

# **Skeletons in the Closet: The Staging of Female Adolescent Identity**

*Marianne McCune*

## **Cast of Characters**

*“Terri” I like my friends, unhealthy food; talking on the telephone, shopping, and going to parties. Sound like your typical preteen? I’M NOT! I also like to read books and magazines, play my violin, listen to music, and of course be dramatic about everything.*

*Anyway, as I was saying about me, I like school this year better, but there’s more to come this for this year, so I’m hopeful.*

*“Lynn” My birthday is September eighth. I was born six weeks early, therefore my birthday is not in October. I play the violin. I haven’t played since I was in kindergarten. I also play on a soccer team and have been playing since I was about nine or so. I also like to read but, lately I have found myself not having very much time to read (because of homework). (I would have written more but I kind of forgot what to say. If you want me to write/tell you anything more just ask. Sorry I forgot!-Lynn)*

*“Janie” I’m a normal 12 yr. old I go to Roosevelt Jr. High. I have a lot of friends including a best friend. I like horror movies, my dog Magic, swimming, Wynnona Ryder, Axl Rose (Gun’s and Roses), Metallica, Nirvana and my friends. I go to sleep at 9: 15-9: 30 p.m. to 6:55 a.m. I have a lot of relatives and I hate my little brother. 2 days a week I go to Hebrew School because I’m going to get a Bat Mitzvah. Hasta luego.*

*“Katie” Hi, I am a pretty ordinary brown haired; brown eyed twelve-year old girl who loves olives, plays soccer, loves to swim, quit the violin, and cries at sad movies. My name is Katie. It’s not like anyone hasn’t heard my name before but it’s not common. I have no nickname. I guess I should start at the beginning.*

*Usually, my brother and I do not fight a lot. He is really nice. (As little bro’s go!) I have two cats named Buster and Target who usually sleep on my bed at night. I have braces that I can’t stand but will be getting off in a month. I am usually pretty good in school but I’m not great at spelling. (As you maybe can see.) My mom thinks being left-handed has something to do with it but I just smile and say, “Everyone is born right-handed but only the greatest overcome it!” I have a bunch of really good friends that care about me and what happens to me. Vice-versa with me. Sometimes I think we (including me!) get*

*too wrapped up in ourselves' and forget that friends are hard to come by these days.*

*So I wish I had something meaningful to say to wrap this up... But I don't. I guess your study had definitely taught me somethin', "friends and family are really what count." Sap-city!!!*

Poem written by Janie:

*Look into the past  
what do you see?  
A great group of  
friends it seems  
to be...  
    old friends, new  
    friends, and a few  
    cruel friends.  
Through tough times and  
Rough times... Through  
good times and better times.  
    I've had you to  
    turn to.  
So I'm sorry to say,  
that I have to leave today...*

## **Introduction**

While adolescence has often been described as a developmental stage, the *staging* of adolescence, as a performance is staged, is only now being explored. The present study attempts to understand how biological, psychological, and cultural influences combine forces to stage the dynamic performance of female adolescent identity. I try to illuminate the processes that link female adolescent ambivalence regarding sexuality and overt authority to the ways in which girls perform their reactions to that ambivalence. As they turn from the world of their parents to the world of their peers, they face a re-negotiation of the boundaries of identity. The opportunity to assert that new identity is acted out in the competitive peer group and in the realm of style.

Many middle class adolescent girls do not explicitly reject rules and regulations, or structural authority. In order to assert themselves as individuals they reject overt authority in a less direct manner; they define their identity in contrast to the identities of their parents and established norms. But while adolescents attempt to

assert their own individual and generational identities, covert authorities gain influence in self-definition. As I will elucidate in this article, market and mass culture are almost unrecognizable as authorities, hence slipping past adolescent desire to reject authority. Yet the adolescent performance is constrained by these unrecognized presences. The performer's critical eye is distracted and complacency ensues. These are the processes which I intend to make explicit by unmasking some of these disguised authorities and the ways in which they influence female adolescent development. The developmental stage will be understood in the context of the theatrical stage of female adolescence.

In the spirit of Marcus and Fischer, I have tried to respond to the challenge of "represent[ing] the embedding of richly described cultural worlds in larger impersonal systems of political economy" (1986:77). According to Marcus and Fischer:

What makes representation challenging and a focus of experimentation is the perception that the 'outside forces' in fact are an integral part of the construction and constitution of the 'inside,' the cultural unit itself, and must be so registered, even at the most intimate levels of cultural process. [1986:77]

I have tried to trace the relationships between the everyday lives of a group of four girls and the cultural processes that feed and are fed by their adolescent behavior. This paper should illuminate some of the relationships between the outside forces and the inside dramas of female adolescence.

### *Methods*

I spent about eight months *hanging out* as often as possible with a group of four eleven- and twelve-year old girls, hoping to understand better the culture of adolescence. One of the girls, Terri (all proper names and institutions are aliases), has been a good friend of mine and my family's since she was born. She, at my request, defined the peer group I observed and in which I participated. Lynn is Terri's best friend, and Janie and Katie are best friends, relationships which lasted throughout my time with them. They are a group of white, middle class girls, the daughters of Berkeley doctors, lawyers, writers, teachers, and computer experts. All of the families are politically liberal, relative to the rest of the United States middle class. I consider the girls' residence in Berkeley an important variation of "white and middle class," in that Berkeley's political leftism and professed intellectual character may produce a generation of middle class adolescents that is not representative of the general population of the United States. This is not a comparative study, however, so I leave to the reader to decide in what ways these girls are and are not representative.

All four of the girls were in sixth grade at Jackson Intermediate School when I began, and are now in seventh grade at Roosevelt Junior High School. At Jackson, three of them, Janie, Katie, and Terri, were in the same class (Ms. Baker's class) while Lynn, the fourth, was in another class. Most of the rest of their social "clique" were in Ms. Baker's class as well, so that is where I spent most of my school time. I attended both Jackson and Roosevelt as a child, so I had the advantage of being familiar with the terrain, and the disadvantage of being influenced by my own experiences there. The latter, unfortunately, is always a liability of doing anthropology in one's own culture. I attempted to be equally conscious of the differences and the similarities between my experiences and the girls'.

In addition to spending time with the girls, I asked them to keep personal journals for me in which they could talk about anything and everything. I gave no indication of what I wanted them to write about, not even whether they should write nonfiction or fiction. Toward the end of my time with them, Katie also allowed me to look at the private journal she had been keeping since the third grade. This was especially helpful in that she had not been writing with me in mind, except perhaps in the final month, when she had already decided to allow me to read it. I quote often from the journals of the four girls, leaving their spelling and grammar mistakes unchanged because I feel that the mistakes in the girls' writings help to preserve some of the idiosyncrasy and character of their discourse. My only insertions in brackets are to explain to the reader something that might be unclear.

I chose to open this ethnographic account with the girl's own words in an effort to put off adult-erating their realities for at least a few sentences. As Dick Hebdige writes in the conclusion of *Subculture*, "we, the sociologists [and anthropologists] and interested straights, threaten to kill with kindness the forms which we seek to elucidate" (1978:139). I have never felt more strongly the desire to just tell endearing stories, with no form, structure, or 'meanings,' than when I was organizing and writing down my analyses of the lives of four girls for whom I have gained so much respect, compassion, and caring in the past eight months. However, my endeavor has not been to write a novel, but to examine cultural structures and processes and to try to communicate my findings. I only hope the reader will keep the girls' opening words in mind as she or he reads, and allow it to throw into question all of the analyzing, organizing, and objectifying that I, "with kindness," impose on the poetry of adolescent life.

### *Theoretical Context of Adolescence*

Studies of adolescence have fallen into three main categories: the bio-psychological, the psychoanalytic, and the sociocultural. The bio-psychological approach has looked to link the biological origins of puberty and adolescence to their psychological expression, as did Stanley Hall's adolescent stress hypothesis, which

Margaret Mead set out to test in Samoa. Stanley Hall believed that the moody and rebellious character of adolescence was biologically determined, that raging hormones brought adolescent scowls and frowns (Mead: 1928).

Among those using psychoanalytic approaches to the study of adolescence, Erik Erikson is perhaps the most well-known. Erikson explored adolescence as part of an in-depth psychoanalytic study of childhood, *Childhood and Society* (1963), and in a number of other texts. Erikson writes that the psychoanalytic method is more than the study of neurosis as *analogy* for societal phenomena. Instead, he defines it as an historical method, a study of "psychological evolution through the analysis of the individual" (1963:15). Erikson probes deep into "selected aspects of the end of childhood and of entrance into adulthood under the changing conditions of industrialization in this country" (1963:46). In this sense, Erikson's psychoanalytic approach resembles sociocultural approaches to adolescence.

Erikson's work was heavily influenced, for instance, by the work of Margaret Mead in Samoa. In her most famous and, unfortunately, infamous book, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, Mead disputed Hall's "adolescent stress hypothesis," extrapolating from her relativist conclusions about Samoan adolescents that the *sturm und drang* of American adolescence was due to American cultural influences rather than biology. She blamed the rigidity of American institutions and the American family for the storminess of American adolescence. Beatrice Whiting and her colleagues have also done extensive, cross-cultural research on adolescence. Like Margaret Mead, however, their studies have focused more on socialization by parents and immediate community, neglecting the mass cultural role in adolescent dynamics (cf Whiting and Edwards: 1988).

All of these approaches to the study of adolescence help to illuminate it as a stage of development. However, none of them satisfy the contemporary need for ethnographic studies of adolescence that address the links between the common conditions of adolescence and the mass cultural conditions that have become such an important cultural force, especially in the United States. Erikson, Mead, and Whiting all focus too narrowly on the family upbringing and institutional socialization of adolescents to be sufficiently expanded to encompass present conditions of late capitalism. The dynamic relationship between adolescent identity and mass cultural processes needs further exploration.

### **Adolescence as Performance**

In an attempt to understand the dynamics of American middle class adolescence, I have found Erving Goffman's social-psychological account of the performance of self in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), useful for understanding the moments of negotiation between biology, psychology, community, and mass capitalist culture that comprise American adolescence. Although Goffman

did not write his book specifically about adolescence, his notion of the self as an unstable and inconsistent performative process is particularly apt for analysis of the interactions of adolescent girls with each other and the world around them.

Goffman's work, as applied to adolescence, is fairly consistent with Erikson's theory of adolescence as a stage. Adolescents stand at the threshold of adulthood. This threshold can be understood as the theatrical stage on which the dynamic performances of adolescence are held. The content of the performances are constantly changing to find expression for the varying constitution of the actors and to adapt to varying audiences. Goffman's concept of self as a performance adapted to different audiences provides a model for understanding the staging of adolescent behavior as the negotiated process between biology, psychology, community, and mass culture.

Goffman describes the self in terms of a series of performances for different audiences. Each situation in which an individual participates demands "a framework of appearances that must be maintained, whether or not there is feeling behind the appearances" (1959:242). The self is focused outward, on an audience the performer wishes to impress in some way, although the audience to whom he or she directs a performance may be internalized when the performer strongly believes in the reality of her or his performance to that audience:

In such cases the performer comes to be his own audience; he comes to be performer and observer of the same show. Presumably he intercepts or incorporates the standards he attempts to maintain in the presence of others so that his conscience requires him to act in a socially proper way. [1959:81]

Even when alone, behavior may be tailored to some ideal of an audience present in the conscience. The self is performed to different sets of either internalized or consciously addressed audiences.

### *Common Context of Adolescence*

There are two commonly acknowledged conditions of female adolescence that constitute the context of female adolescent performance, each eliciting confusing ambivalence regarding that performance. First, puberty brings changes that alter the body of the actor, demanding adaptations in her performance of self. As the shape and hormonal make-up of her body change, she is forced to adapt her performance in response to those changes. At the same time, cultural meanings of female sexuality influence her responses to these bodily changes, complicating the re-negotiation of self that the bodily changes necessitate and inviting ambivalence regarding sexuality and womanhood. Second, adolescence is a time of resistance to overt authorities. Adolescent girls want to separate themselves from their mothers and assert an identity

of their own. They become resistant to any overt authority, in search of a realm in which they can feel their *own* authority. The extent of their authority, however, is limited by their position as the daughters of their parents, as minors in the state, and as females in a male-dominated world. These limits frustrate their desires for separation and autonomy and, again, invite ambivalence, this time regarding authority. These two conditions of female adolescence necessitate complicated negotiations in the performance of a female self.

As puberty arrives and adolescent girls' bodies begin to grow in some places and shrink in others, the self that they present must be adapted to the new components of their physical selves. Sometimes they dread the changes and feel that their developing bodies betray them, and sometimes they eagerly await the changes. Either way, the changes usurp some of the girls' control over themselves and force them to re-negotiate the boundaries of their changing selves.

Girls' dread of the physical changes that puberty brings can be partially explained by the ways in which female sexuality are presented in this culture. The emerging sexuality of their bodies can be intimidating in a culture where a large portion of representations of female sexuality emphasize the disempowerment and victimization of women precisely as a result of their sexuality.

I recently watched a TV movie with Terri in which the main character was a sixteen-year old girl who lived with, and was sexually abused by, her mother's boyfriend while her mother was off working as a prostitute in another city. In this narrative, every sexual encounter was abusive. The adolescent protagonist ended up shooting and killing her mother's boyfriend, to which Terri responded, "I think she was right, but she shouldn't have killed him. She should have gone to the police." Regardless of whether Terri was right about what the character's recourse should or could have been, Terri's reactions to the scenes in which the girl was abused were revealing. She was not at all surprised at the girl's victimization. This kind of image is abundant almost to the point of banality in our culture, and Terri did not show any sign of outrage or righteousness. It was horrible to Terri, but certainly not unthinkable. She expressed a combination of fear and distaste and did not want to continue watching the movie very much longer. It is this cultural presence of everyday horror that, on some level, translates into fear of the sexual changes that take place in girls' bodies at this age.

Katie writes about a similar fear in her description of an incident that took place at her sailing class:

We just had capsizing day. It was fun. Then in the dressing rooms, we could hear everything the boyz said. They were talking about chicks. ['Boo! Hiss!' is written above the word 'chick.'] We stopped listening. It was gross!

Evidently, the sight of girls in wet clothes inspired in everybody—girls and boys—a consciousness of their developing sexuality. Katie is not particularly “developed” for her age, but she seems one of the least comfortable of the group with the changes that are taking place. She dresses in baggy, unrevealing and very gender-neutral clothes most of the time. Katie’s displeasure at the term “chick” reveals, perhaps, a fear of the potential for objectification that the curves of her body allow.

While sexuality can thus be fearsome, girls also see their newly sexualized bodies as empowering, as indicators of their mature womanhood and, therefore, their authority. Because the ideal of success for women that reverberates through our culture usually includes sexual attractiveness very prominently (Steiner-Adair: 1990), many girls receive their bodily changes as a signal of success, even while they may be afraid of them. If they feel that their sexuality allows them the potential to be powerful by attracting boys, then adolescent bodily changes are something to look forward to. Janie, for instance, was happy to get her period even though she was one of the very first. She was so eager that, according to Katie, she even claimed once to have gotten it before she actually had. After getting it, Janie writes in her diary: “I feel so different doing stuff I used to with my period. Just hanging around and talking. Like now I’m complete.” Janie is also excited about other bodily changes.

At the pool on Friday, I had hair sticking out of my bathing suit. Me and Natalie are the most matured kids of are group of friend. At least body-wise, because we are the ones who always wear are bras. Terri never does. Today she was wearing a shirt where she hella [version of “hell of,” slang for “really” or “very much”] needed one.

These anecdotes reflect a pride in bodily change because change indicates progress in the race toward “successful” womanhood.

Whether sexuality equals fear or success, or both, it is a cause for alarm and rethinking of the self that a girl is to perform. The discomfort girls like Katie feel about their bodily changes may intensify their desire for some stable and continuous identity to counter the threatening instability of female sexuality. Even for girls like Janie, who perceive the physical changes as positive or empowering, those changes are still de-stabilizing to the self in that they alter the ideals of success that feed identity. Sexuality is a reminder of the threshold at which adolescents stand. The loss of bodily control and ambivalence regarding sexuality inspire the desire for a stable and continuous identity that will reconcile the contradictions of sexuality.

Female adolescence is also a time of resistance to overt authorities. This occurs partly in reaction to the physical changes that are forcing girls to re-negotiate their identities. They yearn to reject the authority of their parents and established institutions as a means of asserting their own autonomy. This rejection, however, is frustrated by the lack of real authority they have in making decisions for themselves.



They feel and desire a self separate from that of their parents, yet they are still subject to the control of their parents and of institutional authorities. As a result, female adolescent performances of self include the negotiation of some sort of authority that does not conflict with the real, or structural, authority of parents and institutions. As puberty hits, girls begin to resist talking to their parents about events they feel their parents would not understand. Katie writes in her journal:

Over the weekend I went to the 'ranch' (near Cazerdo) with my family. I never realized exactly how embarrassing they are. I mean I get along really well with my mom but we're not *really* that close. I don't exactly tell her what goes on at some of our parties. Like Rochelle and Kay daring each other to kiss boyz... My dad knows what goes on at school even though I don't really tell him he gets the idea. We have kind of a closeness that I can't really explain. It's like we have ESP for each other... It's great, but we don't talk about well that kind of *stuff*.

Janie writes: "I need someone to talk to. I can't talk to my mom or Laura [her older sister] or anybody. About growing up. I'm so confused. Friends, puberty...etc. you name it!" To adolescents, parents seem far from authorities on the subjects that are becoming important to them. The girls are wary of talking to their parents about subjects they perceive as private or taboo and begin to withhold information from them.

Bothered by the imposition of their parents' authority on their lives, girls seek to separate themselves from it. Terri's eyes are constantly rolling when she talks about her mother. Her mother's clothes are wrong, her conversation is boring or irritating—she is basically a nuisance. Of course, Terri tends to be unusually critical of everything. But this sort of criticism, a means of resisting the authority of and rebelling against parents and other power-holders, is very common. Lynn is embarrassed when her parents watch the TV show *Beverly Hills 90210* with her and makes fun of them for telling her that "it brings up good topics to talk about." Janie fights with her mother and father all the time, and feels she cannot talk to them about the content of her adolescent life. There is a growing need to see themselves as different from their parents, an increasing sense of self that spawns frustration regarding their parents' roles in the girls' lives and identities.

Adolescents' self-assertion is also frustrated by the ambiguity of their position in relation to institutional authority. As they begin to hold stronger opinions and beliefs about the world and their place in it, they are still tied to the authority of the institutions in which they are obligated to participate. Paul Willis summarizes:

All young people experience one aspect or another of the contemporary 'social condition' of youth: unwilling economic

dependence on parents or parental homes; uncertainty regarding future planning; powerlessness and lack of control over immediate circumstances of life... imposed institutional and ideological constructions of 'youth' which privilege certain readings and definitions of what young people should do, feel, or be. [1990:13]

Adolescents feel themselves becoming more 'mature,' physically and mentally, yet they are still expected to obey authorities (even more so than the older age group to which Willis refers). On the three-day camping trip that Terri, Katie, and Janie's class took, I witnessed extreme frustration with the necessity of obeying authorities. The first day we went hiking, almost everybody resisted from the start. Hiking was not their idea of how to enjoy the trip. They complained constantly, and asserted that it was not fair for the teacher to make them go; it should be their *right* to choose not to go. When they were ultimately forced to hike, they were very vocal about their frustration over not having a voice in decisions made for them, yet reluctantly cooperative in continuing on the hike. The contradiction between adolescents' emerging voices and their lack of actual authority to use them in many situations both feeds and frustrates their desire to redefine and assert new selves. Their conflicting needs to assert themselves and still cooperate with the regulations set for them spawn more ambivalence.

While this ambivalence in the face of authority is true for both boys and girls, the frustration may be stronger for girls in that they also feel and are taught about the marginality of women in our culture (Gilligan: 1990). In one instance of the camping trip, some of the girls were frustrated when the boys who were supposed to be a part of their dishwashing team for dinner did not show up. The girls would have liked to assert their authority and evade dishwashing responsibilities as well, but they felt obligated to stay, especially since the boys were absent. In this case, the girls' authority was frustrated both by institutional and male assertion of authority. Carol Gilligan eloquently describes the paradox: "for girls to remain responsive to themselves, they must resist the conventions of feminine goodness; to remain responsive to others, they must resist the values placed on self-sufficiency and independence in North American culture [1990:10]". Again, ambivalence between responsiveness and independence pervades female adolescence.

For the most part, established authorities are *not* rejected in middle class female adolescence. They retain real control over kids of this age. Adolescent girls rarely rebel against rules and regulations set for them by authority figures, and even seek them out now and then. One night I ate dinner with both Katie's and Terri's families at Terri's house. I sat with the kids, Terri, Katie, Katie's brother Tom, and four Zuni girls who were staying with the two families at the time. Although the kids were given autonomy enough to sit separately from the adults, when a conflict arose between Katie and Tom and escalated into a problem they were unwilling to negotiate between each other, they went immediately and without reservation into the other

room to turn the problem over to the hands of authorities, their parents. In general, these middle class girls have very law-abiding personalities. All except Janie, whose older and “wild” sister is an important authority in Janie’s life, are still strongly opposed to the use of drugs, smoking cigarettes, and skipping school. They do not rebel against the rules their parents set for them and rarely reject their moral stands.

As a result, adolescent girls’ authority must be negotiated in other realms: it must be expressed outside the boundaries of authority that parents and institutions maintain. This ambivalence about the roles of parental, institutional, and, on some accounts, male authority in female adolescent identity is important in girls’ negotiated performances of self. Like their ambivalence regarding sexuality, their ambivalence regarding overt authority must be grappled with as they present new identities. Because they accept a major portion of their parents’ and instructors’ regulations and moralities, Terri and her friends must find other modes of asserting the performance of their own authority.

These conditions of female adolescence produce ambivalence and instability. The conflicting drives and demands of pubescent changes and cultural meanings of sexuality, as well as of adolescent desires for autonomy and parental and institutional authority, push and pull from both inside and out. Adolescents, as performers, must grapple with these tugs as they search for an identity that will allow what Erikson calls “continuity and sameness” (1963:261).

#### *Response to Ambivalence: Shift in Audience*

In response to their ambivalence regarding these conditions of sexual confusion and frustrating power relations, adolescent girls divert their attentions toward the peer community. As they grow older and sexuality and self-assertion become more important, the realm of the social life becomes more central. There, they can experiment with identities autonomous of any overt authorities. The peer group allows them to benefit from the security of people exploring the same terrain as they, while also allowing them quasi-freedom from the “institutional constructions of ‘youth’ ” (Willis 1990: 13) imposed by overt authorities. A diary Katie began in the third grade is almost entirely about parties by the time she reaches sixth grade. Sixth grade is the year that “boy-girl” parties become regularities (including games like “Spin the Bottle” that allow them to explore the sexual arena as a group), as well as overnight parties and get-togethers among girls. Among their friends, adolescent girls seek a continuity of identity without the interference of their parents and institutions. An adolescent world is constructed wherein there are few overt authorities and many opportunities for self assertion. In response to the combination of conflicting feelings about sexuality and a strong yearning to be autonomous, adolescents turn their focus and energies to the society of peers surrounding them.

The assertion of a female adolescent identity is thus an attempt to create a

world in which the authorities to whom girls are usually accountable have little or no place. They are still subject to adult-imposed regulations, but they are allowed a more independent self definition. They gain a social network that is entirely separate from their parents. When friends are not physically present, relations are conducted over the phone where information can be shared in complete privacy. I have often seen Terri run for the phone before even the first ring is finished sounding. They sit at a separate table from their parents when they have dinner with friends. Their rooms become sanctuaries of privacy, where they are in charge of decor, can cover the walls with photographs of *Beverly Hills 90210* characters, can write in private diaries, and can tell each other secrets. Terri even does her own wash and sometimes cooks her own meals. All four of the girls receive a substantial allowance, \$25 a month, and some of them work as baby-sitters or odd-job workers to increase their incomes. Money gives them a chance to own some of the things their parents refuse to buy for them. In Terri's case, for instance, purchases include some fancy shampoo and hair mousse, or in Katie's case, various teen magazines. They buy rap albums that their parents might find offensive or make-up that they are embarrassed to admit to wanting. In essence, these middle class adolescents obtain a substantial degree of separateness from overt authorities. They have a social network, living space, secrets, responsibilities, media, and material property from hair products to clothes to calculators or cameras.

In Goffman's vocabulary, this turn towards a society of peers can be translated as a shift in audience. As the girls reach an age where social interaction outside of the family is increasingly important, their consciousness of others and target audience shifts from parents to peers. While they have partially internalized the audience their parents have provided since birth, they turn their more conscious energies to their peers, whose authority is less explicit. Their peers constitute an audience of equals: people whose bodies are also changing, who also lack real authority, and who are also searching out a new audience. This audience provides a different and more negotiable set of power relations, allowing for the boundaries of self to be more supple and the performer more autonomous.

### **Peer Competition and Symbolic Expression**

Adolescent girls act out this audience shift both competitively and symbolically. In these two realms they seek to assert a continuous and authentic identity in contrast to the identities of overt authorities. First, adolescent girls perform their rejection of established authorities by turning to the privacy of peer groups where they may competitively negotiate authority among each other, ignoring overt authorities. Therein, they find both security and discord; well-defined cliques provide them with the continuity they desire as well as with more supple power relations that allow competition for authority. Second, girls' appropriate theatrical props of identity that symbolize their separateness from established authorities. They costume themselves in particular aesthetic styles in order to assert their independence from overt authorities. Neither of these performances of authority threaten the status quo,

against which they generally do not rebel. Their performed rejection of authority, among their peers and in the realm of the symbolic, does not contradict overt authority; instead, it *avoids* overt authority. This avoidance of overt authorities increases adolescents' susceptibility to the power of *covert* authorities, those of production and advertising and of mass media, to intervene and exploit both adolescent ambivalence regarding their bodies and authority, and the instability of adolescent identity.

### *The Peer Group*

Adolescent girls reject the identifying authority of their parents and other overt authorities through their turn to the apparent solidarity of the peer group. The youthful society in which they find themselves both reassures them and positions them in a competitive framework of individuals who are each after some degree of authority.

Adolescent commitment to an audience of peers is partially acted out in the small groups we know as *cliques*. Especially beginning around the sixth grade, girls spend more and more time reinforcing their identity as a group. During spring break, for example, Katie's backyard became the site of daily picnics involving most or all of the 'members' of their clique. The loss of intimate classroom structure in junior high makes the importance of a structured social network of peers increasingly pressing (although cliques certainly exist in the years before junior high). Cliques allow a personal and everyday network of interaction, acting as an audience for which girls can experiment in their performances of self and providing the security of group exploration. Erikson writes that adolescents "help one another temporarily through much discomfort by forming cliques" (1963:262). By discomfort, he refers to the instability of the adolescent process of redefining oneself: "samenesses and continuities relied on earlier are more or less questioned again" (261). Cliques relieve some of the insecurity of adolescent ambivalence, offering some external structure to an internal chaos.

In return for the provision of structure, however, the audience demands consistency and authenticity from its performer. In their search for sameness and continuity within themselves, the girls demand it of each other in order to secure the structure of their clique. Audience members scrutinize their performers for authenticity, checking that there is "feeling behind the appearances" (Goffman 1959:242) of the performer. For example, in one conversation between all four of the girls and a fifth member of their clique (Emma), Lynn claimed to have talked to Jake (Terri's ex-boyfriend at the time) on the phone the night before:

*Lynn: He called me last night, and...*

*Terri: He did?*

*Lynn: Yeah, and he said, Lynn, where's Terri?*

*Terri: He wasn't fucking home last night, Lynn.*

*Janie: That's true.*

*Terri: So you're lying again.*

*Lynn: No, he called at like five or six.*

*Janie: Yeah? We called him at five and he wasn't home.*

*Katie: Cross examination?*

*Terri: Lynn, you do this. You forget what day it is.*

*Emma: We didn't call at five or six [to Janie]!*

*Lynn: No, he called me last night and said, "Where is..."*

*Emma: I think he did*

Terri and Janie question the authenticity of Lynn's assertion of her phone call, therefore her friendship with Jake, and then Emma questions the authenticity of Janie's assertion that Lynn could not have talked to Jake ("he wasn't home"). Each audience member pays close attention to the authenticity of other clique members' performances and each performer tries to maintain as much continuity and sameness as possible. Members of the audience thus demand successful, or perceptibly authentic, performances out of discomfort with their own discontinuity and contradiction.

Goffman uses the term *team* to define "a set of individuals whose intimate cooperation is required if a given projected definition of the situation is to be maintained" (1959:104). That is to say, a team of individuals works cooperatively to maintain a coherent performance:

A teammate is someone whose dramaturgical co-operation one is dependent upon in fostering a given definition of the situation: if such a person comes to be beyond the pale of informal sanctions and insists on giving the show away or forcing it to take a particular turn, he is none the less part of the team. In fact, it is just because he is part of the team that he can cause this kind of trouble. [83]

According to Goffman, the mutual dependence of team members gives any member of a team the power to disrupt the performance by introducing destructive information. Team members are forced to rely on each other to project an agreed-upon definition of a given situation, and as a result, risk the betrayal of their performance by any of the other team members.

Goffman also addresses the issue of designated roles within a team. He suggests that if team members are to be *cooperative*, they should be "unanimous in the positions they take" in a given situation, hence, well informed about the stand the team is taking (89). Because consensus and cooperation are rarely achieved without direction and designation of roles, however, Goffman introduces two dimensions in a

team performance that often guide the positions within and character of a performance: *directive* and *dramatic* dominance (101). One often finds in a team performance that "someone is given the right to direct and control the progress of the dramatic action" (97) and/or someone is "made the star, lead, or center of attention" (100).

Although Goffman makes a clear distinction between cliques and teams in his analysis, that distinction is unnecessary in an application of the team model to adolescent girl cliques. The girls are joined together to assert themselves as identifiably separate from their parents and other authorities. They are engaged in a group performance of the selves they wish to present to each other and to the general public. Because they are dependent on the secure structure of the clique to provide them with an audience of peers, they are mutually dependent in the negotiation of their performances of self. In this sense, they are forcibly a team in their performance of the selves of their clique, as well as each others' audience.

Because adolescent girls are engaged in a desire for and process of rejecting authority, they are resistant to accepting any obvious directive or dramatic dominance from their peers. They do not want to repeat in the peer group the vertical relations they have with their parents and other authorities. Their focus on the peer group as an audience for their presentation of self is a result of their desire to escape overt authority. Hence, when vertical relations within the peer group arise, there is competition, especially among the more intensely resistant to outside authority, to act as the authority in the group rather than allow others to do so. Directive or dramatic dominance (the two are generally interchangeable for my purposes) are sought out within the parameters of the team.

As a result of their competition, the girls are uncooperative as a team. This may help to explain the commonly referred to cruelty of adolescent girls to each other. The girls are dealing with contradictory drives: one, to reap the benefits of a group identity and structure, and the other, to be autonomous and powerful individuals. They thus find themselves engaged in a competition for directive dominance in their team performances through disruption of other team members' directions. Their interdependence as a team in their "presentation of self" gives each girl a stake in her friends' performances, so she interrupts the performances that contradict her own projected definition of a situation. Competition for directive dominance thus discourages cooperation as a team as they try to hinder each other's performances in efforts to control team definition and role designation. Instead of cooperating, the girls disrupt the performances their peers define in efforts to redefine the structure and drama of the performance to their advantage.

Although my claim that this competition is felt by all the girls, not just the so-called leaders, may seem contradictory to other theories that clique members fall into categories of leaders and followers and it is only the leaders who compete for dominance, my observations of this particular group have led me to a slightly different

interpretation. Katie's diary entry about the idea of leaders and followers helps to explain;

Janie and Terri are leaders. Lynn and I are flowers [followers]. Opsites [sic] attract. Terri and Janie couldn't spend two days together with out some kind of tuffle [sic]. Lynn and I work well together though.

According to Katie, and agreed upon by most of the girls, Terri and Janie are two of the most successful at asserting their dominance over their peers. Their assertiveness, perhaps correlated with a more intense desire than the others to be seen as autonomous, or perhaps because of some biological or psychological personality trait, makes them natural candidates for dominance. As leaders, they try to define and structure the performances in which they participate to their advantage. Katie and Lynn, on the other hand, often follow Terri or Janie by adapting themselves to the situations that Terri and Janie define, but this does *not* mean that they are not engaged in any competition for authority. For example, their choice of whom to follow may be a competitive choice regarding who has more solid standing in the clique. The girls have varying degrees of success in different methods of asserting their dominance, and so do it in different ways. Their hesitance to challenge the authority of the leaders can be understood, instead, as a lack of confidence that they will gain any dominance by *directly* challenging the leaders.

Because the security of clique, or team, membership is extremely important to all of the girls (for reasons discussed earlier), maintenance of any position in the clique, whether dominant or not, is very important. If that membership were to be threatened by challenging a leader, then it is unlikely that a girl would do so. Definitional disruptions are risky if one is not assured of enough support in the clique. The competition is thus conducted diplomatically. Riesman's statement regarding the "other-directed person" can be extended to encompass all kinds of persons: "Because it is approval for which one is competing one must repress one's overt competitiveness" (Riesman 1959:103). One must compete within the constraints of what that competition may offer without risking abandonment by the team. Strategy is of utmost importance.

### *Competitive Advantage and Institutionalized Discord*

The competition among girls for dominance in team performances is played out in such a way that the parameters of the team are never challenged, while its internal structure is constantly re-negotiated. When there is a conflict of definitions and the girls break down into rival groups within the team, there is no such breakdown of the team itself. That is to say, the same girls still associate with one another and identify themselves as part of the same group. Disruption, rather than cooperation, is the norm, yet it rarely leads to any questioning of the value of being a part of a particular team. The clique thus engages in a sort of "institutionalized discord" (Goffman 1953:211), the term Goffman uses to describe the performance of a court



hearing. The discord that competition among clique members spawns is normal, as is the discord that ensues in courtroom hearings. The adolescent girl clique is an institution of competition, discord its long-standing tradition.

The strained relations between Terri and Janie during the study and even since the third grade help to exemplify the primary ways in which competition for team dominance is played out without threatening team parameters. Terri and Lynn are best friends and Janie and Katie are best friends, according to everyone who knows them and regardless of how they are getting along. Terri's or Janie's directive dominance is derived partly from the respective support of Lynn or Katie. Conflicts arise when Lynn does not follow Terri or when Katie does not follow Janie. In order for Terri or Janie or any of the others to attract the support of followers, to be a leader, she must gain some competitive advantage that allows her directive or dramatic dominance in the team. There are two primary ways of gaining dominance over the group: through information control, and through boys and attractiveness. (Other ways of gaining competitive advantage, such as academic achievement or sports, may sometimes be factors or correlated with other competitive advantages, but their importance was generally minimal in my study). Neither of these two forms of competition threatens the parameters of the team; the competition is either indirect or the discord caused by direct confrontation is institutionally condoned.

Controlling, or trafficking, information within a clique ascribes some competitive advantage in gaining team dominance. Information may be impersonal, such as media news or knowledge of the lives of older kids, or it may be information, gossip, about people and events in or related to the clique. Both are used to gain dominance: the first by attracting the respect or admiration of the other girls and the second by tooling a redefinition of the team structure. The latter, used most often, is *indirectly* competitive when the gossip is done behind the victim's back. When it is expressed in front of the person, it is usually done so within some institutional tradition, posing no threat to the parameters of the team.

Sharing of information like media gossip or older-sibling "inside scoop" ascribes competitive advantage to the teller of information. Respect is paid to anyone who knows what will happen on *90210* in the future, or what kind of people the stars of that show are. "Scenes From Next Time," which the girls familiarly call "scenes" in conversation, is much more exciting than the show to the girls, because it provides insider information. Information of that kind is precious, and if its carrier is one of the girls, she receives honors for sharing it. Similarly, information about the future is powerful. Janie, because of her two older sisters, has always been partly empowered by this kind of inside information. When the girls talk about the history of their friendships, they all mention how Janie lost popularity after fourth grade when her older sister left Jackson and started at Roosevelt. The obvious connection she had to the older kids was obscured, and she had to work harder to present herself as "in the know." But even so, her knowledge of the parties and activities of older kids continues to give her a certain amount of power in the team. Her knowledge of the

future is undeniably greater than most of her friends.

More personal information, about people or events related to the clique, ascribes a competitive advantage to its teller in a slightly different way. It allows a team member to affirm her position as integral to the team or to gain dominance within the team by bad mouthing those team members who threaten her position. Bad mouthing is almost always done behind backs, but the news inevitably reaches the victim of the gossip. This provides a system of indirect competition that does not challenge the stability of the clique. If bad mouthing is done directly, it is usually within some institutional confine, like a game or a joke, which makes the discord benign to the survival of the group and therefore institutionally condoned.

The girls see the sharing of information among each other as an indication that they are integral to the clique. They expect to be told, for example, of events like a clique member getting her first period. If they are not told, they feel they have been excluded from something to which they have the right as a team member. Janie, as I discussed earlier, did not hesitate to tell her friends about her period. Natalie, another member of the group, only told some of the girls. Terri found out through Katie and Lynn, and had to pretend not to know the truth while competing to get Natalie to tell her directly. She was distressed that Natalie had not told her and *had* told Janie, Katie, and Lynn.

A party Katie gave toward the end of sixth grade provides an example of how girls may use information to gain dominance within the team by bad mouthing those who threaten their standing. During the last month of school Terri and Katie were spending a lot of social time together. Janie (who is Katie's best friend) began to feel left out and unjustly treated. The situation between Janie, Katie and Terri became increasingly tense, reaching a climax at Katie's party. Janie writes in her diary:

What a disaster. Tim came and left. [Tim was part of an entirely separate conflict regarding his DJ-ing that left Katie angry and in tears and without a DJ]. Katie was in tears and wasn't paying attention to me. So I started crying and yelling at Terri. She got upset and left to go home!! I didn't care. Whenever anybody talked about Katie I made them stop, but not when they talk about me. She joins in. Well me and Lynn felt the same way. Katie and Terri were spending too much time together!!

Janie, chagrined at what she saw as Katie's neglect of their friendship (and failure to help Janie maintain her position in the group by "making them stop" when girls bad mouthed her), attempted to reassert her control over the definition of relationships within the team by initiating a dramatic scene and bad mouthing Terri as publicly as possible, but behind her back. When Terri went up to confront Janie, she would not say what was wrong. By crying and complaining at a party, she was able to attract enough attention to circulate some negative portrayals of Terri and Katie. The more successfully she could present hers as the actual definition of the situation aided, of

course, by the authenticity that tears suggest, the more allies she could gain and the more dominance she might have over the team.

A variation on this situation, wherein information was used to redefine the structure of the team, occurred when Trina, an on-again-off-again member of the clique, wrote Lynn a note in which she said, "I'm sorry your friends are such bitches." No one ever accused Lynn of soliciting this comment from Trina in any way, even though it seemed evident that Lynn had at least expressed anger with her friends. Instead, Terri decided that it was important to tell all of the rest of the clique what Trina had said. She "felt it had to be spread." Katie and Terri were together when Terri told me this story, and they seemed to sort of reinforce each other's annoyance at Trina as they spoke. The piece of information was used in an attempt to redefine the structure of the clique, by stripping Trina of any power she had within it. Terri was particularly threatened by Trina, in that Lynn and Terri are best friends, but Lynn and Trina, being in the same class at school, had been spending a lot of time together. Hence her desire to disrupt Trina's performance by sharing damaging information with all of the other clique members.

In both of these examples, the gossip advanced about a team member was indirect, behind the back of the addressed competitor. This kind of conflict does not end a girl's membership on the team. Instead, she may respond in one of two ways: like Terri, who responds to Trina's gossip by turning it back on her, advocating her own definition of the situation; or like Janie, who was so criticized by her peers for making such a scene at Katie's party, among other things, that she refrained from participating in any competition for dominance for a while. Responses to gossip, then, are either to compete or to behave, if only temporarily.

A game the girls call "Skeletons in the Closet" epitomizes the way in which conflict and competition that is direct, is institutionalized to avoid any threat to the team parameters. For Janie's birthday, the weekend after Katie's party, she had an all-girl sleepover to which all the girls in her clique were invited. During the course of the evening, Janie and Trina, the two who had been the most upset and accusatory at Katie's party, talked everyone into playing "Skeletons in the Closet." In this game, one girl sits in the middle of a circle of girls, each of whom is allowed to ask one question of her. The girls have to tell the truth or refuse to tell by saying "skeletons in the closet," which "no one ever says," according to Terri. As soon as Janie was in the middle of the circle being questioned, Trina asked her whom she hated most in the room. She answered "Terri," as did Trina, when Janie posed the same question to her. Terri was later asked that question as well, to which she of course responded, "Janie and Trina." All of this information was conveyed with nervous smiles and uncomfortable laughs, but it was all within the rules of the game and, in that sense, did not challenge the classification as "friends" of those feuding. Janie and Trina used the game to express their hate for Terri in public and damage Terri's position on the team, either by compelling her to back down, to behave, or by convincing the others that she

was hateful. The “discord” the girls were engaged in was institutionalized: a game allowed them to express hate toward each other but protected them from losing the comfort of the clique.

Direct competition is also institutionalized, or socially condoned, when it is disguised behind jokes or smiles. There were times when Terri did confront Janie about why she was angry, and Janie, with an embarrassed smile on her face, evaded real confrontation by refusing to talk about it. Terri, more confident about her own position in the group, was willing to confront Janie more directly, less afraid of the consequences of losing Janie’s friendship. Both girls always left things unresolved and continued the friendship, or membership, as before. When I asked if things with Janie had been resolved or had just blown over, Terri always responded, “Yeah, they just blew over.” They would continually resume indirect competition for dominance.

The sharing and manipulating of information, then, is an extremely important means of gaining support, or dominance, in a given performance. Because losing the team would mean losing an audience, the “information game” (Goffman: 1959) allows the girls to compete with one another within a structure that goes unchallenged; the team remains consistently disruptive but consistently in existence. The competition is either indirect, or unacknowledged as such, or direct, wherein the discord is institutionally condoned. The internal structure of the team is in constant flux, with perpetually changing power relations. Its parameters, however, remain solid and unchallenged.

A second way of gaining a competitive advantage on the team is by attracting boys. Of course the motivation for seeking a boyfriend may not only be to gain dominance within the clique, and attracting boys may not always be intentional. However, regardless of intentions, the *attention* of boys ascribes directive dominance to their recipient. As sexuality becomes increasingly important, the degree of competitive advantage stimulated by the attentions of boys grows. In a community of girls where fantasies of boys and romance are increasingly significant, staying on the team of a girl who has boy connections is almost as inviting as having your own boyfriend. As a result, there are two kinds of competition at work: competition to attract boyfriends and sexual experience, and competition to be friends with girls who attract boyfriends. I use the word *attracting* here because *getting* a boyfriend does not have the same implications. Girls who are “attractive” draw boyfriends *to them*, while girls who are not might still *get* a boyfriend if they pursue him. My purpose is to point out the centrality of attractiveness as the underlying competitive advantage, even if there is no actual boyfriend to prove it.

Terri’s dominance on the team was greatly buttressed by the fact that she had a boyfriend and was liked by more than one of the other boys in sixth grade. She was considered “very attractive” in the fifth and sixth grade. As a result, she was almost always able to win more directive dominance than Janie, whose strength was more rooted in information sharing. Katie describes an instance in her journal wherein Terri

and Jake (her boyfriend at the time) were “dared” to French kiss:

Chris dared Jake to French kiss Terri in the bathroom but you see they didn't really *french* kiss they just kissed on the lips for about 2 seconds I had some fun but I think Terri will use her “kiss” as sinority [seniority] over me and Lynn.

Katie's fear that Terri will “use” her kiss reflects the power of boys and romance to ascribe dominance to those who have experience with them.

Here, competition is also indirect, this time in a slightly different way. Because attractiveness is the underlying advantage, competition for the attention of boys is based on trying to be attractive, not trying to get boyfriends. It is a passive, rather than active, quest for boyfriends. The girls spend substantial amounts of time getting ready to go to parties and trying to look as attractive as possible. Terri once mentioned the stress of going to parties because “you never know whether someone is going to have a better outfit than you.” Presenting oneself attractively and therefore competitively means having a “better outfit” than the others, thereby indirectly competing for the attentions of boys.

Indirect competition regarding boys evades overt confrontation in another way. There are rules that discourage direct competition. For example, once a girl likes a boy, he becomes her property unless someone is willing to challenge her authority, test her dominance on the team. In order to preserve the team, regulations regarding who can like whom are overtly respected. For example, Katie talks constantly about Jake in her private diary all through fifth and sixth grade. She writes how many times she has danced with him at parties, and how much she has enjoyed being so close to him, yet she never fully admits to liking him. Terri and Jake were “boyfriend and girlfriend” on and off throughout the fifth and sixth grades, and Terri even became jealous of Katie's relationship with Jake at one point. Katie writes:

Anyway, back to Jake. We slow danced a lot. Which made Terri mad. But she shouldn't be mad because she broke up with him. She really needs to loosen up! That's not my problem.

In another entry that begins with a discussion of the fact that Terri is still “going on about Jake” even though it has been three months since they broke up:

And Jake hates her now. I don't blame him... They [Terri and Sarah] don't seem to understand that I don't like anybody. Each person has a person who they like. But they get mad at me if I like them.

Katie seems to have a crush on Jake, but she does not act on it overtly, or even admit it to herself. She does not think she would win a direct competition for him, or even for the right to like him. She denies even to herself that she likes Jake. Instead, however, she may compete for him indirectly, by passively trying to seem attractive to him, by subtly flirting with him, or by being platonically close to him (instead of

“romantically”). This is not necessarily “covert” action on Katie’s part, but rather the outcome of a social structure that prohibits her from competing overtly. If Jake flirts with her, she feels good about herself, presumably closer to her ideal of attractiveness, and she gains power within the group.

Because attracting boys is, like information control, a talent at which some will have more success than others through traits like appearance, charisma, or flirtatiousness, those who are not successful at attracting boys share information about them. That is, they can gain a certain amount of authority by involving themselves in their friends’ relationships, securing their place in the information circle. When I first began spending time with the girls, an enormous portion of what they talked about was Terri’s relationship with Jake. Their focus on Terri in discussions with me may have been partially attributable to the fact that I was introduced to the group through Terri, having known her for a long time. Yet, their interest in Terri’s and Jake’s relations was not only for my benefit. As Terri’s best friends, they were actually involved in the relationship in many ways. Janie, for example, was responsible for “setting up” Terri and Jake at least two of the times they “went together.” Katie writes of one of those incidents in her diary: “I don’t know why Janie set them up because she likes Jake!” Apparently, being involved in the relationship by setting Jake and Terri up was worth minimizing her chances for “going with” Jake herself. Katie also writes in her diary of one of the times Jake asked Terri to go with him:

He mouthed to her Will you go with me? And she nodded. Then she whispered to me ‘Oh my god I’m going with him!’

Terri and Jake’s relationship was consummated by Terri recounting the event to Katie. Katie thus had an important role in the relationship and an indirect liaison with Jake.

Further involving the whole clique in the relationship, Jake would often call Terri’s friends on the phone to talk about what was going on with her when they were in a fight, or what he should get her for a present, and so on. None of Terri’s close friends had boyfriends during this period. When Terri was in an “off-Jake” phase, he called her friends so often asking why she wouldn’t go with him that they began to see him as a pest instead of as a signal of their involvement in the relationship and therefore the clique. On one occasion, Lynn made fun of Jake asking her “what Terri said,” and mocked a sarcastic response.

Well, she took a deep breath, then she scratched her nose, then she took another big breath...hold on a second, I wrote it all down!

Katie writes in her journal:

Don’t tell Terri this, but I am getting really sick of Jake. Yes, he is nice to me and all that, but all he talks about is how much he likes Terri. I have never known a boy to do that... It would be nice if he was quiet about her for just 5 minutes. I know Terri is getting sick about all this too but I just don’t know.

Janie commented, "I think Jake uses us to find out stuff about Terri." The girls' feeling of involvement in the relationship becomes less rewarding if Jake talks about Terri too much and is not flirtatious with them. It becomes too obvious that Jake is only talking to them because of Terri, and their fantasies of attractiveness and participation in the relationship are untenable. However, even while complaining about the situation, they would never have considered telling Jake not to call. He was an indicator of their position as a part of the team; he was team property.

Boys thus offer a competitive advantage as individual property and as team property, and attractiveness becomes central in ascribing team dominance to girls. Girls compete indirectly for the attention of boys in their efforts to attract, rather than *get*, boys. Rules about overt competition limit confrontations regarding boys in order to maintain the parameters of the team, and therefore protect the important security of the clique.

Because the security of the clique is so important to adolescents in face of their internal confusion, the competition in which they engage to assert their authority is performed in such a way that the performers' team affiliation is never threatened. Girls' desire to assert some authority, without rejecting real structural authority, results in a constant process of indirect or institutionalized disruption of each other's performances, without disrupting the parameters of the team. Indirect competition and institutionalized discord are nonnative. The girls undermine each other indirectly or they conflict with each other within accepted traditions of discord. They thus learn the traditions of what Paul Riesman calls "antagonistic cooperation" (1953:103), which could equally be called a performance of complacent competition. The authority regarding their own identities that adolescent girls wish to escape is displaced, rather than evaded. A competitive group structure and established ideals of attractiveness replace the authority of parents and of the recognizable status quo.

### *Aesthetics*

The second realm in which girls act out their rejection of overt authority without rebelling against the structures and regulations set by those authorities is that of the symbolic. Through cultural taste and style choices, *aesthetics*, girls assert their autonomy from their parents and previous generations, as well as act out their commitment to their peers. Aesthetics are the props of their performances of self, identifying them as individuals separate from their parents and other overt authorities while simultaneously concretizing their commitment to each other.

Adolescents' symbolic rejection of authority demands the materials of what has been called the "generation The Gap," the way in which generations are supposedly different from and misunderstanding of each other. Generational aesthetics are symbolic expressions of a generational self, one that is in contrast to the selves of previous generations. Obviously, there is no one self that can represent a

whole generation, but there are ideals of how the self should be presented that are widely circulated and widely conformed to. It is these ideals that both produce and are produced by adolescent desire to reject established institutions and identify themselves with newness. Aesthetics are part of the commonality that binds a generation together and differentiates adolescents from other generations. They simultaneously provide youth with materials of rebellion and of cohesion; they delineate the "The Gap" between adolescents and their predecessors.

Integral, then, to the adolescent aesthetic is the newness it must suggest in the eyes of youths. They feel that they are on the frontier of aesthetic expression, and scorn what is old. One day, a couple of the girls were singing the lyrics to what I know as a Lou Reed song, "Take a Walk on the Wild Side." I asked them how they knew about Lou Reed and his music, and they responded chidingly, "No, no, no, no, no. That's Marky Mark. [chanting] 'Take a walk, on the wild side of the land.'" Another day, Terri chided Katie for using some "old-fashioned" piece of slang. "That's from the fifties! 'Fresh.' That's from the nineties." Little did she know that the word "fresh" has already been in slang use for at least two decades. When Color Me Badd, a pop band, played in an episode of *90210*, the girls complained that Color Me Badd was "out." Katie explained that: "They were really popular a couple months ago, but they need to come out with a new record. They were probably popular when they shot this episode." The importance of the newness of cultural tastes reflects the girls' general concern with autonomy: they wish to rebel against established aesthetics, and assert their own differential aesthetic as a means of asserting themselves.

Some of the aesthetic choices adolescents make suggest a desire to express anti-establishment sentiment without actually rebelling against the established institutions. Rap and the culture that surrounds it is very central to contemporary adolescent aesthetics, as are some other anti-establishment styles, like *punk* and *hippie*. Adolescents adopt these aesthetics as props for their performances, symbolically expressing their opposition to the establishment.

The most popular music among the girls and their friends is mainstream rap. I say "mainstream" because the rap they listen to is generally a tame, commercial version of the more militant rap for which the audience tends to be some combination of inner city residents and middle class college kids. When these adolescents listen to the radio, it is Wild 107, a station that especially targets young Black-identified, but mainstream audiences. At parties, rap is played constantly, except for an occasional "slow song." Because rap music is relatively new in the mainstream (Samuels 1992) and is commonly perceived as a voice arising out of oppression to speak for itself, it easily fits into the aesthetics of youth's symbolic rebellion, regardless of the ethnicity or class of its listeners. While rap may in part be a music of "empowerment" (by providing a voice for those who are not benefited by the establishment), it has been appropriated by the sons and daughters of the establishment, and "mainstream." This is not because young white consumers empathize with the hardship of the people who



introduced and continue to produce rap, but because they respond to the illusion of empowerment rap offers them. They, like rappers, want to rebel against the status quo and assert themselves as power holders. This might help explain phenomena like the extreme popularity of the rap group Kriss Kross, whose members are only thirteen- or fourteen-years old. Their emergence out of racial and cultural oppression *and* adolescent powerlessness gives Kriss Kross all the more clout and honor among adolescents for empowering themselves, making themselves heard. They are models of real empowerment through rap, fueling adolescent s' illusion of empowerment as they listen to the music and lyrics.

Although more than half of the students at Jackson are Black and many come from neighborhoods similar to those that produced rap, the popularity of rap music at Jackson is not a question of exposure or accessibility to rap music culture. Recent statistics show that rap's largest audience is white, suburban kids (Samuels 1992:25). There is, especially among adolescents, a strong attraction to rap among all ethnicities. The embrace of rap culture and its anti-establishment aesthetic by white middle-class kids may partly be an attempt to detach themselves from the guilty history of their class and race. David Samuels, in his controversial article on white response to rap in *The New Republic*, posits that: rap's appeal to whites rest[s] in its evocation of an age-old image of blackness: a foreign, sexually charged, and criminal underworld against which the norms of white society are defined, and, by extension, through which they may be defied (1992:25). Rap carries the symbolic potential for a rejection of established "norms" of the middle class, as well as an exploration of sex and power, and thus acts as a vehicle of rebellion for middle class adolescents.

As a result, rap and the culture that surrounds it have become a large part of current youth's generational identity. Rap infuses almost every realm of adolescents' symbolic expression: the way they dance with, or "freak" each other at parties, the lyrics that they chant together, the language they use, their tones of voice, their clothing, and their class consciousness. This generation is the first group of young adolescents to grow up with the MTV show, *Yo! MTV Raps*. "*Yo! MTV Raps* debuted in 1989 as the first national broadcast forum for rap music. With *Yo!*, rap became for the first time the music of choice in the white suburbs of middle America" (1992:28). Not only did rap become the music of choice, but the clothes rappers wear, the way they speak, and many more of their aesthetic choices became integrated into the culture of choice.

Teens' language, both verbal and physical, is highly reflective of the influence of rap culture. Words like "fresh," a contemporary version of "groovy," are common in rap songs and are now ubiquitous in the language of adolescents. Terri and her friends used the term "jungle fever" to describe a sudden plethora of interracial couples in her class, totally unaware of its negative connotations. In their diaries, two of the girls write "boyz" in place of "boys," mimicking street gangs' appellation of their fellow gang members. Katie and some of the others consistently used the word "prerogative," which was popularized as a sort of slang in a very successful Bobby

Brown song called "My Prerogative." They now use it as an assertion of individual autonomy and choice. Katie writes in her journal: "Jake is a really good friend and could be more, but I don't think so because he still likes Kay. And that's his progitive [sic]."

The tone and stance many of the kids adopt when they express themselves is also rap-influenced. For instance, their slang is often powerfully expressed, as when they "cap" or "rank" on each other, spouting insults in as condescending and distanced a manner as possible. This sort of "attitude" is an important part of their verbal and physical vocabulary, with both positive and negative connotations. Terri describes a girl in her class, Kenisha, whose attitude intimidates her a little. "Kenisha can be pushy ... She struts around like she's the queen ... puts on airs." But when Terri is with people she feels she can top in attitude, she finds it empowering. For example, during an evening we spent with all the adults of both of our families, she expended much energy in sneering and rolling her eyes at the "out of it" comments of the older generation. Katie, during a "boy-girl" party she held, kicked a boy named Tim out of the party with a burst of attitude that surprised me. Attitude furnishes girls with a mode of self-assertion that is sometimes in great contrast to the more established, middle class forms of expression.

A similar anti-establishment aesthetic is reflected in the girls' apparent scorn of conspicuous expense. However, just as many rappers contradict themselves in their simultaneous anti-establishment message and embrace of conspicuous consumption of goods produce by *established* institutions, the girls express their own contradictory feelings about conspicuous consumption. While at Jackson, for instance, the girls expressed a certain scorn for families who chose to send their kids to a local private school which some of their friends attended. Mention of the school often evokes imitation of snobbish accents or some other critical teasing among the Jackson girls. Terri constantly talks about the price of everything, always implying that she cannot believe anyone would spend so much money on material items. She mentions the prices of her mother's new clothes, of Trina's new shoes, of a "firestorm victim's" house, and on and on. All four of the girls exhibit a certain pride in being public school kids, constructing images of themselves as kids without all the amenities of the private school kids. However, when Terri wanted a pair of \$80 shoes, she did not hesitate to begin lobbying her mother. And Janie, while talking negatively about displays of wealth in others, buys new clothes constantly, provoking the others' scorn and criticism when she is not around. The anti-establishment attitude is not so much practiced as postured; the girls see others' consumption as conspicuous but do not question their own consumer desires. While they do not explicitly claim that The Gap is representative of their generation, they talk about The Gap as if the clothes are produced in consideration of their aesthetic tastes and ideals of "self" presentation.

Another component of the differential aesthetic that helps define their generation is the girls' participation in the set of generational fantasies reflected in the media they consume, even while they overtly criticize and mock TV shows and

magazines in demonstration of their media savvy. They may make fun of the character "Donna" for having a nose job, but *Beverly Hills 90210* arguably plays a very prominent role in their fantasy lives, perhaps as in a major segment of youth in the United States. The show has broken all kinds of records in television ratings and viewership polls since it began in 1990. Three out of these four girls plaster their rooms with pictures of *90210* actors, and watch the show every week. Sometimes Terri and Katie call each other during each commercial break, discussing what has happened and what they think will happen. During the spring, Terri's friends often likened her to one of the characters, Brenda. Sometimes they would say sincerely that she looked like Brenda, sometimes they would tease her for *trying* to look like Brenda. Terri, while denying that she was trying to be like Brenda, was thrilled at their comments. When I watched *90210* alone with her, she was much less critical of and more sympathizing with the characters, and would get a very far away, fantasy-world expression on her face while watching. Once, when she and Katie were watching together, they began going through their friends, deciding which of them would be which *90210* characters, projecting themselves into the fantasy realm of the show. These sorts of fantasies are a part of the girls' "aesthetic" in that the girls' consider them a part of the property of their generation: fantasies and characters tailored to their desires.

The fantasies played out in shows like *90210* both respond to and define the desires of adolescent girls, a notion I will address thoroughly in the second half of this article. Fantasies similar to those depicted in *90210* are found in much of the other media the girls consume. There is a best-selling teen novel series called *Freshman Dorm*, one of which Terri loaned me entitled *Freshman Choices*. The Fox network has gone on a major campaign to serve younger audiences, creating a whole network of shows that speak to adolescents. The marketing techniques they use propel the idea that young adolescents have their own identity, fantasies, and modes of communication, and need narratives that speak to them exclusively. Teen novels and magazines are also sold as the private property of the adolescent generation. The girls think of what they watch and what they read as their own, part of their private generational aesthetic.

Anti-establishment and differential aesthetics are part of the commonality that binds adolescents together and differentiates them from other generations. The symbols can be as anti-establishment or different as the generation demands, allowing for adolescents to obey real authority while they simultaneously feel a sense of assertion of their own authority. Their performance of an anti-establishment and differential identity may be as "authentic" in their minds as it seems superficial from a distance; they reject authority symbolically as they comply with authority in action. In this sense, adolescents are especially susceptible to the covert authority of producers that market their commodities as anti-establishment, or new and different, thus defining and designing an aesthetic which adolescents will adopt and perceive as their own.

## **Covert Authority**

In their efforts to competitively and symbolically reject the overt authority of parents and institutions, adolescents fail to evade the influences of covert authorities. Covert authorities, in this case, are those forces of capitalist production, advertising, and mass media that adolescents do not recognize as authorities and therefore allow to slip quietly past their resistant front. These *covert* authorities design the ideals of identity that adolescents are attempting to define for themselves through their rejection of *overt* authorities.

In the previous sections, I have outlined some of the conditions and traditions of adolescence: the adolescent desire for ambivalence regarding differentiation and assertion of self; the development and processes of indirect competition and institutionalized discord between adolescent girls; and the channeling of adolescent resistance into symbols, such as private property. The remaining sections are an attempt to illuminate how capitalist culture dialectically responds to and produces these conditions and traditions under the guise of covert authorities. It is to the advantage of market culture to maintain the existence of these institutions of adolescence; institutionalized discord is part of an uncritical environment that discourages questioning of covert authorities and encourages indirect competition. Indirect competition perpetuates female adolescent desire for products of attractiveness. Symbolic rebellion, in place of critical resistance, supports an economy of symbols of rebellion (as, for example, in the case of the mass production of X hats) that may have little to do with an actual desire to activate a change in the status quo. By looking to the outside forces of which Marcus and Fischer (1986) write, I try to reveal how the processes of adolescent rejection of authority are usurped by covert authorities to encourage complacency in lieu of the critical thinking that adolescent ambivalence might invite.

### *Material Culture: Identifying Props*

The character of middle class, female adolescent resistance to overt authority allows for a great degree of susceptibility to another, less tangible authority: production and advertising. While their rejection of authority and assertion of self is channeled into indirect and institutionalized competition and symbolic resistance, the props of that adolescent performance of self are provided by the market. The symbols that girls desire in order to assert themselves as autonomous of overt authorities, as part of a generation, as part of a clique, and as dominant and attractive individuals are most often sold to them. Not only the material property, but also the ideals of success that the props are supposed to achieve are constructed more for them than by them.

For example, considering the history of the clothing store The Gap and the number of “generation gaps” it has bridged, it is ironic that one of the symbols these adolescent girls identify most vehemently as the property of their generation is Gap

clothing. The Gap was begun in the seventies and began by selling only Levi's jeans and belts. It expanded so fast that, by the eighties when the Levi's company was no longer willing to meet its demands, the chain began producing its own line of clothing. The name The Gap refers to the generation gap, the supposed difference between a parent generation and the generation of their kids that prevents them from understanding each other. The Gap could either signify the bridging of the generation gap through clothes that everyone can wear, or the provision of clothing suited only for the newest generation, separate from the old by a generation gap. Terri, Katie, Janie, and Lynn subscribe to the latter interpretation, the one Gap advertisements evoke, and consider themselves members of "the Gap generation." The Gap, by contrast, has eagerly served every generation since the seventies, defining each as an exclusive "Gap generation" and serving them all simultaneously. Thus, The Gap plays a role in producing as well as catering to the so-called generation gap by convincing all of its customers that they are exclusive members of a Gap generation.

The following is a more thorough discussion of how market production and advertising act as covert authorities in adolescent identification by selling the ideals of identity along with the technologies that are supposed to achieve those ideals. To extend Goffman's terminology to analysis of market and advertising forces in the performance of self, this section is an exploration of how the performance of identity is staged. In order to sell the props of the performance, the market and advertisers also sell theatrical roles, exploiting the ambivalence and needs of adolescent girls. Roles are conflated with props. My purpose is to reveal the ambiguity of the meanings of these three terms and the ways in which that ambiguity is used and abused.

In his book *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, Daniel Miller suggests that integral to the study of any material culture, from lipstick to virtual reality technology, is "the phenomenon of certain mundane objects becoming so firmly associated with an individual that they are understood as literal extensions of that individual's being" (1987: 119). Technology has always been a part of how humans construct their identity, as currently exemplified in a TV commercial for a type of car. In reference to the car, a "wonder-mom" explains, "I couldn't be everything I am without it." Although only an actress in an advertisement, she evidently appeals to an audience susceptible to the idea that the van is a part of her identity. It is a component of her perception of herself. Miller summarizes this relationship: "the 'self objectified in the object will be differentially constructed according to the cosmological content'" (119). The object, according to the different cultural meanings accompanying it, identifies the person with whom it is associated.

Material culture is often perceived as a technology of identity. It is a public expression of differentiation from or affiliation with an identified group. Miller explains, "The object may lend itself equally to the expression of difference, indicating the separate domains to which people or aspects of people belong, and to the expression of unity, connecting otherwise diverse domains" (130). It may provide social cohesion among individuals or it may differentiate individuals from one

another, often both. According to Miller, “one of the many results of the rise of material culture as a mode of cultural form was its ability to multiply and keep apart a plethora of hierarchies and diverse spheres” (153). Because adopting the use of a particular object provides membership to a certain social group and exclusion from another, material culture can be seen as a tool of boundary maintenance, separating different “hierarchies and diverse spheres.” So in addition to the more often referred to role of technology as “proclaim[ing] or deny[ing] a distance from nature” (115), technology maintains boundaries between different social groups.

Meanwhile, the boundary between the object and the subject becomes blurred. Material things signify particular social identities and, in the process, becomes intertwined with private identities. Objects that are part of our visual representation of self exemplify particularly well the potential blurring of boundaries between material object and the self. They are extensions of the physical body as well as of public identity. Not only does the object become a component of our identities, but it is also a semi-permanent extension of our bodies, and is seen as part of our representation of self in the public sphere. For instance, a woman whose hair is dyed blond and who wears dark mascara might be perceived as a beautiful blond with long eye lashes, even if her natural hair color is brunette and her biological eye lashes are ordinary. Appearance enhancers thus confuse boundaries between objects and the body, as well as between objects and identity.

Advertisements for various appearance enhancers found in magazines directed toward adolescent girls illuminate, through exploitation, their confusion and ambivalence about boundaries between objects, the body, and the self. Because adolescents are at a stage of growth in which their bodies are rapidly changing, and raging hormones can obstruct the possibility of consistency of self, they are hungry for some clarification and continuity. Products related to appearance provide them with an illusion of clarity and consistency by allowing them some control over their bodies and their presentation of self. By manipulating these things, they can manipulate their identities, or so they are told in the magazines; hence Janie’s focus on clothes and make-up. The advertisements found in teenage magazines usually promote their products as technologies of identity more emphatically than as enhancers of appearance. They are objects which seem to allow adolescents control over their bodies *and* their selves. Advertisers thus make use of the haze over boundaries between object, body, and identity by mixing and matching all three categories to sell their products. But what kind of control over identity do these products really allow?

Implied definitions of identity are in constant flux in advertisements for appearance enhancers, especially in media addressed to a teenage audience. In the April and May issues of *Teen* and *Sassy* magazines, I noticed four advertising strategies illustrative of advertisers’ exploitation of the widespread mix-up over object, body, and identity. The ads are savvy to adolescent ambivalence over how the object relates to the body and the self, or identity. Advertisers use that savvy

exploitatively.

The most common strategy used in advertising evokes the paradoxical idea that products are necessary for beauty, but that they should be made invisible so as to preserve the illusion that the body is pure or authentic. The *Cover Girl* ads for a line of make-up called *Clean Make-Up* employ slogans like, "BELIEVE IT: When your make-up looks this natural, you know it's Clean." Over an image of an elated Christie Brinkley reads:

One look says it all. Natural. Believable. Beautiful. That look is *Cover Girl Clean Make-up*. So good to your skin. So clean. With pure Noxzema ingredients. For healthy color. Honest coverage. The look of great skin. That's the believable look of Clean Make-up.

The syntax comically recalls Arnold Schwarzeneger in *The Terminator*, invoking the image of a cyborg hidden behind human flesh; emphasis on words like "natural," "believable," "Clean," "pure," "healthy," and "honest" imply that products are *contrary* to these organic qualities, and that Cover Girl brand is the exception. An ad for Clarion blush reads, "Finally. Blush believably. For hours." Again, the word "believably" implies that a technological blush is inauthentic and should be made to seem natural at all costs. The boundary between culture and nature is simultaneously reinforced and transgressed in both of these ads. Products are not natural so they must be hidden, yet achieving believable and natural beauty is abetted by the use of these products.

Some of the ads for menstrual absorption pads and tampons also play on the desire for products to be invisible. Although pads and tampons might not immediately be considered related to appearance, the advertising strategies for these products emphasize appearance, not utility. An Always maxi-pad ad depicts four women, from mid-riff to knees, wearing "skin-tight" clothes. The caption reads: "Pop Quiz: who's wearing the tampon? Nobody. They're wearing 'no-show' maxi." *Quel horreur* that we should actually see and know that a woman, or a girl, wears a pad to stop blood from staining her clothes! Tampax's latest slogan is "Trust. It's knowing no one will ever know you've got your period. Period." Ironically, all of these advertisements promote the idea that the products must be hidden in order to preserve the natural look, while in fact controlling and hiding what is natural.

The most striking of this set of ads is one for Finesse hair-shaping products. In the right hand corner of a two page ad, we read:

The-how-to-be-totally-obsessed-about-your-hair-until-it-looks-  
absolutely-amazing-at-the-prom-but-you-look-like-you-didn't-even-  
think-about-it guide.

Here, not only the product itself must be hidden, but the mental and physical effort a girl puts into her appearance must also be camouflaged. The rest of that side of the page gives a list of "Prom Coifs" one can achieve with Finesse. "For Prom 1992, all

you really need is Finesse,” as long as you can keep it a secret. The other half of the page promotes “the hold that loves to be held,” and shows a man running his fingers through a woman’s hair. The ad boasts that this hairspray “keeps hair touchably soft,” so the product cannot be detected even through touch. These invisible products claim to allow teens to transcend the limitations of their natural bodies, yet maintain an illusion of the authenticity and naturalness that beauty and success evidently require.

An ad for Love’s Baby Soft cologne spray narrates a boy’s obsession with a girl, Ashley, in which he ends by saying, “I love Love’s Baby Soft,” and the ad responds, “Underneath it all, she’s Baby Soft.” The object is so successfully naturalized, incorporated into her, that the boy equates it with Ashley: she is Baby Soft. In this advertisement, as in the others of this first category, women and girls are made out to be inherently inadequate and thus in need of these products. However, if the technology can be hidden, naturalized, no one will dis-cover their inherent inadequacy. Hence, the title Cover Girl may be understood on multiple levels: as the girl on the magazine cover, and the girl whose inadequacy is covered.

A second set of strategies of advertising imply that the products being promoted are actually reflections of a girl’s insides, her individuality, rather than supplements to or alterations of her identity. Esprit runs an ad that asks, without apparent reference, “what would you do?”, and then gives the idiosyncratic response by, one assumes, the teenager pictured opposite. “I’d clean up the planet... but not my room.” (Janie has an Esprit T-shirt with this slogan on it). The ad only correlates the individuality and wit of the girl in the picture with her Esprit clothing. It claims no causal relationship between the advertised object, the clothes, and the girl’s apparent attractiveness. However, because objects are the materiality of identity, the ad implies that emulation of this girl by wearing Esprit clothes means that one must be an individual of her caliber and status. Similarly, the Converse shoes slogan reads, “It’s what’s inside that counts,” and displays photos of the shoes alone, implying that the shoes validate a girl’s inside and will reflect her individuality. The buyer of these shoes is told that she must be the kind of individual whose inside counts.

Ads of this type imply, on one level, that the girls and women depicted are inherently successful instead of inherently inadequate. The objects are portrayed as merely a reflection of the success of these individuals. However, the ideology of individuality is paradoxically irreconcilable with advertising. The ad has the aim of speaking to as many individuals as possible, and enticing them to conform with each other in buying the advertised product. This means that the individuality proposed by the ad is improbable if the product is successfully sold. So while less obviously defining women as inadequate, these ads are internally contradictory and hypocritical. Individuality is an oxymoron in a market economy.

A third strategy among advertisements for appearance enhancers employs rather explicitly the theme of differentiation between social groups. This is a strategy of boundary maintenance. In one hair spray ad, differentiation between past and



present generations is emphasized. Superimposed over a photograph of an upside-down woman are the words, "if it's FLIP-it's HIP!," and "if it isn't BOLD, it's OLD!" Miller holds that what makes an object fashionable is "its ability to signify the present" (1987: 126). The Bold Hold hairspray ads play on adolescents' desire to be part of contemporary definitions of success, thus differentiated from past generations. The ad threatens that if they do not use this product, they will be old, part of the past and the wrong generation.

A Ten-O-Six skin cleanser advertisement exploits the contemporary focus on pollution and the environment by implying that their product will prevent new generations of adolescents from suffering the negative effects of pollution, perpetrated by past generations of adults. Over a photograph of a blue sky and sierra mountain scene, the ad reads, "TEENS HAVE TAKEN THE FIGHT AGAINST DIRT AND POLLUTION INTO THEIR OWN HANDS," and after a long description of how it cleanses and is the ultimate pollution-fighter, it repeats, "Ten-O-Six. Helping teens everywhere win the fight against pollution." The ad twists the actual meaning of fighting against pollution, usually connected with intentions of saving the environment, into the idea of defending oneself against a polluted environment in order to maintain a fresh and flawless face. The implication is that by using Ten-O-Six, one becomes a member of a new generation immune to the detriments of a polluted environment. The ad perversely exploits an important and menacing social and global issue by differentiating teenage girls from older generations and absolving them from unattractive responsibility for the environment. By providing them with a group identity based on an innovative ability to protect themselves from the problems of older generations, the ads discourage instead of encourage teen action in response to pollution. "It's a dirty world out there," the ad threatens, and by taking Ten-O-Six "into their own hands," girls can become a member of a "cleaner and gentler nation." The ad projects negative qualities onto older social groups and professes to provide, through objects, an alternative niche for the strong and innovative teenagers described. Boundaries are maintained between the teen body and pollution, and between teen identity and all others: "[Just as] nation states define themselves, in part, in terms of what they are not...by setting themselves in opposition to alternative degenerate or ideal societies" (Miller 1987:123). These appearance enhancers, advertised as identity constructors, constitute differentiating boundaries that encourage girls to define themselves "in terms of what they are not." Particularly for teenagers, differentiation between groups is important. Angela McRobbie, in her study of British teen magazines in the eighties, argues that:

Beauty products articulate a symbolic space in the transition from childhood dependence to teenage independence. The soaps and lotions and tonics and the freedom of choice exercised by the girl in purchasing these items play some role in effecting this transition. [1991:177]

Differentiation, then, implies independence for girls at this stage of maturation. The ad for Playtex tampons reads, "PSST . . . it's not your mother's tampon." Although this

product is not advertised through appearance, as the earlier tampon and pad ads were, it is presented as an extension of the body that differentiates the identity of teenage girls from that of their mothers and thus provides the illusion of independence. Girls are encouraged to assert their independence by criticizing and differentiating themselves from those upon whom they have been dependent. All of the ads of this set promote differentiation and boundary maintenance.

The fourth strategy of advertising important to definitions of object, identity, and the body, is that of defining appearance-enhancers as *tools* of representation that endow girls' with power over their presentation of self. The product is explicitly recognized as a product, rather than naturalized or individualized. Perhaps the clearest example of advertisements that embrace appearance enhancers for their own sake is seen in the current ads for Maybelline products. They feature the tall, dark, and beautiful Maybelline model next to varying versions of the following excerpt: "When it comes to eye lining some women seem to do it all. Even if it's a different look every day. Just clever? Nah. Expert Eyes. Liner by Maybelline." At the bottom of the page in a bold, black and white box-strip, the slogan touts, "Maybe she's born with it. Maybe it's Maybelline." These ads essentially deny that the images of beauty and success pictured in their pages are natural, individual, or a part of the identity of any social group. Instead, achieving this look is simply a matter of using a product to attain a certain result. The product is spotlighted, and expert skill in using it is admired, as opposed to those ads that advocate hiding the product as well as the skill and effort required to use it. Here the words in bold lettering are: eye lining, do it all, Expert Eyes, Maybelline. In other ads of this series, the bold words are: fuller, get noticed lashes, Great Lash, shadow, never loses impact, Expert Eyes. The article is either named or described, and expressions like "get noticed lashes" and "never loses impact" focus on the visible effect. These ads seem to reflect a trend among women towards embracing material culture. Technology is coming out of the organic closet and identity is gaining the freedom to incorporate "a different look everyday."

Janie is overweight, according to sixth- and seventh-grade standards of beauty and success. One week I took her and her friends on a picnic, and at the end of the day, we stopped at her house so her friends could rummage through the huge pile of clothes she was giving away. Later I learned that she gives her clothes away all the time, either because they don't fit her anymore or because she just doesn't like them anymore. The rest of the girls told me that "her mom just buys her new ones." They were happy to have the free clothes, but incredulous that Janie could just give away her sixty dollar jeans when they were hardly worn. I began to detect a little bit of scorn in their voices. Janie was abusing her privileges. She was trying to maintain her dwindling status in the sixth grade hierarchies through wearing the right clothes. And if those did not work, wearing a different set of right clothes. And she wears make-up, too. More eye-rolling.

Janie embraces material objects as a means of achieving physical attractiveness. Her use of clothes and make-up corresponds with the ideology set forth

in the Maybelline ads. Consciously or not, she treats them as tools of social identity. But, according to her peers and to herself, she does not succeed in their social hierarchy by making endless trips to The Gap and department stores. Her performance is perceived as inauthentic. The cycle of buying clothes, giving them away, and buying new ones again reveals her lack of satisfaction with each successive mode of self-representation. Evidently, she continues to feel inadequate, herself. In her journal, she writes:

I know Katie ignores me. This weekend instead of doing something with her "Best-Friend" quote-unquote she does something with Princess Terri, and Princess Lynn and poor old peasant Anne. But hey who is poor old "fat" Janie to expect her best friend to be with her. Who would want to hang out with a LOSER!!

Janie describes a social hierarchy of princesses and peasants, in which she apparently places herself somewhere below the rank of peasant. Her social rank is inextricably linked with her fat, according to her. Under all her products, she is still stuck in her inadequate body, unable to successfully *cover* it with clothes and make-up.

Meanwhile, her friends sense her attempts to cover her inadequacy with products and seem to disrespect her for it. Their attitudes match the ideology of the first category of ads I discussed. They see Janie as lacking natural success, and her attempts to manipulate her body in order to achieve a more successful social identity are too obvious. Not only is she unsuccessful at hiding her body, she is unsuccessful at hiding her products. By contrast, I once watched Terri get ready for a "boy-girl" party. She used three different kinds of hair products, namely gel, mousse, and environmentally safe spray, to make her hair do exactly what it had been doing before she used the products. At the party, no one knew she had used these products and her dominant status in the social hierarchy went unchallenged.

Even if Terri's hair products had been noticeable, she might not have been chastised. Terri and Lynn are naturally much closer in appearance to the sixth grade ideal than Janie is. They are thus less dissatisfied with their social identity. While they still feel compelled to buy the *right* things in order to maintain their membership in their peer group, the products are not the initial cause of their success within that group. They understand these objects as a sign of the success they already have, recalling the ideology based on the insides of the second group of advertising strategies. So Janie, by using the material culture of the model identity to which she aspires, places herself at the bottom of the social hierarchy constituted by that ideal of identity. She achieves association with a social group through symbolic expression, but her success within that group hinges on the desirability of her natural identity instead of her technological one.

The effect is a catch-22. There is an ideal of appearance to which most of these girls aspire which includes the use of certain technologies. If a girl's natural appearance is not already close to the ideal, desire for products to cover what does not

match it intensifies. But ultimately their use is dissatisfying. Appearance enhancers do not get rid of the body beneath it, and the body still holds a fundamental role in identity. Objects may signify membership to a social group, but they do not necessarily denote success within that group, as the advertisements imply. For these adolescents, individual identity is bodily based, reflected in objects but not defined by them. The object is an authentic part of a successful identity *only* if the body has enough of the natural components of the consensual ideal of beauty.

Imagine a world where all adolescent girls and the society they belonged to *did* embrace the overt use of products, saw them as an authentic component of identity. Every adjustment to natural appearance, from clothes and make-up to plastic surgery and liposuction, would be warranted as fair play in authentic expression of identity. The girls would be empowered by objects to control their identity, as is advocated in the Maybelline ads.

But the idea of empowerment by material culture is deceptive in a world where advertising plays a primary role in defining what is desirable in identity. Gloria Steinem writes that “the myth that advertisers simply follow readers is very strong” (1990:24). While the objects might empower girls in their efforts to achieve success, ideals of success are still largely controlled, not followed, by advertisers. Steinem describes “the seamy underside of publishing” (20). Addressing the difficulty of publishing women’s magazines without catering to the demands of advertisers, she discusses a publishing world in which a woman’s magazine cannot attract advertisements for products like cars and electronic technology, because the agencies do not believe that women buy these products without the aid of men. Conversely, a woman’s magazine cannot attract advertisements for women’s products if it does not accompany these ads with “complementary copy,” editorials or articles that advocate the use of the advertised products, sometimes even naming the brands:

Advertisers who demand such “complementary copy,” even in the absence of respectable studies [of female consumer groups], are clearly operating under a double standard. The same food companies place ads in *People* with no recipes. Cosmetics companies support *The New Yorker* with no regular beauty columns. [25]

This ad-edit linkage secures advertisers’ roles in defining, not following fashion. Just as the contents of the magazines are controlled by advertisers, the contents of the culture surrounding these magazines are controlled by the images and articles advertisers make abundantly available. Images of what men, women, teenagers, and children should be, according to advertisers of the objects of these identity groups, are accompanied by articles and editorials advocating achievement of these identities:

It’s all so familiar. A writer trying to make something of a nothing assignment; an editor laboring to think of new ways to attract ads; readers assuming that other women must want this ridiculous stuff; more women suffering for lack of information, insight, creativity, and laughter that could be on these same pages. [28]

Advertisements define and perpetuate identity groups and maintain communities of consumers.

In order to understand this science of advertising, it is helpful to apply Bruno Latour's (1990) conception of how scientific communities gain respectability and power. According to Latour, the production of knowledge is an attempt to dominate what he calls the *agonistic situation*, wherein different interpretations of the world are in competition. Domination of this competition is achieved through the mobilization of resources, and consequently, a community of allies. Latour says that by inscribing perceived elements of nature in writing, images, charts, models and indices, one is able to buttress one's interpretations of the world through cascades of simplified representations of those ideas. In other words, the more simple and superficial representations of an idea one is able to circulate in the world, the more allies one will be able to mobilize. The representations attract communities of allies who then perpetuate the production of similar representations.

The science of advertising mobilizes allies in the same manner. Advertisers' agonistic situation is a competition over different interpretations of identity. Whoever dominates the powerful knowledge of identity is allowed to define it in such a way that it requires use of the products being advertised. Domination is achieved through inscribing perceived elements of identity and then circulating those inscriptions, or representations. So advertisers circulate as many images of their definitions of identity as they are able to. We see them in magazines, on billboards, on TV, in newspapers, in store windows, in catalogs, and now, even "movies and books are being commissioned by companies like Federal Express" (Steinem 1990:28). The images are so abundant and consistent that we are convinced of their authority over the meanings of success. Because they depict silent, uncomplicated, and internally consistent worlds, it is difficult to question the validity of the nominal knowledge they convey. Ideal men are strong, rich, heterosexual, and mostly white; ideal women are fashionably dressed, heavily made-up, sexy, happy, heterosexual, and mostly white; ideal teenagers are independent, pure, individual, thin, clear-skinned, heterosexual, and mostly white; and so on. Individuals that subscribe to the identities defined by these images are "mobilized" into communities that then perpetuate the production of these identity groups. Hence the science of advertising and of identity construction.

Because there are only a few ways to *legally* commodify the actual organic body, commodified technology remains the most direct channel of control over definitions of identity. Instead of selling bodies, advertisers sell desires for ideal bodies and identities and the objects associated with them. The Hungarian scholar Ferenc Feher (1978) describes the economy of recently fallen Eastern European communism as a "dictatorship over needs." In the American market economy, it is not the government, but the production industry and advertisers who hold a dictatorship; a dictatorship over desires. By defining the ideals and boundaries of identity, advertisers virtually dictate adolescent desires based on the products that producers supply. Once they buy the objects of the desired identity, suppliers and advertisers reinvent their

desires, and they are convinced to buy again, as adolescents, as young women, and as adults. Because objects are tools used *by* individuals, it is difficult to see how they are used *on* individuals. By focusing attention on how individuals may use the products being marketed, advertisers detract attention from the larger picture and discourage adolescents from asking themselves *why* they desire what the products purport to offer.

The advertising strategies reviewed in this section show how adolescent desires and ideals are influenced by the covert authorities of advertising and production. Even some of the most basic common assumptions about adolescence, like the desire for authenticity and continuity, or the security of group membership, can be seen as dialectically related to advertising strategies: these desires may originate in certain bio-psychological or psychoanalytic processes, but they are then perpetuated by the market. This perpetuation discourages critical thinking and adaptive change in face of unfavorable cultural conditions that adolescents might choose to change if they were recognizable as authorities. Complacent competition and symbolic rebellion replace thoughtful redefinition of self.

#### *Media: Strategies of Containment*

Media narratives also act as covert authorities in the definition of adolescent selves. Because the meanings of television texts or teen romance novels are not always explicit, and sometimes contained by more explicit meanings, even adolescents who reject the overt authority of the media are affected by the covert meanings the media often communicates. The television show *Beverly Hills 90210* provides an illuminating example of the covert authority of the media.

Alert to overt authorities, contemporary adolescents act savvy about television and reject its authority. While watching TV, adolescent girls maintain a constant stream of criticism of whatever is flashing before them. Their criticism reflects a thorough knowledge of what goes on behind the scenes, and therefore, an understanding of everything as inauthentic. For example, when Donna, a character in *Beverly Hills 90210*, made her first appearance on one episode, Katie and Terri immediately started in on her: “the only reason she’s on the show is because her father is the producer” and “nose job city!,” followed by peels of laughter. At one point during another episode, Katie began very accurately predicting the camera movements and music cues, “OK, now zoom in and cue on the music.” All of the girls are experts in predicting the action, a game they seem to enjoy even while they criticize the show for being too predictable. They also criticize commercials for being stupid or transparent, or even political debates for the inauthenticity of the debaters. Paul Willis (1990: 49) talks about the media-reading skills of college-age British youth, arguing “no other group is considered as discriminating, cynical and resistant to the “hard sell.” Furthermore, no other group is as astute at decoding the complex messages, cross referencing and visual jokes of current advertising.”

The generation after the one he denotes, the one that includes these girls, has an even greater degree of media savvy and cynicism.

However, even this generation's media savvy is somewhat superficial, and today's television programs are covert in their communication of authority. The meanings behind contemporary mass media narratives are often obscured by what Mimi White (1987) calls "strategies of containment" in her essay on ideological analysis. These are strategies which explicitly address one aspect, while implying much more about other such aspects. Even while they criticize and scoff at *90210*, the girls come back every week to sit, glazed in front of the TV. The ambivalence and instability that adolescent girls feel regarding sexuality, authority, competition, and symbolic expression are easily tapped by the show, and their desires are channeled directly into the idealistically consistent and rewarding community of Beverly Hills. The *90210* cast provides a second, more cooperative community of peers to which its viewers may perform internally. When I asked Terri what name she wanted me to use in place of hers for this piece, she immediately replied, "Brenda," a primary character on *90210* (of course I could not use Brenda's name because it would confuse my discussion of the TV show). As much as she criticizes, she simultaneously embraces the fantastical stage on which *90210* allows her to perform.

Like advertisers and producers, media narratives also play a dialectical role in defining desires. *90210* both responds to and contributes to adolescent desires for autonomy and simultaneously channels those desires into complacent acceptance of the status quo. By addressing and resolving everyday contradictions within the same structure that spawned them, *90210* contains deviance, subtly discouraging ideals that might include critical thinking as part of their consequence.

### **Beverly Hills 90210**

*Kelly: At least I don't have to clear it with my mom before I ...*

*Brenda: I think we are going to need a raise in our allowance.*

*Kelly: It all depends on whether the doorman thinks you're cute or not.*

*Donna: Yeah, well if this is the real world, you can have it.*

In an essay titled "The End of Childhood," Neil Postman argues that "with the assistance of other media such as radio, film, and records, television has the power to lead us to childhood's end" (1988:154). Tracing the origins of our distinction between childhood and adulthood to the spread of literacy. Postman claims that children *became* children because of the instruction and learning required in order to become literate. Since the arrival of television, discernible differences between children and adults have begun to vanish. "The symbolic form of television does not require any special instruction or learning" (Postman 1988: 154), as do reading and writing. No preparation or education is necessary to understand television. No critical thinking is necessary. Furthermore, television does not segregate its audience. We can no longer

keep any secrets from children because television “forces the entire culture to come out of the closet” (Postman 1988: 155).

According to Postman, a new kind of person has emerged both on and off the television screen: the *adult-child*. The adult-child is somewhere between the ages of twenty and thirty, independent of overt authority figures, yet childlike in desires and behavior. He writes that television “promotes as desirable many of the attitudes that we associate with childishness—for example, an obsessive need for immediate gratification, a lack of concern for consequences, an almost promiscuous preoccupation with consumption” (157). The behavior of adults and children is suddenly indistinguishable.

Although I disagree with many of the conclusions Postman draws about television’s general role in our society, some of his ideas are clearly applicable in the case of one of current television’s most popular narratives: *Beverly Hills 90210*. During the hour between nine and ten o’clock every Thursday night, one can revel in the exciting and gratifying lives of a group of adult-children. The show collapses the differences between adults and children, reconciling what viewers love and hate about each. In fact, *90210* promulgates an ideology in which a number of important conflicting desires can coexist harmoniously. The program skillfully uses what Mimi White (1987) calls “strategies of containment,” wherein “[m]inority positions or deviations from the mainstream are introduced but are framed and held in place by more familiar, conventional representations” (156). All is resolved before there has been any chance for the audience to think critically about the issues brought up. Through strategies of containment, *90210* attempts to reconcile and direct its viewers ambivalent and conflicting feelings not only about adults and children, but about wealth and poverty, surfaces and substance, and fantasy and reality.

*At least I don’t have to clear it with my mom before I . . .*

Role-reversals between parents and children in *Beverly Hills 90210* is well established in the very first scene of the first episode of the show. The Walsh family, of which the twin son and daughter are named Brenda and Brandon, has just moved from Minneapolis to Beverly Hills. Their belongings are still strewn all over the house on the kids’ first day of school, and when Brandon comes down for breakfast, he cannot find the toaster. “Mom, where’s the toaster?,” he asks. Her response is to grab the toaster out of a cardboard box and, with a stubborn pout on her face, hurl the toaster onto the floor. Brandon, calm and collected in face of his mother’s tantrum, just shrugs and says, “I guess breakfast is out of the question this morning.” Immediately in the narrative, a reversal of parent-child relations is established: the parents throw tantrums and the children try to remain calm and deal with their problems maturely.

Conversely, any assertion of parental authority is scorned among the *90210* crowd. Kelly, the blond bombshell of the group, makes this explicit in her criticism of



Donna for having to “clear it with [her] mom” before doing something. In the first episode, Brenda is thoroughly humiliated when her mother accompanies her out to her new friend’s car on the night of Brenda’s first *90210* party. Not only is she forced to admit to her new friends that indeed she does have a mother who wants to be introduced, but she must endure the public disgrace of an argument over her curfew. The other girls are apparently unfamiliar with that word. From here on out, curfews are constantly an issue between the Walsh parents and their kids, and it is evident in their contestations that parents do not derive any natural authority from their status. They must negotiate their authority, instead. If they say 12:00, Brenda says 12:30, and they respond with 12:15.

In their compromise, the Walsh parents sound desperate to maintain some authoritative stance, yet they seem to know that if they do not negotiate, they will lose the respect and love of their children. In this sense, authority is shared on the basis of a logic that validates both positions in the argument. Because all of the members of the Walsh family are sympathetic, viewers see both sides of the argument as reasonable. Brenda and Brandon are in a new city, where in order to *be somebody* they need to conform to the norms of *90210* kids; their parents are in that same new city, enormous and ominous, and they are afraid of losing track of their children and giving up the mid-Western familial intimacy of their background. Throughout the Walsh’s adaptation to Beverly Hills, viewers on both sides of the authority question are reassured. Children win ultimate authority on most issues because they prove themselves worthy of autonomy. Brenda repeatedly reminds her parents that she always behaves well. Hence, adult viewers are assured that if they allow their children autonomy, they will make the right choices, and child viewers are assured that they are independent and capable, deserving of the authority their parents unjustly try to maintain. The adult-child reigns.

Of course, there are episodes in which Brenda, or one of the other kids in her group, does do the wrong thing. In a recent episode, Brenda denies her parents authority by lying to them and spending the weekend in Baja with her boyfriend, Dylan. While even her peers and brother discourage her from going, she is compelled to rebel against her parents’ ultimatum because they offer no rational reason why she should not go. The structural discourse of the show implies that she is justified in her rebellion against her parents, but that her mistake is in lying. During her secret weekend in Baja she finds out that Dylan lied *to her* a year ago, when he went to the same motel with another girl. The viewer is sympathetic with Brenda’s anger at Dylan, and lying becomes the villain of the episode. If Brenda is really responsible enough to be independent, she should be able to negotiate and defend her position against her parents, as she does with her curfew. So although Brenda’s decisions are overtly presented as wrong in this episode, she learns lessons from the experience which she would not have learned had she not gone. Implicit is the idea that parents’ ultimatums prevent children from learning the more important lessons of experience.

Brenda summarizes in a complaint to her brother, “How can I prove that I’m responsible if they won’t let me do anything?”

While Brenda has the maturity to forgive Dylan for lying once he admits his mistake, Brenda’s father is unable to do the same for Brenda and Dylan when Brenda is caught in her lie at the border, having forgotten to bring any identification to Mexico. The border control calls her father and he comes down to get her, furious at both her and Dylan. Once Brenda has expressed her regret and she and Dylan have apologized, Mr. Walsh’s anger is seen as irrational and unjustified. He becomes the child for not being mature enough to forgive, like Brenda was with Dylan. Even Mrs. Walsh regards her husband’s anger as excessive, and, in the last episode of the season, makes her own attempt to smooth things over by asking Dylan to overcome his anger at Mr. Walsh’s betrayal and try, once again, to apologize and make amends with him. But Mr. Walsh is stubborn and childish in his anger. His resistance to Dylan’s apologies is made to seem almost neurotic. The importance of honesty is buttressed by the importance of forgiveness. The show tells viewers that mature adults are honest with each other and forgive each other. Again, *mature adults* does not mean older people. In these two episodes, both child and adult learn lessons about honesty and forgiveness. As long as we are all open with and forgiving of each other, we can all be mature adult-children together.

When guidance or authority *is* called for, it is often institutional support that regulates the masses of adult-children. Brenda and Brandon are warmly received by their principal at West Beverly, and when Brenda’s grades begin to slip because of an affair she is having with an older man, the principal omnisciently intercedes and forces her to communicate with her parents about what is happening. Dylan deals with his alcohol problem by going to Alcoholics Anonymous; almost all of the kids and adults see, or have seen, psychologists; Brenda is forced by the border control to admit her lie about Baja. Authoritative parents are unnecessary because institutionalized guidance interferes with unacceptable behavior and forces everyone to be responsible.

What emerges is a community of individuals who are all equally susceptible to mistakes and equally equipped to do the right thing. All ages are leveled into a horizontal mass of people whose problems are all the same. Both parents and children struggle with the temptations and difficulties of affairs, alcohol and drug addiction, sex, sexual assault, pregnancy, disease, and so on. They deal with these temptations and difficulties by remaining in constant communication: everything is public information. A large majority of the scenes of each episode involve more than a few of the members of the *90210* peer group, and many of those scenes take place at their house of commons. There are constant reaction shots to reveal the usually consensual feelings and ideas of the community. Problems between people are dealt with through openness, and resolutions are achieved through forgiveness.

Because no one has any hierarchical authority over anyone else’s life,

however, they only participate in each other's decisions through advice, never ultimatums. Responsibility and maturity are learned through mistakes. In this way, the show is able to reconcile responsibility and irresponsibility, maturity and immaturity, the adult and the child. Because learning to be a responsible, mature adult requires experiential learning, the behavior of irresponsible, immature children is seen as inevitable and even necessary. To repeat the words of Neil Postman: "[90210] promotes as desirable many of the attitudes that we associate with childishness—for example, an obsessive need for immediate gratification, a lack of concern for consequences, an almost promiscuous preoccupation with consumption." By implying that irresponsible and immature behavior usually leads to the revelation of the rights and wrongs of adulthood, the show is able to advocate irresponsibility and responsibility simultaneously, appealing to both the adult and the child in all of the adult-children watching.

Kelly's advice to Brenda, "Have a good time, that's what I always do," is validated as an ideology. Having a good time will gratify us in the immediate, and teach us how to do the right thing in the long run.

*I think we are going to need a raise in our allowance.*

*Beverly Hills 90210* also attempts to reconcile conflicts in the American consciousness over the meanings of wealth and poverty. One of the music-accompanied opening sequences of the very first episode reveals the unbelievable wealth among students at West Beverly High. The shots are self-consciously exaggerated, emphasizing the difference between these kids and most viewers. Teachers at the high school arrive in small cars, contrasting with the flashiness of the students and establishing them as outsiders to the wealth within the text. The two most important outsiders within the text, however, are Brenda and Brandon, who, upon arrival at school, agree that they are going to need raises in their allowances.

Brenda's and Brandon's positioning as outsiders to this community of wealth is extremely useful in positioning the viewer in the text. At first, we are allowed to associate ourselves and gawk with them, as outsiders. As they adapt to their new lives and wealth in Beverly Hills, however, we adapt along with them. Brenda and Brandon act as characterized fictional readers, who guide us in our understanding of the text, and consequently, our understanding of extreme wealth. As they explore the world of West Beverly High, they discover for us that although wealthy people seem different on the surface, they are really *just like us*.

Brandon's romance with the richest girl at West Beverly in the first episode sets up Brandon's, and our, initiation into the zip code of wealth. He meets her because they are both alone at what he later finds out is her own party; their loneliness in the midst of hundreds of people brings them together. Because Brandon is attracted to her body and mind before he knows her reputation and wealth, he does not just assess her as a rich and beautiful party-girl. Instead, he gets to know her through her

problems, her loneliness and confusion over who she is, and is ultimately touched by the difficulties being rich entails. Marianne is presented as victimized by her wild and wealthy sixties parents who pressure her to lead an even wilder life. The implication is that the rich are just as oppressed as the poor and we should not, as even the rich kids at West Beverly do, resent people like Marianne.

To further deflect any resentment of the rich, Marianne's oppression is skillfully presented as the fault of "excessive" sixties parents, not Marianne's money itself. This is extremely important in a period of history during which people are finally beginning to express resentment of the widened The Gap between rich and poor that developed during the Reagan and Bush eras. Excessive wealth needs to be accounted for in cultural texts, and *90210* needs to treat the subject while still encouraging its viewers to consume. Marianne is both rich and a victim, allowing viewers to sympathize with her. Yet her oppression is really caused by the excesses of the liberal sixties, not those of the conservative eighties. Hence viewers' resentment of the wealthy is subdued because they see that the wealthy are also victims of oppression, and at the same time, viewers' desires to consume and be wealthy is maintained because the problems of the rich are not actually caused by wealth.

The character Andrea provides a second angle on the reconciliation between wealth and poverty. She is relatively poor and does not live in the 90210 zip code. Even though she is less affluent, she manages to make a place for herself among the West Beverly kids. In the last episode of the season, she is still insecure about her belonging to the group when she incorrectly believes that she is not invited to Kelly's mom's wedding. This constant insecurity that she is really an outsider allows the program to deal with the viewer-outsiders' insecurities that they, too, could not really belong to such a wealthy group. In this case, Andrea acts as a characterized fictional reader. Her doubts allow the narrative to reassure her, and viewers, that her belonging to their group has nothing to do with money. The implication is that you do not need money to mingle with the rich kids. Andrea's determination to go to a good school and her hard work are enough to bring her into that circle. Everyone, even the less affluent, has access to the benefits of *90210*.

The contradiction between this ideal of equal access and Brenda's and Brandon's decision to demand higher allowances in order to fit in reflects an ideology that contains ideas which challenge the meaning of wealth. Everyone feels they have the potential to be a part of the world of *90210*. All they have to do is demand more money from their parents.

*It all depends on whether the doorman thinks you're cute or not.*

The importance of appearance in *90210* is rarely contested. For the most part, the show seems to revel in surfaces, and appearance is embraced as one of the most important components of identity, especially for women. As Kelly explains, "It all depends on whether the doorman thinks you're cute or not."

However, there is some attempt to incorporate an understanding of identity that focuses on *what's inside*. Marianne and Andrea are, again, both examples of this shot at reconciling conflicting ideas over what role appearance plays in identity, while containing the threat of substance to surface. In Marianne's case, it is not only her money, but her sex appeal that gives her a reputation as a party-girl, and even compels her to act the part. Because Brandon gets to know her as a sensitive person instead of as a party-girl, he reveals that she has a beautiful inside, as well as body and face. Similarly, Andrea is not quite as beautiful as the rest of her friends, but she is still accepted among them, and Brandon even dates her now and then. Her intelligence, rather than her appearance, is the substance of her character.

This rare focus on substance rather than surface is fairly forcefully contained, however, even in episodes where appearance and identity are overtly addressed. For instance, during Brandon's and Marianne's hot-tub conversation about the depth of Marianne's identity reaching beyond her party-girl appearance, Brandon does not allow her to go so far as to transgress gender boundaries, which are an important part of the appearance and identity connection. When she suggests that they take off all of their clothes, he objects, supposedly because he does not want to objectify and exploit her. However, in objecting, he refers to her aggressiveness as an inappropriate role-reversal. Even while the depth and complexity of Marianne's identity are being explored, she is not allowed to transcend the passive role of woman. In Andrea's case, the importance of intelligence, instead of appearance, in her identity is contained by the fact that she wears her intelligence. That is, she is allowed to be appreciated for her intelligence only if she incorporates it into her appearance. She wears smart clothes, smart hairstyles, and smart glasses.

Ultimately, *90210* encourages viewers to understand appearance as an integral part of identity while still incorporating the minority position of "it's what's inside that counts." In one classroom scene in the first episode, a girl who is dramatized by the music and reaction shots as fat and ugly, searches for a seat in class. Everyone throws bags and books onto the seats next to them in hopes that she will not sit there. Kelly tells the fat girl that the seat across from her is saved, and she is in turn rescued by Brenda, who walks in just as the fat girl demands to know for whom the seat is saved. Viewers already know that Brenda is worried about making friends on her first day of school, so it is difficult to resist being relieved that she finds a seat with someone friendly and beautiful. Because Brenda has already been established as a sympathetic character, even if one objects to the treatment of the fat girl, one cannot help being happy that Brenda, who is attractive inside and out, gets to sit there instead. In an appeal to materialism, *90210* constantly validates a focus on appearance and surfaces, even while claiming to explore possible contradictions between appearance and identity, surfaces and substance.

*Yeah? Well if this is the real world, you can have it.*

Related to containment of the threat substance poses to surfaces is *90210*'s attempt to contain the threat reality poses to fantasy. The most important thing the show must do is keep its ratings high. In other words, *90210* wants its viewers to keep watching. In order for them to keep watching, viewers have to believe in the merit of fantasy, or the world as seen through the television screen. Reality outside of the television is a threat.

One episode provides an illuminating example of how reality is contained in *90210*. A well-known band, Color Me Badd, comes to Beverly Hills and Donna, Brenda, Kelly, and David decide to try to meet them. In essence, they try to turn the fantasy of the fame, glory, and sex appeal associated with the band into a reality for themselves. Kelly is at first hesitant to buy into the fantasizing of fandom, but she finally gets talked into going to the hotel where Color Me Badd is staying, and is ultimately rewarded for it.

One of the first scenes of their search for the band is presented as a music-accompanied, video-style detective scene. They have already begun to participate in a fantasy, sunglasses inside and all. During the course of the evening, however, Kelly is the only one who makes it in to see the band. Donna, by contrast, runs into her mother, who is having an extra-marital affair. She, Brenda, and David, her boyfriend, go home together. There is much talk about how imperfect everybody is, and how it does not mean anything about their love for their children. Donna goes home to embrace her mother and forgive her, although still upset.

Meanwhile, Brandon and Brenda have a conversation in the bathroom discussing the woes of being human and fallible: "You think you know where your life is headed, then you get off an elevator on the wrong floor [where Donna discovered her mother] and, bang, everything's different," says Brandon. And Brenda responds, "Yeah, I mean it's so surreal. This morning she was Donna and now she's Donna, but a completely different Donna." At this point, the wise father interjects, "Same Donna, more complicated world." Later, they all meet at their regular hangout, to deal with Donna's problem communally. As Donna is leaving her house with David, she complains, "I never knew what it was like to have problems," to which David responds, "Welcome to the real world." Donna, uncomforted, retorts, "Yeah, well if this is the real world, you can have it."

Later in the show, things seem a *little* brighter. Then Kelly arrives with the band. Donna is dumb struck, "I can't believe they're here, and their eating hamburgers!" As they break into a song directed at Donna, of which the lyrics are "Dream on, dream away," Donna leans over to David and chides, "Weren't you saying something about the real world?"

This episode reconciles the contradictions between fantasy and reality while clearly advocating the superiority of fantasy. It begins with the kids efforts to turn a

fantasy into a reality by meeting a band whose members are of the highest star status. The plan backfires when reality interferes. Donna's mother's affair becomes an obstacle to fantasy, a reality too powerful to transform. Reality is suddenly perceived as surreal in its inconsistency and fallibility, and the world seems more complicated than it should be. Donna can only think of escaping the horror of reality. When Kelly arrives with the band, reality is transformed into an infinitely more engrossing and satisfying fantasy. They could not succeed in turning fantasy into reality, so, instead, they turn reality into fantasy. This part of the episode is so implausible and dream-like that it is as if they are all dreaming away as an escape from the dissatisfaction of real life.

Implicit is the idea that this is not the real world, but it is easy to replace one's real world with this sort of fantasy. All you have to do is turn on the television! The layers of fantasy and reality are made very complex in *90210*: the actors and producers of the show are involved in the actual Beverly Hills *scene* in reality, simply by virtue of being actors; the characters are involved in the Beverly Hills scene because they live there, and consequently, they are involved in the scene of producers and actors. In interviews with the actors, they sound very similar to their characters; and, in interviews of Beverly Hills High School students, the students also sound similar to the television characters. The show could almost be called a documentary. And yet the documentary is about people for whom fiction is fundamentally important. In watching the show, reality is transformed into fantasy, which is presented as infinitely more rewarding than real life. Its narrative structure provides consistency and resolution. The threat of reality is contained by the ideology of fantasy.

All of these strategies of containment—prescribing a framework for conflicting ideas in which a dominant ideology is favored over the minority position—are components of what seems a concerted effort to defend the values of the eighties against rising criticism. Viewers of *90210* are told that, deep down, we all face the same problems and we all are equally equipped to resolve these problems. Adolescent audiences are encouraged to subscribe to an ideology of appearance, individual wealth, and most importantly, fantasy—and to unabashedly cultivate their desires for these temptations. Unequal access to control over the sources of satisfaction is denied, and the audience is pacified by the show's positioning of its viewers as a horizontal mass of people whose problems are equally grave. *Beverly Hills 90210* places its viewer in the consensual community that meets at The Peach Pit every Thursday night, a community in which harmony is derived from autonomy, materialism, superficiality, and denial.

## Conclusion

I have tried to show how the female adolescent processes of rejecting overt authority are intertwined with mass culture in contemporary American society. This paper has illuminated the links between the biological, psychological, sociocultural,

and mass cultural influences on adolescent identity formation, in addition to demonstrating the difficulties of distinguishing them from one another. The processes of adolescence are dynamic, and while the temptation is strong to pin blame, to match each effect to a cause, the resulting inaccuracy will only further obscure the fickle truths.

Still, it remains important to recognize that with changing times, different authorities discussed in this paper have greater and lesser influences. While perhaps in the fifties, overt authorities were less contested, in the eighties, covert authorities seem to go unrecognized and are therefore extremely powerful. The eighties have spawned a culture of denial and escapism in which compulsive consumption distracts most citizens from the problems intrinsic in what and how they consume. This denial and lack of critical thought allows market and mass culture to expertly exploit those who are not in positions of power: for example, adolescent girls. The ambivalence and insecurity of adolescent girls is recognized, responded to, and perpetuated by market and mass culture, more so now than ever before. The status quo of capitalism gains strength by offering superficial remedies to those whom it does not adequately serve.

The covert forces that absorb youthful resistance and guide youthful redefinition can be awesome. If market and mass culture were recognized as perpetuating as well as responding to cultural conditions, some of the needs that seem inevitable in adolescence might dissipate. Covert authorities rendered overt would allow adolescents to think more critically about the choices they make, and reduce their tendencies to reject authorities simply because they recognize them as such. There are skeletons in the closet of this culture that, upon emergence, might inspire adolescents of all ages to favor action over complacency.

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