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THE MEDIA(TED) GIRL: CREATING (FEMINIST) SPACES

A Dissertation in

Curriculum and Instruction and Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies

by

Laura E. Rattner

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The dissertation of Laura E. Rattner was reviewed and approved * by the following:

B. Stephen Carpenter, II
Professor of Art Education
Dissertation Advisor

Patrick Shannon
Distinguished Professor of Education, Language and Literacy Education
Co-Chair of Committee

Stephanie Serriere
Associate Professor of Social Studies Education
Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies Affiliate
Co-Chair of Committee

Michelle Rodino-Colocino
Associate Professor Film/Video, Media Studies & Women’s Gender and Sexuality Studies

William Carlsen
Director of Graduate and Undergraduate Studies, Curriculum and Instruction

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School
ABSTRACT

American popular culture perpetuates sexist and repressive myths of dominant femininity and heteronormative relations that flatten the experiences and complexities of girls and women in raced and classed ways (Kearney, 2006; Sweeney, 2008, Zaslow, 2009). While our sexist society often presents messages that can feel limiting for all citizens, for girls and women these messages can be particularly problematic. In the highly digitized public spaces girls traverse, how do girls seek to mediate, combat and/or inform messages of who they are (or not)? The purpose of this study is to explore the ways Reel Grrls, an after school media literacy/technology film program with a feminist culture, offers a counterbalance to repressive and limiting messages for and about girls in mainstream media culture. This work highlights the official and unofficial curricula of the Reel Grrls program and the experiences these girls encounter to create personal narratives as they move from roles as cultural consumers to cultural producers. The girls’ stories, “the ones that only they can tell,” transcend those told by conventional media as they highlight issues of race, class, gender and other differences, in interesting and poignant ways. Girls, then, are not mere sideline characters or ‘tokens, but rather are the protagonists of their films just as they author the stories of their lives. This feminist ethnographic study reveals what I call an enmeshed feminist curriculum, a positive normative feminist praxis, visible throughout the Reel Grrls program and in the finished films the girls produce. Reel Grrls provides possibilities of how feminist pedagogy and feminist activism might be practiced with youth engaged in contemporary media production.
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“Let yourself be silently drawn by the strange pull of what you really love. It will not lead you astray.”

(Rumi, 2004)

“Here, in a bizarre twist, it is feminism that is seen to complicate what is assumed would otherwise be an easy and straight-forward transition from girlhood to woman.”

(Gonick, 2006, p. 8)

“She struggles with the forces that would tell her story for her, or write her out of the story, the genealogy, the rights of man, the rule of law. The ability to tell your own story, in words or images, is already a victory, already a revolt.”

(Solnit, 2014, p. 78)
Popular Culture and Public Pedagogy

Much informal learning happens outside of classroom hours. In fact much of that time is spent engaging with some form of popular culture, which incorporates a wide range of media sources, film, music, television in addition to “the full range of cultural forces we experience on a daily basis” (Sandlin, Schultz, & Burdick, 2010, p. xxii). In those informal learning spaces, popular culture becomes the teacher. Given our constant connection with some form of popular culture, educators find its influence to be greater than formalized educational settings (Sandlin, Shultz, & Burdick, 2010, p. xxii), most likely because popular culture not only educates, but also entertains us in the process (Giroux, 2002). Writing specifically of film media, Giroux (2002) notes they “…deploy power through the important role they play connecting the production of pleasure and meaning with the mechanisms and practices of powerful teaching machines” (p. 3). The mixture of pleasure with the power of learning sometimes can make the messages and/or meanings seem innocuous. Giroux continues that this public pedagogy we are getting helps to “…construct the landscape of American culture” by offering “subject positions, mobiliz(ing) desires, [and] influenc(ing) us unconsciously” (Giroux, 2002, p. 3).

While our sexist society often offers messages that can feel limiting for everyone, for girls and women these messages can be problematic particularly given that the cultural expectations to push against boundaries is not encouraged or condoned. If
we are not thinking about the types of repeated messages we interact with on a daily basis, they can become part of our lexicon and normalized in our psyches. If this is so, then how do girls seek to mediate, combat and/or inform messages of who they are (or not) in the highly trafficked on-line spaces they traverse? And how do nonprofit organizations working with girls assist them in this process?

The Beginning

In 2002, I spied a blurb in the weekly newspaper that told of a public screening of films created by girls. I was intrigued by the thought of girls being behind the camera and interested in what they would create. I could not have imagined the creativity that leapt off the screen. The girls produced short public service announcements (PSAs) and one- to two- minute movies that explicitly tackled feminist issues of gender inequality with such humor and grace. For example, topics ranged from domestic violence to homelessness and family and menstruating men to Barbie. I was astounded that the girls who stood before me answering questions and garnering applause for their efforts had created the films. I was not astounded because the girls were young, but rather because they mastered a powerful medium to capture their stories.

The next fall I started my Ph.D. journey by taking a course1 that also opened my eyes to the power of film as a form of public discourse and pedagogy. In this class we

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1 Film as Public Pedagogy with Henry Giroux
talked about how film translates information as a form of public pedagogy. For Giroux (2002) film, “…more broadly as a part of public discourse and cultural pedagogy…participates in a kind of ideological framing and works to structure everyday issues around particular assumptions, values, and social relations” (p. 11). It is, in a sense, a language and a contested site that can transmit information about public mores, popular beliefs and attitudes, e.g., how people are to act and to think or what they should buy and wear. While Giroux (2002) warns against a “direct correlation,” film can still work “to shape individual behavior and public attitudes in multiple ways, whether consciously or unconsciously” (p. 11). Particularly when it comes to showing gender and youth, the media’s messages become redundant and limiting. For example, Brown (2008) notes that the normalization of girls “fighting and competition…led [her] to co-author a parenting book about the ways media and marketers package and sell a narrow version of girlhood to girls” (p. 7). Often girls and women are portrayed in restrictive and familiar tropes. Sweeney (2008) writes that because she has had multiple conversations about how girls and women are portrayed in the media with her own daughters they are “well versed in the vocabulary of Dumb Blonds, Valley Girls, Amazons, Cyberchicks, Warrior Women...” (p. xi). Another example comes in Orenstein’s book (2012) Cinderella Ate My Daughter: Dispatches from the Frontlines of the New Girlie-Girl Culture which chronicle’s her struggle with the ubiquity of princess culture and what it means for young girls. These tropes/typical genres are very instructive for girls in a way that is similar to self-help and/or girls’ magazines. Girls are consuming and contesting all types of cultural messages that endlessly surround them, e.g., how to look pretty,
how to get the boy and how to dress in a particular way. Unfortunately, there is no more popular and ubiquitous message for girls in films than that they are tokens and sidelin(e)d characters who help to move male plots along, rather than the authors of their own stories. In fact, "the manic pixie dream girl," (Rabin, 2007) is just such a trope. Her purpose “exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures.” (Rabin, 2007). Rabin (2014) recognized and coined the term in an “effort to call out cultural sexism,” although it ended up being taken up in the larger cultural context to accuse the phrase of “being sexist itself.” (para. 11). Its effect is to idealize a particular type of woman, which ultimately is a male fantasy parading as a realistic character. It begs the question though that if “the manic pixie dream girl” trope comes from the mind of the (male) sensitive writer-director, than what would happen if that director were female?

Once I opened up my understanding to the possibilities of film as a form of public discourse, I merged my two interests of public pedagogy and women/girls. The idea that film is a language that transmits ideas, mores, and/or narrow gendered roles led me back to the spring night in Seattle, where I had sat in the dark amazed by the power of a group of girls telling their stories. These girls’ stories differed from those typically created on and consumed through television and movie screens. In fact, they blew up any conceptions of how girls should be, and challenged the mainstream media by telling stories that detailed their own experiences through

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2 See Anita Sarkeesian’s http://www.feministfrequency.com/ “Tropes vs. Women #1” for more.
girl-produced media. Ultimately, the girls were (and are) changing the way others see girls, albeit, a little at a time.

I thought about what it would mean for girls to move from simply consuming culture in whatever form they wrestle with it as a recipient, i.e., a “cultural consumer” to creating cultural artifacts as a producer, i.e., enfolding them within the ranks of “cultural producers”? How would their films differ? If it was anything like what I had witnessed in that short evening watching films by girls and applauding their efforts to tell their stories, then I was in for an interesting ride. I wanted to experience the Reel Grrls curriculum to see how these girls engaged with the material. As a feminist who critiques media, I am concerned about the presence of messages of dominant femininity and heteronormativity in the American U.S. culture. The sexist and redundant messages that continue to dominate the main/male-stream (Warren, 1989) landscape limit and affect girls’ physical and emotional health, and general well-being. I recognize that girls take up these images in a variety of ways that express their agency, resistance and multiple understandings (Gonick, 2006; Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009, 2011; Ringrose, 2008). The Reel Grrls program is one of a handful of programs where girls are learning not only to ‘read’ the media (media literacy), but also how to have the hands-on technological knowledge to ‘talk back.’ As an institution they are successful in creating media. A quick search reveals that the Reel Grrls have respectively over 262 and 1,140 videos available for viewing on Vimeo and Youtube, and are growing. One of Reel Grrls’ programmatic goals is to move more girls into many of the underrepresented fields
of cinematic production. Another way to say that would be to move girls into the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) pipeline\(^3\), but specifically for film, so that their professional representation would be among all aspects of the production process, rather than solely in front of the camera. According to a report recently released from the USC Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism,

> Currently, only 7% of directors, 13% of writers, and 20% of producers are female. With such a dearth of female representation in front of and behind the camera, it’s a struggle to champion female stories and voices. \((R)\)esearch proves that female involvement in the creative process is imperative for creating greater gender balance before production even begins. There is a causal relationship between positive female portrayals and female content creators involved in production. \((W)\)hen even one woman writer works on a film, there is a 10.4% difference in screen time for female characters. Sadly, men outnumber women in key production roles by nearly 5 to 1.

\((\text{Smith, 2014})\)

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\(^3\) Harvey White coined the term “STEAM,” \((\text{Eger, 2010})\) recognizing that one must also include the arts among the core STEM competencies because it is the use and development of the arts and creativity that enables innovation for the future (See http://steam-notstem.com/).
If women were more involved in all levels of film production, women would not only have more parity among protagonists and screen time, but even the stories that are championed and told would be different. Overall, the films that Americans get to see would offer more variety in the marketplace.

**Undertaking a research project on feminism, girls and the media**

Although I cannot give a definition of feminism that will serve for all feminists, bell hooks’ (2005) definition that “feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression,” offers a solid place to begin (p. viii). I like to think of feminism as a gendered lens through which I view my everyday life and experiences. Indeed feminist scholars across various fields, e.g., anthropology, psychology and history, have been placing women at the heart of their research as “subjects of inquiry and as active agents in the gathering of knowledge” (Stacey & Thorne, 1993, p. 169). Placing women at the center “makes women’s experiences visible, reveals the sexist biases and tacitly male assumptions of traditional knowledge, and...opens the way to gendered understanding” (Stacey & Thorne, 1993, p. 169–170). I believe the gendered lens helps me to focus and filter information to see where and how women’s and girls’ experiences are affected. When viewing the world through a feminist lens, I believe American culture holds sexist and repressive myths of dominant femininity and heteronormative relations that flatten girls’ and women’s experiences and complexities in raced and classed ways.
When viewing American culture through a gendered lens, it becomes apparent that the media repeatedly portray women and girls in familiar ways that are then reified and become recognizable tropes. Although well-known tropes can be seen in all types of media, I am going to focus on examples from print media advertising (Kilbourne, 1999) and reality television (Pozner, 2010), a genre of television that attempts to function as a real-time documentation but is highly scripted and constructed, to illustrate how the tropes are visible in other types of media beyond film.

In terms of print advertising, Jean Kilbourne (1999) has been researching and lecturing how “advertising often turns people into objects...women’s bodies...are dismembered, packaged, and used to sell everything from chain saws to chewing gum” since the 1970s (p. 26). The crux of her argument is “(a)dvertising encourages us not only to objectify each other but also to feel that our most significant relationships are with the products that we buy” (Kilbourne, 1999, p. 27). How American society views and treats women (and girls) is very visible through this constant objectification, and the consequences are particularly harmful for them. “If the cumulative effect of some advertising...is to degrade women or to sexualize children or to increase eating disorders, surely that is not the intent of the advertisers. It is simply an unfortunate side effect.” (Kilbourne, 1999, p. 28).

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4 Her popular movie, Still Killing Us Softly: Advertising’s Image of Women (2010) is in its 4th iteration.
Advertising helps to shape values, mores and tastes, just as any other form of media.

As Pozner (2010) argues,

(m)edia is our most common agent of socialization, shaping and informing our collective ideas about people, politics, and public policy.

Pop culture images help us determine what to wear, whom to date, how to vote, how we feel about our bodies, how we see ourselves, and how we relate to racial, sexual, socioeconomic, and religious “others” (p. 97).

Using the frame of reality television to look at gendered relations, and the intersections of race and class, Pozner (2010) ultimately finds women are seen through four tropes: bitches, stupid, incompetent at work and failures at home, and gold diggers. Additionally, the poor are mocked and people of color are dehumanized; thus, many harmful stereotypes become reinforced through seemingly innocuous reality television (Pozner, 2010).

Pozner (2010) continues that “mass media is our prime purveyor of...cultural hegemony ... mean[ing] that media is largely responsible for how we know what we know...media shape what we think of as ‘the truth’ about ‘the way things are’” (p. 97). If American youth (ages 8–18 years) spend an estimated 53 hours per week engaged with some form of media (Rideout, 2010), what can that mean to adolescent girls who are seeing advertising and (most likely) watching some form of
reality television? I believe that navigating through the confusion and difficulties of being simultaneously thrown into a sexualized and yet potentially hostile space can be daunting for adolescent girls. Moreover, because girls’ bodies are maturing faster than at any other time in history, (e.g., their menarche is happening at younger ages,) they are “being treated as sexual beings at younger ages than perhaps ever before,” requiring that “girls become street-wise long before their mothers [ever] were” (Kearney, 2006, p. 129). Marketing has also shifted their tactics in “compressing” age markets such that they push products to younger children (Schor, 2004, p. 56). “It’s KAGOY…Kids Are Getting Older Younger. The social trends become part of the license for treating kids as if they were adults” (Schor, 2004, p. 56). However, spaces of agency and resistance can offer girls opportunities in which to create transformations. Historically, for many girls these agentic and transformational spaces typically have been their bedrooms. There also are other places that offer girls opportunities for agency and community, such as the Reel Grrls, Skate Like a Girl (where girls learn to skateboard), and Girls Rock Camp (where girls learn how to play music, form bands, and write songs,) that started in Portland, OR but can now be found in over 40 U.S. cities.

As Kearney notes, girls’ bedrooms have long been seen as sites of cultural production (2007). Historically, those bedrooms were places of consuming culture, whereas now, there has been a shift.

...(r)ecent developments in media technologies have contributed to an
increase in both the domestic cultural productivity of American girls and
the circulation of their media texts beyond their homes, which in turn have
significantly altered bedroom culture while also subverting the
public/private binary that has historically limited girls’ experiences.

(Kearney, 2007, p. 126–27)

For many girls these private spaces left them angry and alone, unable to “talk back”
to the media they were consuming. With the advent of Do-It-Yourself (DIY) Riot grrl
culture (Monem, 2007) of the 1990s and the development of inexpensive media
technologies, girls learned to engage in cultural production, not just consumption.

Kearney (2003) notes that a criticism of early media literacy programs is that they
taught girls how to critically ‘read’ the messages of media without teaching them the
tools to advance their understanding of how to do it. Without knowing how to create
and in a sense ‘talk back’ in the same medium, girls were isolated in private spaces
to be angry about it. Giroux (2001) and Bhabha (as cited by Khan, 1998) offer two
possibilities, respectively, for the power of resistance and the creation of a “Third
Space,” i.e., a place of possibility opened by rupturing hegemonic ideological
“signifiers and symbols,” and by re-appropriating or “rereading” them to create a
space of “unanticipated forms of historical agency” (Bhabha as cited by Khan, 1998).
As media literacy has shifted to a “promotionist” approach (Kearney, 2003, p. 19),
meaning their philosophy is to engage student learning by approaching “media as
social constructs which contain multiple and often contradictory messages (which) elicit multiple and often contradictory responses” (Kearney, 2003, p. 19), while respecting youth. Kearney posits “media educators see their role as one of facilitating, supporting, and promoting young people’s critical and creative media abilities” (Kearney, 2003, p. 19). Thus moving from a passive place of being a cultural consumer to an active cultural producer can be powerful role change.

One of the past assumptions for people interested in changing the cultural conversations about the ways girls and women are seen and how they see themselves was that they could simply exchange dominant ideological texts, with ones that are more “politically acceptable.” For example, once a girl “sees the veil of distortion lifted from her eyes, she too will want to engage in those activities from which she has been forbidden by virtue of her gender” (Walkerdine, 1990, p. 165). Feminist educational scholar Valerie Walkerdine, in her work with girls in the 1990s, uncovered a powerful discourse, the discourse of desire. She explains it is the manner of “how we come to want what we want” (Walkerdine, 1990, p. 164). Walkerdine seeks to engage the text actively to discover “the way in which images and other signs, verbal and non-verbal, are constructed” (Walkerdine, 1990, p. 164). Sweeney (2008) has taken the “discourse of desire” into the millennial generation by offering the idea of “Eye-Con.” Coulter (2012), in her review of Sweeney’s book, writes that the ‘eye-con’ consists of “seductive, hypertextual signifiers of girlhood that are continually reproduced within the corporate machinery of popular culture” (p. 129). Because of the cultural exchanges meshing between the girls’ cultural
productions and the popular culture media’s images, Coulter (2012) suggests past theorizing of girls as either “autonomous agents” or popular culture “dupes” are not that clearly drawn (p. 130). She continues,

...representations of girlhood are intertextual and layered upon older images, which then become fodder in the performance of a girl subjectivity. This perpetual reproduction of the collage of girlhood by real girls in the privacy of their own domestic spaces, is emblematic of the ways in which young girls navigate their daily performances of a girl subjectivity that is active, layered and deeply personal

(Coulter, 2012, p. 130).

Coulter (2012), similar to Kearney (2007), evokes the aforementioned ideas of private bedroom spaces with a more complex understanding of the possibilities not of strict one-dimensional transference, but as a site under negotiation of layered meanings. Even knowing these meanings are built upon multiple layers, however, if the majority of images shown are sexist, redundant, and limiting, how can one create space for something different?

It is unreasonable to expect that when a girl is faced with a larger peer group that she can be resistant to misogynistic messages without some support (Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007). In fact, Kelly and Pomerantz (2009) looked at “realistic” teen girlhood in popular culture and found that girls are portrayed in ways that limit
their “access to feminist and other oppositional discourses that name girls’ experience and link their feelings to the ongoing quest for gender justice.” (p. 1).

Thus, Mazzarella and Pecora (2007) call for “Collective Feminist Activism,” (Durham, 1999) which means that when girls are provided with mentoring, safe spaces, and a community, they are “able to resist these mediated messages” and can “transform ‘resistant reading’ into an act of affirmation and inclusion” (Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007, p. 112). We now live in a hypersexualized (Dines, 2010) image-saturated culture (Bordo, 1997) that has been attempting to kill off feminism for more than 30 years (Faludi, 1991); the demise of feminism has been forecasted so often that Pozner (2003) somewhat satirically called out the media on spreading the “false feminist death syndrome.” Are we living in the “aftermath” of feminism (McRobbie, 2008), or a “postfeminist” era (Tasker & Negra, 2007) that no longer requires the need for gender justice? Tropman (2011) writes that feminist pedagogy has shown to be “significant...as a means of addressing power relations...and...as a way of implementing the use of feminist critiques of representation.” (p. 137).

Recognizing the importance of feminist pedagogy, Tropman (2011) paired feminist pedagogy with media literacy in a theoretical intervention—feminist pedagogical media literacy (FPML) as a way to empower girls and young women (p. 136). I will argue that Reel Grrls embodies Tropman’s (2011) theoretical idea into a working reality with demonstrable results.
Research questions and situating the research

I conducted this feminist ethnographic study in 2006 with Reel Grrls, an afterschool hands-on media technology and media/literacy program for girls ages 14–18 in Seattle, Washington. I have always been interested in assisting women and girls to free themselves from violence in their lives, to stand up and tell their truth; in short to work for their/our equality in a world that far too often falls short of that goal.

Feminist inquiry, which aims “...to replace the ‘view from above’ with a ‘view from below,’” (Krenske & McKay, 2002, p. 268), reflects a decentering of hegemonic (i.e., dominant) beliefs, and also embodies the empowerment that can be found in feminist research. I find myself, as described by Reinharz (1992) to be at a crossroads: “Feminism supplies the perspective and the disciplines supply the method. The feminist researcher exists at their intersection” (p. 243). In this study I use a feminist lens (i.e., overlaying gender onto my analysis) to look at the pedagogical space within Reel Grrls.

In this dissertation, based on my experience with the Reel Grrls program, I seek to determine the ways in which a program with a feminist culture can offer a needed counterbalance to repressive and limiting messages for girls in mainstream media culture. In pursuit of this inquiry I intend to consider how feminist pedagogy is enacted within the program, and explore the following questions:

Q1: How does feminist pedagogy manifest itself in the Reel Grrls curriculum?
Q2: How do Reel Grrls participants seek to mediate, combat, and/or inform messages of who they are (or not), as they move from cultural consumers to cultural producers?

This research fills an unexplainable void, as there are few examples of this type of work in the scholarly literature that details girl filmmakers (See Bloustein, 1998; Gonick, 2003; Kearney, 2003, 2006, 2011; Sweeney, 2008). Mary Celeste Kearney is possibly the most thorough scholar who details girl filmmakers, in addition to providing information on a wide array of other girl-produced media. In *Girls Make Media*, Kearney (2006) details five programs around the United States that have media programs specifically designed to help girls learn the art of filmmaking. Reel Grrls is one of those she mentioned. Kathleen Sweeney (2008) also surveys girls’ media production. Although she does not limit herself to film, she also mentions the Reel Grrls program. Both Kearney (2006) and Sweeney (2008) provide an overview of the program and their accomplishments however they do not present a daily overview of the program as the participants experience it. In contrast, my study details a more detailed program overview of Reel Grrls over 12 weeks that offers working insight into the use of feminist pedagogical practices with youth.

This work will also add to the scholarship regarding feminist public pedagogy and the intersecting possibilities with media literacy. Tropman (2011) argues for a “theoretical intervention—feminist pedagogical media literacy (FPML)—that has
practical application,” i.e., a media literacy that can bring “empowerment for girls and young women” (p. 136). She gives examples of “practical applications” which she has found in the scholarly literature and I see this study of the Reel Grrls complimenting her work. Tropman (2011) rightly points out to the theoretical concerns with the liberating or empowering capabilities of these positions (Ellsworth, 1989), and the backlash that can occur for youth adopting feminist sensibilities. Ultimately, Tropman (2011) states, “FPML not only arms [girls] with ways to understand discourse and representation, but also gives them ways to create alternative and even hybrid artifacts that speak to the complications and contradictions therein, without forcing them to altogether reject such constructions” (p. 152). Tropman’s theoretical call has already been enacted by two different organizations. For example, Giffort (2011) details activities of a Girls’ Rock camp, that utilized an “implicit feminism” with the girls who participated in their program. Additionally, Sheridan-Rabideau (2008) detailed the workings and decisions of a feminist grassroots organization called GirlZone, which brought over four hundred hands-on workshops to girls while struggling with sharing their implicit and/or explicit connection to feminism with funders, supporters, and participants. This study adds to the existing literature of feminist praxis by specifically detailing the curriculum of film/media technology and media literacy, and their normative (i.e., tacit) feminist culture.

Much extant research addresses post-structural analyses of girls’ identity formation (Davies, 2003; Willett, 2008), the discursive formation of subjectivity (Gonick, 2003;
Reay, 2001; Ringrose, 2008;), connections between girls, social change and/or neoliberal anxieties (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005; Driscoll, 2008; Gonick, Renold, Ringrose, & Weems, 2009; Harris, 2004b; Ringrose, 2007; and uses of media and/or popular culture as sites of resistance and/or cultural production (Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2009; Driscoll, 2002; Kearney, 2002, 2003, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2011; Pomerantz & Kelly 2009; Ringrose, 2011; McRobbie, 1991;). This research, current and historical, is vital to the field of Girls’ Studies—inquiry across disciplines and institutions to conduct “girl-centered research” (Kearney, 2009, p. 1) and has helped to ground ethnographic studies with girls (Currie et al., 2009; Gonick, 2006; Pomerantz & Kelly, 2009;). What these authors have in common is a commitment to move ideas of “who the girls are” (Gonick, 2006) away from the psychological “confines of the girl-in-trouble perspective” that was prevalent in the 1990s (Coulter, 2012, p. 128), to identify the contextual ways in which “young girls navigate their daily performances of a girl subjectivity that is active, layered and deeply personal” (Coulter, 2012, p. 130). The aforementioned scholars and others (e.g., Sweeney, 2008) argue girls occupy a liminal space (Madison, 2005), one that “reveals the blurred tensions between girls’ own cultural productions and the productions of popular culture” (Coulter, 2012, p. 130). Further, these spaces often produce content that is more complex and interesting than the “one-dimensional images offered by a patriarchal Hollywood” (Coulter, 2012, p. 132). There are more sites (e.g., YouTube, Vimeo, Vine, Facebook) for these cultural productions to transpire in a multitude of media. This research adds to that dialogue by providing a

5 The aforementioned citations are not meant to be an exhaustive list, but do provide an indication of the breadth of the topics.
textual analysis of work produced by girls ages 14–18. Tropman (2011) suggests, "... girls in middle and high school benefit from earlier exposure to the existence of a relationship between feminism and media" (p. 143), which is also a cornerstone of the Reel Grrls program, even if that feminism is tacit knowledge.

A word on structure: Flashforward (prolepsis)

Within literature and film nomenclature, a flashforward is a narrative device that moves the story from the current moment to an expected or intended future point in time. A flashforward also reveals significant moments of the story that have yet to occur, but that soon will be revealed in greater detail (Flashforward, n.d.) This dissertation will have a significant flashforward – I will be revealing my findings of the data in the next chapters. As a film viewer, having knowledge of where the story is headed, allows the viewer to see how the threads of this story work together—moment by moment—to create the conclusion. Although unconventional for a dissertation, understanding the philosophical underpinnings and having the outcomes first are crucial to demonstrating key moments of the curriculum. I do this not as a literary scheme, but because I believe it is necessary to have the form and content of this dissertation parallel one another.

This dissertation is a work of feminist research. As such, the work itself will challenge patriarchal norms and the established ways of viewing our American culture. We will be “reading” the media with a lens focused on gender. The Reel
Grrls program—whose motto is “making media that matters”—emphasizes by its very nature that teaching girls the tools to make media are just as important as reading what is in the media. The girls instead of being passive recipients of knowledge are active participants in their learning of the media and their own capabilities. The form of the program and the content and structure are thought out for and with girls in mind so that they are supported and mentored. I am asking the reader for the same level of participation here, in order to understand the layering of the content within each curricular moment of the Reel Grrls program.

Chapter Overviews

My research explores Reel Grrls, a unique after-school media literacy and hands-on media technology program for girls ages 14–18 the Pacific Northwest. This task was accomplished through 12-weeks of ethnographic fieldwork and many months of data analysis and reflection. Chapter 2 has a detailed presentation of my methodological process, and my choice of qualitative research methodology, specifically why a feminist ethnography was selected as the best choice for this study. This chapter also delves into my connection with Reel Grrls and how being a volunteer lent me credibility as a researcher and allowed me access to the girls. I describe the study and the participants in greater detail, highlighting their “goals and norms” as a way to begin the discussion of my findings of an enmeshed feminist curriculum (EFC), i.e., a positive normative feminist culture. I utilize an unconventional approach in this dissertation in two ways: (1) by revealing in flashforward, cinematic fashion my findings, and (2) in the presentation of data in
multiple forms, e.g., a screenplay page or field notes full of thick description. Much like a film that shows the ending first, or jumps forward in time to key pieces of information and then works backwards, the EFC is revealed so that the reader can understand how the three aspects of the Reel Grrls program—(1) hands-on media technology, (2) media literacy, and (3) an *enmeshed feminist curriculum* work together. Chapter 3 begins by highlighting the literature of image-based culture and advertising, touching upon Berger’s (1972) notions of ‘glamour’ and Mulvey’s (1992) ‘male gaze,’ amongst other theorists to discuss what it means to look at mainstream media through a gendered lens. I also present my data of two exercises in the Reel Grrls program. ‘Bad Ads’ and ‘Media Girl,’ each work to highlight how the Reel Grrls program offers technical challenges and media literacy to combat the sexism and dominant femininity found in mainstream media, laying the foundation for the *enmeshed feminist curriculum*. Chapter 4 relates the curricular moment I call the “Turning Point” (week 6). This chapter begins with a brief history of media education and media literacy programs with an additional feminist analysis specifically focused on girls. I present data and analysis of other curricular moments in the Reel Grrls program, leading to a power shift I call ‘the turning point’—a rite of passage whereby the girls become responsible for their experiences in the program—which adds another layer to the *enmeshed feminist curriculum*. Chapter 5, S.C.A.N. (week 7) really speaks to the societal roles and limitations placed on girls and the place of access for all. As such, I highlight historical expectations and anxieties for girls from the 1990s through the present. Through further discussions of Riot Grrrl and ‘girl power,’ I describe the perceived shift to a neoliberal subject
where community has been stripped away in favor of a commercialized individualism, illuminating the importance of democracy and activism with youth involved in media. This information is important when looking at the technical training the Reel Grrls participants receive in a community access television studio. The chapter then details the girls’ experiences as they collaboratively respond to the prompt: “every girl has a right to...”. Chapter 6, “Pitch Day” (week 8), again builds on the EFC, by describing the girls’ chance to present their stories and raise their voices for their own ideas—a central issue in feminist research and pedagogy. I detail the girls’ process of presenting to the expert panel and working with their mentors. Because of the positive normative feminist environment created within the program, I analyze the persistent trope of the “mean girl” to show how this normalized narrative has become antithetical to building girl/feminist community. Lastly, I illustrate how “Pitch Day” brings together all the technical and media literacy aspects of the enmeshed feminist curriculum making it the real apex of the Reel Grrls program. In Chapter 7, using film critic and theorist David Bordwell’s (1989) four-component methodology, I analyze textually three of the Reel Grrls films in this chapter. Because this research does not address what individual Reel Grrls’ participants take away from this program, but rather addresses what was there for the taking (Martin & Kazyak, 2009), I explore how the girls’ films complicate what a ‘girl’ can be on-screen. I explore the three directors’ varied cinematic techniques, structure and/or editing to highlight their construction of a “girl’s gaze”(Kearney, 2003)—a vision that is created from girls’ lived experiences, rather than imitating stereotypical tropes in mainstream films. By textually
analyzing these three films, the viewer can get a sense for the larger implications of
girl-made media, the “girl gaze” (Kearney, 2003), and the importance of an
enmeshed feminist curriculum. Chapter 8 begins by contextualizing this cultural
moment of the Reel Grrls program and my study. It seems that society might be at a
cultural ‘tipping point’ for talking about the enmeshed feminist curriculum, as
conversations and interest in sexist stereotyping and limiting expectations for girls
are exploding within mainstream popular culture. The numbers of women working
within the film industry, however, remain at a low level of participation, which is
disheartening for girls wishing to continue within this industry. I then turn to my
reflections of the study, providing evidence for the enmeshed feminist curriculum
throughout the Reel Grrls program. Next, I situate this dissertation within the
scholarly literature that details the work of girl filmmakers, and the fields of girls’
studies and feminist pedagogy. I provide implications and ideas for future research,
with both the Reel Grrls participants and the enmeshed feminist curriculum. The
study’s limitations are also discussed in the chapter. Lastly, I provide a wrap-up of
the Reel Grrls program by talking about endings and beginnings.
Chapter 2: Overview of Reel Grrls and Methods

The Reel Grrls and the Researcher

I begin this chapter by detailing the Reel Grrls program – who they are and what they do. Chapter 2 describes my research questions and methodological process. In this chapter I discuss my choice of a qualitative research methodology, and explain specifically why I selected a feminist ethnography for this study. I also explore how being a volunteer afforded me credibility as a researcher and allowed me access to the girls. Next, in an unconventional flash-forward, a technique used in film to jump past the natural progression of events in the narrative to a future moment in time, I reveal the results and discussion of my dissertation. In essence, I flash-forward in order to present my findings about the inherent and unspoken feminist component of the Reel Grrls program. I call this feminist component an enmeshed feminist curriculum (EFC). The EFC creates a normative feminist reality for the girls who participate in the program and builds into the “Collective Feminist Activism” (Durham, 1999) called forth by other feminists, e.g., Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007), which is described fully in Chapter 7.

Reel Grrls Program: The History

Malory Graham started The Reel Grrls\(^6\) program in the Pacific Northwest in 2001 as a collaborative program with assistance from 911 Media Arts (a non-profit organization supporting creative use of media), The Metrocenter YMCA, and KCTS

\(^6\) http://www.reelgrrls.org/; 911 Media Arts (http://media911.org); Seattle YMCA (http://www.seattlemca.org/Pages/Welcome.aspx); and KCTS (http://kcts9.org/)
(Seattle’s Public Broadcasting station-affiliate). As a media professional offering technology training workshops in schools, Graham became disconcerted and dismayed after seeing girls repeatedly being “the talent” (i.e., standing in front of the camera) while the boys created, designed and filmed the shoots. She believed that if a safe space for girls could be created in which they could explore their curiosity to stand behind the camera, as well as design their own films, the experience could be powerful for them. “Reel Grrls addresses the unique needs of girls to critique media images and to explore technology in a safe, open environment, mentored by a network of multicultural women media professionals so that they can create their own media” (Reel Grrls, 2005). Graham was right. By 2006, the program’s fifth year, Reel Grrls had trained over 260 girls in their hands-on media technology and media literacy program.

Believing that girls need to “start looking critically at the media they consume,” Reel Grrls makes media literacy a “cornerstone” of the program (Reel Grrls, 2005). For a more in-depth discussion of media literacy, please see Chapter 4. The Reel Grrls program defines media literacy in their literature as “the ability to interpret and create personal meaning from the thousands of verbal and visual symbols absorbed through TV, radio, computers, newspapers, magazines, and advertising” (Reel Grrls, 2005). Their literature highlights the following about girls and media:

Did you know...
Most girls in the United States will have watched 5,000 hours of television before entering kindergarten (Kaplan). As a result, girls are exposed to over 20,000 TV commercials a year (Stoneman & Brody). By the time a girl is 16 years old, she will
have spent more time watching television than going to school (Baslow)

(Did you know..., n.d.)

With that much exposure to media, the aforementioned information certainly underscores the need for girls to be critical media consumers. However, the program functions as a balancing act between the two components of media literacy and hands-on media technology training. The balancing act between these two components is explained in great depth in chapter 4.

The Reel Grrls program for girls ages 14–18 is novel in that they approach girls at a critical moment, i.e., “exactly at the age they are prone to drop[ing] out due to lack of interest [in technology]” or when other barriers to their entry seem strong (Reel Grrls, 2005). This phenomenon is underscored by the fact that girls who often face a lack of support from teachers and/or endure sexual harassment by their peers, tend to drop out of math and science programs as potential career goals (Hill, Corbett, & St. Rose, 2010). There are many technical aspects of filmmaking where individuals benefit from having a background in STEM programs. Kearney (2006) posits film is seen as a masculine realm—from the heavy camera equipment carried by male bodies to the shops where film equipment is sold that are presided over by men who “...use their technical knowledge and jargon to reinforce their masculinity, bond with other men, and exclude females” (p. 202). Reel Grrls is a counterpoint to the masculinized world of film. For more information on the masculinized world of film, see Kearney (2006), p. 191–206, where she explains her ideas in more depth.
Indeed, Kearney (2006) writes “(t)he historical male dominance and thus masculinizing of filmmaking roles, technology, spaces, discourse, and training have resulted in many girls having minimal desire to engage in this form of communication and creative expression” (p. 206). Graham structured the Reel Grrls program to focus specifically on hands-on learning, so that girls would be prepared for these male dominated environments, (e.g., be familiar with all aspects of a video camera or know which lights are needed for a particular shot and how to set them up). In order to be proficient, girls need to know their equipment, almost better than boys, if they are to be taken seriously (M. Graham, personal communication, November 5, 2005). Women and girls not only need to enter into these predominately male spaces, but also in some cases they need to break through the door.

The Reel Grrls program strives to include all girls, particularly those from neighborhoods and schools that do not otherwise have access to technology and/or arts-based programs due to lack of funding. Of the girls served in the program over the four years, more than 60% of girls come from “under-represented or low-income backgrounds” (Reel Grrls, 2005). Although the median household income in 2006 was $63,489, which includes the City of Seattle (Office of the Executive, 2011), the program reaches throughout all of King County, Washington to areas that have lower household incomes. To assist in their funding efforts so that any girl who wants to participate can and will not be turned away due to lack of financial
standing. The Reel Grrls (http://www.reelgrrls.org) have received numerous local grants and support from private foundations and public corporations.

The program also includes girls who have “struggled with eating disorders, self-mutilation [i.e., cutting], or low self-esteem and find the program to be a place where they can get support to stop criticizing themselves and instead look critically at the media they consume” (Reel Grrls, 2005). Essentially, within the context of the Reel Grrls program, the girls learn to turn their gaze outward recognizing the sexism of their surrounding culture. The participants get a chance to work out their thoughts, feelings and ideas within a supportive group that provides space to explore the many messages girls receive from society. Rather than turning their gaze inward upon themselves, manifested in the personalized struggles mentioned above (i.e., eating disorders, self-mutilation, cutting, etc.), in an individualized and negative fashion, the girls take control of a medium that gives them a larger platform to create their own media.

Upon completion of the Reel Grrls program, the girls have produce personal films that are then placed upon one reel and shown locally to the public in local venues, their families and friends. Often, the films are submitted and sometimes screened at national and international film festivals, such as Sundance Film Festival, The Hong Kong and Korean International Film Festival. Some films have garnered awards at the aforementioned festivals and endorsements from the American Library Association, among other organizations.
Even if their films do not go on to win awards at film festivals, there is a significant and immediate impact the night of their screening. As Lucia, the co-facilitator, told me,

the girls always underestimate the power of putting their work in front of the public. It gives them a boost of self-esteem—they’re beaming like celebrities for the night. That is a huge moment for the girls, they’re validated when someone understands them, laughs at something they created; people can identify with them. They (the girls) don’t realize going into it (the program). They’re pretty blown away at the end.

(Rattner, field notes, February 2, 2006).

I have been in the audience of a public screening—as described in Chapter 1—and witnessed the impact of the films on those audience members, the accolades given to the girls and their smiles, I knew that I wanted to understand this feminist program and explore their curriculum, the girls and their films. In the next section, I discuss my research questions and my research methodology, both of which are grounded in feminist ethnography.
Research Questions and Feminist Ethnography

In this dissertation, based on my experience with the Reel Grrls program, I seek to determine the ways in which a program with a feminist culture can offer a counterbalance to repressive and limiting messages for girls in mainstream media culture. In pursuit of this inquiry I intend to consider how feminist pedagogy is enacted within the program, and explore the following questions:

Q1: How does feminist pedagogy manifest itself in the Reel Grrls curriculum?
Q2: How do Reel Grrls participants seek to mediate, combat, and/or inform messages of who they are (or not), as they move from cultural consumers to cultural producers?

The questions above lend themselves to a qualitative investigation, specifically through a feminist ethnography (Reinharz, 1992) and participant observation (Merriam, 2002). The data I collect and analyze to respond to the research questions is comprised of material collected as a researcher with the Reel Grrls program (Rattner, 2006) in the role of participant observer. Further, I also respond to the research questions by analyzing curricular moments within the Reel Grrls program, which are detailed within subsequent chapters (Figure 2.2).

As stated in Chapter 1, I cannot give a definition of feminism that will serve for all feminists, however, bell hooks’ (2005) definition that “feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression,” offers a solid place to begin (p. viii).
When I use the term feminist, it means using a gendered lens, i.e., putting women at the center, when I look at the world. An ethnography is a methodology that “involves an ongoing attempt to place specific encounters, events, and understandings into a fuller, more meaningful context,” which becomes both “...a process and a product” (Tedlock, 2000, p. 455). The process of the ethnography involves fieldwork, descriptions, interpretations and representations of human lives, (Tedlock, 2000, p. 455), that produce a contextualized and situated understanding of those lives. For my research, it means having a gendered lens while exploring those lives.

My study utilized a feminist ethnography (Reinharz, 1992), which is a multi-method approach involving observation, limited participation, and focus group interviewing (p. 46). A feminist ethnography calls for extensive fieldwork by the researcher to capture the “language spoken in that setting, first-hand participation in some of the activities that take place there, and most critically, a deep reliance on intensive work” (Merriam & Assoc., 2002, p. 237). Feminist researchers have long recognized that positivist research had an androcentric focus that skewed research and knowledge in particular directions, i.e., in almost every discipline, men were viewed as the standard by which women were judged by a “female otherness” (Tavris, 1992, p. 17). This is also the case for those interested in researching girls. Kearney (2009) writes, “...we might consider how the reproduction of patriarchal ideologies via the historical male dominance of academia contributed to the persistent construction of males as normative in all forms of research, including those that were youth-based”
(p. 4). Feminists felt understanding women’s experiences from their point of view “corrects a major bias of non-feminist participant observations that trivializes females’ activities and thoughts...” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 52). This study, as akin to other feminist ethnographers (e.g., Gonick, 2003), interprets girls’ behavior as shaped by their social context rather than as context free or rooted in anatomy, personality, or social class (Reinharz, 1992).

As I look at the participants moving from being cultural consumers to cultural producers, I am interested in their process through the Reel Grrls curriculum. However, I will be looking at the girls’ experiences within the larger framework of the curriculum. The research, then, aims to address what was there for the taking within the Reel Grrls curriculum (Martin & Kazyak, 2009). This research does not address what individual Reel Grrls’ participants take away from this program. I problematize and analyze the Reel Grrls program and the girls’ productions and creations within the framework of the Reel Grrls Curriculum.

Situation the Researcher

As a feminist researcher, it is important to put myself in the research such that my experiences are considered to be an important resource as it informed my research and my questions (Zaslow, 2009). During this study, I worked with the belief of “research as responsibility” (Dillard, 2000). In this approach, research is not about developing a “recipe” between a detached researcher (knower) and the researched (known), but rather as a commitment to the communities and people “being
engaged in the inquiry” (Dillard, 2000, p. 663). In this case, it means my interpretation comes with a strong commitment to my sense of being a feminist, a woman and in assisting girls to navigate the contradictory messages they traverse within our society.

As Reinharz (1992) suggests, “(c)ertain field sites are particularly assessable to female ethnographers that are either inaccessible or uninteresting to male ethnographers” (p. 55). As a woman roughly the same age as the ReelGrrl founder and mentors, I had access to the Reel Grrls afforded to me by my gender and age, which made my presence possible and less of a distraction to the girls than had I been a male researcher in an all-female environment. When I began this research I was 38 years old, and had often been mistaken for a woman in my late twenties. During the research, I dressed casually and tried to respectfully engage the girls in what I believed to be a friendly, easy-going manner. I knew one of the girls, “Anna” from being a volunteer in the Reel Grrls Conference the previous Fall, so she seemed to respond positively to me. “Anna” is a pseudonym that the participant chose for herself. In the next section there is more information about the girls who participated in focus group of the study, Table 2.1.

However, I do not know how the girls perceived my presence in general. I noticed in my interactions with the girls initially that they were not completely comfortable with me in the beginning, even though I was present from the very first day of the program, when the girls attended their 8-hour workshop. For example while the
girls were interactive with other mentors and the facilitators, they would not engage with me unless I ventured a question or comment, even just to say hello. As a participant observer (Merriam, 2002), this would seem ideal, as I was able to observe and be present to what was happening in the program. However, I wanted to try to be as unobtrusive as possible so as not to disrupt the program, but I also wanted the girls to be comfortable in my presence. It was not until at least three weeks into the program on February 21, 2006, when I noted in my field notes that one of the girls seemed excited, smiled and talked to me without my prompting her to do so. I believe my presence was somewhat confusing for the girls, as my role was so different from everyone else in the room. I was present, but not a part of the action. I was not associated with the director or facilitators, or even the mentors and yet, I was there. For example, before every meeting the girls had a check-in process—namely going around the circle and answering the question of the day—I was always skipped. So I was present and the girls had been informed that I was studying the Reel Grrl program, but I was not involved. Most of the girls did not know me, beyond my name as they did with the other facilitators whom they interacted with on a regular basis. I was pregnant during the research period, and I noticed curiously, that as I became visibly larger—during my third trimester—the girls were more interested in my presence. They seemed to want to interact with me more, (e.g., asking me questions about my pregnancy, if I had chosen baby names, what it felt like to be pregnant, and my future baby in general (Rattner, field notes, March 21, 2005)). I cannot be sure that it was the pregnancy or the fact that the girls had become more comfortable with me after almost two months of the program.
However, they seemed very animated when asking about the baby, telling stories they had heard about pregnancy, or sharing other baby-related questions, theories, and images with me (Rattner, field notes, March 21, 2005).

The Ask and Lead Up

On September 15, 2005, I met with the co-facilitator is the Reel Grrls Program, Lucia Ramirez at her downtown Seattle office of the YMCA, to ask permission to conduct my doctoral research with their organization. I explained that I had attended one of their public screenings, and that I wished to study the curriculum to see what happens for girls as they move from being cultural consumers to cultural producers. Lucia, and later Malory Graham, were eager for me to join the Reel Grrl Program as their researcher. I stated that I would be conducting my research on their 12-week Spring program. I explained that I wished to film the entire program, conduct pre- and post-focus groups with some or all of the girls, and interview the co-facilitators, Lucia and (founder) Malory Graham. I was given permission and because I was thankful for their agreement to conduct my research, I made myself available to volunteer or assist them beforehand, as February was six months away.

I was quickly drafted as a volunteer for their program in ways I had not expected. I was asked to contact several local high schools to recruit girls to the Reel Grrls’ Fall Conference. I spent approximately two or three hours contacting administrators and teachers to talk about the Reel Grrls program and the opportunity for their female students to attend the Conference. Additionally, I attended a fundraising event for
the program on October 13, 2005 where I listened to Board members and parents of former participants speak to the success of the program. The Reel Grrls’ Board President relayed “what an amazing program Reel Grrls is...how I wish this program had been around when I was young. It would’ve made a huge difference in my life and I believe that I’d be doing something totally different if it had been around for me” (Rattner, field notes, October 13, 2005). I noted specifically that I needed to be careful about over-identification with the girls (when I conducted my research), who they are and who I am, or reminiscing about what I was like at their age (Rattner, field notes, October 13, 2005).

I also attended a volunteer training to be a chaperone for the Reel Grrls Conference Weekend for 50 girls at Camp Killoqua in Standwood, WA. As a volunteer working with minors at the YMCA of Seattle, I had to pass a Washington State background check and be approved by the United Way of King County, both of which happened. At the volunteer training, I noted that when all the Reel Grrls mentors were separated from the rest of the general YMCA volunteers, we were left with a dynamic group of women artists. Lucia, who lead the training, stressed that it was important to “meet girls where they are” (Rattner, field notes, October 19, 2005). She continued “most girls question, is Reel Grrls about feminism or bra burning?” (Rattner, field notes, October 19, 2005) One of the mentors replied, “no, bras are too expensive” which elicited some laughs from the group (Rattner, field notes, October 19, 2005). Lucia continued to describe how she creates a safe space for the girls to express their interests while in participating in a large group of strangers.
Reel Grrls tries to put girls at ease. This weekend is about expressing the self and also trying new things. I tell the girls they have a ‘cool card’ in their back pocket. Everyone has this card and should take it out, so everyone is cool and we don’t have to worry about it while we’re here doing what we do. For mentors it is also important to also model this for the girls—don’t be afraid of new things, jump in and try new things. Also notice if any girls seem shy, try to involve them.

(Lucia Ramirez, field notes, October 19, 2005).

For the Fall Conference weekend, I was present as an adult chaperone. I did not run any of the workshops or activities, but I did participate as a member of the group, and I did sleep in a cabin of eight girls (one of which was Anna, as previously mentioned), with another mentor, who was also present for the 12-week Spring program.

The Study Itself

The study with the Reel Grrls program ran for 12-weeks from February 3, 2006—April 25, 2006. See Figure 2.1 for an overview of the program, including the weekly instructional focus, optional Thursday meetings, and a daily breakdown for the editing week in April. This study was conducted with 14 girls, ages 14–18 (10 Caucasian, two African-American, one South East Asian, one Japanese) from across
King County, Washington. Although the group is not very diverse racially and ethnically, it does mirror the larger demographic population of Seattle. According to the 2010 Census, Seattle is 69% Caucasian, 14% Asian, and 8% African-American; 6.6% Hispanic or Latino (Suigmura, 2010). When I looked at Census data from 2000 and 2010, the racial breakdown was roughly the same, so I am assuming that there was not a noticeable difference in 2006. All of the girls agreed to be filmed for my research, but a smaller subset of six girls also consented to take part in two two-hour focus group interviews. During the course of the 12-week program, when the girls divided into smaller groups for specific activities, I chose the group that contained at least one of the subset of six to observe and film. The six girls who consented for the smaller focus groups are: Anna, Jones, Ashlee, Chelsi, Seseanté, and Sudha. See Table 2.1 for the demographic data that corresponds to each of these girls, whose names have all been changed to pseudonyms they selected. For each girl there is a listing of her name, age, race/ethnicity, prior media experience, future career aspirations, and media they like, e.g., movies, televisions programs. For example, Anna is an 18-year-old Caucasian girl, who has had some prior film and video experiences and wants to continue working with film as either a film reporter or program director for her future career goals. Some of her favorite media she enjoyed were the movies, Crash and The Notebook, television program, American Idol, and Seventeen Magazine.

All the girls attended a 7-hour “kick off” workshop on February 4, 2006, in addition to the regularly scheduled program of 2.5 hours for 11 weeks (February 7, 2006 to
April 25, 2006). The week of April 10–14, 2006 consisted of full days from 10a.m. to 4p.m. that towards the end of the week became 6-hour editing days. Some of the girls spent a night or two during those editing sessions, as the week coincided with their Spring Break. Optional meetings on a second day (on Thursdays) for 2.5 hours were offered for those who wished to attend. As previously mentioned, this information can be viewed in Figure 2.1

On February 3, 2006, 7:30–9:00 p.m., the Reel Grrls gathered at the YMCA for an evening “kick Off Reception” to launch the program for “Mentors, Grrls & Families” (Reel Grrls2 Schedule, Reel Grrls, 2006). Malory Graham, founder, introduced the program and walked participants and their parents through the program and elements of what the girls would be learning. Graham told the people in the room that they would be “looking at mainstream media and how it affects you” (Rattner, field notes, February 3, 2006). She told the crowd that “we live in a media saturated culture. What if you saw media that was important to you rather than ads?” (Rattner, field notes, February 3, 2006). The evening allowed parents and participants to ask any last minute questions, and to welcome the new group of girls. Lucia, who was introduced as the Program Director, told the girls that Reel Grrls is a “small program and that they will get to know one another …it kind of becomes a family…and they become very close knit at the end” (Rattner, field notes, February 3, 2006). Malory told the girls that they had entered into a commitment by being in this program, “We expect a lot from you and also really invest in you as well” (Rattner, field notes, February 3, 2006). The evening basically was a forum for
parents and participants to get a feeling for what would be happening, get any
questions asked, listen to testimonials, and view some of the past films made during
this program. There seemed to be an excitement in the air that night.

The girls next came together on Saturday, February 4, 2006, from 10a.m. to 5p.m. for
an all-day training session. The girls were busy from the moment they set foot into
the YMCA building. Their activities included making binder covers, welcomes and
ice-breakers, overviews of the program and the video production process. They
attended workshops in camera basics, lighting and design, audio and interviewing
skills. One of the sections I want to highlight is their session on “Goals & Norms” (see
Figure 2.3).
Figure 2.3: Pictures of Reel Grrls Goals and Shared Norms. The girls individually and collectively decided what their goals and norms would be for the Reel Grrls program.

**Reel Grrl Goals**
- develop tech skills for films/music videos
- say something
- future skills
- **FUN!**
- develop artistic freedom
- make friends
- meet new ppl/same interests
- develop skills for career
- to learn from everyone
- women in power/academy award (directing)
- express yourself
- show the world that girls are more than just pretty bodies
- **Make Movies!**

**GROUP Norms**
- support each others ideas
- honesty
- respectfull constructive criticism
- listen
- open minded to new ideas
- ask questions
- respect differences
- stay focused & present
- admit what you don't know
- **be yourself!**
Goals and Norms

Lucia worked hard to establish some positive group dynamics for this group of strangers. When the girls were talking about their goals for the program, Lucia mentioned that she and Malory hoped for the program to be successful and fun for the participants, stating, “it's what you make it, and it's different every year” (Rattner, field notes, February 4, 2006). She asked the girls to think about what were their “personal goals” and “what did they need to do to work”? (Rattner, field notes, February 4, 2006). In order to record their discussion, the girls and Lucia engaged in a discussion of goals and norms, and recorded their responses on large pieces of paper using colored markers (Figure 2.3, see above).

The girls were asked to come up with some of their goals for this year’s program. The majority of the answers from the girls included statements such as, “develop tech skills for films/music videos, say something, FUN!, make friends (which was contributed by Ashlee) and learn from everyone in the group.” Statements like the aforementioned, point to expected experiences that many girls would answer. They seem to be more general, i.e., any participant (boy or girl) might come up with these answers, but what is unique here are some of these other comments. Another category of statements seemed to get at the Enmeshed Feminist Curriculum’s perspectives (e.g., “show the world that girls are more than just pretty bodies”) or go beyond the technical and interactional statements to issues of power and possibility, e.g., “Women in power/academy award (directing).” Actually, what was
stated by Jones in the conversation in which these goals and norms were created, was “Feminist transcend(ence) over male-dominated power” which was truncated by Lucia to what was listed (Rattner, field notes, February 4, 2006). I am not sure if she left off “feminist” because she was worried it might impact some of the other girls, or as I suspect, she was moving fast to capture their thoughts in a rapidly shifting group effort. However, as a self-identified feminist looking for signs of feminism in the Reel Grrls program, I was surprised and delighted to hear a girl state this on the very first day. This feminist goal and also “show the world that girls are more than just pretty bodies” (stated by Anna) highlights the range of comments and the wide diversity among the girls’ knowledge and experiences with media and media literacy before coming to the Reel Grrls program.

The development and use of “Group Norms” was also an important piece of the Reel Grrls program, in that it stated clearly for the girls how to treat one another and what was expected when they came to Reel Grrls. I believe the development and construction of group norms to be a strong moment not only of group dynamics, but also of creating a positive safe environment. Although the creation of a positive safe environment is discussed in later chapters, here it serves as a glimpse into the setting of the foundation of the Enmeshed Feminist Curriculum and development of an awareness of the girls’ sense of responsibility talked about in Chapter 4, Turning Point. Lucia, as she stated in the volunteer training, told the girls that it was “Ok to

7 Another way to explore the differences among the girls is to look at Table 2.1, where their experiences and some preferences are listed.
be where you are” and the most important thing for the girls was “to Be Yourself!” Once the list was completed, Lucia read the entire list (from “support each others ideas” to “Be Yourself”) and instructed that this was the “Reel Grrls Oath.” Each girl had to promise to strive to achieve all the listed goals while at the program and hold each other accountable to these goals, as well. Then each girl had to raise her hand to signify agreement. Not only was the program uncompromising in this promise, but took very seriously the girls’ creation of a safe space, which runs counter to the trope of the “mean girl” often suggested when groups of girls get together. This “mean girl” trope is discussed in Chapter 6.

Throughout the day, as the girls moved through workshops, ate their snacks and their lunches, created their personal Reel Grrls binders, and interacted with each other, mentors, and Lucia and Malory, I noted that they were laughing, talking, and sharing. As noted by Hains (2012), “when an adult is willing to listen — nonjudgmentally, with sincere interest....girls have a lot to say” (p. 120). This seemed to be the case, and I hoped they would say much to me.

Before the end of the day, the girls came back together in one large group. Malory introduced me to the girls as a special guest who was going to be observing the program as part of a program evaluation. I introduced myself to the girls and explained that I was a graduate student interested in looking at the RG program and asked if they would all consent to being filmed for my research. I told the girls that I would be filming the entire program and observing them as the participated in the
program. The girls had two decisions to make: (1) If I could film them for the research, and (2) if they wanted to be part of the smaller focus group research, where we would meet in two focus groups. Once group would take place in the beginning of the program, and then again at the end to discuss the Reel Grrls program and thoughts on media.

This study had been reviewed and approved by the Pennsylvania State University's Office for Research Protections for use with human participants. In working with minors, there is always an ethical concern for their safety and well-being; however, I observed a program for which they voluntarily enrolled and were actively involved. Therefore, my research gathered information on their lives, which did not incur any additional hardships outside of their daily living experiences. Additionally, every effort was made to ensure their anonymity. Each girl who participated in the study was asked to choose her own pseudonym and fill out some demographic data. (As stated in Table 2.1).

**Reflexive Analysis and Emergent Data**

Ultimately, ethnographies are the product of “continual theorizing and research practice” (Skeggs, 1994, p. 73). Data analysis and theorizing was a constant process during this research. Because the data analysis and data collection happened simultaneously, as researcher I had to be reflective while working, organizing and discovering what the data had to tell me (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 127). Listening to what the data “has to tell you” (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 127) is also known as
emergent theme methodology, and requires an inductive process whereby themes emerge from the data themselves, rather than through a set of prescribed ideas or categories (Williams, 2008). My reflexive process evolved through the gathering and questioning of the data which included participant observations, two focus groups, textual analysis and interviews. Themes and meanings emerged from this data analysis that led me to a greater understanding of the data and the Reel Grrls curriculum (Figure 2.4: Informational Flow of Qualitative Analysis and Interpretation). The data consists of over 158 pages of field notes, over 240 minutes of videotapes, 73 hours of “classroom” time, the Reel Grrls’ videos (13 videos produced by Reel Girls, the compilation of their films, which encompassed 60 minutes watched over 20 times, and countless hours and years spent (re)-reading field notes from 2005–2015 to compile emergent themes.

Throughout the analysis and research process, I questioned reflexively as a means to explore whether the understandings I generated were trustworthy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I employed triangulation as a means of “checking data obtained by a variety of methods” (Ely et al., 1991, p. 96). Triangulation is a process that illuminates evidence gathered by different methods or that occurs with the same method but over a period of time (Ely et al., 1991, p. 96). I used the processes of triangulation by analyzing the data and triangulating with emergent theme methodology (see Chapter 1) (Denzin, 1978; Janesick, 2000) through the theoretical perspectives of public pedagogy (Burdick, Sandlin, & O’Malley, 2013; Giroux, 2001 and 2002;) and feminist theory (hooks, 2000; Luke, 1994).
For the qualitative educational researcher, the issue is not one of generalizability or replicability, because the point of the research is to “uncover the meaning of events in individuals’ lives” (Janesick, 2000, p. 394), not to be able to generalize to a particular population. I fully recognize that I have uncovered “situated knowledge” (Haraway, 1991), and that my research is my best interpretation of the curriculum at this moment and the experiences of those at this particular time. My research with Reel Grrls is not meant to be a grand truth. Particularly within the field of Girls’ Studies, it is important to remember that who the girls are depends on the context, (i.e., these particular girls cannot be a stand in for how all girls are, act, live, make meaning (Gonick, 2003)). Similarly, Feminist Media Researcher and Girls’ Studies Scholar Emilie Zaslow (2009) notes there can be no generalizations for “all girls” but there are common experiences to be explored growing up female in American society within media culture (p. 46). I would concur that growing up female within a sexist and misogynist culture can lead to similar experiences for girls who grow up in that same context, particularly as reflected in the images created and tropes repeated within mainstream media culture.

Presentation of Data

The presentation of the data for this dissertation, as described in Chapter 1, is unconventional and idiosyncratic. Because I intend to have the form and content of this dissertation parallel one another, I believe understanding the philosophical
underpinnings of feminism and the enmeshed feminist curriculum and having the outcomes and implications of the data analysis presented first are crucial to understanding and demonstrating key moments of the curriculum. This approach is similar to a flashforward in a film. Therefore, the chapters of the dissertation follow within specifically identified curricular moments of the Reel Grrls curriculum where the *Enmeshed Feminist Curriculum* comes to a noticeable apex, and are explored in a chronological order (Figure 2.2), rather than in conventional dissertation sequence, i.e., problem statement, literature review, methodology, analysis and implications. Therefore, in the unconventional approach taken in this dissertation, each chapter, then, is a recounting of a specific—or several—curricular moment(s). So, it follows that the data for each chapter presented is unique. Each of the data chapters (3–6) follows a similar general structure and is comprised of each of these components: a screenplay page, field notes, quotations from girls, mentors and facilitators, and researcher recollections. The discussions of the data are taken up through my interpretations and theorizing, supported by the review of literature presented within each chapter. Through these presentations the reader is privy to the words and accounts of individual girls, the mentors, facilitators and the Reel Grrls’ founder. Chapter 7 is the only chapter with a different structure from the others, as it also includes textual analysis of the girls’ productions.

Much like watching an interesting film, the reader of this dissertation is an active participant experiencing the Reel Grrls’ journey, anticipating intricate plot twists, uncovering multilayered story lines, and discovering intriguing character
development. As in a fast-driving, absorbing film, the reader's mind is working to reveal the connections among the data and theorizing as if the Reel Grrls' participants, mentors, facilitators and founder were characters upon the screen of their own action film to be puzzled, explored and understood.

The Flashforward

As mentioned previously, The Reel Grrls program operates on two levels—that is, (1) teaching hands-on media technology capabilities and (2) thinking critically about the media for literacy and/or understanding. The data of the specific program are revealed through the subsequent chapters in the form of field note excerpts, quotations, and rich descriptions. With each technological challenge the girls faced, they worked to incorporate both aspects of the program. However, what I also found was an enmeshed feminist curriculum (EFC) woven within every aspect of the program; as a result of being woven into the program, the EFC created a positive normative feminist culture. The relationships among these three aspects are illustrated in Figure 2.2. I liken the Reel Grrls curriculum to being a three-legged stool: (1) hands-on media technology, (2) media literacy, and (3) an enmeshed feminist curriculum. Each leg is of vital importance to the stability of the program. Without each leg, the stool will fall. I believe this three-legged structure has been one key to the program’s success with girls.

The Enmeshed Feminist Curriculum (EFC) is unstated within the official documents of the Reel Grrl program, yet is as much a part and focus of their curriculum as is the
hands-on media technology and media literacy. Although the EFC is not acknowledged officially, it is part of the curriculum that the facilitators and mentors have created by virtue of who they are and what they do. The EFC is an integral piece of the Reel Grrls curriculum that I uncovered through the research process of gathering the ethnographic data, analyzing that data for emergent themes and triangulating my interpretations through reflexive practices and through the data itself. This process is how I came to understand and recognize the enmeshed feminist curriculum throughout the Reel Grrls program (Figure 2.5). The EFC is not talked about explicitly among mentors, student participants and the founder—although Malory mentioned that they try to show the girls things they would not otherwise have a chance to see—nor is it mentioned officially (on their website or curriculum documents), but rather becomes a part of the operational curriculum of the program. For the Reel Grrls, the EFC is the third aspect that encompasses the whole curricular framework.

**Conclusion**

I believe these girls of Reel Grrls who were the subjects of my research have much to tell about the types of messages they read in the main/male-stream media (Warren, 1989). The Reel Grrls are on the frontlines of doing media work with girls within a supportive community of tacit feminist understanding. By its very nature Reel Grrls works within a culture of social responsibility and social justice. I have documented and analyzed the Reel Grrl program to bring light to a process that might be useful for others to emulate or incorporate. Sociologist Bud Hall (1992) writes,
“Participatory research as a tool...uses...part of a variety of strategies and methods for the conduct of their work....Countless groups make use of processes that resemble participatory research everyday without naming it or certainly without asking for outside validation of the knowledge that is produced” (p. 25). In other words, the Reel Grrls are a group of individuals producing feminist knowledge. By using feminist ethnography to document the experiences of Reel Grrls participants, I have been able to describe their explorations and witness them as they affirm their own stories.

As educational theorist Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2002) notes, “[sharing] is an individual and communal process that celebrates the mystery of life and the journey that each of us takes. Celebration is a way of spreading the lights around” (p. 145). I hope that this dissertation can assist these girls and the Reel Grrls program by holding an interpretive mirror into their reflected lights—i.e., a mirror that will shine a light on the Reel Grrls curriculum, the girls’ general experiences within the program and their cultural productions to make sense of the possibilities of feminist public pedagogy.
Figure 2.1 shows the Reel Grrls Master Schedule 2006, which lists the dates, times, and places for the 12-week program and identifies the instructional focus for each week. Additional hours find themselves into the curriculum through optional Thursday meetings, and in April when the girls meet for full days due to their Spring break schedule.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>WHEN</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>WHERE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Fri. Feb. 3 7:30-9pm</td>
<td>Kick Off Reception for Mentors, Grrls &amp; Families (Coffee/Tea/Dessert)</td>
<td>YMCA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Sat. Feb. 4 10am-5pm</td>
<td>Introductions, ice-breakers, goals and norms Teambuilding/leadership Overview of the Video Production Process Tech workshops in lighting and audio and camera certification (see plan below) View: Killing Us Softly 3 (did not view) Groups prepare “Bad Ad binder” and preps for shoot</td>
<td>YMCA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Tues. Feb. 7 4:30-6:30pm</td>
<td>Intro to Interviewing Person on the street interviews “What’s in an ad?” View Interviews Intro to logging</td>
<td>YMCA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Thurs. Feb. 9 4:30-6:30pm</td>
<td>Field Trip</td>
<td>Meet at YMCA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Tues. Feb. 14 4:30-6:30pm</td>
<td>“Good” body activity View: Cindy Crawford’s dress; Intro to Storyboarding &amp; PSA critique</td>
<td>YMCA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Thurs. Feb. 16 5:00PM - 8:00PM</td>
<td>Field Trip</td>
<td>Meet at YMCA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Tues. Feb. 21 4:30-6:30pm</td>
<td>Storyboard &amp; Shoot Video Haiku</td>
<td>YMCA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Thurs. Feb. 23</td>
<td>Fieldtrip Day</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Tues. Feb. 28 4:30-6:30pm</td>
<td>Intro to editing on Final Cut Pro Edit Video Haiku</td>
<td>Center School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Thurs. Mar. 2</td>
<td>Fieldtrip Day</td>
<td>Conworks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Tues. Mar. 7 4:30-6:30pm</td>
<td>Intro to Animation/More tech? Screen sample genres and past RG videos</td>
<td>RG2:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Thurs. Mar. 9</td>
<td>Fieldtrip Day</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Sat. Mar. 11 10am-4pm</td>
<td>Field trip to SCAN to learn TV studio Intro to Crew Positions Shoot Short video TBD by RG2</td>
<td>SCAN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Tues. Mar. 14 4:30-6:30pm</td>
<td>View SCAN shoot Brainstorming process &amp; writing exercise Intro to pitching</td>
<td>Conworks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Thurs. Mar. 16</td>
<td>Fieldtrip Day</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 2.1 shows the Reel Grrls Master Schedule 2006, which lists the dates, times, and places for the 12-week program and identifies the instructional focus for each week. Additional hours find themselves into the curriculum through optional Thursday meetings, and in April when the girls meet for full days due to their Spring break schedule. (p. 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity / Events</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Tues. Mar. 21</td>
<td>4-6:30pm</td>
<td>&quot;Pitch&quot; Your Idea Day with Panel review Critique using 4 levels of criteria (GMTM) cont.... (If possible, finalize projects. If not, staff decides projects and announces at next class.)</td>
<td>Conworks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thurs. Mar. 23</td>
<td></td>
<td>RG2: Fieldtrip Day</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Tues. Mar. 28</td>
<td>4-6:30pm</td>
<td>Story board &amp; pre-production planning Shoot if ready</td>
<td>Conworks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thurs. Mar. 30</td>
<td></td>
<td>Shoot if ready</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Tues. April 4</td>
<td>4-6:30pm</td>
<td>Screening outreach plan Shoot</td>
<td>Conworks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tues. April 4</td>
<td>4-6:30pm</td>
<td>RG2:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tues. April 11</td>
<td>10am-4pm</td>
<td>Shoot at SCAN?</td>
<td>Conworks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Mon. Apr 10</td>
<td>10am-4pm</td>
<td>Shoot/Animation?</td>
<td>Conworks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Tues Apr 11</td>
<td>10am-4pm</td>
<td></td>
<td>Conworks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Tues. Apr 12</td>
<td>10am-4pm</td>
<td>Edit</td>
<td>Conworks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Thurs. Apr 13</td>
<td>10am-4pm</td>
<td>Edit</td>
<td>Conworks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Fri. Apr 14</td>
<td>10am-4pm</td>
<td>Credits, compile pieces, set up space Girls write artist statements and mount with photo self-portraits REHEARSAL SCREENING &amp; critique with panel</td>
<td>Conworks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fri. Apr 14</td>
<td>6 pm</td>
<td>Group dinner?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Tues. Apr 18</td>
<td>4-6:30pm</td>
<td>Final editing Plan screening</td>
<td>Conworks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tues. Apr 18</td>
<td>6 pm</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Thurs. or Fri. Apr. 20 or 21</td>
<td>7pm</td>
<td>FINAL SCREENING</td>
<td>Conworks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tues. Apr 25</td>
<td>4-6:30pm</td>
<td>Final class party &amp; evaluation</td>
<td>Conworks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 2.2: Timeline of Reel Grrls Curriculum. Each blue box, (e.g., Bad Ads, Turning Point, etc.) presents a particular curricular moment of the program, which is labeled by the week they represent and the chapter in which they appear. Each clear box also gives a general listing of the information covered within that chapter. Because I am highlighting specific curricular moments when the Enmeshed feminist curriculum reached a noticeable apex, it might appear as if weeks are missing; however, each week builds onto the next for a cumulative effect.
Table 2.1: Demographic and Media Interests of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Prior Media Experience</th>
<th>Future Career</th>
<th>Movies</th>
<th>Television</th>
<th>Magazines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Short program for film and television in Canada, and two video production classes at a local college</td>
<td>Film reporter or anchor or program director</td>
<td>Crash, The Notebook and Failure to Launch</td>
<td>American Idol</td>
<td>Seventeen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jones</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Completed media programs in middle and high school, and “personal hobby”</td>
<td>Media/Communications</td>
<td>Baraca, The Edukators, and The Royal Tannenbaums</td>
<td>Curb Your Enthusiasm</td>
<td>Beautiful Decay, Adbusters, and New American Painting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashlee</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>no previous experience</td>
<td>Chef</td>
<td>Half Baked, Mr. and Mrs. Smith, Bourne Identity, Bourne Supremacy, and South Park: Bigger, Longer and Uncut</td>
<td>7th Heaven, Rescue Me, Inked, Pimp My Ride, and Fri</td>
<td>Teen People, Seventeen, J-14, BOP, and Piercing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chelsi</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Attended a broadcasting class at school and did some filming</td>
<td>No Idea</td>
<td>The Matrix, Beauty and the Beast, and Garden State</td>
<td>Arrested Development</td>
<td>Lacrosse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seseanté</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Computer Science</td>
<td>Love and Basketball and Mulan</td>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>J-14 Cosmopolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudha</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>East Indian</td>
<td>Left Blank</td>
<td>Left Blank</td>
<td>Ice Age, The Matrix, and Shrek 2</td>
<td>Fresh Prince, Ned’s Declassified, Drake &amp; Jost, American Idol, Criminal Minds, and Law &amp; Order</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 2.4: Informational Flow of Qualitative Analysis and Interpretation. Each oval represents an important aspect of the development of the EFC. Through analysis and interpretation of the ethnographic data, themes emerged. Those emergent themes were triangulated through reflexive questioning and a return to the data. The directional arrows illustrate that any and all information, whether questioning reflexively, revealing themes or uncovering what the data had to say (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992), was continually being refined through this process.

Enmeshed Feminist Curriculum

Reflexive Practice

Emergent Themes

Ethnographic Data
FADE IN:  Week #1 of the Reel Grrls Program

EXT. PIKE PLACE MARKET - DAY

“The Pike Place Market” on a Tuesday afternoon is a busy place. The fish market guys [made famous in the movie Sleepless in Seattle] are trying to drum up business yelling to all who walk by them. A busker stands in front of a pig statue playing his guitar, and vendors stand in their stalls selling wares as tourists, exploring the historic venue milling around, stopping here and there. Four girls carrying camera equipment and a long boom pole try to find a place to set up their equipment. As they check that everything is ready to begin their shoot, a homeless man in a red cap walks by and mugs for the camera trying to get in the shot. Four teenage girls try to engage several people, and are eventually able to stop a couple of tourists walking by their spot. One girl takes the lead to introduce herself and explain their purpose, another produces a permission form in order to film them, and a third girl checks her camera. They place a binder full of advertisements featuring women in the hands of the couple and ask their first question.

GIRL 1:  
“In what ways do these pictures affect your views on women”?

FEMALE TOURIST:  
“I think she looks sexy. I mean that’s her job. It doesn’t mean she’s a slut or anything. It’s her job or a hobby or whatever.”

FADE OUT.

THE END
Advertising and Kids

As a consumer market, teenagers and tweens, i.e., those “in between’ teenagers and children” (Schor, 2004, p. 56), have a powerful role to play in the lives of products which are marketed specifically at them. Schor (2004) explains the “total advertising and marketing expenditures directed at children reached $15 billion” (p. 21). Tweens and teens also impact decisions made within their families. For example, “children ages four to twelve directly influenced $330 billion of adult purchasing in 2004 and ‘evoked’ another $340 billion...and...that influence spending is growing at 20 percent per year” (Schor, 2004, p. 23). Kids are not only more influential within their families’ purchasing power than they have ever been, but also are considered to be more sophisticated than previous generations. These changes are due to a host of societal changes: “…the increased responsibilities of kids in single-parent or divorced families, higher levels of exposure to adult media, children’s facility with new technology, early puberty, and the fact that kids know more earlier” (Schor, 2004, p. 56). With billions of dollars in the targeted marketing of products for them and their families, the tween and teenage market has never been more sought after than now.

The social trend that kids are more experienced than their predecessors led to a shift in advertisers’ thinking to stop “talking down to kids” and instead bring the “adult world” of “…glamour, fashion, style, irony, and popular music” directly to kids. (Schor, 2004, p. 56). The marketing industry makes a common practice of age
compression, i.e., “...taking products and marketing messages originally designed for older kids and targeting them to younger ones” (Schor, 2004, p. 55). For example, between the 1980s to 2000s, Seventeen magazine changed their target audience from sixteen year olds to eleven and twelve year olds\(^8\) (Schor, 2004, p. 56). Similar changes have occurred within the toy industry and the designer clothing industry is now geared towards Kindergarteners\(^9\) (Schor, 2004, p. 56). Age compression is so institutionalized that marketers developed the acronym of KAGOY — Kids Are Getting Older Younger — to illustrate the trends of younger kids being pushed novel and costly products rather than marketing these products to older age groups (Schor, 2004, p. 56). What is important to me here, is not only the many billions of dollars spent in marketing to youth, but also the ways in which these dollars are specifically spent in relation to magazines, such as Seventeen and other women’s magazines, where their reach is moving ever downward in age.

Looking at the age difference from a psycho/social developmental standpoint, that four-year difference from high- to middle-school years, is a deep chasm dividing awakening pubescent tweens to hormonal teenagers. What are the specific advertisements? What is the age of their target audience? Who do advertisers think they are reaching?

\(^8\) Magforum notes that other magazines (e.g., Elle, Cosmo, and Vogue) made similar changes by trying to “tie their readers in early with teen versions of their fashion titles” (Quinn, 2012). There were several other reasons for the shift to younger readers besides KAGOY: increased competition from other media sources, i.e. the internet, computer games, mobile phones and social media; the change in the ways teenagers spent their money; and a demographic drop of people aged 17-24 year old from 7 to 6 million by 1995 (Quinn, 2012). Overall, magazines for teenagers were suffering and in need of new readers which makes the shift to younger readers an obvious choice. “In 1998, 11 titles sold 2,441,163 copies a month...at the end of 2008 six titles sold 568,095” (Quinn, 2012).

\(^9\) For insight into how the age shift translates into different clothing choices for girls see Packaging Girlhood (Lamb & Brown, 2006) pgs. 25-33.
Although Schor (2004) and others (Klein, 2001; Quart, 2003; Jhally, 2003 and Linn, 2004) critique consumer culture, the aforementioned scholars are accused of constructing youth as “innocent, helpless and unable to resist the power of the media” (Buckingham, 2007, p. 16). Digital theorist Buckingham (2007) points out the neglect of kids’ voices in their work, and therefore their claims become essentially a “discourse generated by parents on behalf of children” (Buckingham, 2007, p. 16). As mentioned previously in Chapter 1, a process of negotiation transpires between youths’ individual desires and the larger world of media. My purpose here, however, is to show there is a concentration of wealth spent to attract the eye of young consumers, and provide some background on the compression of age ranges for products, rather than focusing on the specific trends in consumer culture. Additionally, age has been compressed so dramatically within the marketing industry that young girls eleven and twelve are now seeing advertisements in their magazines that used to be for their older sisters. How youth interpret these messages does not negate the fact that ultimately there have been substantial changes to the ways in which advertisers have increased their realm.

**Image-based Culture and Advertising**

Americans live in an image-based culture that is dominated by consumerism posits cultural scholar Sut Jhally. “The marketplace (and its major ideological tool, advertising) is the major structuring institution of contemporary consumer society” (Jhally, 2003, p. 250). Although these declarations were asserted 25 years ago, Jhally
could not have been more correct in his assessment of the future of contemporary society. “In the contemporary world, messages about goods are all pervasive—advertising has increasingly filled up the spaces of our daily existence...Advertising is ubiquitous—it is the air that we breathe as we live our daily lives” (Jhally, 2003, p. 250–251). With the advent of mobile devices, tablets, and personal computers, we are almost never free from advertisers. For example, even when playing a purchased game on an iPhone the user encounters: unsolicited pop-up windows to buy similar games; links to trailers of upcoming movies based on those characters; offers to enhance the current game; and unexpected pop-up links with multiple offers to unlock new or more characters or increase some other kind of choice, etc. Unsolicited pop-up advertisements are part of our modern lives.

The image-based culture of advertising is a “discourse through and about objects” which links our emotional feelings and connections to our sense of happiness and well-being (Jhally, 2003, p. 251). Jhally explains that the images also work to construct a world that is “structured in quite specific political ways” (Jhally, 2003, p. 252). He continues “(t)he commodity as displayed in advertising plays a mixture of psychological, social, and physical roles in its relations with people” (Jhally, 2003, p. 252). What this means is that advertising drives us towards the purchase of commodities as a means to satisfy our feelings of happiness. Although there is no specific cause and effect—such that if you buy a specific product, a specific outcome will happen—the advertising evokes a specific feeling that comes from association with the item. English art critic John Berger would call Jhally’s “feeling of happiness”
a product of what he called glamour, which comes from being envied by others. “The state of being envied is what constitutes glamour. And publicity is the process of manufacturing glamour” (Berger, 1972, p. 131). Berger (1972) continues, “Publicity is about social relations, not objects. Its promise is not of pleasure, but of happiness: happiness as judged from the outside by others. The happiness of being envied is glamour” (p. 132) So, advertisement (or publicity) works by creating an image of the person to themselves of their own glamour as reflected by their purchase and the perceived envy of others. As you will see later in the Alexander Wang ad below, the advertisement is not about the jeans, but the glamour reflected in the highly stylized setting and the woman who is ready for the taking.

The use of gendered images within advertising can often become a short-hand way of reifying attitudes that already exist within society. As Sociologist Erving Goffman (1978) observed much can be learned from body language and posing in advertising. The advertisements “draw from a narrow and quite concentrated pool...that)...has shown the domain of gender display—not the way that men and women actually behave but the ways in which we think men and women behave” (Jhally, 2003, p. 253). It is apparent from looking at advertisements, that not only do women and men have unequal power in our culture but they also behave differently based on that power indifference.
For example, looking at the Alexander Wang advertisement (Figure 3.1), it is apparent that the woman is there for someone else's pleasure. The pose is of a woman reclining on a leather chair naked except for her crumpled jeans (the object she is selling) pushed down to her calves and ankles. She is oiled up, looking sleek—if not slippery—and her closed eyes make her look either worn or passed out. The ad is meant to be provocative to get people's attention and to think about sex, but it only serves to reify the images of women as being an object of someone else's desire and gaze, which is discussed later in the chapter. This woman could not be more passive—laying naked (almost) and waiting—for someone or something to happen. Moreover, when I see that advertisement, I see a woman who appears drugged and
possibly assaulted, given that her pants are pulled down, but not off her legs. The image is also similar to other pornographic images—particularly those that mesh sex with violence—that have been steadily creeping into mainstream popular culture over the past 10 to 15 years. I will discuss the influx of pornographic images later in the chapter.

Kilbourne (1999) explains that men almost always appear in active, strong, forthright poses, contrasted with women who are often dominated, and “generally subservient...through both size and position” (p. 141). Sometimes the advertisements are more subtle than they have been in the past but they are all meant to be read within a specific context, to sum it up succinctly “men act and women appear” (Berger, 1972, p. 47). If women appear to behave in ways that are pleasing and subservient to men (i.e., the Alexander Wing denim advertisement), than it sends the message that women are for consuming and not to be taken seriously as valuable and contributing members in our society; I believe this message is detrimental to the mental, physical and spiritual health of girls and women.

**Women and Spectatorship**

Berger (1972) writes, “Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak” (p. 7). What someone sees may help to establish their place in the world, even though they then come to understand and explain that place through words, however doing so does not negate or undo the power of the image
In Berger’s conception of seeing the image of women is very powerful and yet it is also a very confined space – i.e., into the keeping of men.

A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping.

From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually.

Berger posits women are objects to be surveyed and that they survey themselves as well. “The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight” (Berger, 1972, p. 47). Berger utilizes the world of art and historic paintings to make his point when talking about how women and men are viewed. Through variations of the story from paintings such as *Suzanna and the Elders* (Artemisia Gentileschi, 1610) to *the Judgment of Paris* (Peter Paul Rubens, 1636 and 1638) Berger provides plethora of evidence in the form of Western oil painting that echo the surveiling of women by men.

While Berger makes his case through examples of oil paintings, scholar Laura Mulvey specifically explored the world of film and came much to the same
conclusion. In Mulvey's case, she argues what is going on here is a matter of the “male gaze.” (Mulvey, 2003).

The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly...women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness (Mulvey, 2003, p. 11).

Mulvey frames films with a psychoanalytic approach in order to understand the visual pleasure of film and to describe a new language of desire. Mulvey describes the role of male characters as active beings that move story lines along, while women are objects not only of the male gaze of the audience (as spectators) but also of the male protagonists in the narrative, i.e. “(s)he is isolated, glamorous, on display, sexualized” (Mulvey, 2003, p. 13). For Mulvey, the “male gaze” describes and explains how women are viewed on screens large (film) and small (television). Women are seen as objects to be ‘gazed’ upon and displayed for the pleasure of others. Because so many mainstream directors are male, most of what (men and) women spectators see are objectified women and having been exposed to multiple viewings of women in this way, many women can then come to see themselves through the same lens of the male gaze (i.e., objectified and sexualized).

Mulvey’s analysis also has been used as a basis of much feminist film criticism, and also has been criticized as privileging gender over race, thereby effectively negating
the existence of black women in film (hooks, 1996). In the past, when black women were seen on screen oftentimes it was to “enhance and maintain white womanhood as object of the phallocentric gaze” (hooks, 1996, p. 201). Black women were supporting characters in film, for example one that comes to mind in cinema is Gone with the Wind (1939). Although hooks maintains that many black independent filmmakers utilized black women in similar ways to white women, i.e., “as object of a male gaze” (hooks, 1996, p. 200), as in Spike Lee’s movie She’s Gotta Have It (1986). In order to find themselves in cinema, black women had to find a new way of deconstructing film.

Black women had to become “critical spectators” from a “disrupted” space in order to create for themselves an “oppositional gaze” in order to find a place of agency (hooks, 1996). In order to see agency within the roles for black women in film, black women had to critically look and deconstruct the black women on screen so they could see themselves reflected within these images. Images of black women have become powerful tropes as well. For example, black women have been subjected to a number of “controlling images” or stereotypes within popular culture that work to foster Black women’s oppression (Hill Collins, 1990, p. 67). These hostile images, seen as undeveloped and one-dimensional, include “mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas” (Hill Collins, 1990, p. 67). While some of these narrowly constructed tropes may seem dated, as mentioned in a preceding chapter, one need only to look at “reality television” to see how these stereotypes continue to be used. Omarosa Manigault, a contestant on The Apprentice—Donald Trump’s
television show’s first season in 2004—is a perfect example of the “angry black woman.” Her antics and other shenanigans were edited to make her a recognized villain on the show. Another example more recently seen in the New York Times, in a review by Allesandra Stanley, of the new hit television show, How to Get Away With Murder. Thinking she was complementing Shonda Rhimes (the successful, black showrunner of three other popular television series), Stanley referred to Rhimes as “an angry black woman” (Stanley, 2014). Although the rest of the article is utilized to undercut that title, i.e., that Rhimes creates interesting women characters in diverse working worlds, the use of the “angry black woman” stereotype is offensive and reifies its existence, even if Stanley does not recognize it as such. The use of this powerful and racist trope in a major publication about a popular and successful black woman writer and showrunner exemplifies how deeply embedded within American popular culture these images are.

Whether in western art history, film, or popular television, the constructions of women and how they are viewed through the male gaze seems consistent, entrenched and deeply problematic, particularly for women who want to find a place of agency or to create their own place of belonging free from the objectification and surveillance of males. As spectators, women are offered limited opportunities in mainstream popular culture for seeing themselves in powerfully new ways, not only as sexualized or isolated characters.\footnote{This year (2015) at the Golden Globes ceremony, actress Maggie Gyllenhaal spoke eloquently about this topic. See #10 on the following link. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/11/feminist-golden-globes-2015_n_6453108.html} Berger (1972), Mulvey
(2003) and hooks (1996) all offer clear examples of the ways in which the world of images have a deep impact on all women.

Magazines, Dominant Femininity and Sexism

One of the major tenants of Second Wave feminism was to call attention to the sexism women endure, e.g., women not getting equal pay or in many cases even a seat at the corporate or political table (Donovan, 1985). Feminists also demonstrated how women are objectified in American culture. Two examples are Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth* (1990) and Wendy Chapkis’s, *Beauty Secrets: women and the politics of appearance* (1986). Both give critical assessments of the beauty industry and their detrimental impact on the lives of women and girls. ‘The criticism of ‘objectification’ came naturally to feminism because of the continual cultural fetishization of women’s bodies and body parts” (Bordo, 2003, p. 459). In magazines, even the ways in which women’s bodies are arranged can intimate specific characteristics, e.g., “dependence or seductiveness or vulnerability” (Bordo 2003, p. 459). More specifically, women’s bodies continue to be cut into parts (e.g., breasts, legs and butts) to be scrutinized and appraised by men and women alike for their adherence to those particular standards of dominant femininity. Jean Kilbourne (1999), a prolific and outspoken critic of advertising writes, “(m)any ads feature just a part of a woman’s body – a derriere, a headless torso.” (p. 258). Kilbourne describes an advertising copy that continues to describe a woman’s derriere as a separate object, “(y)our butt. It’s practically a fixation. You look at it in
the mirror...You pinch it, for firmness, like a melon…” (Kilbourne, 1999, p. 258). The copy is promoting the self-objectification and monitoring by women of themselves are seen not as whole beings with integrity (subjects), but as things or objects to be picked at, or used, and/or torn apart. “It is almost impossible to imagine what our popular culture would look like if women’s bodies weren’t objectified and dismembered” (Kilbourne, 1999, p. 259). In other words, Kilbourne claims that it is hard for women to remain intact in such a toxic environment.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, in 1979, Kilbourne created a media presentation, Still Killing Us Softly (currently in its 4th iteration), which critiques both the advertisers and the messages that they are imparting about how society treats women based on their treatment in media. Ultimately, Kilbourne’s argument is when women are viewed as objects, without empathy and humanness, it is easier to do violence to them. Kilbourne asserts the violent images associated with advertising have become so pervasive that people have become numb to them and that the violent images contribute to “a state of terror...The violence, the abuse, is partly the chilling but logical result of the objectification” (Kilbourne, 1999, p. 278). Although some argue that the violent images do not lead directly to violence, the prevalence of violence against women is hard to dismiss11.

11 “Over 22 million women in the United States have been raped in their lifetime...Every 90 seconds, somewhere in America, someone is sexually assaulted...Girls ages 16-19 are 4 times more likely than the general population to be victims, of rape, attempted rape, or sexual assault” (www.feminist.com, January 5, 2015)
Bordo (2003) claims that “fashion is never ‘just’ fashion, [however] and the images are never ‘just’ pictures” (p. 455). She talks about the prevalence of eating disorders, America’s obsession with thinness, and the anxieties associated with women who are “too much.” She means not only their physical presences, but also about women taking up space. Anyone who is not seen as waiflike and thin, or who asks for things is deemed “too much.” Her central claim is that the image of women in advertising is powerful not simply as a “passive imprinting,” but also as a complex construction and contested site. The viewer is not merely taking in the message by also having one’s own desires as well.

To this point, Bordo (2003) claims,

(we) recognize, consciously or unconsciously, that the image carries values and qualities that ‘hit a nerve’ and are not easy to resist. Their power, however, derives from the culture that has generated them and resides not merely ‘in’ the images but in the psyches of the viewer too

(p. 460).

As discussed in Chapter 1 there is a negotiation process between the individual’s desires and the image that takes place for the viewer. If the only images a viewer sees are those crafted within a particular set of narrowly prescribed features, such as a perfectly thin body, or an impossibly symmetrically airbrushed face without lines, what does that mean for how women and girls are viewed who are not only
inside but also outside those accepted forms? What does it mean for the Reel Grrls who are looking through their own cameras at other girls? As Kilbourne explains, “The media define what is sexy, and, more important, who is sexy...Women are portrayed as sexually desirable only if they are young, thin, carefully polished and groomed, made up, depilated, sprayed, and scented” (Kilbourne, 1999, p. 260). And, what about anyone who falls outside of these ‘norms’? And, what models are we illustrating for all girls, and specifically for the Reel Grrls?

**Double standards and confusing times**

Girls have always been given multiple messages about whom they are supposed to be, (e.g., soft but strong, smart but not too smart, available but not easy) particularly as they come of age sexually. Girls are “supposed to be both innocent and seductive, virginal and experienced, all at the same time” (Kilbourne, 1999, p. 145). As we have moved into a mainstream media age that claims we no longer need feminism, and are even in a period of postfeminism, ads are more infused with messages of “go girl” feminism where girls can break free of standards and rules. However, Walsh (2005) who studied how an online environment constructed adolescent girlhood found “…editors and advertisers [of mainstream girl’s magazines] consistently portray girls with a narrow construct for femininity, while at the same time portraying them as independent and autonomous, thereby reinforcing both traditional and modern aspects of femininity” (69). It would seem that while the media likes to use the language of feminism (e.g. independent women), it does so in
familiar ways that reinforce a narrow femininity (e.g., getting the boy). Many girls are aware of the contradictory messages they encounter in the media.

Although, as Kilbourne noted almost 15 years ago, “the solution to any problem always has to be a product. Change, transformation, is thus inevitably shallow and moronic, rather than meaningful and transcendent” (Kilbourne, 1999, p. 153). The cooptation of feminisms’ ideals as a transcendent movement for change has been reduced once again to the purchase of a product. Walsh (2005) furthers this point by noting “(t)he commodification of femininity and female sexuality presents [girls’ magazine] readers with a very specific construct linking power, control, and individualism to material consumption that gets naturalized and carried into girls’ social interactions” (p. 70). These interactions carry over into the choices that girls find for themselves in the pages of the magazines, such that all their power for independence is linked to choices in hem lengths, hair color, and type of boyfriend.

However, maybe girls’ interactions can be more substantive and less about purchasing products, particularly if they are involved in a media literacy program grounded in media’s tactics when advertising to and creating content for girls. In the next two sections, I will be detailing the Reel Grrls’ experiences as participants in just such a program. The next sections, What is Bad Ads and Media Girl, highlight two activities where girls examined the mainstream media within a positive normative feminist environment. My field notes compiled over a period of three months are provided to offer the reader thick description (Geertz, 1973) of two brief
moments in the history of the 5-year program. In my descriptions below, the 17 girls have been involved in an all-day Saturday kick-off workshop that was the first day of the 12-week session. “Hit the Ground Running” is a more detailed account of the activity and the girls’ reactions. The following section, ‘Media girl’ details another media literacy component of the program. Finally, I analyze and interpret both exercises and how they fit into the discussion of girls and the enmeshed feminist curriculum central to the Reel Grrls program.
What is Bad Ads? (Exercise #1)

Field Notes:
February 4th:
Just as the all-day workshop came to a close with all the girls sitting in a circle, Malory [Founder of Reel Grrls] tells the girls that they will be doing their “on the street” interviews on the following Tuesday, and that their first job will be to find “provocative” pictures from magazines. They are to “take the ad[vertisement]s as they exist.” Each team will find between six to eight pictures that they will put in a “bad ads” binder. Mallory says that they will go more in depth on Tuesday, but that they should be ready to jump.

Malory and Lucia (the co-facilitators) who have been running the events of the day, do not discuss any of the philosophy and/or theory of why the advertisements are considered “bad” or even why the girls are doing this. In the program’s written curriculum for the Saturday workshop, the girls were supposed to watch Kilbourne’s movie Still Killing Us Softly 3 (1999), but they ran out of time. So, the girls did not receive any media literacy training around issues of sexism or heteronormativity. There was no talk of the function of advertisements or the use of women in them. I was disappointed, as I had been looking forward to watching the Kilbourne movie with the girls and hearing their thoughts. I wondered in my “life notes” what assumptions I held for the girls and their knowledge of the ways advertisements depict women or even of sexism in the media. Similarly, I pondered what media literacy meant to the founder (and facilitator) of Reel Grrls. “What is the underlying philosophy of the program?” “What are the hopes/expectations for the girls involved?” I asked myself three questions for the girls about the “bad ads: “What do these ads show?” “Why did you choose them?”, and “what is the purpose of this exercise?”
Hit The Ground Running

What follows is an explanation of the girls’ first exercise as part of the Reel Grrls program. The program started on February 4th with an all-day workshop, and thereafter the girls met once per week for 2.5 hours, with an optional second meeting also for 2.5 hours. Today, February 7th, begins the girls’ first afternoon workshop. They had their first introductory eight-hour workshop the previous Saturday but that was three days ago, and in the life of a fast-paced teenager, those 72-hours can seem like an eternity.

The master schedule lists today’s activities as follows: “Intro to Interviewing; Person on the street interviews ‘what’s in an ad?’ View Interviews, and Intro to logging” (Reel Grrls master schedule, February, 2006) There is some apprehension and excitement in the air. The girls do not get time to ease into the program, it is time to ‘hit the ground running’ with their ‘person on the street’ interviews. The girls will be breaking into teams to find people on the street to interview. In order to do this task, they must break into groups, create their bad ads binder, write their interview questions, checkout their equipment and film at least three “on the street” interviews. Each girl group had approximately 40 minutes to complete three interviews and return to the building, so everyone could then review all the groups’ interviews and make comments about how they accomplished their task.
This activity functions on several layers. On the technical challenge the girls were being tested on their proficiency with the camera and their technical skills to achieve the given task of filming an interview. The girls will have to remember how to chose their location site, to frame their shots and to make sure their sound is being captured. The girls are divided into groups of three or four and will rotate through each of the “jobs” during the interview. The jobs consist of: the camera operator, the boom operator (sound), and the interviewer.

On the media literacy component of the program, the girls were given the task of going through magazines to find pictures that they found interesting or would be good for beginning a conversation. The girls were also tasked with writing interview questions. They were given brief instructions to ask questions that began with ‘how,’ ‘what,’ or ‘why’ and to stay away from those types of questions that could be answered with a simple yes or no. Some sample questions from the group that I followed were: “How does this image make you feel?”, “What are your reactions to these images?” “If male, if this was your daughter/sister would your opinion change?” “What are your thoughts on how media portray women?,” “In what way do these pictures affect your views on women?”, “How do you think these pictures affect women’s body images?”, and “How do these ads make you feel, why?”.

The girls were told to “try to mix it up” in their interviews, meaning to make sure they switch roles and interview questions. The girls were also warned to make sure their equipment was in working order and their permission release form signed.
before they began their interview. The facilitators also told the girls to be vigilant and very careful in the field with their camera equipment, which they had to sign out. "Never let it out of your sight," the facilitators impressed upon them. Lastly, they were again told to "make sure you're all ready to go, microphone check and camera ready before you get someone to interview." With those last instructions and a final check that one person in each small group left a cellular phone number with Lucia (co-founder and facilitator), my group headed to Seattle's famous Pike Place Market to conduct some interviews.

The group I accompanied was comprised of four girls ready with their “bad ads” binder, camera equipment, a mentor to stand by for questions, and me. Not sure how to proceed in my own data collection, and wary about interfering with the girls' experiences, I asked one girl as we were walking, “why don’t you like those ads you selected?” She responded immediately, “because they're degrading, and they're gross.” Another girl echoes, “yeah, they're gross.” Once at the Pike Place Market, the girls seemed hesitant at first, but then excited to play their roles and asked passing strangers if they would like to be interviewed.

People in the market seemed to almost ignore the girls, even as the girls tried to get people’s attention or even talk directly to them. I found it very interesting and also telling that in this cultural milieu of reality television in which people seem to go to

\[^{12}\text{While all the Reel Grrls’ parents gave me permission to conduct my research with their daughters, I only had permission from 6 girls who chose to participate more in depth. So, while I would like to name the girls in my group, I am restricted from mentioning their names.}\]
great lengths for their moment of fame, a girl camera crew can still be ignored. I wondered if it spoke to the historical invisibility of girls (Kearney, 2007; Sadker & Sadker, 1995) or the fact that girls are not taken seriously. (Graff, Murnen, & Smolak, 2012). The girls had trouble getting people to even listen to their request. Other groups reported that “people didn’t want to talk to us” or “We went through three rejections before a yes, but sometimes it’s good to hear no before yes.” Exemplified by this aforementioned remark, some of the girls took on the challenge as a positive experience, I felt surprised by people’s inability to immediately engage with the girls.

The scenario that is recounted at the beginning of this chapter is an actual interaction with a person at the Pike Place Market. In response to the question, “In what ways do these pictures affect your views on women”? A female tourist responded, “I think she looks sexy. I mean that’s her job. It doesn’t mean she’s a slut or anything. It’s her job or a hobby or whatever.” This comment got the biggest response from the girls in our group. The girls were shocked that someone thought their “bad ads” were sexy, rather than disturbing. The reactions in general were not what the girls, or I honestly were expecting for the “bad ads” challenge.

I believe that the girls expected to find people who would agree that the ads were bad, particularly because this exercise was titled “bad ads,” and they were told to find provocative ads. As the girls collected their advertisements, I watched them carefully sift through pictures to find ones they felt were appropriate, and heard
them talk about the ones they felt were appropriately “gross.” I was surprised for two reasons. I had seen some of the Reel Grrls previous video work (which can be viewed in Girls Make Media That Matters, 2005) that featured several “bad ads” interviews where all of the interviewed women stated the ads were demeaning to women, even though men answered the women looked sexy. I felt sure that even four years later, the people the girls interviewed would react the same way—meaning the women would say the “bad ads” were objectifying and echo some of Kilbourne’s (1999) theories that advertisements use women to sell products and reproduce narrow beauty ideals. Instead, I heard women responding positively to the advertisements and even state that they believed the “bad ads” seemed “sexy.”

The statement from the female tourist that the woman (in the advertisement) was just doing “her job” and that “it doesn’t mean she’s a slut,” was also unexpected. I believe the female tourist was caught within the double standard mentioned earlier in this section—e.g., strong but soft; alluring but not too easy; cool yet accessible—where women and girls are caught in impossible double-binds of acting two opposing ways at once according to media messages about what is acceptable or even expected of them. Although the tourist was making a distinction between a woman doing her job and appearing as a “slut,” the delineation really was between what she believed to be “sexy” (i.e., what is an appropriate way for women to act) and what she believed to be a “slut” (i.e. an inappropriate way to behave). In the end, the girls were able to get their three interviews: A woman, the tourist couple, and a brother and sister. It took them some time to find willing participants. The
interviewees answered the question given to them, but most did not follow up on their answers. However, each interviewee responded positively to the advertisements that they saw and all the interviews lasted only a few minutes. I did not keep track of exactly how many people rejected the girls’ invitation to give an interview, but many more people rejected them, as previously mentioned, or ignored the girls and kept walking when solicited.

As our group walked back to meet the rest of the girls, I listened in as the girls talked about their lives and what they had heard, but because we were walking, I was not able to record all their thoughts. I captured one girl’s remark that stood out among the regular “getting-to-know-you” talk. She said, “I think both men and women are objectified but that it seems more socially acceptable to objectify women.” The other girl nodded in agreement. I thought it was an accurate and astute comment considering what the girls had just experienced in reaction to their ‘bad ads.’ The girls had just heard the acceptability of objectification first hand. Even though the girls recognized the sexism present in their advertisements, their interviewees did not; however, the girls were able to make sense of and articulate the fact that while media images teach us all about the expectations for women and men, it is more “socially acceptable” to objectify women. In short, to view women through the objectifying “male gaze” (Mulvey, 2003) is not only acceptable but is so commonplace it has become normalized.
Once back with the larger group in the large room at the YMCA, the girls sat at four assorted tables in their groups, talking about their interviews and putting away their camera equipment. All the separate interviews were digitally uploaded onto the same computer by the technical staff, so the entire group could watch what everyone had done. The girls had to cue up their favorite interview, which was then shown to the larger group. The facilitators and mentors began to ask the girls questions about their interviews.

There were many comments about technical aspects of the shoot. For example, an interviewee had a pole behind him that made it look like it came out of his head, which was pointed out by one of the facilitators. One interviewer said that as she was starting her interview with a man, another random man walked into her shot. A mentor in the room then gave some advice about where to place the camera in relation to the subject, so that it would not be possible to have that happen again. For another interview “the focus was too soft on that image” which made it hard to see what the person was looking at in the “bad ads” binder. In another interview, the interviewee looked very short because the top third of the screen was essentially empty, so the comment made was “there’s too much head room in that shot.” This gave the mentors an opening to talk about the “rule of thirds”13 in film composition. When composing a shot, the director places a 3x3 grid over the entire area and lines up the subject in a place where the lines intersect. Another interview

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13 For a deeper explanations see: (Siebold, 2001) http://www.craveonline.com/film/articles/171953-free-film-school-7-the-rule-of-thirds-which-rules
was very dark but there was a lighted sign on the left side of the background that was very distracting. Another interview was problematic because as the interviewee was answering the question, the audio was making a noise, making it hard to hear the interview. In our group, the girls chose an interview with a brother and sister. The girls framed the shot in such a way that it gave the interview a feeling of space, rather than a squished, closed in feeling such as the earlier example with the extra headroom. This was one of the better shot interviews, and the girls were acknowledged for their effort. There were compliments as well, such as “I like that close-up” or “You did an awesome job framing that shot.” Once the interviews were dissected according to camera techniques, lighting possibilities, and audio tips, the girls were dismissed for the day.

One other interview question I heard was: “Do you think [the idea that] sex sells is true”? Although everyone listened to all the answers given in all the interviews, the substance of those answers and interviews was not discussed with the girls. This wrap-up was designed to critique only the technical aspects of their interviews. The group did not formally deconstruct the media’s use of women to sell products. However, by labeling them “bad ads” and asking the girls to really look at the advertisements, I believe the Reel Grrls were making an implicit statement about the sexism present in the media.
Field Notes:

February 14, 2006

After the girls do their check-in warm-ups, we move to the white tables. The girls are given paper, and told they will be tying up their images of women and ads to finish it off. Lucia (co-facilitator) tells them “make a picture of what society tells us, what a perfect teenager is supposed to be. What characteristics”? The girls split into two groups; one continues to sit at the table, the other group spreads out on the floor and starts drawing an outline of a girl. Lucia tries to get the group at the table to start. They seem to balk at trying to draw an outline. Lucia has them write some words – like “this tall, clothes, this weight.” They still seem to be stuck. Lucia gives them some “hints” – blonde, X number of pounds, etc. One girl remarks, “Oh, she should be sexy, but not overt.” They come up with: blonde, thong, slits (in clothes), tattoos, bellychain, bling-bling. Media Girl. Active, Light skin, smart, but not too smart.

Lucia: Why are these images in mainstream magazines?
Girl 1: It’s what guys want. If you’re like that (she points to list on the paper) you’ll be seen as a better person.
Girl 2: America has chosen to value a stereotype. We can consider anything beautiful. It’s not true.
Lucia: Are you affected at all?
Girl 3: We’re imitating it, but you can’t be all those things, it’s not realistic.
Girl 4: If you’re so focused on that stuff, it’s not going to get you far.
Girl 5: I’m self-conscious about being tall, but people are not respectful of her (Media girl’s) feelings.
Girl 6: Most girls you ask, we know it’s not realistic. It’s airbrushed. She’s anorexic or bulimic, but we still buy into it.
Lucia: We know they don’t exist, but why do we still buy into it?
Girl 7: It’s all just pictures. There’s a girl in an ad in Seventeen Magazine. It’s super fake.
Girl 2: I got a Russian magazine from a friend which shows the ‘before’ and ‘after’ airbrushing on a model. I mean Brittany Spears’ boobs don’t look like that. It’s mostly guys who only want to date the hot chick. We buy into it because the guys buy into it.
Girl 6: It’s like a self-fulfilling prophecy.
Lucia: Media is a powerful tool – we all know it’s not real. There are billions of dollars spent here. In Reel Grrls we’re learning how to be behind the camera. When you’re making your film, you have something unique to bring. Second thing is we know this isn’t reality and we can bring something new! So, rip up the “media girl!” In Reel Grrls we can move beyond these stereotypes and don’t have to be restricted by them!
Media Literacy! This is a peek behind the curtain. The girls are able to discern not about themselves or their desires, but about what boys will want – or that they know it’s fake and they buy into it anyway.

She’s Come Undone

This exercise, as I noted above in my field notes, is straightforward media literacy\(^{14}\)—meaning that there was no technical challenge that the girls were asked to achieve. Reel Grrls typically functions as both a hands-on media technology and media literacy program, but not here. In the ‘Bad Ads’ exercise, the girls were working on their proficiency with cameras, capturing sound, setting shots, and getting interviews, all while using the advertisements (i.e. media literacy component) to further those goals. Here, the girls were asked to describe ‘media girl,’ as defined by the mainstream media, in order to begin a critical assessment of what is already in that space, so that they can then “move beyond these stereotypes and don’t have to be restricted by them,” (Rattner, field notes, February 14, 2006), when they made their own projects.

Although there was no direct technological challenge, the exercise worked on two levels. As a media literacy exercise, the girls were asked to critically “read” the media, to get them to ask questions of the material, e.g., what comprises ‘media girl’ and why is she like that? Who does she appeal to and why? The girls came up with many descriptors for ‘media girl’ and who she was designed for in their minds. The

\(^{14}\) In Chapter 4, I will provide an in depth discussion of media education and media literacy programs, particularly those with a feminist component. So, this information is just a primer of sorts, until the next chapter.
girls recognized the contradictions that ‘media girl’ embodies as Kilbourne (1999) noted, she is “supposed to be both innocent and seductive, virginal and experienced, all at the same time” (p. 145). The girls were able to identify the contradictions, e.g., “oh, she should be sexy but not overt” or “smart but not too smart,” and point out that her qualities were “not realistic,” even as the girls felt moved to imitate them (Rattner, fieldnotes, February 14, 2006). On another level, I was excited for this exercise as the girls gave both a peek behind the curtain of Reel Grrls media literacy specifically, and their own thoughts. As I noted above, the Reel Grrls facilitators had not gotten to some of their media literacy curriculum earlier which had disappointed me, but not so here. We were able to get the girls impressions of ‘media girl,’ their critical reflections of their own identities, and their negotiation within those two worlds when they come together. We learn that the girls recognize that ‘media girl’ is “not realistic” but one they “imitate” anyway, e.g., mentioning the ‘before’ and ‘after’ airbrushing in the Russian magazine, etc. (Rattner, fieldnotes, February 14, 2006). I was struck by Girl 4’s response that “(i)f you’re so focused on that stuff, it’s not going to get you far” (Rattner, fieldnotes, February 14, 2006). Although I will talk about issues of activism in Chapter 5, it seems that the conversation that is rarely heard in girls’ voices is their recognition of the time and energy they have to put in to creating themselves, which shortchanges their efforts to do other things. The other comment that stuck out for me, was Girl 5’s response “I’m self-conscious about being tall, but people are not respectful of her (Media girl’s) feelings.” (Rattner, fieldnotes, February 14, 2006). Was she really speaking to
her own and other girls’ feelings of self-consciousness at being at the center of the ‘male gaze’ (Mulvey, 2003) of a sexist media machine?

In the beginning of this chapter, I discussed how we live in an image-based culture that uses omnipresent advertising to sell us images and products that elicit feelings of happiness – and or “glamour” (i.e., the feeling of pleasure from having others envy what you have achieved) (Berger, 1972; Jhally, 2003). I also discussed how those gendered and coded images reveal the power differential among women and men, and how the images are shot through a ‘male gaze’ that harmfully objectifies and sexualizes women (Kilbourne, 1999; Mulvey, 2003). ‘Bad Ads’ is a technical challenge to learn about the camera, the shots and the on-the-street interview, and its content reveals the media literacy challenge to acknowledge the dominant femininity and sexism present in advertisements. The twin goals for this challenge are for the girls to learn technical competence and to begin to critically read the mainstream media through a gendered lens. Although not a technical challenge, the ‘Media Girl’ exercise similarly asks the girls to acknowledge the tropes and messages for girls in mainstream media through a media literacy component in order to uncover those biases and to move girls beyond what has been seen to create something different. I believe acknowledging sexism in the media, which is foundational to feminist pedagogy, opens a space for learning in a feminist environment for girls i.e., an enmeshed feminist curriculum.
Mediating Critical vs. Typical Perceptions:
The Beginnings of an Enmeshed Feminist Curriculum

A contemporary media scholar whose work covers similar topics to Jean Kilbourne is Gail Dines. Dines\(^{15}\) (2012) states that we live in a media saturated culture that profoundly shapes our consciousness. Dines picks up Kilbourne’s mantle. While Kilbourne’s work seems to reiterate and repeat the same argument albeit with updated images in her film Still Killing Us Softly (1999), Dines attends to contemporary examples ultimately moving the discussion off the printed page and into contemporary images. Both Dines’ and Kilbourne’s work point out that women need to be able to media literate. Kilbourne (1999) argues, “...we fight back, using the tools of media education that enable us to understand, analyze, interpret, to expose hidden agendas and manipulation, to bring about constructive change, and to further positive aspects of the media” (p. 305). This is the reason behind the “media girl” exercise. As explored in my field notes, the girls are given a peak behind the media curtain to begin to understand and analyze the images and what they mean. What is more confusing is the question of why, i.e., “It’s airbrushed...but we still buy into it.” as Girl 6 states. However, Reel Grrls (ages 14–18) are getting their media literacy comparatively early in their lives. Dines, problematizes the lack of critical media education for her undergraduate students. For example, she lectures that her undergraduate students enroll in college course in how to analyze English literature, but not how to analyze Cosmopolitan magazine. Dines—describing the social and cultural context in which contemporary women and girls live—posits that

\(^{15}\) See also Chapter 1
the ubiquity of the image, which is powered and fueled by corporations, is structured on hegemonic, hypermasculinity and dominant femininity that together creates a vulnerable state for women and girls. The message for both Dines and Kilbourne remains that young people need to be taught how to critically read the media that surrounds them. Both Dines (2011) and Wolf (1990) propose that many beauty–related industries exist and millions of dollars are spent, by women trying to make themselves look like the almighty image they see on the page, even though most women know that those images are fabricated or at the very least airbrushed and photo–shopped. The Reel Grrls involved in the ‘media girl’ exercise also know that the image is not real. They are able to identify all the signifiers of the “hot chick” media girl detailed above and yet, they “buy into it,” and even feel it is a “self fulfilling prophecy.” What is interesting to me is how the girls are able to voice their critical perceptions of the media even as they struggle to define their place within that media world. Additionally, the image itself seems to have shifted as well over the years, e.g., tattoos would not have been a part of media girl image in the 1980s and 1990s. However, that twenty to thirty–year difference—particularly between Kilbourne’s and Dine’s media analysis—has led to some dramatic changes in the images we see.

Dines believes that advertisements have shifted to more pornographic images, which in turn has shifted our cultural milieu. In fact Dines (2011) has written a book on the topic *Pornland: How Porn has hijacked our sexuality*. Dines, along with
cultural critic Arial Levy\(^{16}\), makes the further connection that our American culture has undergone a shift in the past ten years to an even more hyper-sexualized culture. For Dines, images in advertising and media in general have replicated soft-core pornography. For Dines (2011), she places women into two groups: “fuckable” and “not.” Dines believes that the media has become so noisy and crowded with images that the way to cut through is to be seen as “fuckable.” She utilizes the example of Miley Cyrus’s transformation from Disney darling to her new audacious incarnation seen in her “wrecking ball” video (Corse, 2013). The first step was for Miley Cyrus to pose artfully for Annie Leibovitz at age 15. (“Miley Cyrus Bare,” 2009). She is naked (presumably) in a sheet with her back uncovered, staring directly into the camera. Once the picture was in Vanity Fair there was an outcry against this artistic shot. Miley Cyrus claimed she was embarrassed; Disney said the image had been manipulated to sell magazines; and Annie Leibovitz said she thought it was a “natural” and “beautiful” shot of her subject. From age 15 to her current space (age 23) within popular culture, Miley Cyrus is repeatedly photographed nude and continued attempts to shock keep herself within that hyper-sexualized space of being seen.

I believe the shift to a more hypersexualized culture as described by Dines (2011) is one of the reasons why the people looking at the “Bad Ads” binders now find them “sexy,” or view them positively, rather than as sexist with negative connotations. Reel Grrls has been using the “bad ads” challenge for over five years, and when I

look at older videos of “on the street” interviews (Reel Grrls, 2005), there were many more women who had a more complicated understanding of the sexism seen in advertisements. For example, one woman stated that the ads made her feel negatively about herself; a husband and wife stated that the advertisements were there to sell people on being consumers; another woman stated while the women in the advertisements might be appealing to men, those same men did not go home with women that looked like the ones in the magazines (i.e., essentially saying that while men might like the fantasy women of magazines, they live with the reality of women in their world.)

Currently, people over age thirty-five once lived in a print media saturated culture, but individuals ages 18–30 now are dominated by “the image,” and that image is daunting. As Girl 1 states above, “If you’re like that...you’ll be seen as a better person.” But what if a girl cannot be like that “airbrushed,” unrealistic, “super fake” image? Dines professes that girls and women are socialized to hate their bodies. She posits that the power of the image has also created young women (those under 18) and girls who rarely have had the freedom to experience their bodies as their own (e.g., an inherent freedom) and instead as only something to be looked at by others (Dines, 2012). Dines assertion that girls are not free to experience their bodies, contemorizes the “male gaze” (Mulvey, 2003) and speaks to Berger’s (1972) work, that women—and now girls—are also feeling the pressure of being looked at critically. Indeed when 80% of 10-year-olds are currently or have at some point tried to diet (Hepworth, 2010), it suggests girls are the subject of the “male gaze” as
described by Mulvey (2003) and of the self-surveillance described by Berger (1972) and, giving into the pressure of being looked at and compared to some idealized standard of beauty. Dines is also saying that there is not a single way to problematize these images. The process is an on-going critical praxis built upon the multiple critical readings of others.

Throughout the Reel Grrls program the girls are moving, whether they know it or not, from being cultural consumers to cultural producers. As they move through this program they also are being introduced to an *enmeshed feminist curriculum*, i.e., a positive normative feminist environment. The Reel Grrls program is also an example of the “collective feminist activism” called for by Durham (1999)—this is the flashforward (prolepsis) that I mentioned in the first chapter.

The ‘bad ads’ and ‘media girl’ challenges are methodological steps in the *enmeshed feminist curriculum*, and lay the groundwork for the rest of the program, i.e., each piece or challenge building upon one another in an effort to offer counterbalances to repressive and limiting messages for girls in mainstream media culture. Both challenges can also be viewed as a practical applications of Tropman’s “feminist pedagogical media literacy” (2001), for the Reel Grrls not only are beginning to understand the ideas of representation but also provides them ways to speak to the “complications and contradictions therein, without forcing them to altogether reject such constructions” (p. 152). The challenges also work on two levels, of ‘other’ and ‘self,’ respectively. The ‘Bad ads’ works on experiential ideas of media,
spectatorship, and media literacy, while challenging them technologically as well. The girls are asking strangers to comment on the advertisements in ‘Bad Ads;’ conversely, during the ‘media girl’ exercise, the girls are looking inward at the self. Lucia asks them, “Are you affected at all”? The girls are asked to discuss their critical perceptions of their own identities and how they feel about what they are seeing. In both exercises, what the girls are presented with is a challenge to see the dominant femininity and sexism as it exists in our American culture. For example, instead of seeing objectifying advertisements solely as “sexy,” they can also understand that the advertisements work to dictate a specific and narrow definition of what it means to be sexy, and choose whether or not to adhere to that definition, and/or to find their own. The girls are able as a group to identify and get confirmation from their peers that ‘media girl’ is “super fake,” “not realistic,” “airbrushed,” and yet, to some extent they all “buy into it” (Rattner, fieldnotes, February 14, 2006). The Reel Grrls program goal of “making media that matters,” enacts feminist pedagogy by infusing their technical challenges with critical readings of the media. They are *enmeshing* their feminist ideology within their technical teachings—feminist praxis—that assists in building the *enmeshed feminist curriculum* (EFC). The EFC is a methodology that creates a tacit feminist environment. The examples provided here are the ‘Bad Ads’ challenge and the ‘media girl’ exercise, but as you will see within each subsequent chapter, there are different activities that all work to encapsulate a positive normative feminist environment that allows girls space to explore critical perceptions of the media and of their identities while being in a supportive environment.
In the next chapter, I will explore the curricular moment I call the “turning point.” First, I give a brief background in media education and media literacy, highlighting the move from ‘protectionist’ to ‘promotionist’ programs and feminist critical media literacy. I also present data and analysis of other curricular moments in the Reel Grrls program. The “turning point’ reveals a power shift through a rite of passage and details how the ownership of the Reel Grrls program becomes the girls’ responsibility. By spotlighting alternatives for girls that complicate expected norms, the next chapter builds further evidence for the enmeshed feminist curriculum.
Chapter 4: Turning Point

FADE IN: Week 6 of the Reel Grrls program

INT: “Inside of Reel Grrls” YMCA space

Once inside a large brick building, a visitor must descend in the elevator into the basement. You then must go through a set of double doors on the left side of the room. Passing through the doors leads directly into a large open room divided into sections by the placement furniture around the room instead of walls—although there are large floor-to-ceiling posts, which can obscure one’s vision across the room. On the Northern wall close to the double doors are two large white boards mounted on the wall. In front of the white boards are approximately six white tables, measuring roughly 5’ long x 2.5’ wide. Chairs are strewn around tables in haphazard fashion. Several feet beyond the tables, an inviting group of large and small leather couches and chairs create a large, oblong circle filling that portion of the room. At look at the southern wall reveals small, barred windows set high in a horizontal line that shows the diagonally sloping sidewalk outside. Along the Southern wall, just below and in front of those windows is another large open space with a television set, some computers and a multitude of cords set upon a metal cart. Fourteen girls of various ages from 14-18 years old sit around the white tables in the front of the room, talking loudly to one another. The co-facilitator stands and the girls quiet down to listen.

LUCIA (CO-FACILITATOR)
(excited)
This is a turning point. I want you
to remember this moment after I say it.
Shhh, quiet.

She stops talking and silently stares at all the girls, looking around the room for 30 seconds to a minute. Some of the girls fidget nervously.
There, did you feel that? At this point in the program we turn Reel Grrls over to you—your projects, what YOU want to do. Do you feel different?

FADE OUT.

THE END

Complicating notions of ‘girl’

This chapter is titled the “Turning Point” because it details the moment in the Reel Grrls (RG) program when the girls become the drivers of their experiences. The girls up to this point have been following the leads of the facilitators and mentors in the Reel Grrls program. This chapter highlights how the Reel Grrls program shifts the power to the girls and to their individual and group projects. It is as if the mentors and girls have been riding together in a car where the mentors have been steering; now, the mentors are moving into the back seat to watch where the girls will navigate the car. As such, this chapter details this moment of co-creation (Soep, 2003) where the technology figuratively takes a backseat to the content and the mentors are available for guidance, rather than purely technical training.

This shift is another foundational piece of the Reel Grrls curriculum, and a flashforward moment in the data (as mentioned in Chapter 1). Having the girls work together on their own and others’ group projects, helps to establish a positive normative girl community and adds another layer to the enmeshed feminist
The *enmeshed feminist curriculum* is an inherent and unspoken feminist component of the Reel Grrls curriculum. Keep in mind the EFC—is not a clearly defined outline of objectives—but a methodology that can be identified in the moments of feminist praxis and feminist content that coalesce to create a tacit feminist community. By shifting the power of the Reel Grrls program to the girls, the facilitators are utilizing a tenet of feminist pedagogy—decentralizing hierarchical relationships. “Feminists share a commitment to a form of politics directed towards ending the social arrangements which lead women to be ‘other than’, less than, put down, and put upon” (Kenway & Modra, 1992, p. 139). The ‘turning point’ offers the opportunity for the mentors and facilitators of the Reel Grrls program to commit to the girls in a feminist, valuing and supportive way. Allowing the girls the opportunity to be responsible for their learning shows them: they are important; their ideas are valuable; and they are being heard. At its core, feminist pedagogy offers “…an understanding of pedagogy which recognizes that knowledge is produced, negotiated, transformed and realized in the *interaction* between the teacher, the learner, and the knowledge itself” (Kenway & Modra, 1992, p. 140). I think this interactive feminist pedagogical understanding of knowledge is similar to the ways in which feminist (and others) scholars have theorized popular culture (Sweeney, 2008; Daspit & Weaver, 2000). Popular culture becomes important and pedagogical to an individual as well, although the interaction is among the individual, the knowledge itself, and society—e.g., peers, media, teachers—meaning some larger force outside of herself. For Reel Grrls, the stories, the ideas, and ultimately the work must come from the girls, although they are working with their
mentors and the other girls. As Malory Graham (Co-founder of Reel Grrls) says to the girls, “these are the stories only you can tell,” which also means they are the only ones who can create them.

In this chapter, I begin by exploring the changing philosophy of media literacy programs between ‘protectionist’ and ‘promotionist,’ and how that analytical (protectionist) philosophy in turn shaped the philosophy and types of programs available to girls in the 1990s. Then, I provide an additional layer by offering a feminist critical media theoretical lens to the question of media literacy. Next, I describe what has been happening for the girls in the Reel Grrls program between the “bad ads” (week 1) and “Turning Point” (week 6). At this point, the girls have experienced more of the *enmeshed feminist curriculum*, and their time within this curriculum continues to deepen their experiences within a positive normative feminist environment which runs contrary to the dominant narrative of the “mean girl,” and also helps to complicate what it means to be a girl in mainstream American popular culture. Although I explore the “mean girl” and positive relationships more deeply in Chapter 6, in this chapter, I highlight the community created by the girls and mentors. In essence, this chapter provides insight into a crucial moment in the Reel Grrls curriculum—a moment when the girls take ownership of the program which encapsulates and offers insight into what an *enmeshed feminist curriculum* looks like in practice. This moment is the “turning point.” The role of this chapter is to explore Reel Grrl’s feminist praxis with an eye
towards the ways in which the feminist pedagogy of Reel Grrls manifests itself within the *enmeshed feminist curriculum*.

**(Feminist) Media Literacy Past and Present**

Media educator Steven Goodman (2003) notes that the urban kids he works with in New York City are caught within two very different systems —global media and factory schooling—that “oddly parallel” one another in their “form, structure, and outcomes” (p. 2). Within the system of global media, young people are called upon to “to be spectators and consumers rather than social actors,” while a factory system of schooling desires youth “to be passive and willing vessels for a prescribed set of knowledge and skills” (Goodman, 2003, p.2). Both systems want youth to be passive receptors to prescribed content without thought to what they can do to interact with/rebel against/choose the content. He further claims that for “poor and minority children, a third system is congruent with the first two: a social and political order that wants to monitor and control their behavior in order to minimize risks to white, middle-class community.” (Goodman, 2003, p.2). It is not only poor and minority children who are being “monitored and controlled,” taken up with the addition of gender specifically, the “other” has been a source of worry, e.g., poor, black girls have been “monitored” and their behavior “controlled” in schools (Fordham, 1993). Goodman (2003) concludes that these three aforementioned systems “are one-way...that seek to repress the agency and self-determination of young people” (p. 2). The way to combat these systems is to redress the disconnect students feel between their lived and school experiences. As
a media educator, Goodman (2003) wants to “recognize the social and cultural contexts in which students live” through media literacy. Goodman (2003) describes three groupings for understanding media education: “technology integration, media literacy, and community media arts” (p. 10). I am going to give a quick overview of some of his ideas, as below I will be giving a more complete accounting from a feminist scholar (Kearney, 2006) whose divisions are similar. He argues for a “critical literacy” which includes “the ability to analyze, evaluate and produce print, aural, and visual forms of communication” (p. 3), which is similar to the Reel Grrls mission. For Goodman (2003) detailing “technology integration” means using different technological devices and advances in schools, not as a system of “instructional delivery” but rather to “enhance student exploration and communication” (p. 10–13); And, “community media arts” describes moving media arts out of academia and government policymakers (theorists) into the hands of community arts (practice) (p. 16–18). He details the history and best practices of these parts of media education in order to assist the low income and minority at-risk youth with whom he works in an after school, community based organization called the Educational Video Center in (Goodman, 2003, 18–21). Goodman (2003) recognizes that youth are caught within the differing global media, schooling, and political and social systems that curtail their agency. He stresses that their increased alienation can limit their chances to escape poverty, mutes their voices and leaves society without their creative contributions (Goodman, 2003, p. 2–3). I believe that Goodman’s assessments affect girls disproportionately due to the media’s inherent sexist bias. I chose to detail the similar history of media education but with different
groupings from a scholar who focuses on gender within media education, and highlights how the history affects girls specifically.

According to media and film scholar Mary Celeste Kearney, broadly speaking media pedagogy programs have been around for decades, and can be divided into the three different approaches of “integration, production, and analysis” (Kearney, 2006, p. 96). As noted above, these categories are similar to Goodman’s (2003) work. The curricula for the ‘integration’ method meant instructors included media texts (e.g., newspapers and films) “as supplemental learning materials” and media technologies (e.g., television, and the Internet) “as alternative channels for delivering information to students” (Kearney, 2006, p. 96). Integrating the latest technological innovations (e.g., iPad platform or streaming content) along with different texts kept the material and the ways in which that information was received fresh. ‘Production’ based approaches involved “facilitating students’ knowledge and skilled use of various media technologies for purposes of documentation, communication, and creative expression” (Kearney, 2006, p. 96). The production based approaches seemed to focus on the technical and technological aspects of those programs. Media literacy programs were among the third “analytical” approach. These programs honed students’ “critical skills for analyzing and evaluating media texts” (Kearney, 2006, p. 96). Kearney (2003) posits knowledge of the three aforementioned approaches is critical for understanding the girl-centered media education programs in the United States (p. 96).
It seems that many media literacy initiatives arose out of either concerns or panics for youth. Kearney notes that many scholars date the first media literacy initiatives to the 1920s and 30s, and “connect it contextually to the rise of mediated popular culture” (Kearney, 2006, p. 96). The next notable time period is the 1950s with the publication of “Seduction of the Innocent” (Wertham, 1954), which linked “children’s comic book reading to juvenile delinquency” (Kearney, 2006, p. 96). Marshal McLuhan introduced the “first formal media literacy program” for eleventh graders in Canada in 1959, due to concern of “media’s effects” on children (Kearney, 2006, p. 96). The need for such programs again arose in the 1970s with alarm related to the 1972 Surgeon General’s report17 that linked antisocial behavior in youth with watching violent television programs (Kearney, 2006, p. 96). The report prompted several media literacy programs to be instituted in elementary and secondary schools within the United States. Other countries (e.g., Canada, Australia, and Great Britain) followed suit and with the support of educators, teachers and officials, their programs continued to thrive into the 1980s. During that same time period, the United States took a conservative turn bowing to pressure for a return to school “basics” and defunded their previously successful federally-funded efforts (Kearney, 2006, p. 97). The 1990s ushered in a rise in media literacy programs due to governmental funding, private entities and grassroots awareness, e.g., Center for Media Literacy.

Most recently, the increased access, ubiquity and commercialization of media in contemporary popular culture have joined with parental concerns over the potentially negative effects of their children’s media consumption, have contributed significantly to the recent resurgence of media literacy programs (Kearney, 2006, p. 97). Media literacy programs are different from other groups such as Campaign for a commercial-free childhood, even though they have overlapping concerns for youth. CCFC began in 2000 and grew out of a concern by “activists, academics, educators and healthcare providers concerned about corporate influences on children...(and) has grown into a powerful force, working through...legal means to end the exploitive practice of child-targeted marketing so that children can grow-up...without being undermined by greed” (Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, 2015). Thus, their focus is trained on the advertising and marketing industries, with the goal of challenging their tactics, even as the group works to provide education to their constituents.

Kearney notes that media literacy programs vastly outnumber media production programs, and though she has several suggestions for that difference, e.g., teachers’ “minimal training in media technology and production practices” or “schools’ limited access to or funds for equipment,” it seems that the “dominance of media literacy curricula in the United States can also be connected to the reemergence of conservative social agendas during the late twentieth century, particularly ‘family values’ and ‘back to basics’ that focus on reading, writing and arithmetic.” (Kearney, 2006, p. 97; Buckingham, 1990). Similar to Kearney (2006) and Buckingham (1990),
I would also add that with the advent of policies and programs like *No Child Left Behind*, and the emphasis on testing in schools, similarly conservative constraints have continued well into the twenty-first century.

As a restorative to the conservative pedagogy of many of the media literacy programs heretofore, many contemporary media educators have argued against the ‘protectionist’, i.e., “analysis-only approach” (Kearney, 2006, p. 98), which “is both apolitical and theoretically antiquated” (Tyner as cited by Kearney, 2006, p. 98). Kearney notes cultural theorists such as Adorno who critiqued popular culture as “formulaic entertainment” meant to keep laborers within their prescribed role in the 1930s (Kearney, 2006, p. 98). The ‘protectionist’ approach has its roots in “anti-popular culture sentiments of elite cultural critics and social reformers from past decades” (Kearney, 2006, p. 98). An example was Neil Postman’s anti-television rhetoric of the 1980s (Kearney, 2006, p. 98). I believe that this argument can be brought into the present with the debate and argument over the ‘culture wars’—the struggle between conservative and progressive values in our American culture.

However, critical media studies scholar Wehmeyer (2000) notes that much of the media literacy rhetoric has been a rehashing and updating of “…popular concerns over the relationship between mass media and the changing sociocultural norms of 1950s and 1960s America, the so-called mass culture debates” (p. 94). So, while I meant to contemporize the debate by calling on the ‘culture wars’, Wehmeyer (2000) provides that these types of debates are indeed not new. Kearney (2006) posits that ‘protectionist’ media literacy “borrows the rhetorical strategies of
conservative social movements of the past, positioning media culture as a cesspool and media literacy as an inoculation against such pollutive forces” (p. 98). The reductive nature of this approach also constructs youth as passive recipients at the mercy of commercial culture, a point I stated in Chapter 1, and has been re-theorized as viewers are in fact active participants creating and making meaning in concert with the images and their own desires (Jenkins, 2006; Kearney, 2006; Sweeney, 2008; Walkerdine, 1990).

As with Berger’s (1972) idea of ‘glamour,’ Kearney (2006) posits that media literacy is about translating a very particular set of values and class.

As a form of analytical training, media literacy is intended to give students mastery over commercial media culture by providing them with the tools necessary for finding the harmful messages in such texts. Once young people see the manipulative and formulaic nature of mass media, it is believed, such texts will be demystified, and youth will turn to more legitimate forms of culture, such as literature, thus reproducing the taste culture Pierre Bourdieu associated with the middle class (Kearney, 2006, p. 99–100).

Some media literacy programs that focus on analytical tools, seem to have different ideological underpinnings, but lean towards a denial of the entertainment value of popular culture texts and the individuals’ inability to resist the “harmful” messages
provided therein, whether one is ideologically positioned on the left or the right side of the political spectrum. Wehmeyer (2000) argues “(m)edia literacy is about individual ‘reactions’ and aired ‘points of view,’ it seems, not about the ideological positions of given groups and demands for changes in representational practices, policies, or laws”\(^1^8\) (p. 97). Regardless of individuals’ ideological stance, they all need ‘protection,’ which does not include learning media production.

The privileging of the mental processes of critical analysis over the manual practice of creative production in media literacy curricula not only results in students being only partially informed about media culture, but also continues to reinforce the other impenetrable wall that separates media analysis from media production...theory from practice”

(Kearney, 2006, p. 100–01).

These programs separate the media theory from the learning practice that makes it difficult for individuals to have the tools necessary to respond or to have any agency to address what they see—whether they wish to emulate and replicate, or resist and transgress.

Kearney posits further that the rise in media literacy campaigns of the 1990s coincided with the interest in girls’ psychological and social health, and in particular

\(^{18}\) We will talk about Reel Grrls reaction to this type of media literacy analysis in the next chapter S.C.A.N.
the ‘girls-only’ “media literacy programs also reveals the influence of feminist research” (Kearney, 2006, p. 101). As discussed in Chapter 1, with the rise of public interest and research surrounding issues of girls’ self-esteem in the 1990s, many feminist and other organizations set about to advocate for girls. Feminism is a political movement about creating change for women and girls, so they were among the first to create and advocate for the health and well-being of girls. For example, the Girl Scouts of the USA refocused their programs to link the positive connection of girls’ mastery of skills (i.e., badges) to girls’ increased self-esteem; and the Ms. Foundation started the “Take Our Daughters To Work Day” in 1992 as part of their National Girls Initiative; even the U.S. government (Department of Health and Human Services) got involved by creating its ‘GirlPower! program19 (Kearney, 2006, p. 108) to champion “girls’ self-confidence, by providing girls with positive messages, meaningful opportunities and accurate information about health issues” (Kearney, 2006, p. 109). Although there is no way of knowing if these programs were inspiring or impactful on girls, these programs did have an underlying theoretical problem. Feminist Smith (1997) writes of Riot Grrrl, “It is a turn toward an attitude of independence rather than simple repudiation [of white male authority], and is firmly entrenched in the power and inspiration of a feminist community” (p. 230). Instead of invoking this Riot Grrl notion of independence and do-it-yourself philosophies, as with other adoptions of the “girl power” message,20 the “girl advocacy initiatives…stress the future empowerment of female youth

19 See Kearney, 2006, p. 108-109, for a more in-depth list of programs aimed towards building girls’ self-esteem.
20 Please see the discussion of “girl power” in Chapter 1
through adult intervention, and thus unwittingly construct girls as disempowered in the present” (Kearney, 2006, p. 109). Constructing girls as disempowered is the opposite of what the ‘girl power’ initiatives hoped to achieve. As with media literacy programs that left girls in the position of deconstructing the media without knowing how to create their own, or girl advocacy programs that seemed to champion their voices without helping them to find venues to use it, there seems to be an underlying philosophy or replication of the idea that it takes adult intervention for girls to create change.

Instead, media literacy programs that involved direct engagements with not only the analysis of media but also the tools and practices of media production started in small pockets around the country, one of which was Reel Grrls. Although girls had been productive in their “bedroom culture” (McRobbie & Garber, 1991; Kearney, 2007), creating (maga)’zines and other artifacts, e.g., fan culture, blogs, etc., some girls were also angry not knowing how to create or talk back in the same medium. Kearney (2007) also re-contextualizes the notion of bedroom culture of the 1970s to the 2000s where these sites of girls’ media production (i.e., their bedrooms) signal not a withdrawing into a private space, but rather “...they are reconfiguring such sites to create new publics that can better serve their needs, interests, and goals” (p. 138). Girls’ bedrooms have become places where resistance and transgression can occur. Beyond the bedroom, though, production-based media programs, or ones that blended both analytical and production, were viewed as “promotionist” for they promoted the abilities of girls specifically, and broadly speaking youth to learn other
technologies and then—continue to or—create their own media-worthy ideas (Kearney, 2006).

I detailed the history of analytical media literacy programs from its ‘protectionist’ foundations to more production-based (or ‘promotionist’ programs) while also linking the similarities of representations of girls in the 1990s in need of protection from their low self-esteem, to underscore that the Reel Grrls’s program is unique in its commitment to blending not only feminist praxis, but also analytical media literacy with cultural production within its curriculum. In this way, Reel Grrls is working within a narrow window of programs (like Rock Camps for Girls, other film programs (cites) that try to balance both theory and practice for its participants.

Tropman (2011) posits that feminist pedagogy naturally exists within media literacy because feminist pedagogy seeks to redress power relations and “critiques of representation,” both of which are explored in media literacy programs (p. 137). Indeed, Feminist scholars (Gonick, 2006; Projansky, 2014; Ringrose, 2008) have been the ones to call into question representations of girls in media culture, particularly in response to the media induced “moral panic about the threat to all girls of at-risk status” while simultaneously surveilling them for protection (Projansky, 2014, p. 4). Although I will explore this relationship more deeply in Chapter 5, there was a moral panic surrounding how girls were positioned in the 1990s as either “at-risk” or “can do” which replicates the tired representations that girls need to be protected or assisted in their efforts to overcome their surveilled
status. However, film and media arts scholar Sarah Projansky (2014) calls out these discourses of girlhood for their focus of individualism, and explains, “the majority of girls in media culture are simply white” (p. 8). Kearney (2011) notes that explorations of girl media characters reveals mostly white, Anglo, middle-class, heterosexual, and suburban girls. There are a myriad of white female protagonists; television shows who fit the aforementioned description. While this list is not meant to be exhaustive, I have tried to just take a random selection of shows over the past thirty years, e.g. Square Pegs (1982–1993); Blossom (1991–1995); My So-Called Life (1994–1995); Sabrina the Teenage Witch (1996–2003); Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997–2003); Hannah Montana (2006–2011); iCarly (2007–2012); Suburgatory (2011–2013). Even for programs that were ensemble shows, most of the girls were white, e.g., Saved by the Bell (1989–1993) or Beverly Hills 90210 (1990–2000). An outlier in that category was an ensemble show that featured girls of different racial/ethnicities was The Facts of Life (1979–1988) or Sister Sister (1994–1995). Another show which featured several black girls was A Different World (1987–1993), but that show was about college students at a traditional black college, whereas the other programs mentioned focused on girls in high school or younger.

Projansky (2014) further contextualizes a new focus in “turn-of-the-twenty-first-century-media culture: (to) the discursive production and social regulation of the girl as a fabulous and/or scandalous object on display,” which she calls the ‘spectacularization of girlhood’ (p. 6). It seems to be an iterative problem that arises within celebrity culture. As she seeks to address representations of girlhood who do
not belong to the “either/or” categories but can widen the lens of girlhood,

Projansky (2014) asks the following questions

How can we use antiracist, queer, feminist girls’ media

  criticism to upend—rather than reify—the white,

  heteronormativity that undergirds the can-do/at-risk dichotomy?

And how can we use criticism to broaden and multiply the

  versions of girlhood visible in media culture?

  (p. 10)

I add her questions for two reasons. The first is to underscore the possibilities of a

  feminist critical media studies, which brings a gendered lens to “the critical study of

  imagery and iconography of contemporary media and popular culture” (Luke, 1994,

  p. 30). This lens includes those voices that have been marginalized or silenced in the

  mainstream media, e.g., women, people of color, queer, trans, any “other” than

  white, heterosexual male. Luke (1994) notes central to feminist theoretical

  arguments against male textual rule is the near seamless historical repression of a

  female authorial voice” (p. 32). So, while female absence has a long history, more

  currently women’s and girls’ voices—if included at all—replicate the same types of

  women and girls that have already been seen. For example, for women she can be

  the “the manic pixie dream girl,” (Raban, 2007 and 2014), as mentioned in Chapter

  1, the slightly crazy, beautiful but off-beat, white girl who spurns the male

  protagonist towards achieving his life goal, even though she seems to have no goals
of her own. For girls, she usually is “the impossibly high-achieving heterosexual white girl who plays, sports, loves science, is gorgeous but not hyper-sexual, is fit but not too thin, learns from her (minor) mistakes, and certainly will change the world someday” (Projansky, 2014, p. 1). Both of these caricatures stand in for fully realized women and girls in many mainstream movies. The second reason is to demonstrate that the very questions Projansky (2014) is addressing—i.e., moving beyond simplistic representations of girlhood with familiar tropes to create representations of girlhood that broaden and/or alter the familiar—is one of the reasons Reel Grrls was created.

With the historical grounding in media literacy program and an understanding of feminist critical media literacy, I will now turn back to the Reel Grrls program itself. I will focus on the Enmeshed Feminist Curriculum by highlighting the stories and opportunities the girls have had within the Reel Grrls program that leads up to the ‘turning point’.

Laying the Groundwork of the Enmeshed Feminist Curriculum

After the ‘Bad Ads’ exercise, the girls were given other tasks and assignments, in addition to having other adventures. For example the girls met performance artist, Alex Martin, who started a project called “little brown dress,” in which she wore the same handmade brown dress for an entire year from July 7, 2005–2006. I am including the description from Martin’s blog below, but it is a more polished and
thought-out (after the end of the project) response, than when she met the girls at only seven months into the project.

In this performance, I challenged myself to reject the economic system that pushes over-consumption, and the bill of goods that has been sold, especially to women, about what makes a person good, attractive and interesting. Clothes are a big part of this image, and the expectation in time, effort, and financial investment is immense. (Martin, n.d.).

In our meeting, Martin told the girls that she made costumes and clothing, but felt it was a challenge to herself as a designer and as an artist to use the opportunity to think about issues of sustainability on many levels. For example, it is not necessary to change your clothes every season; indeed, many women spend much time and money to keep up with fashions. She asked the question “what if we made stuff that was to last”? (Rattner, field notes, February 9, 2005). Martin noted that she had not decided yet, if it was “feminist or something,” but maybe by the final performance she would (Rattner, field notes, February 9, 2005). In the end, according to her website, she did decide that it was in part a feminist stance against women’s need to use a new wardrobe as self-expression.

Was this a feminist thing? Probably. Also an art thing. Also a let’s stop wasting time and money thing. But on a feminist note, let’s stop agreeing that the best way for women (in particular) to “express themselves” is by purchasing new wardrobe items and putting together daily outfits.
I believe that meeting Martin was another form of feminist critical media literacy, in that she was questioning and challenging the girls to think about their own personal choices in self-expression. Additionally, it is part of the *enmeshed feminist curriculum*, for her performance offered an alternative to the mainstream ways in which discussions of women’s clothing and fashion are exchanged in popular culture. Instead of pushing towards consumption and purchasing more, Martin is questioning ideas of sustainability, fashion, and fundamental choices of personal expression. In fact, one of the Reel Grrls seemed personally taken with Martin’s idea, and described how she had made her own skirt out of t-shirts.

The girls also viewed three films created by mentors in the program. These are films that the girls otherwise would not have an opportunity to see as the filmmakers do not have a forum to show these films outside of festivals, like the Sundance Film Festival. The kinds of places where these films might be seen, e.g., film festivals, women’s studies classes, media centers, alternative fringe media festivals, are generally places where most of these girls do not go. Similarly, the themes of these films are more alternative or of a feminist nature than the films the girls would see typically. Viewing and discussing these films within the context of Reel Grrls with the filmmakers, helps to broaden the girls’ perspective on the types of girls and/or content they can see on the big screen.
The first movie titled *Jump Like a Girl*, (2004), was an hour-long documentary, made by mentor Ruth Gregory, that follows the dream of women ski-jumpers Lindsey Van and Jessica Jerome. The filming takes place from 2002–2004, where the girls hoped to challenge the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to make women ski-jumping a recognized Olympic sport. The film addresses sexism in yet another arena—i.e., not in advertising, but in sports. After the movie, there was a question and answer session. Gregory spoke of her experiences of sexism with sports in high school and within graduate film school. She talked about the ideas of “throwing like a girl or playing like a girl” and what those phrases meant to her. “They don’t expect women to be like men in other sports...(It) seemed like a microcosm of what happened in high school and college” (Rattner, field notes, February 9, 2005), from this seed her idea grew into the film. Gregory questioned the idea that her film was feminist, but felt sure that the administration thought it was. She stated “anything about girls and women that did not involved them being strippers,” she had to fight her school for equipment and money, and to find her own travel (Rattner, field notes, February 9, 2005). In the end, the film meant so much more to her because of her struggle. In a way, her struggle with her administration mirrors that struggle of Van and Jerome (ski-jumpers) and their parents’ fight with the International Olympic Committee (IOC), as they are all pushing against a systemic view of girls that does not include jumping off a very long ramp to fly into the air. Gregory explained to us that Title IX is only is the United States and affects the “funding for

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21 This finally happened in 2014 at the Sochi Olympic Winter Games.
government handouts,” but when the girls competed in Norway, they had to be included due to the laws of gender equity.

The Reel Grrls’ girls railed against the idea that the girls are not allowed to jump solely because they are girls. Gregory explained that ski-jumping is an “extreme and manly” sport requiring “no fear” to jump over a football field in length (over 120 yards in length). If the IOC allowed girls to do it, it “wouldn’t be extreme anymore” (Rattner, field notes, February 9, 2005). I believe that Gregory’s answer here gets to the center of the controversy, if ‘throwing’ or ‘playing’ like a girl is an insult, than what can it mean for girls to be included in a very extreme sport? It challenged the very nature of what it means to be a girl, and also brings up long-held ideas of protection—as it was thought that girls could get hurt and no one wanted to be responsible for that kind of problem, even though it was not an issue with men. For example, this type of argument was utilized to justify military women staying off the front lines during wartime and fighting with her unit.

The second documentary to be shown was a short film on arranged marriages within an East Indian family. Sukhi Sanghera, another mentor of the Reel Grrls’ program created this film. It was shown for its content, as it again highlights girls/women that are outside of the mainstream press; and, it does so while making people of color the subject of the film rather than token side characters or a subplot of the ‘real’ film. The film also was used to demonstrate a particular camera style, as it featured much movement and many interviews that can be tricky as they can
show more emotion. The content of the film was again decidedly feminist in showing diversity in the representations of women and challenging norms within the East Indian community and within American popular culture.

Lastly, the girls saw “How to Go on a Man Date” (2006) created by Wilson Diehl, another mentor. This short 8-minute film was a satirical film shot as an instructional video from the 1950s. The subject matter challenged heteronormativity by featuring how men become friends as its central theme. This film was shown to the girls as an example of how a filmmaker could play with different genres, because Diehl mixes humor, satire, and spoofs instructional videos simultaneously. Additionally, in making the film, Diehl explains specific techniques to the girls, e.g., how her voice-over audio was dubbed in afterwards; and how her editing made the film look “distressed and older...or more “scientific” (Rattner, fieldnotes, February 28, 2006). Speaking in contemporary terms, the film is like a “Bromance” movie but told in a specific instructional style, shot in black and white. A “Bromance” film details the “complicated love and affection share(d) by two straight males’...Often torn apart by women, a well-tended bromance teaches male characters (and viewers) about love and friendship, and ultimately, themselves” (Mancini, 2014).22 Outside of attending a film festival or stumbling onto the DVD *Seattle Women In Film* (2008), the girls would be unlikely to see this film that pokes fun at the constraints of straight male friendships and constricting stereotypes of masculinity, effectively challenging mainstream popular culture.

Although each of the three films detailed above were shown to demonstrate different filming techniques, genres and styles, their content collectively creates another layer to the enmeshed feminist curriculum. This is a feminism made normative within the Reel Grrls space, by making a space for alternatives to mainstream popular culture—ones that allows girls to challenge their own physical boundaries and/or cultural customs, or pokes fun at the stereotypes for masculinity and femininity—and offering a counter balance to repressive messages for both sexes. In each of these three examples, the films were important and personal stories that each filmmaker wanted to tell. The mentors stress to the girls that they must begin thinking of their own personal stories that they want to explore in their short film (under 5 minutes) projects.

Field Notes:

Graham (co-founder of Reel Grrls): stresses to the girls that “the main theme is that we don’t want something that’s already in the mainstream. If you were going to die in two weeks from now, what’s the story you want to tell.” Although it sounded shocking, I found that Graham often spoke in terms of extremes and appreciation for living life to the fullest extent—e.g., she pointed out the number of days the average person lived in one of the first meetings and asked what each girl planned to do with her time? She also quoted a Mary Oliver (2008) poem, “What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life”? The facilitators continue to tell the girls that they and other mentors will be on hand to help them with their ideas.

Graham: We won’t limit or censor you, but push you into ways that will allow you to be the most successful. Sometimes someone has a really strong idea and maybe it sparks interest of another girl who wants to be her cameraperson. We’ll give you tried and true methods of things that work.
Mentor: Some people can work together or alone. You get to figure out how this will naturally happen. It always happens...the girls work it out naturally what will work.

Mentor: In male traditional Hollywood-type you would have particular roles, but we don’t have that here, it’s a more collaborative process. We help each other.

Turning Point: what does it mean?

In field notes dated February 28th seen directly above, I recount data that explicitly shows how the Reel Grrls program builds a collaborative and supportive environment, which is feminist pedagogical moment of the enmeshed feminist curriculum. The mentors offer assistance in shaping ideas “to be the most successful” in a process that they specifically differentiate from a “traditional Hollywood-type” male environment (Rattner, field notes, February 28, 2006). Graham tells the girls to choose personal stories that have not been seen in the mainstream press, which broadens the notion of ‘girlhood’ and demonstrates how the program builds upon the enmeshed feminist curriculum in everyday moments. This curricular moment builds more evidence for the tacit feminism seen within the program. Keep in mind, the enmeshed feminist curriculum does not adhere to a rigid outline, but happens in small pedagogical moments of feminist praxis. The opening vignette featured at the beginning of the chapter (Rattner, field notes, March 7, 2006) offers the reader another inside view of how the Reel Grrls presented one of the pivotal moments in the program. I believe it is a special moment, because it is marked so distinctively by the co-facilitator’s actions. Lucia literally stops talking. She stares at the girls, and then makes a point of telling them “I want you to
remember this moment,” because it sparks a shift in the power dynamics of the program. The girls will now effectively be running the Reel Grrls program— it will be their ideas and their momentum that will push their projects to the finish line, i.e., the ending date of the program. Although the girls have been primed for this moment, as evidenced by the data from February 28th where Graham tells them the mentors will be on-hand to help and guide them to be successful, it is not often these moments are made aware to the participants at the time. This was why Lucia (the co-facilitator) noted that it was a ‘turning point.’

This moment becomes an important rite of passage for the girls. A rite of passage marks the passage of different “well defined stages, each of which is characterized by its own patterns of obligations, privileges, and types of relationships with his fellows” (Bossard & Boll, 1948, p. 247). Bossard and Boll (1948) signify the formal debut of wealthy young (white) girls into Philadelphia society as such a rite, but also mention other ceremonies such as birth, social puberty, engagement, marriage, or death (p. 247). They also note that the purpose is to move an individual from “one fixed situation into another equally fixed” position. (Van Gennep, as cited by Bossard & Boll, 1948, p. 247). I mention the idea of a “fixed” position because I perceive the Reel Grrls are not “fixed” in the same way as one would be after experiencing another type of rite of passage, such as a religiously associated one (e.g., bar/bat mitzvah or confirmation), or ones associated with the body (e.g., beginning menses). Similarly, for rites of passage associated with specific laws or the body i.e., a marriage or birth, those states are also ‘fixed’ in a concrete way. All the
aforementioned examples move the youth from a distinct “before” and “after” period or state of being. This ‘turning point’ moment is really a performative act-played out in a theatrical and performative way. She tells the girls “shhh, quiet” and waits for their attention, before symbolically (at this moment) passing the responsibility of the program over to the girls. There is no liminal space, or easing in or through this experience, once Lucia tells the girls “we turn Reel Grrls over to you!” it is done. While the Reel Grrls rite of passage is equally important in a shift of power and/or knowledge, the transition leaves the Reel Grrls in a state of co-creation and becoming, rather than having arrived at a fixed location. Furthermore, as the girls’ progress within the Reel Grrls program, they continue to understand more of what they are creating and the tools they are using to tell their stories, i.e., their understanding of the power shift is continually happening, although there is not a clear demarcation other than this moment. “Shhh, quiet. There, did you feel that?” Lucia tells the girls. The girls take their cue from this moment, whether it registers or not as an important moment personally, for the enmeshed feminist curriculum, their rite of passage is a key to valuing the contributions girls can make as they move from being cultural consumers to cultural producers.

**Conclusion**

I began this chapter by drawing on the history of media literacy programs and efforts to ‘protect’ youth from potentially damaging messages by teaching the analytical tools to ‘read’ the media. How could youth possibly understand the sophistication of the messages and the techniques being used to sell them products?
Kearney (2006) and Wehmeyer (2000) both suggest that media literacy programs translate particular values and class, and their rising surges over the years has resulted from the fear over both increasing interest in popular culture and changing sociocultural norms. Next, I explored the connection and similarity between the philosophy of girls-only media literacy programs and the replication of the dichotomous ‘at-risk/can do’ girlhood popularized and reified in the 1990s media. Using Projansky’s (2014) notion of “spectacular girls” to broaden the definition of acceptable girlhood, I raise her question “...how can we use criticism to broaden and multiply the versions of girlhood visible in media culture” (p. 10) to think about the possibilities of feminist critical media studies. I believe that cultural criticism and cultural production can work together, and do so in the Reel Grrls program. The Reel Grrls are coming into a period of shared knowledge and co-creation with their mentors and peers and is another step in the enmeshed feminist curriculum.

I detailed all the ways in which Reel Grrls seeks to complicate and engender a positive normative feminist environment. The girls in fact have been welcomed and embraced into a community of women media professionals who are teaching and learning with them. From meeting the artist, Alex Martin (2005) of the “little brown dress” to seeing movies that they would never have the chance to see, not only because they are independent cinematic creations that have a hard time finding a place in our mainstream culture, and due to their specific feminist content, but also because the types of places these films and performance artist might be shown or attend are not typical places for teenage girls to go. The EFC also highlights the
alternatives for girls who can complicate expected norms for themselves and
highlights how stereotypes can be constraining for everyone—e.g., from women ski-
jumpers, challenging arranged marriages in modern times, and creating male
friendships. The girls have also been exposed through these movies and experiences
to a wider view of what ‘girl’ (i.e., a girl character) can mean in film.

All this information is filtered through the rest of the girls’ experiences and adds a
layer of richness that challenges their daily diet of mainstream/malestream
American popular culture. Everyday, girls are seeing literally thousands of messages
about who women/girls should be, at Reel Grrls instead of a flat or one-dimensional
female character the idea of what a girl can be on screen can become complicated by
the intersectionalities of race/ethnicity and class. The “turning point” moment
offers the girls a chance to take ownership of the program to test out what they have
been experiencing in a supported and valued way. The girls are roughly halfway
through the Reel Grrls program, the rest of the program outside of one more field
trip (See Chapter 5 S.C.A.N.), is really about the girls creating their ideas for their
film and then making that idea a reality. At this moment, the girls are being asked to
take the lead in shaping their experiences in the program—to make it meaningful
for them—as a ‘rite of passage’ that few experience outside of religious, legal or
physical dimensions. As the girls continue within the enmeshed feminist curriculum,

23 There is a whole discourse of intersectionality, “the mutually constitutive relations among social
identities” (Shields, 2008) that I will not get into here, but is important in looking at the contributions
of feminist theory to the ideas of theorizing identity. Although fraught with theoretical assumptions
(Nash, 2008) and methodological issues (McCall, 2005), intersectionality is utilized within feminist
research.
they are offered alternatives to the typical sexist media narrative in a community that can offer a broader picture to include all that they are, not just a trope of American girlhood.

In the next chapter, I detail the girls’ experiences at a community access television studio to discuss the ideas of societal roles and limitations placed on girls, and the place of access for all, and intersectionality of culture/ethnicity/race/gender. I begin by highlighting historical expectations and anxieties for girls from the 1990s—focusing on the dichotomous representations of the “at risk” and “can do” girl—until the present. Through discussions of Riot Grrrl and “girl power,” I describe the perceived shift to a neoliberal subject, where community has been stripped in favor of a commercialized individualism, illuminating the importance of democracy and activism with youth involved in media.
Chapter 5: Seattle Community Action Network (S.C.A.N.)

FADE IN: Week #7 of the Reel Grrls program

INT: “Inside of Television studio” Seattle Community Action Network. This is a busy television studio. There are three television cameras operated by girls. The working control room, which is off to the right side of the studio is also filled with several girls, sitting behind sound equipment, each waiting to begin recording. Out in the studio behind two large grey screens is another group of girls. Although unseen, their voices are heard softly in the background. A group of six girls crouch down in a semi-circle, in front of the same two grey screens. The girls are waiting to be told it is time to begin. In front of where they stand, there is a large “X” (their mark) on the floor. They wait quietly, but determinedly. Everyone is paused expectantly until they hear word from the Director, a large headset on her head standing in the control room, that it is time to begin.

DIRECTOR (GIRL 1) — (O.S.)
Ok, let’s go

FLOOR MANAGER (GIRL 2)
Holds up three fingers

And, three...

She holds up two fingers, then one finger, and then points at the group of girls waiting quietly in their semi-circle stance.

GIRL 3
Moves to her mark – the X – on the floor

Every girl has the right to rise above.

Behind her every girl rises to their feet; she then steps back to join the group.

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* O.S. means “off screen”
GIRL 4

Moves to X.

Every girl has the right to stand apart

She separates her feet standing boldly. Behind her every girl strikes a bold pose; she then steps back to join the group.

GIRL 5

Moves to X.

Every girl has the right to play football.

She pretends to throw a pass and behind her every girl strikes a football pose; she then steps back to join the group.

GIRL 6

Moves to X.

Every girl has the right to box, and get down and dirty.

She begins to shadow box, as all the girls behind her strike a boxing pose; she then steps back to join the group.

GIRL 7

Moves to X.

Every girl has the right to have an attitude.

She snaps her fingers, behind her every girl strikes a pose; she then steps back to join the group.

GIRL 8

Moves to X.

Every girl has the right to start a revolution!
All the girls pump their fists in the air.

FADE OUT.

THE END

Introduction

This chapter about the Reel Grrls’ visit to Seattle Community Action Network—S.C.A.N. (week 7) speaks to the larger issue of the societal roles and limitations placed on girls. As such, I describe historical expectations and anxieties for girls from the 1990s through the present, focusing on the shift to a neoliberal subject. Neoliberalism is a political persuasion, generally linked to conservative politics, that believes in allowing the power of free capital markets to govern economic and social forces, i.e., no government intervention or regulation in economic measures or in social safety nets of any kind (Martinez & García, 2000). The idea of a ‘public good’ or ‘community’ is replaced with individual responsibility. By neoliberalism, I am drawing on a broader “ethos of individualization, competition and marketization” (Ringrose, 2007, p. 484) as noted by feminist, educational scholars Walkerdine and Ringrose (2006). What does this mean for girls in a new market economy and the anxieties surrounding them? “Neoliberalism maintains that individuals have been ‘freed’ from the traditional constraints that, historically, acted as barriers to Self-fulfillment. Individuals are now able to begin—and hence must take responsibility for—fashioning Selfhood. Neoliberalism thus positions girls to construct new
girlhoods” (Currie, D., Kelly, D. & Pomerantz, 2009, p. 175). Essentially what this means is that neoliberals focus on individual choice, rather than on societal or structural changes—a stalwart of feminist philosophy—as a means to achieving success, in whatever arena it may be. This cultural neoliberal turn also highlights the importance of teaching about democracy and activism with youth involved in media. Within the Reel Grrls curriculum, democracy and activism are a part of the larger conversation and philosophy about what the audience gets to see and whose stories get to be told. By speaking about democracy and activism, Reel Grrls provides a necessary counterbalance to mainstream media culture. For example, the consolidation of media outlets\(^\text{24}\) leaves fewer options for viewers. Women “hold less than 7 percent of all TV and radio station licenses... (p)eople of color hold just over 7 percent of radio licenses and 3 percent of TV licenses” even though they represent 51% and 36% respectively of the United States population (Free Press, n.d.). What these statistics demonstrate is that the choices of what people get to see becomes fewer and the diversity of those stories becomes almost nonexistent. By focusing on activism and democracy, the importance of having a voice and speaking up for yourself and your community becomes even more fragile and important within this environment.

This chapter explores one of the only times that the *enmeshed feminist curriculum* is not enmeshed, probably as a result of a concerted effort to resist neoliberal politics and the gravity of losing diversity in mainstream media. The themes of democracy,

\(^{24}\) See: http://www.icntv.tv/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/media-ownership.jpg for a graphic that shows the myriad of media outlets owned by just six corporations.
the importance of having a voice and the means to tell a different story are fully visible within the curriculum when the ReelGrrls participants receive technical training within a community access television studio. This could also be. This chapter details the girls’ experiences as they individually and collaboratively respond to the prompt: “every girl has a right to...”

A Recurring Panic Attack

Over the past 25 years girls in the United States, generally have been positioned and discussed within two major and competing discourses in social and historical contexts. These competing discourses surrounding girls either placed them into the world of psychological mine-fields (“at risk”) or at the height of their girl-powerness (“can do”). The beginning of this “girls’ era” was ushered in during the 1990s, with two groundbreaking research studies: the American Association of University Women Educational Foundation (AAUW) report (1995), How Schools Shortchange Girls, and Failing at Fairness: How American's School Cheat Girls by Myra and David Sadker (1994). Both uncovered that girls were being subjected to gender bias in their classrooms and unequal outcomes over their educational lives; the authors also noted a drop in girls’ self-esteem. For the first time scholarly works placed girls at the forefront of their research, which in turn led to a spate of programmatic and curricular changes in the classroom, e.g., training in egalitarian teaching methods and using materials with more female protagonists in the classroom. They also effectively shifted the feminist research agenda in the field of education pursuing issues associated with a ‘girl subject’ and ‘young femininity’ (Renold & Ringrose,
2013, p. 247, e.g., Aapola et al., 2005; Gonick, 2006; Harris, 2004; Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2005). Although the aforementioned research opened up many doors to change and proved to be useful in identifying blocks to girls and women successes—the dichotomy of the “at risk” and “can do” categories for girls “(b)oth participate in processes of individualization that...direct attention from structural explanations for inequality toward explanations of personal circumstances and personality traits” (Gonick, 2006). This means that the individualized language of neoliberalism that surrounds these contested depictions does not address systemic change, but instead furthers these problematic depictions—or recurring panics—as individual girls rise and fall within the mainstream media.

“At Risk”

In addition to this new attention to girls in schools, in the mid-1990s there was also a release of books focusing on girls’ psychological development, and particularly their downward spiraling self-esteem. Titles such as Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls (Pipher, 1994); Ornstein's (1994) School Girls: Young Women, Self-Esteem, and the Confidence Gap, or Meeting at the Crossroads (Brown and Gilligan, 1993), revealed that psychologically girls were “going underground,” and not revealing their true selves. Girls buried their true feelings to become the ‘good girl’ and were having self-esteem issues as a result of this in-authenticity, which led to detrimental behaviors, e.g., eating disorders and self-cutting. With all this attention to girls there was a dominating discourse of girls in a deficit-model (Hyde, 1996), i.e., as missing and/or losing something whether it be their self-
esteem, voice or authenticity. The deficit model is often used as a way to describe how other people, typically those in authority, frame and perceive learners rather than the learners perceiving themselves in this way, at least initially.

As a result of the interest/focus with girls’ psychological health, there was a rallying cry to empower girls in whatever form that took. As Gonick (2006) notes within the field of psychology, “girls went from being invisible to being vulnerable...(which) soon traversed disciplinary boundaries and spread in multiple directions” (p. 14). Further, girls’ psychological failings of self-esteem soon grew into what Baumgardner and Richards (2000) call a “veritable cottage industry” (as cited by Gonick, 2006, p. 14). Gonick (2006), notes several editions of books with “Ophelia” in the title and many programmatic responses of schools, churches, and nonprofits to assist girls with shoring up their lack of self-esteem. And, yet, while these empirical researchers focused on the girls themselves and what either they or those who cared about them could do to assist them, there was another equally powerful mix of supporters, a foil if you will, pushing for girls to assert their “girl power” in a more “effective” way.

“Can Do”:
The “can do” discourse arises from a different theoretical background than the “at risk” discourse previously explained. While the former is based in empirical research, the latter group takes its cue from those trying to understand the “sociohistorical context and the complexities of power, pleasure and play in cultural
phenomena” (Kearney, 2011, p. 3). They were girls and adults who looked to the larger societal answers for the possibility of girls’ achievements. This “can do” girl represents a “new girl”: assertive, dynamic, and unbound from the constraints of passive femininity” (Gonick, 2006, p. 2). Once again the discourse of neoliberal individuation is paramount in describing her success and her failures, i.e., they rest solely on her shoulders alone, rather than looking to systemic barriers where institutionalized sexism, racism, and classism are the real barriers.

As Gonick (2006) notes, both representations of girls “…participate in the production of the neoliberal girl subject with the (can do) representing the idealized form of the self-determining individual and the (at risk) personifying an anxiety about those who are unsuccessful in producing themselves in this way” (p. 2). What it means for girls is that their space in the world is carved out of two distinctive modes of being which actually work in concert with one another to reinscribe what femininity looks like in the media. The popularity of a “can do” girl is “credited to its very lack of threat to the status quo for the ways in which it reflects the ideologies of white, middle-class individualism and personal responsibility over collective responses to social problems.” (Gonick, 2006, p. 10). As I discussed in Chapter 4, the most visible girls in the media are white and middle-class (Projansky, 2014).

Feminist media studies scholar Sarah Projansky (2014), sums up both of these dominant media depictions for girls in a succinct manner that connotes the ways in which these tropes are reinscribed and repeated within media culture.
The can-do girl is a successful athlete. The at-risk girl is a pregnant teen. The can-do girl is independent and confident. The at-risk girl is depressed. The can-do girl is beautiful and fit. The at-risk girl is hypersexualized at too young an age. The can-do girl is smart. The at-risk girl uses drugs and has unprotected sex. The can-do girl has girl power. The at-risk girl lacks resources. The can-do girl reads *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* and *The Hunger Games*. The at-risk girl sexts. In short, the can-do girl has the world at her feet, while the at-risk girl ‘loses her voice’ (Projansky, 2014, p. 4).

Although Projansky does not show what “at risk” girls read or watch\(^{25}\), her summation draws what appears to be a clear delineation between the contested portrayals of teen girls, noting that it is clearly better to be “can-do” rather than “at-risk.” Projansky (2014) asserts, along with scholars Gonick (2006) and Harris (2004a), that “the ‘can-do’ girl must be vigilant lest she become ‘at risk’ girl” (p. 4). A media trope which highlights both interactions of the can do/at risk girl is what Projansky (2014) has called “…the ‘crash-and-burn’ girl: the can-do girl who has it all, but who—through weakness and/or the inability to live with the pressure of celebrity during the process of growing up—makes a mistake and therefore faces a

\(^{25}\) I believe her point is that “at risk” girls lack the resources or maybe even the interest to want to read, preferring to text instead. But, surely “at risk” girls watch the movies of the books that the ‘can-do’ girls read.
spectacular descent into at-risk status” (p. 4). She notes some examples of actress Lindsay Lohan, singers and sisters, Britney and Jamie Lynn Spears, (Projansky, 2014, p. 4), and I would add, actress Amanda Bynes as the newest girl to join this troubled group. Ms. Bynes was a popular actress through the 1990s and 2000s on the Nickelodeon channel, as well as films and television, but has more recently been behaving erratically (e.g., starting a small fire on a stranger’s driveway, arrested for drug possession) and placed in a psychiatric facility.

Projansky (2014) notes “(b)oth the can-do/at risk dichotomy and the media obsession with the ‘crash-and-burn’ girl celebrity illustrate a concomitant love and contempt for girls (p. 4). Projansky describes an ambivalence in the media portrayal of girls as she sees both “their anxious repetition of both fetishistic desire and phobic derision” (p. 4). Both the way the media represents girls and the constant obsession with their celebrity, works to constantly observe and scrutinize them. Projansky (2014) argues that the surveillance of girls is actually “protectionist, coalescing in a moral panic about the threat to all girls of at-risk status” and notes that “...the process of ’reporting’ on and worrying...reproduce(s) and reif(ies) images of girls as hyper-sexualized and miserable” (p. 5). So, the media are creating and perpetuating these damaging tropes of victimized girls that serves to create panic over the girls that they are worrying about in their reporting. For the ‘can-do’ girls, girlhood provides

...a fantasy promise that if girls work hard, not only can they avoid becoming at-risk, but they can achieve
anything. Particularly in neoliberal consumer culture, this narrative promises unbelievable happiness and achievement—girl power—for the girl who embodies can-do status through career, fashion, and lifestyle choices (Projansky, 2014, p. 5).

Once again the overarching theme of individualized, free choice becomes the dominant narrative for girls looking to be successful, however, narrow and prescribed those ‘choices’ may be. Taking the can-do/at risk dichotomy and mixing in America’s obsession with celebrity culture, Projansky (2014) explains that the media has made girls into “spectacles—visual objects on display” (p. 5). While some of the girls are spectacular, in the best sense of the word, some are also just scandalous. She argues collectively “the discursive production and social regulation of the girl as a fabulous and/or scandalous object on display” is the spectacularization of girls in turn-of-the-twenty-first-century media culture (Projansky, 2014, p. 6). Drawing on the two dominating tropes, of can-do/at-risk, we now have a new light being shined within mainstream media culture and the 24-hour media cycle directly on the spectacles of girl. If, as Projansky (2014) argues, “the media’s obsession with celebrities and girls is intensifying simultaneously” (p. 6), than it is even more important than ever that girls learn the tools of production in a feminist environment, like the Reel Grrls where they are valued, instead of objectified.
The Riot Grrls were the original feminist empowerment movement, with their slogan of girl power. To understand where the idea of girl power originated, and how the media can change intent and messaging, I will now turn to a discussion of the Riot Grrrl movement and their underlying feminist philosophy.

**What is a Riot Grrrl?**

In the early 1990s there were a group of feminist women punk rockers who were tired of the male-dominated and male-centered movement of punk: where they were seen more as girlfriends of the band rather than members of the band, where they were subjected to violence and where they were not taken seriously as musicians by the men in the punk scene. “Riot Grrrls”—the term *grrrl* is attributed to Kathleen Hanna26 of the punk band *Bikini Kill* as a self-identified term of agency—banded together in the spirit of Second Wave feminism’s themes of self-empowerment and independence and of punk’s ethos of do-it-yourself (DIY) (Rosenberg & Garofalo, 1998, p. 809). For a comprehensive history of the beginnings of Riot Grrrl, see Klein (1997) or Hains (2012). The term “grrrl” represents the attempt to “reclaim the vitality and power of youth with an added growl to replace the perceived passivity of ‘girl,’” i.e., grrrl rather than girl (Rosenberg & Garofalo, 1998, p. 809). Much the same as saying there is no “I” in team, the Riot Grrrls were also creating a community of grrrl fighters, as if they were

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26 I have also read that “grrrl” is attributed to Jen Smith, Allison Wolfe and Molly Neuman, members of the punk band, Bratmobile (Hains, 2012, p. 13). After seeing Kathleen Hanna speak (4/29/15), I know that Hanna along with members of Bratmobile came up with the term together while in Washington, D.C.
putting them arms around one another to link their shared experiences of being young women in a cultural script that expected them to be “passive, weak, conventionally pretty, and in need of saving” (Hains, 2012, p. 19). Instead, these Riot Grrrls flipped the script, defying those expectations. Actively calling themselves “grrrls” represents their defiance of feminine socialization that renders girls to be quiet, rather than vocal. Instead, this reclaiming of identity through this revised spelling was means to “talk back” to dominant culture (Delaney, 1999, p. 3). The Riot Grrrls were explicitly political and feminist, working within the framework of loose networks of girls/young women to talk about issues relevant to their lives: sexual abuse, racism, self-mutilation, self-defense and eating disorders, among others. They held conventions, spread their message by word-of-mouth, created bands, wrote and performed music, and self-published magazines (termed zines). These are not mainstream approaches, but are marginalized quite often, but that is where the power resides. They had located their power in these marginalized spaces.

Taking their cue from Second Wave feminism, they made the personal political. Riot Grrrls are loud and through zine, music, and spoken word, express themselves honestly and straightforwardly Riot Grrrl does not shy away from difficult issues and often addresses painful topics such as rape and abuse. Riot Grrrl is a call to action, to ‘Revolution Girl-Style Now’

(Rosenberg & Garofalo, 1998, p. 810)
Although their mission was “staunchly political” Rosenberg and Garofalo (1998) state Riot Grrrls paid more attention to the personal experiences of the everyday, rather than focusing on “marches, legislation and, public policy”\(^{27}\) (p. 810). The music and zines were important sources of sharing their experiences, self-empowerment, political activism and creation of grrrl community and culture. If one reads the “declaration” of the Riot Grrrl philosophy by Bikini Kill, an implicit understanding of the movement emerges. I will only highlight a few of the statements:

BECAUSE we must take over the means of production in order to create our own meanings.

BECAUSE viewing our work as being connected to our girlfriends-politics-real lives is essential if we are gonna figure out how [what] we are doing impacts, reflects, perpetuates, or DISRUPTS the status quo.

BECAUSE we don’t want to assimilate to someone else’s (boy) standard of what is or isn’t.

BECAUSE we are unwilling to let our real and valid anger be diffused and/or turned against us via the internalization of sexism as witnessed in girl/girl jealousies and self-defeating girltype behaviors.

BECAUSE I believe with my wholeheartmindbody that girls constitute a revolutionary soul force that can, and will, change the world for real.


The feminism of Riot Grrrl combined the ideas of activism and empowerment with a grassroots structure that enabled all who wished to join the movement to find a

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\(^{27}\) Given that Riot Grrrls are part of the Third Wave of feminism and/or associated with youth culture, I wonder if this focus on their individual experiences in collusion with the “postmodern” shift away from identity politics is what moved young women/third wave feminists to be more focused on the own experiences and away from collective feminist movement?
place within it. "...(I)t's greatest power is that it gives girls room to decide for
themselves who they are" (Rosenberg & Garofalo, 1998, p. 811). Riot Grrrl also
avoided one of the pitfalls of Second Wave feminism by not essentializing, but rather
“interrogat(ing) the dominant categories of representation” (Delaney, 1999, p. 3)
through their acceptance of difference through intersectionality. Riot Grrrls adapted
the punk ethos of pushing boundaries, challenging the status quo, and making the
world better through their art (Hanna, April 29, 2015, lecture). Thus, Riot Grrrl as a
feminist-inspired postmodern philosophy allowed for a “constant process of change
and images that invoke multiple contradictory meanings simultaneously” (Delaney,
1999, p. 3). This, then, is the moment in which “grrrl/girl power” was claimed. It was
in this moment, in which ideals, such as, independent and connected, empowered
and activist, uncensored and angry, disruptive and contradictory, in which the
power of grrrls/girls were born. Riot Grrrl was created partly to critique “the sexism
girls faced in daily life, constantly judged against impossible beauty standards” (as
mentioned in Chapter 3). To combat these and other forms of sexism, grrrls
challenged beauty standards by their dress, manner and lyrics. For example, some
grrrls wore Army boots, or shaved their heads, or wrote “slut” on their bodies. Many
journalists who were fixated with the Riot Grrrls’ appearance, misinterpreted their
lyrics for their readers by not providing the full context for their anti-misogynistic
movement (Hains, 2012). Hains (2012) explains there was confusion in the
mainstream media because it is “...difficult...for young women to attempt to critique
sexual objectification while simultaneously communicating their rights as sexual
agents” (p. 21). She notes that Riot Grrrls’ efforts to subvert normative femininity
was pathologized. The media depicted Riot Grrrls as angry foul-mouthed, sexual deviants crying out for help, rather than presenting these girls as strongly demonstrating for their right to be themselves (Hains, 2012 p. 23) Unfortunately, Riot Grrrl was a short lived movement, and by the late 1990s, more people mis/heard about the efforts of girl power from the mainstream media, e.g., Sassy or Newsweek, rather than these informal girl/punk/political networks from which they originated. Some Riot Grrrls felt it was a distortion of their punk, rebellious roots, while others felt the media was just a means to an end for the notoriety of the movement (Rosenberg & Garofalo, 1998, p. 810). For some grrrls, Riot Grrrl became their rallying cry and a way through the sexism of our mainstream media culture. For others it was a short-lived oddity during their socialization. What is most notable is that Riot Grrrl emerged from a feminist youth underground that offered girls a different, empowered, more resistant way to experience girlhood within mainstream culture.

Although, not a new phenomenon, as girl power crossed over into mainstream media only the most marketable aspects of it came to the fore. As Second Wave feminist bell hooks (1994) notes mainstream feminism was always packaged into a more palatable message with a white, liberal, privileged-class spokeswoman (p. 75). Kathleen Hanna of Bikini Kill also noted that there were many women involved within Riot Grrrl, but she became the face of the movement due to her being an attractive white woman (Hanna, April 29, 2015, lecture). Hooks, a more radical
feminist, considered the more mainstream, palatable view of feminism to be one where, “(l)arge numbers of feminist thinkers and activists oppose the exploitative, hedonistic, consumerism that is repackaging feminism as a commodity and selling it to us full of toxic components (a little bit of poisonous, patriarchal thinking sprinkled here and there)” (hooks, 1994, p. 74). Some twenty years later, “...the move from the disruptive to assimilations and consumption is a ‘natural’ strain of development within a capitalist postmodern social context which the evolution of girl power illustrates (Delaney, 1999, p. 2). Delaney (1999) further states that due to the rise of technology and our media saturated culture, Riot Grrrls were not able to refine their message of self and their mission before it was morphed into the contested site it ultimately became. Thus, “(y)oung women who were waiting for a new way to express themselves latched onto the commodified concepts of girl power, without necessarily looking for its origins” (Delaney, 1999, p. 5). The move became more about self-empowerment through the consumption of goods or personal strength, rather than about community or shared experiences.

The differing ways in which girl power has been taken up and the discursive possibilities have been explored by many scholars (e.g., Budgeon, 1998; Delaney, 1999; Hains, 2012; Harris, 2004a; McRobbie, 2004; Projansky, 2014; Taft, 2004). Of the scholars who have explored these discursive possibilities, I elucidate two interpretations—Taft (2004) and Harris (2004a)—for their concerns mirror my own. Jessica Taft (2004) illustrates four different ways in which girl power has been
represented, i.e., girl power as: “anti-feminism,” “post feminism,” “individual power,” and “consumer power,” all of which alienate girls’ from their political selves. Anita Harris (2004b) writes, “The idea of girlpower encapsulates the narrative of the successful new young woman who is self-inventing, ambitious, and confident” (p. 17). However, Harris (2004b) cautions that the meaning of “girl power,” should be interrogated for its contextual realities, as the meaning has become linked with consumer choice, rather than citizenship and community.

Each of Tafts’s interpretation of ‘girl power as’ has a unique understanding and specific function, but all work to “define girls as noncritical, nonactive subjects” (Taft, 2004, p. 70). Girl power as “anti-feminism,” references the phrase in situations meant to discourage girls from feminism and to present a negative image of feminism. Taft (2004) uses the Spice Girls as the example of a girl power that is “empowering, celebratory, and affirmative of girls’ strength” but also “is softer, sexier, [and] less active than feminism” (p. 71). This spin promotes girls-positive feelings within a non-politicized and highly cultural milieu, i.e., the softer side of feminism. Girl power as “post feminism” is a version that illustrates gender equity as having been achieved, and neglects to show how race, class and sexual politics are interconnected. Thus, “girls are discouraged from seeing inequality and from engaging in challenges to such inequalities” (Taft, 2004, p. 73). Girl power as “individual power” manifests as a neoliberal individualism that negates the real consequences and connections of our places in various societal structures. “(I)t
hides both the material and the discursive forces shaping identity and the ways that these gendered, raced, classed, and sexualized identities may give girls privileges or pose challenges” (Taft, 2004, p. 73). It is within this individualized form of girl power where neoliberalism shines through brightly, as our societal evolution has shifted over the past twenty years ever closer to a more individualized understanding of our collective social positions.

Working with the same themes Taft outlines, girls’ scholar Angela McRobbie calls into question the way in which the media presents feminism particularly as “beneficiaries of Western sexual freedoms” (McRobbie, 2009, p. 26). McRobbie argues that the media “disarticulates” —“a force which devalues, or negates and makes unthinkable the very basis of coming-together”—whereby possible affiliations among different women are untenable (McRobbie, 2009, p. 27). Talking about Western women and women in repressive or fundamentalist regimes, (McRobbie, 2009) posits “...possible affiliations which would be based on Western feminist post-colonialist critique of how Western sexual freedoms are strategically deployed so as to support notions of civilization and superiority, and...displaces possible solidarities” (p. 27). Other feminist scholars, like Lisa Duggan (2003), have noted that the rise of neoliberalism has masked the dismantling of “old alliances across the spectrum of left, feminism and anti-racist movements” (McRobbie, 2009, p. 29). Without solidarity, individual power is all that remains, particularly when women in non-Western cultures are portrayed in the media as “other.” Taft's (2004)
final point about ‘individual power,’ within girl power rhetoric overemphasizes each girls’ own responsibility for achievement. That is, it overemphasizes girls’ failure or achievement as resting solely with herself. This type of discursive reality has many consequences, possibly “serv(ing) to inhibit girls’ connections with one another, reduc(ing) the possibilities for social analysis and critical thinking, and thus hinder(ing) girls’ social and political engagement” (Taft, 2004, p. 74). Taft’s final meaning of girl power is probably the most popular, as it associates girl power as “consumer power” and circumscribes girls’ societal power to consumption and purchasing ability (Taft, 2004, p. 74). This representation “does not include spaces “to create, to think, and to act” or to engage in social or political action or cultural production (Taft, 2004, p. 75). In each of Taft’s (2004) iterations, girl power rhetoric is stripped of its more activist roots in favor of consumption and individualism.

Anita Harris’ (2004a) critique of girl power also takes up similar ideas to Taft (2004), in that she notes, “(t)he Girl Power market not only relies on young women as its key consumer group, but sells an image of savvy girlness to them in the process” (p. 166). Journalist and media commentator Naomi Klein describes this very process in her book No Logo (2000), “(o)ffering Fortune magazine readers advice on how to market to teenage girls, reporter Nina Munk writes that ‘you have to pretend that they’re running things…Pretend you still have to be discovered. Pretend the girls are in charge’” (p. 77). Munk is writing about the power of a company to be seen as independent and as something new to assist in boosting a
products’ name to girls, at the expense of any type of authenticity with their customer. But then, Girl power has been packaged to sell many different kinds of products, e.g., “clothing, accessories, cosmetics, and snacks,” and for different private (for- and non-profit) sector and government programs and services related to, e.g., “health, sexuality, education, sports, business knowledge, and self-esteem” (Harris, 2004a, p. 167). Additionally, even as girl power revolves around rhetoric of “citizenship status and entitlements,” it “teaches that rights and power, that is, citizenship, are best enacted through individual choices in the market” (Harris, 2004a, p. 167). Critiques of the uses and meanings of “girl power” presented by Taft (2004) and Harris (2004) highlight that the general understanding of ‘girl power’ among the public is easily misunderstood, and as a result must be interrogated in its contextual realities. A recent example of a “girl power” message for 2015 is a short film created by writer, director, and actor Lena Dunham (Davies, 2015). The film is an advertisement for clothing that utilizes the language of “girl power” to sell the image of a young, discouraged political candidate named Audrey. As Audrey knocks on doors of would-be constituents, only to have them slammed in her face, she fantasizes of becoming President with an all-woman Supreme Court and her mom as First Lady. As she comes out of her reverie to the reality of an elderly woman haranguing her, Audrey tells her “girls can do anything.” It is the perfect cooptation of feminism, the “can do” girl and consumerism. Is it meant to be just fun and an advertisement to sell the clothes? Of course it is, but it also illustrates Mc Robbie’s point of how feminism is disregarded, and effectively speaks to Taft’s (2004) and Harris’s (2004a) analysis of “girl power.”
There are those who also see this shift in girl power/feminist thinking as offering some possibilities as well. McRobbie (2004) writes beyond worrying how feminism has shown up in the 1990s popular culture, it is also an achievement “of some degree of effectivity among a wider and younger section of the female population” (p. 5). Five years later, however, McRobbie (2009) has come to amend her earlier thoughts on feminism. Now feminism is invoked to suggest that equality has been achieved and is no longer needed; feminism is offered as a sense of nostalgia and as a force that works in the “dismantling of feminist politics and the discrediting of the occasionally voiced need for its renewal” (p. 12). The idea of having gender equality was called out in the media recently by Republican Presidential candidate Rand Paul, who suggested there is no urgency for the United States to elect a woman president, as “women are already ‘involved at every level and in everything now,’” (Dusenbery, 2015). The fact that women still are underrepresented and do not have an equal voice within the government does not seem to enter the conversation. This is an example of McRobbie’s argument in the “post-feminism” media era, “post-feminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasize that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force” (McRobbie, 2009, p. 12). When feminism is no longer seen as needed or that equality has been achieved, then institutionalized sexism—e.g., the gender wage gap—can be ignored or dismissed even though there are very real material consequences for those inequalities.
As mentioned by others (See Chapter 1, Faludi, 1992; Pozner, 1999 & 2003) “elements of contemporary popular culture are perniciously effective in regard to this undoing of feminism, while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism” (McRobbie, 2009, p. 11). Popular culture still evokes old tropes of Second Wave feminists only to discount some of their hard won understandings. However, as old stereotypes of feminists are pulled repeatedly in front of audiences—e.g., man-hating, unfashionable and hairy-legged—as women out of touch with what young women want today—to be “girlie,” to be feminine, and strong—it works to concretize myths and dichotomies. Stereotyped feminists, and feminist myths and dichotomies gives the overall impression that feminism has not evolved, rather than showing the ways in which feminism has attempted to redress some of the most powerful critiques of racism, exclusion and essentialism, among others. Therefore, feminism is seen as no longer needed in the present world.

Sociologist Shelly Budgeon (1998) notes although feminism and girl power helped to complicate tensions for women between their understandings of feminism and femininity, they also “provided a discourse of empowering ideals, unavailable to previous generations, that young women today may draw upon in defining their own identity” (p. 116). Yet, as the opportunities have increased for girls’ and women’s notions of empowerment, social activism and participation, these different
interpretations of ‘girl power’ illustrate that the contextual and historical factors which shape girls’ experiences need further examination, as seen below.

With the ideas of historical and contextual significance in mind, then, it is important to note some material and cultural differences for girls. Girls’ Studies scholar, Catherine Driscoll (2002) notes that feminism and the emergence of feminine adolescence were both powerful and “influential” discourses in Western cultures of the 20th century, ones that characterized girls in particular ways, e.g., as conformists, rather than rebellious, and then almost exclusively equating girls to either side of the division, as if these were the only choices. The language of feminism has permeated the cultural consciousness (as noted above), and with that comes a shift in the ways that girls (and women) have been portrayed. As Kearney (2002) notes, “(a)lthough operating on the margins of society, Riot Grrrls’ pro-girl ethos and reshaping of girlhood as a powerful position of social, political, and cultural agency have helped shift public attention toward female youth” (p. 133). Harris (2004) believes that this attention has placed a burdensome responsibility for girls’ to be “can do” girls, i.e., a “successful new young woman who is self-inventing, ambitious, and confident” (p. 17). When the “can do” girl, however, is not successful—as addressed above—it remains her fault and personal shortcomings, rather than a result of a host of institutional and/or socioeconomic factors. The shift from the Riot Grrrl’s version of a girl power full of agency in the 1990s, to the current consumer/neoliberal definition of girl power’s right to consume and individualized expression is at the heart of the tension in assuming the girl power
mantel. This tension is evidenced in the mission, focus and curriculum of Reel Grrls program.

The Reel Grrls founder and mentors know from their experience that it is “vital” for the young producers to “create projects that arise from their own core values” (Reel Grrls, 2005, p. 3). Additionally, this positive reclamation of feminist/Riot Grrrl teachings is in itself an activist project and a concrete example of the ways in which to talk about how “the representations of women is to discuss the real. To show...how (girls) are represented and constructed in and by language is an enormously important political act” (Zalewski, 2000, p. 131). In this way, Reel Grrls is part of at least a concurrent political climate to educate the next generation of girls.

As Delaney (1999) observes of Riot Grrrls, “(they) disrupted the assumption that one could ever be completely categorized and defined within a movement” (p. 8). Additionally, although mainstream notions of ‘girl power’ are concerned with how individuals present themselves (i.e., dress or style), Riot Grrrl Kathleen Hanna, “points to the fact that girls’ resistance will not always be the same, and that ‘image’ is not a useful means of classifying girls, or their potential for resistance (Delaney, 1999, p. 9). While Reel Grrls (2005) does not prescribe particular agendas or viewpoints, they instead demand civic engagement from the girls (e.g., showing their work in a local retirement facility), because “(t)he use of media in an engaged
democracy is a founding principle” (p. 3) of the Reel Grrls program. Thus, their mission is one of critical pedagogy and critical media literacy: to understand the dominant messages, the inter-textuality of their (the girls’) experiences and lives, and to make media that matters to them.

Visiting S.C.A.N.

As stated in Chapter 1, while our sexist society often offers messages that can feel limiting for everyone, for girls and women these messages can be even more problematic particularly given that the cultural expectations to push against boundaries is neither encouraged nor condoned. Often times the types of repeated messages we interact with on a daily basis can become part of our lexicon and normalized in our psyches. If this is so, then how do girls seek to mediate, combat and/or inform messages of who they are (or are not)? How might feminists notions of Second Wave feminism and girl power be used to inform messages as girls move from cultural consumers to cultural producers? And how do nonprofit organizations working with girls assist them in this process? Kearney posits “media educators see their role as one of facilitating, supporting, and promoting young people’s critical and creative media abilities” (Kearney, 2003, p. 19). The Reel Grrls message of creating “media that matters,” (Reel Grrls, 2005) speaks directly to Kearney’s quotation above and is directly applicable to the Reel Grrls participants’ visit to the Seattle Community Action Network (S.C.A.N.)
Visiting S.C.A.N. is one of the few opportunities within the Reel Grrls curriculum where the exercise brings feminism out into the open for the girls. For some of these girls, this might be their only explicit interaction with feminism even perhaps in their daily lives. Participating in the feminist curriculum during the Reel Grrls experience can be engaging for some girls. For this day, the fact that we met on International Women’s Day where girls learned about the history of the United Nations’ work to recognize women’s rights internationally was just as significant as having the girls respond to their prompt of “every girl has a right to….”

The whole day was given a focused message that the greatest part of a democracy is one in which everyone has the right to tell their own story. Within the Reel Grrls curriculum, both the media literacy and technological challenges work together to create an experience born out of the need to broaden the field of the stories currently being told. The media literacy component was the message itself, i.e., learn to use your voice to tell your story. The technological challenge was to learn what it is like to be in a working television studio, e.g., how do you operate those big studio cameras; what does a floor manager do; how does the sound board work and how do you record what is going on in the studio? The enmeshed feminist curriculum aspect of this day was to have girls represent their own unique voices and stories. Being in the studio with the Reel Grrls gave the participants an opportunity to explore different ways of being, without fear of repercussions from anyone. In a sense, the girls through their work within the Reel Grrls program were able to create a safe space. The larger implications for the enmeshed feminist curriculum
might take up important critical questions such as: What stories are missing and why? Who has access to tell their own stories and when? Who does not? And why?

Field Notes:  
March 11, 2006

It is a bright Saturday morning, as I pull my car up to a small grey house that is Seattle Community Action Network (SCAN), a working cable television studio. Inside is a large room that has a group of grey chairs in a circle. To the left end is a blue screen with big lights attached to the ceiling. All the lights that are needed—key, fill, background—are attached in various positions. The girls stand around, not sure what to do yet. A new group of girls, a satellite group from Tacoma, has joined the Seattle group today. With the additional group, there is a total of 22 girls, plus two new mentors from their group. I wonder how the girls are going to get along, given that they have never seen each other before today.

Malory tells the girls “today is International Women’s Day, which declared human rights for women in 1967.” Each girl is given four papers stapled together that is entitled “United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, Proclaimed by General Assembly resolution 2263(XXII) of 7 November 1967.” The United Nations took the forefront in granting women’s rights, Mallory informs them. The girls were also handed a single piece of paper with the “Girls Incorporated Girls’ Bill of Rights” on it. Malory says, “So, the line for today is ‘Every girl has a right to...’ You will be able to say whatever you want. You can be very serious or you can be playful. We’ll be in rehearsal and working in groups, so your group will be figuring out what you’ll be saying. We have here a fully equipped television studio and they produce work that we can then show. First I will introduce you to Gillian, who runs SCAN.”

Gillian: “SCAN is a public access station. We are part of PEG – Public education and Government access cable television channels here in Seattle – actually channel 77 - which means that any resident of King County can come in and use our camera equipment, TV studios, and we provide training to them to create their own television show. If you are a cable subscriber, then you pay a fee, so that we can provide this service to the community at very little cost. We are all local independent producers. I understand you’ll be making a video today. Well, we have room for you, not matter what your interest is. It’s boundless where you can grow or go.”

Malory: “So, here is today’s government lesson: Democracy! The fact that SCAN exists is important. It’s an amazing thing about our country. We live in a democracy that says everyone’s voice has a right to be heard. The structure for today is that everyone is going to rotate through to have an opportunity to be in all the crew positions. One
group will start in the control room, another will be on the floor and the third will be rehearsing.”

From the activity: I had been following the first group that was rehearsing their answers. Seseanté and Anna were both in this group. My group was called to come in front of the green screen and run through their answers. The girls rehearsed their lines again. A few decided to put some actions with their responses. They ran through their responses another time. The girls waited and then ran through their responses again. The girls waited quietly for word from the floor manager. She told everyone they needed to talk louder. The girls rehearsed again. They seemed to be getting antsy, moving around and giggling. Finally the girls were given the word that they would be doing their final run through. Seseanté said “Every girl has a right to make as much as men and burp in public.” She then burps loudly. Anna stated, “Every girl has a right to wear men’s deodorant and to advocate for herself.” A girl from Tacoma stated, “Every girl has a right to love” and blew a kiss into the camera. Another girl said, “Every girl has a right to pursue her creative interests.” The next girl responded, “Every girl has a right to dance,” she then began moving her arms and danced in place. The last girl stated, “Every girl has a right to make magic.” The girls decided to do a jump cut or in film editing to make it look like the last girl was making the other girls in her group disappear. My group then got to move into the control room, for their the crew positions, e.g., camera board, camera-woman, floor manager, director, sound engineer. The next group began to rehearse their answers to the same prompt that includes the following responses. “Every girl has a right to: love; eat what they want to eat; avoid mindless consumerism [this statement came from Jones]; not be scared; feel beautiful; be whoever they want to be; be individuals; never feel inferior to men; say no; and be heard. The control room was freezing. Anna pulled her hood up over her head for warmth, as she sat with her hand resting on the camera board. She listened to the Director and when she said “take” Anna switched to a different camera. Seseanté listened to Malory who mentored her through becoming the Director in the shot. Seseanté stated “everyone places…count down.” The girls in the studio began their lines. There was another run through, though this was the final one. Afterwards, Malory told Seseanté she did “Great”, and told the crew “great job” as well. Seseanté smiled. Malory told her “You can say, it’s a wrap.” So she did, and their jobs were completed. The girls hung around the control room until the next group came in for some hands-on training.

The last group to perform was the group listed at the beginning of this chapter. They responded to “Every girl has a right to: rise above; stand out; play football; box and get down and dirty; have an attitude, and start a revolution.”

There was quite a bit of time that was spent waiting for the crew to set up the shots, and for the camera-women to figure out who was shooting which person at which time. When the taping was done, the girls all clapped and moved.
Democracy in Action

This day was very different from the rest of the program. From the very beginning moments of being at S.C.A.N., the Reel Grrls were asked a different question in that feminism had become an explicit curricular component of the day. The technological aspect of working in a new environment with larger equipment—these were big television cameras that glided around on wheels that most of the girls had probably only seen as props in movies or on talk shows, if at all—and learning the workings of a real television studio. As I looked around at the girls smiling and laughing together, I observed a simultaneous look of skillful determination that seemed to be full of focus and fun. The media literacy portion of the challenge was a definitive acknowledgement of the power in having a voice and the necessity—or responsibility—in a democracy of utilizing that unique voice. Lastly, the enmeshed feminist curriculum aspect of this experience called explicitly on that female voice, and even came with a mini-history lesson about the significance and triumph that led to the creation of International Women’s Day.

What I find interesting about the girls’ responses to their prompt—every girl has the right to—is the range of the statements, e.g., from “burp in public” to “avoid mindless consumerism.” They can challenge acceptable standards of composure/behavior—(e.g., “play football”)—or some might say monitoring of girls’ behavior (e.g., “have an attitude” or “feel beautiful”)—or speak to the very serious ideas of being a mindful and engaged citizen (e.g., “to advocate for herself”).
Moreover, the girls were provided a safe space in which to explore their answers and perhaps try on different ways of being without the fear of repercussions from the group, and from other people. I have aggregated the responses into four different themes: desire and acceptable self-expression, areas where girls feel constricted, acceptable behavior, and, feminist.

The first set of statements explore the themes of desire and acceptable self-expression, e.g., love, pursue creative interests, dance, and make magic. This set of experiences seems to be examples that are generally in keeping along traditional gendered norms. Although they are related earnestly and remained compelling for the speaker and the viewers, they represent an acceptable self-expression. The “rights” expressed here of “love, pursue creative interests, dance and make magic” also are ones that can be seen as cutting across gendered lines. They are not necessarily specific to girls. Interestingly, if the gender of the speaker switched to boys then particularly with dance—an activity that still is more associated with girls—there is more of a specific challenge to gendered norms.

The next statements delve into the themes of areas where girls feel constricted, e.g., be whoever they want to be; be individuals; never feel inferior to men; feel beautiful; and eat what they want to eat. This group of statements expressed the themes of places where girls seem to be monitored and scrutinized, particularly when deciding who “they want to be,” who is “beautiful,” or what they eat—which could also be a reflection or acknowledgement of our culture’s preoccupation with
“thinness” (See: Bordo (1997) in Chapter 3). The statement of a right to be
“beautiful” can also be a calling out of the narrow European beauty standards often
repeated in mainstream media. Girls definitely feel the pressure to adhere to certain
standards set by the media, their peers, their cultural expectations. As discussed in
Chapter 3 with Bad Ads and “media girl” exercise, girls are very aware of the
dominant femininity and the very acceptability of who and what is beautiful within
the pages of a magazine. The idea of “being whoever they want to be” could also be a
challenge to the pressure of the “can do”/ “at risk” dichotomy for girls discussed
previously, and/or the individuation process that is a natural part of being an
adolescent. Taken together, these statements express a tightening or awareness of
the cultural standards for girls. The Reel Grrls are expressing the comparing that
happens to a girls’ own ideals with those of popular culture standards and tropes of
the mainstream.

The next group of statements also explore what is acceptable behavior for girls, e.g.,
wear men’s deodorant; box; get down and dirty; play football; stand apart; rise
above; and, have an attitude. Each of these responses showed a lived reality of
expectations for girls and a challenging of those expectations by exhibiting
behaviors that contradict expected norms, e.g., to box or get dirty. Even wearing
men’s deodorant was a seemingly silly way to challenge those norms. However, this
seemingly funny response has real world consequences, e.g., there is a “pink tax”
that women pay in services (e.g., dry cleaning) and products specially marketed to
women that end up costing them approximately $1300 more a year (Plank, 2015).
The idea of “having an attitude,” or “stand apart” is something that is seen typically by teachers and authority figures as a particularly negative trait in African-American girls (Fordham, 1993). These girls are claiming it as their right, and also as a way to challenge those who try to place restrictions upon them and their behavior. Further, to “rise above” can also be related to this idea of being called out specifically due to one’s race. All the girls of these comments were African-American. Education scholar Signithia Fordham (1993) notes that African-American girls use their “loudness” as a way to challenge and subvert gendered and raced expectations of behavior and academic performance.

Although all the statements reflect feminist themes—particularly those found in a typical introductory women’s studies class—the following set of statements specifically draw upon the differences of privilege afforded to men, but ones in which women continue to struggle, e.g., to advocate for herself; not be scared; say no; be heard; make as much as men; and, start a revolution. These statements are powerful, particularly when taken together, because they show the depth of what real girls were thinking and feeling about their own rights in that moment and that space, and the curriculum of which they were part. The variety of the girls’ responses would be ones rarely seen within mainstream popular culture, where girls’ concerns typically vacillate around more typical themes of boys and clothes, e.g. a recent Disney release Cloud 9 (2014) typifies this genre whereby even a girl snowboarder is no match for tropes about girls in popular culture. The girl protagonist spends a great deal of time buying or talking about clothes.
In fact, as mentioned in Chapter 1, education scholars Kelly and Pomerantz (2009) looked at “realistic” teen girlhood in popular culture and found that girls are portrayed in ways that limit their “access to feminist and other oppositional discourses that name girls’ experience and link their feelings to the ongoing quest for gender justice.” (p. 1). Similarly, ideas of politicization are also closed down for women as well.

Consumers are described as informed, discerning, nowadays empowered and hence able to make their own choices, and this particularly applies to women. This rhetoric of the confident female consumer forecloses on the re-emergence of feminism in favour of apathy and de-politicisation (McRobbie, 2009, p. 43).

Both of these quotes speak to the ways in which feminism has become closed off to girls and women.

Through my analysis and interpretation of the Reel Grrls visit to S.C.A.N, I have come to realize the importance of not only having a larger societal framework for understanding the daily interactions women and girls face, but also the importance of teaching that knowledge widely, particularly in everyday spaces. When a woman or girl does not have a context for the sexual harassment she experiences, she might
interpret those experiences as some sort of bad luck or personal failing on her part, instead of understanding that her experience is part of a larger systemic issue of sexism, misogyny or other intersections of the cultures/ethnicities/races and gender she inhabits.

As neoliberal ideology is gaining more attention, (i.e., framing societal issues as individualized or personal responsibility), particularly when combined with the (false) idea that sexism has been eradicated, and equality between the sexes has been achieved, then how does someone explain to girls and women the barriers they still face? Cultural studies critic Henry Giroux notes neoliberalism does more than just consolidate wealth into the hands of the top few, and in the process breaks unions, deregulates government, and more as discussed at the beginning of this chapter. “It thrives on a culture of cynicism, insecurity, and despair” (Giroux, 2010, p. 486). It is critical that communal spaces and ideals of voice and democracy not get lost in the current rush toward individualized, personal responsibility.

The enmeshed feminist curriculum works to redress the loss of the larger social responsibility by participating, and in some cases even demanding that voices of others be heard, and then producing work to push those different or alternative stories through to be seen and heard in the community, for without engagement, nothing can be done. Reel Grrls is working to actively engage youth with those larger social systems of social justice, which is the link Riot Grrrl worked to solidify, i.e., a connection from their feminist politics to their activist music and art. By
building these activist connections for girls, Reel Grrls became part of the “Collective Feminist Activism” (Durham, 1999) mentioned previously in Chapter 1. “Collective Feminist Activism,” (Durham, 1999) means that when girls are provided with mentoring, safe spaces, and a community, they are “able to resist these mediated messages” and can “transform ‘resistant reading’ into an act of affirmation and inclusion” (Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007, p. 112). Within these activist spaces, girls can thrive as part of a group working for a collective goal.

Next in Chapter 6, I discuss “Pitch Day” (week 8), which builds on the enmeshed feminist curriculum, by describing the first moments in which the girls present their stories and raise their voices. Presenting their own stories and raise their own voices are central issues in feminist research and pedagogy. In the next chapter I also detail the process of how ideas are chosen and stories are shared on Pitch Day to explore the working process between the girls and mentors. I give examples of interchanges among the Reel Grrls’ participants and the panel of professionals, and between a participant and her mentor to illustrate the mentoring that occurs within the ReelGrrls program. In popular culture, the “mean girl” trope is normalized to the point of a perceived biological reality for all girls. I analyze this trope to demonstrate that the positive normative feminist environment built within the Reel Grrls program actively works against “mean girls.” Additionally, I describe how Pitch Day is the real culmination of the program and the enmeshed feminist curriculum, which demonstrates how the Reel Grrls program is part of the answer to the call for “Collective Feminist Activism,” (Durham, 1999).
FADE IN: Week 8 of the ReelGrrls program

INT: “Inside of ReelGrrls” YMCA space

Back in the Reel Grrls space, a large open floor-plan basement in the bottom of the YMCA building downtown, 13 girls of various ages from 14-18 years old sit around several white tables, measuring roughly 5’ long x 2.5’ wide. Lucia and Malory (co-facilitators) are standing in front of the group and have indicated to the girls that we are in the final minutes of the program for the day. The final exercise for the day will be to go around the room and have each girl give her “pitch on the fly,” in 30 seconds to one minute, i.e., they are going to tell (pitch) everyone—their mentors as well—the main idea they have for their film.

Girl 1

Suicide in school. I don’t think depression is the only reason kids do it. There is more to it than what others think.

Girl 2

Imagine a coffee shop, you see people and someone sitting and observing. You don’t care because it is not your life. It’s life of the absurd, but there will be stories behind each person you see, and domestic violence will be in it.

Girl 3

Girls can be loud and make a difference.
Girl 4

A letter to my Dad. It’s a personal story.

Girl 5

Step back and look at the bigger picture in the relations between products and consumers, by following the life of a shoe – follow it around as it’s being made, from start (for example, it has the blood of the worker on it) to its finish (when it’s being sold).

Girl 6

Generational curses and breaking the cycle. The audience will be watching and it’ll look like the girl’s falling into alcohol, pregnancy, prostitution, but in reality it will be revealed to show that she’s breaking the cycle.

Seseanté

Interracial relations. When you’re dating someone and have preconceived notions of them. Like if I’m dating a white guy, I think one thing, but if I see a black guy with a white girl, you know. I want to make it more beyond that person. What makes someone black or white.

Girl 8

Culture clash. About a guy in Japan who falls in love with a woman in the U.S.

Anna

My grandparents have been married for, like, 50 years. They’re 86 and 88. My question is have I ever loved someone so much to do something about it. I want to portray the action of love.
Sudha

Mental illness. My brother is autistic and I want to talk about how it effects my family.

Chelsi

I want to talk about ADD. ADD is often diagnosed incorrectly and then it’s used as an excuse.

Jones

I just read this book Ismael and it’s about how humans are living, and consumerism and production.

Girl 13

Personal story about having to grow-up with so many pressures.

Lucia (co-facilitator)

These are gems that need to shine. Think how you can make your ideas stand out.

FADE OUT.

THE END

Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss “Pitch Day” (week 8) which builds on the enmeshed feminist curriculum (EFC), by describing the girls’ efforts to present their stories and raise their voices for their own ideas—a central issue in feminist research and
pedagogy (Gilligan, 1982). In this chapter, I detail the process of how ideas are chosen and of how girls' stories move from first blush ideas to Pitch Day presentations. By giving examples of interchanges among the Reel Grrls participants and the expert panel, and between a participant and her mentor, I illustrate the mentoring that occurs within the Reel Grrls program. Oftentimes, the popular cultural trope of the 'mean girl' is utilized as evidence that girls are incapable of working together to create community. I examine the 'mean girl' trope in light of the Reel Grrls program and detail how the idea a positive normative feminist environment can inoculate against this damaging trope. Moreover, the mentoring and partnership among the girls and mentors demonstrates the continuous building of the “Collective Feminist Activism,” (Durham, 1999), and of the enmeshed feminist curriculum.

Girls as Agents

In chapter 5, I spoke of the popular discourse surrounding the ways in which girls have been positioned—as either ‘can do’ or ‘at risk’—in mainstream media and in general, the ways in which girls have been discussed. I explained (as argued by other scholars\(^\text{28}\), such as Gonick, 2006; Kearney, 2006; McRobbie, 2008; and Projansky, 2014), that not only are they both representative of the same conservative, neoliberal political ideology, but also that both ‘can do’ and ‘at risk’ positioning over-determine the individual girl, rather than impugning the system and context within which these girls function. Girls Studies Scholars, Carrie A.

\(^{28}\) See chapter 5 for a more complete list of scholars.
Rentschler and Claudia Mitchell (2014) seeking to redress this understanding as editors of a special issue of *Girlhood Studies*, 7(1), (Summer 2014), note that they were looking “...to better understand, explain, and challenge how these social constructs over-signify girlhood as a state of vulnerability and under-estimate girls’ own collective potential for response and change work” (2014, p. 3). Rentschler and Mitchell (2014) seek to redress the description of ‘girls in crisis’ to better understand those differences. “If we approach girls not as problems-to-be-solved or subjects-to-be-rescued, but as agents who face systemic barriers to their own agency and autonomy, we can begin to stop linking them to crisis constructions that denigrate their subjectivities and experiences” (Rentschler & Mitchell, 2014, p. 3; Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007). This dissertation, just as Reel Grrls itself, stands in the face of those problematic constructions to assert girls as agents working towards understanding “systemic barriers” through the gendered lens of media. Reel Grrls provides opportunities through their curriculum for girls to

...develop their capacity as organic intellectuals and to critically analyze social problems...to see their problems not merely as private troubles, but as socially constructed and understand that their lives are not isolated from the community and social forces, but shaped by them

(Taft, 2010, p. 23).

An organization that can accomplish the aforementioned goals stated above is part
of what sociologist Jessica Taft (2010) recognizes as a “transformative model” (p. 23). Taft (2010) finds that a ‘transformative’ organization is one where “organizations talk about developing girls’ collective power and skills for shaping their communities and the wider public sphere” (p. 23). Reel Grrls participants, as discussed in this chapter, conceive of an idea and create a short film (4–5 minutes) or public service announcement (30 seconds) based on their idea. The girls’ films are viewed by the local public, shown at film festivals, and often posted on the Internet for the world to see, which speaks to their power to connect within the public sphere. Moreover, individuals in transformative (Taft, 2010) organizations not only talk about collective power, but also actively “encourage girls to imagine the public sphere as space they can shape” (p. 24). Reel Grrls is part of this ‘transformative’ model (Taft, 2010) as their curriculum works to bring girls’ voices to the center of the conversation of what girlhood can look like on a screen.

The ‘transformative’ model (Taft, 2010) is contrasted with a more omnipresent model of the ‘normative’ organization that “focuses on strengthening the skills and knowledge of individual girls in order to better prepare them for facing challenges and leading successful lives” (Taft, 2010, p. 12). I could also say that Reel Grrls has aspects that resemble a ‘normative’ organization (Taft, 2010), because it does give girls hands-on media technology experiences, and works with them in all aspects of film production, which will give them hard skills and experience in a real-world setting. The difference with the ‘normative organization’ (Taft, 2010) is that they prepare girls to face societal barriers by shoring up their skills, rather than having
the girls collectively address how to challenge those barriers (p. 20–21). However, a key aspect of ‘transformative’ organizations is that they encourage “social action in the community and encourage girls to claim public voice and authority,” although that is measured in “lobbying, public education and direct action as well as service provision” (Taft, 2010, p. 23). I believe with Reel Grrls that the curriculum offers moments of civic engagement by challenging the mainstream media⁹. For example, the girls engaged in talking with the public during the Bad Ads exercise. This exercise helped Reel Grrls to identify the sexism found within the world of fashion magazines. If these girls continue working within the field of media, will face a thick glass ceiling (there are fissures happening which will be explored in the last chapter). However, they will also be able to recognize the inherent sexism within their chosen career and hopefully work to change it. Media artist and feminist, Kathleen Sweeney (2003) notes that “(m)aking media often empowers girls to overcome other kinds of gendered social programming to speak out on social issues as well” (p. 235). She further contends that the Reel Grrls she interviewed participated on panels at film festivals and “youth leadership conferences sponsored by the National Organization for Women (NOW) and other organizations” (Sweeney, 2003, p. 235). Given that some girls continue their quest for social justice within the public area, it would qualify the organization to be categorized within the ‘transformational’ organization (Taft, 2010). Reel Grrls also directly addresses problematic issues with mainstream media through the media literacy aspect of the

⁹ Although it is beyond the scope of this dissertation, it is interesting to note that Reel Grrls has worked with youth to speak out against media consolidation, in addition to creating programs specifically for LGBTQ youth and youth with disabilities to ensure that they can use their voices and stories to be visible within the larger mainstream and make positive changes for their communities.
program. For example, the S.C.A.N. exercise provided an opportunity for girls to learn about the importance of democracy, of public access and of direct action through expressing the rights of girl citizens.

Additionally, the *enmeshed feminist curriculum* plants the seeds for a broader vision of what is possible in media. For example, as detailed within this chapter, the girls voice their ideas within the moment of ‘pitch day,’ when larger societal themes are made personal within their own stories. In some ways, then, Reel Grrls straddles the middle ground of the ‘transformative’ and ‘normative’ organizations (Taft, 2010), offering strategies for flexibility in a changing world, by using their learned skills to drive their abilities, and their voices to enact change within the media. Their stories of real Reel Grrls can immediately complicate and expand what girls can look like on a movie screen beyond the recognized tropes—like ‘mean girl’—that we so often see.

**What does it mean to be ‘mean’?**

Within mainstream media, girlhood is fraught with heternormativity, dominant femininity, and repetitive tropes, where girls seem to be perennially stuck in the worlds of boys, princesses and fashion, as discussed in previous chapters. One trope that picked up more momentum in the 2000s was the ‘mean girl’ trope. With the proliferation of books about tensions and conflicts in girls friendships, and the interest in bullying (e.g., Simmonds, 2003) *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Aggression in*
Girls and Wiseman (2002) Queen Bees and Wannabees\(^{30}\), there seemed to be a turn in mainstream, academic and expert areas toward girls who were vulnerable (‘at risk’), but now the girls were facing a new aggressor—other girls. The tensions in girls’ relationships have now risen to a level where bad behavior (e.g., “nastiness, viciousness, and back-stabbing [where]... girls use exclusion, rumors, name-calling, and manipulation” (Gonick, 2004, p. 397)), or ‘relational aggression’ has become naturalized. To clarify, in mainstream media perceptions about girls went from a ‘crisis’ of their being either ‘at risk’ of losing themselves or feeling the pressure of the ‘can do’ attitude of having to do it all, to now being seen as victims of ‘mean girls’ or even being the aggressors. The problem is that the ‘mean girl’ phenomena within mainstream media “…rely on understandings of girlhood as a universal, biologically grounded condition of female experience” (Gonick, 2004, p. 397). As a trope, the audience comes to understand the ‘mean girl’ as a natural and inherent part of girl friendships. Naturalizing the ‘mean girl’ phenomena “fails to recognize the particular sociohistorical, material, and discursive contexts which actually produce social categories like ‘girls’ and the processes which render them intelligible (Gonick, 2003; Johnson, 1993; Jones, 1993; Lesko, 1996) (Gonick, 2004, p. 397).

That is, girls’ behavior is more representative of approaches taken to navigate their lived experiences at a specific moment and time, than it is an inherent way of being. Explained another way, girls’ behavior is understood as biological, which obscures the social reality of their lived experiences within a sexist society.

\(^{30}\) For a more complete list see Gonick, 2004.
Gonick (2004) recognizes that the ‘mean girl’ “…pervasiveness results in a narrowing of vision and imagination for the multitude of ways in which girls’ self-expressions might be read and engaged” (p. 397). The ‘mean girl’ trope works to limit people’s understanding for how girls are responding to their environment, effectively shortchanging not only girls’ understandings of their own behavior, but also the awareness and insight of others (parents, professionals, educators) who are in relationship to girls. That is, any type of behavior can be understood to be “mean” which in many ways explains the girls’ behavior and effectively shuts down the conversation; the behavior then becomes an individualized problem, rather than leading one to investigate the root cause of the action.

The notion of the ‘mean girl’ as an individualized problem within one girl, instead of a cultural issue is another example of the ways in which neoliberalism has shifted the conversations society has about social issues in general. Gonick (2004) and McRobbie (2000) both argue “public anxiety and cultural fascination” (p. 395) over girls is common given that

(youth researchers have noted that in times of great social change there tends to be a heightened focus on youth. Particular social anxieties are projected onto young people as a displacement for the stress of coping with unsettling change and uncertainty about the future

The renewed focus and anxiety directed at girls and their relationships is a repeated historical strategy for managing stress and the unknown future. “McRobbie has suggested, girls have replaced youth as the metaphor for social change (2000: 201)” (Gonick, 2004, p. 395). If replacing youth in general with the specificity of attention to girls, then the repeated manufactured ‘crisis’ in girlhood (e.g., “at risk,” “can do,” “mean”) makes sense as a way to channel the aforementioned anxiety (Gonick, 2004).

Although I do not want to get too far afield with the post-structuralist argument here as it is beyond the scope of my study, it is important to note that Gonick (2004) posits a disjuncture in the ways in which girls’ relationships have come to stand for “a cultural symbol of disorder, moral decay and social instability...more broadly. Yet...the treatment and resolution of the problem is almost always articulated in individualized and individualizing terms” (p. 395). One of the most salient examples of this can be seen in the proliferation of stories in the last few years about dress codes for girls in school\textsuperscript{31}. The policing of girls’ clothing in schools, to dances, even to graduation, is read as code for the ‘moral decay,’ as Gonick (2004) notes above; yet, it is up to each individual girl to be sent home to change, rather than turning our collective attention to the mainstream cultural milieu of rape culture. For example,

\textsuperscript{31} See the following for some recent examples: \url{http://www.foxnews.com/us/2014/06/16/dress-that-got-teen-sent-home-from-school-looks-fine-on-mom-at-daughters/}; \url{http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/04/10/viral-photo-school-dress-codes-body-shaming_n_7039276.html}; \url{http://feministing.com/2015/05/27/stop-sexist-dress-codes-were-students-not-distractions/}
girls must change their clothes because girls are the ones responsible for boys’ inevitably uncontrollable behavior (See Chapter 3; Projansky, 2001). Some girls are banding together to challenge those dress codes in collective actions\(^{32}\), or even in individualized, yet humorous ways that raise critical awareness of these issues (Pittman, 2015). To understand larger social issues within an individualizing framework is the very definition of the neoliberal, political outlook mentioned previously. The contradiction Gonick asserts gives insight into “...new discursive constructions of femininity” (p. 395). Her query and exploration into the ‘mean girl’ phenomenon as a naturalizing rhetoric that narrows understanding girls’ behavior and locates her choices within an individualizing framework, also works to cover the privatized solutions to real social and political issues.

Although I am not undertaking a post-structural analysis of the Reel Grrls curriculum, these insights into the ways in which girls have been positioned offers a larger framework to understand the contextual moment into which we have come with its increasing visibility and ambivalence towards girls in mainstream media (Projansky, 2014).

In the next section, I present two different analyses of the film Mean Girls (2004) by education scholars Kelly and Pomerantz (2009) and media scholar Sarah Projansky (2014). Both recognize the importance of the movie as a vehicle for understanding

girlhood within mainstream media, and yet, offer divergent views of the ways in which feminism is portrayed in popular culture. I offer this analysis, as an example to show how tropes are utilized to naturalize particular types of girl behavior, and to show the complexity in understanding the impact of films about girls, “...in their ability to cohere as a body of work, to gel together as a narrative that is seen as symptomatic of girlhood itself” (Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009, p. 3). That is, the depictions of girls on the screen become almost instructional for how girls should (not) or do behave. The ‘mean girls’ trope is a complicated discourse particularly because it is explored within many different scholarly discourses (for example, psychological, education, sociological, media studies) that create tensions and incongruences in discussing it. The relationships among the various discourses among the vast literature to one another all require careful consideration and demarcation. It is, however, beyond the scope of this dissertation to exhaust all of these relationships. I provide just two examples of ways in which this film can be read, as I believe programs like Reel Grrls and the stories they produce act as a counterpoint to the very idea of ‘mean girls’ and the narrowing of girlhood that happens within these types of tropes for girls.

**Mean girls on the screen**

Although just about every teen movie of the last 30 years features at least one ‘mean girl’ character, there is no better movie to look to for understanding the ‘mean girl’ trope, than the quintessential movie on the subject, *Mean Girls* (2004). The movie tells the story of high school newcomer Cady (Lindsay Lohan) who, after spending
12 years in Africa with her parents (who are zoological researchers), returns to the States and, for the first time, attends public school. Cady is knowledgeable about animal behavior and the African landscape, but totally lost within the hierarchy of her new social environment. She befriends two outcast students, Janis and Damien, but slowly gets drawn into the popular girl crowd, ‘the Plastics.’ When Cady becomes interested in the ex-boyfriend of one of ‘the Plastics,’ a competitive rivalry begins between the two girls who attempt to out-do each other using the tactics known to ‘mean girls’ (rumors, name-calling, and underhanded power plays) in an effort to win the clueless boy’s affections and achieve popularity, the highest reward of high school. Once Cady has made the ultimate transformation into the worst of ‘the Plastics,’ even replacing the Leader of the group, she is brought down hard. Cady receives her comeuppance as she loses the boy, her friends, her popularity, and is forced to take the blame for her rivalry’s ‘mean’ actions. In the film’s resolution, Cady returns to her previous ‘nice girl’ ways and her two friends, Janis and Damien.

Comedy writer and actor Tina Fey took the ideas in Wiseman’s (2002) parental guidebook, and turned it into the Mean Girls screenplay and movie. Mean Girls (2004) was noted by critics and the general public for the assembled female cast of characters, as well as the ‘mean girl’ trope which “paints a portrait of teenage girlhood that is overwhelmingly evil (of course, for comedic effect)” (Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009, p. 5). The film also had the reputation of being sure to make fun of some of the basic assumptions of ‘mean girl’ and a hope of a feminist sensibility,
given Fey’s reputation as a smart, feminist comedian. For example, Lohan’s character is named Cady for Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a famous Suffragette and early women’s rights activist. Additionally, Cady’s friend is named Janis Ian in reference to the singer/songwriter of the same name who wrote the popular song *At Seventeen* (1974) which is about the delusion of popularity and the complexity of high school. The song can be heard playing in the background during a scene in the movie as well.

Kelly and Pomerantz (2009) in their assessment of the film note a “taken-for-granted assumption of postfeminism, where girls are seen to be without politics and their problems are viewed as easily solvable if only they could get their individual acts together and figure things out for themselves” (p. 4). They describe how the film highlights individual solutions, particularly the ways in which girls police each other, rather than looking at larger social institutions and barriers. Feminism and female community are reduced to jokes and caricatures that are then dismissed in the film, which echoes McRobbie’s (2009) analysis noted in Chapter 5. Feminism in popular culture is often made the butt of jokes, for example on conservative news and radio shows. Girls live in a world where the ideals of feminism and caricatures about women are rampant. The film shows “girls struggling bleakly with larger social structures that go unnamed: heteronormativity, compulsory heterosexuality, patriarchy, and oppressive constructions of gender, race, and class” (Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009, p. 4). In a scene where all the girls are assembled in the gym to discuss the ‘mean girl’ problem, the solution given is for the girls to just stop
behaving this way towards each other, creating a "...closed loop that does not implicate boys or men in any way, never hinting at a sexual double standard..." (Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009, p. 6). The film never asserts a larger societal critique of power or social constructions of gender. 'Mean girls’ is essentialized as a ‘girl only' issue. The larger social forces at work in creating and maintaining ‘mean girl’ are undercut by making it a single sex issue, giving an ahistorical perspective to the problem. In fact, the opportunities for social change, rather than individual solutions to problems is never raised as a possibility, forestalling an understanding of feminism.

Kelly and Pomerantz in lamenting the unnamed larger social structures at work in the film note that girls are rarely exposed to feminism in school, but that popular culture can offer opportunities to be

...exposed to ideas and identities that might otherwise be foreclosed to them...But girls are not being exposed to counter-hegemonic stories that might help them to imagine a different world at home, at school, or in interactions with boys or other girls


In other words, feminism and popular culture could be drawn together in ways that would be helpful to girls in navigating their lives, if girls were shown a wider variety
of different types of girls and situations. However, currently the “discourse of feminism...in...popular cultural texts produced on and for girls, suggests that girls and feminism are worlds apart,” even as the themes of movies “suggest the absolute urgency to equip girls with a language and a politics for social critique” (Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009, p. 15). If girls are continually made individually responsible for larger social issues, they will always be held responsible for a systemic and social failure. The authors express a wish for a melding of feminism and popular culture, where the feminism presented is “not as an underground, accidental, or alternative reading” within popular culture but one that can be read strongly by those who see it (Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009, p. 15). If even a small percentage of current films within the larger mainstream media were feminist, it would be a positive change for girls to see other possibilities.

I now turn to another reading of Mean Girls (2004) film by Sarah Projansky (2014) to offer an alternative and feminist-positive reading of this same film. Projansky’s (2014) analysis of Mean Girls (2004) “draws on a feminist media studies methodology in pursuit of optimistic antiracist, queer readings” by looking for as many varied images of a celebratory girlhood that offer and insist upon those aforementioned differences and being present within mainstream media (Projansky, 2014, p. 21, 95–99). She finds the film to proffer an “implicit critique of heteronormativity” when read through an optimistic antiracist, queer lens (p. 21). Feminist media studies is the connection of feminist studies and media studies, and draws connections between media and girls, often highlighting “complex and
multiple, and multilayered media representations” from “an intersectional perspective (especially in terms of race and sexuality)” (Projansky, 2014, p. 13–17). Although her reading offers a contradiction to Kelly and Pomerantz’s (2009) analysis, Projansky (2014) believes that feminist media criticism often invites just such multiple and oppositional readings of films which can only work to expand the public conversation of girlhood (Projansky, 2014, p. 21). Projansky (2014) asks several questions when looking at films,

> What kinds of films led to pervasive attention to girls and girlhood? What anxieties and assumptions seem to be the basis for these public discussions? When comparing the public discussion to the films themselves, what contradictions or tensions emerge? And what versions of girlhood are available when reading the films from an antiracist, queer feminist perspective? (Projansky, 2014, p. 96).

Although I focus the comments in answering the last question, all of these questions help to center Projansky’s (2014) work among the “spectacular” girls—girls who are the recipients of the intense “ambivalent oscillation between adoration and disdain” by a media culture that continues to feed the moral panic surrounding girls—mentioned in Chapter 5 (Projansky, 2014, p. 98). Projansky (2014) describes the Mean Girls (2004) as a “genre film that defies its genre because it is smart and
hard-edged” (p. 106). For example, Cady—who mostly eschews beauty—is good at math, but pretends she is flunking the class so she can get close to the object of her affection. Projansky notes that the film is “smart” and “hip” offering “alternative” girls who were celebrated, but only in relation to their difference from the other—regular—girls on the screen (Projansky, 2014, p. 106). In this way, the special girl can only be so by disparaging the idea of the ‘regular’ girl, who is seen as wrapped up in beauty and consumerism. As Projansky (2014) notes the “celebration is not of all girls. In fact it requires the belittling of girls more generally” (p. 106).

Unfortunately, ridiculing girls (e.g., “stop being such a girl about it”) or behavior attributed or associated with girls (e.g., “You throw/run like a girl”) is not uncommon in our culture either.

Projansky (2014) believes that Mean Girls (2004) offers a critique of heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality because Cady does not become ‘mean’ until after her love interest is reclaimed by his ex-girlfriend, one of her friends in the “Plastics.” “Here heteronormativity and a heterosexual narrative imperative are preconditions for meanness: heteronormativity causes meanness” (Projansky, 2014, p. 114). The logic is that the competition among girls for boys (and their attention) causes meanness. This analysis explores the idea that it is actually the involvement of boys that leads to girls’ meanness, and not some innate or naturalized state of being a girl, giving a more positive feminist understanding of the behavior than previously presented by Kelly and Pomerantz (2009). Projansky (2014) also provides evidence that heteronormativity would not be an issue if Cady
were queer; her meanness would not exist as she would not need to initiate a conflict for the enforcement of a nonexistent heterosexuality\textsuperscript{33}.

Once again the point of offering both analyses is to illustrate how the ‘mean girls’ trope has been differently read and naturalized, in addition to its ubiquity in mainstream media. Overall mainstream media continues to propagate the idea that when women get together meanness is inevitable and expected, and those particular tropes are repeatedly told. Like Kelly and Pomerantz (2009), I believe there needs to be a joining of feminisms and popular culture in an effort to broaden the types of roles and experiences girls see of girlhood on the screen. I also believe that Reel Grrls does that work through their stated curriculum and the unstated enmeshed feminist curriculum. Having girls speak for themselves, telling their stories and ideas, can directly affect the public sphere; they offer complexities rarely seen upon a screen by adding the girls’ own voices and stories. Their stories can stand as a rejection of the popular narratives that work to naturalize behavior and spectacularize (Projansky 2014) girls. So, in the spirit of telling girls’ stories, I turn to my field notes as they offer rich description of the girls’ ideas.

\textsuperscript{33} Projansky (2014) also offers a queer reading of the film as well, but I am going to stop here (see p. 115-116).
‘Pitch Day’ Exposition\textsuperscript{34}

The following field notes are taken from two different dates on which the girls and mentors discuss pitches—ideas for movies—that are presented (aka “pitched”) to professionals for feasibility and funding. The first set of field notes from March 7, 2006 describes the girls’ first iterations of the larger themes in their work and what their specific films will be. Although the girls receive an introduction into the idea of pitching, I refer to it as ‘pitches on the fly,’ because the girls have to come up with an idea mostly on the spot (i.e., on the fly). The idea of having to give a pitch at this point in the program is not a surprise, as they have been given writing prompts for journal entries and forewarned that pitch day was fast approaching. This day, though, marks the first time the girls will give voice to their own ideas for their project in front of the entire group.

The second set of field notes, from March 18, 2006, describes the process when the girls give their actual pitches to a panel of industry professionals and Reel Grrls board members. Included in this second set of field notes (dated March 18, 2006) are two dialogues of pitches by two different girls. The first pitch on suicide is given by a 15-year-old, Caucasian girl. The second pitch entitled “Breaking the Cycle,” was given by an African-American girl, age 17. I kept all of the data about the girls’ themes, pitches and film selection process within this chapter for cohesion and ease of understanding for the reader, even though they happen over the course of a few weeks.

\textsuperscript{34} Exposition in film terms means “important background information for the events of the story” (http://www.filmsite.org/filmterms8.html).
Field Notes:
March 7, 2006

The girls have been getting writing prompts (see Appendix) from one of the mentors to focus on outside of Reel Grrls’ meeting time. They are to take the prompts and write for 10 minutes non-stop, i.e., almost stream-of-consciousness writing. This has been going on for a week. So, when that same mentor gives them a prompt for today to respond to now, they listen. She tells them, “Imagine first, you have a microphone that is hooked up to speakers to the whole world, and now you’re going to say...” She stops short of giving an answer and, instead just smiles as she gestures with her hands in a wide expansive way. The girls begin to write. After some time, Lucia tells the girls to read back through their writing (from all the prompts, not just today) and look at any clear ideas. She says to look for any themes and circle them or any words in their writing.

Lucia then asks the girls to call out anything they have and as they do she makes a list on the white board behind her on the wall: superstition; fear; abortion; kleptomania; when I was a kid; decisions; love; sexual orientation; defensive; listening; right/wrong; silliness; patriotism; religion; pressures; theater of the absurd; unique talent; black, white and gray areas; battles everyone fights; personal strengths from experience; suicide; family; suffering; trust; culture clash; prejudice; ignorance is bliss; stereotypes; environment; power of friendship; voodoo curses; fighting the man-corporate power; acceptance; loneliness; interracial relations; racism; weight; rock n’ roll; sex and drugs; I don’t know how to explain=labels and boundaries; parent fuck-ups; laws-bureaucracy/boarding the corporate ladder/selling out; expression of who you are; violence; perversion; OCD; forgiveness; redemption; opposite of war is creation; non-traditional family; incest; behind the mask; embarrassment; social constraints; mental illness; learning disabilities; generational curses; originality; overcoming adversity; STDs; alcoholism; abuse; domestic violence; taking things for granted; gangs and drug dealers; emotionally numb; gender assumptions.

Everyone is then asked to jot down five (5) themes from the master list that really resonated with them. And, then the girls are asked to narrow it down even further by “taking a theme you connect with and make it concrete, something specific. For example, racism can become racism in the classroom, put it in a context where it means something specific to you. We are each going to share two (2) themes that you can put in a concrete place.” Some of the girls begin to respond. One girl says “generational curses, breaking the cycle within a family.” Another girl responds, “Third world sweat shop items bought by Americans and ignorance is bliss.” A third girl offers, “Autism and mental illness.” Another girl states, “having to plan out your life and pressure.” Lucia is encouraging as she tells the girls “If someone came into your screening with these themes, they would leave with a different perspective. You need to make this more personal a story, fleshing out your experience for a final piece. Talk about how you might have a story to tell.” Malory mentions the movie Brokeback Mountain (2005),
describing how it was a very personal love story. Watching the movie you had no idea of the larger issue, “you want to bring it down to a personal story”. The mentor who gave the writing prompts tells the girls that they want to think about the ideas of “inflict versus invitation.” She continues, “You want to invite people into your story rather than pushing your story on someone.” Anna, Reel Grrl participant, mentions her themes are love and religion; she continues to explain her idea of “what you would give up for passion”? Lucia tells the girls that the next week they will pitch their ideas for women filmmakers.

Another mentor, Sandy\textsuperscript{35}, steps forward to describe for the girls her experience pitching her idea while at film school. Sandy explains that she did not get chosen to direct her own personal story because the first time she was pitching her story she was a little nervous. “So when you have an idea, have a story and a vision. Think about it—the image, the story, music. The more you know and can connect with it, the better, more confident you seem and the more people want to trust you with it. It’s your moment. You’re saying this is me. This is my story and this is why I want to do it. This is your moment—Go for it, if it’s important to you!” Lucia explains that the panel will be looking for three things: creativity, meaning something unique; clarity of message—are you clear? And, feasibility, can you get it done in this amount of time. They will ask questions, she warns the girls. Lucia also tells the girls to “show don’t tell” by creating a visual representation, color a picture. “Take them there, like the first shot is OTS\textsuperscript{36}, hitting an alarm clock.” Lastly, Lucia tells the girls that they will be pitching individually, and then based on the panelists’ recommendations, they [panel] will decide which projects will work individually or as group projects.

A ‘turning point’ revisited

‘Pitches on the fly’ describes the girls’ first act of moving into the figurative drivers’ seat of the Reel Grrls program, an analogy I mentioned in Chapter 4. I assert that the ‘Turning Point’ is a symbolic rite of passage that importantly marks the shift in the Reel Grrls program whereby the girls shift from being learners on the receiving end of instruction about content to becoming the drivers of their own learning, with their ideas, voices, and stories present. That is, they are reliant on the mentors for technical assistance, rather than solely for content. This moment once again

\textsuperscript{35} This is a pseudonym.
\textsuperscript{36} OTS = over the shoulder
highlights the *enmeshed feminist curriculum*, as the girls’ own voices and ideas become the curricular fodder for their learning, in a way that honors their knowledge. The girls also continue complicating the notions of what ‘girl’ can be on a movie screen. Their creations can become more complex with lived intersections of race, ethnicity, and class that rarely, if ever, are seen. Additionally, the positive normative girl community, which stands in direct opposition to ‘mean girls,’ can continue to thrive as the Reel Girls participants work to support each other through the process of creating and making their own films together.

When the girls are asked to supply their ideas for possible themes (listed above), I was surprised and moved by the breadth and scope of their ideas. Their ideas included fear; when I was a kid; sexual orientation; battles everyone fights; and racism; rock n’ roll; parent fuck-ups; redemption; mental illness; and embarrassment. The themes the girls identified were so much wider than the ideas presented in mainstream media, particularly in relation to girls or girlhood. The list illuminates the questioning of a group of girls who want to engage with their community in a larger sense of being citizens of the world interested in making sense of it. Even as the girls narrow the larger themes down to a smaller number, and then connect their personal stories to those themes, interesting ideas emerge. For example, Girl 5 is working through ideas of consumerism with her idea of following the life of a shoe from the factory worker to the person who will buy it. This idea is from a girl who is thinking clearly about larger societal themes, globalization, workers’ rights, and the people connected through the process of
creating a shoe and bringing it to the marketplace. Another example are the stories of Sudha and Chelsi, who each mine their own families for stories of either a pervasive illness or misdiagnosed illness and how it affects them and their family members. As Lucia tells the girls

   If someone came into your screening with these themes, they would leave with a different perspective. You need to make this more personal a story, fleshing out your experience for a final piece. Talk about how you might have a story to tell

   (Rattner, field notes, March 7, 2015).

Throughout this process, the girls will be repeatedly reminded to make a story that “only they can tell.” The power of the story comes through when they are able to make a deep connection to it. The power of their voice and the power of their ideas are heralded as the most important aspect of the Reel Grrls program from this moment forward.

Although girls in general have increasingly been encouraged to speak their minds, being told they can achieve anything, as the ‘can do’ and ‘girl power’ movements attest, I believe that the Reel Grrls program represents a “transformational” (Taft, 2010) program (as detailed above) because it can “help girls to claim authority in public spaces” (p. 25). Reel Grrls champions girls to claim public spaces in ways that make sense to individual girls through their personal stories, but then those films
become part of a larger conversation of ‘girlhood’ and what it means to be a girl, which in turn widens the possibilities of those public spaces for girls. For example, as actor and gender champion Geena Davis notes, “(t)he one area where there’s a huge gender disparity that can change literally overnight is onscreen” (Greenhouse, 2015). While there are many areas of gender disparity within society, many of them are caught within the bureaucracies of their fields mired in institutionalized racism and sexism. The act of changing the gender of the protagonist in a movie from a boy to girl, however, can have a huge immediate impact on audiences.

As with other curricular moments of the Reel Grrls program that exhibit the blending together of the technical, media literacy and enmeshed feminist curriculum aspects of each challenge, the work of the initial pitch day is no different. The technical aspect of the curriculum comes from Sandy’s instructional lesson of her pitch in film school and the lessons she learned from that experience. The girls are given the technical aspects of a ‘how to pitch’ lecture with very specific, apprentice-like information on how to sell their story visually with passion. The media literacy aspect of this moment works by the girls’ critical assessment of their themes and personal stories, crafting their ideas and turning themselves into cultural producers who care about their content and stories. The enmeshed feminist curriculum aspect continues to build support for the girls in a positive normative feminist environment whereby girls can be encourage each other, particularly when trying something new, rather than being ‘mean’ to one another. Taken together these three aspects woven into the ‘turning point’ create a new sense of responsibility for the girls in
their experience in the program. It now will be up to them to decide how their stories are told. Next, I turn to the second set of field notes to show how at least two ideas came into sharper focus for the girls during their actual ‘pitch day,’ and how stories are discussed and selected by mentors.

Field Notes:
March 18, 2006

The girls are all standing around a hallway in the YMCA building. We are all waiting outside a door that leads to a conference room, where the panelists are seated inside. The girls are getting last minute instructions from Malory and Lucia: ‘Show don’t tell,’ be detailed or create or talk about the mood. Lucia gives them some questions to think about before their pitches: “what do you want people to come away feeling? What do you want to give your audience”? Lucia has the girls line up in their order of presenting and gives them numbers. She asks the girls to go by their numbers and makes sure that everyone knows what they’re going to say before they go up to present. The girls are nervous. I know this, because they keep saying “I’m really nervous.” They are worried that their pitches are not going to be complete, or ready or enough. A few girls have come in with their storyboards or notebooks. Lucia tells the girls that they are going to need three things: Active listening; big clapping (for everyone after their pitches); and, save the idea of forming their groups until after this evening. She cautions them to “really pay attention.” Malory lets the girls know that they are “exposing the world to girl-made media. Something that makes this really work is to be flexible. Come present what you’re excited about, but also be really open to any possibility that’s open.” The panelists are then introduced they are several women from around the Pacific Northwest. They are directors, producers, actors from different communities, (for example, Longhouse Media (Native American community) and South Asian film community) and Reel Grrls board members as well. The girls begin their pitches. The first girl stands silent for a moment as if gathering her thoughts, and then begins her pitch.

Girl: Suicide. Why is it becoming popular? Is it boredom with life? Feeling stuck in a situation that you can’t get out of? Is it really just depression? What made them do it. I want to talk to people who have tried it. I see a whole short film with black and white close-ups [shots] of people talking, people in shadows cutting. I like contrast and I really want to do a documentary on why people commit suicide. How they felt about life before and after.

37 I am only going to provide documentation for two pitches, due to space constraints.
**Panelist:** You’re really clear on questions you want to raise. But, in the time you have, do you think you can get people to agree to talk about it? Have you thought about how to approach the topic?

**Girl:** I know a lot of people who would be able to talk to me, and the world.

**Different Panelist:** Some people might have a difference in talking to the world and might not be as open.

**Different Panelist:** Are you thinking just your age group? Or older?

**Girl:** I want it to be broader, to try to talk to older people because they’re further from the shock of it.

**Different Panelist:** How are you going to research the questions that you’ll use for interviewing?

**Girl:** For programs about suicide in the media, I want to go for other questions and research on the internet. I’m not just pushing, like emo, as the reason.

**Different Panelist:** I’m very impressed. I think your take is very unique. I have images that are coming to my mind. Just some feedback for you. If you focus on one person with a story or a journal and use that as a background and play with images, it could be more of an experimental style film.

**Girl:** Yeah, less talking head.

**Different Panelist:** It’s very important that you tell this story.

**Girl:** The title is ‘Breaking the Cycle’. I want to research how children are likely to follow their parents. I want to talk about different circumstances, like teen pregnancy, alcoholism, drug use and running away. In version #1 I show the plagues: the shots are sad, dark, grey and portrays a dark mood. Scene 1, girl in VO [voice over] writing in her diary about following bad cycles – this is the introduction. For the focus on alcoholism, we see a girl drinking juice then we see a tv commercial about beer. She turns the tv off and walks into the kitchen. The audience has to believe she’s following the cycle. But in version #2, we see all the same scenarios showing the same scenes but what happens; so we follow her into the kitchen and she pours the alcohol out of the bottle. The Closing is a VO [voice over] writing in her diary. The girl is taking control of her life. How she’s breaking the cycle and how she makes a promise and goals and plans for her life. I want a black screen with white words featuring my own poem about how she’s distracted by all these plagues but she won’t follow them.

**Panelist:** That’s fantastic. It’s a unique experience with a philosophical understanding. Can you do all those things in five (5) minutes?

**Girl:** I hope so, I’ve written it all out.

**Different Panelist:** Maybe you could just do the diary portion? Or where you do a video poem with more visuals over the diary VO. I don’t think you’ll do the topic justice.

**Different Panelist:** I think it’s doable and original and completely possible!

After the last pitch, a Reel Grrl mentor hands all the girls white index cards and asks them to write down their three (3) top pitches that they are interested in working on as a crew member. Lucia congratulates all the girls. She tells them “you should be really
proud of yourself”. The girls leave the room in a staggering group of giggling elation and palpable relief.

Now that the girls have left, the panelists talk about all the ideas presented, their reactions to the pitches and the feasibility of each project. It is the end of a long day for everyone, so the wrap up is an abbreviated 15 - 20 minutes of time. Comments are made about several of the films, for example there is a noted similarity between two of the girls pitches who both talked about consumerism and sustainability —should it be one film instead? Two other girls both talked about their brothers and health issues with ADD and Autism, maybe they should also combine their projects? Malory notes that a specific pitch might be interesting when seen as a comedic piece, instead of having a serious tone. The “suicide” pitch, however, garners the most specific comments. A mentor notes that it is “going to be hard to find people to speak out or maybe it will dramatize suicide and can become a teachable moment for the girl.” A Reel Grrls board member notes that it “could be huge if she can pull it off.” But also cautions that the Reel Grrls do not want the film to promote the idea of suicide as becoming "cool.” Another mentor notes that she “likes the topic but it makes assumptions about some kids.” She is questioned by another panelist who counters that the girl will need to have questions around any assumptions she is making.”

A timeline is given for the final date of the films completion of April 15th for the rough draft and April 20th for the final screening. The adults go around the circle with each project and give a quick “yeah” or “nea” to their favorites. If someone has a concern for a project, it will be mentioned, even as the initial vote is being taken and tallied. The girls’ index cards that hold the girls’ votes are also tallied to see which are their top selections. We discover that the ‘suicide film’ pitch is at the top of the girls’ list with the most votes. A mentor comments that with the girls ‘friends are voting for friends’. I ask what happens if the girls vote for projects that are opposite to the ones adults vote to pass. I am told that “this is where we learn as executive producers, we need to choose projects that will succeed, so girls have to trust us”. The panelists are thanked and we all leave for the night. I am left thinking about the issue of trust. How will the projects be chosen? Which girls will be disappointed and which projects will make it to the end?

**Red/Yellow/Green light: the selection process**

Several mentors, Lucia, Malory and I met two days later to discuss the projects in earnest. It is not feasible or possible for all of the girls to make the films they pitched to the panelists, because of the large number of girls in the program (14) and the amount of time (roughly a month) in which the girls have to finish their projects. Of
the 14 girls who made pitches, 11 final films were created in the program. As exhibited in the field notes above, during the pitches the panelists ask questions to help the girls to shape their ideas. Given the experience of the panel, they try to see the possibilities of what the girls want to achieve in their films, particularly given the short amount of time they will have to produce the films they pitch. As stated above similar themes emerge sometimes, in which case ideas are brought together for girls to work on one film together instead of two separate films. Additionally, some ideas are not workable because of copyright or licensing issues for images or music they want to use. Sometimes the ideas are determined by the mentors to be just too big for a five-minute film and therefore need to be changed or re-focused.

The team tries to be “open and flexible, to make sure the girls are happy but also the projects are worthy of succeeding, and good to put our resources behind an idea” (Graham, field notes, March 20, 2006). With Malory’s opening statement, the team then went on to discuss each pitch in turn. Each project garnered questions and further thoughts or possible suggestions, and a tallying of the girls’ votes, before the mentors assigned a green, yellow or red light it. A green light on a film, similar to the green of a stoplight meant the project could proceed as pitched, which remains a standard film/television term. If a film was given a yellow light, it meant that the girl would have to re-think certain aspects of their film—whether it was to merge it with another film, narrow the focus, secure a location, tighten the script, or try a different approach. In other words, a yellow light meant the film could proceed, as it was of general interest to the mentors, but they had concerns or reservations about the
film coming together as pitched in the time allowed. Ultimately, the girl was approved to proceed with her idea, pending revisions.

A film given a red light, was one the mentors felt was not feasible to produce either because of the current theme, or because they felt it was not right for the program overall. Within this group, there was only one pitch that the team felt was not up to Reel Grrls standards. The sole red-lighted pitch was basically a love story about a “guy in Japan who falls in love with a girl in the U.S.,” the girl described the film as a work about a “culture clash” (Rattner, field notes, March 7, 2006). This Reel Grrl participant gave her first pitch during the “pitches on the fly,” but not at the official “Pitch Day,” as she had a schedule conflict and was absent. In the end, this girl’s idea was given a red light because the theme of boy and girl falling in love was not something Malory, Lucia, and others felt was appropriate for Reel Grrls. There was no personal connection to the story for this girl, and it was deemed to be a more mainstream type of story. Of all the stories pitched during both ‘pitch day’ sessions, this film idea seemed the most out of place within a feminist program. I was not surprised when Malory and Lucia decided that this girl could not make her film as stated. Although she was sad and frustrated at the time, she became excited when she hit on another idea with two other girls who were all absent for a portion of the weeks during the filming and editing process. This Reel Grrl participant along with the two other girls ended up working on a different film altogether.

38 She gave her pitch to the rest of the girls, who acted as her official panel of experts asking questions, etc. on March 28, 2006.
Most films were given a green or yellow light. Again, the suicide pitch caused much discussion. The concerns raised were similar to those noted earlier. For example, would the film glamorize suicide? There were also voiced opinions about this girls’ level of sophistication around the topic as a 15 year old and whether it would result in a trite or contrived work on suicide. A mentor, who wanted to give a yellow light to the project, suggested the focus be changed to the topic of cutting, rather than suicide. Another mentor raised the issue that to make a documentary for a first time filmmaker would be a difficult feat, particularly because of the girl’s admission that she did not have a specific person in mind or know the amount of work it would be to create her film. The mentor also noted that the suicide pitch seemed to resonate with all of the girls in general, so she wanted to also give a yellow light. One mentor first decided to pass on giving a recommendation, and then changed her mind in favor of a possible green light, but only if the filmmaker focused on one person. In the end, the group decided they did not want to censor the girl, as she was “very protected by her family, but she’s obviously screaming about something” (Rattner, field notes, March, 20, 2006). So, they gave the girl a green light, but made sure the mentor on the project would proceed with caution and step in any time she felt that there were any ethical concerns.

This particular exchange of assigning green/yellow/red light, although it is only one of many like it in the program, exhibits the overall philosophy and meaning of the *enmeshed feminist curriculum.* For example, the mentors note that this girl is

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39 Due to space constraints, I only detail this one conversation about the suicide pitch.
inexperienced in filmmaking, yet recognize her desire to express something she wants to say. In doing so, the mentors are utilizing their feminist praxis in their decision making process by allowing everyone to have a voice, even the girl who is absent from this meeting. The mentors recognize the girl’s need to tell her own story, and want to give her a platform to use what she has learned in the program to create a film that speaks to her. The mentor group was also continuing to work on creating a positive normative feminist space where this Reel Grrl participant would be supported in her challenging new endeavor by mentors and other girls who worked together to create her film.

Once the mentors made their decisions, they had to tell the girls which projects had been selected. Lucia was tasked with telling the girls at their next meeting. After giving the girls pizza as a reward for their hard work of learning the editing software, FinalCut Pro, in anticipation of their projects, Lucia began telling them the results of Pitch Day. She began by heaping praise on the girls for their “amazing” pitches, and let them know the decisions to chose film projects was difficult (Rattner, field notes, March 21, 2006). Most of the girls now had homework to do. As discussed above, for example, some girls were given the tasks of coming up with scripts; deciding if they wanted to put themselves in their films; or working with another girl to figure out how one or both of their ideas could be incorporated or changed so they were both satisfied with the new idea.
Anna—whose “pitch on the fly” was about “love in action” but changed during the official pitch day to a film about “being raised by a village”—was given specific instructions to think about her story and if she would feel comfortable telling more about her past. Her film was given a green light, but a mentor who had a special connection to Anna, was tasked with helping guide the process. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Anna was a participant in the Reel Grrls kick off program, the previous Fall. I was a chaperone in her cabin, and I, as well as several other mentors, knew more about her personal story than she shared during her pitch. Grandparents raised Anna and her twin sister, as both of their parents were heroin addicts. During the Fall program, she had created a short film where she spoke about some of those issues by directly addressing the camera. It was very powerful. So, Anna was specifically being asked in her “raised by a village” film if she would again want to talk about her upbringing as a child with drug-addicted parents, and even invite some of her family members and use some of her family pictures to feature in that film.

As we both left the building that evening, Anna and I ended up walking separately from the rest of the girls. I was given a chance to be alone with Anna and I asked her what she felt about the suggestions she been given. She was quieter than usual, and seemed to struggle, almost stammer with her speech, as she replied that she “didn’t know” (Rattner, field notes, March 21, 2006). I told her that as I had been going to all the meetings, I knew that the mentors felt her short film from the Fall program was particularly personal and moving. Anna said, “Oh is that what they want?” I replied,
“not necessarily” (Rattner, field notes, March 21, 2006). Anna said she was confused. She wanted her film “to be uplifting and not about tears or poor me kind of thing” (Rattner, field notes, March 21, 2006). I replied that it did not have to be, but maybe there was a way to incorporate what she had been able to persevere; perhaps find a way to show where she had come from—challenged by her parents addiction—to the here and now—a successful high school graduate on her way to college. Anna was unsure whether she wanted to use her parents’ lives in her film, even though her mother had given her permission to use their lives because “this film was about her life—her story”—but still Anna was not sure she felt comfortable about it and wanted to talk with her parents again, who were now sober (Rattner, field notes, March 21, 2006). I stated that it was “one thing to share and be comfortable with it, and another to have it be on a screen with 300 of your closest friends watching” (Rattner, field notes, March 21, 2006). Anna was not sure if I was saying that Reel Grrls wanted her to make a film like she had before. I tried to assure her that it was her decision.

I shared my conversation with Anna in its entirety to illustrate some of the thought process that the girls were confronted with as filmmakers, given many had selected rather heavy issues and important personal stories in their films. Each girls’ story contained a significant truth for them—whether it was Anna’s past growing up with heroin-addicted parents, or Girl #4 whose film was an audio and visual letter to her incarcerated Dad—where they revealed their complicated lives that moved beyond the one dimensional characters so often seen of girls in mainstream movies. Of
course, not all the girls’ films had such a heavy theme, but the safety and space within the positive normative feminist environment of the Reel Grrls program allowed them to explore issues they might not have otherwise thought was possible.

**Working Together: Mentors and Girls**

Reel Grrls along with other programs have recognized the importance of collaborative mentoring relationships (Bogat & Liang, 2005; Soep, 2003). The close relationships offered girls feelings of emotional connectedness (Brown and Gilligan, 1992), while also providing technical support, whether or not girls were exploring non-traditional fields of study (e.g., STEM) (Darling, 2005). Reneé Spencer and Belle Liang (2009) note “…role modeling and coaching, which serve to nurture the talents and abilities of the adolescent…are…critical for girls,” particularly with adults who were outside of the family structure (p. 112; Darling et al, 1994). The mentoring relationships among the Reel Grrls participants and their mentors could be counted among the types of programs providing strong emotional and technical support for girls. Additionally, the *enmeshed feminist curriculum* offered girls a positive normative feminist environment that allowed girls the space to unpack the sexism present in American popular culture. “Feminist researchers have asserted that strong relationships between adolescent girls and adult women can promote healthy psychosocial development by serving as sources of resistance against cultural forces associated with sexism and stereotypical beliefs about femininity (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Sullivan, 1996; Taylor et al. 1995)” (Spencer & Liang, 2009, p. 113). Reel Grrls assisted girls in developing a “healthy critical perspective on
societal messages about gender,” that served to open up the types of conversations and definitions surrounding what it meant to be a girl in contemporary American popular culture (Spencer & Liang, 2009, p. 113). I believe that the Reel Grrls mentors—a key factor of the program’s structure and strength—offered the critical emotional, technical and feminist support that allowed girls to thrive in this program. Mentors and girls worked together closely after their pitches at this stage of the curriculum to complete their films.

Once the pitches/films were chosen to move forward, each was assigned a mentor. Each girl was the lead on her own film, in addition to serving as crew on someone else’s film. Girls do not have to be the lead on a project, if they do not want to, but all must work as crew regardless. So, girls work together in groups to assist each other in film production. For example, shooting primary action and B-roll\(^{40}\), holding the boom mike, scouting locations, acting in each other’s pieces are all ways in which girls assist each other as crew members on other films. The girls work closely together and the mentor also provides additional hands, suggestions, and guidance as needed. Because the mentors have been around the girls for the previous eight weeks of the program, the girls have become familiar with them. The mentors have established trust, mutual respect, and a collaborative process with the girls that also helped to cement their working relationships and deepen the enmeshed feminist curriculum. This working relationship between mentors and girls was most strongly

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\(^{40}\) B-roll refers to background shots and supplemental footage gathered during filming that then gets used in editing to either set a scene or provide information by showing alternative footage while a character is talking.
evidenced in the one-on-one conversations that I observed countless times. For example, between Anna and her mentor, I observed the following exchange,

Anna: I want to film my family interactions, and have it be unscripted — maybe use old footage from our toddler years and horseback riding, and cut from younger to our present day shots. I want to ask my sister to talk about herself, my grandparents, my father and mother, my cousin and me. I’m focusing on these 7 people. In the Fall, I have to watch it again, it focused on problems, but I don’t want to focus on hardships. Maybe my Mom can talk about hard times. I really want to focus on the village. And love.

Mentor: You just brought out the focus. These are all good things to know. You know where you’re going because you know why you’re doing it. This film is not just about where I came from.

Anna: I just want to say thank you. Maybe I can think about other people. (she asks questions about specific lights and camera equipment). I will need equipment time, I don’t need or want to have another person to be there to film, they [family] might clam up.

Mentor: You don’t want someone?

Anna: No, I might be on film, or want to directly address the camera. Oh, maybe just an intro or a letter. I used to write down bullet points. I might use B-roll over bullet points.

Mentor: I have a question, you said a couple times, I want people to tell things.

Anna: Yeah, I want my Mom to talk about birth and disability. My twin and Grandparents will talk about us like one person. That’s okay. I feel okay having each person to talk about things.

(Rattner, field notes, March 28, 2006)

This was just a small part of their conversation, but it illustrated how each mentor worked with the girls to establish these collaborative relationships. Each mentor and girl pair had a similar type of exchange in that the mentor listened to the girl’s story and asked questions as possible to get her to think about what she was trying to say in her film (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). Again, the girls’ voices were prominent in this particular challenge of the program (Taylor et al., 1995). It was the girls’ ideas that were the drivers of the Reel Grrls program and curriculum from here forward. The mentor was a sounding board, who also offered advice to the girls about their projects. In this dialogue between Anna and her mentor, they worked
collaboratively to figure out the best way to approach Anna’s story and found a clear path through to the heart of her film (Soep, 2003). To work together this closely requires a level of safety and trust that was palpable in the room, particularly in Anna’s case to make herself vulnerable in this situation was a brave act of agency (Spencer & Liang, 2009).

A place for meaning: the Enmeshed Feminist Curriculum revealed

I began this dissertation by stating that the reader would be taken on a journey of feminist discovery, much the same way that the participants were led, through the Reel Grrls program. Through the narrative device of a flashforward, I revealed the inherent and unspoken feminist component of the enmeshed feminist curriculum (See chapter 2). I employed this to parallel the content and structure of the Reel Grrls program with this dissertation. I wanted the reader to experience how each specific curricular challenge added another layer to the enmeshed feminist curriculum, in an effort to respond to my question: How does feminist pedagogy manifest itself in the Reel Grrls Curriculum? With this question in mind, and working knowledge of the enmeshed feminist curriculum, I return to key curricular moments to illustrate how Reel Grrls utilized hands-on media technology, media literacy, and the enmeshed feminist curriculum to create a program where feminism becomes tacit knowledge.

The first two exercises that the girls experienced were: ‘Bad Ads’ (street interviews) and 'Media Girl' (deconstructing media’s expectations for girls). Both exercises
focused the girls on the technological aspects of learning and utilizing the camera
equipment and media literacy in addressing the sexism found in mainstream media.
Additionally, the girls were challenged to see the dominant femininity, sexism and
heteronormativity as it exists in American popular culture (See chapter 3). The
enmeshed feminist curriculum worked to cut through the noise of our cultural milieu.
Through deconstructing the ‘media girl’ assignment participants offered resistance
to mainstream—ideas of narrowing standards of beauty and dominant femininity—
in favor of layered explanations of themselves and/or stories that moved beyond
tropes. Reel Grrls through a positive normative feminist environment worked to
offer girls alternatives and/or at least to broaden and offer complexity to what they
see. When the girls viewed the films of their mentors, they witnessed girls on screen
who differed from mainstream media portrayals, particularly in terms of their
abilities and intersectionalities of race/ethnicity and class.

Because of the safe space provided by Reel Grrls, participants had the opportunity to
explore who they were without fear of repercussions or judgment from other girls—
which added another layer. For example, the girls were given several weekly
technical assignments (e.g., to work on lighting; POV; story-telling; and camera
angles) that required them to work together and create funny scenes. Additionally,
when the girls were at S.C.A.N., many were playful and some serious, as they
explored what every girl had a right to do (See chapter 5). In other words, Reel Grrls
created a community of supportive girls and women, and supportive friendships
that stand against the accepted cultural norm that being ‘mean’ for girls is ‘natural.’
When I first began this research, I believed that the moment when the girls stepped on stage to talk with an audience about their finished works was the apex of this program. However, what I came to realize was that ‘Pitch Day’ was the real zenith. Just as the “Turning Point” moment (See chapter 4) was a ceremonial ‘rite of passage’ for the Reel Grrls—a place where the girls’ ideas and voices became the driving force for the program—“Pitch Day” was the functional moment when the girls actually had to display an understanding of all the different components of the curricular moments of the Reel Grrls program. For example, the ‘Bad Ads’ and ‘media girl’ assignments, offered learning about sexism and dominant femininity, but also street interviews where they gathered foundational understandings of people’s daily lives. In addition, learning about storyboarding and analyzing videos, taught the girls about sequence and narrative composition. Also, recognizing camera angles where they understood a POV, and how the camera angles allowed different implicit messages to be communicated. Lastly, when they worked at S.C.A.N., where the girls learned about citizens’ rights, the power of voice, and how to run a control room. These are just some stand out moments of technological, media literacy and enmeshed feminist curriculum. “Pitch Day” was the fevered and functional moment where the synthesis of all these aspects of the curriculum happened because of the girls’ own voice, agency, and decisions afforded by the experiences that they have had up to that point.
I began this chapter by stating that Reel Grrls stands in the face of problematic constructions of the “at risk” or “can do” girl, by challenging the systemic barriers girls face through the lens of media. I also challenged the assertion that ‘mean girls’ was an inevitable state of being and instead was culturally produced and supported. By describing Pitch Day and the girls’ process, I asserted that girls have the agency and technological capabilities to create stories that speak to their heart, and also challenges and complicates what typifies girls on the screen.

The heroine’s journey and conclusions

The girls not only have to understand, but also to integrate their knowledge. Utilizing the movie plot of the heroine’s journey—i.e., a hero’s journey: call to a quest; facing challenges; reaching an abyss; transformation/self-discovery; resolving/presenting a solution—as an analogy, Reel Grrls participants spent the first half of the Reel Grrls’ program being challenged in their inexperience and growing knowledge. They had learned helpful technological, media literacy, and feminist information along the way of their path (aka, the program), but they then must be able to rise to the final challenge of integrating all of their technical capabilities, their ability to think critically about media, and the enmeshed feminist curriculum, in order to create the film that they want to have to succeed in their quest for understanding film production—to be a cultural producer.
Although there is much within the *enmeshed feminist curriculum*, it was taken up by each participant differently, meeting her where she was. This program of feminist media literacy and media production enabled the girls to create an awakening to understanding the larger systemic barriers and forces of their own personal experiences. In other words, the Reel Grrls program was unique for each participant. However, the girls may not have realized it at the time. Malory Graham, the founder of Reel Grrls, told me that it often happened that girls would contact her a year or two after the program—either to assist in the mentoring program for older girls, or to ask for a recommendation letter—and let her know how much the Reel Grrls program opened their eyes to gender bias in the media.

As feminist writer Rebecca Solnit (2014) reminded, “The effects of your actions may unfold in ways you cannot foresee or even imagine” (p. 93). The work of Reel Grrls might have long lasting effects on its participants, as Malory Graham attested to above, that are not even known to the girls themselves during the program. Although the girls might not have an appreciation for the impact of the program on them while they are in the program, their films can have an immediate impact on the audience at the moment of viewing. The Reel Grrls films they created might also carry over as the viewer reflects upon their experiences of seeing the films. For example (See chapter 1), it was due to the Reel Grrls films that I saw that began my interest in conceiving this research.
The Reel Grrls films also help their producers to become experienced in movie making—to know what technical tools they need, which allowed them to contribute to the film and technological pipeline of female film workers who might translate their experiences within Reel Grrls to a vocation. For example, several graduates of the Reel Grrls program continue to take more advanced classes with Reel Grrls; work in their mentoring program for younger girls; work in Reel Grrls studio lab; and study film in college and film school. Because of the network of mentors who work in all aspects of the film industry, Reel Grrls are given unprecedented access to women in the field—creating connections much as the equivalent of an ‘old boys’ network. For example, one of the girls in this study—through her connections with Reel Grrls—became an assistant to a prominent filmmaker working on her film set in Seattle. Additionally, the Reel Grrls is constantly adding film/video content to the world through Vimeo, Youtube and other outlets for their film shorts that challenge perceptions of girls on screen. Moreover, the Reel Grrls program could be counted among those doing the work of “Collective Feminist Activism” (Durham, 1999, as noted by Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007). That is, when girls are provided with safe spaces, attentive mentors and supportive community, they were more apt to resist more mediated messages (See chapter 1; Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007). As noted above in connection with the enmeshed feminist curriculum, Reel Grrls provided all three components of “collective feminist activism,” particularly by making feminism tacit knowledge, and as such provided girls with the opportunity to create possibilities for themselves within the public spaces of media culture.
In the next chapter, I conduct a textual analysis of three of the girls’ films to explore how their films complicated what was seen of girls on the screen. Utilizing film theorist and critic David Bordwell’s (1989) four-component methodology, I analyzed each film and highlight moments where each girl utilized film techniques, story structure and/or editing to highlight strong and interesting portrayals of girls. I discuss each film in detail noting their construction of a “girl gaze” (Kearney, 2003) that grows out of their lived experiences, rather than recycling the stereotypical ideas about girls in mainstream media.
Chapter 7: Resolutions and Textual Analysis

FADE IN: Week 12 of the ReelGrrls program

INT: “Inside of Conworks.” Conworks is a workspace building for artists with offices, gallery exhibition spaces, and two (2) theaters, and home of the Reel Grrls’ main office.

The theater is full of excitement, the usually cavernous building of Conworks, a series of artist spaces and offices, that is mostly empty during the day when the girls have been here, is now full of people. The theater seats 300 and there is an additional theater full to capacity of 50 people. Friends, family and supporters are milling around. It feels like graduation day. The Reel Grrls girls are gathered together in clumps or in groups with family and friends, scattered around the room. There are volunteers helping to sell concessions and $10 entrance tickets, t-shirts, and DVDs. In a corner of the room a silent auction is set out on a table. Additionally, there is a live DJ on a stage. This is a definite event. Lucia, co-facilitator of Reel Grrls, steps up to the microphone readying herself to introduce the Reel Grrls’ movie.

FADE OUT.

THE END
The Girl Gaze

The preceding film script page is meant to set up the reader for the suspense and excitement of what will be the final moment of the Reel Grrls’ program, and almost the final chapter of this dissertation as well. This chapter concludes the journey of the several specific curricular moments of the Reel Grrls program, as I mentioned in Chapter 1, illustrating how the enmeshed feminist curriculum has been woven into the fabric of the Reel Grrls program to create a supportive normative feminist environment. This journey would be incomplete if the girls’ films were absent from this discussion, as they are the cultural artifacts that have been produced as a result of the program.

In this chapter I present three of the Reel Grrls’ works through textual analysis of their films. The films, “Cut Here,” “Breaking the Cycle,” and Anna’s film “It Takes a Village,” are all powerful works that have been highlighted in some way through these chapters. “Cut here”—the film about suicide—and “Breaking the Cycle”—the film about generational choices—are both featured in Chapter 6 in the field notes about Pitch Day. Similarly, the film “It Take a Village,” which was created by Anna, is discussed in Chapter 6 in the field notes that detail her interactions with her mentor. As each of these films has been discussed in the abstract or as partial ideas, it felt necessary to give them weight and closure, by analyzing them in detail.

Additionally, I selected each of these films for their ability to showcase the differences between girl-made and mainstream media. I believe that seeing the end
result of the program will shed light on the possibilities of film through a "girl gaze" (Kearney, 2003, p. 32).

Feminist media scholar Mary Celeste Kearney (2003) asserts that the "girl gaze" exhibits particular connections to girls’ lived experiences that are—and continue to be—different than simply imitating the stereotypical ideas typically seen in mainstream films (p. 32).

Rather than mimicking the representation and discursive strategies of the mainstream film industry, these girls are creating movies that demonstrate attempts not only to establish a ‘girl's gaze’ but also to engage directly with the ideologies of gender and generation prevalent in popular culture and contradictorily experienced by female youth. If we would like a better understanding of this phenomenon, we would do well to watch the movies girls make

(Kearney, 2003, p. 32).

Kearney (2003) is issuing a call to “watch the movies girls make,” but also is offering an explanation as to why it is important to support girl-made media. As documented by girls’ scholars, “mass culture abounds with sexist and otherwise problematic representations of adolescent girls” (Durham, 1999, p. 211, as cited by Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007, p. 110). As I have argued in previous chapters, the movie content created for girls often recapitulates tired tropes—e.g., “the manic pixie dream girl”
(Rabin 2007 & 2014) or “mean girl” (Gonick, 2004)—and reproduces well worn themes which provide “...girls with images of a stereotypical and narrow range of role models of femininity centered on the importance of beauty, romance, and fashion” (Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007, p. 110). By analyzing textually these three Reel Grrls films, I offer the reader a sense for what would constitute a “girl’s gaze” within this larger context of a sexist media that continually recycles sexist, heteronormative and narrowly defined ideas of what it means to be a girl (Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007).

I have posited that a film program with a feminist culture can offer a needed counter balance to repressive and limiting messages for girls in mainstream media culture. As artist and feminist media writer, Kathleen Sweeney (2005) notes,

> Media literacy, combined with courses in digital photography and film/videomaking, should help expose the technical underpinnings of image construction and icon-making in popular culture. Filmmaking requires females to look through the same kinds of lenses used to produce corporate media’s images of beauty, power, and celebrity. And it grants them the power to create rather than simply consume. Once girls begin to frame their world through the lens, issues of power, reference, and choice come into focus

(Sweeney, 2005, p. 39).
Sweeney, who has surveyed different girls’ film programs across the United States, articulates the crux of my argument. Simply, a program like Reel Grrls that offers both opportunities for media literacy and hands-on media technology training can become a powerful tool for girls to wield in today’s media-driven world. The added benefit of a program with an enmeshed feminist curriculum, however, remains key in unpacking the sexist nature of a hypersexualized (Dines, 2012) media culture that continues to prize the appearance of women and girls over the substance of their ideas, contributions and minds. To be clear, I fully acknowledge that not all girls’ films will have a specific “girl gaze” and counter mainstream media options. However, the director of any film carries its vision and story forward. So, just having a girl behind the lens can open up the types and complicate the kinds of stories that are possible, particularly for girls who have typically had their stories written for them by others.

**Textual analysis**

In this chapter I interpret and analyze the three aforementioned films utilizing film critic and theorist David Bordwell’s (1989) four-component methodology: referential, explicit, implicit and symptomatic. I detail each component here, and refer to them in my interpretation of the three Reel Grrls’ films below.  

The first level of Bordwell’s (1989) analysis is the “referential” meaning, which is a description of the film itself. The “explicit” meaning describes an intention set forth

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41 Due to the different styles of each individual film, the interpretations and analysis for each will not be uniform, even though I will using the same methodology.
in the film. Both the “referential” and “explicit” meanings taken together describe what is usually considered the “literal” meanings of the film (Bordwell, 1989, p. 8). A film is also assessed for its “implicit” meaning that includes themes, but “...they may also be identified as “problems,” “issues,” or “questions” (Bordwell, 1989, p. 8–9). The last component is the “symptomatic” meaning, which is an “involuntarily” exposure of an aspect of the film (Bordwell, 1989, p. 9). Bordwell (1989) continues to describe the symptomatic meaning as a veil or “disguise” that might be at odds with the explicit meanings. Taken together, he describes, “...the activity of comprehension constructs referential and explicit meanings, while the process of interpretation constructs implicit and symptomatic meanings” (Bordwell, 1989, p. 9). Through the process of analysis and interpretation, I explore some of the meanings and themes of three Reel Grrls’ films to shed light on the possibilities for girl-produced media.

**Role Tape**

**Suicide: Cut Here**

The opening shot of the film is a black and white close up of a wrist with dash marks and scissors written in ink, and the words “cut here” underneath (Figure 7.1).
Figure 7.1: Kolodziejski, used with permission, *Cut Here*, 2006.

An implicit meaning of the visual “cut here” is an analogy of the wrist as if it is an instructional letter to be cut and opened; the viewer is presented instructions as if the topic of suicide will be easily understood by following the directions. The shot fades into a black background with the following statistic in stark white writing, “Suicide is the 3rd leading cause of death among teenagers in the U.S.A,” as melodic instrumental music plays in the background (Kolodziejski, 2006, *Cut Here*). The referential scene is set with just the title image of the wrist and the statistic. Filmed in black and white, the implicit suggestion is this film will pack an emotional punch, particularly because it is shot in black and white, which gives it a gritty, hard edge.
Already, the implicit tone of this film is working against the accepted happy format of most mainstream teenage movies for girls. From the beginning, then, the audience is put on notice that this will be a difficult film to watch.

In the next scene, a girl begins talking about

the day that I wanted to kill myself, the day I wanted
to take myself out of this world...I was just by myself...no
one could hang out...and I felt like...people made up excuses
so they couldn’t hang out with me...I hated it...and I just
wanted it to stop, right there, right there

(Kolodziejski, 2006, Cut Here).

As we listen to her voiceover, there are black and white shots of an unidentifiable girl in the foreground while kids with skateboards are hanging out on the steps of a school building, mill around behind her. The viewer sees side angle shots of her with a black hooded sweatshirt pulled up over her head, then shots of her lower body, her legs in patched jeans. These images show explicitly that this girl is alone, even as she is in proximity to others teens. She is separated and her covered face conveys that she cannot see the other teens, just as they cannot see her. Implicit in these shots is the feeling of her own isolation, and understanding that she is not “seen” by her peers, just as the viewer cannot see her. A symptomatic meaning of the lower body shots suggests an inability to move freely, even though she has the capacity to
move. She—as a person considering suicide—is stuck and immobilized by her isolation.

These shots then fade into a overlaid screen shot of the back of a girl walking away, alone on a beach on the right side of the screen, while we see a girl, head tilted down with a baseball cap over her eyes, on the left (Figure 7.2). Again, these scenes reiterate the girl's explicit isolation and separation as she is shown from the back, walking away from the viewer. Her eyes are unable to make contact with the audience, either due to her walking away, or to the cap covering her eyes. Implicitly, her aloneness is palpable in her gray surroundings.
More statistics flash on the screen: “Girls are 3 times more likely to attempt suicide than boys” (Kolodziejski, 2006, Cut Here). The statistic fades into a series of magazines with the girl’s face superimposed over it, as she talks about watching television and reading magazines—with thin and beautiful women—where “men drooled over them…seemed like as I walked down the halls in my school, all the thin, really pretty girls were getting all the guys…and, seemed like no one paid attention to me” (Kolodziejski, 2006, Cut Here). In voice over she explains she tried to kill herself while another statistic, “Boys are 4 times more likely than girls to actually kill themselves while attempting suicide,” illuminates the screen.
(Kolodziejski, 2006, *Cut Here*). The screen then fades to a shot of a girl, dressed all in black, with her head resting down on her shoulders as she is slumped in a corner. Implicitly, the audience sees this girl is stuck in her corner as she does not reflect the “really, pretty girls” that are everywhere she looks, e.g. at school, in magazines, on television programs. Again, the symptomatic meaning is girls have nowhere to turn in our society to escape the media-driven image of what a girl should look like.

The viewer hears her talk about when she decided to cut her wrists, and her explicit feelings of trepidation and doubt. As she talks, there is a montage of dark evening shots looking up at branches framed in a cloudy sky. As the camera seems to spin, the implicit meaning is an echoing of her confusion and uncertainty. As the sky spins unsteadily in the frame of the shot, the branches shift to reveal some trees mixed into the branches, and then fade into a still black night sky, with a bright almost-full moon. All the while, the voiceover continues to describe the girl’s difficulty and pain as she thinks about cutting her wrists. Ultimately, she decides she cannot do it,

...It was probably the most difficult moment of my life...I could just start cutting myself and I could be bleeding to death, and that seemed terrifying...I was scared...it was, like, utter fear, like, wow, I’m actually going to die...I just couldn’t do it. I just...I was just...I didn’t want to do it. I couldn’t

(Kolodziejski, 2006, *Cut Here*).
The shots of the sky, and the dark, moving branches, that change into a still black night sky with a glowing moon, offer implicit references of the narrators move from her sadness and turmoil, to her moment of clarity, as with a glowing moon that illuminates a dark sky, when she realizes she cannot cut herself.

Another statistic appears on the screen, “suicide took the lives of 31,655 people in the USA, in 2005” (Kolodziejski, 2006, *Cut Here*). The film then returns to a double shot of the girl’s baseball cap-obliterated face superimposed over a shot of a girl walking away from the camera along a wooded parkway. She is heard in voiceover explaining that at the time of her suicidal thinking, no one knew. She did not tell anyone. She explains that she was the “extremely happy girl” who cheered other friends; she hid her sad feelings away. As she is talking, the screen shows for first time, the faces of two girls sitting on a table, legs swinging and laughing together. Then in close-up with her baseball cap-obliterated face, she explains “people treated me normally, they’d have fun with me and laugh with me...” (Kolodziejski, 2006, *Cut Here*). Then she explains that she had moments when she would “just cry” for no known reason. Her boyfriend would ask her why she was crying, and she could not explain and would make up excuses. While she is talking, the screen shows two hands joined together. She explains that she broke-up with this boyfriend because “he treated me differently” (Kolodziejski, 2006, *Cut Here*). The hands on the screen become unclasped. The explicit meaning of this scene is that the girl and her boyfriend have separated (Figure 7.3).
Another statistic, white writing with black background, “Suicide deaths outnumber homicide deaths 3 to 2,” illuminates the screen (Kolodziejski, 2006, *Cut Here*). This first part of the short film takes 2:50 (2 minutes, 50 seconds).

Then, a shift happens. The next shot reveals a girl’s back, seated in a single swing. In voice over, the girl explains, “My outlook on life has changed tremendously...and the rest of my sophomore year was kinda, kinda a blur” (Kolodziejski, 2006, *Cut Here*). She explains that she told her parents that she was feeling depressed, got medication, and took a self-improvement class, which helped her to gain perspective.
on friendship. Once she finishes explaining that she is happier now, the girl sitting alone in the swing literally disappears, leaving the playground empty. The implicit meaning of this shot with the literal disappearance of the girl, is also the figurative disappearance of her aloneness. The shots that accompany her new happier outlook, move quickly from one shot of a lone girl in a black hooded sweatshirt walking away from the camera down a road. This shot then blends into another girl—face only partially obscured—as she looks up to the afternoon sky through the branches of a tree. The implicit meaning is that the girl, while still alone, is now on a path to receive help (e.g., she is literally on the road). She is no longer on a desolate beach, as in the other nature scenes. As she looks up at the trees, instead of just seeing the branches as before, the shot moves from the top of the trees down to the roots. The implicit meaning is that she is more grounded now (e.g., like a rooted tree), with the support of her family, friends and medication. Then we see close-ups of girls’ legs swinging, and the same two girls from before, are sitting next to each other and laughing. The implicit meaning of the swinging legs—a return to a happier time for this girl and her friends—is a carefree moment. The girls are sitting in a supported manner by the table, but in this moment their movement could also be symptomatic of wanting to move on even through this unchartered territory, as the girl feels understood and connected with her friend.

Lastly, there is a shot of a girl in extreme close up, with her baseball cap masking her face, explaining that she is feeling better. This girl has changed, and she is becoming more grounded in her voice and imagery. She “began to feel comfortable with
herself...and realized the medication helped because like, depression is like, a chemical imbalance” (Kolodziejski, 2006, Cut Here). She recently told her friends why she would cry when she was a sophomore. Her friends were supportive, which made a “huge impact, and made my friendships stronger, and just made me realize that I have the best friends that I could possibly ask for...now I just have a more positive attitude” (Kolodziejski, 2006, Cut Here). In the end, as the viewer sees an extreme close-up of this girl's obscured face, baseball cap covering everything except her mouth, and a view of a shoreline in the background. This time in the overlaying images, it is the girl who is seen more clearly in the foreground, with the fuzzy shoreline in the background. The viewer hears her say that she now feels as if she is back to her old self, where she is happy. Although “people have their days,” she realizes she “has more good days then bad” (Kolodziejski, 2006, Cut Here). The screen fades to black, as the closing music and credits roll. This last part of the short film is 1:23 (1 minute, 23 seconds). The director packs an emotional, stark and personal story into this 4 minutes and 13 seconds of film.

The technique of utilizing an obscured face, either mostly hidden behind a baseball cap, shot from the back, or from the side, provides the viewer an opportunity to see, and perhaps feel, the girl's presence and emotional situation without attaching them to a specific girl. Because we cannot see her face, this girl can become “any” girl who has lived a similar story. She stands for all who feel as alone she did rather than associating her story with a specific face and/or girl. The symptomatic meaning is
she is any girl and every girl. This girl, then, represents any girls who feel isolated and unseen.

While the “mean girls” trope explored briefly in Chapter 6 is an element of girls’ culture, the story illustrated in Cut Here (Kolodziejski, 2006) is very much tied to female friendships, which is another hallmark of girls’ lives (Griffiths, 1995). To be understood and have close relationships with friends is important to adolescents, and particularly to girls. “Developmental psychologists have consistently demonstrated that close and intimate friendships are linked to positive developmental outcomes” (Frith, 2004, p. 357). It is telling that the only time the viewer sees full, unobstructed views of girls in this film is when two girls are shown together either laughing or sitting together, swinging their legs. Most of the film shows either a girl walking away, a single girl in a baseball cap, or a girl alone but also superimposed on a lonely scene in nature—in the woods, branches, expanses of water or shoreline. The explicit meaning of these shots is an increased feeling of isolation. However, in the end of the film when the speaker talks of the strengths of her friendships, the viewer again sees two girls together. This story was created in the safety of the strong bonds of friendship built through the Reel Grrls program, and this particular girl felt it possible to share a very personal and scary moment with her friends and the world. The story speaks to the power of her sense of self and as she says, level of comfort with herself, and her ability to relate her story to help others. But, it also speaks to the ability of the Reel Grrls program to build in the
positive normative feminist culture of the enmeshed feminist curriculum, where these girls felt a real sense of community.

The enmeshed feminist curriculum is also supported in this film. The statistic that “girls are 3 times more likely to attempt suicide than boys,” (Kolodziejski, 2006, Cut Here), appears right before the girl mentions watching television and reading magazines that contain thin and beautiful women. She explains that everywhere in the pages of magazines she sees thin and beautiful women. She also sees men getting together with beautiful women on television. She notes that even at school, everywhere around her are thin and beautiful girls. She states

> men drooled over them... seemed like as I walked down the halls in my school, all the thin, really pretty girls were getting all the guys... and, seemed like no one paid attention to me

(Kolodziejski, 2006, Cut Here).

Thin and beautiful women were around her everywhere in her daily life, both in school and within popular culture. The film does not make an explicit link between girls feeling the pressure of a sexist culture and hyper-sexualized images that can be toxic to their mental health. However, Reel Grrls offered the girls an opportunity to deconstruct sexist messages and constricting cultural expectations for girls with the “media girl” exercise (See Chapter 3 and Kilbourne, 1999). This film makes the
correlation by showing this particular statistic with the next image of women’s magazines, where the girl’s voiceover notes that everyone is thin and “drooled over,” while she feels ignored. The symptomatic meaning is girls’ high suicide attempts could be a result of girls feeling the pressure of unreal expectations for them created and perpetuated through popular culture. It is not known whether the Reel Grrls curriculum had an effect on the girl in the film—who made connections for herself about her feelings of disconnection and isolation—or on the filmmaker—who edited those scenes together—but there is a possibility that the enmeshed feminist curriculum influenced their decision to put those scenes together.

Cut Here (Kolodziejski, 2006) also takes a very challenging topic and turns it into an uplifting story, while giving appropriate weight and importance to the topic of suicide. The film does not glamorize the act (as was feared by the mentors and expert panelists). Rather, the film describes both verbally and visually the confusion and fear that happened when this girl thought about killing herself. The isolation, confusion, and unsettling aspects are conveyed visually in several ways described above. For example, the slightly spinning branches and trees in the dark skies, which felt disorienting and scary, just as the girl is sharing her darkest moment. This particular scene is emotional and also disquieting—hearing someone say she was “terrified” and “scared” and also to hear the real pain in her voice. The images and voiceovers convey the girl’s experiences in personal, yet ambiguous way, by not identifying a specific girl’s face with her feelings.
The director’s original pitch was to uncover:

Why is suicide becoming popular? Is it boredom with life?

Feeling stuck in a situation that you can’t get out of? Is it really just depression? What made them do it. I want to talk to people who have tried it. I see a whole short film with black and white close-ups [shots] of people talking, people in shadows cutting. I like contrast and I really want to do a documentary on why people commit suicide. How they felt about life before and after

(Rattner, field notes, March 18, 2006).

The director of this film along with her collaborators, achieved what she set out to do, which was to uncover a reason as to why people consider suicide (See Pitch Day, Chapter 6). Through her film, the director also brings to light connections and pressures that young women feel when their physical appearance does not match narrowly defined and prescribed beauty ideals put forth through mainstream media.

**Generational choices: Breaking the Cycle**

This film begins with music, a funky bass beat and what sounds like clapping hands, as the words “Children often mimic the lifestyle of their parents,” then “and are influenced by the environment in which they are raised” illuminate a black screen (Roldan, 2006, *Breaking the Cycle*). Those words disappear and the screen is filled with the words “This is the foundation of a generational cycle” (Roldan, 2006, *Breaking the Cycle*). The screen then is filled with an interior shot of a bathroom. An
African American girl, haired pulled into a bun and wearing a green shirt, comes into the frame, sitting astride a toilet while holding a pregnancy kit box, she looks at a clock. Her voiceover begins, “Being a teenage mom is difficult, I know ‘cause I’ve seen it in my family generation after generation. My mom had her first child at 17; all five of my sisters followed her path at 16” (Roldan, 2006, *Breaking the Cycle*).

The camera zooms in on a close up shot of a positive pregnancy test, as the voiceover continues, “And now, well, now, it’s not just my Mom and my sisters.” (Figure 7.4) (Roldan, 2006, *Breaking the Cycle*). The girl looks away from the pregnancy test, as the screen fades to black. The scene ends, and a new interior shot of a living room lights up the screen.

Figure 7.4, Roldan, used with permission, “Breaking the Cycle,” 2006.
The same girl, though now in grey sweatpants and a light blue t-shirt, is sitting on a brown couch in front of a television, painting her toenails that are propped up on a table. In front of her, the coffee table holds scattered dirty dishes, nail polish remover, a television remote, books, and a gallon bottle of dark alcohol. The voiceover continues, “the first time I tried alcohol, I was 8. I didn’t really understand what it was then. My Mom left it on the table when she was asleep, and I was curious, so I took a few sips” (Roldan, 2006, *Breaking the Cycle*). The girl picks up the bottle in one hand. “She leaves them around all the time” the viewer hears, as the girl sniffs the open bottle (Roldan, 2006, *Breaking the Cycle*). The girl turns to walk out of the room, and the voiceover continues, “I still get urges. Sometimes I just...(she trails off), the feeling is hard to explain” (Roldan, 2006, *Breaking the Cycle*). Again, the screen goes black.

Now, a third scene of the same girl emerges in an interior shot of a bedroom. The room has a dresser with a large attached mirror, and open shelving. The same girl is now dressed in high heels, fishnet stockings, plaid skirt with lacy fringe that ends at her mid-thigh, and a tight low-cut red top (Figure 7.5). She walks provocatively towards the camera, then turns to look at herself in the mirror.

The voice over narration begins,

> My Mom always said I’d end up just like her. She encouraged me actually, told me how easy it was to get a date; in return for a sexual favor, put money in my wallet. Come on girl, you
can do this! My Mom knew she was right.

(Roldan, 2006, *Breaking the Cycle*).

The girl turns to leave the room, and as she walks away from the mirror and the camera, the screen fades to black.

![Image](image_url)

Figure 7.5, Roldan, used with permission, *Breaking the Cycle*, 2006.

With each of these scenes, the viewer is left with the explicit feeling and meaning that this girl is following into her generational cycles of (1) teen pregnancy; (2) alcoholism; and (3) prostitution. Within each scene the girl’s voiceover references her mother in connection to each of these social struggles. The implicit meaning, particularly in having an African American girl as the protagonist in the film, is that
these problems of teen pregnancy, alcoholism, and prostitution are understood to be common in African American communities and repeated generationally.

The next scene reveals the same girl, seated at a table that is covered with books, writing in a journal. She is wearing a green t-shirt, and her hair is pulled back. Her voice over narration continues, “All these things, prostitution, pregnancy, drugs and alcohol, it's taken over my family. I made so many mistakes” (Roldan, 2006, *Breaking the Cycle*). The screen fades to black and the viewer hear an audible ‘sigh.’ In the next shot, the same girl directly addresses the camera framed tightly around just her face and shoulders. She tells the viewer, “But, I refuse to do what they did, become less than my full potential. Nah,” She shakes her head and smiles a bit, “I got goals and plans. If I gotta’ work hard and motivate myself, I’ll do it” (Roldan, 2006, *Breaking the Cycle*).

The screen cuts to black, and then the sound of a rewinding tape is heard. In rapid succession all of the three previous sequences—now shown in black and white—the girl in the bedroom (3); the girl in the living room (2); the girl with the pregnancy test in the bathroom interior (1), rewind. The viewer is alerted to the fact something new is taking place on the screen. With the new information that the protagonist is determined not to follow into her family’s generational cycles, or “become less than [her] full potential,” the audience is treated to a full viewing of each of the three opening sequences, not knowing that the first presentation of them was incomplete (Roldan, 2006, *Breaking the Cycle*).
In some ways, the film utilizes a technique popularized by the German film *Run, Lola, Run* (1998), where the film action rewinds three times to reveal different outcome for Lola. Here in this family, the forgone conclusion is the girl will follow her family’s generational cycle of social problems. Until the moment of the direct address by the protagonist, the audience is led to believe she will be another statistic for teen pregnancy, for alcoholism, and for sex work. However, an implicit meaning of both *Run Lola Run* (1999) and this film—is the dueling ideas of free will and determinism. Will this African American girl be fated to follow the same path of her mother and sisters? Does she have free will to make her own choices? In *Breaking the Cycle* (2006), the author is implicitly challenging the idea that generational cycles are inevitable.

The viewer now sees the film in color again. The African American girl—dressed in a green shirt from the first scene—is knocking on a bathroom door, asking “Are you done? Can I come in?” (Roldan, 2006, *Breaking the Cycle*). The next shot is of a white girl, with blonde hair and dark eyeliner. The young white girl replies “I’m so scared,” while the camera holds an extreme close-up of just her face (Roldan, 2006, *Breaking the Cycle*). The camera then switches to an extreme close-up of the African American girl as she responds, “Look, don’t worry. I’m here for you no matter what happens, because you were here for me when I had nuthin’” (Roldan, 2006, *Breaking the Cycle*). With this scene, the audience learns the true identity of the pregnant teen. It is not the protagonist, but her white friend who is pregnant.
The film then reverts to the beginning of the movie. The same interior bathroom scene and the same exact music and voice over begins again, “Being a teenage mom is difficult, I know ‘cause I’ve seen it in my family generation after generation. My mom had her first child at 17; all five of my sisters followed her path at 16” (Roldan, 2006, Breaking the Cycle). The camera zooms in on a close up shot of a positive pregnancy test (See Figure 7.4), as the voiceover continues, “And now, well, now, it’s not just my Mom and my sisters.” This is where the scene ended in the first take.

Now, a new scene is added at the end of the narration, the screen is filled with an extreme close up of the same white girl with blonde hair, looking sad. The voiceover adds, “And now, well, now, it’s not just my Mom and my sisters. It’s my best friend too” (Roldan, 2006, Breaking the Cycle). The director has just revealed the viewers’ assumption that it is the African American protagonist who was pregnant; when in fact, it is the white girl who is in trouble. This scene cleverly reveals an implicit meaning that viewers might make the assumption of connecting African American girls with teen pregnancy, as they are erroneously perceived to be more sexually promiscuous (Tolman, 1996). The scene also reveals a symptomatic meaning of the racism present when making these types of unconscious assumptions. In many mainstream media portrayals of African American girls, there is often a teen mother. This movie points to that assumption and turns it on its head for the viewer. Because the viewer has now experienced a retelling of the first scene, it seems likely to happen again.
The next scene replays as well. A black screen alights to reveal the living room interior with the same African-American girl painting her toenails as the same voice over begins,

The first time I tried alcohol I was 8... I didn’t really understand what it was then. My Mom left it on the table when she was asleep; and, I was curious, so I took a few sips. She leaves them around all the time. I still get urges. Sometimes I just...(she trails off), the feeling is hard to explain

(Roldan, 2006, *Breaking the Cycle*).

As the girl turns to leave the room, instead of stopping as in the first telling, this time the narration continues. The girl is seen walking into a kitchen, “I just, I want to break every bottle in the house. I wish my Mom knew, or even cared about how much it bothers me when she’s drunk,” the voiceover continues (Roldan, 2006, *Breaking the Cycle*). The girl pours out the alcohol into the kitchen sink (Figure 7.6). In the next scene, she writes a note and leaves it on a table. An extreme close up of the note reveals its contents, “Dear Mom, I love you but I hate your drinking. I think it would be best if you get help. Love, Adrien” (Roldan, 2006, *Breaking the Cycle*). The voice over begins, “I love her unconditionally. But, watching her as I grew up, I know that’s not the life I want for me” (Roldan, 2006, *Breaking the Cycle*). The screen fades to black. Again there is an implicit meaning of the generational cycles of alcoholism and an assumption that this girl will be caught up in the addiction. The
director has once again defied the viewer’s expectation. Because the voice over mentions that the girl “took sips” and “has urges,” there is an assumption that she will drink her mother’s alcohol, instead of pouring it out. The “urges,” she talks about in the narration as the viewer learns, are to get rid of the alcohol, rather than to consume it.

Figure 7.6, Roldan, used with permission, “Breaking the Cycle,” 2006.

In this scene, the girl is casually dressed in grey sweatpants and a light blue t-shirt that reads, “Sweet by nature, Sour by choice” (Figure 7.6). I cannot know if the director chose to wear this t-shirt specifically, but the implicit meaning of the text is the message that girls are no longer assumed to be—as the old English song and nursery rhyme (c. 1820)—“sugar and spice and everything nice” (Southey, 2015).
Contemporary girls in the age of “girl power” media now can be anything, even “sour” if they choose. The symptomatic meaning is the underlying strength in her stance. Is she being “sour” by pouring the alcohol down the drain and attempting to get help for her mom by writing a note? Or, Is she really following through on being an intelligent young woman in today’s societal expectations for young women that still harkens back to a nostalgic time when girls were not taken seriously, and their paths were determined by others’ desires for their future. I believe her shirt sends the message this girl is defying those gendered expectations.

The third sequence in the film has the same bedroom interior. The same girl is dressed provocatively and walks suggestively towards the camera. The camera shot pans the girl from her toes to her head in a long, extended and typically ‘male gaze’ way (See Chapter 3). The camera angle and action is another signal to the viewer that they are complicit in objectifying this girl in this way. The voice over begins,

My Mom always said I’d end up just like her. She encouraged me actually, told me how easy it was to get a date; in return for a sexual favor, put money in my wallet. Come on girl, you can do this! My Mom knew she was right

(Roldan, 2006, Breaking the Cycle).
This time, the action in this second enactment of the scene continues as the girl places her empty wallet into a purse. She looks at herself in the mirror, as her voice over narration continues,

My mom knew she was right. But, I guess she doesn’t know anything about me. Tonight I have my first lead role in the YMCA’s play ‘Candy Brown.’ She entices men with her sexual appeal to get in return whatever she wants, but that path is the road to self-destruction. Too bad she didn’t show up to see it

(Roldan, 2006, *Breaking the Cycle*).

The camera shots lingers on the flyer for the play ‘Candy Brown.’ After the voiceover ends the girl turns on her heel and walks out of the room. The implicitly meaning of that action is the girl turning her back on her own objectification, her mother’s advice, and the idea that her mother knows who she is. Once again, the viewer learns that their implicit assumption of this African American girl based on her clothing and her manner has been turned upside down. The viewer is now made aware to check their assumption that this girl is behaving in a particular manner, e.g. a sex worker. This scene in particular plays with the idea of rape culture. In a way, the assumption that this girl is using her sexuality is correct. The fact that those traits are ascribed to a specific character in a play and not this girl, however, should give the audience pause that they might have put their role expectation upon this girl, rather than see who she is. By playing with the camera angles, and using a ‘male
gaze’—the camera’s slow pan from bottom to top—to objectify her, the audience does as well. But, in continuing the narrative, the director turns that gaze back onto the viewer to challenge their objectification of her subjectivity, which she expertly reclaims by the end of the scene. The director has once again complicated and layered this girl character. She is more than she appears to be, which again is not typical of girls seen within mainstream media.

The next scene begins in voiceover, “I’ve accomplished a lot in this year, good grades in school, running start for college, and an internship as a barista at the library café” (Roldan, 2006, Breaking the Cycle). The camera shots during the narration are a montage of clips: a close up of a black and white picture of an eye that pans out revealing the full flyer for the YMCA play ‘Candy Brown;’ a shot of the girl dressed up provocatively as (we know now) her character in the play, turning away from the mirror; a black and white shot of the letter she wrote to her mom urging her to get help; an action shot of the girl pouring the gallon jug of alcohol down the kitchen sink; and, then the girl disappears and just the kitchen sink is left in the scene. The girl’s voiceover continues, “despite my family history and the environment I've been surrounded by,” the screen then shows a black and white photo of an African American family (i.e., parents, and four children, all dressed up) (Roldan, 2006, Breaking the Cycle). The camera then shows a close-up of the same girl as she directly addresses the camera, “I choose to excel and have high standards for myself, it might not all be easy, but my life is worth it to me” (Roldan, 2006, Breaking the Cycle). Then, the screen fades to black with the words, “Generational cycles have the
potential to influence - ” As the words fade, the next shot reveals “But following your own path sometimes means,” which then is followed by the final screen “Breaking the Cycle” (Roldan, 2006, Breaking the Cycle).

This film is fictional, but due to the way it is filmed with the direct address to the camera and confessional-like dialogue, it seems more like a documentary film. The audience can be fooled into feeling they are learning the “truth” about this girl and her life. It is an interesting choice of the director to use only the direct address to the audience in particular moments of “truth telling.” For example, any time she is letting the audience know her truth—who she really is—she utilizes the direct address. The symptomatic meaning is that her “girl's gaze” is so different from mainstream media’s ideas of girls, that she needs to use the direct address just to make sure that she is finally heard and seen. The idea that girls’ ideas are prominent and their voices are the story, is another tenet of the enmeshed feminist curriculum. For the rest of the scenes in the film, the audience almost exclusively hears the voiceover narration, which is more seductive. The viewer can choose to listen or not to a voiceover. A direct address, however, cannot be ignored.

This film idea came into the program almost fully formed. I remember hearing this particular girl say that she had the idea before she became involved in the program. During Pitch Day, she speaks passionately about her ideas for this film, even as the mentors debate the possibility of her successfully completing the film in the time allotted. (See Chapter 6, field notes, March 18, 2006). The panelists and mentors put
their trust in this girl’s ideas and hands to complete her vision for the film. A major tenet of the enmeshed feminist curriculum is demonstrated here through the collaborative process of the girl and mentors working together to create her film. Another aspect of the enmeshed feminist curriculum is the challenging of generational, racist, and sexist stereotypes throughout this film. It highlights the intersectionalities of race/ethnicity and class that are often missing from mainstream media’s portrayal of girls. The filmmaker complicates three social issues of teen pregnancy, alcoholism and sex work in a specific, yet thematic way. Each issue is targeted for its effect in the protagonist’s life, but also calls into question the larger assumptions the audience may hold surrounding each issue. At each turn, this girl was given the support she needed to complete her film. Further, it is evident that her “girl’s gaze” produced a different type of girl than is typically seen on mainstream movie screens.

Family Struggles: It Takes A Village

This movie opens with a home movie of a child’s birthday party. Outside of someone’s home the viewer sees a long driveway with lawn and bushes on either side as the partygoers cavort in the foreground. There are adults and kids, and in the middle of the shot are twin girls, age 3 or 4, dressed identically in blue dresses with white/silvery aprons. The girls look like the character “Belle” from the Disney movie of Beauty and the Beast (Disney, 1991). The screen fades to black and the words, “This is my Family,” appears and then disappears. The next scene reveals a shot of two people hugging, as the camera pans out left a woman is seen blowing
kisses, and an older woman with grey hair is shown overlooking the scene as the screen fades to black. The words, “This is my Village” emerges. Classical music plays softly in the background. The screen then cuts back to the people hugging, as they pull apart, the audience can see they are twin girls about 18 years old. They are in a classroom, as there are white boards filled with math equations in the background. One of the girls holds a bouquet of flowers as two teachers and an elderly gentleman look on smiling. As a girl’s voice begins speaking, the screen shifts from a soundless video of a smiling elderly woman—wearing big glasses and short grey hair—who blows a kiss at the camera and then an elderly man smiling, before cutting to the speaker in front of a black screen in a direct address. “Grandma and Grandpa were my first home, and that’s where I learned I always have a home,” says a girl, who has glasses and is wearing a tie-dye shirt (Olsson, It Takes a Village, 2006).

Her Grandmother speaks directly to the camera. She appears much older, with grayer and shorter hair than in the earlier video shot of her seen just a moment ago. She sits comfortably on a couch with a cushion barely visible behind her back, a fuchsia pink flowered plant rests on a table to her left. She says “Well, your parents were not able to take care of you then,” she pauses nodding her head up and down slowly a few times, before she continues, “…and, we could, and we wanted too” (Olsson, It Takes a Village, 2006).

The next scene shows a picture of the twin girls, approximately age 6, both in blue jumpers with white long-sleeved shirts. They are each wearing matching white
bobby socks, and blue sneakers, their long hair pulled back with white headbands. With their arms around each other’s shoulders, the girl on the left has glasses, and her right sleeve is pushed up to her elbow. She stands a little awkwardly next to her sister, on her left. The picture flashes for a few seconds, before “Anna” reappears on-screen in a direct address to the camera. “I have a twin sister, Maria Lynn. She is the other half to my heart; and, I think out of everybody in my life, she understands me the best” (Olsson, *It Takes a Village*, 2006). The next shot begins with a soundless home movie of the twins as babies in matching high chairs in a restaurant decorated with balloons and streamers. It is the girls’ first birthday party. A camera flashes, a car is seen through the restaurant window backing away from a parking spot, and in the foreground of the screen the toddlers look around joyfully at their surroundings. The restaurant interior fades to dark, and then a girl is on the screen. Maria Lynn age 18, directly addresses the camera about her sister, “She taught me that it’s okay to be who I am” (Olsson, *It Takes a Village*, 2006). Maria Lynn is wearing a maroon sweatshirt and white jean jacket, while sitting in a desk chair. On the wall directly to her right is a picture of the twins, approximately age 3. The girls are dressed up in pink tulle; one holds a blue stuffed animal, while the other grasps what looks like a leaf. Both girls have pink crowns on their heads. Anna continues again in her direct address to the camera, “We were born three months premature and, which resulted in a physical disability called cerebral palsy” (Olsson, *It Takes a Village*, 2006). Anna’s and Maria Lynn’s mother wearing a pink fleece top and sitting outside appears in the next scene. She begins explaining the girls’ birth story, at times stopping to sniff, wipe her hand across her nose, or tear up,
My doctor, my doctor, not the pediatrician, the OBGYN who was just a dear, came to see me and he said, I’m sorry Christine, your babies both have had, ah, hemorrhaging in their brain, a cranial bleed and, we, it’s graded on a 1 to 4, 4 being the worst, and they both had a 3 and 4. And, then they explained to me what that means is that 86% of children who have a grade 3 alone go on to have spastic diplegia which is a very severe form of cerebral palsy.

(Olsson, *It Takes a Village*, 2006)

Figure 7.7. Olsson, used with permission, *It Takes a Village*, 2006.
The mother, as she is today, fades into a screen shot of an old Norman Rockwell-like photograph of the parents in a church. The parents are standing behind a small table with a silver bowl inset into it and holding the twins on their christening day (Figure 7.7). The girls wear soft white sweater dresses. The mother looks sharp in a black and white checkered dress with matching orange belt and hat, while the dad wears a grey suit and black tie. They have flower boutonnières, a orange flower for him, and white one for her. Anna is heard talking before we see her again saying, “The birth, and the complications that came from the birth caused a lot of stress and sadness” (Olsson, It Takes a Village, 2006). Anna’s mother fills the screen again,

When you have twins, and especially when you have sick twins, you need help! You know, I mean, that’s just like normal. Only I, I, I just couldn’t accept that. You know? I wanted to be able to do it all myself. The point, the point is that I’m getting at here is that I was really falling apart. I started using heroin, you know, the strongest painkiller known to man.

(Olsson, It Takes a Village, 2006).

As the mother is talking about having sick twins and wanting to do it all herself, the screen fades into two home movies of the twins. The first home movie shows the girls approximately 4 or 5 years old at their birthday party with a magician (which is
shown in the opening scene) and, then another birthday where the girls are babies. The second home movie shows the girls as their father and grandfather are seating and buckling them into high chairs. The shot reveals an implicit meaning illustrating that the mother had at least some help from family members, even though she is expressing her desire to do it all alone.

As the mother talks of her drug use, the camera—which is directed by her daughter—pulls into a close up shot of her directly addressing the camera. This revelation for the viewer that the mother used heroin is a big reveal for the audience. Up to this time, it is unknown why the parents could not care for their daughters. Another explicit meaning for the film is that drug use causes havoc in families. The symptomatic meaning is that the drug use by the mother is a part of this family, but does not define these girls now. They have the power in this dynamic as evidenced by the daughter filming the scene. The film sequences with the mother are all shot at a slightly lowered angle—meaning that the mother is slightly lower than the director and the audience in the place of vulnerability and in a place of less stature. The screen again fades from the mother, into a direct address by the grandma. Grandma tells the audience, “And as time went on, you understood better that they could not, at that time, um...make the necessary changes.” The scene changes from grandma to a color photograph of the girls seen together from their senior high school yearbook photograph. Then another picture of the girls appears on the screen. They are approximately age 4 or 5, in a homemade fort under a sheet-covered table (Figure 7.8).
Then the screen fades into a video of the girls, approximately age 16 or 17, and their mother around a table, smiling for the camera. The grandmother is heard in voice over saying during this particular montage, “And, the one thing I wanted you children to understand was that it was not your fault in any way” (Olsson, *It Takes a Village*, 2006). The pain in this woman’s eyes is palpable. It is especially noticeable as she pauses when she tells the viewer that the parents could not “make the necessary changes” (Olsson, *It Takes a Village*, 2006). What a difficult moment that she is being asked to address; yet, she does not speak of the drug use. Is she
protecting her family? As she is speaking, she looks down and not directly at the camera. Is she feeling sadness and possible feelings of shame for having drug use in her family? It cannot be known. However, she faces the camera straight on as she talks of wanting the girls to know they were not responsible. The screen again fills with the mother, still sitting on some concrete steps that lead into an apartment or office,

> It worked, huh huh. I mean I could paint the kitchen and do the laundry and I had so much energy, and it was like everything was okay, I mean it was bad, and it was serious, but I could deal with it

*(Olsson, *It Takes a Village*, 2006)*.

As she talks of her former drug use, her voice becomes stronger and her arm gestures become bigger, it seems as if she is remembering her “energy” which translated into her doing what she felt she needed to do. It is interesting that the mother could “deal with it,” meaning her drug use. The symptomatic meaning is the awareness that she could not handle using heroin and that it tore her family apart. She was no longer able to care for her twin daughters, even as she is extolling the benefits of having energy to do it all. The screen fades to black, and then grandpa appears on the screen. Sitting in the same position on the same couch as his wife, he begins, “We also kept you close to your parents,” as a photograph of the twin’s parents looking decidedly unhealthy—e.g., the father is looking thinner than before
with missing teeth and the mother looks pale even though she is smiling—is shown. Grandpa continues in voiceover, “And we made special efforts to do that” (Olsson, It Takes a Village, 2006). The scene changes to another shot of a photograph, as Anna begins speaking in a voice over narration.

The photograph shows the girls, approximately 6 or 7-years, sitting on a red and blue patterned carpeted floor in a living room, with a card game spread out in from of them. Two dogs rest in the background. A woman in a blue plaid shirt and jeans sits between the girls. One girl has her outstretched hand resting on top of this woman’s hand. “After middle school, I moved in with my cousin Dana, who, who, who wanted us.” The photograph disappears, and the woman from the photograph, but visibly older, begins a direct address to the camera. “The opportunity was presented uh, for you know, Grandma Marlene to, to uh, to have a break, essentially” (Olsson, It Takes a Village, 2006). As she is speaking a montage of pictures begins of first the grandparents come into view. Next there is a shot of the twins, probably age 12 or 13, sitting on either side of their grandpa. Then, final shot of cousin Dana with grandpa. When she is directly addressing the camera, cousin Dana, who is dressed in a pink turtleneck sweater and white faux fur vest, sits with her back to a large wall-sizes photograph behind her (Figure 7.9). The large photograph shows a white sandy beach with blue skies and a few fluffy white clouds. Beautiful clear turquoise blue water looks inviting, while a lone green tree grows in the sandy shoreline. The symptomatic meaning, although possibly unintentional, is that cousin Dana is part of this oasis beach scene; that is, cousin Dana became an oasis for the girls—a respite
from the troubles of their parents—and for the grandparents as well, to get a break from raising their twin granddaughters.

![Image](image_url)

Figure 7.9, Olsson, used with permission, *It Takes a Village*, 2006.

The next scene is a direct address to the camera by twin Maria Lynn, “From Dana, I learned, how to pick up my boot straps, and move on” (Olsson, *It Takes a Village*, 2006). Maria Lynn fades into a shot of a family video of Dana, in a homemade crown, sitting on one end of a futon with another woman (possibly an aunt or family member42) sitting at the other end. The two women are bookends for the twins, age

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42 In the last montage sequence, this woman reappears in a family photograph
17 or 18 years old, everyone on the futon is laughing uncontrollably. The explicit meaning of this scene is that with cousin Dana the girls have fun and laughter in their lives. The implicit meaning, however, particularly given the previous comment by Maria Lynn that she learned how to be independent and strong—i.e., “pick up my boot straps, and move on”—is that there were some difficult times. A person is in need of their bootstraps when they are learning life lessons. This is revealed further in the next scene, as cousin Dana begins a direct address to the camera stating, “You guys have actually been great teachers for me. You know we worked through tough stuff. We did; we worked through really tough stuff” (Olsson, *It Takes a Village*, 2006). The screen shifts to a close-up on a contemporary photograph of the girls on either side of cousin Dana, all smiles. Then the screen changes to another recent photograph of the girls dressed in shorts and matching light blue sweatshirts standing on the beach, the water and sky visible behind them. “And here we are at the graduating point of Maria Lynn and Anna,” she continues speaking in voice over, (Olsson, *It Takes a Village*, 2006). There is a nice symmetry of imagery between the beach oasis wall art of Dana’s house and the photograph of the girls standing on a beach, as Dana talks of their reaching the milestone of the high school graduation. The implicit meaning is that cousin Dana assisted them in getting to their own beach, i.e., possibly a place of peace, by being their oasis/desert island when they needed someone.

The screen then fades to black and then grandma speaks in a direct address to the camera, “*You must do this. You must develop your own life*” (Olsson, *It Takes a
The explicit meaning in this scene is that her advice is typical of an elderly family member given to her granddaughter after her graduation. But, an implicit meaning is really the imperative—particularly as it is said in short, halting, emphasized words before the screen fades to black—that the girls not let their parents drug use become part of their story.

The next scene returns to the home movie of the twins at their first birthday party, as Anna begins speaking in a voice over. The twins are each sucking and/or holding onto miniature yellow ducks. Toys are strewn across each of the sliding trays of the high chairs with balloons tied to their wrists. The screen then fades into a family photograph of the twins (age 2 or 3), their mother, the grandparents, cousin Dana and another woman. Although Anna begins her address in a voiceover, after the family photograph, she directly addresses the camera, “I have to create my own story without forgetting where I came from, but leaving it enough that it’s not who I am” (Olsson, *It Takes a Village*, 2006). This is an explicit moment of adult discovery that every young person has to face as they grow. However, an implicit meaning for Anna and her twin is the added complication of their parents’ drug use and deciding what part of that story can fit into her new life as an adult.

As she finishes speaking, the screen fades to black, and then the viewer sees her mother, in the pink fuzzy top once again. Speaking directly to the camera in a close up shot of just her shoulders and head she says,
I wouldn't change it for a second, because, if it means that my children who definitely have the genetic pre-disposition to be um, addicts/alcoholics, if, if all the pain and all the bad things I did mean that you don’t ever, ever, ever have to experience that, it’s all worth it, every minute


The explicit meaning of this very powerful scene is of a mother tearfully declaring her love for her children by allowing her life to stand as a lesson of what not to do. Moreover, the sacrifice of the mother is an explicit meaning; her life choices and mistakes (e.g., pain and bad things) are her penance and her price for having her children be able to be drug-free in their lives. The scene’s implicit meaning illustrates the real tragedy of drug addiction in people’s lives. A white, middle-class, educated family struggling with addiction is rarely seen on screen and illustrates the symptomatic meaning as the film pulls back the curtain on something that is mostly hidden. Typically in mainstream media, drug addiction is saved for both African American and white families struggling with poverty, or on the opposite end of the spectrum in extremely wealthy families. It is rare to a documentary-style film of a real, middle-class, educated family struggling with drug addiction. The imagery is interesting as the photographs and home movies show how typical their lives were amidst the drug addiction. The twins’ parents are visible in photographs and some of the home movies, and yet, the audience does not know how much they were involved really. The father is never seen in the film, except in photographs. There is
an effort to show normalcy, and yet one wonders the extent of their parents’ involvement. It could be that they were, as the grandpa says “close to your parents,” but is that simply proximity (Olsson, *It Takes a Village*, 2006)? There is little shown of the extent of the drug addiction or of the cost to the daughters. For a Hollywood-type story, the focus of the film would be on the parents and the salaciousness of their story played for either the maximum ruin or the tearful triumph of the daughters’ futures. Anna veers away from telling a Hollywood-type of story, and in doing so makes it about the positive forces in her life.

As this movie is about thanking the people in her village (i.e., care takers and family members), the last scene is a touching, intimate moment as Anna thanks her Grandpa. The shot shows grandpa seated on the brown couch, as Anna leans into the frame from the left of his close-up shot. She simply says “Thank you.” He replies, “An I’ll do it again” (Olsson, *It Takes a Village*, 2006). They exchange a look and she gives him a kiss on his right cheek. As he smiles and laughs, Anna turns away to her right smiling. The screen fades to black. The symptomatic meaning of this last scene—of Anna turning away—mirrors her emotional struggle with reconciling her family support with her need to separate and grow. She is last seen smiling and stepping ahead towards the camera and, presumably, her future. Through the “girl gaze,” the viewer can see Anna for who she is in relation to her circumstances, not just as a result of those circumstances. Particularly as she negotiates this pivotal moment in her life, the struggle to grow and to remain connected to her family. The
The audience can see the love and support Anna and her twin have received to reach this stage in their life.

The enmeshed feminist curriculum offered Anna the supportive environment that she needed to complete this film. There were many discussions between Anna and her mentor. They worked closely—certainly trusting each other—for the entire editing week sitting side-by-side, and watching frame by frame (See Chapter 6, field notes of March 28, 2006). Even as Anna wanted to focus this film on love and family, her family was affected by drug use and her story cannot be told without including her parents’ drug addiction. The story remains a brave portrayal of the challenges of growing through adversity, separating from your family history, and creating your own story.

The Girl Gaze and the Enmeshed Feminist Curriculum

Each one of these three Reel Grrls films offers a complicated take on what it means to be a girl in contemporary society. While Cut Here (Kolodziejski, 2006) and It Takes a Village (Olsson, 2006) are both shot in the documentary film style, Breaking the Cycle (Roldan, 2006), while a fictional account, feels similar to the others in its confessional tone. The documentary film is significant in that these are real people, not just fictional accounts that people can relate to their own lives. There is a depth of significance in hearing someone’s personal story and secrets. Even in fictional accounts, viewers explore a vicarious role or thrill as they relate to either their
perceived similarities to or differences from the protagonist. *Breaking the Cycle* (Roldan, 2006) has a blurred feeling in that the story looks similar to the other films presented here in that the director uses the direct address to the camera to full effect, creating an intimacy with the audience that can make a viewer forget it is a fictional story.

As Sweeney (2005) notes girls use the same technological tools to create their visions, but “(o)nce girls begin to frame their world through the lens, issues of power, reference, and choice come into focus (p. 39). This could not be more true than in the aforementioned films. Each director makes interesting choices that highlight their competence with the equipment and their understanding of storytelling. For example, in *Cut Here* (Kolodziejski, 2006), the director uses close-ups of her subject with an obscured face to highlight that this girl is “any” and “every” girl. In *Breaking the Cycle* (Roldan, 2006), this director utilizes the technique of misdirection in her sequencing to shake up the narrative. Additionally, she uses the technique of panning a woman from bottom to top, imitating the “male gaze,” (Mulvey, 2003) to objectify the protagonist effectively leading the audience to make an erroneous conclusion about her. Lastly, in *It takes a Village* (Olsson, 2006), the director utilizes powerful camera angles particularly when shooting her mother and close-ups to connect the emotion of the story to the audience. Each of these films, and these examples by extension, demonstrates that these Reel Grrls have absorbed the technological and media literacy curriculums of the Reel Grrls program.
Additionally, each girl wields the camera to full effect of the “girl gaze” (Kearney, 2003). As Kearney (2003) posits the “girl gaze” exhibits films that speak to the particular connections to girls’ lived experiences while not imitating the stereotypical ideas typically seen in mainstream films (p. 32). In a sense, the “girl gaze” is enhanced through the *enmeshed feminist curriculum*. I believe that each of these films exhibits both entities, for an aim of the *enmeshed feminist curriculum* is to complicate the notions of what it means to be a girl and to exhibit how it is different from mainstream media portrayals. For example, in *Cut Here* (Kolodziejski, 2006), the director makes known the pressures that young women feel when their physical appearance does not match those narrowly defined and prescribed beauty ideals recycled throughout mainstream media. In *Breaking the Cycle* (Roldan, 2006), for example, the director addresses the intersectionalities of race/ethnicity and class that is often missing from stereotypical portrayals of girls. In the film, *It Takes a Village* (Olsson, 2006), the director takes on the issue of becoming an adult amidst family hardships. Each of these films just by having a female director and portraying a girl protagonist is already different than many films in the mainstream media where women represented only 1.9% of female directors and only 21% of female lead or co-lead in 100 of the top grossing films of 2014 (Smith, et al., 2015).

Each of these films came from girls’ ideas, who through the support of knowledgeable women were able to create their visions. This is another aspect where the *enmeshed feminist curriculum* plays a strong role in the Reel Grrls program. Taken together, these three films are about girls being seen in their lives.
Whether the story is fictional or not, each girl presented in these films is struggling to reclaim their life in some form. For example, the protagonist in *Cut Here* (Kolodziejski, 2006) is getting support for her depression and returned to her “old self.” Additionally, the protagonist in *Breaking the Cycle* (Roldan, 2006) defies cultural and familial expectations to follow her goals. Lastly, Anna is learning how to create her life on her own terms without the shadow of her parents’ addiction (Olsson, *It Takes a Village*, 2006). The enmeshed feminist curriculum is woven throughout these films by offering complexity to what it means to be a girl; by championing girls’ ideas; by their collaborative and supportive process assisted by girls and mentors; by challenging sexism and dominant femininity; and by creating films that become part of the larger cultural lexicon of girls. By analyzing textually these three films, the viewer can get a sense for the larger implications of girl-made media, the “girl gaze” (Kearney, 2003), and the importance of an enmeshed feminist curriculum.

In the next chapter, I begin by contextualizing this cultural moment of the Reel Grrls and my study. It seems that society might be at a ‘tipping point’ for talking about the enmeshed feminist curriculum, as conversations and interest in sexist stereotyping and limiting expectations for girls are exploding within mainstream popular culture. The numbers of women working in the film industry, however, remain at a low level of participation, which is disheartening. I then turn to my reflections of the study, providing evidence for the enmeshed feminist curriculum throughout the Reel Grrls program. Next, I situate this dissertation within the scholarly literature. I then
provide implications and ideas for future research, with both the Reel Grrls participants and the *enmeshed feminist curriculum*. The study's limitations are also discussed in chapter 8. Lastly, I provide a wrap-up of the Reel Grrls program by talking about endings and beginnings.
Chapter 8: Conclusions and Beginnings

The tipping point

In discussing the “promotionist” approach (Kearney, 2003, p. 19) of media literacy, Kearney writes that it is necessary to engage student learning by approaching “media as social constructs which contain multiple and often contradictory messages (which) elicit multiple and often contradictory responses” (Kearney, 2003, p. 19). When I look at current media culture through a gendered lens, it could not be more contradictory. In some ways this could be the most auspicious moment to be speaking about the enmeshed feminist curriculum. There seems to be an increased attention on sexism in the media and the variety of modalities to discuss independent ideas (e.g., tweeting, instagram, facebook, change.org petitions, and other possibilities), and for the viewer to voice their independent concerns. I think it all shows that we are in a cultural tipping point moment, where feminist issues regarding expectations for girls and ending sexist stereotypes are finally making it out of feminist ghettos and into more mainstream conversations and the greater cultural consciousness.

A focus on sexism in the media can be seen on the big and small screen. For example, the film Miss Representation (2011) gathered large crowds to view ideas that have mostly been recycled from Women’s Studies classrooms for the past 30 years; the documentary featured recognizable celebrities such as from media personalities
(Katie Couric), politicians (Senator Cory Booker of New Jersey), and entertainers (Christina Aguilera) all talking about the limiting portrayal of women and girls in the media and how that bias has translated into unequal representation from workplaces to the government. On the small screen, televisions and computers, big companies like Verizon, Always and Dove have created campaigns that champion girls and their abilities; that are being critical about cultural expectations; and that preach self-acceptance, respectively. In department and retail stores there has been a move to create gender-neutral toy sections (e.g., this happened in 2013 in Herrod's Department store in London and most recently at Target stores in August 2015).

Most everywhere one looks, it seems that a greater understanding of dominant femininity, narrow beauty standards, and sexism are bubbling up within mainstream media, and changing the world for the betterment of women and girls.

Due to the easy use and relatively inexpensive price of technology, girls are able to take command of different modalities available to them to combat sexism in their lives through their phones and computers. For example, when girls wanted to fight back against administrators on dress code policies they posted pictures on YouTube; tweeted to their friends; or created petitions on Change.org. (See Chapter 6). Girls were able to publicly shame administrators, rally their friends and supporters, and bring general awareness to this sexist and (mostly) unchecked

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policy across the United States (See Chapter 6). Additionally, because of the variety of nontraditional media outlets afforded through the Internet, anyone with a concern and computer access can create a blog; post on a company’s website or facebook page, or vlog about any concern they have. Women and girls have been able to create changes within their local communities, schools, and greater societal changes. For example, a 14-year-old girl petitioned and changed the culture at Seventeen Magazine to only utilize healthy models and not change models’ bodies or face shapes when retouching images.44

However, on the other hand, there is still the rampant hypersexual nature of media and the pornification of U.S. culture (Dines, 2011). In order to be heard above the distracting din, feminist sociologist Gail Dines (2011) argues, one has to make advertising more extreme to gather enough attention (See Chapter 1 & 3). Jean Kilbourne (2014) who has been a vocal critic of advertising and media portrayals of women has recently stated that in the 40 years she has been speaking on this topic of women, advertising and violence, the advertising today has gotten much worse45. Additionally, critics argue that the positive changes in those big companies noted above are just a response by companies looking to capitalize on media surveys and tracking trends that tell them “fempowerment” (Baker, 2014) is selling. In essence, those companies are seizing on those new trends in order to create and exploit those new markets (Klein, 2000).

44 http://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/07/03/after-petition-drive-seventeen-magazine-commits-to-show-girls-as-they-really-are/?_r=0
45 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lyy8yLaoWybk
In the world of film, there are also positives and negatives. Women have been moved to make and direct their own films; found women-run producing companies; created collectives to produce and promote women-directed projects; and funded projects for women screenwriters, all in an effort to tell different stories. Even John Lasseter, the head of Disney studios, which is not known for being particularly feminist or progressive, realized the importance of “female and ethnic characters” after seeing the rave reviews of their film Inside Out (2015), which featured a female lead.46 However, of the top 100 films of 2014, “only 15.8% of creators working as directors, writers, and producers were women” (Smith, 2015, p. 2). Broken down by the individual groups, “1.9% of directors, 11.2% of writers, and 18.9% of producers” were women. These numbers can be very disheartening for women working in the film industry. Women and girls are fighting back with the prolific and easily adaptable modalities at their disposal (e.g., tweeting or Facebook) when they recognize injustice. However, this cultural moment seems to be filled with a general confluence of empowerment, social activism, and deeply institutionalized racial and gender bias. These, then, are the contradictory spaces that girls and women are trying to traverse and the spaces to which programs such as Reel Grrls respond.

Reflections of the study

In this dissertation, based on my experience with the Reel Grrls program, I sought to determine the ways in which a program with a feminist culture could offer a needed

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46 Worldwide, to date, this movie has made close to $690 million, (http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=pixar2014.htm)
counterbalance to repressive and limiting messages for girls in mainstream media culture. I have shown how the *enmeshed feminist curriculum* enacted feminist pedagogy utilizing feminist praxis—a combination of feminist theory and practice—throughout the Reel Grrls program and opened spaces, particularly through curricular moments, for the Reel Grrls participants to mediate, combat, and/or inform messages of who they were (or not), as they moved from being cultural consumers to cultural producers. As previously stated, I liken the Reel Grrls curriculum to being a three-legged stool, equal parts: (1) hands-on media technology, (2) media literacy, and (3) an *enmeshed feminist curriculum* (EFC). The hands-on media technology component provided the girls access to the tools of production—the technical knowledge they would need to create their films. The media literacy component offered girls questions and a critical eye through which they could critique what they were seeing and producing, in turn. The *enmeshed feminist curriculum* component enveloped girls within a positive normative feminist community, one in which they might not have even known they were immersed. Each leg was of vital importance to the stability of the program. Without each leg, the stool would fall, particularly in providing a needed counterbalance to the dominant femininity, sexism, heteronormativity, and lack of diversity found in mainstream media. This three-legged structure has been one key to the program’s success with girls.

Throughout this dissertation, with each curricular experience and layering, I illustrated what an *enmeshed feminist curriculum* looked like and how it was enacted
within the Reel Grrls program to create tacit feminist knowledge with and for the girls. The girls were challenged to see the world through a gendered lens, where at each technical challenge they were asked to critically ‘read’ popular culture and/or respond to cues that were outside of a typically narrow view for women and girls. Girls were offered alternatives that complicated notions of ‘girl’ seen on a screen, for example when they watched the films created by their mentors of women ski-jumpers and of East Indian women who were struggling with their familial obligations of arranged marriages (Chapter 4). The Reel Grrls program brought complexity to what girls saw in the media and took a stand to effectively call out sexism and hypersexualized (Dines, 2011) media culture, e.g. when the girls conducted their on-the-street interviews with their ‘Bad Ads’ binder (Chapter 3). Similarly, the girls explored cultural expectations of girls by deconstructing the ‘media girl’ assignment (Chapter 3). The Reel Grrls program offered the opportunity for the girls to explore who they were in this different and safe space, without worrying that they would be judged, e.g., when the girls visited S.C.A.N. and gave their answers to the prompt, “Every girl has the right to...” The girls’ responses explored themes: of desire and acceptable self-expression; areas where girls feel constricted; acceptable behavior for girls; and feminism. Each response, no matter how serious or silly became part of a larger conversation that these girls were having with each other in discovering and/or challenging what or who a ‘girl’ could be for themselves and their peers (Chapter 5). Moreover, the sense of community for the girls and for their mentors, built within the safety and trust of the all-female
program, and the collaborative working process were another part of the success created by the Reel Grrls program (Chapter 6).

The program sought to make seeing the world from a feminist viewpoint the norm. The importance of having a larger societal framework for understanding the daily interactions women and girls face, but also the importance of teaching that knowledge widely, particularly in everyday spaces was an important discovery for me personally through observing the program. I came to understand in a visceral way that when a woman or girl does not have a context for the sexism, sexual harassment or injustice she experienced, she might interpret those experiences as some sort of bad luck or personal failing on her part, instead of understanding that her experience was part of a larger systemic issue (e.g. sexism, misogyny or other intersections of the cultures/ethnicities/races and gender) in a crossroad that she happened to inhabit.

Reel Grrls joined together feminisms and popular culture through their stated curriculum and the unstated enmeshed feminist curriculum in an effort to broaden the types of roles and experiences girls could see of girlhood on the screen. Having girls speak for themselves, telling their stories and ideas, directly affected the public sphere particularly as those films continue to circulate in online spaces. Reel Grrls participants offered complexities rarely seen upon a screen by adding their own voices and stories. Their stories stood as a critique and rejection of the popular
narratives that work to naturalize stereotypical behavior and spectacularize (Projansky 2014) girls.

Situating the work

This research adds to the scholarly literature that details the work of girl filmmakers (See Bloustein 1998; Gonick 2003; Kearney 2003, 2006, 2011; Sweeney 2008). Although other scholars have explored girl filmmakers and girls’ media culture (Kearney, 2011), in addition to providing information on a wide array of other girl-produced media (Kearny, 2006; Sweeney, 2008), few offer working insight into the enmeshed and structured use of feminist pedagogical practices with girls in creating their films. For those who work with girls in nontraditional settings, my research is an example of successful working and mentoring relationships with youth (Bogat & Liang, 2005; Darling, 2005; Darling, Hamilton, & Niego, 1994; Spencer & Liang, 2009).

This work also adds to the scholarship regarding feminist public pedagogy and the intersecting possibilities with media literacy. Tropman (2011) argues for a “theoretical intervention—feminist pedagogical media literacy (FPML)—that has practical application,” i.e., a media literacy that can bring “empowerment for girls and young women” (p. 136). This study of the Reel Grrls compliments Tropman’s (2011) work, who states FPML “...arms [girls] with ways to understand discourse and representation, but also gives them ways to create alternative and even hybrid artifacts that speak to the complications and contradictions therein, without forcing
them to altogether reject such constructions” (p. 152). Tropman’s theoretical call has already been enacted by Girls’ Rock camp (Giffort, 2011) and *GirlZone* (Sheridan-Rabideau, 2008) My study adds to the existing literature of feminist praxis by specifically detailing the curriculum of film/media technology and media literacy, and their normative (i.e., tacit) feminist culture.

This work also makes a contribution to the scholarship in Girls’ Studies—i.e., inquiry across disciplines and institutions to conduct “girl-centered research” (Kearney, 2009, p. 1). My research works in the tradition of a commitment to move ideas of “who the girls are” (Gonick, 2006) away from the psychological “at risk” girls to identify the contextual ways in which “young girls navigate their daily performances of a girl subjectivity that is active, layered and deeply personal” (Coulter, 2012, p. 130) through their cultural productions. Many girls’ scholars argue girls occupy a liminal space (Madison, 2005), one that “reveals the blurred tensions between girls’ own cultural productions and the productions of popular culture” (Coulter, 2012, p. 130). I offer this study in the spirit of opening spaces for girls to see themselves in all their complexity, such as others before me (Currie et al., 2009; Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz 2009; Driscoll, 2002; Gonick 2006; Kearney, 2002, 2003, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2011; McRobbie, 1991; Pomerantz & Kelly 2009; Ringrose, 2011). This research adds to that dialogue by providing a textual analysis of work produced by girls ages 14–18, who benefitted from “earlier exposure to the existence of a relationship between feminism and media” (Tropman, 2011, p. 143) This dissertation also informs the growing body of knowledge understanding the
development of a “girl gaze” (Kearney, 2003; Sweeney, 2005). Through the interpretation and textual analysis of three girl-produced films, the idea of a “girl gaze” is illustrated here, yet should be explored further. Lastly, this work is also an example of and contribution to “collective feminist activism” (Durham, 1999), that states when girls are provided with mentoring, safe spaces, and a community, they are “able to resist these mediated messages” and can “transform ‘resistant reading’ into an act of affirmation and inclusion” (Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007, p. 112). Within these activist spaces, girls can thrive as part of a group working for a collective goal.

Implications for future research
Thinking about the time that has passed since this research was conducted, it seemed like there could be some unique opportunities for possible future studies with these specific girls. It would be interesting to track down some of the girls in either a check back or longitudinal study to see what happened to them. What were their career choices? Did they continue to study film or stay in some type of artistic production? To what degree did the Reel Grrls program have a discernable impact on their lives? Investigating these questions would enable assessment of the more individual impact of the program on the girls and their experiences, particularly in the realm of understanding the enmeshed feminist curriculum. Additionally, I concluded an enmeshed feminist curriculum offered the girls safe space to explore other ways of defining and/or producing ‘girl.’ To what degree did they come to understand the feminist nature of the program? What affect (or not) did the program have on their future choices? In what ways did they adopt a gendered lens?
Another implication for this study would be to see how the *enmeshed feminist curriculum* (EFC) could be transferrable to other types of programs. Because the *enmeshed feminist curriculum* was not a clearly defined outline of objectives—but rather a methodology that could be identified in the moments of feminist praxis and feminist content that coalesce to create a tacit feminist community—this approach could be beneficial to others who wished to work with youth in other settings. For example, several programs work with girls to interest them and plug them into non-traditional fields, whether it was “girls who code,” or “BlackGirlsCode,”47 to educate and inspire girls to resist gender stereotyping. I do not know if the other programs have a strong feminist praxis, but if they had a similar ideological framework, it would be interesting to see if those programs had similar structures and successes. If so, this similarity would demonstrate that the Reel Grrls program was not an anomaly, and that the EFC structure could be replicable to other programs making inroads into other male-dominated fields.

Although I did not have the space or time to delve deeply into mentoring and partnering relationships with girls, I would like to explore these ideas in a greater fashion. Utilizing my existing data, I could more fully explore several working relationships to see if the dyads have any common characteristics. My finding of the *enmeshed feminist curriculum* and witnessing the trust and collaborative relationships built within the Reel Grrls program, demonstrate that these

47 “Girls who Code” and “BlackGirlsCode” are groups which specifically work with girls to get them interested in computer coding language as a part of an interest in STEM education for girls.
relationships were special and unique; yet, there must be something about them that cuts across all those different pairs to create a sensibility or successful working relationship.

Lastly, I wonder if those mentoring and working relationships between women and girls in an after school program like Reel Grrls could be or currently are being replicated within a formal or traditional school structure, e.g., an all-girls school. Would a school with a feminist mission, and a similar structure to the Reel Grrls program, built on similar three-legged stool approach, have similarly close community and social justice ties? In essences I am interested in knowing how a similar structure to Reel Girls and enmeshed feminist curriculum would play out in a traditional school structure or formal educational setting.

**Limitations of the study**

This academic research, like all other dissertations, would have benefitted from the vantage point that I now hold, having completed it. My choice to conduct a participant-observation was a conscious one. Because I was so graciously allowed into the Reel Grrls program as a guest/volunteer/researcher, I was very aware of wanting to maintain a low profile in order to observe the program without affecting the way Reel Grrls ran it. More specifically, I did not want to influence how the participants behaved due to my presence. I know I was not successful in the former condition, as I was asked not to participate in an extra curricular activity offered to the girls by one of the facilitators who felt that I was judging the way she enacted
her feminism. Even as I struggled with my Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle-like task of recognizing that one cannot measure the effectiveness of something without affecting or changing its behavior\textsuperscript{48}, I tried to minimize the affect my participation would have on the girls. Because of this, I did not conduct many "open-ended interviews" with the girls, where I may have gained some insight or was curious about their choices. I also did not engage in conversations about their personal readings of the media, even as I wanted them to be the authors of their own stories and wondered about their opinions of what they saw. Instead I listened closely, and turned my attention to the process of the program and their productions (i.e., cultural artifacts). The data could have yielded different information about their personal experiences if I had engaged the girls in questioning their choices, likes and opinions.

While I conducted pre- and post- focus groups with several of the girls in the program, these interviews yielded little information. The girls appeared to be uncomfortable with me in the beginning of the program. For example, our group dynamic had not had time to settle, and my role—although explained and established—was possibly confusing for them at first. So, the first group meeting remained mostly demographic in nature. The post-focus group was conducted after the program had concluded and consisted of a single participant, as four of the girls, even though they confirmed, failed to show-up for the meeting. I think more

\textsuperscript{48} I am applying this scientific principle in a very broad way as explained to me by Dr. Raymond Timm (personal communication)
regularly established check-in groups would have been beneficial in exploring more personal insights and information.

Additionally, I did not ask the Reel Grrls founders or facilitators for a hardcopy of their curriculum. Having a hardcopy would have been helpful in analyzing their choices, omissions, and reasoning for their curricular decisions. I would have been able to compare their official curriculum with their operational curriculum. Perhaps, it would have provided more detailed information that would have been helpful in discussing their curriculum, and would have offered another point for triangulating the observational data with the ‘hard’ data of their written curriculum.

As mentioned previously, as with all programs that focus on girls, these girls cannot be assumed to be stand-ins or representative of all girls. As the researcher, I tried to contextualize this work and problematize not only what was found in the research, but also assumptions I hold about girls when making claims about them.

This research details a particular group of girls at a specific time, and while we can gain scholarly insight about their choices, and make interesting discoveries, it is important to remember the findings cannot be generalized. This study would have benefitted from having more informal interviews and questions with the girls about their process through and understandings of the Reel Grrls program. This additional information could have provided more insight into their experiences of the program, in addition to adding valuable content into the pedagogy.
Final wrap-up

The beginning of Chapter 7 (Resolutions and Textual Analysis) started with a description of the inside of the Reel Grrls office building and gallery on the night of the Reel Grrls film premiere. At the final screening, a room full of 350 people filled to capacity, watched and applauded the creations of girls aged 14–18 and saw their self-confidence shine through wide smiles. When all the Reel Grrls stood up on the stage in front of their audience to accept accolades and answer questions about their films, it was something to behold. The girls completed a great amount of work in a relatively short period of time—the time between delivering their ideas to the final screening was roughly one month, with a full week of editing time—it was quite an accomplishment.

I conclude this final chapter by talking about the final screening because this was the end of the girls’ achievement—the transformation from cultural consumer to cultural producer—and, yet it was the beginning of something new. It was the launching stage for the girls’ films, as they continued to live on at film festivals and on-line sites (e.g., Vimeo and YouTube). For the Reel Grrls, having been through this program and experienced the feeling and accomplishment of being a cultural producer, maybe a new direction or exploration for their future would arise. Through observing this program from the very first welcoming orientation to the final screening of the girls’ films, I was transfixed by these girls and their commitments: to the program; to their friends; to their films, to their vision, and to their ‘girl gaze.’
References


Disney (Producer). (1991) Beauty and the beast [Film]. USA.

Disney/Pixar (Producers). (2015) Inside out [Film]. USA.


Appendix: The girls' writing prompts from the Reel Grrl Mentor.

Remember:
+ Keep your pen moving for 10 minutes.
+ Don't edit.
+ Don't erase or cross out.
+ Misspell! It doesn't matter, just keep writing.
+ Don't think, or worry if it's logical.

**Wed Mar 1st**
**Prompt:**

"I used to be__________, but now I _____________....

Fill in the blanks and then keep going.

**Thurs Mar 2nd**
**Prompt:**

"I almost....."

**Fri Mar 3rd**
**Prompt:**

I was looking for__________, when I found__________....

**Mon Mar 6th**
**Prompt:**

Name an emotion you can not describe. Now describe it.

**Wed Mar 8th**
**Prompt:**

I absolutely encourage that you all do free writing on your idea that you stood and practiced pitched. One way to do that is to ask yourself, "What do I mean?" or "What I want to say is..." and write from there.

I do have specific prompts for today, from your fellow Reel Grrls, choose either one, or both:

1. "I am finally free from...."

2. "Have you ever loved someone so much that you...."
I do have specific prompts for today, from your fellow Reel Grrls, choose either one, or both:

The idea is to be writing to find out what you have to say. So wherever you start, just writing is what is important.

**Thurs Mar 9th**
**Prompt:**

"Dear (insert your name here), I am writing to tell you..."

(sometimes when you write in letter form, it allows you to be specific, say exactly what you mean because a letter is to someone in particular, about something particular. This is a letter to you. Try it. I know it seems strange, but see what you have to say to yourself)

**Fri Mar 10th**
**Prompt:**

"If I were to write an instruction manual, I would tell the world how to...."
Laura E. Rattner

Curriculum Vitae

ACADEMIC: Teaching and Honors

The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 2015
Doctor of Philosophy: Curriculum & Instruction and Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies
• Specialization, girls’ identity, youth culture, and feminist theory
• Dissertation, The Mediated Girl: Creating (Feminist) Spaces
• Secretary, Women’s Studies Graduate Organization Officer, Fall 2004–Spring 2005
• Graduate Student Representative, Feminist Scholars Series, Fall 2004
• Selected, Graham Endowed Fellowship, Fall 2003
• Awarded, Dean’s Research Assistantship, Fall 2003–Spring 2004; Fall 2004–Spring 2005
• Received, Doris M. Niebel Scholarship, Fall 2005–2006
• Graduate Lecturer, Introduction to Women, the Humanities, and the Arts, Summer 2005

The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 1998
Masters of Social Work
• Specialization, Nonprofit Administration
• Student Member, Committee on Multiculturalism & Gender, Fall 1997–Fall 1998
• Awarded, Special Grant, for high achievement, Spring/Summer, 1997
• Editor, Michigan Feminist Studies. Gender & Health Issue, Fall 1996–Spring 1997
• Graduate Student Instructor (GSI), Introduction to Sociology, Fall 1997

Simmons College, Boston, MA 1994
Masters of Arts in Liberal Studies
• Specialization, Self-designed concentration in Social Psychology & Women's Studies
• Thesis, Uneasy Bedfellows: Feminist Theory and the Construction of Female Sexuality
• Received, Liberal Studies Grant, Fall 1993
• Teaching Assistant, Women & Health, Spring 1993

The University of California at Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz, CA 1989
Bachelor of Arts, Psychology

PUBLICATIONS

Rattner, L. (2008). Through the (feminist) looking glass: Feminism, education and feminist responses to “What about the boys?” In R. Hammett and K. Sanford (Eds.) Boys, girls, and the myths of literacies and learning. Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars’ Press Inc. and Women’s Press/