

Gender and Popular Culture

Gender and Popular Culture:

Identity Constructions and Representations

Edited by

Kusha Tiwari

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INTRODUCTION

Cultures ranging from folk to mass culture, with further emerging subcultures, interrogate as well as consolidate social constructions and identities. Popular culture is a comprehensive and highly mediated phenomenon that consists of an extensive range of cultural texts and practices, from films to newspaper and television, and designing computer games to creating cartoon series. The social recycling of identity through these subcultures over time creates realities that are naturalized, historicized, and ritualized. In particular, gender dynamics acquire significant material and symbolic dimensions in the workings of popular culture. The possibilities in popular culture in contemporary times have blurred the boundaries between the virtual and physical reality. This blurring of boundaries has created new parameters of identity construction and fashioning that have in turn led to the realignment of gender identities.

Gender as a social and religious construct is continually produced, consumed, and represented in popular culture, and it is these processes of consumption, production, and representation that interact to create what we commonly identify as gender identities. Media spaces/texts are central to the popular culture as they construct narratives of fanciful youthful experiences. Representations of gender in mass media/new media create exclusive ideas of masculinity and femininity that are internalized and imbibed as behavioural attributes by society. The stereotypes associated with the masculine and the feminine further affect the developing understanding of the adolescent mind about their environment. Men and women are expected to perform, believe in, and adhere to precise gender roles and stereotypes that have been established by society. Males are expected to be strong, self-reliant, and athletic, whereas females are expected to be gentle, submissive, and attractive nurturers. Social conformity to such gender attributes is boosted by media representations. Gender differences in dress and behaviour are overtly pronounced in television advertisements featuring children that feature little boys as dirty, naughty, and rowdy, while the little girls are projected as delicate creatures in beauty soap commercials. It is as if girls cannot play in mud puddles, or boys are not innocent enough to promote beauty soaps. Our daily experience is continually mediated through such omnipresent symbolic media practices, including popular movie songs that portray women as

agents of titillation. Video games and cartoons have few female superhero characters. There are also Whatsapp jokes on gender stereotypes spammed in bulk and pornography that legitimizes overtly violent and degrading sexual acts, among other things. There are other facets of the popular culture that are part of lived experiences, such as wedding spectacles, religious rituals, glamorized festive extravaganzas, and the gendered world of sports. All these cultural constituents create/promote gender identities that are mediated through discourses of power and inequality.

On the other hand there are counter-popular-culture narratives that contend that the categories of sex and gender are not fixed but fluid, and should not be restricted to conventional gender identity binaries. Intersex identities face constant stigma and oppression due to the homophobic and sexist reactions based on the popular misrepresentation of these queer individualities. Popular culture thrives on the contradictory nature of reality and its resulting chaos as opposed to dominant elite cultures that apparently generate the principle of social harmony. But when it comes to understanding these plural experiences of identity formations in contemporary times, we realize that there are certain gaps in the popular conception/perception of the “different” subjectivities. Trans identities challenge the rigid classification of the gendered self and have been an integral part of our culture and mythology. Thus, it is pertinent to explore those aspects of popular culture that resist or reproduce dominant gender norms and stereotypes. Gender itself is a deeply political and contentious concept, and due to its performative nature it becomes so customary and naturalized in the practical world that it is imperceptible. Thus, oversimplification and polarized perceptions of gender subtleties in/through differing cultural modes tend to (mis)represent queerness as an aberration, giving rise to gender phobia that is reflected in homophobic jokes and negative cultural depictions. There have been many films and media forums that have marginalized and stereotyped LGBTQI identities. The film and television world’s use of queerness has been a matter of active public debate in recent decades with websites, films, magazines, and other cultural products producing and dismantling queer stereotypes. Queer issues in mainstream cinema especially are dealt with hostility and bias, wherein the LGBTQI characters are mostly depicted as caricatures, socially deviant, or psychopathic. However, in recent times there has been greater sensitivity towards handling issues of bisexuality and homosexuality with compassion and open-mindedness.

Gender as a social construct is appropriated through different variants of popular culture in various ways in day-to-day life. Popular culture plays a

very important role in constructing exclusive ideas of femininity, masculinity, gender relations, and perceptions. The culture of mass media and new media continually engages with and influences the changing cultural perceptions in society about gender roles and stereotypes. So, sometimes, there are confident expressions of women's power alongside graphic reports of violence against women or rape within the same space as cheeky ads for escort services. Thus, both the virtual and real worlds are dominated by gender politics and sexist appropriations. Against this background, the scholarly articles in this volume cover diverse areas of interaction and engagement between gender, culture, and media. The first article by Bronwyn T. Williams, "Girl Power in a Digital World: Considering the Complexity of Gender, Literacy, and Technology," explores how very young children initially transcend gender roles only to be swept up in the dominant culture's gender expectations as they proceed through primary and secondary school. Boys who, as toddlers, give teddy-bear tea parties eventually pick up sticks and pretend to shoot laser beams at each other, while the girls who pretend to be pirates become more and more curious about makeup and fashion magazines. All of this often happens much to the chagrin and concern of their progressively minded parents, who think that they can raise their children to not be bound by such conventional gender roles. In terms of literacy and identity, this means that the adolescent students in our classes are often balancing the identity demands of the institution against those from outside. At the same time we, as their teachers, are balancing our responses to students between the expectations of the institution and what we perceive as the necessities of the adult culture and our empathy for the pressures on students from their peers, families, and the world outside the classroom door.

Historically, the majority of studies on children's image making have emphasized the appraisal of children's graphic development and/or the artistic qualities of children's pictures, thereby assigning them the status of self-contained visual artifacts and objects of analysis in their own right. However, such a product-oriented paradigm of inquiry places major value on the "artifactual residue" of image production, while generally overlooking the contextual complexities of drawing practice as a lived social and cultural experience. In this context, the next article by Olga Ivashkevich, "Children's Drawing as a Sociocultural Practice: Remaking Gender and Popular Culture," reconceptualizes children's self-initiated drawing as a sociocultural practice interwoven with discourses of childhood and gender, and embedded in children's peer interactions, daily activities, and participation in popular culture. It illustrates this premise by discussing the collaborative image making of two preadolescent girls as a

complex process of negotiating and resisting sociocultural ideas about femininity that dominate everyday practices and popular culture texts.

The next chapter by Shilpi Singh titled “Consumerism in Indian Weddings and the Role of the Media in Producing the Perfect Brides” studies how class becomes amenable to the transformation of taste and distinctions, as formulated by Bourdieu through an in-depth understanding of the role of the media, image building, and consumption. The economic reforms that took place in India along with the dynamic role of image making that is played by the media produced a hegemonic discourse stressing the aspiration of what is a good and desirable life, affecting individuals and communities, and their relationship with one another. The author tries to understand concepts like symbolic consumption and aspirational consumption, where the aesthetic and the social signal given by the commodity trump the utility of the commodity. The paper uses weddings as a metaphor while engaging with these practices, and also discusses the significant role played by the media in accelerating such practices and impacting individuals at the micro level.

The next group of chapters focuses on the cinematic or televised representation of complexities of gender identity and cultural constructions. Anna Halipiliias’s “*Sherlock: an Affective and Violent Depiction of English Masculinity*” talks about the popular British series *Sherlock*, which offers an affective and violent depiction of English masculinity. Affect is established through mimesis – the mimicry of contemporary London. Affective mimicry also takes place, with the characters’ bodily states affecting viewer disposition through processes like emotional contagion. Spectacle is also used in an attempt to satisfy viewer needs and desires. Holmes, the credible protagonist, addresses a crisis of English masculinity, a stoicism suppressing masculine assertion of rebellion and violence. The predominant masculinities portrayed in the text are repressed masculinity, rational masculinity, and masculinity in extremes, all of which struggle to assume the unnatural and stoic nature of the English gentleman. The viewer sympathizes with the protagonist by often seeing the diegesis from his perspective, situating the viewer in the text by attempting to engage them in affective violence. The violence statistics of the television series suggest that both the primary aggressor and primary victim are solo white UK men aged twenty to thirty-five. This suggests a warring demographic unsure of its place within its culture.

The next chapter by Karen Gabriel “The Country in the City: the Bylanes of Identity” talks about a Hindi film, *Aamir*, which presents us with a set

of problematics about the Indian nation state and its minority communities, specifically the Muslims. The important concerns discussed are the extent to which the principles of exclusion and othering are foundational to the formation and sustenance of the nation state, and the ways in which these manifest cinematically. While examining these, this chapter examines the ways in which the city – the most significant form of social organisation in the twentieth century – is made to function as a signifier specifically in this film, and more generally, in cinema, the most significant cultural form of the twentieth century. It links this to the ways in which discursive continuities are cinematically established between a country as an exclusive and unequal nation space and cityscape. Given that nations and cities are definitively characterized by inequities and exclusion, the figuring of the city in cinema may be either utopian or dystopian, depending on whose city is being figured and by whom.

This book has contributions that talk about how women have been breaking the glass ceiling in the world of business as well as in fields that have been primarily the masculine domain. The next set of chapters explores women in real-life scenarios who have been pioneers in making their mark in history and shattering popular perceptions about their abilities or inabilities. Richard Ravalli's chapter "The Bodybuilding and Entertainment Careers of Cory Everson" discusses the history of women's bodybuilding, focusing on the six-time Ms. Olympia champion Cory Everson (today Everson-Donia), who represented the sport's early focus on femininity over muscularity. The paper emphasizes the need for a nuanced understanding of Everson that underscores the role she played in reshaping the American woman of the late twentieth century. Ravalli further emphasizes the inadequate evaluation of Everson's subsequent film and television career, which tends to obscure her importance as a pioneer in displaying large female physiques on screen. Ravalli concludes by noting that the legacy of Everson's "feminine muscularity," an impressive and complex blend of power and beauty, lives on, evidenced in part by athletes who continue to cite her as an inspiration.

The next chapter in the volume is Rabi Narayan Kar's "Women Managers in Developing Countries: Challenges and Strategic Responses," which talks about how women managers (or aspirants) face various challenges in management enterprises, which are accelerated due to the demonstration of typical stereotypes of vertical segregation that place men at a higher level than women in the same professional group. This chapter provides a contextual analysis that focuses on the challenges that women managers face in developing countries due to gender barriers and their strategic

responses. Using both the extant literature and relevant extracts of responses from select practising women managers, it aims to depict, document, and expose the gender prejudices, discriminations, condescending outlooks, discriminatory performance parameters, and local cultural bias. In this context, the present chapter explores a futuristic agenda for aiding women managers and operations to enhance their proficiency and cultural intelligence towards a mindset that will facilitate the effective handling of these issues in a transitional environment.

The next chapter by Sidharth Mishra on “Women Moving Mountains: a Eulogy for Contemporary Indian Women Activists” is a paper based on Mishra’s more than a quarter-of-a-century-long experience as a newspaper reporter, giving him the opportunity to see Indian society evolve from very close quarters. The paper explores the evolution of the Indian society especially with relation to the role of women. There have been powerful women personalities and writers like Shivani and Mannu Bhandari in Hindi literature, Mahasweta Devi in Bangla literature, Amrita Pritam in Punjabi literature, and Qurratulain Hyder in Urdu literature who, through their writing, have questioned dominant patriarchal structures advocating fixed gender roles and representations. There are women who have moved mountains, in recent times, with their politically challenging actions and socially motivating personae. One such charismatic and determined woman is Neelam Krishnamoorthy, who has fought a relentless battle for the last two decades against the apathy of the political and judicial system in India. There are many such exemplary women figures who have not only travelled a different road but also been beacons of hope for the Indian women through their persistence, questioning spirit, and success. The paper delineates the struggles, lives, and success stories of such contemporary Indian women who are rewriting history with their politically and socially challenging actions.

The next group of chapters deal with issues of gender and sexuality as presented in ancient and medieval literatures, as well as the complexities of gender diversity in ancient Greek and Indian mythologies. Bec Rengel’s chapter “Hippocrates’ ‘Women’: Queering Gender in Ancient Greece” discusses the Hippocratic text of Phaethousa and Nanno, who were assigned female at birth but later found their bodies spontaneously becoming masculinized, thoroughly destabilizing cultural norms about “maleness” and “femaleness.” They became subject to the controlling powers of physicians who desperately tried to re-establish an “intelligible gender” for their bodies; the language used by the author also becomes a controlling factor, presenting them as merely diseased women. They thus

become liminal in and limited by the gender binary. The theory of queer unhistoricism allows researchers to fully explore Phaethousa and Nanno as the ambiguous beings they were, providing critics with the language to liberate them from the strictures of cultural normativity. The paper states that gender ambiguity, in all its forms, is not something to be feared, but is instead a natural part of human existence.

The next chapter by Kusha Tiwari, “Deconstructing Gender Binaries: Indian Myths and Contemporary Reality,” takes up the issue of gender ambiguity in Indian mythology. This paper looks into how myths and mythologies in India shape the understanding of the self and how they become significant articulations exploring the sense of being that is moulded by these fabulous narratives. At the same time, the paper also looks into how, over the ages, there has been a rift in the mythological and historical sense of the self as the multifaceted self gets subsumed in the normative cultural identifications and regional identity formations over time. The self under discussion is androgynous, diverse, and non-categorical which, with changing cartographical realities, acquires cultural specific traits and becomes straitjacketed. The religious mythological tales are narratives outside the purview of historical veracity, and are thus understood and looked at as the human’s attempt to find meaning and value in life. They become valuable not because they have any geo-historical value, but rather because these tales trace the development of human imagination from prehistoric times, as depicted in Palaeolithic cave paintings. The modern gender self-fashioning and identity formations are the result of convergences and divergences in the mythological and historical reality within regional cultural contexts. Every region in the diverse Indian subcontinent has its own unique religious folklore with overlapping narrative boundaries colliding and merging with the surrounding religiosities. These overlapping, merging boundaries create imaginative shifts and variations in the religious version/s of popular religious myths in the subcontinent. Thus, there are multiple versions of a particular mythological tale, exuding ancient wisdom on all aspects of human and terrestrial life forms. The scope of the paper showcases how gender diversity in Hindu mythology acknowledges the simultaneous, peaceful existence of queer voices with cisgender identities.

The volume as a whole looks into the issues of created identity perceptions in mass media, social media, new media, films, advertisements, daily soaps, songs, the corporate world, and mythology. In the present times, when our physical reality and identity are intricately connected with multiple virtual identities that we embrace through Whatsapp, Facebook,

or Twitter, it becomes all the more important for us to understand that it is we who are contributing to the stereotyping of identities, as we are both the producers as well as consumers of popular gender practices. The volume engages with the ideas around the performative aspects of gender and its political implications and outcomes. The articles in this volume also raise the point of how we need to further our understanding of issues where greater and coordinated actions at the global level are needed to rise up and speak against any kind of oppression and discrimination related to race, class, community, and gender, so as to facilitate and develop a world without pain, agony, and violence.

GIRL POWER IN A DIGITAL WORLD: CONSIDERING THE COMPLEXITY OF GENDER, LITERACY, AND TECHNOLOGY

BRONWYN T. WILLIAMS

In my more cynical moments I have often envisioned culture and its influence on our construction of identities as a giant wave. Try as we might to resist, the wave is going to pick everyone up with it and carry us all along in the same direction. Swimming against it only ends in exhaustion. The only choice is to swim with the wave and try to land somewhere safe.

This aquatic metaphor seems particularly apt when thinking about questions of gender and identity. I've lost track of the number of children I have seen, or have been told about by parents, who when very young seemed to transcend gender roles, only to be swept up in the dominant culture's gender expectations as they proceeded through primary and secondary school. Boys who, as toddlers, had given teddy-bear tea parties eventually picked up sticks and pretended to shoot laser beams at one another, and girls who had pretended to be pirates became more and more curious about makeup and fashion magazines. All of this happened much to the chagrin and concern of their progressively minded parents, including myself, who thought that they could raise their children to not be bound by such conventional gender roles.

I know that my depiction of children being swept along in conventional gender roles is a generalization that does not reflect all the choices and activities of individual children. Many parents and teachers can point to ways in which adolescents have defied dominant gender roles, and ways in which those roles have changed. Yet, looking at how the culture at large constructs expectations of gender identity is important for examining and understanding the forces at work on individual girls and boys, and how they adapt or oppose such forces. I also would never make the argument that gender identities are connected to immutable biological traits. Still,

with those disclaimers in mind, the cultural power of conventional gender roles often seems inexorable. Like a postmodern King Canute, I am acutely aware of my inability to turn back the relentless waves of culture.

The power of culture to shape gender identities becomes particularly crucial for adolescents making the transition from child to adult. As young people build their adult identities they constantly look to the culture around them, from family to peers to popular media, for guidance and hints. They seek the assurance that they are becoming insiders – people who will be accepted by the dominant culture – and not those who will be shut out and shunned. Yet, as adults, we offer little coherent, direct instruction in such matters. Of course, we give the intermittent words of wisdom, lectures, admonishments, or encouragement – all of which may or may not be attended to by any given adolescent. But the reality is that most adolescents spend a great deal of time and energy observing adults, popular culture, and their peers, and then obsessing about how to interpret and incorporate what they see into their values and actions.

In school, then, this means that adolescents are working non-stop to shape their gender identities in ways that fit the expectations of the institution, the larger culture's perception of the institution, and their peers – and not necessarily in that order. Although the institution of school is a powerful instrument in reproducing the ideology of the dominant culture, it is not the only instrument, and the values of the classroom often run counter to the values of the rest of the society. In terms of literacy and identity, this means that the adolescent students in our classes are often balancing the identity demands of the institution against those from outside. At the same time we, as their teachers, are balancing our responses to students between the expectations of the institution and what we perceive as the necessities of the adult culture and our empathy for the pressures on students from their peers, families, and the world outside the classroom door. Sometimes, all this balancing goes well; other times – well, we all know what it feels like when it comes crashing down.

The Paradox of Doing Well

As I discussed in Williams (2004), for adolescent boys, the conflict between the expectations of school and the gender identity expectations of the larger culture often manifests itself in literacy classrooms over issues of narrative violence and resistance to reading and writing that focuses on emotion and fiction over plot and action.

The situation for adolescent girls, as one might expect, manifests itself in different behaviours but raises concerns just the same. There has been increasing attention in the last decade on the way gender socialization affects girls in school. One of the best-known reports is a document on “How Schools Short Change Girls” (American Association of University Women, 1992), which shows that girls received less attention in the classroom than boys and less encouragement for their efforts, and suffered sexual harassment from boys. In addition, the study shows that many classrooms created an atmosphere of competition among the students. Such an atmosphere played to the strengths of boys who were socialized to compete, but often intimidated girls who were more often socialized to collaborate. These findings and other subsequent research (Sadker and Sadker 1994) have made teachers more aware of how gender identities influence both student behaviour as well as teacher responses to such behaviour.

It is worth noting, however, that much of the concern of “How Schools Short Change Girls” was focused on girls being discouraged from pursuing studies in math and science. Literacy education seemed to be one area where the news was good for girls in the classroom, because they seemed to be doing well with reading and writing. In terms of both literacy testing and anecdotally from teachers, girls in general were regarded as more successful and willing readers and writers than boys. Girls more often gave teachers what they were looking for in assignments in literacy classes – character-driven, non-violent, open and reflective interpretations of readings and writing, and assignments were usually neater than boys’ work. The general success of girls in literacy classes, and the struggle of boys with the same work, has led some educators to rethink how boys are socialized and where this might conflict with teacher and institutional expectations.

What some scholars argue has been overlooked in framing the discussion of gender roles in these terms is that the very success of girls in literacy classes may create a cultural paradox for girls as readers and writers in general. If girls follow the assignments and rules in the class they will receive good grades and learn how to produce the kind of work the institution of school values. A number of studies over the years have found that girls tend to read and write more about relationships with family and friends, romance, shopping, and other subjects that do not challenge the order or values of school as an institution (Finders 1997; Hunt 1995; MacGillivray and Martinez 1998; Sanford 2005). Even as some teachers and researchers have worried about the action-laden narratives of boys,

they have worried about the traditional romance or consumer-focused narratives of girls. Of particular concern are the narratives from girls that portray females as passive characters, waiting for the male hero to save the day or complete the story by completing the romance. If boys seem to often be rewriting the traditional dragon-slaying narrative, the concern is that girls, from a very early age, are reading about and rewriting the traditional marriage plot, which depends on a male hero. Such narratives do not disrupt the classroom or the institutional goals of the school, but they do reinforce a set of values where males are problem solvers and dominant and girls are comforters and subsumed into the male story.

At the same time, if girls follow assignments and class rules they may become successful rule-followers and test-takers, but be less willing to take risks or experiment with reading and writing. By quietly doing their work well, girls may also find that they do not receive as much of the teacher's time and consideration (Sanford 2005). If teachers are not worried about girls, they also may not pay as much attention to them. Sanford found that teachers perceived that girls did better as a group but produced fewer exceptional, risk-taking readers and writers than did boys.

Sanford also raises the question of whether girls' success with the traditional print-based literacies that continue to dominate literacy education in most schools puts them at a disadvantage with regards to the literacy practices that are most prevalent outside the school walls. As girls succeed in traditional school-sanctioned literacy practices, "they are gaining the skills required for admission to post-secondary education, but as they 'gain' on the boys in formal educational success (identified through grades and awards) they lose ground in other ways, particularly the development of skills in alternative and computer-based literacies" (2005, 305). Girls may be mastering certain kinds of literacies, according to this argument, but not the ones that are connected to their daily lives or that are truly valued in the culture (Haas, Tulley, and Blair 2002). By succeeding in outdated school-sanctioned print literacies, girls limit their expectations and perceptions of what they believe literacy can be (Marsh 2003).

Girls' Online Worlds

The troubling aspect of any discussion of cultural constructions of identity is that we must inevitably engage in generalizations that, if we are not careful, can become calcified ways of perceiving individuals and result in rigid equations about behaviour. For example, adolescent girls prefer to

write about relationships – this student is an adolescent girl, ergo, she will want to write about relationships. When such rigid expectations result in institutionally unimaginative or personally inflexible responses, no student benefits. What is more useful is to reflect on the complexities of such generalizations, and then look for ways to think about culture and identity in the classroom in a way that connects the insights gleaned from such reflections with the flexibility demanded by a humane response to individual students.

As an example of how we might approach such issues, let's pursue one concern about how gender identity affects girls' literacy practices – girls' literacy practices are less connected to computer and online technology, which puts them at a disadvantage with boys who are more comfortable with the digital world. Certainly, this is a concern in a world where much of the communication takes place through digital media. If girls are not comfortable writing with a computer, let alone reading and writing in the developing genres that mark computer-mediated literacy, they will find themselves at an increasing disadvantage in school, the workplace, and the society in general. The degree to which males continue to dominate fields of computer programming and design contributes to the concern that some have over how much girls are involved in digital literacies. The astonishing growth of the computer and video-game industry as a dominant force in popular culture has reinforced the sense that boys are dominating computer use in terms of interest and abilities. Put together the phrase “adolescent and computer” and the image for many will be that of a boy looking at the screen. Such perceptions are a perpetuation of cultural traditions that construct the active use of electronic technology as the domain of men.

Yet, as we observe the first generation of girls growing up with computers and online access as a part of daily life, research and experiences indicate that the girls' literacy practices with computers complicate the vision of the digital world as relentlessly intimidating and unwelcoming to adolescent girls. The number of studies indicating that many girls engage in a variety of online literacy practices with enthusiasm and confidence grows each year. Research has shown how girls are creating webpages (Haas, Tulley, and Blair 2002; Selfe and Hawisher 2004), writing blogs (Guzzetti and Gamboa 2005), reading websites (Lankshear and Knobel 2003), and chatting online (Jacobs 2004), among other activities. All indications are that these are not isolated cases, but that adolescent girls are actively involved in online literacy practices in large numbers and with little anxiety or uncertainty about writing and reading with computer

technology. Even computer games, once considered almost the sole province of boys, have begun to appeal to a large number of girls. Although girls are still in the minority playing some of the more violent computer games, for some of the popular role-playing games such as *The Sims* they are now in the majority (Schiesel 2006).

In my experience with talking to adolescent girls in school and observing their online literacy practices, I see young people who are comfortable in reading and writing with technology. They are involved in instant messaging, visiting popular-culture websites for the movies and television shows they watch, listening to and downloading music, and designing webpages and visiting them almost daily to tinker with the page and communicate with friends. They seem to undertake all these activities with the same lack of self-consciousness or intimidation that they probably show when turning on the television set. The adolescent boys also seem not to regard girls' use of computer as in any way unusual. Computers and online communication are an unremarkable but ubiquitous part of these girls' lives.

If we are challenging the old conventional wisdom that girls are not comfortable using computers, we still need to maintain an awareness of how dominant cultural gender roles are being transferred to these new literacy practices. The current research would indicate that, as with print literacy practices, adolescent girls tend to focus their online literacy practices on building and sustaining social relationships. The utopian ideal that accompanied the early days of computer-mediated communication – that it would liberate individuals from the limits of culturally constructed identities – looks almost laughably naive as we see how dominant cultural ideologies shape technology uses. Technology is part of culture and does shape it, but does not escape being shaped by culture at the same time. The construction of Myspace pages, for example, may be little different from the traditional decorations inside school lockers, and the messages that get traded electronically echo those passed as paper notes in my long-ago adolescence. Although the uses girls put computers to seem less directly competitive than what boys do with technology, girls often use computers for highly literate practices in ways that boys sometimes do not. A role-playing computer game favoured by girls such as *The Sims* may involve more reading and writing than a first-person shooter such as *Half-Life* which is popular with boys.

The question is this – if adolescent girls use computer-mediated literacy practices (like other traditional literacy practices) towards relationship

building and social interactions, is that a bad thing? Do such uses, as Sanford (2005) and Marsh (2003) claim, put girls at a disadvantage in the world outside of school? If writing about relationships requires thinking about audience, tone, and the effect of words and images on others, how can teachers build on such abilities? The more pressing question may come from a more traditionally feminist perspective – rather than trying to find ways to help girls use computers in the same ways boys do, how do we help them build on their strengths to find new, creative, and feminist ways of designing and using computers? For example, if girls have been less interested in learning computer programming and software design, including literacy-connected software, perhaps this can be traced to a perception that such work is not relevant to their interests. But when interests such as the desire to build relationships or engage in more character-driven narratives are foregrounded as the goal, girls may be more intrigued. As Caitlin Kelleher, a doctoral student conducting research with girls and technology, notes: “If you walk into a room full of girls and ask them, ‘Who wants to learn to program computers?’ you don’t get very many hands ... But if you ask them ‘Who wants to learn how to make a movie like Pixar (animation studio) or perhaps something like *The Sims*?’ you get a very different response. And fundamentally those two activities can be the same thing” (Schiesel 2006, 1).

Conversations About Culture

Clearly, it’s not enough to say that more girls are reading and writing online, so everything is rosy. If adolescent girls, through their social relationships with boys, limit their ambitions and perceptions of what they can achieve or regard competition with boys as unseemly, that is a cultural construction and no more positive online than in traditional relationships. The dominant cultural ideology lives with us online as it does in the rest of our lives, for both good and ill.

One way this situation is particularly sharply defined for girls in their online literacy practices is in terms of sexuality. If violence from adolescent boys is the fear in US culture – fear sharpened after highly publicized school shootings and the source of much concern about violent computer games – sexuality is the concern about girls, both in the culture at large and in the virtual world. Sexuality (either in terms of sexual purity or sexual power) is a traditional concern about adolescent girls in our culture. In the United States we struggle over the competing concerns of either girls’ sexual vulnerability or the perceived capacity for seduction. In

the same way that school shootings heightened concerns about violence and boys, well-publicized stories in the popular media about online predators have raised concerns about what girls are doing on the internet. Certainly, adolescent girls are bombarded with enough popular-culture images and general cultural messages that they should be interested, if not obsessed, with their physical appearance, fashion, relationships with boys, and sexual lives and power. For many girls this leads to real problems – not just with self-esteem but with life-threatening issues such as eating disorders. And no one would discount the threat of violence against girls.

Yet, just as most boys who play violent computer games do not shoot fellow students, most girls do not end up victims of sexual assault. If we let our discomfort with the explicit violence and sexuality available online or through computer games frighten us into hysterical responses, in the way that these issues often get discussed on cable talk shows and in other popular media, then we miss the reality that most girls find ways to develop a critical distance of some kind from many of these online texts. They develop ways to distinguish fantasy from reality in the same way that boys do about violent games. They sometimes even engage in rather cutting parodies or ironic comments about popular culture that, although not critiques in themselves, reveal openings for more thoughtful analysis or reflection.

Just because there is an opening for analysis, however, it does not necessarily mean that students will walk through it. That's where we come in as teachers. Helping adolescent students, girls and boys, develop a critical perspective on how gender expectations influence their literacy practices is part of the ongoing conversation we should be having in the classroom. Like most people, students' conceptions of literacy are usually as a standalone set of skills. Students believe that certain people can be taught to master these skills, others cannot, and some small select few are gifted artists who possess innate abilities to read and write well. If we begin to help students see how definitions and practices of literacy are culturally situated, we not only show them how they can learn to read and write well and with pleasure, but also how the same culture that influences their choice of clothing or music influences what and how they read and write. Writing about relationships for girls is not a matter of either biology or individual tastes. The more students understand this, the more control they have over their literacy choices.

I'm not calling for a one-time lecture, nor am I in favour of badgering students with a reductive form of cultural-studies jargon that tells them

that they are only puppets in the larger culture. Done correctly, however, a continuing conversation about how culture shapes our reading and writing can help students see more options because they are not limited by biology or taste.

When students understand that their values and assumptions are constructed by the culture, they have the power to connect with those values, or explore alternatives. Either way, they have a choice to make, and in making choices they are learning to think critically. The questions we can start with in class are not complex, and we should not expect students' initial answers to be sophisticated. But we should help students to start recognizing these questions as important: how does the world around them, from family to friends and from popular culture to school, shape their desires and fears? How do they respond? What are the values described in a piece of writing? Who do they assume the audience for a text is, and what are audiences' values? How do values influence the assumptions of what we expect to happen when we write or read? What effect do students want to have with a piece of writing? What are the implications in terms of identity of each authorial choice? What would happen if the author of a work decided to reflect different values and assumptions? In terms of gender, more specific questions are in order. If we ask boys to think about the effects of violent narratives on characters and on their readers, and to think about distinctions between gratuitous violence and action that serves a narrative, then we can ask girls about who seems to have power in their writing about relationships, what the roles of girls are supposed to be, and what other words might be used to describe female characters that might not be concerned primarily with physical attractiveness.

Digital Girls and Zines

There are many examples of teachers and scholars exploring ways to help girls explore more complex and empowering literacy practices, particularly in online situations. One exciting example, the Digital Girls project (2006), is described as a collaborative effort among “an international team of researchers, techno-geeks, tweens and teens, ethnographers, teachers, filmmakers and more.” Through research, teaching, and outreach to girls, project members explore:

The knowledge of digital technology that Canadian, British, and South African pre-teen and teenage girls are acquiring through computer play on and off the Internet. We consider – and contest – the “digital gender

divide” that is said to exist and examine girls’ voluntary engagement with technology. We are interested in mapping out the emergence of a particular digital literacy that includes technical knowledge, social uses of technology, and moral and ethical decision-making.

Another example is a study by Guzzetti and Gamboa (2004) of adolescent girls creating their own zines outside the classroom. The authors found that the girls writing these zines produced work that promoted social justice and challenged dominant ideas of gender identity. Although not advocating the introduction of zines to the classroom as a school assignment, they argue that teachers can tap into and promote the critical ethos found in zines in school-based reading and writing. The study illustrated that girls can respond well when encouraged “to be resistant readers and writers and to critically analyze texts for issues of social justice” (433). Such approaches to literacy education connect students’ lives and cultural knowledge and expectations with their reading and writing in ways that then promote critique and creativity.

We should not regard questions of gender socialization and literacy as a zero-sum game where if girls do well in school boys must be doing poorly, or vice versa. Instead, we need to understand the complexity and shifting nature of the cultural assumptions and values that exist, and offer possibilities and critiques for both boys and girls. As Newkirk (2002) argues, discussions of gender and literacy in school often focus on setting up binaries between girls’ and boys’ interests instead of examining the culturally constructed difficulties that schools present to both genders in different ways at different times.

Perhaps I have been wrong all these years, and culture is not so much a wave as it is a river. Yes, we are all moving along in the water, and, yes, there are currents that move generally in one direction and often make it easiest to go with the flow. Although the currents are not always predictable, the surroundings often change, and the river can change course, it is still possible to travel the river under control and chart your own course. What we need to teach students is how to recognize the challenges of the river; how to navigate it to get to where they want to go; and, when necessary, how to turn the boat around and – slowly, and with great effort – move upstream against the current.

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CHILDREN'S DRAWING
AS A SOCIOCULTURAL PRACTICE:
REMAKING GENDER AND POPULAR CULTURE

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Since the end of the nineteenth century, a number of psychologists, philosophers, art historians, and educators have conducted extensive studies of children's drawings, including drawings solicited by adults and initiated by children themselves. Historically, there have been two clearly distinguishable, sometimes overlapping, strands of research. The first has sought to understand children's graphic development in the hope of providing an important tool for educational intervention (Burt 1921; Cox 1992; Feldman 1980; Freeman 1980; Gardner 1973, 1980; Goodenough 1926; Kindler and Darras 1997; Lowenfeld 1947; Luquet 2001; Parsons 2003; Partridge 1902; Piaget and Inhelder 1948; Wolf and Perry 1988). Yet another body of research, one that has shaped the basic vision of children's drawings as a form of art, has aspired to appraise the drawing aesthetic and its formal qualities as a pictorial medium (Alland 1983; Arnheim 1954; 1969; D'Amico 1953; Gardner 1973; Kellogg 1955; 1969; Korzenik 1981; Lowenfeld 1939; 1947; Read 1945; Ricci 1895; Schaefer-Simmern 1948; Tomlinson 1934; 1947; Töpfer, as cited in Schapiro 1978; Viola 1936; Wilson 1987; Wilson and Wilson 1982). It should be noted, however, that both these strands of research have undergone considerable revisions over time. That is, the developmental approach has shifted from a view of drawing development as a natural and universal step-by-step evolution of graphic forms towards visual realism to nonlinear developmental models that account for both sociocultural influences and individual differences in drawing acquisition. Likewise, the second body of research, which initially focused on identifying the universal pictorial symbols and graphic principles in images produced by children, has now recognized the influence of cultural pictorial conventions on children's image making.

Nevertheless, despite these significant revisions, both approaches remain largely object-oriented and place major emphasis on the analysis of graphic form. Such a standpoint, however, generally ignores the sociocultural realm of drawing production and the specific ideas and meanings explored by children through their image making. Thus, as Pearson (2001, 348) argues, researchers often place major value on the “artifactual residue” of children’s image production while leaving the contextual complexities of drawing practice as a lived cultural experience largely unexplored. In accordance with Pearson’s claim, this article reconceptualizes children’s self-initiated image making as a sociocultural practice interwoven with social and cultural discourses of childhood and gender, and embedded in children’s peer interactions, daily activities, and participation in popular culture. It also presents a hermeneutic¹ ethnographic account of collaborative image making by two preadolescent girls as a complex process of negotiating and resisting sociocultural ideas about femininity that dominate everyday practices and popular culture texts.

Towards a Contextual Understanding of Children’s Image Making

According to Pearson, a contextual paradigm of inquiry should be able to grasp children’s self-initiated picture making as a form of social practice – one that should not be viewed as merely a visual artifact. Rather, it should be seen as woven into a complex fabric of daily living. Pearson further argued that looking at the particular context in which an instance of drawing takes place is crucial for understanding the meaning and value of image making in a specific child’s life. Such an examination would also

¹ The ethnographic study discussed in this article draws upon the ideas of philosophical hermeneutics, initially developed by Gadamer (1994) and recently revisited by Schwandt (2000; 2002). A hermeneutic approach attempts to eliminate the dualism of a researcher’s objective and subjective understanding of life phenomena and emphasizes that individual understanding is always historically and culturally bound. Proponents of philosophical hermeneutics believe that the researcher’s historically and unreflectively held biases should be engaged and, possibly, altered through self-reflexivity and dialogic encounter with the phenomena studied. Within this framework, the process of understanding research participants is neither objective nor subjective, but intersubjective and conversational. Thus, the meaning of participants’ actions is not simply discovered, but produced and cocreated; that is, it is “negotiated mutually in the act of interpretation” (Schwandt 2000, 195).