 1984).

Habitus is produced through economic and cultural capital, translating into the “intrinsic and relational characteristics” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 8) that form “who” we are. These characteristics are made manifest in our social practices, such as attitudes, opinions, and choices in food, drink, sports, vocabulary, and style. All of these characteristics form a template of “character.” Bourdieu (1984) theorizes that people are positioned within social space based on these templates—sharing spaces with those with whom they have the most in common and creating distance between those whose templates are different. Habitus is thus the internalization of structure through social practices based on “the traditional distribution of power and status in society” (Wells, 1997, p. 423). As Bourdieu (1977) elaborates, “habitus is the universalizing mediation which causes an individual agent’s practices, without

---

21 Within the sphere of education, cultural capital is what enables some students to effortlessly succeed while others fail based on their fluency in the dominant language of the school, a fluency that stems from their access to this dominant language in the home (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).
either explicit reason or signifying intent, to be none the less ‘sensible’ and ‘reasonable’” (p. 79).

While Bourdieu outlines habitus as unconsciously embodied dispositions, he carefully enunciates its power as a productive structure, rather than a deterministic one. While habitus mediates structures and subjects, it does not fix them within an immutable set of circumstances. Lois McNay (1999) calls this mediation a “generative principle” in that habitus “engenders a potentially infinite number of patterns of behaviour, thought and expression that are both ‘relatively unpredictable’, but also ‘limited in their diversity’” (p. 100). Habitus functions in this manner because it is embodied. As the internalization of social structure made visible in a person’s dispositions, habitus is the “living through” of one’s social circumstances (McNay, 2000, p. 35). Habitus is, therefore, “a historical structure that is only ever realized in reference to specific situations. While an agent might be predisposed to act in certain ways, the potentiality for innovation or creative action is never foreclosed” (McNay, 2000, p. 43). Bourdieu defines habitus as “history turned into nature” (1977, p. 78) in order to point out that seemingly “natural” dispositions are actually embodied historical constructions.

While Bourdieu does not explicitly link habitus to other identity categories, many educational theorists have done so in order to highlight the connections between race, ethnicity, and class, as well as to highlight the embodied dispositions that exist within racial and ethnic categories (MacLeod, 1995; Horvat & Antonio, 1999). Like class, race and ethnicity are discursively constructed categories that have come to be viewed as “natural” based on “inborn” characteristics. Generally, race has been used to classify people through their physical attributes, creating a form of power and control that enables one race to
Race is often defined as biological features that are uniform to particular groups, thus creating an assumed homogeneity. But as Yon (2000) suggests, while “race might have a specific meaning in a given context and time, its significance changes in different circumstances and times” (p. 10). As a discursive category, race is “socially, historically, and politically constructed. Thus, it does not have a fixed meaning, but is always under transformation” (Bettie, 2003, p. 207). Ethnicity, or one’s heritage and customs based on a cultural affiliation, is also often viewed as natural to particular groups, rather than as a set of historically bound cultural practices.

Gender is similarly defined as a social construct, rather than a set of inborn characteristics intrinsically experienced by males and females. Butler (1990, 1993) explores the construction of gender through her theory of performativity. Based on Nietzsche’s (1967) claim that “the doer is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything” (p. 45), Butler (1993) argues that gender, as an effect of discourse, is not performed by a “doer,” but nor is it something we simply “fake” as the word “performance” might suggest. Rather, performativity is meant to denote the process by which discourse continues to reiterate the very thing which it already “regulates and constrains” (p. 2). This process of regulation is based on the constant repetition of gendered acts that mark a body as either recognizably “male” or recognizably “female.” Gender is thus “a set of repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame that congeals over time to produce the appearance of a substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler, 1990, p. 33). As a result of such repetitions, Butler (1990) also locates “gaps and fissures” (p. 10) in gender, where creative acts of agency and resistance can occur. Butler (1990) explains that,

the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a
de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction. (p. 179)

As I have noted above, the constructed nature of gender, or any other identity category, does not mitigate its effect on girls in the school, who often felt their identities as fixed. And while girls understood that they were often doing “things” that they did not “have” to do, or that they felt compelled to do “things” that they knew were “stupid” or “made up,” they also often felt the pressure to perform girlhood in very specific ways. This reality of school identities signifies the power of discursive categories and their perpetuation within institutions, particularly the school, which Walkerdine (1990) describes as “one of the modern apparatuses of social regulation” (p. 32). But as the stage upon which girls performed their school identities, ESH also offered up both the physical and the discursive space for girls to negotiate how these categories positioned them within its complex social world. Up until now, I have discussed this negotiation as a general facet of identity. In the final section of this chapter, I would like to specifically address how this negotiation takes place through style.

Social Skin: Style as Embodied Subjectivity

“...I mean, I guess wearing your clothes is a way of expressing yourself, almost.”
-Zeni, 15, “casual/sporty” style

The temporary attachments that girls felt as identity were products of the intimate relationships they developed to the conglomeration of subject positions they occupied, or their subjectivities. Traditionally, subjectivity has been located through the mind. As Christine Weedon (1987) suggests, subjectivity is all “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relations to the world” (p. 32). However, locating subjectivity vis-à-vis the interiority of
consciousness has prompted Elizabeth Grosz (1994) to challenge the Cartesian dualism that this mind/body split engenders. If subjectivity is located through consciousness, then the mind is given priority over the body as the locus of self-awareness.

In an effort to transcend this dualism, Grosz (1994) proposes a model of subjectivity that is embodied. As a way of explaining embodied subjectivity, she offers the example of the Möbius strip, a three-dimensional figure-eight. Through the Möbius strip, Grosz shows how psychical interiority and corporeal exteriority succumb to one another by the "torsion of the one into the other, the passage, vector, or uncontrollable drift of the inside into the outside or the outside into the inside" (p. xii). For Grosz, the body and mind are not distinct entities operating in mutual exclusion, but are mutually bound to one another through embodied subjectivity, a concept that affirms that "[b]odies have all the explanatory power of minds" (p. vii). McNay (1999) also suggests that as "the point of overlap between the physical, the symbolic and the sociological, the body is a dynamic, multiple, mutable frontier. The body is the threshold through which the subject's lived experience of the world is incorporated and realized" (p. 98). Embodiment thus enables feminists to talk about the body without reducing women or girls to their bodies, avoiding charges of essentialism that have plagued feminist discussions of the corporeal self. McNay (2000) further explains that by linking the psyche, body, and society, the concept of embodiment produces a body that is "a transitional entity where corporeal identity is regarded as unfinished and as relatively amenable to transformation" (p. 20). In other words, the body is as fluid and shifting as identity itself.

The feminist concept of embodiment is an intriguing one in relation to girls' style. The body, after all, is not naked in society; it is always dressed. As Elizabeth Wilson (1985)
comically notes, “[f]or everyone clothes are compulsory” (p. 228). As compulsorily dressed bodies, it is our clothing, accessories, and accoutrement, what I am calling style, that becomes a locus of embodied subjectivity in the social world. Style is the observable, external layer that covers the hidden interior layer of the body. As that which makes us socially visible, style acts as social skin. As social skin, style is extended all the explanatory power that Grosz and McNay afford the body. Style is the body’s emissary in the social world, acting synecdochically for that which lies beneath it. Style grants not just visibility, but meaning to the body, revealing and releasing the body, cloaking and confining it, shaping it and giving it definitions, borders, and folds (Wilson, 1985). Style fashions the body into a fluid social text, creating a “deep surface” (Warwick & Cavallaro, 1998, p. xxiii, original emphasis). For Wilson (1985), dress is the connection between the body and the social world, the link between “public and private” (p. 2). Similarly, Joanne Entwistle (2001) sees dress as a “situated bodily practice” (p. 34) that acts as an embellishment by supplementing the body with “a whole array of meanings” (p. 33) that it would otherwise not have.

As social skin, style is a significant locus of embodied subjectivity for girls in the school, where it is one of the most visible and accessible cultural practices used to negotiate identity. In this way, style acts as a membrane of permeability, or a porous covering that enables girls to transfer something of themselves into the social world (subjectivity), as well as enabling the social world to transfer something of itself into girls (discourse). Style is thus an entrance into and an exit out of girls’ school identities, as well as a point of convergence, where discourse and subjectivity meet. As Kaja Silverman (1994) suggests, style is a “necessary condition of subjectivity” (p. 191) that affects our ability to understand ourselves and others in relation to the social world. Style announces to others what “kind” of
relationship we are going to have with them. Before we leave the house, we check to make sure we are dressed “appropriately” for the day, we think about how we want to look through style and before we even speak to others, they look at our style and make decisions about who we are (Lurie, 1981). Our social visibility is wrapped up in style; our identities are contingent upon it.

*Dressing the Part*, the title of this study, is meant to invoke the multifaceted understanding of identity that I have explored in this chapter, particularly as it is negotiated through style within the school. Girls at ESH dressed for the parts they were positioned to play by the identity categories they occupied, but within these seemingly structured categories, girls continued to negotiate the parts they wanted and yearned to play through style. Sometimes they were successful, making transitions effortlessly from one school identity to another; sometimes they were called “posers” and forced to return to an earlier incarnation of themselves; sometimes they occupied several contradictory identities at once; sometimes they forged hybrid identities, refusing to occupy just one at a time; and sometimes they fantasized about the possibilities that they knew existed, but were afraid to make happen. As Sandra Weber and Claudia Mitchell (1995) suggest, clothing is a complex amalgam of social needs and fears, signalling “a proclamation of resistance, a mode of innovation or becoming, a reconciliation, a desire to belong, or a surrender” (p. 62).

Whatever reasons a girl had for dressing the way she did, it always included an affinity *for* something and/or a desire to distinguish herself *from* something, reasons that I, too, could relate to. I suffered from “style paralysis” (Pomerantz, 2003, p. 23) each morning before heading off to school, as I stood before my closet wondering how I wanted to look as a white, university-educated, middle-class researcher with a youthful demeanour. I was never sure if
I reached my desired goal, so ambiguously hidden was it within my own desire to be both “popular” and “professional” at the same time. And so, as a school ethnographer, I did my best to “rock” what I was wearing, an expression I learned from Gianna, meaning simply to make whatever I was wearing work for, instead of against me. But I also did my best to play the part in which I had positioned myself: a university researcher encroaching on girls’ spaces within the school.

In order to link girls’ style to identity negotiation at ESH, I spent a school-year hanging out with girls. I rotated through thirty-seven classes in order to meet girls from diverse backgrounds, and eventually settled on a semi-regular schedule that offered me the best “view” of the school. I focused on interviewing and observing girls from three diverse programs: French Immersion, an academic program composed of mainly white students who were middle- and working-class, girls in the “Regular” program, ESH’s racially and ethnically diverse “main” student body, composed of middle-, working-class, and working poor students, and girls in the Aesthetician program, otherwise known as “beauty school,” a vocational stream that was composed of working-class and working poor girls from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds. This selection of programs offered me the opportunity to get to know girls from a variety of economic circumstances who were both academically and vocationally positioned within the school, as well as girls from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. My sample of twenty (though I came to know dozens more through casual conversation) consisted of three working poor, eleven working-class, and six middle-class girls. The racial and ethnic backgrounds of the girls ranged from white, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, First Nations, Italian, Ethiopian, African-Canadian, Hispanic, Middle-
Eastern, to mixed-races. Within the group, seven were first-generation Canadians from immigrant families.

Whenever possible, I participated in the activities of the classes I attended, analyzing poetry, joining in on "theatre sports," taking part in language games, where I was pegged by Mr. Murphy as a member of the "Boggle generation" (a title which, sadly, I could not live up to), conducting science experiments, and pouring over the "hot" fashion looks of the season.

I also spent time with girls at lunch, hanging out with them in their various corners of the school: stairwells, classrooms, the cafeteria, bus shelters, the smoking area, and hallways. I attended assemblies, evening events, and chatted with students on the way home. I also turned down several invitations to "party" and "skip" classes with girls, some of whom enjoyed trying to get me to "blink" in my role as researcher/adult.

I wanted to understand how the school and its social world both necessitated and facilitated particular school identities for girls and how these identities were negotiated through style. In chapter two, I explore methodological dilemmas, where I discuss my role as an ethnographer guided by feminist poststructural theory. In chapter three, I work toward mapping the complex terrain of the school in order to contextualize how girls were positioned by its uniquely postmodern social world. Chapters four and five focus specifically on girls’ negotiations of identity through style within that postmodern social world. Chapter four highlights the processes of subject positioning as girls used style to forge recognitions between themselves and others. Here, I explore style as a pivotal force in the formation of social groups, as well as the ambivalence girls felt as they were positioned and worked to position themselves as particular "kinds" of girls through social categories. While chapter four focuses on group identity, chapter five focuses on style as an expression of individual
identity. Girls spoke of their “images” and how they wanted others to see them, and used style to creatively negotiate their positionings within discourses of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality. In this chapter, I also explore girls’ negotiations of image as an expression of agency. In chapter six, I conclude by returning to the fruitful theoretical crossroads of girls’ studies and feminist sociology of education. I also explore the broader ramifications of this research in relation to education and feminism, two social projects that have let girls down, but also offer the potential to shift how girls are viewed within this society.
Chapter Two

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE, ANYWAY?: TOWARD A GENERATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY OF GIRLS"

"There can, of course, be no apolitical scholarship."
-Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991, p. 53)

Not a Girl, Not Just an Ethnographer: Questions of Purpose and Presence

"We are not simply positioned, like a butterfly being pinned to a display board. We struggle from one position to another and, indeed, to break free—but to what?"
-Valerie Walkerdine (1990, p. xiii)

On my eleventh day at ESH, Geraldine, the curt secretary in the office, told me that I no longer needed to pick up a visitor’s badge when I signed in each morning. “People are getting used to you,” she said without looking up. At first, I was pleased to have been “gotten used to” and to have somewhat mitigated my role as the “anthropological stranger” (Agar, 1980). But as I left the office without a badge clipped to my shirt, I realized that I had come to rely on its easily-understood designation in order to negotiate my own identity in the school. When the badge fell from my t-shirt one day, Casey, a girl I had come to know in grade 9 science, called out to me. “Shauna, you dropped this!” Running back to her, I thankfully scooped it out of her hands and replied, only half jokingly, “without this, I’m nothing!” With the badge, I had a clearly defined purpose—one that was provisional, official, and comprehensible: VISITOR. But without the badge, it was difficult for students to understand why I was still hanging around their school. As the following exchange with Shitar shows, categorization eluded me and created an undecidability surrounding my presence at ESH. When Shitar told me that she thought one of the English teachers was “weird,” I abstained from offering an opinion, explaining that I did not “know her very well.” Realizing that it was an excuse not to gossip, Shitar replied, “You can’t say anything
anyway...you’re a...well...I don’t know what you are... you’re like a...” Trying to help her out, “...not a high school student?” “Something like that,” she replied.

I was betwixt familiar social categories for girls, occupying a liminal space “in-between the designations of identity” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37). But because of the confusion that this liminality caused, I was also easily slotted into *any* category in students’ and teachers’ attempts to make sense of my presence in their school. While I was not a teacher, I was constantly positioned as one. I was sometimes left alone with a class when the “real” teacher stepped out to get some photocopying done or to grab a coffee in the staffroom. I was turned into the “expert” as teachers sometimes deferred to me on particular issues, told students to ask me difficult questions, and used me as a resource for everything from journalism to spelling to sautéing to lipstick. Once, I found myself teaching a class when a substitute did not show up. Though I called down to the office immediately, I was left in charge for 45 minutes. And while I was not a student in the proper sense of the word, I was also often positioned as one by teachers who sometimes saw me as one of the many bodies before them in class, where I sat day after day, taking notes, not knowing answers, and worrying that I might get into trouble for talking during the lesson. Students, too, saw me as one of them, as they watched me offer my two cents in class discussions and during group work. As Steven, my dishwashing partner in grade 9 Foods and Nutrition class pointed out to me: “You’re like a kid, we’re used to you, but you don’t have to do the work.”

Because I spent most of my time with girls, both in and out of class, I was also positioned as a girl/friend. On Wednesday mornings, girls would seek me out for the obligatory *Buffy* rehash; on Thursdays it was *Gilmore Girls*. And on Monday mornings some girls would find me in order to tell their tales of “getting wasted” over the weekend:
vomiting, dancing, drinking, getting into clubs, seeing bands. Girls also spoke to me about quitting school, bad break ups, foster families, Canadian and U.S. politics, bullying, dating (high school boys and older men), sexuality, MSN messenger romances, pop stars, consumer culture, part-time jobs, body piercing, and myriad other topics that girls discussed with each other as part of their daily meaning-making practices. But this camaraderie was not consistent and while I felt popular some days, other days I felt lost, lonely, and invisible. The constant tension between insiderness and outsiderness was often exhausting, a feeling that was well documented in my field notes. On the day I hid out in the library whilst surreptitiously eating a Twix bar for lunch, I wrote, “I’ve been a loser and a winner. I’ve been a star and a persona non-gratis. I’ve been overrun in the halls and been given a wide berth like a leper.”

Given the different subject positions that I occupied, my presence and purpose in the school was murky to students and, sometimes, to teachers. I was often taken for a reporter or a writer. During one particular lunch, I was hanging out in the drama room, a refuge for some of the self-defined “alternative” students in the school. Someone had put on a tape of Arlo Guthrie’s *The Motorcycle Song*. About fifteen of us were lounging on chairs and grungy couches in the open space of the studio. I had come to know most of the students in the room, but one, Davis, was new to me. He was a skater with blonde, curly hair that easily escaped his black toque. Between moments of singing, laughing, and the general mayhem that filled the room, he hesitantly turned to ask me if I was a “student or a teacher,” not really sure if either category was suitable. Someone else called out, “she’s writing a book!” Interested and a little defensive, Davis asked, “what, like, are you looking for the stereotypical teenager?” I explained to him that I was a university researcher interested in
the social world at ESH and girls' experiences of image and identity in the school. Still a little puzzled, Davis decided to simply tease me about my interest in his school, asking: “Is it going to be like Degrassi Junior High?”

In a similar attempt to make sense of my presence, Freddie, a senior and admitted slacker, once greeted me in the hallway by demanding to know, “What are you doing in my school?” More commonly, the question was issued to me in this form: “What are you doing here, anyway?” Often asked out of curiosity, it was certainly a good question and one that I pondered in old-fashioned bathroom stalls while I was generating data at ESH, in Atlas TI software during data analysis, and in the form of the text that you are reading during the ethnographic write-up. The question, “What are you doing here, anyway?” is thus one that can be read on three related levels: theoretical, empirical, and epistemological. What was I doing in the school as an ethnographer guided by theory and how did that theory shape the study? What was I doing in the school as a researcher gathering data and how did the interaction between the girls and myself impact both the study and our subjectivities? And what am I doing here, in this written document, as a producer of knowledge on girls? Taken together, these questions guide an exploration of the methodology that I employed, namely ethnography, and move me toward what I call a generative ethnography of girls.

A generative ethnography acknowledges that data are generated, rather than discovered or simply collected. Any form of empirical research is thus continually being negotiated in light of that data generation. Girls’ innocent inquiries, curious comments, and thoughtful

---

22 *Degrassi: The Next Generation* (Epitome Pictures) was a popular television show on CTV during the time of this research. It was a spin off of *Degrassi Junior High* (1986-1989). Both shows featured the life of Canadian teenagers and were ridiculed by students at ESH for their improbable situations. Several girls told me how unrealistic the show was and offered these examples: someone was always getting pregnant and the goth girl character was scared to pierce her tongue.

23 It is worth noting that most of the challenges to my presence in the school were issued by boys. While girls were curious about who I was, they seemed more inclined to accept my presence. Perhaps this acceptance was due to the fact that they knew I was there to study them.
criticisms pushed me through and beyond my own conceptions of the study to create something that, like the subjectivities of those involved, continuously evolved. While this conceptualization of ethnography is not new, as I explore shortly, I have chosen to put the emphasis on the word “generative,” instead of “postmodern” or “poststructural” or “critical” or “reflexive” or other labels that I might have selected to describe my methodological inquiry. In so doing, my aim is to foreground the various meanings of “generative” as key to any ethnographic project: co- and re-production, co- and re-creation, and co- and re-invention. I return to these meanings and their epistemological significance in the conclusion to this chapter.

As any qualitative research necessitates a theory of action, or a methodology, I begin with my choice to conduct an ethnography, one that was influenced by feminist poststructural thinking. Here, the emphasis in the question, “What are you doing here, anyway?” is on the “doing” as I question what I am doing here, anyway, as an ethnographer guided by a particular theoretical stance. Next, I turn to the “here” of the question. Specifically, how did being in the school necessitate a shift in my understanding of the generation of data? Finally, the emphasis is on the “you,” or my own generation of an ethnographic text. This concluding section focuses on methodology as epistemology and the generative possibilities inherent in knowledge production on girls.

What Are You Doing Here, Anyway?: Questions of Ethnography

“No research can take a photograph of the social process.”
-Jane Gaskell, (1992, p. 31)

Though I was routinely positioned (and positioned myself) as a teacher, student, and girl/friend who vacillated between insider and outsider status, I also positioned myself as an

45
It was a word that I most likely never uttered in the school, but it was how I saw myself in relation to all other positionings. As an ethnographer, I had come to ESH to explore girls’ negotiations of identity through style, a project that was politically charged by my own feminist desire to change popular and academic impressions of girls as drowning victims and dupes of culture. Though girls’ studies is becoming more prevalent, at the time of this writing, women’s studies programs across Canada had still not incorporated girls into their curriculum in any meaningful way. And while many ethnographers are conducting feminist research, “women’s experience” is almost always foregrounded as the key criterion, with no mention of girls at all. So while girls may have made a tentative leap into the academic world through special topics courses and supplemental readings, they are still unacknowledged as a primary focus in feminist methodologies. As well, “girl power” rallying calls within the popular sphere are still being drowned out by the Ophelia genre, a cottage-industry that continues to pump gloomy representations of girls into the public imaginary. I felt strongly that more qualitative data on girls were needed, not just to counteract negative impressions, but also to add to the rather slim empirical record on girls’ cultural practices. In order to help fill this void, I chose ethnography as my methodology.

Ethnography is “multimethod research” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 46) that enabled me to draw from a variety of sources, including long-term observations, in-depth interviews, and field notes. One of ethnography’s most alluring qualities is this “hybrid textual activity,” offering the potential to travel across “genres and disciplines” (Clifford, 1986, p. 26) and to dip in and out of data pools. As Margaret Eisenhart (2001) notes, learning about girls’ culture means figuring out the “important symbols” for girls, “how they are used, how they are being experienced, where they come from, what other phenomena they are connected to,
and what they imply” (p. 21). More generally, “culture” is the understanding of what one needs to know in order to participate within a group; it is knowledge of “in” jokes, language, activities, style, music, and any other meaning-making practices that enable people to cohere as a whole. Within groups, culture is knowledge of the “‘maps of meaning’ which make things intelligible to its members” (Hall & Jefferson, 1976, p. 10). This kind of knowledge provides “the material and the context for the construction of subjectivities and identities” (Yon, 2003, p. 419). Eisenhart (2001) thus sees ethnography as a useful means for exploring the “relevant ‘culture’” of girls as it depends upon “first-hand, personal involvement in [their] lives” (p. 18). Indeed, ethnography is completely reliant upon the personal. Without the personal, ethnography loses what Britzman (2000) cites as its three “attractive and mythic” qualities: it promises to both disclose techniques for investigating a culture and to render that culture in a completed text; it promises a “good” read so the audience can enjoy colourful storytelling and the guilty pleasure of voyeurism; and finally, it promises (limited and partial) entrée into a culture which the reader is interested in “stepping into” (p. 27).

Aside from offering the ability to investigate girls’ cultural practices, I was keen to employ a methodology that best suited my feminist agenda for generating new understandings of girls, including “multiplying, diversifying, and transforming the possibilities” (Gonick, 2003, p. 48) for girls within the public imaginary. Through ethnography, I could make empirical, not just theoretical, connections between girls’ style and their negotiations of identity. I could link the cultural practices in which girls were engaged to the place where such practices made sense as a contextual and shifting set of signifiers—namely, the school. Finally, I required a methodology that would generate complex representations of girls in order to counteract the uncomplicated images often
offered up by the press and through the Ophelia genre. Ethnography thus offered the possibility for "thick description" (Geertz, 1973, p. 42), or a rich and detailed exploration of girls' meaning-making practices. Ethnography, with its on-the-ground approach, seemed the best way to satisfy these textual and political agendas, offering a methodology that could both explore the complexities of girls' identity negotiations in the school and showcase diverse ways of thinking about girlhood within educational research.

In order to conduct the kind of ethnography that I felt would be compatible with these agendas, I employed feminist poststructural theory. While "methodology is itself theory" (Skeggs, 1997, p. 17), a feminist poststructural ethnography was well-suited to a deconstructive text on girls, one that focused on keeping the signifier "girl" in play, rather than constructing further binaries, such as "good" girls/"bad" girls, "nice" girls/"mean" girls, "normal" girls/"abnormal" girls, etc. This stance seeks to engage in Derrida's (1978) challenge to wriggle beyond the closure of binary thinking, toward the "as yet unnameable which begins to proclaim itself" (p. 293) when data remain undecided. A feminist poststructural ethnography is not concerned with smoothing out the edges of data in order to generate seamless research, a practice that produces "homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness" (Gonick, 2003, p. 30). Instead, it "resists closure" (Visweswaran, 1994, p. 12) and reflexively analyses the roughness of the ethnographic text. Indeed, Britzman (2000) notes that the very qualities that make ethnography so "attractive and mythic" are also the qualities that make the text appear "seamless because they blur traditional distinctions among the writer, the reader, the stories, and how the stories are told" (p. 27). I did not want to blur these distinctions, but instead wanted to highlight them as part of my analysis of girls'
cultural practices in the school. How the story was knit together is as much a part of data
generation as interview transcripts, observations, and field notes.

Ethnography, as Clifford (1986) explains, has its roots in the “persistence of an
ideology claiming transparency of representation, immediacy of experience” (p. 2). Its
anthropological and sociological premise is thus to make “the familiar strange, the exotic
quotidian” (p. 2), or to portray the “other” in a way that makes them knowable, digestible,
and safe (Said, 1978). This kind of ethnography, generally characterized by the term
“naturalism,”\(^{24}\) seeks to produce a rendering of culture that is unmediated. As Trinh Minh-ha
(1989) suggests, this kind of ethnography relies on “a neutralized language that strips off all
its singularity to become nature’s exact, unmisted reflection” (p. 53). Here, the ethnographer
seeks to observe the performance of culture by acting like a “fly on the wall” (Roman &
Apple, 1990). Culture is thus taken to be the collective “property of social groups, bounded,
determined, and internally coherent” (Yon, 2003, p. 423), rather than a social construct. The
ethnographer retains his or her persona as the “anthropological stranger” and remains
invisible both in data collection and in the write-up of the ethnographic text. This invisibility
is meant to suggest a suspension of judgement, value-neutrality, and objectivity, as the
ethnographer has not jeopardized the study by becoming too personally involved. Donna
Haraway (1988) has termed this mode of research the “God trick,” one which offers “a vision
that is from everywhere and nowhere, equally and fully” (p. 584). Similarly, Fine (1994a)

\(^{24}\) Naturalism is a continuation of the positivistic tradition in the social sciences (Roman & Apple, 1990).
Positivism suggests that the social world can be objectively measured and that these measurements will yield
generalizations and predictions about future behaviours. This way of thinking is drawn directly from scientific
methods, such as value-neutrality, universality, and quantitative measurement. Based on the thinking of
Auguste Comte, positivism posited a “new science” that claimed to be able to “describe the facts and laws of
social life as scientifically as mathematics and physics describes those of the physical world” and that
observation can provide “unmediated access to the world and its features” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 495). While
many ethnographers saw naturalism as a break from positivism, Roman & Apple (1990) show that it is actually
its continuation, as naturalistic ethnography maintains the value-neutrality, authority, and invisibility that was
considered necessary for positivistic research.
calls it ventriloquy, as the researcher feels they do not have to include their “gender, race, class, or stance” (p. 17), but instead let the data speak on their own.

This “traditional” view of ethnography as it was conducted in the early days of anthropology and sociology has shifted significantly in the wake of critical, feminist, and postmodern influences. As well, these influences have borrowed from each other, cross-pollinated, and hybridized to form numerous variations of ethnography that critique an unmediated and isolated view of culture, as well as the lack of reflexivity that characterized “traditional” ethnographic texts. Hoping to politicize the ethnographic project, Simon and Dippo (1986) highlight the three characteristics of critical ethnography: its problematic seeks to reveal structures of inequity and the operation of power in society; it seeks to foster social “transformation of unjust and disabling forms of moral regulation and material distribution” (p. 198); and finally, it engages in reflexivity by questioning how the production of knowledge in the ethnographic text contributes to the very structures that critical ethnographers aim to critique.

Born of the “rich tradition of dissent within Marxism” (Foley, 2002, p. 471) that gained renewed popularity through the neo-Marxist perspective of the CCCS, critical ethnography links qualitative studies to larger systems of economic oppression in order to “place ethnographic research within a broader socioeconomic context” (Quantz, 1992, p. 458). Paul Willis’s (1977) groundbreaking ethnography, Learning to Labour, for example, highlights the relationship between the social actions of working-class “lads” in an English comprehensive school and the broader culture of class in which they willingly participated. Willis shows that the “lads” chose their class futures on the shop floor as a form of masculine success, jocularity, and resistance to the non-masculine class futures embodied by the
middle-class “ear ‘oles” who were college bound. Willis’s link between forms of culture and economic structure helped to push ethnography into new territory, where it was no longer enough to explore data as isolated and self-contained phenomena.

While neo-Marxists, such as Willis where conducting ethnography as politics through the lens of class cultures, feminist ethnographers were also working to infuse ethnography with a political agenda—one that critiqued and transformed the masculinist stance inherent in its humanist foundations. “Traditional” ethnography is a humanist project in that it seeks to define the essence of things, to get at that single, unique factor that enables one to identify something or someone and group it with others of its kind in various structures, thus producing, and even enforcing, order out of randomness, accident, and chaos. (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 480)

The humanist project necessitates a stable, rational self that is readily identified and classified. According to Jane Flax (1990), it also assumes that inquiries based on reason can produce “an objective, reliable, and universal foundation of knowledge,” that “language is in some sense transparent” and that actions and objects are not “linguistically (or socially) constructed; they are merely made present to consciousness by naming and the right use of language” (pp. 41-42).

The feminist critique of “traditional” ethnography sought to challenge these features of existence as they privileged reason—a characteristic associated with men—over any other form of knowledge, including those typically associated with women. As a result, “men” and “man’s experience” became the only genuine subject for research, excluding women from possessing legitimate knowledge (Harding, 1987; Smith, 1987; Lather, 1988, 1991). Feminist research has thus focused on redressing this imbalance within the social sciences by conducting studies from the standpoint of women. According to Smith (1987), such research necessitates highlighting the issues that affect women’s everyday lives in a patriarchal
society, viewing the world from a uniquely female perspective, and recognizing how men’s organization of the world has limited and disqualified women’s intelligence (see also Jaggar, 1983; Harding, 1987).

Conducting researching from the standpoint of women has also generated different kinds of data gathering techniques. Feminist methodologies aim to alleviate the division between researcher and researched, as well as transforming the material realities of women and how they have been (un)represented in the social sciences (Oakley, 1981; Lather, 1988; Harding, 1987; Smith, 1987; Stacey, 1988; Stanley & Wise, 1990; McRobbie, 1991 [1982]; Wolf, 1996; Skeggs, 1997). Feminists have focused on mitigating the “hierarchical, exploitative relations of conventional research; urging feminist researchers to seek instead an egalitarian research process characterized by authenticity, reciprocity, and intersubjectivity between the research and her ‘subjects’” (Stacey, 1988, p. 22). Feminist researchers have thus worked to build rapport with their research participants by relying on reflexivity, good listening techniques, empathy, and connected knowing. In this way feminist researchers aim to interrupt “the membrane of objectivity” (Fine, 1994a, p. 14) that characterizes “traditional” ethnography.

While these techniques are a far cry from the invisible accounts of “traditional” ethnography, some feminist ethnographers have also drawn criticism for an essentialized formulation of women and a lack of reflexivity toward their own research practices. In an effort to counteract the hierarchical nature of qualitative research, feminist researchers have, themselves, been accused of unethical research practices. Ethnographers using feminist research principles cause Stacey (1988) to wonder if there can ever be a feminist ethnography, given that research based on friendship and empathy masks “a deeper, more dangerous form
of exploitation” (p. 22). According to Stacey, the more intimate a researcher is with her participants, the more risk there is for mistreatment. As everything is “grist for the ethnographic mill” (p. 23), the feminist drive for equality between researcher and researched could obscure the fact that the tape recorder is always on. While feminist researchers thoughtfully analysed women’s exclusion from the social sciences, both as legitimate producers and legitimate subjects of knowledge, Stacey suggests that the same reflexivity was not equally applied to some feminists’ own research techniques.

Feminist research also came under scrutiny for its emancipatory focus, a focus rooted in white, middle-class, and western assumptions of liberation. This claim to “know” how women feel essentialized women’s experiences by eradicating the differences between races, ethnicities, sexualities, classes, and the everyday realities of women around the world. As well, feminist researchers who privileged gender as the only analytical category were challenged by critical race and third world feminists who “questioned whether gender could or should serve as the primary category of analysis for understanding women’s subordination” (Cuádraz & Uttal, 1999, p. 158, see also hooks, 1984; Trinh, 1989, 1991; Hill Collins, 1990; Mohanty, 1991; Spivak, 1993; Crenshaw, 1997). Such critiques are a part of antifoundational thinking, or the understanding that there is no ultimate, final, or essential form of knowledge around which the world can or should be organized. This way of thinking interrogates “what the theoretical move that establishes foundations authorizes, and what precisely it excludes or forecloses” (Butler, 1992, p. 7). While feminist discourse is antifoundational in its critique of humanist authority and gender bias, what was missing from earlier feminist ethnography was a deeper understanding of the regulation and surveillance inherent in any ethnographic study (Lather, 1991), as well as a more nuanced understanding
of intersecting identity categories and intersecting categories of oppression (Hill Collins, 1995, Crenshaw, 1997).

As an antifoundational discourse, poststructuralism offers a way to think through (though certainly not resolve) these dilemmas within ethnography. Heralded by the “linguistic turn” in the social sciences, poststructuralism “focuses on the power of language to organize our thought and experience” (Lather, 1991, p. 111). Language, poststructuralists contend, does not reflect reality by capturing an already existing social world in words. Instead, reality is produced by language and its ability to structure whole systems of thought. For Derrida (1976), language cannot point to any one reality as it can never point to one, stable form of meaning. Rather, it points to a continuous string of possible and shifting meanings, deferring full presence in any word, concept, or system of thought. Differance is the name Derrida gives to the deferral of meaning through language, a concept that separates words, or signifiers, from the things they signify, or their arbitrary designations. Language, then, renders meaning unfixed. The shift from language as it reflects reality to a reality that is produced through language signals the linguistic turn and the related crises of representation and epistemology, for if the meaning of language shifts depending on social context, then representation can only ever be a “temporary retrospective fixing” of meaning (Weedon, 1987, p. 25). All knowledge is thus suspect, as is the authority of the knowledge producer.

For Foucault (1977, 1978, 1980), language signifies socially constructed systems of knowledge that are held in place by institutions, such as the church, the prison, and the law.

---

Hill Collins (1995) describes “interlocking oppressions” as “the macro level connections linking systems of oppression such as race, class, and gender. This is the model describing the social structures that create social positionings.” She then goes on to describe “intersectionality” as the “micro level processes—namely, how each individual and group occupies a social position within interlocking structures of oppression…” (p. 159). Taken together, these two processes create forms of oppression within society.
These systems, or what Foucault terms "discourse," construct social reality by enabling certain possibilities to exist, while making others unfeasible, illegal, and immoral. Discourse comes to organize how we think about ourselves and the world, creating forms of regulation and power that feel normal—always was, always will be—instead of the product of social, cultural, and historical forces. As I noted in chapter one, this way of thinking about the world also incorporates a subject who is constitutive of discourse, thus making subjectivity and identity as unstable as meaning itself. Poststructuralism, as Britzman (2000) notes, raises "critical concerns about what it is that structures meaning, practices, and bodies, about why certain practices become intelligible, valorized, or deemed as traditions, while other practices become discounted, impossible, or unimaginable" (p. 30). To do poststructural research, then, is to foreground the impossibility of unmediated representation by reflexively analysing the discursive forces through which the researcher, the researched, and the research process are produced. For Laurel Richardson (2003), poststructuralism thus highlights the continual cocreation of Self and social science. Each is known through the other. Knowing the self and knowing about the subject are intertwined, partial, historical, local knowledges. Poststructuralism, then, permits—nay, invites—no, incites—us to reflect upon our method and explore new ways of knowing (p. 509).

Feminist thinking has pushed poststructuralism in important and political directions, working to infuse the deconstructive aspects of poststructuralism with a critique of gender as it intersects with race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality. Feminist poststructuralism seeks to "question the location of social meaning in fixed signs" (Weedon, 1987, p. 25), specifically as they pertain to the fixed signs that construct gender. As Davies (2000) suggests, feminist poststructural analyses focus "on the possibilities opened up when dominant language practices are made visible and revisable" (p. 179). Such analyses entail examining how it is
that girls and women are positioned through prohibitive and regulatory binaries, including man/woman and masculinity/femininity. The categories "girl" and "woman" are opened up and kept in play in order to not only highlight their arbitrary designations within society, but also to explore all the possibilities that have yet to be as a result of these discursive constructions. Just as meaning is rendered unstable through *différance*, so too are gender and gendered categories that seek to fix girls and women in rigid and oppressive ways of being.

A feminist poststructural analysis thus works to crack open the limitations of gender by pointing to the discourses that enable these limitations to exist and thrive (Walkerdine, 1990; Davies, 1989, 1993, 2000; Britzman, 1991; Lather, 1991; Lather & Smithies, 1997; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000).

Feminist poststructural ethnography works against the seamlessness of representation by reflexively analysing how language both constructs and maintains knowledge. This kind of "messy text" (Marcus, 1994) stands in resistance to a homogeneous, self-contained analysis and, instead, highlights the inherent partiality, fictionality, and troubling negotiations of power that take place within any ethnographic project. Through this lens, "the real" of ethnography is taken as an effect of the discourses of the real; ethnography may construct the very materiality it attempts to represent" (Britzman, 2000, p. 28). The ethnographer thus acknowledges that all knowledge is "situated knowledge" (Haraway, 1988) based on the positioning of the researcher, as well as the imbalances of power that exist between the ethnographer and her research participants. The ethnographer also acknowledges that her "location is epistemically salient" (Alcoff, 1991), as is the social and historical moment in which the research takes place (Crapanzano, 1986).
Critical, feminist, and poststructural ethnographies are predicated on reflexivity, where thought turns "back upon itself" (Macbeth, 2001, p. 36). Through reflexivity, the ethnographer confronts the constructed nature of the text and the audience is made to recognize that they are reading a mediated account of culture. But even more importantly, reflexivity enables the ethnographer to represent her research participants in a way that disrupts the promise of a "totalizing’ narrative” (Kelly, 2000, p. 9), pulling the curtain back to reveal not a wizard performing the “God trick,” but a negotiation of power between researcher, researched, and the research site itself. As Pillow (2003) suggests, “[t]o be reflexive, then, not only contributes to producing knowledge that aids in understanding and gaining insight into the workings of our social world but also provides insight on how this knowledge is produced” (p. 178, emphasis added).

For some, however, reflexivity as a research imperative has gone too far, as the researcher purges herself of any methodological guilt by simply admitting “who” she is and “how” she has conducted her study. Pillow notes that this purging can stand in for careful, ethical research, releasing the researcher from her “discomfort with representation through a transcendent clarity” (p. 186). For Daphne Patai (1994), reflexivity has thus become the practice of “wading in the morass of our own positionings” (p. 64) without necessarily producing better research. She sounds this note of caution: “We do not escape the consequences of our positions by talking about them endlessly” (p. 70). Yet for feminist poststructural ethnographers, reflexivity is a vital ingredient in the production of a text that is "accountable to the complexity” of human experience (Lather, 2001, p. 203). Pillow (2003) thus challenges researchers to engage in useful reflexivity, or “reflexivities of discomfort,” where reflexivity is neither an over-indulgence, nor a cure-all for the guilt of representing the
“Other.” Instead, it pushes the researcher “toward an unfamiliar, toward the uncomfortable,” in such a way that representation is disrupted, while “the political need to represent and find meaning” is still acknowledged (p. 192). To that end, I would like to draw attention to both the empirical and epistemological issues that were opened up by the question, “What are you doing here, anyway?” I see these two issues as integral to “working the hyphens” of the researcher/researched relationship, where “we are all multiple in those relations” (Fine, 1994b, p. 72). As the “[s]elf and other are knottily entangled” (Fine, 1994b, p. 72) in the researcher/researched relationship, the remainder of this chapter works toward representing that knotty entanglement.

What Are You Doing Here, Anyway?: Questions of Negotiating the Field

“Methods are not passive strategies.”
-Fine & Weis (1996, p. 267)

My desire to conduct feminist research on girls meant that I had to think of my methodology as more than just a passive plan of action, but as a politics in and of itself. As Kelly (2000) notes in relation to critical feminist ethnography,

I was not just interested in research for its own sake; I sought to challenge and transform unequal relations of power. Researchers can help groups without access to traditional sources of power to articulate their concrete needs, clarify their concerns, and communicate both to a broader audience. They can draw attention to new or marginalized issues and recast old problems. Critical researchers thus attempt to counter or reframe dominant discourses. (p. 185)

In a similar vein, I sought to challenge the imbalance of power that existed between girls and larger mechanisms of knowledge production, such as the media, the academy, and popular cultural modes of “putting the word out” on girls. These authorizing institutions framed girls in ways that girls simply could not counter without the aid of researchers, journalists, and documentarians interested in telling their stories. Indeed, a number of girls told me that they
were glad I wanted to hear their opinions, as the media were always making them "look bad." Chrissie told me she wanted to be in the study because she was "sick and tired" of hearing negative things about girls in the news and how girls are just "open wallets" that marketers can take advantage of. Similarly, during my interview with Abby, she told me that "marketers think girls will buy anything," and this stereotype irritated her as she felt it was an unfair representation of all girls.26

In an effort to conduct the kind of feminist research that I felt would challenge dominant discourses on girlhood, I had initially conceived of my study differently. Though I had always intended to study girls' negotiations of identity in the school through style, I had originally specified that I wanted to interview "alternative" girls in the brochure that I was passing around to teachers and students. I defined alternative girls as those who dressed against the "mainstream" or in ways that were not considered to be "fashionable.” Alternative girls, I reasoned, could offer different models for viewing girlhood, thus enabling me to help change the impression that others had of girls as drowning victims and dupes of culture. But, significantly, I had trouble finding participants who fit the bill. Teachers did not understand what I meant by "alternative,” telling me that all of the girls in their classes were “really regular” and “really average.” And in my initial interviews, I spent more time explaining what I thought “alternative” meant rather than gathering data on how girls saw themselves in relation to the term. The typical response was, “alternative to what?”

While I wanted to conduct a study on girls that would mitigate other, more negative representations, this feminist agenda did not mean that I was exempt from reifying

26 Though most of the girls I spoke with had a very good understanding of the media as a marketing “machine,” it is also important to note that a critique of media does not make any of us impervious to its barrage of images, slogans, and seemingly urgent creation of needs. Girls were critical of the media, yes, but this critique did not render them invincible to its powerful reach.
essentialized categories within girlhood. I had entered the school with a hypothesis—that some girls were more alternative than others. In so doing, I had set up a binary between alternative/mainstream, privileging the former term and disparaging the latter. In short, I had done the same thing as the press and the Ophelia genre, but in reverse. Instead of privileging one view of girlhood (one that I deemed to be negative), I privileged another view of girlhood (one that I deemed to be positive). And as a result of this binary construction, I had inadvertently validated the negative view with which I so strongly disagreed. Further, I had made a decision about what I was going to find during the generation of data, instead of waiting to hear how girls defined themselves. I had thus reinforced the very problem that I had hoped to work against—static notions of girlhood. By creating a binary between alternative girls and those “who were not,” I had limited my understanding of girls in advance of knowing the spectrum of social categories in which they could be positioned and could position themselves.

During my first few weeks at ESH, I could feel that something was not working, but after interviewing Ratch, a self-defined punk, I understood that I had to shift my study in a new direction. I had interviewed Ratch as an “alternative” girl, but she questioned my criteria for this classification. Some girls, she told me, looked alternative on the outside, but were really mainstream on the inside. And some girls, she continued, looked pretty mainstream on the outside, but were actually quite alternative on the inside. Alternative girls, she deduced, were impossible to define. A few days later, Ratch leaned over to me in English class, and whispered, “I’ve been thinking about your study.” “Yeah?” I responded curiously. “You know, everyone’s alternative in their own way.” I nodded. “Punk and goth and hippies are so mainstream. You can just go to the store and buy it.” But, she explained,
“if you choose to look different, you have to be prepared for other people to look and make comments. So it’s a lot harder to look different than to [actually] be different.” Though Ratch did not use these words, she was trying to explain to me that the “alternative” category was unstable as it pointed to many possible meanings within many shifting contexts. She was trying to tell me that I was fixing meaning, rather than attending to the ways in which meaning becomes unfixed through its endless deferral. She was also trying to tell me that the word “alternative” was inadequate for describing any “true” reality in her school. In short, she was trying to tell me that my study did not make sense.

As a result of this exchange with Ratch, I pulled away from trying to find “something” and instead began to ask different questions, such as, What is going on here? and, How do girls from a variety of social locations use style to negotiate their identities here? After all, the point of poststructural research is to “increase the circumference of the visible” (Søndergaard, 2002, p. 202). Though the category “alternative” did come up, as I explore in chapter four, it was girls themselves who used the term in relation to their own understandings of identity in the school. By pulling back the lens and reframing my study as exploratory, rather than a mission to find something in particular, I was no longer limited to one framing of girls, a framing that worked against my feminist poststructural desire to keep the signifier “girl” in play and to generate as many different possibilities for girlhood as possible. My new, open-ended focus was thus a direct result of the negotiations that took place between myself and research participants like Ratch, who had no trouble telling me that I had gotten it wrong. Similarly, Gonick (2003) explains that,

the negotiation of reality that takes place in the doing of ethnography involves complex and shifting relations of power, in which the ethnographer acts but is also acted upon. Understanding is multiple, plurivocal, and pervaded by relations of power on the part of both researcher and researched. Not only did
the ethnographic space we inhabited emerge through various negotiations and manoeuvrings, within these relations, my research questions did as well (p. 37).

My research participants were not docile; they had the agency to speak out. Like myself, they were invested in the project. They wanted the study to make sense in order that their stories should be heard—and heard properly. If the project made sense, we all seemed to reason, then maybe a different way of thinking about girls could emerge.

Feminist poststructural ethnography, Britzman (2000) notes, is not when “the ethnographer authenticates a particular truth. Rather, the ethnographer traces, but not without argument, the circulation of competing regimes of truth” (p. 36). In other words, feminist poststructural ethnography highlights the contradictory elements inherent in any research project by showcasing the “hesitant voices of participants who kept refashioning their identities and investments as they were lived and rearranged in language” (Britzman, 2000, p. 31). My own hesitations and false starts were thus a key component to the ethnographic project. My initial intent was to position girls “in a single textual location” (Walkerdine, 1990, p. 198), but this intent would not have been compatible with what I actually found, or with my feminist agenda to highlight the significance of style for girls in the school. Feminist poststructural ethnography is thus concerned with leaving these tensions in the text, rather than resolving them. In this way, ethnography can ask “questions that produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently, thereby producing different ways of living in the world” (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000, p. 1). Leaving tensions in the text thus entails including stories that may contradict themselves, including false starts and the confusion of the ethnographer, who must learn about the social world in which she
has positioned herself, rather than suggesting she has come to it with complete knowledge and understanding.

Girls continued to offer their feedback throughout the year. Those who were in the study offered suggestions as to what questions I should ask during interviews (more on the importance of thinness, boyfriends, smoking, and eating disorders, some said; you should really talk to more preppy girls, some said). As well, I learned that a few of my questions continued to reify a stable, rational subject. In one interview, I asked Zeni if she felt that other students at ESH knew “the real you.” She paused, tripped up on the question. And then she responded, “I don’t even know who the real me is!” Though she did not say so, Zeni resisted the idea of a unified core to her identity, a theoretical concept that I understood, yet had ignored in my question.

But the project was equally shaped by those who were not a part of it. While I selected twenty as the size of the sample, feeling that it was neither too few nor too many, I asked many girls to participate who said “no.” These refusals shaped the sample as much as any decisions I may have made. As well, my sampling was once questioned by Sydney, a multi-racial, working-class girl who, though interested in being in the study, eventually said “no” due to overwhelming pressures at home. But even though she was not an official participant, she continued to prod me about my research techniques. One day in the hall she asked how I was “choosing” people to talk to. When I explained that I was trying to talk to as many “different kinds of girls as I could,” she seemed relieved. “Good,” she said. I later learned that she was concerned that I only wanted to talk to the popular (white, middle-class) girls in her English class, a class I often attended. Though I had not intended to interview any one
“kind” of girl, Sydney’s question forced me to become more attentive to my sampling practices, even as girls had the power to thwart this attentiveness by saying “no.”

Becoming more attentive to my sampling practices meant becoming more attentive to my own location as a white, middle-class, university researcher in a multicultural high school. While many girls were comfortable talking with me and letting me hang around, some were not. Once, I made an appointment to interview Sela, a First Nations girl who sported a style reminiscent of hip hop artist Missy Elliot. But when I met up with her after school, she told me she could not talk as she had detention after class everyday for the rest of the week! Fifteen minutes later, I passed Sela and her group of friends laughing and jumping off of some nearby park benches. I caught her eye. She shrugged her shoulders at me, as if to say, “sorry, but I had better things to do.” I later learned from one of Sela’s teachers that she did not trust white people and avoided them whenever possible.

Elements of distrust infiltrated many other possible connections I could have had with girls from varying races and ethnicities. I experienced this feeling most often with girls from Asian backgrounds, particularly the popular Chinese and Vietnamese girls. And while some girls wanted to talk to me, they did not feel as though they could, given their responsibilities at home to younger siblings and part-time jobs. Kelsey, a popular working-class Hispanic girl, agreed to an interview, but when I approached her the next day to set up a time and place, she looked at me like I was crazy. “I can’t talk to you after school!” she said adamantly. I have to pick up my little sister and take care of her. There’s things I gotta do.” Our easy-going rapport became somewhat strained after that and I backed off.

My white, middle-class habitus was thus a deterrent to some girls, but I also attribute a lack of interest on some other girls’ parts to my adult/researcher status in the school. Some
girls simply did not want me intruding in their private lives. I was occasionally “blown off” by middle-class, white girls (particularly popular Frenchies), who sometimes viewed me as an over-interested adult poking around their business. Girls also sometimes wondered if I was going to “narc” on them if they spoke to me about drug use, alcohol consumption, or skipping class. Once, a Chinese boy told me to “go do my spying” somewhere else. And once, I became highly self-conscious about my decision to enter the private space of ESH’s social world at all. Ernie, a boy I had come to know well in grade 10 English, told me that I was the topic of his short story assignment. “What’s it about,” I casually asked? He replied, “It’s about a university researcher who goes back to high school in a pathetic attempt to recapture her youth.” I bravely (stupidly?) asked him if he felt that that was what I was doing at ESH. “Oh, no,” he quickly responded. “I’m just using you to base my main character on. I added the pathetic part.”

As Visweswaran (1994) notes, “[a]cts of omission are as important to read as the acts of commission constructing the analysis” (p. 48). These silences, fumbles, and false starts all culminated in the ethnographic text that is written here. I struggled to balance my desire to change people’s minds about girls with an understanding that I was not on some “university rescue mission in search of the voiceless” (Visweswaran, 1994, p. 69). I was, however, engaged in a complexly-knit social world in which I, as the ethnographer, was both powerful and powerless. Girls enacted power by refusing to talk to me, by challenging my questions and sampling, and by seeking further clarification on what I was doing in their school. These challenges were further complicated by girls’ own negotiations of identity in relation to me and me to them; we continuously acted upon each other. As Gonick (2003) suggests, such complications and interrelations make it hard to balance “the epistemological foundations of
knowledge production, research ethics, and the hoped-for critical accomplishments of a feminist ethnographic project” (p. 22). But nonetheless, in order to say something, anything, about girls, a research relationship must be entered into. Yet while there was a great deal to think about in relation to research ethics, personal positioning, and my own feminist desires, I “did not want the complexities of the [girls] lives to be reduced to my history” (Skeggs, 1997, p. 34). Nor did I want to forget that some girls had things to say to me and, as a result, I had things to say about some girls.

What Are You Doing Here, Anyway?: Questions of Epistemology and Generativity

“Words empty out with age. Die and rise again, accordingly invested with new meanings, and always equipped with a secondhand memory.”
-Trinh Minh-ha (1989, p. 79)

What am I doing here, anyway? The question, framed in the present tense, is no longer directed at theoretical positionings or negotiations in the field. This time the question is directed at this text—the product and the goal of any ethnographic project. What does writing an ethnography do, anyway? Gonick (2003) suggests that ethnographic writing is “a way of freezing the disturbing flux, encapsulating experience in order to control it” (p. 29). Ethnographic writing is how culture is rendered, represented, and organized for an audience. But according to Richardson (2003), writing is also a “way of knowing” (p. 499) and “a method of inquiry” (p. 501). Ethnographic writing is thus also a part of the deconstructive process that enables researchers to generate new possibilities by refusing the closure of the seamless text. As Richardson goes on to explain,

No textual staging is ever innocent (including this one). Styles of writing are neither fixed nor neutral but reflect the historically shifting domination of particular schools or paradigms. Social scientific writing, like all other forms of writing, is a sociohistorical construction, and therefore, mutable. (p. 502)
All ethnographic writing is open to interpretation and critique based on the theoretical positioning of the researcher, the choice of topic, the historical moment in which the research was produced, and the understanding that language does not point to a stable form of meaning, but is instead deferred, displaced, and disrupted. For the ethically-inclined researcher, these characteristics beg the question, why do ethnographic writing at all?

The generation of knowledge here represented resides in the relationship between me, the writer of this text, all of the experiences and negotiations which brought me to this text, and the text itself, a product of différence. As a result of the crisis of epistemology that is the inevitable companion to the crisis in language, I have tried to think through ethnography as a generative process, rather than a definitive one. As methodology is an epistemology, this research has the ability to move beyond the localized segment of the population it seeks to represent, however partially. I am not suggesting that there is a universality to the research; rather, I am suggesting that the knowledge produced in this text contains the fragments of a world that have been mediated by the inevitable loss of that world through writing. The knowledge produced here is thus situated, yes, but, there is a drive toward generating an understanding of girls that is linked to generations of girls, past, present, and future. This link occurs through the cumulative effects of discourses that have constructed, are constructing, and will continue to construct girlhood, reaching backwards and forwards through time. The knowledge here is composed. It is the distilling down—the incomplete telling—that occurs in any writing when one moves from the lived experience of a shifting social world to the representation of a shifting social text.

The stories of girls’ negotiations of identity that follow are, therefore, written in order to offer glimpses into girls’ meaning-making practises, but also to generate new possibilities
for girlhood within qualitative educational and feminist research. By placing the emphasis on ethnography as a generative process, I am hoping to further highlight ethnography as a tool for generating more questions than answers, for generating different subjectivities for girls as part of a feminist politics, for generating different responses from readers, who inevitably bring their own knowledge of girls to this text, for generating a contextualized rendering of girls' cultural practices within the place where such practices continuously generate more meanings, for generating critical engagement with the power imbalance between girls and those who would define them (such as myself), and for generating more ways of knowing and more things that can be known about girls.

While many forms of ethnography would claim the same goals, I have chosen to foreground the generative aspects of ethnography by highlighting the creative processes that generated this text. While this ethnography is interpretive in that I have analysed girls' responses to questions, investigated girls' daily activities, evaluated girls' choices in styles and subject positions, and made assertions as to the shifting and multiple meanings of these material gestures, it is also the creation of a world that exists within, and as a result of, this text. This act of creation is predicated on a different epistemological assumption than critical or feminist ethnographies, which view language as reflecting, rather than constituting reality. While interpretation is the aim of any ethnography in that it hopes to generate fresh understandings of a culture, place, and time—generativity is the result, as my interpretations of girls have necessarily led to the generation of this text and its subsequent production of knowledge.

My focus on generativity is also predicated on my hope that this telling will generate different responses to girls, that adults will think twice before laughing off something as
seemingly superficial as “style,” and that researchers will think twice before deciding not to do ethnographic research—the kind of work that has the potential to add to rather than detract from an understanding of girls as interesting and thoughtful beings. And finally, it is also my hope that this telling will generate more qualitative research on girls, some of whom expressed a desire to see their voices better represented in the public sphere. And so before getting on with the telling that is this ethnography, I will leave the last words of this chapter to Abby, who resented the ways in which girls were represented in the press, particularly their construction as “clueless” consumers who will buy anything:

I hate the fact that people judge without having talked to all teenage girls...cause I’m definitely not like that and my friends are mostly all definitely not like that. And so, it’s just really bad, you know? Like, I’m sure if [adults] went out and talked to some people, they’d go: I guess girls are a lot smarter than we thought they were.
Chapter Three

“RULE THE SCHOOL”: SITUATING IDENTITY WITHIN THE SOCIAL WORLD(S) OF EAST SIDE HIGH

“Well, it’s kind of hard to describe popular in our school. There’s so many different people. And they’re just kind of like, in their own little group and they don’t really care about everyone else.”
-Zeni, 15, “casual/sporty” style

“It’s Not Like the Movies”: East Side High as Postmodern School

“You wanted to be a member of the most powerful clique in school. If I wasn’t already the head of it, I’d want the same thing.”

During a lesson on magnetic fields in grade 8 science, I chatted with Ling and Ana, two Chinese girls from the Regular program at ESH who were curious to know who I was and why I was in their school. As was sometimes the case, I was not formally introduced to the students by Ms. Ripple, who had invited me to join her class during our brief introduction in the staffroom earlier that day. I simply came in and sat at an empty stool that linked me to a shiny black lab table littered with tag graffiti and liquid paper art. Like most of the grade 8s, Ling and Ana looked young, having not yet taken possession of a fully pubescent body. They were dressed comfortably, in tune with their “quiet” Chinese status. They wore loose fitting jeans, t-shirts, hoodies, and non-label sneakers. When they asked me who I was, I told them that I was a university student studying image and identity for girls within the social world of their school. Ling, nodding approvingly of the study, wanted me to know that ESH was “not like what you think.” When I asked her what she meant, she explained that “it’s not like the movies, it’s not one major popular group.” Ling and Ana agreed that “teen flicks” had given them the impression that high school would be dominated by a central social hierarchy trumped by one supremely popular group of “bitchy” girls who “ruled the
school." But just six weeks into their first year of high school, both Ling and Ana knew that what they had learned from the movies was incorrect, at least at ESH. "All groups are even," Ling mused. "You can find your own people."

This description of the social landscape surprised me and I wondered what its effect would be on girls' negotiations of identity through style. Having studied numerous school ethnographies on identity construction, I was accustomed to reading about the formation of identity through a central social hierarchy, where girls are defined and define themselves in relation to a fairly straightforward set of social categories. But at ESH, no such hierarchy was enunciated by the girls I spoke with. Girls spoke of varying degrees of un/popularity, meanness, and all sorts of problems within their social scenes, groups, and cliques, but instead of offering a detailed mapping of ESH's social world, they either rejected the idea of a central social hierarchy or portrayed incongruous descriptions of the school's social groups. When I asked Zeni to describe ESH's social world, she fell into the former category:

"There's not really 'groups.' I think everybody gets along well." Echoing Ling's comment, Zeni insisted that, "we're all the same." Azmera, too, told me that she thought, "everyone is pretty much, is pretty equal." Dren indicated that popular "people" existed, but not a popular

---

27 For examples of the kind of "teen flick" to which Ling and Ana were referring, see The Breakfast Club (1985), Pretty in Pink (1986), Some Kind of Wonderful (1987); Heathers (1989); Clueless (1995); Romy and Michele's High School Reunion (1997); Jawbreaker (1999); Never Been Kissed (1999); She's All That (1999); The Princess Diaries (2001); Thirteen (2003); 13 Going on Thirty (2004); Confessions of a Drama Queen (2004); Mean Girls (2004).

28 I use the expressions "social scene," "group," and "clique" to denote various social organizations within the school. A social scene is the larger set of social relations in which a girl is positioned and positions herself, or the outside limit of her social world in the school. An example of a social scene at ESH would be a school program, such as French Immersion or the Aesthetician program. It could also be a racial or ethnic designation, such as Chinese students, Hispanic students, or ESL students. A social scene is made up of groups, a term I use similarly to Milner's (2004) definition of "crowd," which he defines as "a social category, a type of subculture, a reference group, and a status group" (p. 23). An example of a group at ESH would be the "quiet" Chinese girls or skaters or smokers—people who knew of each other and oriented themselves around similar cultural criteria, but who did not necessarily hang out in a more intimate configuration. Groups are made up of various cliques that comprise girls' daily social networks and friendships: "cliques are small groups that embody, transmit, and transform" the larger groups in which they operate (Milner, 2004, p. 23).
“group.” “There is a couple of people everyone wants to be friends with and blah, blah, blah. But a lot of other high schools have that one big group.” She went on to explain that “every class of twenty had a couple of popular people. But if you asked me straight-out, ‘Who’s the popular people?’ I would not have the answer.” And Chrissie pointed out ESH’s lack of a central and identifiable social hierarchy by describing the social world at Braeburn, a middle-class high school in Vancouver’s west side. “There’s the cheerleaders, there’s the jocks, there’s the goths, there’s the jocks, and you can see them all. They all hang out in clumps….It’s so weird. It’s like something out of an American, like, teen film.” At ESH, she explained, the groups were much more mixed and eclectic. You could not define “popular” the way they do “in the movies.”

Aside from rejecting a central social hierarchy, girls also made attempts to describe the social world of the school in as much detail as they could, though these descriptions were often ambiguous. Dren’s version of the school included the “Asian gang groups” and “all the Asian girls who think that social life in high school is like, the most important thing in the world.” It also included the students who “hang out and smoke like, down by the car area.” She finished her description by adding in “the ‘bad-ass’ kids” who start “girl cat fights.”

When I asked her about other social groups, she took a moment to think and then responded: “And then, you have, like—I don’t really pay attention to the rest of the groups that much.” Adrianna also had a difficult time describing the social world at ESH: “There’s um, there’s the Frenchies—French Immersions. The Accelerated Studies. Independent Learners. And we have all the Kappa people.”

29 “Kappa people” was another label for ESH’s largest racially organized social group, the Nammers. Nammers was the acknowledged name for Vietnamese students who were identified by their Kappa-brand tracksuits. Kappa is an expensive label of Italian sportswear that signified automatic affiliation with the
Spanish group of older people...and then uh, there’s trading card collectors—that’s in the library...”

Then there was Shen’s description of ESH’s social world. Shen had switched from an advanced academic program to the Aesthetician program out of an admitted “lack” of ambition and a desire to do something with her “hands.” Her view of the school was thus a little more comprehensive. Shen first listed the skaters, defining them as “Caucasian,” then “those sort of gang member type people, who think they’re cool and dress like idiots!” She separated these “extreme people” from “the people who are like, sort of normal, who are a bit of everything.” Shen then lumped together the various advanced academic programs: “Yeah, there’s the smart people who are sort of nerdy who have no fashion sense who don’t fit in and who are ignored by people and bothered and picked on.” Finally, she concluded by listing some of the racial groups: “There’s the hardcore Chinese guys, like those little Kappa people. And those, like, Spanish-type people.”

These and other contradictory descriptions of ESH’s social world surprised me and did not reflect school ethnographies on identity formation that I had read. In Bettie’s (2003) school ethnography on girls’ identity construction through categories of race and class, she notes that girls were able to consistently map their school’s social world, “which almost all students agreed on and provided readily and easily when asked” (p. 12). Similarly, Penelope Eckert’s (1989) participants had no trouble categorizing the “almost universal” (p. 2) social categories of “Jocks” and “Burnouts” that divided the school. In Paul Willis’s (1977)

Nammer group, even if a student was not Vietnamese. Some of ESH’s black, white, and Chinese students were also considered to be Nammers based on this “uniform.”

30 Here, Shen is referring to the Kappa tracksuits that most Vietnamese students wore in the school, a “uniform” that was generally hated by those who were not in the Nammer group.

31 “Hardcore” is a term reserved for Asian groups who have “gang” affiliations or who are perceived to be tough or into drugs. The Nammers were usually considered hardcore. Shen classified them as Chinese because the Nammers, though predominantly Vietnamese, did not exclude Chinese students. “Hardcore” was also synonymous with “popular,” but it was only used in this way to describe Asian social groups.
ethnography of working-class boys in an English high school, the conformist "Ear 'Oles" were readily identified in opposition to the "Lads" who formed the school's counter culture. Nancy Lesko (1988) establishes a central status hierarchy based on the "rich and populars," the "burn-outs," and the "outcasts" in her study of girls' identity formation in a Catholic high school. And Angela McRobbie's (1991 [1977]) study of working-class girls' culture depicts a school-wide opposition between the "snobs" who conformed to school norms and the working-class girls who resisted them.

But at ESH there was no evident or obvious school-wide mapping of social categories, nor were there any school-wide oppositional categories, such as "Jocks" and "Burnouts" that dominated its social landscape and created a widespread binary opposition that mutually defined each side. According to Eckert (1989), "Jocks" were "middle class and college bound, played sports for the school, participated in school activities, got respectable grades, and drank beer on weekends" (p. 3). But at ESH, this description—except for the class background—could have fit working-class girls. Many of ESH's female sports stars were vocational students. Keisha, a student in the Aesthetician program who planned to start full-time work just as soon as she graduated, switched to ESH "for the sports." As well, many of the student council representatives—positions occupied by "Jocks" in Eckert's study—were working-class girls enrolled in one of ESH's advanced academic programs and thus working toward university admittance. In short, the "cooperative" (p. 3) relationship that Eckert shows "Jocks" to have with the school was not reserved just for middle-class students at ESH.

Similarly, the category "Burnout," which Eckert defines as someone who came from "a working class home, enrolled primarily in general and vocational courses, smoked tobacco and pot, took chemicals, drank beer and hard liquor, skipped classes, and may have
occasional run-ins with the police” (p. 3), could have applied in some manner to many different groups within the school. Most of the skateboarders (skaters) at ESH often described themselves as “stoners” “slackers,” “potheads,” or “stoner/slackers.” But skaters were largely middle-class students enrolled in advanced academic school programs, features that did not coincide with Eckert’s recognition of an “adversarial relationship” between “Burnouts” and the school (p. 3). Similarly, many of the hardcores had reputations for doing drugs, drinking, being confrontational, swearing, and “blowing off” school. Yet some of them also came from middle-class families and were enrolled in academic programs. Further deviating from Eckert’s description of “Burnout,” many working-class girls at ESH were immigrant or first generation Canadian students who wanted to please their parents by getting good grades and obtaining high status jobs. They thus worked hard in school and strove for college or university entrance.

While Eckert’s social categories of “Jocks” and “Burnouts” existed at ESH (albeit under different names and guises), they existed in much more diffuse and compound ways. Unlike Eckert’s analysis, such categories did not represent “the stable and conservative foundations of adolescent society” (p. 4). ESH thus marked a shift away from a central social hierarchy based on mutually-defining social categories to one that was based on “multiple social hierarchies” (Bettie, 2003, p. 5). Girls did not organize their identities around just one or even two social categories, but positioned themselves and were positioned by the identity categories that shaped their lives, such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, immigrant status, curricular track, and lifestyle affiliations. Girls were thus engaged in compound orientations to identity, not just clear-cut identity categories that
signified "who" a girl was based on her membership in a seemingly homogeneous group (Lesko, 1988).

This shift away from a central social hierarchy characterized ESH as a postmodern school, where social hierarchies existed, but on a variety of levels that made its social world highly decentralized and fragmented. Murray Milner (2004), a sociologist and school ethnographer, calls this kind of school "pluralistic," in that hierarchies "tend to be more numerous, more diffuse, and less encompassing" (p. 100). In his comprehensive study of teenage status systems in a large U.S. high school, Milner suggests that pluralism does not designate "a community of love, understanding, and amity. Rather it is one of diversity, limited hierarchy, and tolerance" (p. 114). Pluralism denotes acceptance without assimilation, a concept that Milner explores through two intersecting realms: racial pluralism and lifestyle pluralism. While Milner locates instances of racial segregation, the African American and white populations within the school he studied coexisted without any real tension, violence, or overt racism. Racial pluralism is also made manifest in mixed race social groups, as well as the belief that having multiple races within the school is a beneficial situation rather than a detrimental one. Milner also explores lifestyle pluralism or various configurations of subject positions that cut across and create differences within racial groups. This form of pluralism is based on the fact that a "stereotypical hierarchy is largely absent" (p. 118). Though social hierarchies existed, no general form of ranking was universal to the school.

It is not surprising that the city of Vancouver produced a postmodern school like ESH. Vancouver, a city of just under two million people, has many reputations that revolve around its Pacific north west location—hippy city, outdoorsy city, pot city, rainy city, granola city, lotus-land—but it is also known by its current standing as the city with the highest
percentage of visible minorities in Canada at 37% (725,700). One in three Vancouver residents is Asian and half of that population is Chinese (347,985). Vancouver also has large populations of East Indians, Punjabis, and Pakistanis (142,060), Filipinos (61,550), Koreans (29,180), Japanese (27,035), and Vietnamese (22,865). The cultural diversity of the city is further emphasized by its enormous immigrant population. Roughly 40% (738,500) of Vancouverites were born outside of Canada, in places such as China, Hong Kong, Vietnam, India, and the Philippines. This percentage surpasses the immigrant population of almost any city in the world.

But unlike other North American cities, the immigrant and visible minority populations have not turned Vancouver into a system of “ethnic neighbourhoods.” For the most part, Vancouver’s neighbourhoods remain “mixed”—no one culture can be said to dominate any one geographic region. It is not that Vancouver has no ethnically-infused communities; on the contrary, such an infusion is unmistakable throughout the city. But ethnic neighbourhoods do not belong to any one cultural group. The steady arrival of new immigrants and their dispersal throughout the city creates a ubiquitous ethnicity, but one that is not wholly recognizable in so far as it is contained by a geographic location. As Paul Delaney (1994) writes, this ethnic diffusion goes beyond multiculturalism or the “modernist notion of immigration.” Rather, he calls it “postmodern transculturalism and hybridization” (p. 8). In Vancouver, “we all cross and re-cross ethnic borders everyday” (p. 8). For

---

32 This number is up from 31% in 1996 and 24% in 1991 (Statistics Canada, 2001).
33 One of the political circumstances that sparked an immigrant explosion prior to 1997 was the return of Hong Kong by its British protectorate to communist China rule. The steady stream of wealthy immigrants out of Hong Kong to Vancouver has been called the “Hong Kong Diaspora.”
34 In Canada, only Toronto’s immigrant population, at 44%, surpasses that of Vancouver, making it higher than New York’s 24% immigrant population and Los Angeles’s 31% (Statistics Canada, 2001).
Delaney, this racial and ethnic context means that we can only speak of culture in Vancouver “using metaphors like the mosaic, the network, the collage, or the marketplace” (p. 5).

The metaphor of the “marketplace” is a fitting one for Wellington, the east side neighbourhood in which ESH was firmly situated and where many of the girls at ESH lived. Wellington Ave., the street that embodied the esprit de corps of the neighbourhood, was known as Vancouver’s funkiest hang out, attracting students to its coffee culture, artists to its lack of pretension, and apartment dwellers to its “urban authenticity.” The promise of “street credibility” coupled with the working-class and immigrant populations that occupy the area have formed a “marketplace” state of mind on the street, where shop owners, customers, and residents come from multiple races, ethnicities, and economic backgrounds. As a result, Wellington has become a fluid community of culture and class diversity, offering its assorted residents the chance to mingle on any given day at one of Wellington Ave.’s gelato parlours, Italian cafés, urban juice bars, or falafel joints.

The postmodern influences of the neighbourhood, shaped by the postmodern elements of the city, formed ESH, a school where over 1700 students speak over 50 different home languages. 67% of ESH’s population came from families where English was not spoken; 7% of ESH students were designated ESL, or English as second language learners, and 6% were Aboriginal (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2004). These culturally diverse components offer some insight into why ESH did not sustain a central social hierarchy. Who was on “top” and who was on the “bottom” were fuzzy ideas that shifted depending on the social and cultural locations of the girls I asked. Like the school in Milner’s study, ESH reflected its community: “segregation, some tension, but relatively little open hostility or conflict” (Milner, 2004, p. 127). Though each school program and social scene had their
own hierarchical structures, topics I explore shortly, overall, the school could not be easily
“mapped.” ESH’s large and diverse population thus led to less competition among social
groups and created the opportunity to, as Ling suggested, “find your own people.”

“|It’s Our Reputation”: East Side, West Side, and the Discursive Space In Between |

“Oh yeah. Everyone outside of ESH thinks it’s a scary place.”

-Ms. Mackenzie, English teacher

Another factor that contributed to ESH’s pluralism was its reputation as an “inner city”
school. ESH’s reputation fostered a “generally positive” attitude inside the school based on
“a communal underdog spirit resulting from the school’s negative image” (Bettis, 1996, p. 116). “Everyone outside of ESH thinks it’s a scary place,” Ms. Mackenzie told me. She was
one of the youngest teachers on staff and had a genuine interest in research on girls. While
most teachers were polite and tolerant of my presence in their classrooms, Ms. Mackenzie
was an ally who helped me to navigate my way around the school. She told me that people
often had a “strong” reaction to her job as a teacher at ESH and associated her school with
getting “beaten up” and “violent crime.” “They think everyone at ESH is in a gang,” she said
with some frustration. “It’s our reputation.”

She explained that the media painted ESH as a “bad place” and that this negative
standing had been “engrained” in people’s minds. “Any crime in the city must be related to
Vietnamese gangs, or any car racing must be Asian youth driving. You know, it goes on and
on. And that happens to be our population, so we’re forever getting slammed for it in the paper.” Even the new principal was affected by ESH’s status as a “scary” school. Ms.
Mackenzie told me about several students who complained that the principal was being too
harsh on them, telling her, “He treats us like we’re not a good school, and he doesn’t know
how good we are!” Some of these students wanted to talk with him and let him know that “ESH is not as bad as he thinks.”

The school’s “scary” reputation was the product of broader discursive constructions that positioned girls at ESH as “east side girls,” a social category that conflated particular characteristics with being from the east side, such as “poor,” “immigrant,” “cheap,” “trashy,” “gangster,” “violent,” and “skanky.” This construction was, in turn, based on the discursive construction of the east side within the city. East side and west side Vancouver have well-established reputations. Though both sides are heterogeneous, culturally diverse, and have large immigrant populations, the economic disparity between them has created reputations that are as well known as the street that separates them geographically. The west side is known to be “upscale,” “yuppie,” and “trendy,” inhabited by white and Asian professionals. Though the west side sees crime, homeless, and drug related activities, these issues are often “managed” by urban security guards and responsive police departments, who take extra care in keeping west side neighbourhoods “secure.” As Abby whispered to me while we stood in line to see To Kill A Mockingbird at a west side theatre, “It feels so safe here.” Within this sanitized reputation, west side schools are viewed as “academic,” full of excellent resources, and populated by “rich” and “smart” white and Asian students who are university bound.

Conversely, the east side is known to be community-oriented and down-to-earth, characteristics that intersect with its reputation for poverty, crime, and drugs. In spite of the middle-class home owners who have recently flocked to the area to enjoy “affordable” mortgages, the east side remains overwhelmingly working-class and immigrant. As well, it sees more crime, homelessness, and visible drug usage than the west side, reputations that fix

35 At the time of the study, 33% of east side families had an annual income of under $30 000 (BC Ministry of Education, 2004) and 37.5% of its households were classified as low income (Statistics Canada, 2001).
it in the public imaginary as “scary” and “dangerous.” Within this east side reputation, east side schools are seen as vocationally-oriented, “run down,” lacking in resources, “academically challenged,” and populated by “poor” immigrants, First Nations students, and gangs who deal drugs.

Yet in spite of—or because of—these entrenched reputations, ESH was teeming with an indomitable spirit. The school was big and old, but friendly. Punctuated with visible pipes along the ceilings, a gym from the 1950s, and girls’ bathrooms that still had the high “flush” levers of another era, ESH was certainly not modern. It was cobbled together during various decades in the past that betrayed the school’s lack of funds for finishing (or starting) projects—a discernible difference from the construction job that was underway at Beach View, a school on Vancouver’s west side, replete with floor-to-ceiling windows, a parking-lot basketball court, and a landscaped picnic lunch area.

ESH’s economic realities were obvious to most students. In jewellery making class one day, I was sitting with a group of Regular program girls that I had come to know well: Francesca, a deadly-sarcastic Italian girl from an immigrant family, Cookie, a First Nations girl who could always be counted on to laugh at Francesca’s disgusting noises and dirty jokes, and Wanda, an African-Canadian girl who pumped me for information on university life whenever I saw her in the hallway. During the class, the girls and I chatted about their school while they polished their recently forged metal rings. Francesca wondered if I knew that ESH was on “welfare,” because it received “lots” of money from the government to “stay afloat.” But before I could respond, Francesca yelled, “I don’t care if it is on welfare, it’s where it’s at!” This declaration elicited a round of whoops and hollers from Cookie and Wanda. Then Cookie loudly added, “ESH is the place to be!”
This kind of school loyalty was not hard to find at ESH, even amidst a general dislike for classes, studying, teachers, and the administration. ESH had a reputation among its students for being “laid back” with an “anything goes” atmosphere. It was also viewed by students as a “safe place.” Students knew that the school was theirs and they felt this sense of internal community whether they liked “school” or not. ESH was also a “community” school in the sense that its reach extended into the Wellington neighbourhood. It offered adults art classes, computer seminars, ESL courses, and spaces for meetings during its “off” hours. It was a place for older Chinese men to practice Tai Chi at the crack of dawn; it was a place for teenagers to hang out and play basketball; it was a place for students to get a free hot lunch if they needed it. In short, students and parents appreciated its presence in a neighbourhood that could offer girls “harsh” examples of street life. Shelley, Stacey, and Marla indicated some of these examples during an assignment in English class one day. They were asked to draw maps of their childhood homes. With a good deal of humour and irony, the girls began drawing the crack houses, hookers, heroin needles, and mugging incidents that they felt were a part of their neighbourhood and their upbringing. Living in Wellington offered girls these and other lessons in life. Mina, for example, had been propositioned by two “drunk” men as she walked home from school one day. As she explained, “I’ve had offers to—you know on Wellington Ave. they have places that have open bars, like Frisco’s or Café Ouzo? I’ve been offered by a couple of guys to maybe have a couple of drinks, go back to their place.”

ESH’s pluralism was based partially on the indomitable community spirit that living in Wellington seemed to foster, as well as the cultural and class diversity that created its decentralized and fragmented social world. This postmodern milieu thus cultivated a unique
social landscape for identity negotiation. On one hand, girls were often able to engage with the pluralism of their school’s social world through distinctive and expressive school identities. As a result, girls navigated “who” they were in ways that have been previously unexplored in ethnographies on identity construction in school with a more “traditional” social organization. But on the other hand, girls were still positioned within the storylines of the school and its social world. Though there were no mutually-defining school-wide social categories, smaller-scale hierarchies did exist between and within curricular tracks. And though there was no overt or school-wide racism that created tensions among the numerous racial and ethnic groups, most of the social groups at ESH were racially and ethnically organized, thus producing some covertly racist sentiments based on this racial segregation. In the remainder of this chapter, I explore these smaller-scale hierarchies as they existed between and within ESH’s complex system of curricular tracks that further fragmented and decentralized its social world.

“Our School Lets Us Be Diverse”: Social Landscapes and School Programs

“I like school! I like school because there’s a lot of different people. And I don’t know. I just—I like the environment and for me school’s a safe place. Like I’ve never had trouble with girls or anything at school.”
- Azmera, 17, “comfortable” style

As an institution, the school, through its very structure, conveys messages about what it values in its students and, consequently, what is valued in society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Willis, 1977; Apple, 1982; MacLeod, 1995; Horvat & Antonio, 1999). As Eckert (1989) suggests,

the school provides not an open community in which individuals can explore their values and pursue their interests, but a social regimentation in which particular values and interests restrict each individual to a well-defined place in the institution and in the adolescent community. (p. 23)
But at ESH, a much more fluid structure existed. The school chose to adapt to, rather than assimilate, its various populations, a decision that both highlighted the school’s pluralism through a celebration of difference and created a system of segregation through its specialized programs. Though it was certainly not a perfect arrangement, ESH’s implementation of numerous curricular tracks to accommodate its multiply located student body worked to support students’ different understandings of the world and was often listed as the “best” thing about the school. Jamie commented on how the diversity of school programs made it “easy to be yourself.” Other schools, she told me, were designed to “keep diverse people OUT purposefully!” But ESH is “very open with our classes.” Jamie, who sported eight piercings and was often singled out as one of the “most pierced” people in the school, felt that the school’s inclusive organization “lets us be diverse” and diminished the “risk” of being “different.”

The majority of ESH’s students were enrolled in the school’s main student body—what was commonly referred to as “Regular” because it did not claim to have a specific agenda, other than “regular” education. Outside of the Regular program, smaller populations participated in programs for ESL (7%) and learning disabilities (8%). Numerous programs also existed that catered to advanced academics, vocations, alternative education (drop-out prevention), and culturally specific learning. ESH’s academic programs comprised the school’s “big three” in power and prestige: French Immersion, Accelerated Studies, and Independent Learners. The “big three” were populated by students from middle-, working-class, and working poor backgrounds, but French Immersion tended to be mainly white, while Accelerated Studies and Independent Learners tended to be mainly Asian. ESH’s vocational programs, ranging from the Aesthetician program to mechanics to carpentry to
cook training, garnered less power and prestige. These streams gave students practical instruction in trades while they took required high school credits for graduation. Most of the students in ESH’s vocational programs were working-class and working poor. ESH also offered programs based on the cultural diversity of its student population, specifically those from First Nations backgrounds (6%). The First Nations program did not include all First Nations students within the school, however, but only catered to those who needed or wanted the extra attention that a specialized classroom could provide.

Though each program was housed within ESH, they all had their own spaces with designated classrooms, teaching staff, program identities, and reputations. This organization meant that a girl could be popular within her program and virtually unknown within the school-at-large. Based on the relative cohesion and isolation of each school program, a girl’s friends were most often, though not always, determined by her program location. As a result, each program had its own internal social structure. As Jamie explained, the programs “don’t really mix themselves a whole lot. I don’t have a lot of classes with the French Immersion people. English is my only one. So I make friends with the Regular students, because those are who I have classes with.” Though this was not a hard and fast rule, it was commonly acknowledged that the smaller programs constituted “posses” that stuck to themselves. There was a certain amount of cross-fertilization between academic programs and the Regular program in classes that serviced both, but as Ratch put it, “you would never get someone from drop-out prevention and someone from Accelerated Studies like, hanging out.” Dren, Ratch’s constant companion, emphatically added, “No! NEVER! Ever, ever, ever!”
While ESH’s system of school programs created numerous avenues for students’ success, it also created program reputations. The general “pecking order” among the programs positioned advanced academics or the “big three” at the top, then Regular, then the male-oriented vocational programs, the female-oriented vocational programs, the alternative/drop-out prevention programs, the special needs programs, ESL, and, at the bottom of the hierarchy, the First Nations program. In order to further contextualize the dynamics these multiple programs fostered, I offer “snapshots” of the three curricular tracks from which I drew my sample: the Regular program, the Aesthetician program, and the French Immersion program.

**Regular**

“The Asian people at my school tend to all hang out together... they stick together and they don’t really socialize with anyone else. It’s like, the Spanish people stick together too.”
-Dren, 15, “goth/metal” style

If the Regular program had any reputation at all, it was for being Asian—a blanket statement that was used to describe the entirety of its largely working-class population. This vague description included a variety of social groups or “Asian sub-groups,” as they were called, including Nammers (Vietnamese), Hongers (Hong Kong), Flips (Filipino), Japanese/Koreans (often viewed as one group), and Chinks (Chinese). Like other Asian sub-groups, the Chinese sub-group was further divided into categories that related to length of time in Canada: CBCs (Canadian-Born Chinese), or those who were born in Canada and

---

36 Xiu, the first girl to say “Chink” to me, was Chinese and insisted that she and all of her friends used the label to describe themselves and that there were no racist connotations. She also told me that she and her friends “don’t get mad about other people calling us that. It’s really common now.” All the “nicknames” for the Asian sub-groups were widely accepted by the groups themselves and widely used within the school.
ESLs (English-as-second-language), or those who were born outside of Canada. Xiu, a first generation Chinese Canadian who called herself a CBC, told me that each group thought it was better than the other: “Yeah. It’s um, I guess the CBCs will think, you know, ‘I’m better than you [ESLs] cause I know more English, and I have more experience here.’ And then they’re [ESLs] going, ‘Oh you guys are so dumb. In Hong Kong I learned this already.’ Yeah, it’s competitive.”

Karen Pyke and Tran Dang (2003) refer to these “sub-ethnic identities” (p. 148) as forms of “intraethnic othering” (p. 152), or the ways in which people who occupy the same ethnic designation create forms of disidentification among themselves. These disidentifications often result in internalized racism, usually directed at the “more ethnically-identified, by other co-ethnics, usually the more assimilated” (p. 152). At ESH, intraethnic othering worked in both directions. ESLs felt that they were better than CBCs because of their ethnic authenticity, their loyalty to a homeland, and their detailed knowledge of a language and culture that was not Canadian. And CBCs felt that they were better than ESLs because they were more adaptable to Canadian culture, more interested in the present, as opposed to the perceived obsession that ESLs had with the past, and more aware of North American popular culture.

The Asian sub-groups that formed at ESH were largely organized around intraethnic othering. Yet further distinctions existed among them, which Xiu categorized as “hardcore,” “average,” and “quiet,” denoting various levels of popularity. She explained these categories using her own Chinese social scene: “hardcore Chinese” were popular, tough, fashionable, and swore “a lot,” “average Chinese” were somewhat popular and played cards and computer

---

37 Pyke & Dang (2003) locate two terms that are similar to CBC and ESL in their study of identity among 184 second generation Korean and Vietnamese young adults: FOB, or Fresh Off the Boat and Whitewashed, or assimilated.
games at lunch, and “quiet Chinese” were not that popular and constantly studied. A few other Asian sub-groups were mentioned in conversations I had with white girls (who were called “the Whites” among Asian circles), including the “straight-edge” Chinese girls, often associated with Christianity, and the Asian computer “geeks,” “nerds,” or “dorks,” who played cards by the library and were often associated with ESL.

As Xiu made clear, Asian hardcores, specifically Vietnamese and Chinese girls, were “very popular” within the Regular program. As a justification for this assertion, she pointed out that “usually in classrooms, you'll mainly see black hair students.” This majority fostered an assumption among other students at ESH that “Asian girls” were one “big” group who were all the “same.” Teachers, often unaware of most of the Asian sub-groups, viewed their classes as relatively uniform. Asian girls were sometimes characterized in a lump with words like “nice,” “quiet,” and “smart.” Mr. Murphy, an English teacher for the Regular program, told me that he only had “very well-behaved” Asian girls in his classes. Non-Asian girls often expressed similar feelings. Chrissie, a white girl, mentioned that “the Asian girls are pretty close, all of them. And they hang out together a lot.” As an explanation, she theorized that “possibly, with the Asian people, they have that same background or something, so they have something in common right off. And maybe that attracts them with each other.” This perceived segregation produced some resentment among the non-Asian students. Dren explained that, because “white people are definitely the minority at my school, I think that they do tend to, see this is a lot of a generalization here, but they do tend to socialize a lot more with the other races than the, like, Asian people....”

But this perceived homogeneity erased the segregations that existed among Asian sub-groups. Zeni, a Japanese and Filipino girl in the Regular program, told me that Chinese
people don’t really hang out with Japanese people” based on “the ancient days” when “the Japanese went over to China, you know, tried to kill everyone there.” She went on to explain that the Japanese also “tried to take over the Philippines too. A lot of people don’t like the Japanese.” Xiu also mentioned the antagonism between the Chinese and those from Hong Kong. “I don’t know how they get divided like that,” she initially wondered, “cause Hong Kong and China are like one.” But she quickly amended this statement: “Well, they’re one big little place, but they’re still separated, cause then the Hong Kong people will say, ‘Oh, the China people are stupid, or they’re poor or we’re better than them’!” She similarly described a dislike between the Chinese and the Filipinos. When a Filipino boy asked Xiu out, she told me that she “had to say ‘no’,” because Filipinos were not “suitable” for Chinese families and her parents would never have allowed it.

While Asian girls were often viewed as exclusionary, they were not the only racially-segregated social scene in the Regular program. The Spanish girls also had a reputation for hanging out on their own. Zeni explained that the Spanish people “all hang out together. Doesn’t matter what grade they’re in. As long as they’re Spanish.” When Zeni started at ESH, the Spanish girls found out that she was Filipina and approached her to be in their social group. As she put it, “as soon as I went to the school, they asked me what race I am. And it’s kind of like, ‘I’m half Filipino’. If I’m Spanish, the Spanish girls are just going to come up to me and kind of like accept me in their group. And it was kind of like that!” Because Zeni was half Filipino, she explained that she got to be “welcomed to the group” as “kind of Spanish-y, Portuguese.”

But the Regular program was also full of numerous mixed racial groups. Isabel, an Hispanic girl in the Aesthetician program, hung out with girls in the Regular program who
were Persian, Cambodian, Portuguese, and half African-Canadian. Gwen, a First Nations
girl, told me that her group of friends included “Asian kids, Native kids, white kids.” And
Sydney, a Japanese, white, and Hispanic girl, hung out with girls who were Italian, First
Nations, and African-Canadian. Mixed race groups and racially segregated groups co­
existed within the Regular program without any blatant racial tensions. There was, however,
one obvious form of racism in the school that was directed at First Nations students. During
a rather difficult conversation, Gwen quietly told me that if you were First Nations at ESH,
“people sort of look down on you. It’d just be like, ‘Oh, she’s Native. She’s stupid’.” As a
result of this negative perception, Gwen chose to work very hard in school in order to avoid
the “lazy” and “crazy” Native stereotype that was perpetuated at ESH. “Yeah, I think I work
really hard about it,” she told me. Gwen felt her Coast Salish background, a First Nations
group indigenous to the Vancouver area prior to European colonization, marked her as
“different” from all the white and Asian girls “upstairs.” “Upstairs” and “downstairs” were
terms used by students to describe various program locations. Gwen spent half of her day
“downstairs” with other students in the First Nations program and the other half of the day
“upstairs” with Regular program students. As Dren explained, “if there’s racism at ESH, it’s
against the Native kids.” Ratch concurred: “They’re, like, treated like the lowest of the
lows.” But according to Dren and Ratch, it was not the white students who were “racist
against Natives.” They told me that Asian students were “the really racist ones” who called
First Nations students “chugs.” “Chug” was a derogatory label used by Nammers and other
Asian sub-groups—a label that was short for “chugging,” meaning to drink alcohol quickly.
However, though I noted racism among Asians toward First Nations students, I also saw
white students engage in similarly racist behaviour.
These distinctions within the Regular program marked it as pluralistic as well as hierarchical. Mixed race groups were common, and racial and ethnic groups co-existed without overt racial tensions. But within this diversity, smaller-scale hierarchies created status systems that structured various social scenes, a system that was not present in all programs at ESH, particularly the ultra-pluralistic Aesthetician program.

**Beauty School**

"Cause we're so close and we're loud, and we're like, 'GET OUT OF THE WAY! you know?"
-Gianna, 18, "JLo" style

The Aesthetician program, AKA beauty school, was a vocational stream that operated in a part of the school that many students at ESH never visited. It was in the “Spanish” hall, so-named for the high concentration of Hispanic girls who hung out there, some of whom were in beauty school. But like the Regular program, beauty school was by no means homogeneous. It attracted girls from myriad cultural locations, creating one of the most racially pluralistic programs in the school. As Gianna, an Italian beauty girl, told me,

I don’t even think there’s anything to do with different races [in our program]. Like, everyone just hangs—like, if you see us, we’re all different. We have friends that like—look! Azmera is like, you know? We’ve got black friends, Spanish friends. Chilean. We’ve got Asian. We’ve got, you know, Vietnamese, Chinese. Everyone’s just mixed. And even within us, like, like Punita. She’s like half brown, half Italian. Like, everybody’s just all mixed and we all get along.

Beauty school was a small program that scheduled its students together for most of the day—and all of the students were girls. Keisha mentioned that they would like to have boys in the program, “just to see how it would feel,” but the “all-girls” atmosphere was “kind of better cause then we can talk about anything!” And they did talk about anything, from boys to sex to birth control to cramps to makeup. Ms. Warchowski, the good-natured instructor, let the girls listen to the radio while they performed practical tasks on each other, creating an
environment where singing, dancing, swearing, and gossiping were commonplace. Shen explained that in beauty school, girls were allowed to “speak their mind without teachers telling you to be quiet,” a quality she relished. Isabel also noted that being with the same girls “24/7” created a sorority setting based on “feminine” issues. “Like, we can talk about any girl stuff, and we don’t have to worry about a guy, like, being there…. Like, last class, we were waxing our armpits and no one has to care, you know?”

The “family” mentality that was fostered within the program spilled into lunch, when the beauty girls would emerge from the “Spanish” hall and commandeer a table in the cafeteria. They were the loudest table in the room and they knew it. They delighted in drawing attention to themselves, stridently invoking their neighbourhood savvy by discussing their Saturday nights on Wellington Ave., their work experiences around the city, and their dates with “men” (as opposed to high school boys). While working-class students were in the majority at ESH and, therefore, a majority in most programs, the girls in beauty school seemed to be the most conscious of their working-class habitus. Many of the girls worked at salons or spas across the city as part of their certification requirements and had had many experiences catering to “well-to-do” west side women. Gianna worked at a ritzy salon on the west side that catered to “older women.” She described them as having “lots of money, you know? Some of them never worked in their life!” Because apprenticeship was such an integral component to the beauty school program, it fostered a connection between education and work that other girls in the school did not always have. Work was real to beauty girls. They were required to obtain and keep jobs in the “trade,” but they also depended upon work in order to contribute at home and still have enough left over to buy their own clothes.
Gianna was well aware of the connection between school and work and this awareness kept her in the Aesthetician program, even though she had dropped out several times.

And then I just decided that, I'm like, 'Obviously you have to finish school. Where are you going to go if you don't finish school?' And I always say to people, like, that's my thing, like, if you're not educated, like, I can't stand when people are talking and they just like, they're so uneducated! Or they just talk and they don't even know what they're talking about. So then I was like, 'fine! I'm just going to go back and finish.' Like, for my mom too, right?

Gianna believed that education could take her anywhere she wanted to go and she proved this point by comparing the education levels of her friends on the east side to those on the west side. “Just go down to the Projects and knock on their door and ask them how many people have graduated,” she said emphatically, “and go to the west side and knock on their door, right? They’ll be like, ‘Oh, yeah! Graduated and took 5 years of university!’ Education is like, the key.”

The beauty girls shared many of these working-class experiences and dispositions, deepening the “family” mentality among them and engendering a powerful form of loyalty. Keisha explained that this loyalty was fostered by “being with each other all day…. And you just learn to like adapt to one another, and then—you just stick with each other. You support each other! We’re the beauty girls, you know?!” Aware of their outwardly visible solidity, they described themselves as “powerful,” “outspoken,” “equal,” and “the closest group in the school.” Jo, a working poor, white girl from “the Projects,” summed up the pluralism of the program: “Everyone accepts everyone for who they are, you know?” Ironically, though, Jo was one of the few girls who occasionally took some “gentle” ribbing in the program for being “slow.” If someone asked for clarification or extra time, everyone assumed that it was Jo. But Jo certainly never complained about being teased, and Gianna softened the effects of
the banter by ensuring that, “we’re just doing it for fun. We don’t want to hurt anybody’s feelings.”

As a result of this cohesion, the beauty girls were their own social group. Most of the beauty girls smoked, and they all took their smoke breaks together, tumbling out of the classroom in a pack while laughing over a juicy piece of gossip or the visibility of a girl’s thong in her low-rise jeans. They ate their lunch together, conspired to go to dances together, and watched each others’ backs. When they entered the cafeteria as a gang, Isabel felt that people recognized them as the “most beautiful girls in the school.” But the beauty girls were not seen in this “flattering” light by everyone, and most of the girls in the program knew that they had garnered other reputations for being “smokers,” “loud,” “dumb,” “bimbos,” “airheads,” “gossipy,” and “lazy.” As Azmera overheard a girl in one of her Regular program classes say, “Oh, the reason why they take beauty school is probably because they’re so stupid they can’t take any other classes’!” Outraged, Azmera shouted out, “I’m in beauty school and I’m not stupid!” The girl responded, “Yeah, well whatever! All the girls that are there are probably all blonde’!” This last remark, Azmera explained, was meant to indicate that beauty school is “such a girly thing and we’re not capable of anything else.”

Shen experienced similar negativity, explaining that most people in the school thought that girls only went into beauty school if they “don’t do well in school academically” and if they are “all about looks,” a reputation that was enhanced by Ms. Warchowski’s rules of “professional” dress for the program. The beauty girls had to wear “industry” type outfits and makeup (especially lipstick) during their beauty school training, particularly when “clients” came in during practice days. This did not mean business suits or white blouses; it meant glamorous styles that were often perceived as “skanky” and “over-the-top” by students.
in other programs. This look earned many beauty girls the reputation of “hoochie,” a racially designated term generally reserved for Hispanic girls but also applied to girls of any culture who wore high heels, “hot” pants, “sexy” tops and had thin, penciled eyebrows, and pulled back hair.

The beauty girls thus ranked fairly low on the school’s program hierarchy, but they did not seem to care. They viewed their vocational classes as the best part of the day and credited the program with keeping them in school, getting them a “decent” career, and instilling in them a sense of pride and accomplishment for a job “well done.” They were also well sheltered from the rest of the school and only really interacted with Regular program students in their academic classes every other day. As Gianna admitted, “I don’t…generally know what goes on on that side of the school,” indicating her complete lack of knowledge regarding advanced academic programs, such as French Immersion.

**Frenchies**

“They just think they’re all that. ‘We’re Frenchies, woo-hoo!’”

- Adrianna, 14, “skater” style

Ms. DiAngelo, who taught customer service class in the Aesthetician program, was quite plain about the difference between the beauty girls and the French Immersions: the Frenchies were “middle-class” and the beauty girls were “working-class.” Because of this “obvious” disparity, she preferred to teach the working-class girls, as the middle-class ones did not “need” her as much. Their parents were already invested in their educations, and they were well supported both at home and in the school. But while Ms. DiAngelo’s observations about the parents of French Immersion students were generally accurate, she overestimated the economic homogeneity of the program. Within French Immersion, a least one third came from working-class backgrounds. The fact that the Frenchies were perceived to be “all”
middle-class was, perhaps, a function of their uncharacteristic racial homogeneity. Though not all white students at ESH were in French Immersion, almost all of the French Immersions were white. The exceptions to this rule included small percentages of East Indian, Chinese, and Middle-Eastern students, all of whom hung out together. Shitar, a working-class Lebanese girl who was a part of this non-white contingent, told me that all the Frenchies “of colour” ate lunch together everyday in the stairwell: “No whites with us.” The other girls in French Immersion, whom she sarcastically called “the blondes,” “don’t have any Chinese friends. They don’t have any black friends. They don’t have Spanish friends. They’re all white.”

The majority of the grade 10 Frenchies knew each other very well because they had been together “since kindergarten.” From Shitar’s point of view, their familiarity had turned them into a “dysfunctional family.” But unlike the beauty girls’ “family,” the Frenchie family did not welcome everyone in the program with open arms and instead operated on elements of exclusion. When I asked Shitar what role she had in the Frenchie family, she replied in a deadpan voice, “forgotten child.” More than any other program, French Immersion seemed to embody a traditional social hierarchy that was likely fostered by its mostly white population. It lacked the elements of pluralism that otherwise made ESH a postmodern school, such as racial and ethnic diversity and multiple social groups that opened up different avenues for popularity. Within French Immersion, popularity seemed to be a cut-and-dried affair that revolved around three noticeable social groups: “loud” or “mean” popular girls, “quiet” or “nice” (slightly less) popular girls, and “weirdoes,” “outcasts” and “wannabes,” all of whom existed on the lower rungs of the popularity ladder. This internal social hierarchy earned French Immersion girls the reputation for being “incredibly cliquey,”
“snobby,” and “snots,” particularly by those who found themselves at the bottom of the pecking order or by those from the Regular Program who encountered Frenchies in classes.

The “loud” popular Frenchies earned their name by being confident, energetic, and assertive in and out of class. Leah, a “quiet” popular girl told me that this social group was “really kind of loud and really kind of in-your-face and, I don’t really want to say the word obnoxious, but....it’s true. It’s obnoxious.” She explained that if you stood by their lockers and listened to their conversations, you would hear all about “hair, makeup, and the new person that everybody’s decided they should like, or something.” According to Diane, who existed on the “lower” rungs of the popularity ladder and initially worked very hard to become one of the “loud” popular girls, the features that enabled them to be “cool” were “the fact that they were all pretty. They all wear nice clothing. And they all, you now, they talk about the dancing and that kind of stuff.” Abby, a self-defined “weirdo,” described the girls at the top of the Frenchie hierarchy in similar terms: “They all dress at like, shop at Off the Wall and have, like, MAC makeup. I don’t know....they all listen to their stupid like, Nelly music.”

The characteristics used to describe the “loud” populars by other girls often fell under the rubric of “preppy,” a word that had two meanings within the social world of ESH: it was an orientation towards schoolwork and it was a style. The “loud” populars fell into the latter category of preppy. They were mostly middle-class and wore “trendy” clothes, including low-rise jeans, midriff revealing tops, and brand name skater shoes. They were generally thin and most of them, in keeping with Shitar’s nickname, had long, blonde hair. While they certainly did not label their own style “preppy,” it was a description that other girls levied.

---

38 Off the Wall is a chain store that caters to teenage girls and carries expensive labels, such as Mavi and Miss Sixty jeans. Nelly is an African-American hip hop artist who was constantly on top of the pop charts the year I was at ESH.
upon them. Diane described their style as “the tight jeans and the little shirts and the skater shoes and all that kind of stuff.” She also explained that they were into “boys and clothes and magazines and music that was really bad.” Zeni, who had English class with Frenchies, explained that you could tell the “loud” populars by the fact that they “have their shirt all the way up here, pants all the way down here.” Zeni called them “very loud” and described them as having “their own little world” revolving around “guys.”

The “loud” populars, of course, did not see themselves in this “negative” light. They saw themselves as loyal and unique individuals who “stuck up” for their friends. Maria, a self-described “loud” Frenchie called herself “brave” because she would not let other people give her friends a “hard time.” When a bowling alley clerk tried to charge her friends more than the predetermined price during a birthday party, Maria proudly told me she went up to the clerk after the party, “cause it was my best friend’s party. I didn’t like the way she like, kinda treated her, either. I went up to her and I told her that she should really use ‘Frizzies’ cause her hair’s really frizzy and I went, ‘It really works!’ and like, ‘Try it!’ and I walked out.”

Chrissie, a “loud” popular, saw herself as a “floater,” who hung out with “lots of groups,” such as the skaters. By association, the “loud” populars were also considered to be skaters, even though they did not skateboard. They saw themselves as part of skater culture through style, music, and their skater boyfriends. They thus described themselves as “laid back” and “mellow.” They also saw themselves as “intellectual” and “deep,” reputations that others sometimes agreed with. Dren, who started out in French Immersion but later switched to the Regular program, had mixed feelings about the “loud” populars, but agreed that they were smart. Dren put it like this: “I mean, I wouldn’t necessarily say I agree with a lot of
their views, but they all think about shit a lot and they all know a lot of stuff, and like, they like, they all have really high standards.” Their “intellectualism” was linked to creativity and was often juxtaposed to the “conformist” mentality of Asian girls.

The Frenchie reputation for “intellectualism” extended to the “quiet” popular girls as well, a social group that saw itself as quite different from their “stereotypically popular” counterparts. A stereotypical popular girl, according to Leah, was “really pretty, really loud,” had “really nice clothes,” and was “insanely obnoxious.” In other words, “popular girls who nobody really likes but everyone kind of wants to be.” Conversely, Leah described herself as popular in the “other way,” where “you have lots of friends and you feel kind of comfortable with everyone.” Another marker of “quiet” popular status, according to Leah, was the ability to have “more interesting conversations.” She and her friends often engaged in philosophical debates at lunch, earning them the reputation for being “artsy-fartsy” and “thinking too much.” This reputation also earned them another, that of “preppy,” but in both senses of the word. The “quiet” popular kind of preppy meant that girls wore styles that were virtually identical to the “loud” populars, but also had a particular orientation to their work—they not only did their work well, but “enjoyed” doing it. As Mina put it, the “quiet” Frenchies “are people who just like, attack their homework with such tenacity that they’re considered total preps, you know? They want to look good but they also want to get good grades.” Mina, who was in the same English class as Leah, considered her to be a quintessential prep. “Leah is one of those kids who will just get her work done as quickly and efficiently as possible and look forward to the next time she gets to do it.”
Postmodern School/Postmodern Identities

"I don't really fall under a whole lot of categories that are just one category. If they're very very very very broad, like, "I'm a female"—then yes! I fall into the category.

-Jamie, 15, "out-there-but-socially-acceptable" style

ESH's social world served as the constantly shifting "stage" upon which girls negotiated their school identities. The multiple social scenes that it engendered were a product of this untraditional social world, a world that revolved around racial and ethnic diversity, an indomitable internal spirit, and a system of multiple curricular tracks that both catered to ESH's diverse population and created smaller-scale hierarchies within and across programs. As a result of this melange, ESH did not generate an identifiable and central social hierarchy, but instead created a postmodern milieu in which numerous groups and cliques could thrive on their own terms. As Ling and Ana pointed out very early on in their first year at ESH, the school's social world made it possible to find "your own people."

Little has been written about how identities are negotiated within this complex school context. As a school ethnographer, I found ESH's postmodern social world to be perplexing at times, both during data generation, when I initially felt the need to get a "handle" on the school, and during data analysis, when I initially felt the need to somehow make it all "fit" together in a way that was writable and readable. Mapping the school seemed virtually impossible and initially frustrating. I poured over bits of data where girls tried to explain their "view" of the school in the hopes of producing a final rendering of how it all fit together. But I soon realized that ESH's social world offered a unique milieu for the negotiation of school identities and that mapping it out was not necessarily possible or even desirable.

39 For two examples, however, see Bettis (1996) and Milner (2004), though the latter does not deal directly with identity formation.
The shifting context of the school, with its innumerable permutations within a range of possibilities, opened up new variations on old identity “themes.” At ESH, this was particularly true for girls, who are often positioned through more traditional school hierarchies in subordinate roles to boys, where popularity is contingent upon being desired as a sexual object (Connell, Ashenden, Kessler & Dowsett, 1982; Eckert, 1989; Kelly, 1993; Thorne, 1993; Eder, Evans & Parker, 1995; Kenway & Willis, 1998; Milner, 2004). Because of ESH’s untraditional social world, girls were somewhat more free to move in diverse directions, cross new borders, and explore previously uncultivated frontiers. Girls did not have to be popular with boys to be popular within their social scenes, groups, and cliques. Instead, a girl could be known for being goth, punk, alternative, smart, a good athlete, a good dancer, a nice person, a good actor, a good makeup artist, a good sound technician, a good web designer, and so on. Though girls were sometimes restricted from or within certain social categories because of habitus, past indiscretions, or personality conflicts, for the most part, girls had the opportunity to find a group or groups that would allow them to be “who” they wanted to be—and to thrive in, that social environment.

Having explored these social contexts for identity negotiation, in chapters four and five, I take a closer look at how girls positioned themselves and were positioned within ESH’s social world. In chapter four, I focus specifically on how girls’ used style to negotiate social scene, group, and clique membership. Style was one of the key features that enabled girls to dis/identify with others, creating both cohesion and friction among girls. And in chapter five, I focus specifically on how girls’ used style to negotiate their “images,” or their individual identities within social scenes, groups, and cliques. Through the concept of “image,” I
explore style as a manifestation of agency and girls' understandings of how to shift the ways in which they were seen by others, and by themselves.
Chapter Four

"IF YOU DRESS LIKE THIS, THEN YOU’RE LIKE THAT": STYLES, SUBJECT POSITIONS, AND GIRLHOODS

“If you dress a certain way, people judge you by the way you look, of course, right? That’s—everybody does that. So if you dress like this, then you’re like that. But I know I’m not like them. So I don’t want to be perceived like them.”
- Shen, 16, “casual” style

“Everybody is kind of defined in their little groups, even with their close friends, by what they wear, which I’ve noticed. It’s kind of funny.”
- Leah, 15, “random/casual” style

Identification and the Process of Subject Positioning

“I look at people and go, ‘Wow! That’s disgusting!’ You know, and I’m sure they look at me and go, ‘Wow! That’s disgusting!’”
- Abby, 15, “bad-ass/schoolgirl/business-woman” style

The multiplicity of racial, ethnic, program, and lifestyle groups that produced ESH’s decentralized and fragmented social world meant that girls could, as Ling suggested, “find their own people.” Finding your own people, however, necessitated knowing how to recognize them and, of course, making sure that they could recognize you. Style was the most common way in which girls were able to “see” similarities and differences among themselves. As Shen declared in the epigraph, if you dressed like this, then you were assumed to be like that. In other words, girls actively worked to showcase aspects of their identities through the subject positions that style represented. When a girl noted that she “really liked” how another girl dressed, it often meant that she liked how that girl was performing her school identity, that she felt an affinity for that identity, and that she was also engaged in, or desired to be engaged in, a similar performance. Style was thus a serious consideration, as girls worked to make sure they wore the right this in order to be recognized as the right that. As Shen further explained, if you did not want to be “perceived” like certain girls, you had to ensure that you were not misrecognized because of your style.
This "complicated dynamic of recognition and misrecognition" (Gonick, 2003, p.11) facilitated the negotiation of school identities, as girls were positioned and positioned themselves in subject positions based on habitus, including race, ethnicity, class, and lifestyle choices. (Mis)recognitions forged the (dis)identifications that produced identity, or "the detour through the other that defines the self" (Fuss, 1995, p.2). For Fuss (1995), identities are our "public personas—the most exposed part of our self’s surface collisions with a world of other selves" (p.2). Identification, however, is the initial process that enables us to enact the public performance of identity, making identification the private realization of our deepest desire for belonging, acceptance, and connection to subject positions (West, 1995). Before an identification can take place, in other words, "some common origin or shared characteristics" (Hall, 1996, p. 2) with others must be recognized. Similarly, through disidentification, we come to recognize our identities through the subject positions we desire not to take up. Britzman (1997) suggests that identification and disidentification are thus entwined in the struggle for self-recognition: "What is outside is also inside and this inside, call it difference, fashions both the dismissal of and the engagement in what can be imaged

40 Identification, as I am using it here, is derived from psychoanalytic theory, but has been pushed in new directions through poststructural theorizing of the self. Freud (1991 [1921]) originally theorized identification as a child’s earliest sense of belonging through the Oedipal complex, where the mother is the ideal and the father is a rival. This emotional tug-of-war is a child’s first understanding of desire for the other and takes place within the realms of inclusion (child and mother) and exclusion (father). The ego is formed through this initial act of awareness, producing self-consciousness set within the ambivalent matrix of love and competition, trust and rivalry. As Freud suggests, identification is thus "ambivalent from the very start" (p. 134). Lacan (1977) also theorizes ego formation through a process of developmental awareness, but one that is reflected back to the child in the "mirror stage." Identification is achieved through self-recognition, where the child comes to recognize him or herself as a being in the world. Once that self-recognition is projected outward through the image, it is then projected inward as the limit of his or her own sense of consciousness.

For Freud and Lacan, identification is self-recognition that enacts our worldview. But poststructural theory has worked to distinguish between the naturalism of psychoanalytic identification, where subjecthood is fought for and gained from within, and the contingency of discourse, where identification is viewed "as a construction, a process never completed—always ‘in process’" (Hall, 1996, p.2). The subject is enacted and continues to be enacted through social relations (Butler, 1993; Fuss, 1995; Hall 1996). This "discursive interpellation of subjects to particular subject positions" (Gonick, 2003, p.13) can only take place within an "exclusionary matrix" (Butler, 1993, p.3), where the struggle for recognition in the social world is made possible by (dis)identification.
as the outside and the inside” (p. 33). The inside depends upon the outside for shape, definition, and validity, opening up the inside to perpetual re-negotiations through its “founding repudiation” (Butler, 1993, p. 3). This dependency means that identifications are “never fully and finally made; they are incessantly reconstituted” (p.105). Identification is thus conceived as a “question of relation, of self to other, subject to object, inside to outside” (Fuss, 1995, p.3). For Fuss (1995), identification is that which “inhabits, organizes, instantiates identity. It opens it up as a mark of self-difference, opening up a space for the self to relate to itself as a self, a self that is perpetually other” (p. 2). But as perpetually “other,” identifications are never neatly experienced; they always bear the mark of ambivalence.41

At ESH, I met girls who desired to both occupy and not occupy subject positions at once. In these ambivalences, the possibility for keeping school identities in “play” emerged as girls worked toward maintaining the contradictory elements of their identities, without forcing those subject positions to conform to a tidy notion of the self (Flax, 1990). Gonick (2003) suggests that ambivalence, as the marker of identification, offers “the possibility for expanding the horizon of these investments to embrace new forms of gendered subjectivity” (p.13). Girls’ ambivalent performances of girlhood, as they were expressed through style, created space in the school for a disruption of conventional girlhood, as well as additions and expansions to previously established notions of girlhood. This chapter is an exploration of the public subject positions that girls occupied through style and their relationship to the

41 The Freudian concept of ambivalence merges with discursive understandings of the subject to infuse self-recognition with fluidity and inconsistency. As the name for the “contradictory or mutually exclusive desires” (Flax, 1990, p.14) that we feel through (dis)identification, ambivalence can, as Freud (1991 [1921]) suggests, fill us with a sense of dread, cognitive dissonance, and the desire to kill the object of our ambivalent desire. But for feminists working in the areas of psychoanalytic and poststructural theory, ambivalence opens up more productive possibilities than those offered by a Freudian model of denial or repression (Butler, 1993; Fuss, 1995; Gonick 2003).
private and often uncomfortable process of (dis)identification that enabled these subject positions to become identifiable to girls. In order to explore this struggle for inclusion and exclusion, inside and outside, I locate girls within a range of style that existed at ESH. This range included, but was not limited to, dressing “preppy,” dressing “alternative,” dressing “classy,” and dressing “sporty.” Each style in this range corresponded to fluid and shifting subject positions that girls occupied. One other range of style deserves mention here as it infiltrated most discussions I had with girls—dressing “skanky.” Dressing skanky meant showing “too much skin” and, more importantly, showing it in the “wrong way.” Though only one girl articulated her own “skankiness” in the study, it was a common insult levelled at others, operating as the perpetual outside to all insides.

The styles described in this chapter are by no means exhaustive. The range of styles that I have chosen to include (all research is, after all, a series of inclusions and exclusions) represents the most common modes of dress that girls brought up in conversation, as well as the most common modes of dress that I observed in the school. The categories of style that make up this range are ranges in and of themselves and are not meant to be taken as stable forms of embodied subjectivity. As I will show, while girls characterized themselves within particular modes of dress—and, thus, within particular subject positions within the school—they continuously expressed ambivalent feelings about their performances of these school identities. And finally, the styles described here are not meant to be viewed as isolated or self-contained. Each style existed in relation to the others, entangled in a web of mutual definition through the exclusionary matrices that operated throughout the school. Girls’ ambivalent (dis)identifications with particular styles and the shifting and fluid subject
positions that these styles represented demonstrate the complexities and multiplicities of girls’ school identities within the complex social world of the school.

“Dressing Like a Girl”: Preppy, Sexy, and Popular

“I love being girly.”
-Maria, 14, “classic” style

The two “uniforms” for girls at ESH—the Britney look and the JLo look—were considered to be the most mainstream of all the styles at ESH. The trendiness and mass marketing of these styles meant that they were worn by the majority of popular girls, defined as those who knew the most people and thus wielded the most power in the school (Milner, 2004; Bettis & Adams, 2003; Eder et al., 1995; Merten, 1997; Lesko, 1988). As the popular girls at ESH were variously located throughout the school’s multiple programs and racial and ethnic groups, the uniforms had a great deal of variation. For example, many popular Asian girls, including “Nammers,” “Hongers,” and “Chinks,” wore the velour JLo “suits” in soft, pastel colours, shopped at stores like Aritzia, and wore labels, such as TNA, 555 Soul, and Kappa. Within this “hardcore” social scene, popular Chinese girls who had the opportunity to visit China brought back other variations, such as tops with the words “Baby” and “Booty” written on them in Chinese lettering. And popular Hongers wore another modification, including loose fitting tops and baggy jeans that were still quite “revealing.” These variations were hardly noticed by other races and ethnicities, however, and the JLo “suits” were seen as the main style for popular Asian girls, a style that was considered to be the most fashionable in the school. As Azmera, a beauty school girl, explained, “if you’re a girl, and

42 Maria explained Aritzia’s aesthetic as “urban.” She noted that they “have some dressy stuff, but it’s more focused on casual, laid-back clothing. And, I think some of the stuff’s really original and stuff like that. I would never go into another store and see something like that kind of thing. And I think the quality’s really good.”
you want like, a good reputation with the girls, you kind of just have to like, you have to dress good. You have to keep up a high standard.” This standard meant “dressing like an Asian girl.”

Popular white girls, often exemplified by the loud and quiet popular Frenchies, wore low-rise jeans and tight tops, bought name-brands, such as Mavi, Miss Sixty, and Guess?, and shopped at Below the Belt, American Eagle Outfitter, The Gap, and other stores that catered to a “chic” skater aesthetic.43 Because both popular Asian and popular white girls wore each of the “uniforms” at times, the real difference between Asian popular style and white popular style seemed to hinge on a display of skin, though the answer to which group displayed more shifted depending on who I asked. Xiu’s distinction between the hardcores and the Frenchies depended on the midriff and other, subtle differences.

The typical white group I see at school would have their pants all the way down to almost where you may see their underwear or lower. They like to wear the furry hooded jackets, tight light blue jeans and also, I’m guessing they are called skater shoes. That is fairly different from the Asian group because the Asian group does not like to show their belly that much. They also wear the hooded jackets with the fur, but their shoes are different. The Asians would go for the Nike Shocks instead of skater shoes.

Dren’s understanding of how popular girls dressed at ESH was similarly linked to showing skin. As she put it, “the pants are so low that you can practically see the hair line.” But she felt that the popular Frenchies “don’t do it [show skin] quite as much as like, some other popular girls. They do it! But not as much. I don’t think they do it as much as like, I hate to say it, but a lot of the Asian girls are really into that.” This inconsistency meant that there was a fair amount of finger-pointing over which popular group was more “inappropriately” dressed. White girls were viewed by some Asian girls as “trashy” for wearing their pants “all

---

43 I say “chic” skater aesthetic because the girls who wore this style were not skaters. As I noted in chapter three, the popular Frenchies hung out with and dated skater boys. The chic skater aesthetic was a variation on the Britney look that incorporated skater shoes, such as Etnies, DCs, and Vans.
the way DOWN!” while Asian girls were viewed by some white girls as “hoochies” who wore their pants too “TIGHT!” These judgements were how girls articulated (dis)identifications and served to create solidarity within each racially organized group.

However varied popular girls’ style seemed to be, these outfits were collectively known as “preppy,” an historically shifting category that is often synonymous with popularity (Milner, 2004; Merten, 1997) and refers to “going with the trends” and dressing like a “typical” girl, whatever that cultural construction happens to be at a particular time and place. Dressing preppy has usually meant wearing trendy or name-brand clothing that marks students as popular within the symbolic economy of the school (Milner, 2004; Eder et al., 1995). Maria, a popular Frenchie, articulated this key characteristic: “I try and be fashionable, and like, I know what fashion is, and stuff like that.” The brands that Maria “knew” came from high profile stores that catered to a mainly middle-class clientele. Bettie (2003) describes “preps” as “primarily white students who were the most middle-class of all students at the school” (p. 16). But at ESH, “preppy” was a more complex subject position that related to the postmodern milieu of the school. While some white, middle-class students were preppy (though not all), including the popular Frenchies, the majority of the girls who dressed preppy were working-class popular Asian girls who were known as “hardcores.” To be a hardcore was to swear “all the time,” drink alcohol, go to raves and all-ages clubs, and associate with the gang-oriented “Nammer” boys who were often rumoured to be drug dealers.

Significantly, this notion of preppy represents a radical departure from how preppy has been characterized in the past. Preppy style has never incorporated a “sexy” and “revealing” look until this historical and cultural moment. Instead, preppy has usually meant that a girl
dressed modestly, conservatively, and in a manner that expressed femininity without sexuality (Lesko, 1988; Eckert, 1989; Bettie, 2003). Preppy has also been synonymous with a middle-class femininity and incorporated under the overarching category of “Jock.” As I noted in chapter three, at ESH, the binary opposition that Eckert (1989) identifies, namely “Jocks” and “Burnouts,” did not exist in such a clear-cut or oppositional manner at ESH. In Eckert’s analysis, the Jock/Burnout categories were “embodiments of the middle and working class, respectively; their two separate cultures are in many ways class cultures; and opposition and conflict between them define and exercise class relations and differences” (p. 5). Yet, at ESH, a working-class girl had access to the preppy subject position. In order to afford preppy clothing, many hardcores worked part-time jobs at McDonald’s, Purdy’s Ice Cream Shop, Starbucks, or other local venues on Wellington Ave. Jade, a working-class hardcore, had a part-time job at McDonald’s in order to afford a trendy bomber jacket with faux-fur on the hood, skin-tight Mavi jeans, Nike Shocks, and TNA sweat suits in a variety of colours. Girls also received money from their working-class parents in exchange for doing well in school and being a “good girl.” As Maria proudly announced, “if I wanna go buy a pair of shoes—my mom will be like, ‘Well, how much do you want?’ And if I want a $100 my mom will just give me a $100.”

Maria’s access to her parent’s money was, however, not the case for all working-class or any working poor girls, particularly those who came from single-parent families, like the girls in beauty school. The financial investment that the subject position “preppy” required thus limited access to those who could afford it, were able to work for it, or, as Xiu mentioned, were willing to steal for it. It was a subject position that indicated a girl had money to spend, though money that she perhaps struggled to get. Even still, as Azmera
pointed out, the look was a “rich” one, and one that she felt looked “richer” on Asian girls than on white girls. She explained that “you could have a white girl and an Asian girl wearing the same exact thing, but it just looks different on them [Asian girls]…. everything just looks so elegant on them.” This perception related to the “chopstick” thinness of most hardcores. The thinner a girl was at ESH, the more “in style” she could be.

If the preppy style could be acquired and, of course, was desired by a girl, then it offered her entrée into a particular subject position within the school. It was not just that a girl was viewed as popular in this style (a girl could be popular without being preppy), but rather that she was viewed as being a particular “kind” of girl, a girl who looked “good” in the tight and revealing clothing that the preppy style necessitated, a girl who looked “sexy,” and a girl who wielded power within the heterosexual matrix of the school (Hey, 1995), where preppy girls set a “normative assumption” (Butler, 1993) for femininity against which all other girls were measured and measured themselves. Preppy girls were seen to emulate the “cultural ideal” that was disseminated through movies, magazines, and music videos. Shitar wondered why “everyone says, ‘Real people don’t really look like that!’ But you come to our school and you see people really do. Not all of them, but the ones that are important do.” Dressing preppy thus automatically linked girls to a particular body type, sexuality, and sexual power. Put another way, preppy girls were most likely to be pretty, thin, “sexy,” and involved in a heterosexual dating scene with popular boys.

Shitar explained how this “equation” worked: “Basically, what you look like is how you dress, like, there are—things, like, if your face looks like this, this is probably how you’re going to dress.” If you were blonde and pretty, she suggested, you were probably going to wear “Mavi jeans, low-cut, maybe show your stomach a little bit.” If you were “a
little large,” you were going to wear a style that covered your body, “maybe sweat pants, nothing tight, you know, light coloured.” Diane, a plus-size girl, confirmed this correlation: “If you’re skinny,” she said, “you can be in style.” For Diane, preppiness had everything to do with not only being able to afford the “right clothes,” but also being able to fit into them. As far as she was concerned, preppiness, and all that the subject position entailed, was strictly off limits to her as a plus-size girl, making other components of the subject position off limits too, such as conventional sexiness and the kind of power that came with regulating femininity within the school.

To successfully occupy the subject position “preppy” was to be recognized through the mainstream, heterosexual matrix of “emphasised femininity” (Connell, 1987), a dominant form of femininity that implies girls and women are compliant with their subordination to hegemonic masculinity, or “the maintenance and practices that institutionalises men’s dominance over women” (p. 183). The emphasised femininity of the preppy style demanded that a girl maintain a level of sexiness and thinness that was regulated by mass cultural production, particularly pop stars, such as Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, and Jennifer Lopez. While popular girls were often highly aware of the pressure to look “good,” stay thin, and attract boyfriends, they also continuously alluded to the fact that they were caught up in something that was “really gross.” Leah acknowledged that being preppy held her to a standard of femininity that was unrealistic. “It’s like, it’s almost been like, imprinted in your brain by like, everything! It’s like a little tattoo that you can’t get off!” Leah was referring to the pressure she felt to be thin and pretty based on the clothing that was currently available to girls, as well as representations of women in fashion magazines. She was able to articulate
the “impossible” criteria to which she subscribed, while still acknowledging that she would “rather look like the anorexic person than the obese person.”

As a quiet popular Frenchie, Leah’s contradictory identification with the preppy subject position was made even more ambivalent by her fear of judgement from the loud popular Frenchies. She explained that if somebody walked by the loud populars, “they’ll be like, ‘Oh my god! That girl’s trying to look like Avril Lavigne!’ … or they’ll just take someone and say, ‘What are they thinking!’” Had it not been for the judgement of the loud popular Frenchies, Leah would have liked to have experimented with a different “kind” of style, something more “random,” more “second-hand,” and not quite so mainstream or explicitly feminine. But the thought of making a “full” transition away from conventional style worried her.

I don’t like being judged and I know there’s a lots of people who, just kind of think that you are being like, a wannabe, or just trying to—you know, where there’s a point where you think, ‘Well, I don’t think I could pull this off,’ which is kind of stupid, because you can, in theory, pull off anything. But I’ve kind of begun to realize this this year, but I don’t want people to, you know, make fun of me or relentlessly tease me or get angry at me because I’m wearing something that they don’t think I should be, so…

Leah’s fears concerning judgement were felt by girls across the school.44 Girls worried about the exclusions that could be exercised upon them and surrounded themselves with girls whom they trusted would not judge them, because they, too, wore similar styles.

Maria offered an example of judgement by articulating her own constituted “inside” against the constituting “outside” that “skanky” girls provided. As a thin, pretty, working-

---

44 Like everyone else in the school, I was susceptible to judgement. I became acutely aware of this vulnerability whenever I saw Freddie, a popular skater in grade 12. During one conversation in drama class, I made an admittedly dated comment regarding a Canadian band, The Tragically Hip. At the mention of this band, Frederick began to slowly look me up and down. He then offered his assessment. “You graduated high school in 1989, didn’t you?” I was startled by his accuracy. “Was it the band reference?” I asked. “Yeah,” he said. “That, and I could just tell.”
class Italian girl in the French Immersion program, Maria wore JLo suits and Aritzia fashions on most days, acquiring the nickname “Barbie” for her “girly” style. When I asked Maria to define “girly,” she explained it as: “Um, pink. Pretty. Um, jumpy. Excited. And like, ditzy at times.” Maria did not have a problem with being recognized as girly and thought of it as a “natural” way for her to be. “Just comes, kind of. Like, I’ll just—people will just be like, ‘you’re the girliest girl I know!’ And I’m like, ‘well, I can’t really help it, kinda thing.’” Maria’s normalization of her own emphasised femininity created a familiarity between herself and other preppy girls. It also gave her the power to judge girls whom she deemed to be less feminine.

I think if you see someone dressed like me and Alice [her working-class, Vietnamese friend], no one says anything. Cause I think everybody dresses like that. So, it’s normal. But if someone came to school, with a short skirt and high platforms, flip-flops, panels kinda thing, then, I think that everybody’s going to be like, ‘Oh my god!’ And there’s going to be like, a lot of gossip.

Maria’s validation of her own style as “normal” exemplifies the power that preppy girls had to regulate femininity in the school. While not all girls felt compelled to adhere to this proper citation of femininity, the “normal” style set by Maria and others in this subject position was the benchmark for an “appropriate” performance of girlhood, making all other dressed bodies, particularly “skanky” ones, abject.

No matter what other style a girl wore, the preppy style infiltrated it, shaped it, caused resistance to it, created desire for it, or, more succinctly put, infused other subject positions with ambivalence. Ironically, the “skanky” subject position also held a similar power. It shaped and infiltrated all other styles, too, forming perpetual disidentifications that often necessitated guarding against this incriminating way of dressing. Preppy girls, more than any other girls in the school, had the power to apply this label to other girls. I constantly heard
hardcores and popular Frenchies refer to girls as “skanks.” It was, in fact, the easiest and most commonly cited example of judgement in the school. But, interestingly, preppy and skanky looks shared a threshold of “sexiness.” As I noted earlier, both white girls and Asian girls who wore preppy styles often considered each other to be “skanky.” Dressing preppy and dressing “skanky” were thus closely connected in the school. In order to be skanky, a girl had to be “too sexy” in her style; in order to be preppy, a girl had to be sexy in her style, but not “too sexy.” These lines were arbitrarily drawn and constantly shifting. While “skank” was an insult that preppy girls levelled at those who were seen to be “different” from them, it was also an insult that they levelled at each other as a way of regulating each other’s power.

For Chrissie, the ambivalence she felt around her preppy status was infused by what she expressed as a misrecognition of her style. People thought she was skanky, even though Chrissie wore what she thought were “normal” clothes. “I never thought, ‘Oh, if you dress this way, people will think this or that or that.’ Like, I thought, it doesn’t matter how you dress. And then, I kind of learned, slowly, ‘yeah, it does!’” Initially, Chrissie described her style as preppy, which she amended to “skanky, almost, or hoochie maybe.” But she told me that she no longer “had that style anymore” and that she had begun gravitating “more towards baggy clothes.” When I asked her why she decided to switch her style, she recounted how others were “getting this impression of me, that I was like, a preppy like, hoochie kind of girl, who went out looking for guys, dressed in tight clothing, or whatever.” In her “tight” mini skirts and “skimpy tops,” she noticed that girls were “just very blatant, they’re like, ‘Tramp!’” Chrissie, unaware that her style was sending out “skanky” messages, suddenly noticed “enough little comments that I was like, ‘Oh my god. People think I’m
someone I’m not at all.’ And it really started to bug me.” As a thin, pretty, blonde who drew attention from boys everywhere she went, Chrissie was subjected to the judgement of other preppy girls, who called her “anorexic,” “bleached blonde,” and “that damn Britney Spears.” Some of her friends had even started excluding her from social events, fearing that she would monopolize boys’ attention. Chrissie eventually realized that preppy girls—her friends—“are quite judgemental.”

When I met Chrissie, she had cut her hair short and dyed it a light brown. She had also recently gained some weight. At school, I occasionally saw her wearing hoodies with the hood pulled up over her head, cargo pants, sneakers, and slightly baggy sweaters, a skater style that she had begun to cultivate, along with her more “regular,” preppy look. I asked her if her new look had anything to do with the way other girls were judging her.

Yeah. It all kind of adds up, like, I don’t want to be some Britney Spears skank, blah, blah, blah. I don’t want to be known as wanting to go out and get attention from guys. I don’t like any of that stuff that apparently like, I guess like, my overall image presented to people.

Though Chrissie had begun to develop this other style, toward the end of the year, I saw her wearing outfits from her “preppy” wardrobe more and more. As we sat next to each other in English class one day, I could hear Christina Aguilera’s latest hit, *Fighter*, blasting from her disc player. Chrissie admired Aguilera’s ability to be sexual, powerful, and to fight against “suppressed female sexuality.” She also identified with Aguilera’s recent image change from “just another pop star doing whatever” to announcing,

‘Yeah, I’m not a virgin, blah, blah, blah,’ like, everyone can deal with that, and sorta just, you know, even if it is slutty, she’s not denying it. Know what I mean? And like, I always hear guys saying it about, like, um, using girls for sex and stuff like that. And what she’s doing is just coming right back and saying, ‘Yeah, we can do that too!’
As I listened to Aguilera’s commanding voice through Chrissie’s headphones, I noted that she was wearing a white mini skirt with a deep slit, a tight, pink t-shirt, and strappy sandals with three-inch cork heels. Her hair had become a little more blonde and she had recently acquired a nose piercing similar to the one Aguilera had sported on the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine that month. It was clear that she had not given up her “old” style. Chrissie enjoyed the power of her sexuality, a power that she equated with expressing herself and challenging the double standard of male sexuality. But at the same time, it was a power that generated envy from others and, sometimes, resentment from her friends. Yet Chrissie’s incorporation of two juxtaposing styles—the tightness of the preppy look and the bagginess of a more casual, skater look—represented her own struggle for embodied subjectivity within the social world of ESH and her desire to be ambivalently located within and between these subject positions.

Chrissie also received a lot of criticism from the “alternative” girls in the school, like Dren. Dren fought with Chrissie about the validity of Aguilera’s so-called “power,” as well as the validity of Chrissie’s preppy look. Like other girls who called themselves alternative, Dren’s own style stood in (ambivalent) opposition to preppy girls, creating further exclusionary matrices that (dis)identifications with subject positions necessitated. Of course, alternative style begs the question, “alternative to what?” At ESH, the “what” was clearly defined as those girls who dressed “like everyone else, so you really need to hunt them out. You need to sniff them out and destroy them.” In other words—and to paraphrase Mina—preppy girls.
“To me when somebody says mainstream, I see a girl with a thong hanging out of her pants which are ridiculously too tight, getting drunk at some house party which seems too stupid to happen outside of teen movies—but does.”

- Abby, 15, “bad-ass/schoolgirl/business-woman” style

Jamie called herself Wiccan and was never without the cat’s-eye glasses that sat slightly akimbo on her face. She wore loose fitting jeans, tops, and non-skater (read: untrendy) runners. Jamie sported two visible piercings in places that were highly uncommon for girls at ESH: a stud between the lip and the chin (the labret), and a barbell through her tongue. Her other piercings were hidden within her mane of long, brown hair. She had two in one ear and three in the other. “Yeah, and belly button! But the belly button got infected so I had to take it out. But I still have the hole so it still counts.” Because there were so few obviously pierced students at ESH, those who sported facial jewellery were easily recognizable to each other. Jamie’s boyfriend, Dante, had pink hair and nipple rings that he had inserted himself. “If people want to see them,” she told me, “he’ll just lift up his shirt in the middle of nowhere.” They met when Dante transferred into Jamie’s math class. Dante saw Jamie and knew right away that he was going to talk to her. “He goes, ‘she’s my #1’ and then he walked in and sat behind me. So that was the first thing he saw—my piercings.”

While Jamie’s piercings enabled Dante and others to recognize her as the same, they also generated judgement from preppy girls. In order to make her uncomfortable, some of the loud popular Frenchies often asked Jamie “embarrassing questions,” such as “does your tongue get stuck in Dante’s nipple ring?” This question implied that Jamie was involved in an “abnormal” or “abject” sexuality that revolved around her own aggressive desire to “use” her tongue piercing to inflict pleasure and pain on Dante. As well, girls with tongue
piercings were seen to be “into” oral sex. But her tongue piercing was not “for that,” she insisted. “I don’t want to be seen that way. I want to be seen as different.”

Being recognized as “different”—no matter what the social penalty—was the key criterion for girls who occupied the “alternative” subject position at ESH. While the preppy subject position was solidified around the power that came from enacting an emphasized femininity, the alternative subject position was based on a girl’s refusal to do just that. As a result, no two girls who thought of themselves as alternative dressed in the same way at ESH, unlike west side schools, such as Braeburn, where, Chrissie explained “all the like, goth/punk people stand in one group, and you can see them all dressed in black, standing in one little circle.” At ESH, being alternative meant being “one of a kind” and carefully cultivating a look that could not be misrecognized as preppy. Alternative girls did not wear labels, did not show skin, and did not conform to the uniforms for girls. Their diverse styles served as a visible foil to the range of preppy styles, including normalized body types and the heterosexual imperative that dominated the school. While alternative girls had alternative boyfriends, many of them also expressed interest in bisexuality, or as Mina put it, “I’m lesbianesque with a hint of hetero.” Alternative girls also tended to be boldly sexual without being conventionally sexy. Mina, Jamie, Dren, and Ratch had all slept with boyfriends during the year, while they felt that preppy girls were “prudish,” or that they “did it” but refused to “talk about it.” Not only did alternative girls seem to talk about sex, but they often used their sexual knowledge to make others uncomfortable. Mina brought a Barbie and Ken doll in to class one day and arranged them in “dirty” poses on her desk. She had dressed them as “gay Ken” and “Butch Barbie,” drawing continuous attention to their gender-bending sexual exploits. I also heard Dren and Ratch bring up masturbation in class
numerous times in order to get a “rise” out of the preppy girls, whom they felt were “really close-minded.”

Alternative girls called themselves “different,” “weird,” “not normal,” “unique,” “punk,” and “goth.” Jamie’s best friend Mina saw herself as alternative. Her style was purposefully unkempt and “grungy.” She often combined a loose-fitting, hot pink tank top with her omnipresent black trench coat and man-sized jeans that dragged under her feet. Jamie described Mina’s “look” as “different,” because she had her “own style going on. Sometimes she wears pink and black. I mean, with somebody who wears black, you don’t usually see them with pink.” Mina’s alternativeness was also reflected in her interest in Japanese anime, Wiccanism, and her aggressive (some described it as “psychotic”) way of dealing with people, particularly boys. She was loud, but not in “that preppy way.” As Jamie explained it, “Mina can be at the other end of the hall and scream out her lungs at you and not care what people think about her.” She also “play-fought” with the boys in her social group, biting them, scratching them, and lunging at them for the slightest provocation. Making others uncomfortable was Mina’s speciality.

Mina explained that she and Jamie were friends because neither of them were “flaky,” like the preppy girls, who spent hours talking about which clothes go with which makeup. It’s just really annoying to hear them talk because it’s like, where’s this going to get you in life? What are you thinking about doing? I’d rather have philosophical debates. I do that all the time with Cedric and Jamie. That’s why I fit in with them.

Mina and Jamie’s identification with each other rested on their mutual distaste for mainstream girlhood, as well as their mutual desire to perform an alternative one. According to Mina, an alternative girl was “anyone who won’t do anything to fit in, someone who
would rather be their own person than go with the mainstream.” Mina proved her commitment to this ethos by bragging that “people have tried to get me to be popular. They’ve invited me, right? And I don’t WANT to!” She judged the popular Asian girls for being “giggly,” “fake,” wearing “the same kind of makeup that looks like it’s been painted on,” and dressing like “hoochie mamas,” who wore “heels up to here! They’re thighs are like this wide, they’re wearing really tight jeans and really short skirts.” Similarly, she judged the popular white girls for hiding “behind masks” and pretending to like things just because they were trendy, such as “being in love with Justin Timberlake.”

I asked Mina why she thought those girls were popular. “They tend to be popular,” she replied, “because they’re exactly like everyone else, and if they’re exactly like everyone else, then you can’t exactly hate them, because they’re exactly like you, and if you hated them, you’d be hating yourself!” Mina’s critique of and refusal to participate in the emphasised femininity of the preppy subject position was, however, ambivalently felt. Though Mina and Jamie hung out in the isolated privacy of the drama studio at lunchtime, keeping themselves on the fringe of ESH’s social world, Mina battled her own uncomfortable desire to be recognized by preppy girls, who saw her as a “freak.” “I feel like I’m on parade each time I walk across the cafeteria,” she complained, “on my way to my bench for gym. I’ll just feel that everybody’s eyes are on me.” When I asked Mina what she thought they were looking for, she suggested they were “looking for perfection” and judging her for the lack of it.

I’ll feel that maybe my chest isn’t big enough. Maybe my arms and thighs are too big. Maybe my stomach just hangs out just a little too much. Maybe my butt’s too big. Maybe my hair’s greasy. You know? And if any of that is true, even in the slightest, [preppy] girls tend to exaggerate it. They take it into their minds and they conform it to see this huge, monstrous imperfection.
Mina’s performance of an alternative girlhood was thus infused with both a desire to critique preppy girls and to be accepted by them, but on her own terms. While she was not willing to compromise her “look” or attitude, she continued to hope that they would find her attractive, witty, and intelligent. Jamie told me that she, too, did not want to be totally unaccepted by mainstream girls. Her alternative style and attitude were “different,” but also “socially acceptable,” or, as she explained, “to a lot of people ‘different’ means you’re NOT socially accepted. I’m different in a way that people see me as being different from other people, but they *like* the differences.”

The styles that existed within the alternative subject position ranged from Mina and Jamie’s more subtle differentiations to Dren and Ratch’s subcultural affiliations with goth and punk respectively. Somewhere in the middle were Abby and Shitar, two girls in the French Immersion program who, though they were not friends, shared a healthy dislike for preppy girls and an affinity for putting together unique outfits that stood out in the school. Abby was not a firm part of any social group at EHS, though she had some friends with whom she “roamed the school” at lunchtime and talked about the things that interested her: Orson Welles’ movies, the Lord of the Rings trilogy, and philosophic writings from Plato to Nietzsche. Abby defined her style as “sort of a bad-ass/schoolgirl/business-woman look.” She combined pinstriped pants and high-heeled Mary-Janes with pleated skirts and her trademark striped knee socks. As a working-class girl with no options for purchasing expensive fashions, Abby was a bargain hunter who looked for second-hand clothing at Value Village and in Lost and Found boxes around the school. “I just wear what I want to wear,” she told me. “You know, like, if I think it looks neat, then I won’t really care about what everybody thinks about it or whatnot.”
Abby had only recently chosen to occupy the alternative subject position at ESH. Prior to discovering the striped socks that changed her style, she was a “wannabe popular girl.” “I used to want to be [popular] so badly, you know?” In an effort to become popular, she felt that she had to dress just like preppy girls, in tight jeans and tight tops. But she called striped socks her “salvation.” When she saw the socks in a store, “it was like in the movies, where light comes down and it’s like, ‘Ahhhh!!!’ like, ‘I love you!’” Abby identified with the subject position that she felt the socks could offer her, a unique standing in the school that would signify her shift away from “wannabe popular” to a “weird” girl with her own style. She then stopped trying to fit in with the popular girls, or, as she put it, “I just started not to care.” Abby developed her own critique of preppy style and the “cattle farm mentality” that she felt was being bred in the school.

It’s the most disgusting thing and you have two, like three girls walking down the street and they’ll all be wearing track suits like that, and every track suit is like, the same colour almost…. Yeah, like baby blue or baby pink or, I don’t know, brown or green or. God! I don’t know. It makes me sick! …like, three girls are walking down the street and they all have a shirt that’s baby blue and has ‘Bootilicious’ on it!…. That’s disgusting!

Though Abby’s dedication to occupying the alternative subject position was strong, she also expressed ambivalent feelings regarding her inability to wear the “right” clothing based on her class location and her body type. She told me that she would never wear Mavi jeans, “which is what everyone else is wearing.” When I commented on the cost of the jeans, Abby responded, “Yeah. Like, I don’t have the money to spend $70 on a pair of pants that don’t flatter me anyways.” Further emphasising her point, she added, “like, they really don’t work on me.” As a slightly larger girl than the “chopstick” thin preppies, Abby was well aware that in order to be preppy, a girl had to both be able to afford the “right” clothes and look good in them. As Abby felt that she could not do either, I asked her to what extent wearing
the “right” clothing mattered at ESH. “Well, some people really care! Like, I have been like, people do judge you by it like, on the streets.” Abby told me about the time when she and another alternative friend were standing at a bus stop with one of the loud popular Frenchies.

We were with Shelley and she was wearing her little tight jeans, and her like, one of those hooded sweater things that are ‘in’ right now or whatever. And these girls came up and started trying to pick a fight with us, and they like, completely left Shelley alone, like she wasn’t even with us, you know, it was just us two.

Abby felt that the girls had picked on them because, “well, I had my striped socks on and [the other alternative girl] was wearing some darker makeup or whatnot.” When the girls started to push Abby and her friend around, she took out the pepper spray that she carried with her and they “backed off.”

For Abby, the recognition she sought as an alternative girl was linked to exclusions like these that occasionally made her an outsider in the school, a standing that she acutely felt, but did not seem to mind. Her style took work and planning, and to her, it was worth it. Though she was not popular and did not have a large circle of alternative friends like Mina and Jamie did, she managed to find her own people here and there. She sometimes hung out with Leah, who was working to shift her preppy subject position toward something a little more alternative, though she was not yet prepared to go to the same lengths that Abby had in order to be recognized as “different” in the school. Unlike Leah, however, Shitar, felt that she had nothing to lose by being alternative. As she aptly put it, “I don’t have anything else. Like, I don’t have like a big talent or anything. I don’t have a sport I love, or, I’m not really good at school. I don’t have millions of friends. I have my style. I can make clothes.”

When I asked Shitar what drew her to the DIY aesthetic that she called the “punk ass” look, she emphatically responded, “It’s not zombie like…. It’s not, ‘Everyone’s the same,
let’s all be a nice big family of zombies!” I asked her who the zombies were. “The zombies,” she heatedly replied, “are Gap shoppers. Anyone who—anyone who wears the tight jeans, or the like, tight halter top with, makeup and—that’s a zombie!” Shitar’s look, ironically, was zombie-esque in the sense that she cultivated a slightly goth, slightly punk, mainly DIY aesthetic. She wore mix-and-match styles that she seemed to just “make up” out of anything and everything, including jeans that had been cut short and shredded at the bottom, cow patches, studded belts, sailor shirts, striped socks, stapled black converse sneakers (a real distinction from the pastel and sparkly runners of hardcores), dyed-black hair, homemade jean bracelets, spiked wrist bands, men’s ties, and safety pins that held it all together.

At the beginning of high school, Shitar worked to become friends with the popular Frenchies in all of her classes, the ones who “think they’re Britney Spears.” She tried to dress and act “like them,” even losing twenty pounds through the anorexic guidelines laid out on pro-ana websites. But no amount of effort generated recognition from the popular Frenchies and she remained an outcast within the program. She realized that she could not afford the Mavi jeans and Guess? shirts that were a necessary part of being popular within her social scene. Her working-class habitus, as well as her Lebanese culture and strict Christian upbringing distanced her from the middle-class, preppy girls in her social scene. As a result of these differences, she articulated a sentiment most alternative girls expressed: “No one gets me,” she sighed. “None of them are really like me…. They have their lives. I have mine.”

45 The pro-ana movement, short for pro-anorexia, revolves around websites that are dedicated to the “rules” of doing anorexia “properly,” such as how to feel full and how to avoid getting caught.
This disidentification propelled Shitar in a new direction. She developed a critique of the preppy subject position as “conformist” and decided that she liked her “spot” as an outcast in the school. If the “blondes” would not accept her, she reasoned, then she would also reject them. She started to notice “other people, like, who are like me, who stick out.” Her own style started to develop through this identification with alternative girls, both in and out of the school. “When I go into certain stores, or downtown,” she remarked, “there’s all sorts of weirdoes.” As a “weirdo,” Shitar took comfort in knowing that there were others like her out there, “strange people,” whom she felt were kindred spirits. Though, she admitted to feeling an occasional pang of regret when she saw the “normal” girls,

with like, the straight blonde hair and the tight pants. They all have boyfriends. They all have great lives. They like party all the time and, and then I’m not like that, and I think, if I just dress like them, maybe I would have that too. And then I think, I’ve tried that and it didn’t work. So, I don’t know. They’re trying to draw me in!

Shitar’s obvious expression of ambivalence made her laugh. I asked her if she ever considered giving up her alternative style in order to be preppy. “I consider it. But then I think to myself that it would be wrong.” Shitar felt that the alternative subject position was much more a reflection of “who” she was.

Part of further exclusions, Shitar’s alternative style was not admired by some of the other alternative girls in the school. To Ratch and Dren, Shitar was a “class-A twinkie.” A twinkie wanted to “get into the cool group,” but did not have the authenticity to “pull it off.” The cool group, in this case, was not preppy. It was, in fact, a group composed of Dren and Ratch, two best friends who recognized in each other a desire to occupy the alternative subject position as confidently and as powerfully as possible. Twinkies were those who did not have the same commitment to being different; they were posers who only seemed
alternative on the surface, but did not embody the “true” spirit of punk, metal, goth, or any other subcultural affiliation. “It’s just like, these kids,” Dren explained, “they shop at Cheap Thrills, or buy the bondage pants, and they’ll buy the bondage skirt, when you’re supposed to make the bondage things.” Ratch added that “you’ve got to put the time into it. You’ve gotta develop your look. It takes a while. You can’t just go to the store and buy your fuckin’ look, right?” When I questioned why Shitar was a twinkie if she, too, made her own clothing and had a DIY aesthetic, Dren and Ratch looked at each other and winced. “She just tried way too hard,” Dren said. They theorized that Shitar’s look came from Seventeen magazine, where they tell you how to “make cool clothes by yourself!” Dren mockingly read an imaginary headline: “Oooh, cut your pants like this!”

As harsh as these sentiments were, they represented Dren and Ratch’s exclusionary matrix, the outside to their self-proclaimed inside. At ESH, Dren stood out as being the only identifiable “goth girl.” Though everyone called her “goth,” she actually thought of herself as both goth and metal head, alternating between these styles. Her goth look consisted of tall, black leather boots, flowing, black gossamer shirts, dyed black hair, and spiked bracelets and dog collars. She noted that goth girls were “very feminine, but they’re like, dark.” Metal, however, was quite different, though no one seemed to notice this difference at school. Her metal look included tall, black leather lace-up combat boots, jeans or cargo pants, chains, a black army jacket, an Iron Maiden t-shirt, and the facial piercings she sported year-round—a much tougher, more masculine aesthetic than her goth look. And Ratch was a tall and strong looking punk who wore army pants decorated with graffiti, safety-pinned patches,

---

46 Dren’s piercings were, in fact, what enabled Jamie and her to be “friendly” in the hallways, as they were two of the only girls in the school to wear such jewellery, forging an identification between them even though they hung out in very different social groups.
punk band t-shirts, ripped hoodies, dog collars, and kept her hair long and messy. Unlike her estimation of Shitar, Ratch felt that she authentically embodied the punk spirit of DIY.

If you’re confident with who you are, you can pull off anything! Like, people are like, ‘Wow, a lot of people who do that, a lot of people can’t pull it off!’ But it’s just being comfortable. It’s being confident in what you wear. Cause if you dress like us, you have to have a lot of confidence, or people are going to be like, ‘What the fuck are you doing?’

The unique feature that allowed Dren and Ratch to judge others so harshly was the fact that they came into ESH with an already established alternative “look.” They were not outsiders who were denied access to the preppy subject position; they were not even unpopular. In fact, Dren and Ratch understood that they had been able to remain popular “on their own terms,” simply by “doing exactly what they wanted,” a feat that other alternative girls often admired. While most alternative girls were drawn to the alternative subject position because they were rejected by preppy girls, Dren and Ratch never experienced such an exclusion. The summer before high school began, Dren simply decided to start high school “totally fresh.”

I mean, that summer I went out and bought a whole bunch of different clothes. I was like, so determined that I wasn’t going to go to high school looking like all my friends, and showing up on the first day and getting into fights with your friends because we’d all bought the same shirt.

By grade 10, Dren had cultivated her look, including an eyebrow ring, a lip ring, and a dedication to goth and metal music that gave her credibility. She read goth and metal music magazines, went to goth dances, and was never without her disc player in class, which blasted industrial rock, and death and black metal—her large and powerful headphones perpetually sticking out of her long black hair.

Ratch’s style also grew out of her taste in music. “I found a music that I liked, and then I went with the dress.” Like Dren, she experienced notoriety at ESH for her look, attention
that was sometimes based on the fear she generated as an intimidating figure. “When I walk
down the hallways, I say ‘hi’ like, to everyone. But I know there’s people that cringe when
they look at me.” The people who cringed at Ratch considered her style to be “dirty,”
“disgusting,” and “street kid.” As she put it, “this girl in my socials class looked at me and
looked at her friend, and was like, “Gawwd, can’t you like, get a job and go shopping?” The
negative judgement that Ratch experienced and Dren did not related to their differing class
locations and choices of subcultural style. As a middle-class girl, Dren was able to afford the
expensive skirts, dog collars, and leather boots that the goth and metal looks necessitated. As
well, her goth style was feminine and did not seem to challenge the emphasised femininity of
preppy style as much as Ratch’s punk style did. For all her goth and metal head
accoutrement, Dren was still a thin and pretty girl; Ratch, however, was tall, strong, and
masculine looking. Ratch was a working-class girl who lived in an apartment with her single
mom and brother. Her inability to buy goth style was not an issue, however, as she preferred
her chosen look and the DIY aesthetic that gave her authenticity in the school. As Ratch
pointed out, punks were not supposed to spend money, it defeated the “whole point!”

At ESH, there were only a handful of girls who identified with subcultural styles, and
only two who embodied these subject positions intensely enough to be recognized school-
wide. This solidarity enabled Dren and Ratch to identify with each other and share in their
critique of preppy girls. As Dren explained,

when you’re going to school every day and you’re getting up at eight, or
seven or whatever in the morning and you’re piling on half a bag of makeup
and wearing skimpy little tops and it’s like, autumn or winter, and you’re
showing up at school and like, pouting your face and you’re going into the
bathroom every half an hour to like, reapply your lipstick, just because you’re
like, in English class with a couple of dorks that are your age anyway, like,
it’s pretty stupid.
But as critical as Dren was of preppy girls and their desire to be attractive to boys, Ratch commented that she thought Dren was not so different from them. Ratch explained that Dren was “rather boy crazy, which kind of makes her like a lot of the girls I see around. I’m not saying that I’m not boy-crazy or whatever..., but I’m not like that all the time and I don’t have to constantly talk about guys all the time, which she seems to take joy in doing.”

Dren’s heavily “made up” look caused others to speculate that she was similar to preppy girls, who also put effort into looking good and applying makeup. As well, Abby and Jamie’s admiration for Dren’s “outspoken” style diminished when they learned that Dren was “mean” and “judgemental,” qualities that they associated with being preppy.

Even within a subject position predicated on “difference,” girls judged others harshly for not being different enough or for not being different like they were different. Though, there was an understanding among alternative girls that they were, at least, not preppy; that their styles said, “I am nothing like you!” Dren summed up this alternative ethos:

> Just to do your own thing and not really conform to whatever everyone else is doing. And not to like, shop at *Below the Belt* and *Stitches*, you know. That you, like, look different but not only looking different. Just that you think differently. That you’re not totally like, obsessed with school, or not necessarily even that, but, just that you don’t necessarily do what everyone else does. That you kind of dance to the tune of your own beat. Yeah.

But doing “your own thing” was difficult. As different as alternative girls were from preppy girls (and from each other), they, too, formed restricted groups that operated on elements of exclusion. Mina and Jamie’s social group had become quite “elitist.” Initially, Mina’s social group was drawn to the drama studio at lunchtime because they “were rejected by other groups.” As a result, everyone who came to the studio had their own “thing,” a thing that made them unique and different from everyone else. But eventually, everyone came to like the same comics, the same movies, and the same style. Mina jokingly recounted how hats...
had become the newest “thing” that all of her friends wore. “They’re all supposedly alternative,” Mina complained, “but alternative’s now popular, so it’s no fun anymore!”

According to Mina, all the “things” that made everyone in the drama studio different had now become conventional. As a result, she admitted that her alternative social group might have become just like all the other mainstream social groups who had rejected them in the first place.

“Show Class, Not Trash”: Comfortable, Appropriate, and Dressy

“I like to present myself a certain way. See, that’s the difference, like, someone can dress very like, provocative, and look bad. And someone can dress in sweatpants and look prettier.”
-Keisha, 16, “casual” style

“Oh! There’s a very close line between looking good and looking like a ho.”
-Gianna, 18, “JLo” style

For the girls who could not afford to occupy the preppy subject position, but also did not care to engage in the mainstream critique of alternative style, there was another option, one that was, perhaps the most common subject position in the school. It included a range of styles that took its cue from the Britney and JLo looks, but did not incorporate labels or expensive fashions. As well, this style was viewed by the girls who wore it as much “classier” than preppy style, because, though it was made up of “no-name” preppy fashions, did not seem to be as sexy. Because of this distinction, the girls who shopped at “reasonably priced” stores, such as Le Chateau, Stitches, Suzy Shier, Aldo, Transit, and Dynamite saw their look as “comfortable,” as opposed to the revealing, tight, and expensive clothing worn by the preppy girls. Keisha was sure that girls who showed their stomachs, their thongs, and their cleavage could not possibly be “comfortable.” “I wouldn’t be comfortable,” she confidently asserted, “so I’m pretty sure they can’t be comfortable. I just honestly think they
do it for attention.” According to Keisha, girls who wore the Britney look were sending out the wrong messages to boys, making them think “those” girls were “easy,” “slutty,” and only interested in “popularity.” Girls automatically noticed when other girls dressed “inappropriately,” she continued, “and it’d be like, ‘ssspsssssp’ and talk about it! But guys, guys will notice it when they see it. And be like, ‘Ooooh, look at her! Wow! She’s showing a lot.’” As far as Keisha was concerned, “if you come with a shirt showing your stomach and your cleavage, guys are obviously going to think, ‘Oh, she’s easy! I can get some of that.’”

Keisha’s adamant dislike for the Britney look was a part of the “comfortable” subject position and made her recognizable to other girls with a working-class habitus. This identification incorporated girls who wanted to look stylish and fashionable, but did not have the money to buy the clothes necessary to occupy the preppy subject position. The girls in the comfortable subject position wore jeans, t-shirts, hoodies, sweat suits, and runners, but they were noticeably different from the not-altogether dissimilar styles of preppy girls. They were simply less trendy and less expensive. Comfortable girls sometimes showed their midriffs and their thongs, but most did not. Like Keisha, Shen saw the Britney look as a desperate grab for “attention from guys, and like, maybe, you know praise from their girlfriends, right?” She mockingly imitated what preppy girls might say to each other: “‘Oh, that’s such as nice top!’ ‘Ooooh, you look so sexy!’ or whatever.” Shen, a Christian Chinese girl from an immigrant, working-class family, did not “approve” of the Britney look at all. “It definitely makes them [preppy girls] seem less classy, you know?” Similarly, Isabel made a plea to girls who wore low-rise jeans and midriff-revealing tops: “please don’t go wearing pants that are just like, covering and—you sit down and you’ve got to sit down
holding your pants up, because if not, people are going to see, you know, your crotch or, your ass crack or something, you know!”

The most identifiable feature of the comfortable subject position was a critique of the labels that preppy girls wore. The mere mention of the JLo suits prompted Keisha to articulate her own class location as a girl whose paycheque went straight back home to help out her family.

I hate the labels that have to like, cost so much. And it’s sad because, you know, not everyone can afford it. And so what if someone really wants a pair of like, Mavis or WHATEVER the case may be, and they can’t because it’s too expensive for them, and then they get judged on it at school. And I don’t think that’s fair. That’s why I think all high schools should be in uniforms. That way no one can get made fun of cause they’re all the same.

Keisha’s hatred of labels was shared by her beauty school friends, many of whom worked in part-time jobs, but needed the money to help out at home, pay for their beauty school tuition, or pay for their car insurance and gas. Jo, a working poor girl who lived in the “Projects,” also explained that girls were judged by how they dressed at ESH. This judgement was enacted by the “people that have more than others” toward those who wore styles that were not “name brand, or in style.” Jo, who was troubled by the lack of solidarity that style created added, “we’re girls! We should get along. Girls stick together.”

Gianna took a different approach. Her theory was that even if she had the money to buy expensive labels, even if she were a “millionaire,” she would never purchase the clothing that did not make her “feel like who I am, you know?” For Gianna, dressing like “who she was” meant being recognized as someone with a working-class, east side habitus. But, ironically, her adoption of no-name brand styles that resembled the Britney and JLo looks caused others to (mis)recognize her as a prep. A friend at another school accused her of looking preppy one day while she was wearing jeans. Her friend wore “spiked bracelets and
like, the wallet with like, the chain and like, that kind of style. Gianna could not understand how she had been (mis)recognized as preppy and figured it had to do with her desire to “to keep up with the fashions.” But to Gianna, being stylish was not a preppy characteristic, since her clothes were all no-name brands. Thinking of herself as a prep meant that she had to try to identify with the “rich” girls she knew at ESH and through her work in a spa. The identification proved to be impossible for her, “cause I see the West Van kids that come to my work, I’m just like, ‘No!’”

The comfortable subject position generated a sense of pride and honour among the beauty girls who felt that they were well dressed anyway, and at least were not as “inappropriately” dressed as preppy girls. When I asked Keisha what she liked about her style, she explained that it was the confidence that this pride gave her, knowing that no matter what she wore, she was “still comfortable.” As a result, she did not care if “people are going to be like, ‘Why’s she wearing that?’ Or talk. I have confidence, like I don’t care! Like, I blocked them out. I’m in my bubble!” Keisha’s self-assurance was shared by the beauty girls, many of whom dressed in styles that were similar to, but recognizably different from, the name brands that comprised the uniforms for girls at ESH. As a way of distancing themselves from a subject position that they could neither afford nor identify with, they spoke of themselves as “casual” dressers who liked to “look good,” “tasteful,” and “appropriate” for their age. Keisha very clearly explained that “the way I dress and present myself, I think it’s the right way to present, for a 16-year-old, being in high school.”

Shen wore fitted tank tops, but always made sure to put something over them, like a jacket. She noticed the way boys and men looked at girls’ "asses" in their tight jeans and

---

47 This style, loosely associated with skaters and skate punks, has been popularized by punk-pop bands, such as Sum 41, Blink 182, Green Day, and Simple Plan.

48 West Van is known to be a wealthy suburb of Vancouver.
“suits” and did not want that to happen to her on the skytrain or the bus. But when Shen had the opportunity to buy a name-brand JLo suit from Buffalo at a discounted price, she leapt at the opportunity. Articulating ambivalence with the comfortable subject position and her class location, she embarrassingly explained that she “really hated suits, but I actually got one a few weeks ago, and I was like, pretty mad at myself, cause I felt like such a hypocrite.” Shen desired to look “good,” but then admitted to hating the “cool people” with whom she would now be associated. Though, the thought of this possible (mis)recognition did not deter her from wearing the outfit.

While the beauty girls took pride in their comfortable styles, they also worried about being misrecognized as girls “without class” (Bettie, 2003), given their vocational positioning within the school, a status that made them the most working-class of all the working-class girls at ESH. Keisha worked hard to maintain a “classy” style, “cause that’s how people see you. You know, that’s how people judge you, by the way you present yourself. And if you present yourself the wrong way, then people are going to be like, automatically, ‘she’s not a good girl. She’s a bad girl,’ you know?” To Keisha, being a “bad girl” meant doing “wrong things, like especially with guys. Like, trying to get guys’ attention. Maybe, like, fool around.” But Keisha maintained that “if you present yourself a good way, then [people] look at you, ‘Oh that’s a strong young woman, that goes to high school, that knows what’s right from wrong!’” It was imperative to Keisha that she be perceived as the “right” kind of girl who was not misrecognized for being “skanky.” For Keisha, this meant making sure that her friends also did not come to school dressed “inappropriately.” And if they did, she would tell them, “cause they know like, that’s not the look to go.” The family mentality of the beauty girls meant, in fact, that they all looked out
for each other, cared for each other’s reputations, and made sure that they watched each
other’s backs (and thongs). If a beauty girl came to school in an outfit that was deemed to be
“skanky,” “we’d all start talking about it, and be like, ‘Why is she wearing that?’ And give
looks and whisper.” Keisha hoped that this kind of pressure would make them think twice
before wearing the outfit again.

But as much as they worked to guard against rumours and bad reputations, the
“comfortably” dressed girls in beauty school were targets for judgement by other girls across
the school. The Asian hardcores, the popular white girls, the quiet Chinese girls, the
alternative girls, and even some teachers saw them as “inappropriately dressed” girls who
were trying to be sexy, but who really came off as “trashy.” Though the preppy and
comfortable styles were not that different, they represented the distinction between working-
class and working poor vocational girls and middle- and working-class academic girls. As
well, the “skanky” reputation of beauty girls related to the “outrageous” styles of the
Hispanic girls who were (sometimes incorrectly) associated with the Aesthetician program.
While not all Hispanic girls at ESH were in beauty school, and certainly not all beauty girls
were Hispanic, the two had become conflated. Many of the Italian and Persian beauty girls
were thought to be Hispanic as well because of a shared style, a style that Isabel proudly
called “dressy.” As she announced one day, “I’m a dressy girl. I like makeup. I’m a
makeup fanatic.”

Isabel was from a working-class family that had emigrated from Brazil when she was
little. She explained that she had come by her “dressy” style through her mother’s “elegant”
influence. Isabel noted that if “I look like, more like down, not too dressy, I feel, I don’t feel

49 During their customer service class, I heard one beauty girl tell another that her “pubes” were showing,
which meant “pull up your pants!”
good looking. You know? I don’t feel like, appealing to myself.” Being dressy was part of her culture. In Brazil, she explained, the least fashionable women were still exceedingly fashionable by Canadian standards. Isabel was a “high-heel chick” who liked to make sure her hair, makeup, and style were polished and perfect. Similarly, Rosa and Carla were two other Hispanic girls in the Aesthetician program who enjoyed “looking good.” They saw themselves as “classy,” “dressy,” and “stylish” girls who were proud of their looks. But Rosa was aware that her style marked her as different within the symbolic economy that operated within the school. One day in drama class, she told me that I would be able to pick out her “crew” just by looking down the hallway. “We look really different,” she said. Rosa was referring to how “dressy” she and her friends were, compared to the preppy girls who mainly wore jeans and the suits. Rosa and her friends wore “outfits,” including fitted slacks, heels or platform clogs, ruffled blouses or plunging V-neck sweaters, hoop earrings, and highly coiffed hair. During a game of “duck, duck, goose” that was going on in drama class one day, Rosa’s style marked her as an easy “goose.” Everyone seemed to enjoy making her run in her high heels. After being selected a number of times, she finally took her shoes off in order to run better, a result that seemed to please those who repeatedly targeted her.

Rosa and Carla were pretty and thin girls who wore “glitzy” and “sparkly” clothing that was tight and revealing. They also wore a lot of makeup that was described by other girls as the “Mamacita” look, with dark lip liner, thin, carefully sculpted eyebrows, dark eye shadow, mascara, and brownish lipstick. Often referred to as “hoochie,” their style was, according to Dren, “total trash,” including “crunchy curls, or they slick back their pony tails so tight it looks like they’re going to cut off the circulation to their head.” Leah, who acknowledged that her own pants were “tight,” felt that they were not “necessarily even as close to tight as
lots of other people’s.” When I asked who those other people were, she named the Hispanic girls,

who have their hair all permed, and they jell it in these curls, and they’re known, in my group of friends, as the ‘crunchy curl girls’...cause their hair! Like, yeah, you look like you could break it or something. Just crunch! And they wear really like, not-there shirts and really, really tight pants. And those kind of really annoying...platform runners that are kind of in style, but not really. They’re white and they’ve got little platforms. And also they wear those high heels.

Isabel explained that the kind of judgement levelled at her and other Hispanic girls for their “dressy” style meant that they were perceived as “sluts.” Because she and her friends were “dressed up” for school, some boys assumed they were “easy.” Often ignored by Isabel and her friends, boys would “make up rumours, like, ‘Oh, those girls are sluts!’ and stuff, and it’s like, half of us, seriously, some of us didn’t even have a boyfriend. Some of my friends don’t even have a boyfriend and never even had one.”

The beauty girls’ “comfortable” style, including the Hispanic girls’ “dressy” style, was viewed in this negative light. Though they saw their modes of dressing as “appropriate,” “classy,” and “tasteful,” their raced and classed locations within the school, and, particularly within the vocation program of beauty school, singled them out for derogatory labelling, such as “trashy” and “hoochie.” Even some teachers viewed the beauty girls in this way, as Ms. Mackenzie told me. She had heard a teacher in the staffroom suggest that all you have to do with Hispanic girls is “wind them up and watch them walk.” But the identification that beauty girls shared with the “comfortable” subject position was still a powerful one. As Keisha told me, the beauty girls had “an image to show.” She explained that “you have to look the part, right? You can’t come in sweatpants and expect to do someone’s makeup or hair or facial!” For the beauty girls, then, being comfortable meant being able to dress the
part for which they were training, a part that, though it did not include the prestige of wearing brand-name styles, still catered to emphasised femininity and a fashionable look. Their kind of comfort was being recognized as “good” girls, who did the “right things.” But for “sporty” girls, comfort meant the opposite of what it meant to the beauty girls. It meant wearing the very sweatpants that Keisha and company would never have been caught dead in at school.

“Not Too Fancy”: Sporty, Skater, and Tom-person

“Like, not too fancy and not all sparkly and show-offy and froofy! Definitely not sparkly or froofy!”
- Diane, 15, “sporty” style

When I asked Diane to describe her “sporty” style, she referred to the popular Asian girls who wore the stylish JLo sweatpants. Hers was a “different kind of sporty,” she said. She theorized that girls did not often wear her kind of sweatpants “because a lot of girls think that if they wear like, sweatpants and stuff, people will perceive them as a slob, and they don’t wanna—they want a boyfriend!” To offer proof of this claim, she recounted the time she was standing in the lunch line when she overheard two preppy girls talking in front of her. One girl said to the other, “only slobs wear sweatpants.” Diane, who was wearing her sweatpants at the time, muttered under her breath, “Oh, thank you!” The sweat pants that Diane had on were worn regularly, along with thick socks, sport shirts with three-quarter length sleeves, and loose fitting sweatshirts. It was a different “kind” of sporty from the JLo suits, Diane suggested, because the sweatpants that marked her as different from the Asian hardcores were worn for the comfort of doing physical activity.

Diane’s identification with the sporty style was also linked to her disidentification with the girls who did not “quite fit into” their low-rise jeans. “Like, tight is one thing,” she
declared, “where it’s just tight, but you look nice in it. And then the girls who kind of wear the tight ones that bunch them and then they kind of like, hang over a little bit on the sides and stuff.” Because Diane was a “plus size,” she would not and felt she could not wear low-rise jeans. “My clothes fit me!” she asserted. But by grade 10, she was used to being looked up and down by preppy girls, who “would just kind of—you know that look people give you, like they look you like, your foot to your top? And they have that kind of condescending, ‘what are you doing?’ look on their face and they like, put their eyes up, in that confrontational way.” I asked Diane if she had ever addressed “that look.” “No, because, I’ve figured out that usually that look is insecurity. Maybe they’re insecure about what they’re wearing and so they decide that if they try to bring me down on what I’m wearing, they won’t feel so bad, perhaps?” With her explanation hanging in the air, Diane sighed, “It’s a shot in the dark, but—”

Diane played baseball, soccer, and swam regularly. When she called herself “sporty,” she meant it, as did other girls who occupied this subject position. Like other girls, however, Diane’s identification with the sporty look was also ambivalently predicated on her rejection by preppy girls. She started high school with a deep desire to “fit in” with the “cliquey group of kids in French Immersion,” by pretending that she “liked the same things as them” and that she “enjoyed their conversation.” She also tried to “dress the same as them.” Though Diane wore tight jeans, little shirts and skater shoes, she was not accepted into the group and was, instead, tormented for her efforts. She also recognized that “it wasn’t me, and I never felt comfortable wearing those clothes. Ever!” Diane’s critique of the preppy girls in her social scene extended to all aspects of the preppy subject position. She found their conversations about boys, makeup, music, and magazines to be “really bad” and she hated
the way they all dressed to be popular “with the boys.” But her critique was also predicated on the exclusionary matrix that she felt had been enacted against her. She sadly told me that she had experienced “bullying” by girls, who had made her experience of school unpleasant. “Girls are mean,” she concluded. Boys did not cause her any real heartache, but girls froze “other girls out” and judged their looks, faces, styles, and weight.

Because Diane refused to wear clothes that were tight, it had been suggested to her that she must be insecure about her body. However Diane had a realistic understanding of mainstream marketing. The “cute” clothes could only be bought by “thin” girls, “cause you go into all the stylish shops, for instance, Aritzia, which is where everybody goes right now…. You go in there, and the biggest size could like, fit around my foot!” But she also resented that, as a plus-size girl, she could not be “in style.” Diane felt that if she had been “thinner,” she would have been able to fit the styles that would have granted her entrée into the preppy subject position. “If I had been skinny,” she mused, “I would have been fine!” Though after a moment, Diane added: “Mind you, it might not be true. They might still have done that [excluded her].”

Diane’s sporty subject position was ambivalently located between her critique of the emphasised femininity of preppy girls and her own feelings about wanting to fit in (and, into the clothes). But like the beauty girls, she was proud of her style and her ability to resist the temptation to continuously “try” to be “like them.” Diane felt that her sporty look announced to other girls that she was happy with her body and that she did not feel the need to change. As she put it, “I’m just comfortable with what I look like now. I used to be kind of uncomfortable, but right now I feel like this is how I should be, that I feel pretty, but that I don’t like, I don’t think that I should be skinny or anything. But I feel pretty, the way I am.”
Diane’s desire to “feel pretty” was not reflected by other sporty girls, who saw themselves as “tomboys” who had no interested in dressing “girly” or being recognized as conventionally attractive. Adrianna was often pressured to look more “like a girl” by family and friends, who suggested that she let her hair down, wear lip gloss, put in contact lenses, and wear more “stylish” clothing. But being a skateboarder who wore baggy jeans, Nike cargo pants, Firefly hoodies, and Riptorn skater shoes enabled Adrianna to avoid all of those “fancy schmancy” styles. “They try to make me [look more like a girl], but I can’t,” she giggled. More to the point, Adrianna (who called herself a “tom-person”) did not want to look “like a girl.” Her identification with the sporty subject position, was, for her, a way out of performing the kind of girlhood that made her uncomfortable. As a girl skateboarder, Adrianna stood in opposition to emphasised femininity, including the styles that granted girls’ recognition as being conventionally sexy (Kelly, Pomerantz & Currie, 2005; Pomerantz, Currie & Kelly, 2004).

Adrianna did not have to continuously reassert her power as a preppy girl who could attract boys, but instead, was granted entrée into a subject position that gave her license to perform a less feminine school identity. Unlike Diane, who (ambivalently) wanted to “fit in” with preppy girls, Adrianna desired to more fully identify with the subject position of skater. She felt she was in transition from being “skater/sporty” to “full skater” and had planned to acquire more skater clothing as soon as she could afford it. While Adrianna was interested in learning how to skateboard, a sport she had only just begun to explore, she was much more interested in what the style had to offer her in terms of subject positioning within the school. It was an identification that allowed her to be recognized as someone who did not need to be “girly,” an identification that provided her some relief. Not only was the expectation for
emphasised femininity not a part of being a skater, but it was diametrically opposite to the identity she was cultivating in the school. As a result, she was also free to explore just how "tom-person" she could be and just how far the skater style could take her in this exploration.

The sporty subject position, like all of the subject positions explored in this chapter, operated on elements of inclusion and exclusion—elements that were most easily regulated and recognized through style. While the preppy subject position held the most power in designating which dressed bodies mattered and which ones did not, each style within the range offered its own form of inclusion and exclusion/insider and outsider. Girls continuously judged each other as a way of figuring out "who" they were and where they fit in. In Valerie Hey’s (1995) study of girls’ friendships, she found that judgement was a significant aspect to how girls related to one another. Girls “were almost compelled to position themselves against girls who appear to be what they are not” (p. 132). As a result, Hey concludes that girls judged others in order “to make sense of their own identity” (p. 132). Similarly, at ESH, girls recognized other girls as the same when they did not feel the need to position themselves against each other, but were, instead, drawn to each other’s subject positioning within the school.

Girls never described their own styles without also describing the styles of other girls, “preppy” girls or “skanky” girls or “hoochie” girls or “sporty” girls, etc., in order to make clear that they were these kind of girls and not those kind of girls. Making comparisons was thus a key factor in girls’ negotiations of identity through the more private process of identification. Within this process, girls also experienced ambivalence by locating themselves in subject positions that they, perhaps, did not want to occupy. Here, the preppy subject position continued to hold power as the most enviable social category within the
school, even though girls would often invoke their hatred of preppy girls in one sentence and then articulate the pain at being excluded from it in another. These exclusions were routine for girls, who continuously negotiated the social landscape of their school, desiring a different future, even as they were contented with their present—wanting change, even as they would not change a thing. The (dis)identifications that girls felt with others enabled them to create affiliations, solidarities, and tightly-knit cliques.

As I have explored in this chapter, style was the most obvious way to indicate belonging to (and distinction from) a subject position. In chapter five, I explore another highly charged facet of identity negotiation in the school by focusing on girls' uses of style in their articulation of "image," or how they were perceived as individuals, apart from social scenes, groups, and cliques. Here, I also explore style as an expression of agency that girls used to gain control, however subtly, of how others saw them—and how they saw themselves.
Chapter Five

“I DRESS THE WAY I FEEL”: IMAGE AS AN EXPRESSION OF AGENCY

“Yeah. I do what I feel. I dress the way I feel. I don’t hesitate to cut my pants.”
-Shitar, 15, “punk ass” style

“I think that Image is Really Important”: Discourses of Fixity and Fluidity in the School

“My style represents me. You know, I’m not representing someone else. It’s just ME!”
-Jo, 16, “comfortable” style

As I discussed in chapter one, within a poststructural framework, there are no fixed subjects with stable and immutable identities. Identity is a product of our temporary attachments to subject positions that anchor us within specific institutional settings and discursive practices. I have suggested that girls’ school identities at ESH were thus fashioned by the subject positions to which they were assigned within the institution of the school (gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, curricular track, program reputation) and the subject positions which they “took up” in their negotiations of these discourses. It is important to note, however, that girls’ seemingly structured positionings within the school were not—even though they appear to be—fixed and “natural.” Identity categories felt automatic because they existed within larger historical and social forces that generated entrenched systems of power, inequity, and oppression. But such experiences have historical antecedents and carry social contingencies that make these “inflexible” positionings open to possible reiteration and renegotiation (Butler, 1990, 1993; Hall, 1996; Bettie, 2003; Gonick, 2003). Identity, then, is a combination of both historically and socially contingent structural features that appear to be intractable and the choices we make as discursively produced subjects who recognize how we have been positioned within these broadly-based historical
and social forces. The "suturing" of these two forms of positioning is what produces identity, where the contingencies inherent in each opens up a space for constant negotiation.

I also noted in chapter one that agency is born of this dual process of positioning, or subjectification. While some feminists have argued that agency is compatible within this poststructural formulation of the subject (Butler, 1990, 1992, 1993, 1995, 1997; Davies, 1990, 1997; Davies & Laws, 2000), for others, the dissolution of a stable self precludes the possibility for agency (Benhabib et al., 1995). According to Alison Jones (1997), we cannot be both choosing agents and discursively constituted subjects at the same time "without erring on either side" (p. 262). For Jones, to speak of a subject who "takes up" subject positions is to invoke a "doer behind the deed." Predicated on Hegelian teleology, this version of the subject is able to know itself through steady, linear progress and is thus able to evolve toward freedom through this knowledge. Such a progression marks the self with free will, where discourse is "the result and not the origin of human action" (Valverde, 1991, p. 182). Feminists, such as Seyla Benhabib (1995) further argue that the "death of the autonomous, self-reflective subject, capable of acting on principle" is the death of feminism, where agency is necessary in order to carry out "the emancipatory aspirations of women" (p. 29). For Benhabib, the instability of the female subject "undermines the feminist commitment to women's agency and sense of selfhood" (p. 29), making both individual choice and collective action impossible.

The "agency" debate within feminism calls to mind the agency/structure debate within sociological theory, where structure and agency have been conceived in binary opposition to one another, making them mutually exclusive possibilities. Within sociological theory, structure is the "systematic and patterned" (Hays, 1994) limitations of a pre-existing social
order, characterized by a “fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude” (Derrida, 1978, p. 279). Structure is thus viewed as a determining factor by which experience and meaning are organized. Agency, on the other hand, has been conceived of as choice and the full consciousness of the subject that produces “individual intention” (Jones, 1997, p. 264). Agency thus requires “consciousness, free will, and reflexivity” (Fuchs, 2001, p. 26). In response to this binary opposition, feminist sociologists of education working within a poststructural framework have asked: “Is there a way that we can do more than acknowledge and come to understand the power that forms us and use that understanding to do something different both within and outside the confines of that forming power? Is agency possible in this way” (Davies & Law, 2000, p. 161)? Davies (1990) advocates for an “embodied speaker,” who “can move within and between discourses, can see precisely how they subject her, can use the terms of one discourse to counteract, modify, refuse or go beyond” (p. 46). This kind of subject, Davies suggests, is capable of forging new paths and “taking up” subject positions within and because of her discursive construction.

As an ethnographer, it was impossible for me to hang out with girls and not realize the extent to which they understood how they had been positioned within social, cultural, and historical forces. It was equally impossible to theorize girls as having no say in how they might re/position themselves within the school’s social world. As Sherry Ortner (1998) points out, by attending “ethnographically to the ways in which discourses enter into people’s lives,” it becomes clear that structure and agency do not exist in binary opposition, but rather that they exist in relation to one another, where discourse is “implicitly or explicitly challenged” by subjects “in the course of practices that always go beyond discursive constraints” (p. 14). Similarly, Bettie (2003) suggests that one need not come down on the
side of structure over agency or agency over structure, as both are produced within the same contingent processes: "I can have it both ways because, indeed, it is both ways" (p. 54). For Bettie, having it both ways means understanding how it is that girls can speak of themselves as "fixed" subjects, while simultaneously engaging in acts of agency by positioning themselves within particular subject positions that challenge or negotiate how they have been positioned by constituting discourses. These discourses of "fixity" and "fluidity" mean that it is necessary to attend ethnographically to the ways in which girls feel "fixed" by their social and historical positionings. But it is equally important to attend ethnographically to the ways in which girls articulate agency through their negotiation of these identities. In fact, separating the two seemed impossible to me as I listened to and observed girls’ talk of "who" they were in the school.

At ESH, girls spoke of themselves as fixed subjects with "core" identities, but in the same breath conceived of themselves as having the power to change "who" they were within the school’s social world. Many girls acknowledged that they felt fixed by particular discourses of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality. Many also acknowledged that they felt fixed by their positionings within the school’s academic and vocational streams, as well as program reputations. They were thus fixed by habitus, or embodied structures that produced particular dispositions and lifestyle “choices.” All of these defining features culminated in an identity that felt permanent within the school as each girl became "recognized as a certain ‘kind of person’, in a given context" (Gee, 2000-2001, p. 99). But most girls did not sit idly back and accept their positionings. They cultivated “who” they were by carving out subject positions from the identity materials that were made available to them. This ownership over and creative infusion of school identities enabled girls to talk
about themselves as consistent and stable beings amidst paradoxical articulations of
themselves as fluid and contradictory. For James Gee (2000-2001), identity is thus the
culmination of all the different ways in which we have come to be known through our social
performances. Gee suggests that these “strands” come to feel like a “core identity,” because
they uniquely position us within a “trajectory through ‘Discursive space’,” where we are
“recognized, at a time and place, one way and not another” (p. 110). But at the same time,
this uniquely personal and contextual trajectory enables subjects to “narrativize” themselves,
thus making change possible through the agency of the subject.

As a result of the temporary attachments that girls felt to their school identities, one of
the most ubiquitous features in my discussions with girls was a discourse of fixity signalled
by declarations like Jo’s: “I’m just me,” or Diane’s aspiration to be seen “first of all for who
I am,” or Maria’s self-referential decree, “I see myself as Maria.” When Abby’s mom
bought her “those track pants that everybody’s wearing,” she refused to put them on outside
doing class. When her mom asked why, Abby simply responded, “They’re not me!”
Keisha also invoked this language of fixity when I asked her to describe herself: “I just try to
be myself,” she said. “Like, I try, I don’t try to put a front on, or try to be fake. I be what
makes myself feel comfortable.”

Though the word “identity” was not commonly used by girls, the word “image” was
consistently invoked as a way of describing a girl’s school identity. A girl’s image made her
“readable” within the social world of ESH, where style and image became synonymous. A
girl’s image symbolized her public persona, her habitus, her credibility, her values, and her
social worth. A girl’s image was thus her most protected and cultivated possession. Isabel
easily defined the term:
Your image is the way you look. I think that sums it up pretty much, cause the way you look is your image, and that's the way you're gonna feel. Cause I think image for you, if you look *yourself*, it's everything inside of you, it's how you're going to feel, it's how you're going to treat people, maybe. Like, you know? If you feel good, you're gonna treat people nice. If you don't look good, then you're just gonna be, 'Leave me alone! I don't wanna talk!' you know? I think that image is *really* important.

For Isabel, as well as other girls at ESH, image and "how you looked" were one and the same, making style an extension of "everything inside of you." Shen elaborated on this correlation between style and character when she told me that girls could dress any way they wanted to, "as long as their personality *suits* it."

Discourses of fixity and fluidity were prominently featured in girls' talk about their images. The ways in which girls were discursively positioned within the school became evident when they spoke of how others saw them. As Azmera explained, image boiled down to the opinion that others had of you, an opinion that often felt carved in stone.

Like I could sit here and fight, and say, 'Oh, but this is the way I am! But this is the way I am! But this is the way I am!' But they're just going to be, 'But this is what I think of you! This is what I think of you! This is what I think of you!' So, it's better just to leave it at that. And if they're willing to get to know me, then they might just learn something about me that they didn't know before."

In an effort to make consistent the way others saw them and the way they saw themselves, girls wanted their styles to appear organic, as if they grew seamlessly out of their skin. They did not want their styles to look purchased, artificial, or laboured. But, significantly, when girls spoke about their images, they invoked a discourse that was not really fixed, but fluid and full of the possibility for change. While girls spoke of themselves in unwavering terms ("I'm just me!")}, they simultaneously explored ways to transform their images through style in the hopes of getting others to see them differently. In this regard, style became a marker
of girls’ agency and their ability to re/position themselves within the discourses that constituted “who” they were within the school.

The overlapping discourses of fixity and fluidity that girls invoked highlighted the very real consequences of their school identities based on the temporary attachments they felt in relation to their discursive positionings, while at the same time accentuated agency in their ability to negotiate these school identities. Girls laboured to transform and re-invent their images, while also working to ensure that they were perceived as “authentic” within the discursive constructions that were already carved out for them. These transformations and re-inventions were made possible through style as social skin that girls used to represent “who” they thought they were, “who” they thought they wanted to be, and how they wanted others to see them within the school’s social world. And while image was decided by how others received a girl’s attempts to perform a particular kind of girlhood, girls had opportunities—if they took them—to perform their images differently through style.

In this chapter, I explore examples of girls’ agency through their uses of style in the production of their images at school, including girls’ uses of style to fashion an image to remember, an image that granted them power and authority, and an image that enabled them to maintain multiple school identities. It is important to note that these sections are not discrete categories. Girls’ desire to “stand out” in a crowd caused them to explore multiple images; girls’ desire for power caused them to “stand out.” Each of these examples are connected through girls’ understandings of their images as fluid, even as they were set within the seemingly fixed positionings of their school identities. This fixity anchored girls within the social world of the school, but, significantly, did not keep them from experimenting with “who” they were and “how” they wanted to be seen by others. Girls understood that their
images were “in play,” all day, everyday, and used this knowledge to engage in subtle and/or extreme transformations...with varying degrees of success.

“Not Just Another Number”: Fashioning an Image to Remember

“I’m pretty unique. I think everybody thinks they’re unique, right?”
-Shen, 16, “casual” style

Xiu, a self-defined “quiet” Chinese girl, wanted others to see her as a leader at ESH. But when I asked her how she thought others saw her, she responded, “I think they think of me as a really average person.” She admired all the athletic looking girls who wore Mountain Equipment Co-op Clothing, tear-away parachute pants, and “real” running shoes for track and field events. She felt that this truly “sporty” look created an image of self-control. “I want people to see like, the leader side of me, like that look—but then, I don’t have that look.” I asked her how she thought a leader looked. “Strong and tough!” she replied. “And how do you look?” I asked. Laughing, she said, “Uh, weak and tired!” Xiu’s own style was in keeping with her “quiet” Chinese image: nice, sweet, plain, and modest. Xiu’s brother-in-law often teased her about being “good,” “cute,” and “quiet.” As a result, she wondered if she should experiment more: “be bad and rebellious, you know? But, my brother-in-law, he calls me really quiet cause I’m not like the other girls. I won’t go out every Friday and Saturday, and you know, party, party, party.” Instead, Xiu and her friends studied, did homework, and went out “every now and then. Either shopping or just movies, just, average stuff.” She explained that other Asian girls, particularly hardcores, constantly went out for dinner and drank “coolers and beer and everything.”

Because Xiu was doing well in her Mandarin class and was able to speak the language with some fluidity, others students thought that she was from Hong Kong. She often
surprised people by telling them "I’m born here!"—making her a CBC (Canadian Born Chinese) with a strong interest in Chinese culture and traditions. As a result of this cultural hybridity, Xiu felt that she was caught "in between the white world and the Chinese world." As she explained it, "I sort of want to be Canadian, like a Canadian, not with like, chopsticks all the time and rice! The Chinese world is, um, I guess its traditions are heavy." But then she thoughtfully clarified that she felt that the "Chinese world is winning right now. Cause uh, my Chinese is starting to develop a bit more. Cause before when I spoke Chinese, it would be like, ‘Oh, I can tell you’re Canadian.’ And now they can’t tell."

Even though Xiu’s language skills caused others to see her as a “Honger,” she knew that she could never really be mistaken for someone from Hong Kong because of her style. Girls from Hong Kong had a different “dress code” than she did. “Underneath, they can tell that I’m a CBC,” she said with self-assurance, because she did not wear the loose fitting, "criss-crossed," “strips of cloth” that many girls from Hong Kong and China wore. “And it’s so different from my style, I guess.” But Xiu’s image as a “quiet” CBC made her feel like she was “in a box,” with “tape, cardboard and everything.” I asked her what the box stood for. “I think it’s who I am,” she replied. “I’m a person that doesn’t really talk about their feelings. Like, I can express it with my facial expressions, but then I wouldn’t talk about it until the last minute.”

However fixed Xiu may have seen herself, it did not stop her from thoughtfully enacting subtle modifications to her image as she cautiously tried to renegotiate how others saw her. She told me that she loved to wear the colour black once in awhile, because it offered “a secret, mysterious look, and that’s the kind of look I’d like to keep.” Because Xiu’s style and personality were seen as “too kid-ish,” she saw black as a way to shift this
image and add maturity and sophistication to her “look.” Giggling, she told me that wearing black made others at school “totally get confused” about “who” she “really” was. Pausing for a moment, Xiu further commented that causing this confusion in how others perceived her brought her real satisfaction, a private pleasure that Xiu hoped to cultivate further during her high school years.

Like Xiu, Azmera also felt that she blended “in with the crowd,” because, as she put it, “I look like an average person.” Azmera’s mother was a practicing Muslim from Kenya, whom Azmera described as “strict.”

Yeah. We get along pretty well. We have—well, culturally females aren’t supposed to be going out of the house and staying out late, and if they do, they’re supposed to be with like, family members. It’s just like, what they [practicing Muslims] believe in. But being in this country, we want freedom. We want to be out with our friends and stuff.

Azmera and her mother had lived in Canada for nine years and were struggling with Azmera’s desire to be a “normal” Canadian girl. Azmera was not allowed to date (“she thinks I’ve never had a boyfriend in my whole life!”) or drink (“my favourite place to go would be Red Robin and Cactus Club”), as most of her beauty school friends did. As a result, she would often lie to her mother about where she was and what she was doing. She also struggled to break free of the traditions that her mother hoped she would take up, causing Azmera to become “more rebellious.” “Because before I’d just do what she said, how she wanted me to do it and just not complain about it.” But the summer before the school-year started, Azmera found herself being less obedient. “Like, I’ve listened to her my whole life, so she should at least compromise. But she wants me to get into an arranged marriage and the whole thing, and I tell her no.”
Though Azmera fought against her mother’s strict rules and religious beliefs, she sported a style that made her mother happy. She wore no-name brand jeans, sweaters, and comfortable clothing that did not cost a lot of money. In accordance with her mother’s point of view, Azmera did not agree with the “sexy” style that her friends wore to school. “The way some girls—no, the way some girls can dress and their parents can let them out of the house looking like that!” Azmera told me that her mom often bought her clothes that she really liked. “And it’s pretty neat that she knows,” Azmera said of her mom’s taste. I asked Azmera if her sense of rebellion ever extended to her clothing. “No!” she emphatically responded. “Because as long as I’m covered up, then she doesn’t mind. As long as I’m not showing my stomach! Cause sometimes I’ll have a shirt that’s smaller and it shows a little belly and she’ll be like, ‘Cover it! Cover it!’”

But like Xiu, Azmera longed to subtly enhance her image as the “nice girl” who “couldn’t hurt a fly” once in awhile. “Well, see, I like to try different things,” she explained. Azmera experimented with different “looks” that she hoped would prompt others to say “‘Oh! Wow! That’s looks kinda neat! I didn’t think you could do that!’” For Azmera, standing out meant putting together “outfits” that were not “regular,” such as her favourite boots, “the jean ones with the diamond sparkles on them,” her light blue pants that she folded up in the 1950s retro look that was en vogue at the time, a shirt with sparkles on it, a sweater over top that enabled the sparkles to show around the collar, “and my hat. I love hats too.” This outfit brought Azmera tremendous satisfaction; she felt that it generated “buzz” around her and enabled her to stand out in a crowd. She proudly told me that a “lady” on the street had complimented her on it one day. “It felt great!” she said, beaming. These acts of agency
helped counteract how different she felt from her friends because of her mother’s rules. “I can’t sleep over. I’ve never slept over at anyone’s house,” she told me.

It’s just that you’re not supposed to. Everything with her, it’s not whether she wants me to or not want me to, it’s just that she believes that you’re not supposed to. She won’t change. It’s like, too late for her to change and learn new ways and stuff. Cause she’s known just that way her whole life.

Both Xiu, a “quiet” Chinese girl, and Azmera, a “nice” Muslim girl, used style to negotiate their racial and cultural identities within the school. While these changes might not have been considered “risky” by other girls at ESH, both Xiu and Azmera were engaged in acts of agency that enabled them to gain a sense of control over the images that others expected them to have. Girls who came from strict cultural backgrounds, particularly ones like Azmera’s, where girls and women had to maintain a modest demeanour, could only use style to negotiate their images in understated and quiet ways. But for girls who felt they had a little more freedom at home, cultivating an image to remember at school was much easier (and ultimately much less risky) to do.

Leah, a white, middle-class girl, felt free to experiment with her image as much as she wanted in order to distinguish herself from the girls in her preppy social scene. As a quiet popular Frenchie, Leah felt trapped by her image and desperately wanted to cultivate a style that moved her away from the Britney look, a look that she referred to as “boring and mainstream.” She told me that she never really “liked” her clothes. “I just got them because that’s what the stores had and that’s what I thought I should have.” Leah wore clothing that she and her mom picked out together at shops that she described as “mom heaven,” since they catered to a “nice” and “clean” image for girls. But the summer before grade nine,\(^{50}\)

---

\(^{50}\) Most teachers and girls agreed that if a style change was going to be made, it was usually made in the summer before grade nine so that a girl could start off the year as someone “different.” The going theory was that grade eight was too early in a girl’s high school career to make any real image changes. Girls were just
Leah began to think about her image and how she wanted others to see her at school. She yearned to explore a style that would foster the image that she wanted, an image that was “funky,” “cool,” and “unique.” Leah called this style “random.” The art of randomness, as Leah explained it, was being able to wear anything you wanted, no matter how “totally weird” or “clashing” or “mismatched” it was. For example, Leah aspired to eventually wear striped socks, plaid pants, and a checked shirt instead of the “typical” low-rise jeans and tight t-shirts that were ubiquitous at ESH.

In an effort to shift her image, Leah bought a pair of jeans that were “insanely studded.” “I saw them there and I was like, ‘Wow! These are pretty cool!’” She wore them at the beginning of the school year in order to announce her new look.

So I wore them and probably second week of school, I’m like, ‘these are kind of ugly. They’re tacky. Why am I wearing these?’ And it was kind of after that I kind of began to wean out of my normal style. It was just kind of like, yeah, well—buying those jeans, despite the fact that they were tacky and ugly, it was like a revolution. I’m wearing something that not everyone in Vancouver’s going to have!

This foray into a new style opened the floodgates for Leah to experiment with more and more “random” articles of clothing. She began to troll second hand markets, like Value Village, where she picked up “some pretty insane things,” like her florescent yellow skirt. At ESH, skirts were an anomaly in the sea of low-rise jeans and suit bottoms. As Leah recognized, “I’m sure lots of people think that it’s [the skirt] kind of weird and tacky. But to me it just says a lot about me. It’s kind of, it’s in your face, but it’s kind of subtle at the same time.”

Leah prided herself on her “random” style and felt that she was successfully shifting her image from mainstream to “unique” within the school, though she wished she had the “guts” to “go the extra mile” and become “fully random.” “I’m kind of pushing the limits a bit starting high school and felt too nervous to experiment with their look. But by the end of the year, girls felt settled and ready to take greater chances.
about what I personally feel I can pull off,” she told me regarding her penchant for second
hand skirts. “But I’m also staying within that comfort zone. So to me it’s kind of like I’m
moving away from the normal stuff, but I’m still kind of hanging on to that last little bit of
conformity.” Leah did not so much move back and forth between “random” and “preppy”
styles as she engaged in a hybridization of the two looks, melding elements of both together
to create a style that was truly distinctive within the school. Though, others sometimes
commented that Leah’s efforts did not really suit “who” she was and seemed a little “forced.”
But for Leah, the “random” look was a way of taking small steps in the “right” direction;
little by little, outfit-by-outfit, Leah planned to eventually arrive at the image she so badly
wanted—a one-of-a-kind original.

Cultivating an original image was, perhaps, one of the most difficult tasks for anyone at
ESH, a task with which Shen was admittedly obsessed. When I first met Shen, I thought she
was a “silent” Chinese girl. She rarely spoke in her classes and seemed to shy away from the
bustling activity in which the beauty girls were perpetually engaged. Ms. DiAngelo, the
beauty girls’ customer service teacher, told me that Shen was a “silent girl” who “kept to
herself.” But when Shen called out to me from across the classroom and asked if I would
interview her, I wondered about the “silent” Chinese image that she was clearly
demonstrating to her teachers and classmates. I later discovered that she cultivated this
image in order to deceive others into thinking she was quiet. She was not really interested in
fostering relationships with the beauty girls and used silence as a way of avoiding the
“gossip,” “trash-talk,” and “mainstream” mentality that she felt dominated her social scene.

When I asked her about this ruse, she explained further:

Okay, like, the beauty girls, they think I’m quiet, pretty reserved, cause I am
pretty reserved, unless I want to get to know you. Cause, like, a lot of my
problems with friends is that I don’t really talk to everybody, just cause I
don’t want to. Cause if I don’t really like who they are, then I don’t actually
make an effort to try to get to be their friend.

Shen only cared to develop relationships that were “meaningful,” not “superficial,” and
felt that the beauty girls could not offer her the kind of conversation that she craved. “I have
a few friends,” she explained, “and they’re SO close to me. Like, I’m not the type of person
who likes to spread herself out, just cause they’re like, deep relationships, deep friendships,
right?” Shen wanted to talk about “meaningful things, not stupid things, like a lot of people
talk about.” She did not have a large clique within her social scene and bitterly complained
that most girls at ESH were too immature for her. As a result, a lot of the beauty girls saw
her as “pretty anti-social” and “shy,” while she saw herself as intellectually above “most
people here. Just cause I can’t relate to them. They can’t really seem to—like, some of the
things they say out loud, they don’t really seem to be that smart on the inside.”

Shen had transferred into beauty school from Accelerated Studies—one of the “big
three” at ESH. As a result, she saw herself as “smarter” and more “intellectual” than her
classmates. As well, Shen called herself a “Christian” and held values that did not coincide
with most of the other beauty girls. She disapproved of how most of her classmates dressed,
talked, and acted, was one of the few beauty girls who did not smoke, drink, or “party,” and
did not enjoy the “loose” talk that emanated from her “raunchy” classmates. These
distinctions continued to separate Shen from her social scene and caused her to realize that
she simply did not “fit in anywhere.” She could neither hang out with her old friends in
Accelerated Studies, who no longer saw Shen as one of them, nor could she enjoy the good-
natured humour of the beauty girls, who could not figure out how to relate to her as a
seemingly “quiet” Chinese girl. Though, as she continuously reminded me, Shen did not
really want “more friends,” she just wanted “BETTER friends,” friends with whom she could “just” be herself.

Shen described herself as someone who was not “really noticed that much, right? Just cause I’m not that outspoken or anything.” She compared herself to Keisha, whom she saw as blunt, honest, fun, and wildly colourful in her personality. In contrast, Shen saw herself as living inside of her head, while hiding her “true” self from everyone around her. She admitted that she did not “blend in” with the beauty girls, “but then, I don’t stand out.” Thinking about this statement for a moment, she reiterated, “I fit in, but I don’t blend in, and I don’t want to stand out. So I guess that’s how I dress.” Shen’s style made her a chameleon at ESH. She looked slightly preppy, slightly sporty, slightly comfortable, and slightly skater. She wore casual, modest, and only partially label-oriented clothing. Shen was careful to keep herself out of a “category” because “you don’t want to come off as just stupid, right? Like, following media and everything like that. Following what’s cool and what’s now. You gotta be yourself. Everybody says that, right?” I asked Shen what she thought “being yourself” meant. “Just like, not really try to fit in to any category, cause there’s so many different categories. Like, they all evolve around looks, right? Cause that’s the category.”

Though Shen “hated” the word “cool” and all that it entailed, she also liked to look “stylish” and this desire conflicted with her working-class, Chinese background. She felt that her parents did not “really understand” her. “They have their ideas from the past and try to bring it here, and it doesn’t really work.” As an example, Shen cited the fact that her parents expected “respect.” “Like, I see it as, if they don’t respect me, I don’t respect them. Like I don’t just respect people just because they’re older than me.” Shen felt that her parents did not respect her desire to shop and look a certain way. Though her parents gave her money
when she asked for it, it was not enough to buy the things she truly wanted. “I really want a job,” she complained, “just so I can go, like, shopping more, cause I don’t like asking them for money. Cause they say I spend too much, but compared to other people, like, I don’t spend much at all!”

Shen’s lack of financial freedom did not stop her from wanting to stand out from her social scene and her chameleon style enabled her to see herself as truly “unique.” “First of all, like, yeah, my style? It’s not really here or there. It’s like pretty much everywhere.” Shen felt that her “look” set her apart from the beauty girls. And though she did not exactly stand out in her style, she felt that it was obvious that she was different from “like, people who really follow this kind of [trendy look].” Shen avoided the Britney and JLo “uniforms” (with the exception of the JLo “suit” that she had bought on sale), feeling that they invited the “wrong” kind of attention from boys. Shen did want attention for how she looked, however, just not the sexual attention that made her uncomfortable. “Like, the fact that I have a different style, I want them to notice that. Yeah.”

Wanting to be known for having a “different” style was a feeling Dren could relate to. The very mention of Dren’s name in most social groups in the school caused a flurry of conversation. Teachers, guidance councillors, and students all knew Dren, if not by name, then by style. She was “that goth girl” to just about everyone—and she knew it. Dren’s style was her “baby,” something that she had fostered from grade seven on up. “I’ve kind of cultivated it,” she said of her “look.” “It’s something that not a lot of people have and it makes me different and I’m proud of it cause it’s my own.” Dren saw her goth image as meshing with her “intense” personality. “I have strong opinions,” she told me. “I got that from my mother.” Dren called her mother a “feminist” who taught her how to fight for what
she believed in. Dren loved to engage anyone in a “discussion,” but these “discussions” often became debates or even fights. Most girls felt as though Dren was “crapping on their opinions” whenever she bothered to speak to them, and that she was “trying to like, shoot them down.” But Dren claimed she was really “interested” in what others were saying and just wanted to provoke a “better” and “deeper” conversation.

Like, I like to see people react and really fight for what they think. And like, all those [popular] girls [in French Immersion], they’re not like that. They’re like, they’re just, I hate to say it, but they’re the kind of people who care so much about like, social life, that they’re not really into that. A couple of them are, here and there, but they don’t really get into like, opinionated debates like I like to. And so, a lot of the times, they think that I’m just like, being a total bitch. So, a lot of times, I don’t think that a lot of them really, really like me.

Dren’s left-leaning, intellectual upbringing and her white, middle-class habitus gave her the freedom to experiment with her style, a freedom that most other girls at ESH could never attain due to financial and cultural restrictions. Shitar, for example, explained that while she and Dren were both trying to stand out and that they had “that part in common,” Dren had “a little more freedom” than Shitar did. “I don’t wanna get kicked out of my house,” she said. “Like, if I wore some of the things [Dren] wears, if I like, pierced my lip or something—which I probably will later, but not now—if I did, like, I’d get kicked out of my house.” Shitar, a working-class Lebanese girl, came from a strict Christian family who, like Azmera’s mother, monitored her activities and worried that she was going to be negatively influenced by other students who did not share their beliefs. During one of our conversations, Shitar recounted the time her parents kicked down her door after she did not respond to their knocking. “I think they thought I snuck out or died, I don’t know.” She was listening to loud music on her headphones and simply did not hear them. Months later, her door had yet to be replaced.
They want my door always to be open. They always want to know where I am. So when I go places, I call them and I tell them. And, but they’re like, ‘Who are you with? Who are you with? Where are you going? What are you doing right now? What are you eating?’ “Shut up! I told you I’m not going to be here! I’m not going to be home! I’m at the movies!”—‘Who are you with? Are you with any boys? Boys are bad! Blah, blah, blah!’

In sharp contrast to the surveillance Shitar felt from her parents, Dren was totally unmonitored and had infinite freedom. She and Ratch regaled me with stories from their weekends each and every Monday morning. Dren lived part time with both her divorced parents, neither of whom gave her a hard time about either her extreme goth “look” or her extremely independent attitude. She “partied” late into the night, went drinking in metal and punk bars, and had enough money at her disposal to purchase expensive goth clothing. As well, Dren’s father had allowed Ratch to “temporarily” move in with them because she had been kicked out of her mom’s apartment. As Dren explained, Ratch was not kicked out for being “punk,” but rather for “cramping” her “mom’s style” by being around “too much”—a fate that would never have befallen Dren.

As a result of this freedom, Dren’s style reflected an audacity that most girls at ESH simply could not pull off, an audacity that had earned her a great deal of fame at school and within the Wellington neighbourhood. Proudly, she told me about how wide-reaching her reputation was when a stranger at a party “recognized” her:

And I started to talk to this, like, Native guy there, and we were talking and then, all of a sudden, he’s like, ‘I know you’ and I’ve never seen this kid in my life, and he’s like, ‘yeah, you look really familiar’. He’s like, ‘Do you go to ESH?’ I’m like, ‘Yeah.’ He’s like, ‘I know who you are. I see you around all the time.’ He’s like, ‘Do I look familiar?’ I’m like, ‘No, I’ve never seen you before’ [laughs]…. So it’s like stuff like that. That’s happened to me before too. People who like, recognize me.

As we sat in her father’s living room, drinking tea and eating the oatmeal cookies that she had made, Dren explained why she went to the lengths that she did in order to stand out at
school. “I like people looking at me and thinking, ‘Wow, she’s really different!’ Or, ‘Wow, she looks really different!’” To Dren, being different was more than just standing out in the present. It was a way to make certain she would continue to stand out in the future. Her image ensured that she would be remembered; that she would never be “just another number.” To Dren, being goth was much more than a subculture or a music or a style; it was much more than an alternative affiliation. Being goth was her ticket to immortality.

[Being goth means] That I’m like, my own person and I don’t look like everyone else. I don’t act like everyone else and I don’t follow the same herd as everyone else. Something that like, makes me different in a way that maybe I’ll be remembered. I mean, maybe in a couple of years, when I leave ESH, they’ll be all, ‘Remember that goth girl? That Dren girl? Remember that goth chick who used to walk around with her chains?’ you know?”

Dren wanted to fill a role at ESH that she felt was missing, the role of the “misfit,” or “the kind of kids who like, hang out in the back of the school and smoke their cigarettes or whatever, and kind of glare at everyone else, and walk around the school in their chains and stuff like that, like.” Dren saw herself as one of these “misfits,” purposefully keeping herself on the edge of ESH’s social world, where she and Ratch spent lunchtime in the bus shelter, smoking cigarettes, picking at their chipped black nail polish, and making fun of the preppy girls who came within their laconic radar. Though Dren easily socialized with preppy girls, was invited to their parties, and shared stories with them about getting high, drunk, and “laid,” she relished being the girl that filled the “misfit” boots at ESH. “I kind of like that,” she told me. “Cause no one else is [doing it].”

Abby, too, had a “phobia” about not being “remembered” at ESH and her bad-ass/schoolgirl/business-woman style was meant to ensure that people would “look through the yearbook like 17 years later, and go, ‘Oh, that was Abby! She was weird!’” Abby wanted to be remembered as an “obscure” girl, and if she could not summon up such a
reputation *during* high school, then she would happily wait until *after* high school to become recognized as “ahead of her time.” Abby reasoned that no one remembered “these preppy girls who all look the same and they’re all conformed to what the style of the time was.” Abby wanted to tap into a tradition that she had learned “from movies,” where people become known for their high school personas later on in life. “What I’ve learned from the movies,” she explained, “is that [other students] always go like, ‘Wow, that’s you know, like, the goth!’ or, ‘she was ahead of her time!’” For Abby, being ignored in high school was not that big a deal. But the thought of being ignored after high school—once everyone was able to clearly see her for who she really “was”—was too horrible for words.

Like Dren, what made Abby the most proud of her style was that people always commented on how “original” she was. “You know, people say, like, ‘Oh wow! That’s like, a really original outfit’ or whatever. I always get really gloating and like, ‘Yes! They said I was original!’” Though, originality was not always easy to maintain, even for Abby. She told me that when she saw someone who was wearing the same boots as her at school, she “got really jealous.” “Well, I used to have these crazy combat army boots!” she explained. Like, they were really cheap like, fake leather, but they were really cool. And I came to school one day with them on, and I saw this other girl was wearing them, and I was just furious! Like, I freaked out, and I was like, ‘What the hell is she doing with my shoes?’ These are the shoes that I wore straight for a very long time. And that really made me mad, because that was sort of my style at the time—that was last year…. Yeah. Yeah, thinking about that is making me mad now!

Abby’s image necessitated that she be “one-of-a-kind,” and when the trend toward tall, striped knee socks swept through ESH, she was devastated. When someone walked by wearing a pair of her trademark socks, she would mutter under her breath, “Damn her.”
Shitar, who saw herself as “strange” and called herself an “expressionalist,” did not mind seeing others dressed like a “punk ass” at ESH as much as Abby minded seeing others in her patented socks. She told me that she saw a “couple” of other girls who dressed like her “around,” but they were in grades 11 and 12, older than she was and not within her social scene. She appreciated seeing older girls who engaged in a DIY aesthetic and it somehow made her feel good about her own image, offering a validation of her style. Thinking about it for a moment, Shitar remarked: “Well, I appreciate it. As long as everybody doesn’t show up dressed like me. Then I’ll dress like them.” Shitar explained that if everyone suddenly started coming to school in the “punk ass” look, then she would be forced to wear, “I don’t know, what they used to wear.” “Tight jeans?” I asked. “Tight jeans! Sure, if that’s what it takes! Or a paper bag!”

“Nobody Starts Shit With Us”: Fashioning an Image of Power and Authority

“You know, our look doesn’t say shit if we’re going to sit in the corner of the class and not talk to anybody.”
-Dren, 15, “goth/metal” style

Connected to, but also distinct from girls’ efforts to stand out in a crowd, some girls expressed agency in their use of style to generate an aura of power and authority. This kind of image often entailed creating an impression of self-esteem and confidence, not caring what others thought, and commanding a quiet form of power that did not need to be overtly emphasised. As Isabel commented, sometimes a girl’s image “draws you toward them. It’s like they have, like powers—‘come here!’ type of thing.” Sydney had such powers. I came to know Sydney quite well over the year, though she was never able to find the time for an interview. She and her mom had recently moved into a two-bedroom apartment with her grandmother and she did not want to be unavailable if her mom needed help getting things in
order and organizing the “enormous mess” that Sydney told me was always in the apartment. Sydney wanted to be at home as much as possible, feeling an acute sense of responsibility to her family. When I offered to interview Sydney in her apartment, she quickly responded that there was no place to sit because everything was “really disorganized.”

I had lunch with Sydney and her crew once in awhile, and hung out with her in classes, where we often discussed US politics, her hatred of George W. Bush, and her love of Eminem. Sydney was a working poor, multi-racial girl who was Japanese, First Nations, and Portuguese. She was very tall, solid, and broad in her physique. She composed and performed rap songs, was a talented creative writer, and worked hard to stay on the honour role while maintaining her responsibilities at home. I marvelled at how Sydney was able to remain on the fringes of popularity, while still commanding respect from other girls, even the loud popular Frenchies. Everyone admired Sydney, including Mina, who told me that Sydney was never afraid to voice her “own opinions.” Mina explained that she always “does what she wants and she’s not afraid to tell people how she feels about them. I really admire her for that because I can’t always do that.”

Sydney’s quiet power meant that she had control over her image and how others saw her. She was perceived to be wholly authentic—the “real deal”—even though she was admittedly not trendy, fashionable, or popular. She wore a hip hop style that incorporated sports gear, such as baggy basketball jerseys, hoodies with team logos, toques and do-rags around her long, black hair, Eminem t-shirts, baggy sweat pants, and non-label sneakers. Her style was tough, but not intimidating, linked to a hip hop aesthetic, but not trendy. She

51 If a girl did not want me to come to her home, it was usually because she was embarrassed about her economic situation, so I always tried to offer alternatives for interviews, including classrooms after school, local coffee shops, or outside at picnic tables during the warm weather.
remained unaffected by trends, not because she was cultivating an alternative affiliation, but because she simply did not care whether or not she was deemed to "fit in" by others. And this lack of interest in the symbolic economy of style that permeated throughout ESH made her well-respected by those who wished they could be as unconcerned as she was about what others thought of them. Instead she exuded a modest pride and showed kindness to everyone, and these qualities perpetuated and enhanced her powerful image.

During one of our lunches together, she told me that she was a "heavy child," making her "so nervous to wear anything. I would never wear the same thing twice in one week. Never. But now, I don’t care. I’ll wear the same thing every day." And she did often wear the same outfits over and over without risk of being teased—a practice that most girls could not get away with. Keisha explained that if a girl wore the "same thing three days in a row," other girls usually called her "dirty" and wondered, "why’s she wearing that? She just wore it!" But these insults never fell on Sydney, whose power was simply to stay above the gossip, meanness, and judgement that seemed to plague other girls’ experiences of their social scenes. Sydney preferred to spend her time thinking about how the media worked, who was leading the American League in RBIs, and her family.

While Sydney commanded respect quietly by wearing what she wanted day after day, staying aloof of trends, and pressures to conform to an emphasised femininity, Gwen also quietly commanded respect from girls at ESH by purposefully cultivating a "gang" image. The other girls in the First Nations program, with whom Gwen spent alternate days, sported a hip hop style that was influenced by popular female rap artist, Missy Elliot. This style entailed baggy parachute tear-away pants with a baggy matching jacket, a "paperboy" cap, toque, or baseball cap worn on an angle, wide sneakers with thick, undone laces, long,
manicured nails, heavy chains around their necks with large charms (usually the girl's initial), huge hoop earrings, and multiple rings on each hand. This look also included glittery makeup, heavy eye shadow, thick eye liner, and multiple ear piercings with the occasional tattoo. Based on this common style among the girls in the First Nations program, Gwen stood out as different. She wore tear-away pants, but without the matching jacket. And instead of the white, pink, or powder blue tracksuits that the other girls sported, Gwen wore black, grey, and khaki. She also wore flared jeans, tucked in tops, and little or no makeup. But like a few of the other girls in the First Nations program who considered themselves to be part of east side gangs, Gwen occasionally wore a bandana tied around her forehead or her wrist. I asked her if the bandana "meant anything." "Not really," she replied. "Do people come up and ask you about it?" I wondered. "In my gym class, yes." The preppy girls who swarmed around Gwen were curious about the bandana. "They're like, 'Are you in a gang?' Just be like, 'How tough are you? You ever kicked anybody's ass?" Though Gwen denied that the bandana had any real meaning to her as a gang emblem, she was well aware of its significance within the symbolic economy of style at ESH, where gang bandanas were known to be red, black, and blue. "I only wear the black ones," she noted. "I think red's the most dangerous one." This justification was meant to suggest that Gwen did not need to be thought of as too tough—just tough enough to create the image of power and authority that she was looking to cultivate with non-First Nations girls.

Gwen's "gang" image made her feel unique in the Regular program, where she told me that most of the preppy girls made her feel insecure about her style, looks, and ability to "fit in" as a "Native girl." But with the addition of a bandana, Gwen stepped into a subject position that brought her prestige. First Nations girls were often rumoured to be involved in
gangs, particularly girls in the First Nations program, which was viewed within ESH as a “dumping ground” for “troubled Native kids.” Using this positioning to her advantage, Gwen gained power by easily accessing an image that granted her automatic authority. Interestingly, Gwen never told anyone she was actually in a gang. She simply adorned herself with an element of style that made it possible for others to slot her into their preconceived understanding of First Nations girls.

Gwen’s image as a “tough” girl was quietly perpetuated by her use of style. But for Ratch, there was nothing quiet about her desire to appear intimidating. “I know that when I walk down the street,” she told me, “people look away. They try not to make eye contact with me. They kind of get this like, nervous look, like I’m like, carrying a knife and I’m going to chop off their head or something!” Ratch’s punk style and tall, broad physique granted her the kind of confidence that very few girls felt. She would walk down the hall and call out to whomever she pleased, making fun of the “Nammer” boys, whom she called “gangsters,” for their “bling-bling.”

“I enjoy making fun of them, sometimes to their faces,” she beamed, “and I don’t get very nice looks from them.” Ratch’s bravery was acquired through her love of punk music and punk style. Before she “found” punk in grade eight, she was a shy girl. But once she developed her intimidating style, she felt that she could say and do anything without fear of reprisals, both at school and at home. “Yeah, I’m pretty comfortable with myself,” she boasted, knowing how uncommon this feeling was for girls, who always, it seemed to Ratch, wanted to change something about themselves because they felt “insecure.”

---

52 Bling-bling is an expression that comes from hip hop culture and means jewelry, particularly gold chains and any other “flashy” symbols of wealth and success.
Dressing punk created an aura of power and authority around Ratch that she wore like a badge of honour. “I used to be scared of doing lots of things,” she said of her pre-punk days. “Like, I would never think of going into a mosh pit, because I might get kicked in the head or something. But now I like, go in there and like, I’ve had my face bashed into other people and stuff, and it doesn’t phase me.” Though, Ratch noted that being a “girl” made being in the most pit at punk shows a lot easier. Her attitude and aggressive dance style landed her in a lot of trouble with men, who often swung around to hit Ratch before realizing that she was a girl. “If I was a guy, then I would’ve been knocked in the head,” she laughed. But Ratch also faced sexism and sexual harassment in the pit, where men had stuck their hands down her pants and tried to feel her breasts. Guys have also challenged her right to be a part of the mosh pit as a girl. “One guy,” she explained, “came up and he was like, ‘Get out of the fucking pit!’ or whatever, and I’m like, ‘Noooo! I’m having a good time! Leave me alone!’” Ratch knew that if she ever got into any real trouble, other men would rush to her rescue. “But, I don’t want to be dependent on anybody else except myself,” she realized. “I’ve learned to stand up for myself, too, dressing like this.”

Ratch’s style had, in fact, given her a sense of invincibility that even shocked her from time to time. She stood up to a mugger who demanded money from her friends outside of a convenience store on Wellington Ave. When she gave the mugger a dirty look, he called her a “bitch” and advanced threateningly toward her. “I like, looked away for a minute and then I was like, ‘What the hell? Why am I looking away?’ So I’m like, ‘You can’t talk to me like that!’ And he’s like, ‘What?’ I’m like, ‘You can’t talk to women like that!’” The mugger continued to threaten her and “he came like, right in my face, and he’s like, ‘you wanna say

53 A “mosh pit” is the area directly in front of the stage at a live punk or rock show where participants can dive into the crowd and “surf” over the audience. A mosh pit can also incorporate aggressive styles of dancing, such as slam dancing, where participants charge into each other and vigorously jump up and down.
that to my face, bitch? You wanna be slapped?’ And I’m like, ‘I will kick your ass!’”

Ratch’s complete confidence that she would carry out this threat, combined with her intimidating style, caused the mugger to retreat. “That was pretty traumatizing,” she admitted, later adding, “I’m pretty proud of myself for that one.”

Ratch’s image was louder than that of Gwen or Sydney, who enjoyed the quiet respect that they achieved through their styles. For Ratch, power was in-your-face. She liked the menacing image she fostered with her frightening presence and style. “I don’t get hassled at all,” she chuckled, “like, people see me as looking dangerous even though, I’m not a dangerous person. I love people, so I wouldn’t hurt anyone unless they—of course, if somebody tried to hurt me, then I know that I could do some damage, but I try not to.” I asked Ratch is she enjoyed the power she had to intimidate others as a punk. “I love it,” she declared. “I don’t dress like this because of that, self-defence and whatever, but it does take a lot of pressure off me, cause I’m not going to get mugged like, most likely. A lot of my friends who dress like everyone else, or whatever, get mugged like, get hassled all the time.” A moment later she added, “I could be looking at someone in a really mean way, and they wouldn’t say anything to me, but I’m not going to hurt them unless they bother me.” Ratch’s image, however, was predicated on the fact that the other person did not know that she would not “kick their ass” without provocation. Instead, she let her style do the talking.

Creating an image of power and authority at ESH did not necessarily require a threatening style, however. The most common kind of power that girls generated in the school was also the most controversial—a sexual power predicated on the sexy styles of preppy girls. Given the “close interconnections among clothing, femininity, and sexuality” (Gleeson & Frith, 2004, p. 112), the feminist debate over sex/sexuality as power has been a
mainstay in second and third wave discourses. As Nan Bauer Maglin and Donna Perry (1996) note, “sexuality has been a contentious issue for feminists” (p. xv) since the 1960s. During the second wave, feminist flags were planted in "pro-sex" and "anti-sex" camps as a way of signalling an acceptance or rejection of power derived from the body. Pro-sex feminists saw sex/sexuality as a source of empowerment, where women could feel free to have sex with as many different partners as they liked, express desire, and enjoy ownership over their bodies, including when and how to showcase them in public. Conversely, “anti-sex” feminists saw sex/sexuality as a form of heterosexist control over the female body and sought to eradicate it as part of the second wave agenda. It was not that sex was considered de facto bad, but rather that feminists in this camp highlighted the impossibility of separating the body from capitalist and patriarchal forces that endlessly oppressed women. How, they wondered, could we tease out the difference between sexual agency and sexual domination given the prevalence of the latter?

In third wave feminism,⁵⁴ sex/sexuality and the body become central tenets that offer women the tools for independence, liberation, and power. This new found bodily freedom, what Amy Wilkins (2004) terms “emancipated sexuality” (p. 329), reflects for many the

---

⁵⁴ Third wave feminism is meant to distinguish the political pursuits of today’s feminists from the feminists of the second wave. It is important to note, however, that third wave feminism does not see itself as a “post” feminist movement that views feminism as over and irrelevant. Third wave feminism seeks to further second wave’s agenda by continuing to focus on gender equality, violence against women, and oppression, while also focusing on issues of sex/sexuality, pleasure, technology, and the material issues facing women around the world. As Ellen Riordan (2001) explains, while second wave feminism made sisterhood or sameness its founding issue, “third-wave feminism works explicitly toward understanding difference and respecting its importance to feminist thought” (p. 280). Third wave feminism often credit third-world feminists, critical race feminists, and anti-foundational feminists for third wave’s focus on difference. Three anthologies are often seen as the “founding” texts of the third wave: Barbara Findlen’s (1995) Listen up: Voices from the next generation, Rebecca Walker’s (1995) To be real: Telling the truth and changing the face of feminism, and Leslie Heywood & Jennifer Drake’s (1997) Third wave agenda: Being feminist, doing feminism.
postfeminist turn,\(^{55}\) where women derive power from relationships to themselves and others, instead of solidarity with the sisterhood (Harris, 2004a). For McRobbie (2004), this new standard for female power suggests that women’s freedom no longer requires “any new, fresh political understanding,” but is instead predicated upon an always-already form of empowerment that is “unreliant on any past struggle” (p. 6). The emphasis on individual forms of pleasure and sex/sexuality have caused others to label this aspect of third wave feminism “do-me” feminism or “babe” feminism (Quindlen, 1996, pp. 3-4), where young women “use active sexuality to stake out gender independence” (Wilkins, 2004, p. 329).

This understanding of agency through sex/sexuality is intricately bound up in the male gaze. As Wilkins (2004) suggests, “the centrality of sexuality to sexism makes the task of determining women’s sexual agency complex indeed” (p. 332). This is particularly true in relation to the sexual agency of teenage girls. Deborah Tolman and Tracey Higgins (1996) highlight the discourses that surround girls’ sexuality when it is discussed: “good girls are not sexual; girls who are sexual are either (1) bad girls, if they have been active, desiring agents or (2) good girls who have been victimized by boys’ raging hormones” (p. 206). These two discursive constructions of girls’ sexuality—as vixens or victims—underscore what Fine (1988) terms the “missing discourse of desire” in the school, where girls can enjoy sex/sexuality without being labelled as sluts or dupes. Not only is the “naming of desire, pleasure, or sexual entitlement” absent from “the formal agenda of public schooling on sexuality” (p. 33), but it is also absent from adult/media understandings of girls’ style in the

---

\(^{55}\) Postfeminism is the charge that young women and girls are “enjoying all the freedoms won for them by the women’s movement without engaging in the struggle themselves” (Pomerantz, Currie & Kelly, 2004, p. 1). This attitude, according to Judith Stacey (1990), is “the simultaneous incorporation, revision and depoliticization of many of the central goals of second wave feminism” (339). For a critique of postfeminism as a label that unfairly imputes a lack of political action to young women and girls, see Pomerantz, Currie & Kelly (2004).
school. While it is difficult—even impossible—to separate sexual agency and sexual oppression, within the school (and elsewhere), the former does not even register as a possibility, while the latter is given attention as a “problem” in dire need of solving.

As I noted in chapter one, girls who dress in sexy styles are deemed to be in-trouble or out-of-control. But as Kate Gleeson and Hannah Frith (2004) suggest, “clothing might be one of the few opportunities for young women to explore and publicly present their sexuality” (p. 103). In a study done by Gleeson and Frith on girls’ explorations of identity through consumption, they locate a distinctly pleasurable narrative around the presentation of “mature and sexual identities” (p. 107) in relation to style. While girls did not explicitly articulate what their items of clothing “meant” in relation to sex/sexuality, they acknowledged the gratification and power these styles brought them in the school. Certainly, this form of “girl power” has been rigorously critiqued by feminists who argue that the claim of sexual agency cannot hold if the real objective is to attract the male gaze, compete with other women for male attention, and “shop till you drop” (Griffin, 2004; McRobbie, 2004; Taft, 2004). Yet as an ethnographer, it was impossible for me to discount the fact that—feminist or not—at ESH, sexy styles equalled a form of authority in the school.

To be sexy (but not skanky) was to have power at ESH, as Ms. Mackenzie pointed out. “I mean, I guess in a sense it is empowerment,” she suggested, “because what they’re saying is, ‘I have the body and I’m going to flaunt it.’” Girls who wore the sexy styles of the preppy “uniforms” were often engaged in a performance of their “sexual selves” (Gleeson & Firth, 2004, p. 105). But Ms. Mackenzie, like other teachers, did not count this kind of power as a positive image for girls and instead saw it as a form of emphasised femininity, where girls made themselves sexy within the heterosexual matrix of the school in order to attract
boyfriends. “I think it’s a shame that that’s where they decide they have power,” she
remarked. Some girls also felt that the preppy styles at ESH produced a negative image for
girls. Gwen saw sexual power as “gross” because it gave women “a bad name” and gave
“guys the impression that all girls should dress that way.”

While this point of view dominated teachers’ and some girls’ observations on girls who
“dressed like that,” others saw the potential for power in girls’ sexy styles. Shitar was of two
minds about it. “If they [preppy girls] dress sexy to show off, then I don’t like it,” she
explained, “but if they do it cause they’re confident, and they’re not self-centred, but
confident, it’s good to be sexy sometimes. I admire that. But not always, you know, wearing
shirts up to here and always like, grinding with guys at dances. Not that kind of thing!”

Chrissie, too, was for the power that girls and women could generate as sexual beings, as
long as they were “being themselves.” For Chrissie, being “yourself” meant having the right
to express your sexuality by wearing sexy clothing. She used Britney Spears and Christina
Aguilera as examples. Britney, she theorized, was only dressing sexy to create a media
image, to market herself in a particular way. But Christina was truly interested in being a
sexual being. For Chrissie, the difference between the two entailed analysing how many
image changes they had undergone. Britney could not “make up her mind” about how she
wanted others to see her, whereas Christina seemed more “honest” about her desire to have a
sexual image.

Mina also agreed that sexual power was a valid form of empowerment that girls should
utilize if they could. “I’m a tomboy with a Lolita complex,” she explained, referring to
herself as a girl who uses her “sexual dominance to her advantage.” “I realize that I could
get what I wanted if I had to,” she boasted. Mina had recently begun experimenting with her
sexual power when she wore a skirt to school one day instead of her trademark baggy jeans. She realized that people took notice of her more, commented on what she was wearing, and made her feel “confident” about her “look,” something that did not happen before in her usual “grungy” style. “I should be good enough for myself that I don’t have to rely on these things to elicit things,” she reasoned. “I mean, it’s sort of like cheating, you know? If you have to use the skirt to get someone’s attention, then obviously they’re too shallow to bother paying attention to.” But when I asked her why she did it then, she invoked the discourse of fixity to justify her decision: “I think it’s hormonal. I think I’m supposed to [use my sexuality]. Like, it’s just natural.”

Mina’s foray into sexual power seemed counter to her well-cultivated image as an alternative girl. But having experienced her sexual power, Mina now claimed to have “two powers”: one based on her “creepy” image, the other, based on her new-found understanding of a “natural” female sexuality.

On one side, there’s the part of me that can get people to do what I want. Like, move off the couch simply by threatening to sack them [kick them in the testicles]. And they know that I will actually do it. On the other hand, I can get people to move simply because—I once got a bus ride after I realized I had lost my bus ticket. And it was raining and I was in this skirt, and I just started crying, and the bus driver let me on for free. It’s just the simple power. You can get guys to do what you want if you dress a certain way.

Mina was aware that dressing in a sexual way gave her a “simple” power that brought immediate results, an equation that other girls were very aware of. Dren noted that she and Ratch had no problem getting into Indigo, a bar in east Vancouver that was notorious for fighting, live music, and a tough, metal-head crowd. “I hate to say it,” she told me, “but if you’re a hot chick, you’re going to have a way better chance of getting in.” Ratch further explained that all she had to do was “slut” herself “up” and “put on some makeup” in order to
have free passage into any bar in the city. “Basically,” she explained, “it’s all about the boobs.”

And preppy girls, like Chrissie, were also highly aware of the power they had over both boys and girls when they dressed in a sexy fashion. Boys, she explained, “will notice you” if you dress “sexy.” From her own experiences with friends, she also knew that girls would envy her and covet her style, though this power backfired on Chrissie when some of her friends decided they did not want her “around” any more because she dominated the attention of boys. As I discussed in chapter four, the real power that preppy girls sustained was the power to regulate femininity within the school, where they dictated which dressed bodies mattered and which ones did not. To be preppy meant to wear the uniforms for girls at ESH—the Britney and the JLo looks. But as Diane and others pointed out, only particular body types were seen to “naturally” belong in such styles. To be preppy, then, meant that a girl could look sexy (but not skanky) in her style and could attract the attention of boys. Being noticed by boys was certainly one way to be popular within ESH’s social world. But being able to look good in the uniforms also meant that preppy girls held influence over other girls, girls who looked up to them, wanted to be them, and feared their judgement.

“Different Little Identities”: Fashioning Multiple Images at School

“...if you classify yourself that means you see yourself in that way. I see myself as a million things. A million or more. I like to change things.”

-Jamie, 15, “out-there-but-socially-acceptable” style

I noticed Zeni on election day early in September. She was wearing a bright yellow tie around her crisp white blouse. To wear a tie at that time was to risk being labelled an Avril
wannabe. But Zeni did not concern herself with such insults. She knew that she would never dress like a pop star whom she deemed to be a “poser” for her “fake” connections to skateboarding and punk. “Oh, she thinks she’s all rock! Look at her music! It’s not rock either,” Zeni mused. “It’s pretty poppy—so is her face!” Instead, Zeni had worn the tie in order to make a statement on election day. “It had a professional feel. And, you know, I’m thinkin’ ‘Aw, if I’m gonna lose, I’m gonna lose in style! I’ll lose in my neon yellow tie!’” It was a “scary” look for Zeni, who was concerned that the tie would send the message to others that she was “overconfident” and that she knew she was going to win. But the message that Zeni hoped others would read in the tie was her dedication and commitment to getting the job of student representative for grade 10 done, and done right. “I think I was trying to send a message that I don’t really care what happens today. I’m still going to find a way to get my voice heard. So even though I’m not going to get elected, I’m going to go to student council, tell them what I want done and, yeah.”

When I noted how amazing it was that you could say so much with a tie, Zeni nodded slowly. Everything Zeni wore seemed to “say” something to teachers and students. “I’ll wear leather pants one day and everybody’s like, ‘Woooo!’ You know?” This reaction was multiplied when Zeni was seen carrying her electric guitar to band class. “So they say, ‘Wooa! The whole rock star get-up today!’” In fact, no matter what Zeni wore, it felt to her as though the whole school was watching and waiting to hear “the story.” This scrutiny made Zeni “scared to dress up.” Any change that she made to her “sporty” style became a “big deal.” As she explained it, “I do a little thing and people seem to notice every little change that I make, and they just pin me to it. I don’t know why they see me that way.”

Avril wannabes were said to be emulating pop star Avril Lavigne, who, in the early portion of her career, wore a tie with everything. Though most girls agreed that her music was “okay,” many did not like her image as a “skate-punk” and thought she was a poser.
Zeni was the grade 10 student rep, a star on both the girls’ volleyball and basketball teams, and on the honour role year after year. She also played guitar in a band that performed on talent night and was known as a powerful songwriter. She was recognized by many students; when Zeni walked down the hall, she said “hi” to almost everyone she passed. But her popularity was bittersweet. Being so well-known also meant that she was scrutinized by others and that everyone discussed her every move—and every outfit. Zeni often took heat at ESH for being “rich” in a school where most girls could not afford to own several guitars, as she did. “I just save my money, and I buy good things,” she told me. Though she worked hard to achieve her place of respect on sports teams, on student council, and in classrooms, Zeni was trapped in an image that she felt was “unfair.” Everyone thought she was “Miss Perfect.” “And I don’t really like it that much,” she added. “It seemed like a joke at first, but then when they keep repeating it over and over again…” If Zeni received less than an A on a test or somehow did not respond the way people expected her to, she knew she would be asked to explain herself in a manner that was not equally applied to other students. By her own admission, she was a perfectionist; her “lowest second goal” was “pretty high to some people.” As a result, Zeni admitted that she was a little “self-conscious sometimes.” Reflecting for a moment, she added, “Yeah, I don’t wanna really give people that—*that* much.”

As a way of mitigating the surveillance of others, Zeni actively worked to cultivate multiple images at ESH in order to “keep people guessing” about “who” she was.

I like to be mysterious. Gets people going about you—wanna like, get to know you. Know what I mean? … There’s something about you that they don’t know, but they wish they could know, almost. … I don’t like people knowing [about me]. I keep people guessing. It’s fun. Cause they never know.
She began diversifying herself across the school, joining more sports teams, different music groups, and floating between different cliques and social scenes. Because she was everywhere in the school, she hoped that others would think of her as unknowable and unpredictable. Proudly, she told me that people now saw her in “different ways. Like, people in my guitar class see me as, say, musical. People on my soccer team think of me as, well, soccer. Basketball, just basketball.” Amazed by her own ability to cultivate multiple images, she added, “I’ve got all these different little identities, and I play them when I get there.” Rather than feeling exhausted by these “different little identities,” Zeni felt liberated by the freedom that they bought her. “It’s fun: ‘Oh, I’m this for today! Or “This is who I’m going to be now. Yeah.” As a result of this multiplicity, Zeni described her image as “different.” “That’s the proper word,” she realized. “I’ll talk differently with different groups of people.” She thoughtfully added, “it’s just different me-s. Different ways to communicate to them.”

The multiplicity of images that Zeni fostered necessitated an eclectic style. To maintain her “sporty” style meant that others would continue to see her in the same way and easily “pin” her down. “Like, I got called Gap girl once,” she said. “I don’t wear anything Gap,” she explained, but the insult made her realize how her style was perceived by others as “boring.” “I wanna stand out,” she admitted. “Just so people can look back. ‘Oh, I remember Zeni!’ Not just, you know, someone.” Since everyone noticed her every move anyway, she made the decision to “go [all] out” and really change her style into something that kept everyone guessing as to “who” she was. She began shopping at stores that were less popular with the girls at ESH, buying more “unique” articles of clothing, while still maintaining a look that incorporated cargos, jeans, and a “sporty” aesthetic some of the time.
But other times, Zeni dressed up or dressed down. Once, she wore her pyjamas to school and, on special days, she wore her leather pants, blouse, and a tie. “I have different looks everyday,” she declared. And these different looks enabled her to maintain her multiple images in the school. Her hope was that the more she stood out as being “unique,” the more she could control how others saw her. But she held a contradictory desire that others would help her to find out “who” she was, too. The more she stood out as having multiple images, the more of Zeni she hoped people would get to know. “And then they can just tell me how I am— who I am. Save me all the trouble.”

The irony of Zeni’s desire to have herself reflected back to her by others was not lost on her. She realized that she did not want others to know everything about her, while at the same time wanted others to help her learn more about herself. Zeni compared this contradictory element in her school identity to Britney Spears, who worked hard to get to where she is now, and she’s all popular and that’s what she wanted, right? That’s all she wanted was to be known, to make money, to sing her songs. And then she gets mad with everything else that comes with it. And what comes with it is popularity, the press, photographers, all that stuff. And she’s getting mad about people knowing her, and wanting to know her.

Believing that she had done the same thing as Britney, Zeni called herself a hypocrite who changed her “whole identity” only to both want and not want attention in the school. Upon further reflection, however, Zeni reasoned that Britney was unwilling to accept the consequences of her own concocted image, while Zeni was willing to negotiate people’s desire to know her with her own desire to be un/known. As she thoughtfully suggested toward the end of our discussion, “you have to be prepared for the part. It’s like if you wanna commit a crime, you’ve gotta be prepared to, you know, do the time.”
Chapter Six

JUST STYLE?: IDENTITY, FEMINISM, AND EDUCATION

"I don’t think you can come to any final conclusions. It’s just—it’s constantly changing. There’s no one statement you can make about a group. You can make generalizations, but that’s about it.”
-Mina, 14, “grungy” style

Upstairs/Downstairs: Style as a Membrane of Permeability

The subject positions that girls at ESH occupied—and their attending styles—were indicative of a particular time and place in history. Styles, of course, change, as do their significations. And while certain elements of style might be said to exist in schools across North America at any given time, the significance of style lies in the subtle modifications that girls make within their school. These modifications are based on differing social and cultural contexts. ESH’s social world was made up of multiple races and ethnicities, creating a postmodern milieu. In turn, this milieu created a decentralized and fragmented social world were girls could “find their own people” and exist on their own terms. While preppy girls were certainly envied for their sexual and social power, one particular group of girls did not “rule the school.” Girls were free to enact identities in opposition to the preppy subject position, in relation to the preppy subject position, and in ambivalence to the preppy subject position. Girls were free to enact hybrid identities, multiple identities, and identities that shifted in relation to social scenes and locales.

ESH’s postmodern social world also meant that preppy girlhood was not only the privilege of white, middle-class girls. Unlike previous studies on social categories in high school that pits two binary groups against each other in a battle for popularity, at ESH there were many popular groups based on various racial, ethnic, and program divisions. Quiet Chinese girls were positioned and positioned themselves differently than the Asian hardcores
or the Frenchies or the beauty girls or the First Nations girls. Yet within each of those social scenes, there were small-scale hierarchies that operated around particular elements of style that made sense in relation to the symbolic economy that fluctuated both within each social scene and within the school at large. As a result, there were many different standards for girlhood: preppy Frenchies did not dress the same way as preppy hardcores; quiet popular Frenchies did not dress the same way as loud popular Frenchies; Hispanic girls did not dress the same way as the beauty girls with whom they were so often conflated; First Nations girls in the First Nations Program did not dress the same way as First Nations girls in the Regular program. These multiple social contexts move away from the idea that the school is made up of “Jocks” and “Burnouts,” or opposing class cultures that exist in mutual definition. Instead, the school is shaped by and has shaped the compound orientations to identity that students live day in and day out.

Compound orientations to identity point to the complexity of style as social skin. As an extension of the body, style enabled girls to make themselves in/visible to certain scenes, groups, and cliques. And while girls were positioned within discourses of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality, they also had room to manoeuvre within these categories by positioning themselves differently. This doubleness to identity—subjectification—was made visible through style. Style signified certain aspects to girls’ positioning within limiting discourses, such as body image, the ability to afford the “right” clothing, and being mis/recognized as someone other than whom a girl perceived herself to be. Chrissie was mis/recognized as a skank for desiring to exhibit her power as a sexual being; Isabel was mis/recognized as a hoochie for desiring to dress like a classy Brazilian woman; Xiu was mis/recognized as a quiet Chinese girl even though she was sometimes bursting to get out of
her “box”; and Shitar was positioned as a “class A twinkie” because she was not viewed as authentically alternative enough based on cultural restrictions that kept her from enacting a more “extreme” style.

But just as style signified these discursive constraints, it also signified the embodied subjectivities that girls enacted in order to shape how they were perceived by others. Girls negotiated the social terrain of the school by becoming fluent in its symbolic economy of style and by continuously working to gain control over how others saw them. As a result, girls could mitigate, neutralize, or complicate how they were positioned and mis/recognized by others. Chrissie adopted a baggy, skater style in order to tone down her sexual display; Dren distinguished herself from preppy girls by cultivating a hybrid goth/metal look that granted her ultimate authenticity within the school and beyond; Zeni forged “different little identities” in order to keep people from knowing who she “really” was; and Abby, unable to afford or “look good” in preppy styles, created herself anew by wearing obscure articles of clothing that she believed no other girl in the school would have.

These simultaneous experiences of discourse and subjectivity were how girls formed their school identities. As a readily available, malleable, and visible tool for identity negotiation, style was not incidental to girls’ experience of schooling. One further story helps to make this point. As I discussed in chapter five, Gwen sometimes wore a bandana around her head or wrist as a way of signalling power and authority in the school. But Gwen’s negotiation of identity did not begin and end with a piece of gang paraphernalia. As Gwen spent alternative days “upstairs” in the Regular program and “downstairs” in the First
Nations program, she was engaged in a highly intricate usage of style in order to negotiate what she perceived to be the social and cultural constraints of each discursive and physical space.

Gwen dressed differently for “upstairs” and “downstairs.” She explained that she felt the need to adopt a preppy style “upstairs,” a requirement that was actually frowned upon by many First Nations girls “downstairs,” who sported a much tougher, hip hop style. Though, Gwen was quick to align herself with the “comfortable” subject position rather than the preppy one by explaining that although she dressed “more like them [preppy girls]” when she was “upstairs,” she did not dress “as bad as them. Just be like, like this [pointing to her outfit], but with like jeans and a better shirt.” When Gwen suggested that she did not dress “as bad” as the preppy girls “upstairs,” she was referring to the amount of skin that she felt they showed. It was important to Gwen not to be perceived as a “skank” given the fact that many students already saw First Nations girls as “hoochies.” The “comfortable” subject position was thus a safer choice for Gwen, who wanted to fit in with white and Asian girls, but did not want to (nor could she afford to) buy the mandatory labels necessary to be preppy.

But on the days when Gwen was “downstairs,” she sported an altogether different style. She described herself as a “punk” who wore baggy cargo pants, loose fitting tops, spiked wrist bands and collars, parachute jackets, and hoodies. She described this “split personality” as “punk-slash-prep.” Gwen understood that her participation in two programs that were located in different areas of the school enabled her to negotiate two conflicting school identities. But much more than that, Gwen also felt that her location in two different programs necessitated two differing identities that enabled her to comfortably endure each

---

57 As I noted in chapter three, the terms “upstairs” and “downstairs” were often used to refer to the locations of programs at ESH. The First Nations program was controversially located in the basement and many attributed this geographic positioning to the low status that First Nations students had within the school.
discursive and physical space. While she did not wish to be aligned with white and Asian girls, whom she saw as disrespecting her people, she knew that it was useful to fit in with them in order to both alleviate racist sentiments and distance herself from the “crazy Natives” who were “downstairs.” And while she did not wish to be aligned with some of the First Nations girls “downstairs,” whom she felt gave her people a “bad name,” she also did not wish to be identified with white or Asian girls, whom she saw as really “different” from her.

In order to maintain this complex negotiation of identity, Gwen split her closet in two. She had “a whole bunch of jeans on this side and a whole bunch of sporty clothes on this side.” Sitting in front of her closet each night, Gwen carefully considered her geographic and discursive locations for the next day and planned her outfit accordingly. Though, when asked which style she preferred, Gwen emphatically responded, “PUNK!” She was more comfortable in her “downstairs” style, a style that she felt better reflected “who” she was. Her “upstairs” style, she reasoned, was more of an act, one that Gwen cultivated in order to gain some control over how others saw her as a First Nations girl in a program rumoured to be full of “troubled,” “dangerous,” and “drug addicted” kids.

Gwen’s story emphasises how style, as social skin, acts as a membrane of permeability. It enables girls to transfer something of themselves into the social world (subjectivity), as well as enabling the social world to transfer something of itself into girls (discourse). As a result, style shaped girls’ identities as both an indication of habitus and as a creative and productive tool for negotiation. For Gwen and others, this negotiation was more than just fashion or frivolity; it was more than just consumerism or staying abreast of the trends. It was a serious skill used to navigate the social landscapes of ESH, some of which were deemed to be difficult, unwelcoming, even threatening at times.
The Limits of Identity

Like Gwen, most of the girls in the study have graduated by now and moved on to other things. They are not sitting where I left them, in blue and orange plastic chairs, crammed into fogged-up bus shelters, and amidst the rotting apple cores and empty chip bags that littered the hallways of ESH during lunch time. They have aged, grown, and, in all likelihood, changed styles. In fact, as I write this conclusion, longer shirts, higher-waisted jeans, and a retro 80s-style have begun to make a comeback. A new economy of style is already in the works, as are new subject positions for girls to occupy in the school. It is my hope that this text, however historically specific, will generate other texts on girl (as others have generated it), and that rather than limiting discussion, it will become part of a larger discussion on girls that will push girlhood in new and multiple directions. Such a proliferation of qualitative research on girls is necessary in order to counteract limiting representations that position girls as static and fixed.

But best intentions aside, this study remains inherently partial and incomplete. I cannot speak for all girls. And I certainly could not interview all of the girls at ESH. Though I aimed for as diverse a sample as possible, girls exercised their power to say “no,” their power to say “yes” and then change their minds, and their power to say “maybe” and never get back to me. My attempts to sample from different racial and ethnic groups were thwarted by a lack of interest from the Asian hardcore girls, apprehension from the “quiet” Chinese girls, and a certain amount of distrust from many of the First Nations girls. Though I managed to find some girls in these social scenes who were willing to participate in the study, I felt that this research could have benefited from a greater range of races and ethnicities that further exemplified ESH’s postmodern social world, as well as its myriad possibilities for identity
performance. Though, I am also conscious of the fact that while my sample could have been more culturally expansive, it was a good size for a deep examination of each girl's uses of style in their negotiations of identity in the school.

I also struggled with a lack of clarity in the design of the study. As I noted in chapter two, my initial focus on alternative girls became unfeasible when I realized that I could not simply apply categories to girls before I had even met them. Instead, I needed to let girls explain how they categorized themselves and others through subject positions that were infused with ambivalence and contradiction. However much I yearned for clarity in the initial stages of data generation, that clarity was necessarily unattainable given that I could never gain complete access to a social world in which I would always be an outsider. As an outsider, I hoped for glimpses, "ins," and the kindness of teachers, who allowed me to sit in on their classes, and girls, who allowed me to sit in on their lives. These limited access points enabled me to become more familiar with ESH's complex social world, a world I had to know, however partially, before I could begin to understand how girls made sense of themselves and each other.

As I explained in chapter three, ESH's postmodern social world was difficult to get a handle on. Its decentralized and fragmented system of small-scale hierarchies across and within multiple programs initially created a great deal of confusion as I tried to map the social locations of girls. But in the end, I realized that total clarity was neither possible nor desirable. Instead, I learned to become more (but never completely) comfortable in the confusion, focusing less on my own vision of how I thought the study "should" be and more on the generative vision that emerged in my negotiations with girls on a day to day basis. In this respect, ethnography infused with feminist poststructural theorizing helped me to think
through this lack of clarity and recognize that language and representation have limits. This text is only one telling of many possible readings, because the topic itself is not still. There is always an amendment to be made, a sentence that no longer makes sense in light of current thinking, and a moral panic on girls in the press that adds a new dimension to the themes I have explored here. While the words I have written appear to sit still on the page, their meanings do not; while stories seem to hang in stasis, girls and their identities stay in perpetual motion.

Most of the girls I came to know at ESH were aware of the temporality of these identities. Even as girls struggled to gain control over how others saw them, they were already looking beyond their school identities to the images they would (have to) foster in the “real world.” Abby noted that she would change her bad-ass/schoolgirl/business woman look when she was “trying to make a good impression on people for a job or something.” Looking down at her outfit, she added, “Yeah. Well this will only last so long.” Reflecting her middle-class habitus, Leah suggested that she would revert back to a “normal” style when she decided to go to university and after she had travelled and had “millions of experiences.” Shitar felt that she would change her “punk ass” look when she got married and had children. “I’ll try not to be an adult,” she mused, “but you can’t be a forty-year-old dressed like this.” Isabel also felt that marriage and children would necessitate a shift in her “high heel” style. “You’re in the house,” she reasoned. “Who’re you going to look good for, you know? And you’re married.” And Diane told me that she would most likely change her “sporty” look when she entered “the world of work.” In sharp contrast to her “sweat sweatpants” style, she said, “I kind of like the yuppie trendy look, like, black pants, the black shoes and then the,
kind of, those fitted white shirts that have the collars and then like, a flare back or something, and then those, kind-of square glasses, like your glasses, Shauna.”

Girls’ awareness that their subject positions and attending styles would inevitably change signifies their understanding that new discursive constraints awaited them in womanhood and adulthood. At ESH, particular modes of girlhood were made possible by its postmodern context, and by its institutional and educational setting. But elsewhere, the symbolic economy of style would become predicated on different modes of femininity as they intersected with other institutionalized configurations of race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality. The rules, however shifting, would continue to shift again and again, creating entirely new forms of signification and ambivalence in identity negotiation.

This research has sought to highlight the complexity of girls’ school identities, as well as the role style plays in the negotiation of those identities. At ESH, style acted as a powerful set of signifiers that enabled girls to dis/identify with each other, forge solidarities, create distances, embody ambivalences, invoke agency, and gain control over how they saw themselves and how others saw them. Yet these meaningful practices have often been rendered meaningless through simplistic accounts in the press, as well as the Ophelia genre, which has tended to evaluate such practices without placing them within the spaces where they might make sense as a powerful system of signification. I contend that these oversimplifications and negative evaluations have contributed to a backlash against girls’ new found visibility in the social world. In the remainder of this conclusion, I aim to widen the discussion of girls’ identity negotiations in the school through style. By linking this topic to the broader social projects of feminism and education—two fields that must expand their
knowledge of girls’ cultural practices—the backlash can be more widely understood and more effectively dealt with.

A Backlash Against Girls: Where is Feminism?

The proliferation of prescriptive and negative representations of girls in North American society seems to have come out of nowhere. Where once girls were invisible in the academic and popular press, now they are the subject of cautionary tales that warn parents of the inevitable crises that come in the teenage years: gangs, drugs, sex, violence, bullying, meanness, loose morals, bad judgement, and a litany of other problems that are inescapably cast in the dye of girlhood’s wool. But why have girls suddenly become the focus of all this fear and concern? It is too simple to suggest, as do Pipher (1994), Brumberg (1997, 2002), and Greenfield (2002), that things have gotten “worse” for girls. As older adults, they may well feel that the world is careening out of control, but it is important to remember that girls are born into the times in which they live as girls, and do not necessarily feel the same sense of insecurity about the world around them. Older generations can claim that things used to be better because they are uncomfortable and unfamiliar with the forms of culture in which current generations of girls are fluent. To suggest that things are getting progressively and irrevocably worse is to belittle the current generation’s forms of meaning-making as undeserving of any serious attention. Further, it is worth considering whether or not the “good old days” really were that good for girls, given the fact that girls’ power has only increased, rather than decreased in the social world.

In her book Future Girl, Harris (2004b) offers an analysis of girlhood in the early 21st century. She explores “the idea that in a time of dramatic social, cultural, and political
transition, young women are being constructed as a vanguard of new subjectivity” (p. 1). As Harris explains, the conditions of late modernity, including de- or post-industrialization, globalization, and the economic and social upheaval that these conditions generate, have created a different world for youth to navigate (see also Bettis, 1996). In light of these shifts, Harris suggests that girls have taken on “a special role in the production of the late modern social order and its values. They have become a focus for the construction of an ideal late modern subject who is self-making, resilient, and flexible” (p.6).

Questioning why it is that young women and not youth in general have come to be invested with these possibilities, Harris sites the influence of feminism. Through feminist critiques of employment and education, young women are now the beneficiaries of more choices, more education, and more job opportunities than ever before. These changes to the social order have opened previously closed or unknown avenues for girls’ subjectivities. As a result, girls have come to see themselves,

and to be seen, as enjoying new freedoms and opportunities. They are far more at liberty to make choices and pursue lifestyles independently of their families, the state, and men in general. Young women have been encouraged to believe that ‘girls can do anything’ and ‘girls are powerful.’ (p. 8)

Such freedom is coupled with the current discourse of “girl power” in popular culture, where girls are told they can be anything they want as individual subjects in a world that is their playground.

Harris (2004b) suggests that all of these influences have combined to make girls the subject of late modernity, where girls have become “flexible, adaptable, resilient, and ultimately responsible for their own ability to manage their lives successfully” (p. 8).

However, this newly minted social power has generated a backlash against girls. I suggest that girls are the focus of increasing moral panics because of their newfound visibility. In
fact, the more social space girls take up, the more maligned they become. Susan Faludi (1991) locates a backlash against women in the 1980s by highlighting deep resentment toward women at all levels of social life. In the early 21st century, this resentment has migrated to girls who have, like women before them, pushed their way into the social world as visible and vocal subjects. Where previous generations of girls were not as noticeable in social space—regulated by the “nice, kind, and helpful discourse” of traditional femininity (Walkerdine, 1990)—current generations of girls have become undeniably noticeable and unruly. This visibility has generated a backlash that, like the one Faludi locates on women, overtly and covertly works to curtail girls’ independence.

Though third wave feminism has done much to bring girls and girlhood into the academic limelight, it has done little to mitigate this backlash by coming to the defense of girls engaged in seemingly inconsequential cultural forms (Pomerantz, Currie & Kelly, 2004). This omission is remedied, however, through the generation of more qualitative research on girls. By locating girls’ cultural practices within the places where they make sense as meaningful forms of signification, feminist researchers can show that what girls do matters in girls’ own lives. This connection between cultural practices and the places where such practices are formed and maintained is crucial in order to contextualize girls’ negotiations of identity. After all, such practices only come to have meaning when meaning is assigned to them within a given context. The fruitful crossroads of sociology of education and girls’ studies is one way to make such connections. This theoretical and methodological intersection enables a discussion of girls’ culture as it is performed within constituting institutions, such as the school. Through qualitative methodologies, feminist researchers can learn more about how and why girls take up particular cultural practices and how and why
they become infused with meaning within particular social spaces. Such knowledge has the power to counteract the backlash against girls by offering an alternative story, as well as to critique less obvious forms of the backlash, including the seemingly neutral policies of the school.

**Dress codes: Ad/dressing Educational Policy**

The backlash against girls is also manifest in one of the more subtle forms of educational policy—dress codes. A new generation of dress codes was instituted in schools across North America after the Britney look became popular in 1999. Heralded as necessary in order to curtail the deviant, immoral, and potentially dangerous forms of dress that girls were sporting, dress codes specifically targeted girls who displayed their bodies in tight and revealing clothing. But given its uses as a tool of surveillance and bodily control for girls, it is surprising that this subtle yet significant educational policy has drawn relatively little attention from feminist sociologists of education.

Beneath their outwardly neutral exterior, dress codes delineate “desirable” bodies through what Foucault calls a “regulatory ideal” (1978). As Butler (1993) explains in regards to sex, dress codes are not just “norms,” they are also productive in that they have “the power to produce—demarcate, circulate, differentiate—the bodies [they] control” (p. 1). Dress codes thus form the criteria for which bodies matter in the school and which bodies do not. This regulatory power intersects with issues of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and citizenship, where a girl is either a welcomed subject in the school or she is cast as its “constitutive outside” (p. 3) whose presence is made abject by her failure to conform to a normative mould of girlhood. Sexual, racial, and ethnic differences that may inform how a girl dresses are not factored into the equation. Rather, as part of what Donna Haraway
(1991) terms “border wars,” dress codes distinguish between those who perform white, middle-class femininity correctly and those who do not. Building on Foucault’s notion of the regulatory ideal, Symes and Meadmore (1996) see dress codes as a modulating tactic used to "positionize and calibrate” (p. 171) students. Consequently, dress codes form a “curriculum of the body” (Lesko, 1988) that teach students how to see bodies as either normal or abnormal.

Yet when dress codes focus specifically on girls’ bodies, it becomes impossible to ignore how educational policy is shaping sexuality and femininity (Tolman & Higgins, 1996; Hey, 1997; Kelly, 2000). Girls are positioned within school dress codes through a prohibitive and restrictive understanding of femininity marked by innocence, modesty, and a refusal of sexuality or desire in the school (Fine, 1988). Inherent in this positioning is a “blame the victim” mentality, where girls are held responsible for the wrongs done to them as scantily clad “sluts.” As well, they are charged with the contradictory position of upholding the morality of the school, becoming the scapegoats when boys and men are led astray by their “suggestive” styles. These discursive constructions of girlhood in the school require further analysis. How do dress codes teach students, teachers, and administrators to think about girls’ (and boys’) bodies? How do dress codes that focus specifically on the regulation of girls’ bodies shape students’ understandings of gender and sexuality within the school?

As one of the more invisible forms of school "law," dress codes require deeper examination from sociologists of education seeking to critique the construction of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality in the school.

Rather than introducing reactionary policy to a school’s code of conduct, administrators would be better served by discussing bodily display, respect for girls’ bodies, and the
problem of sexual harassment with students, thus implicating boys and men in the discussion, rather than simply blaming girls for drawing unwanted attention, garnering bad reputations, and prompting sexual harassment. Teachers would be better served by addressing issues of dress in the classroom through open discussion surrounding bodily display. During my time at ESH, I often heard teachers discuss girls' style in the staffroom, but I never heard it addressed in the classroom, where it might have benefited students. As well, I often heard groups of girls and boys discussing how girls dressed in casual conversation, but those fruitful discussions did not find their way into the classroom either, where they might have taken a more critical turn. As styles are now changing and less tight and revealing clothing is making its way back into the school, it's seems unlikely that these issues will surface in the classroom in the near future. Unfortunately for students, they will lose the benefit of discussion surrounding the body, sexuality, respect for girls, and sexual harassment—a discussion that is necessary if the enduring fixity of gender as it intersects with race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality is ever to be challenged in the school.

"Britneys," "JLos," and, "Researchers"

I wrote this text for an imagined audience of not just my PhD examining committee, but also feminists, sociologists of education, youth cultural theorists, and those interested in what is "going on" with girls today. I also imagined, though mistakenly given the academic framing of this text, an audience of girls. While girls will certainly not read this dissertation, it is my hope to continue writing about girls and their cultural practices in more accessible venues, such as newspapers, zines, and mainstream publications. In my desire to reach a broader audience that might include girls, as well as parents, teachers, and administrators, I
have answered questions from reporters, who eagerly sought “expert” testimony for their stories on girls. My research seemed to be just what reporters were looking for, as they were already churning out article after article on how girls were dressing “these days.” But no matter how many times I reiterated my position, it always seemed to come out wrong in print. Reporters did not want to hear my version of girls’ style. Instead, they were looking for someone to verify the moral panic and add to its power as a discourse of fear over and concern for today’s teenage girls.

My research was featured in one particular article that was picked up by eight newspapers across Canada. Punctuated by large glossy pictures of Britney Spears and Jennifer Lopez above the fold, and a slightly smaller and less glossy picture of myself below the fold, the article smacked of strategic marketing. I wondered if the story had been picked up by so many newspapers simply because it gave editors the chance to include pictures of Britney and JLo amidst the dreary news stories of the day. While the reporter made an attempt to capture the flavour of the research, the story was still reduced to a binary opposition, forging a dichotomy that was not only unsupported in the data, but counter to my own agenda of opening up rather than foreclosing on ways for girls to be. One of the many headlines that hyped the article read: “GIRLS HAVE TWO LOOKS: THE BRITNEY AND THE JLo” (Schmidt, 2005, p. B5). When I asked the reporter why she had made the study seem so limited and contrived, she told me that she had decided to go with the angle she thought readers would be most interested in. And, she continued, “it’s impossible to say very much in 600 words or less.”

Her response helped me to further understand how single certainties are fostered in the press and why deeper forms of research are needed to counteract the ease with which
moral panics slip into our everyday understandings of girls. A random collection of instances moulded into a misleading whole cannot do justice to girls' complex forms of meaning-making. In the end, this research was conducted as a rejoinder to stories like the one in which I was featured—a story that perpetuated a way of thinking about girls that I had hoped to critique. This research was also conducted in response to the many folks I have spoken with over the years who did not understand the relevance of girls' cultural practices in relation to education, schooling, and feminism—to those who repeatedly told me, “but it’s just style.”
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Fine, M., & Weis, L. (1996). Writing the "wrongs" of fieldwork: Confronting our own research/writing dilemmas in urban ethnographies. *Qualitative Inquiry, 2*, 251-274.


