

“I Am Who I Want To Be Not Who You Want Me To Be”:

Writing as an Expression of Self & In Relation to Others

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### Abstract

By adding a writing component to an existing model of structured support group, Stentz examines the way four ninth grade girls use writing to define their own identities and their relationships with one another. Her research centers around questions about how writing is received in the group: how does writing further the goals of an organization which seeks to promote connection between girls? And, how do the girls use writing, as opposed to speaking, to articulate their identities? Stentz found that girls' use of writing provides an opportunity to put forward a vision of the self that the girls do not access in speech. Furthermore, the girls use writing—both the words and the act itself—to demonstrate and strengthen their friendships and allegiances within the group. Stentz analyzed the girls' writings and speaking in the support group to reach these conclusions, as well as interviewing each girl at the end of the project. Stentz's project indicates the usefulness of writing in a group that seeks to promote connection between its members and may be of interest to individuals who work with groups, particularly groups of teenaged girls.

## Chapter One: A Study *With not For* Girls

### Introduction

At the age of 19, in a fervor of academic inferiority I signed up for History of Critical Theory, one of the densest courses my English department offers. A month into the course the Professor assigned a chapter of Claude Levi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques* (1955). The chapter was called: "A Writing Lesson." In this chapter, the chief of a native tribe makes a show of "reading," or pretending to read, as a way of asserting authority over the rest of his tribe. Levi-Strauss goes on to assert that writing is always about systemic power, and in fact that "the primary function of written communication is to facilitate slavery" (p. 299)

For the first time in my life, I felt truly indicted by a text. If I accept Levi-Strauss's hypothesis that writing is used to place people in caste systems, to fix them if not in the bondage of slavery, but to subject them to the slavery of stratification, what did it mean that I was an English major? What did it mean that I spent hours tutoring "underprivileged" youth, as well as urging young suburban women to write their stories? What changes about this act if its roots are in oppression rather than expression? What have I been building my life around if, as he suggests, "the fight against illiteracy is...connected with an increase in governmental authority?" (p. 300).

It is still these questions that demand answers as I continue to work with young women. How can the connection between literacy and power be used for good? Literacy can subjugate, but how can it be used to empower? If writing creates systems of power, how can a group engaging in literacy practices together create a system of shared power? Paulo Freire speaks to the need for consciousness-raising projects when he says that "as long as the oppressed remain unaware of the causes of their condition, they fatalistically 'accept' their exploitation" (Freire,

1968, p. 46). In processing Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, community organizations with which I was already involved came to mind. What does Freire's thinking about oppressed people look like in the communities I already inhabit? How does his work apply to the work I'm already engaged in with urban and suburban girls? The Levi-Strauss insight about writing as a way of asserting power (and possibly subjecthood?) is important, and so I began to wonder what role literacy could play in a support group for young women. To more fully articulate my concerns, I turned to feminist thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir and Helene Cixous. In turning to these feminist thinkers, the following questions emerged: How can a community, like the ones imagined by feminist existentialist Simone de Beauvoir (2010), be created for young women to form authentic relationships in which "the mutual recognition of free beings [...] confirm[s] one another's freedom" (p. 1263)? Can women write together, positively asserting their existence? Can it be as Helene Cixous (2010) suggests when she says,

It is by writing, from and towards women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence.

Women should break out of the snare of silence. They shouldn't be conned into accepting a domain which is the margin of the harem. (p. 1947)

### **An Introduction to Girl-to-Girl**

To begin to hazard an answer to these questions, I designed a study in which writing would be infused into a model of structured-support group with which I was already familiar. These groups function something like the consciousness-raising groups, which were popular in the second wave of the feminist movement, and which bell hooks (1981) describes clearly in her book *Feminism is for Everybody*. The organization I've worked with for a few years is a

national organization, founded in 1996 by two mothers who saw a need for their daughters to authentically connect with other girls and discuss pertinent issues in a safe space. Girl-to-Girl\* now holds facilitator trainings across the country, and distributes many curricula around issues of identity, relationship, and health. The Girl-to-Girl format is imbued with ritual meant to create a space that belongs to the girls. The meeting of the group is often called a circle because the girls sit in a circle, rather than in rows with the facilitator in the front, in order to facilitate conversation and demonstrate that everyone's voice is valued equally. Furthermore, at the beginning and end of each circle the group participates in an opening/closing ritual, which the girls have chosen themselves, such as reading a poem or complimenting one another. Similarly, the girls make guidelines for their group to keep the safe space. Girl-to-Girl emphasizes that these circles are the girls' time--the topics are chosen by the facilitator for the girls, and the activities (one verbal, such as writing or discussing, and one visual/creative, such as drawing or collaging) are adjusted to meet their needs. In the Girl-to-Girl group I facilitated, like the consciousness-raising groups hooks describes, "a policy was in place which honored everyone's voice. Women took turns speaking to make sure everyone would be heard. This attempt to create a non-hierarchal model for discussion positively gave every woman a chance to speak" (p. 8).

Facilitators are trained to "let" the group belong to the girls, to enter into facilitation, as Friere (1970) says, "*with, not for*" the girls (p. 30). Vicki, who has trained college students to be facilitators and to run these groups, has brought this national model to the university where she works. The groups take place in public and charter schools, usually during time set aside within the school day, such as study hall or lunch. The purpose of these circles is to provide a safe space for the girls to talk and think through issues such as body image, friendship, alcohol, or anything

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\* The name of the organization and the names of all girls have been changed to protect the anonymity of the participants.

important to the girls.

During each circle, facilitated by college women trained through the program Vicki runs, typical activities include guided visualizations, debating sides of social issues, and discussing prevalent stereotypes. However, one of the tools the girls do not employ often is the creation and sharing of writing. Although story-telling is valued, I'm interested in exploring how asking the girls to commit their words to paper changes the circle. Not only were the girls asked to write their stories, thoughts, and opinions, but they were also asked to read their work aloud. Asking the girls to engage in these activities served as an extension and intensification of the normal sharing in which they engage already in Girl-to-Girl (Mason, Benedek-Wood, Valasa, 2010). Can this act of writing empower the women and, as Cixous (2010) says, "confirm women in a place...other than silence"?

The questions that emerged to concretely guide my research were: how do the girls use writing to present themselves? And, because the group is meant to form social connections between the girls, what role does writing play in that process? As well as, (how) do these identities and connections fit into the societal construction of girlhood?

### **An Introduction to the Study**

The group met for fourteen weeks in the fall of 2012, for roughly an hour a week. The district where these girls go to school is a wealthy suburb of a Midwestern city. Right outside the city limits, the landscape quickly grows rural. Because of a donation from an individual, the school facilities are the nicest around. The school looks like a mini college campus, with pillars inside and outside, prominently displaying privilege. Although this suburb is known for its wealth, the district includes many lower-cost housing options, which does lend *some* diversity.

The girls were chosen for the group by their guidance counselor, recommended for participation for any number of reasons, which she did not disclose. For the first three weeks attendance was largely in flux, as girls negotiated mixing social groups and giving up their lunch to do so. By the end of the first month, the group had settled into a core of five girls, four of whom participated in this study. Despite the district's reputation for being wealthy, the girls have fairly "normal" home lives, with one exception—each girl has moved into the district in the past two years. Jaye, a blonde who was new to the school last year, lives in an apartment. Avery, a bookish and tall girl, and Olivia, who has no close friends in the group but chats with everyone, talk about co-habiting with extended family members. Chelsey, an athlete and Jaye's best friend, says that she too has moved in the past two years, arriving in the suburb last year as well. Despite each girl having moved in the past the two years due to some sort of economic flux (houses to apartments, moving in or out of homes shared with extended family), the well-funded district provides these girls with every opportunity and expectation for success—which in this Midwestern suburb, means an upper-middle class future.

In facilitating this group of girls I had a great deal of freedom of choice, as the Girl-to-Girl model is inherently flexible, providing its facilitators with multiple curricula from which to choose as well as the possibility to write curriculum, which I did some times as well. Although I was conducting research, my primary responsibility was to the girls, and therefore my facilitation took priority over my position as a researcher. However it's inevitable that I asked the girls questions as their facilitator that I would not have if I hadn't been thinking about my own research, and of course, there are moments I missed out on recording or writings I failed to collect because I thought it was in the best interest of the group to focus my energy elsewhere. Because I served as both the leader of the group, and the primary data collector, my data is

additionally impacted by the way the girls chose to act around me. They presented themselves to me in my role as both an authority figure and as a college student. My position within the group both robs me of an ability to be a fully impartial researcher and provides me with a level of intimacy with the girls that allowed them to feel comfortable disclosing to me the information that they did. While my position in the group has its gifts and challenges, it's a necessary position for this type of qualitative research.

As I worked to both facilitate the group and add writing while maintaining the integrity of the group's format, the primary questions that guided my research were:

- How do the participants use writing to assert their own identities?
- How do the participants use writing to relate to one another, therefore furthering the goal of the group, which is to build connectivity between the members?
- And, more broadly, how do the girls comply with or resist societal discourses around "girlhood" through their writing?

### **Data Collection**

To answer my research questions, I engaged in a qualitative research project, namely a case study of four girls as they participated in Girl-to-Girl. In my role as a participant observer, I took field notes. I recorded the routine actions of the girls, such as where they sat, how they dressed, with whom they interacted, and in what manner. I also documented specific literacy events in which the girls engaged. My understanding of a literacy event is drawn from Heath: "A literacy event is any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants' interactions and their interpretive processes" (as cited in Finders, 1996, p. 10). When observing the girls and recording notes about their behaviors, Judith Butler's understanding of identity as performative informed this practice. Butler states that identity performance is "a stylized



repetition of acts,” and therefore, I noted the girls’ actions as indications of the identity they were choosing to present at that moment (p. 2552). Because each girl comes from multiple subject-positions, this gender-specific support group lends itself to being examined in the model of a qualitative case study.

In addition to the field notes, I also conducted an interview (Appendix A) with each girl who chose to participate in my research (which was not a pre-requisite for participation in the group). The interviews (Appendix A) focused on the girls’ experiences in the group, what they did and didn’t like, their self-reported writing practices outside of group, and their relationships with one another both before and during group. In addition to my field notes and interview data, I also collected literacy artifacts, such as poems the girls wrote and the reflection cards we all made at the end of each session in addition to one writing about our community (Appendix B). I collected these artifacts in order to ascertain how the girls were using writing, and to decipher if that usage was different than the way they were using speech to present themselves and to interact with one another.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using the following analytical schemes: 1) Written discourse underwent Gee’s discourse analysis in order to uncover how the girls were using writing. Gee (1989) understands discourses as “defined positions from which to speak and behave,” (p. 4). Questions like, *how did the girl identify herself in this piece of writing?* and, *how is this sense of self in line with the one she presents to the group?* informed the data analysis. 2) Field notes were then held beside the written documents and analyzed by the guiding question, *how is this sense of self in line with the one she presents to the group?* 3) Interview data allowed for the girls to self-report their own gains and struggles in writing, relationships, and identity. All language

the girls used in group, writing, and interviews was analyzed for patterns of use in referring to self and others. When used in combination these three methods allowed for a picture of the identity each girl was performing during our time together, though she may have performed differently outside of group, and even within group fluctuations were present and an important part of the data analysis.

In analyzing data, I was guided by Gee's (1989) suggestion that "discourses are intimately related to the distribution of social power and hierarchical structure... These discourses empower those groups who have the fewest conflicts with their other discourses when they use them" (p. 4). Gee's statement acknowledges that girls may be performing more than one identity, and that these intersections of these identities affect their group interactions.

Adolescence is a particularly interesting time to study identity, as girls are learning to navigate, among other things, between childhood and adulthood. In the midst of this change, Margaret Finders argues that, "a new independence is afforded to adolescent females through literacy. Literacy provided a tangible means by which to claim status, challenge authority, and document social allegiances" (Finders 1996, "Just Girls" p.4). Being aware that the girls may occupy multiple subject positions determined by their age, friendships, family background, school involvement, and more, I sought to understand how their literacy practices supported or undermined those various subject positions.

### **Importance**

Because each girl has intersecting identities (e.g. girl, jock, new to school), it is necessary to examine each girl individually. However, by examining the different discourse communities in which the girls participate, a greater understanding can be gained of the way they mediate their various identities (Lankshear and Knobel as cited in Curwood and Cowell, 2011). Thinking

about how girls comply with or resist ideologies around normal girlhood became an important part of thinking about what meanings the girls were creating for themselves. To think about “normal” girlhood I used both scholarly literature around the theme and girls statements of what was expected of them as adolescent women.

An increased understanding of the way young women behave in gender-specific groups, and particularly the way they engage acts of literacy, particularly writing, could be useful to educators as well as community groups that work with young women. Gender-specific research which seeks to better understand young people in their typical environments (such as schools) could be beneficial to parents, teachers, researchers, and anyone with a vested interest in understanding young women.

## **Literature Review**

### **Constructions of Female Adolescence.**

In 1982 Carol Gilligan, in her book *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, proclaimed that girls undergo a “crisis in self-esteem” in their adolescence. Following this text, girlhood became a point of inquiry for scholars as further research began to quantify this crisis and trace its effects in academic performance. One particularly influential study which followed Gilligan's work was the American Association of University Women Educational Foundation (AAUW) report, “How Schools Shortchange Girls” (1992). The report uncovered dramatic differences between self-esteem in girls and boys, as well as subsequent achievement gaps in math and science classrooms, launching many follow up books and articles about young women. Most wide-spread was Mary Pipher's three-year best seller *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (1994). Aimed at parents, “the crux of Pipher's argument is that due to pressure from U.S. culture, adolescent girls are coerced

into putting aside their ‘authentic selves’ splitting what was, in their younger days, a healthy and united individual, into true and false selves” (Gonick, 2006, p. 12) However, Pipher has received criticism for positioning girls as passive and voiceless objects, rather than allowing them full subjecthood. “Rather than looking at the social institutions and discourses that girls negotiate within actively producing their identities, Pipher represents girls as unwitting victims” (Gonick, 2006, p. 12).

A necessary step towards examining institutions and discourses that influence girls is to examine their environment, which was done in a very visible way by Rosalind Wiseman’s *Queen Bees & Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends & Other Realities of Adolescence* (2002). However, this hugely popular text is problematic. First, the title is essentialist and makes large, sweeping assumptions about adolescence. Adolescents are immediately assumed to be catty, vying for position, cutting one another down, and—most glaringly—heterosexual. If a parent can get past the title to the inside of the book, the daughter does not fare any better. Wiseman asserts of the reader’s imagined daughter, “she’s confused, insecure, often surly, lashing out,” and then, more damagingly, blames girls for these negative behaviors, saying, “girls can be each other’s worst enemies” (p. 3). Most disturbingly, Wiseman (2002) extrapolates these negative assumptions about girls into the rest of their lives, saying she’ll “show you how your daughter’s place in her social pecking order can affect whether she’ll be a perpetrator, bystander, or victim of violence when she’s older” (p. 3). In the daughter’s current and future social relationships, there is no positive option. This sort of fear-mongering may sell books, but it also spreads dangerous and narrow ideas about what it is to be a young woman. To Wiseman’s credit, she takes the significant step of beginning to think about how girls’ relationships with one another may contribute to how they construct their identities,

understanding girls identities to not just be socially constructed (which Pipher points out when she indicts the media), but also mediated through friendships: “she isn’t watching MTV or reading quizzes in teen magazines by herself. She processes this information with and through her friends” (p. 10).

The troubling method of examining these girls as failures-in-progress was briefly mentioned by Peggy Orgenstein, whose book *School Girls: Young Women, Self-Esteem, and the Confidence Gap* (1995), was inspired by the 1992 AAUW report. Orgenstein, citing foundational feminist Gloria Steinem’s thoughts on self-esteem, raises doubts about focusing attention on internal rather than systemic change. “Self-esteem sounded to me like another way to blame the victim,” she exclaims (p. xviii). However, she relinquishes these doubts after “spending time in the world of girls,” deciding that while she once felt self-esteem was victim-blaming for women, it was still a suitable framework for their younger counterparts (p. xix). Her book, otherwise, is thoughtful, and she may even be credited with acknowledging (although quickly dismissing) a potential flaw in the focus on self-esteem, around which multitudes of research and literature were being created in the 1990s and early 2000s. Orgenstein’s response is indicative of the way adolescence was constructed to be understood as a time of great individual vulnerability.

Thankfully, this narrative is beginning to change: rather than blaming individuals within systems, the unprecedented amount of scrutiny girlhood received in the 1990s is being called into question. Anita Harris, in her book *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (2004) says of programs and websites that arose in response to the work of Pipher et al., “such a proliferation of sites to see and hear young women suggests that we are very interested in applauding but also scrutinizing their lives and that we have created more ways for this to happen. I suggest that this new interest in looking at and hearing from girls is not just

celebratory, but is, in part, regulatory as well” (p. 1). As suggested by Nancy Lesko’s thinking about constructions of adolescence, coming of age comes under heavy scrutiny as a place for worry about the possibilities of the future. In her chapter “‘The Can-Do’ Girl Versus the ‘At-Risk’ Girl”, Harris addresses the dichotomy young women today face coming of age at a time when feminism has allowed them many opportunities and many studies have proclaimed crises in their esteem. She worries that girls follow either the can-do narrative (set up by the girl power movement of the 1990s, epitomized in the wild success of marketed pseudo-feminism, for example, the Spice Girls), or the at-risk narrative, set up by Pipher and others. Harris believes that these identities are exacted and enacted through consumerism (what is marketed to whom). While these two views are useful and may accurately describe the options society offers girls, girls themselves are much more complex and rarely fall into one of those two categories so completely.

An advantage to talking about dichotomies and categories, though, is that the focus isn’t on individual girls; it’s on systems and society, as Harris demonstrates. This turn back toward the systemic and away from the individual is further championed by feminist scholar Angela McRobbie (2002), who criticizes what she calls “postfeminism”: roughly, the current moment. Postfeminism refers to this moment in time, in which women have equal rights under the law (for the most part), bringing about the idea that the fight is over. However, feminists argue that this is a false ideal, as women still do not have equal access to resources. Postfeminism is a construction that leads to complacency when change is still necessary. McRobbie claims that the current state of postfeminism fails on two counts: first, that it over-emphasizes individual agency, without considering how women’s choices, despite assumed gender equality, are still dictated by gender norms; and second, that adverse effects of individualization are not

considered, which is to say the cost of blaming individuals for the gap between the assumed equality women enjoy and their actual lived experiences. As an example of how postfeminism functions in the culture, McRobbie talks about the way feminism is acknowledged in the media only to be undone. For example, she talks about *Bridget Jones's Diary*, in which the female protagonist is aware that she doesn't need a man, and is a single, empowered young woman. However, with that knowledge being so inbred in the character and the current moment, it's free to be dismissed: she still wants a man, and is represented in movies and books obsessing over this pre-feminist ideal. Furthermore, Jones takes this task on her self entirely—in a way, that's the empowerment she's gained from feminism: full responsibility for making her own reality. Though she also bares the brunt of her failures as an individual, which can be problematic.

McRobbie's ideas around individualization combine with Lesko's idea of adolescence serving as a point of anxiety about the future to exponentially increase the pressure on young women who are responsible for their own successes and failures even as they serve as a symbol of the future of a nation (which is in fact dependent not on adolescent girls, but economic and governmental systems). Furthermore, there is a substantial gap between the neoliberal idea of hard work leading to success coupled with an increasingly prosperous global economy (made worse for young women by a society espousing the gains of feminism), and what is possible in a country where a huge number of children are in poverty, which becomes cast on the individual (female) adolescent in the form of "empowerment" programs that project the expectation that girls as individuals can rise to correct societal imbalances between genders.

Thankfully, scholar Marina Gonick (2006) suggests a way for girls to assert their agency despite these competing frameworks. While "Girl Power" (demonstrated through the millions of t-shirts bearing that logo in the 1990s, as well as the plethora of female pop-singers and female

television protagonists), which situates girls as highly competent, and “Reviving Ophelia”, which situates girls as vulnerable and passive, seem opposing, Gonick suggests the two may not be in complete opposition. She does this by allowing for individual agency through self-articulation. In Gonick’s understanding, girls are able to mediate between these two identities (Girl Power v. Reviving Ophelia) by asserting their position on the spectrum. She asserts that the two lenses can help the girls to understand various subject positions available to them and to create alternative positions. Gonick suggests that both Girl Power and Reviving Ophelia function as lenses through which girls can begin to understand and construct their selves. While these contradictory stances still indicate a need for systemic change, by engaging girls in conversation around these lenses, they are able to participate in the creation of their socially-constructed identities. Therefore, talking and writing with girls about these discourses can empower them to create an identity and subject position for themselves, having used Girl Power and Reviving Ophelia as starting points (Fecho, Coombs, McAuley, 2012).

Understanding how girlhood is constructed is a necessary precondition to understanding how girls are falling in line with or pushing back against girlhood’s typical mode. Observing how girls interact with and complicate notions of girlhood points towards the way that they’re using literacy to construct an individual subject-position, and frames the basis of this study.

### **Literacy as Agency.**

Girls asserting a subject position is an act of agency, which is in line with the goals of the Girl-to-Girl, which includes increasing self-efficacy. In incorporating writing in the gender-specific support group, my hope is that the writing furthers the goals of the group. Those goals are to build community and relationships, which have been shown to improve self-efficacy among the girls. Increased self-efficacy is linked to improved self-esteem, as well as increases in



school attendance and decreases in disciplinary infractions (Dollete, Steese, Phillips, Matthews, 2005). Though I critiqued earlier studies for privileging self-esteem, and using it as a mechanism for casting girls as victim, self-esteem is an important indicator of emotional wellness and does deserve attention. Harnessing the power of writing is a goal of my research, asking the girls to create messages about their selves, actively constructing their identities sentence by sentence.

In order for the practice of writing in community to be effective, the connections between writing and power must be teased out. Gee (1989) describes the ways discourse is used hierarchically: a person's "primary use" is the one learned from and used with her family group, and the discourses used to communicate with individuals outside of that family group are secondary, tertiary, etc. He explains, "telling your mother you love her is a primary use of language; telling your teacher you don't have your homework is a secondary use" (p.8). Therefore, literacy becomes being able to "control secondary uses of language" (p.8). That is to say, literacy is being able to communicate in secondary and tertiary, etc, settings, such as school. It is, of course, advantageous when the primary use of language is in line with secondary uses of language. Therefore, understanding social conventions and ways of invoking language is part of understanding a discourse—that understanding may be called literacy. The model of primary and secondary literacy is a rigid one, which leaves little room for the agency of the individual—in Gee's understanding, so much is determined by the discourse of the family group. Gee does allow for some agency when he talks about "powerful literacy," which involves a secondary use of language to critique primary or other secondary discourses (or systems of meaning). Powerful literacy demands comfort and literacy in multiple discourses (Gee, 1989, p. 8). Gee comes close to acknowledging that this is a classed issue when he says that it's advantageous for primary and secondary discourses to be in line with each other, (which is a phenomena experienced by middle

class, white children, who are raised with and shaped by the same values that exist in the predominant institutions they're likely to encounter). However, when Gee (1985) talks about lower-class and black children telling stories he says, "it is in these cases that we see the fullest, richest, and least 'marked' expression of our human biological capacity for language, narrative, and sense making generally" (p. 93). While Gee later says that "it is simply perverse to say that one native speaker has mastered the grammar better than another," (p. 95), he still refers to the speech patterns of black children as unmarked by society's "rational" influence. However it is crucial to recognize that these children's speech patterns are still constructed by their surroundings, as Gee would say, by their primary discourse. However, the primary discourse (language encountered in the home) is not the only place from which language patterns are adopted. Gee's theory relies very heavily on primary discourses as determinant, which is particularly in need of revision when studying children in a school where Gee would assert they use their secondary discourse. The model of primary discourses as determinate does not leave enough space for individual agency.

In response to Gee's claim that a person is shaped by the discourse into which they are born (their "family group" provides, for Gee, the primary use of language), Yagelski (2000) asserts, "discourse inevitably shapes meaning and makes all meaning contingent, but discourse does not *determine* meaning; meaning—and truth—are thus always a negotiation among and within discourses by individual writers...who are in turn shaped by those discourses" (p. xii). Yagelski posits that meaning creation happens at a local level, and is an "act of self-construction" (p. xv). Yagelski's view of self-construction, allows for individuals to create meaning for themselves, though that meaning will be contingent upon the larger discourses in place. Engaging these discourses through literacy is the way meaning is created, both on an

individual and collective level. Yagelski stresses participation in discourses and institutions (such as government) as a way of expressing agency; he claims that it's by interacting with political and economic structures that agency is expressed. From this Marxist standpoint, he concedes that young people are "largely irrelevant," in that they're "far removed from the political and institutional structures that shape" their lives (p. 5). Although Yagelski's argument is a step towards greater, localized agency, his argument falls short when it comes to young people. The most predominant structures that shape their everyday lives are not, as Yagelski alludes, generally decided in political elections. Their realities are primarily shaped by interactions with teachers and friends, by the way social groups clash and intersect, by agreements and arguments with parents and significant others (Pipher, 1994). Yagelski may not go far enough in localizing the role of literacy and agency, particularly as it pertains to young people. While Yagelski's work is important, work with an even more localized focus is needed to supplement his ideas.

In her text, "Postmodern Blackness," (1994) bell hooks takes on the academy which is always prescribing theory of marginalized groups onto those populations. She asserts that "if radical postmodernist thinking is to have a transformative impact, then a critical break with the notion of 'authority' as 'mastery over' must not simply be a rhetorical device. It must be reflected in habits of being, including styles of writing as well as chosen subject matter" (in *Norton Anthology*, p. 2511). Working to correct the power imbalance between privileged and oppressed groups is a way to undermine hegemonic power structures in a real way. Hooks emphasizes the importance of inviting individuals and groups of individuals to enter into critical conversations that construct identity. Hooks' approach, combined with the research method of Margaret Finders, greatly informed my work in the field. Finders, who studies the literacy practices of adolescent women, studies the texts that young women consume and produce though

a social constructivist lens in an attempt “to make visible the tacit rules and demands that shape such events and ultimately shape available social roles within particular social circles” (1997, p. 3). My work adopts this approach along with bell hooks’ idea of making space for the subject group to engage and define their own identities critically. Therefore, my field work took up conversations with the girls around topics which affect their identities, while working to keep discussion critical and productive. Therefore, the group centered around three themes that the girls felt to be most central to their selves: friendships, identity, and belonging.

Now that an understanding of the construction of girlhood has been laid out, as well as a few thoughts around how literacy can function as agency, the second chapter of this thesis will focus around themes which emerged in working with the girls. The second chapter takes on themes that emerged during the group for the girls, such as identity, girlhood itself, and friendships, primarily using the words and actions of the girls to draw conclusions. In the third chapter, these insights will be laid against previous work done on girls and literacy in order to support or raise new questions about our understandings of girls’ literacy identities in particular and girlhood in general.

## Chapter Two

### “We Aren’t All Like That”:

#### **Writing as a Tool to Assert Identity, Define Peer Groups, and Revise Notions of Girlhood**

The research questions that guide this chapter are (1) how do girls use writing to assert their own identity, (2) how do they use writing to express or create relationships with one another, and (3) how do the girls’ identities and relationships comply with, resist, or revise traditional models of girlhood? Data emerges from the girls’ writings, interactions, and interviews. I argue that throughout our time together, the girls used literacy in two key ways: to assert an identity and to situate that identity. They used writing and language in certain ways to put forward, revise, and define their social positioning—to mark belonging in a group or clique, as well as in the broader social context of girlhood. They also shaped the way they used language to demonstrate relationships with one another, by writing to or about one another, or, at times, like one another.

Two of the four girls spoke and wrote often about the way they were labeled socially. Of the four girls in the study, Olivia and Chelsey, both brought up labels often, and were labeled fairly clearly. While Olivia would call herself an “outcast,” and Chelsey would call herself either a “jock” or a “popular,” the other two girls fit less distinctly into categories, or fit into categories that were less well-defined. Perhaps it’s significant that the two girls who did not fit neatly into a peer group, Jaye and Avery, were more focused on what it meant to be a “normal” girl. Rather than comparing themselves to certain groups within their school, they were more likely to talk about girls as a general category. This chapter will deal with Olivia and Chelsey separately, and then take on Jaye and Avery’s thinking about girlhood and relationships together, as the two girls relationship with one another underwent a significant change during Girl-to-Girl.

**Asserting an Identity: Olivia's Protest Poem**

Olivia labels herself as an outcast. An eighth grader, she's already switched districts seven times. She moves back and forth between the homes of various family members, moving in most recently with her "nana," or, grandmother. She came to this district at the end of last year, and hasn't fallen in with a friend group yet. Our group meets in the guidance office, where she's very comfortable—popping in between classes to share with her guidance counselor what's happened to her throughout the day and to seek a listening ear where she can find one. Often she'll come straight from her guidance counselor's office, and go back there as soon as we're done, to share with her a poem or activity we did during group. At an age when her peers are valuing relationships with friends more and more, Olivia's comfort with her adult counselor is likely viewed as strange by her peers, and further marks her as an outsider.

Olivia sees herself, and speaks and writes about herself, as an outsider. One possible and partial explanation is that she was diagnosed with Asperger's last year. Without privileging this diagnosis too much, or letting it define her in my mind, it was still important to me to acknowledge that it was something she had accepted. That category had become a way that she saw herself, and likely affected the way teachers and others understood her behavior. That she saw herself as a social Other was clear. When the girls were asked to brainstorm labels, the only ones she volunteered were marginalized ones like "freak," "weird," and "loser." She was also not afraid to talk about when she'd been cast out, for example, in the lunch room. Her awareness of her isolation combined with years of rhetoric from school counselors about being "different", means that she's often proclaiming her disenfranchised identity and then following it up with a statement of dismissal. The girls were asked to write a form poem in which they filled in a label they'd had applied to them and then to negate an assumption that goes with that label. These

“Just Because” poems were in the following format: “Just because I’m \_\_\_\_\_/Doesn’t mean\_\_\_\_\_.” Olivia followed this format to create the following poem about labels she felt were applied to her:

Just because I am smart  
 dose [sic] not mean I am weard  
 Dosent mean I am a nurde  
 Dosent mean I am a freck  
 I am Different

Just Because you hate me  
 Dosent mean that I care  
 Dosent mean that I will change  
 Dosent mean that I am not me.

I am who I want to be not who you want me to be. I am me.

Olivia rejecting these labels was a relief to her, and on her reflection card from that group she said it was a gift “getting everything off my chest.” She was quick to share her poem, and didn’t appear embarrassed or hesitant to deny labels presumably given to her by the same sorts of peers she was sharing with now. Though the girls who were listening to her read her poem aloud probably had engaged in making these assumptions about her—may have been making them even as they chose their seats each week, across the table from her as she sat beside an empty chair--as far as I know, Olivia never addressed the way she felt labeled to or by these girls outside of group, though she was able to read them her poem in group.

It's important to note that throughout our time in group she did not protest these labels verbally—only when she had time and the structure of a form poem, did she react against them. Olivia used writing as a way of protesting her social positioning, and denied the identity she'd been assigned as “literacy is a form of ethical address that structures how we construct relationships with ourselves and others” (Mitchell & Weiller, 1992, p. x ; Kelly, 2012). Furthermore, she asserted her own unique identity in opposition to the labels she'd been assigned: “I am me.”

Despite feeling as though she's labeled negatively, Olivia's statement, “just because you hate me,” isn't demonstrated in our group. While the girls only sometimes make active efforts to include her by asking her follow up questions or soliciting her opinion, they always respond to her respectfully. For example, after group one day when one of the girls had her phone out, playing music, Olivia asked the girl to play certain songs. The girl did, while another girl asked her what types of music she liked. In other words, they are polite to her and engage her in conversation when she speaks up. However, while they might tease each other, politeness is all Olivia is offered in group. Though this differential treatment is likely well intended, it may or may not be something that Olivia notices and identifies as something that isolates her.

Olivia stating that she's isolated serves as a critique of her social system. While Olivia is comfortable stating her isolated status, as she did in her “Just Because” poem, which likely isolates her further, she is not unaware of the subtle ways she is excluded: at lunch tables and during group projects. When a girl is talking about how she and Olivia met last year because they had lunch in the guidance counselor's office, the girl says it was because there weren't enough tables. Olivia corrects her, saying: “they could've made room. No one wanted to sit with us.” These bold statements challenge the other girls; Olivia's blatant loneliness comes across as an



accusation, and the other girls both try to be kind, smiling and nodding, and are visibly put off, leaning back in their seats and crossing their arms. Olivia's speaking out about her isolation may be seen as a critique of the discourse present in her school, in which students are categorized and ranked in their popularity. Her "Just Because" poem serves as a form of powerful literacy, in which she critiques the social system that rules her, and most, school systems.

Olivia expresses another aspect of herself that makes her different through her writing: her identification with her family group above friends. Each week Olivia comes in and sits beside me. For the most part, all of the girls sit in the same seats, but Olivia's is beside me, and on her other side the chair is always empty. She's used to identifying with adults, and talks about her parents more than any other girl. When we check in with a high and a low from our week, Olivia almost always mentions her family. A high is that she didn't have to babysit; a low is that she and her mom got in a fight. During an activity where the girls write using their non-dominant hand, Olivia has a lot of trouble. She jokes about it being unreadable chicken scratch ("Does this mean I can read chicken writing?"), but explains her failure with a family tie—"In my family, we only use our non-dominant hand for lifting and carrying." The exercise Olivia was reacting to was one where the girls were asked to write a question with their dominant hand, and then to try to answer is in their non-dominant hand. The goal of this writing time is to engage another side of the brain in their processing, as well as to slow down their thinking as their writing with their non-dominant hand was very slow. As was alluded to, the answers to Olivia's questions were illegible, but her questions provide a good deal of insight. It may even be that they lead into one another through associations. Olivia asks of herself, "How can I make friends? How do people go crazy? Why dose [sic] my mom yell? Why do people write chikan scratch?" The sequencing of these wonderings is vague. Does Olivia think she is going crazy? Does Olivia think her mom

is crazy? And then, these deeper questions are subverted by a joke question: why do people write chicken scratch? When reflecting on this activity which was obviously frustrating to her, Olivia said that answering the questions didn't matter, "because I knew I couldn't read them anyway (because of the handwriting)." However, this dismissal seems disingenuous, as she did spend time on this exercise. Her flippant reflection seems like a way of letting herself off the hook and pretending at a lightness that isn't apparent in her writing. It's significant that Olivia explained her struggle with this activity with a family tie. While adolescents are typically thought to "sever ties with adults," Olivia is invoking her family as an explanation for the way she acts in group, among her peers (Lewis & Finders, 2002, p. 104).

In fact, home came up repeatedly for Olivia. While school is clearly a contentious place for her, and sometimes her mother is a source of distress, she seems to find real happiness in her home, and particularly with her Nana. She finds security and comfort there, writing: "I am from flowers, from roses, and you/I am from the living room at my nana's/ (calming colors, growing up, my nana's perfume)/ I am from the pictures of flowers on my nana's wall./ Those pictures helped me when I would grow." This poem activity was to copy the form of an existing poem, which Olivia was set on doing correctly. However, while other girls strayed in topic, Olivia remained tightly focused on the happiness that her Nana and growing up with her has provided. Olivia's willingness to write about her family and to share about the happiness and security they bring her points to the way she wishes to construct her identity. She situates herself within her family group more readily than among her peers against whose judgments she spoke out earlier through her "Just Because" protest poem.

It's important not to understand Olivia's identification with her family as a lack of sociability. She was eager and able to make a new friend during our time together in group.

When a girl who was new to the district joined our group, Olivia went out of her way to help this very, very shy girl to feel included. She recognized that she was needed and was more than willing to help. The new girl was with her, and Olivia was set on helping her follow the form as well. Starting the very next week Olivia started missing a lot of school. She didn't come to group anymore, except sometimes at the end for five minutes, saying she forgot. The week Olivia wrote about her Nana's home was the last full week she could attend. When I asked her whether she'd like to participate in a final interview, she said no. When I asked her why, she said: "I'm weird like that," and that seemed to be enough for her. While I don't believe either of us accepts that label for her, I'm glad she didn't feel she owed me more of an explanation, that what I saw in her was self-assurance even if within this marginalized label.

### **Chelsey: Defining the Space Between Peer Groups**

Though both in the eighth grade, Chelsey's social situation and interaction with labels are drastically different than Olivia's. Though this is only her second year in the district, she's found her place as a member of the volleyball team. Most everything she does is mediated through that identity. Our group meets on Wednesdays, which are the same days that the volleyball team has games. Because of this, Chelsey is always dressed to match her teammates, usually in nicer clothes. While most of the girls in Girl-to-girl wear sweatpants or jeans, Chelsey comes in in skirts and heels, which not even teachers at this school wear. Her outfit marks her as belonging to a certain social group, which she calls the "jocks." Being a jock is respected amongst the girls, as demonstrated at the beginning of our group. I asked the girls to compile a list of guidelines that they would each agree to follow in order to respect one another and our time together. When cell phones were mentioned the girls all agreed that cell phones were allowed to be used in special cases, only when they were really needed. Examples of times the girls deemed a

cellphone necessary include, texting your parents if you forgot something at home, if your afterschool plans changed, or if Chelsey needed to text anyone from the volleyball team so that they could coordinate what they wanted to wear.

For Chelsey particularly, what she wore was a huge indicator of her social status, which she wanted to signal at almost all times as being “jock.” She explained to me that her leggings were spandex, because athletes wore spandex leggings and “populars” wore cotton leggings. As seems to be the case in most high schools, the popular girls aren’t necessarily the most liked girls, they’re usually identifiable by the types of (expensive) clothes they wear, and which boys (usually athletes) like them. Chelsey’s spandex leggings showed that she was in volleyball, where spandex was part of their uniform. For Chelsey, being a jock means being associated with the volleyball team, which importantly, had popular girls on it. Because of this intersection, Chelsey sometimes identifies as popular. Within our group, the girls talk about how mean the popular girls are, and just once, Chelsey retorted—“We aren’t all like that.” Chelsey’s interjection came while the girls were discussing a role playing situation. Three girls at a time would act as different friend groups dealing with an issue—for example, if one girl was acting in a way the group didn’t like, would the group confront her? What might that look like for groups they identified? e.g. nerds, laugh-a-lots, populars? When the popular girls had to confront their friend, the girls in the role play focused on how the girl’s behavior affected the way others saw them, saying: “you’re just embarrassing yourself and us.” This behavior may be categorized as policing or as “relational aggression” that is intended to damage girls’ social status and relationships” (From *Badness to Meanness: Popular Constructions of Contemporary Girlhood*, 2004, p. 45, Meda Chensey-Lind and Katherine Irwin ). When I asked about the connection between popular girls and this behavior, the girls were prompted to explain to me that *all* the

popular girls were mean, at which point Chelsey interjected, identifying herself as popular, and perhaps feeling attacked. None of the girls challenged Chelsey's identification as popular, but instead revised their assertion: not all popular girls are mean, but all "mean girls" (a clique subset, rather than an individual attribute of those girls) are popular.

Never again in the group would Chelsey identify as popular, though she would sometimes rise to their defense, saying that girls on her volleyball team were popular and nice. Instead, the word Chelsey most identified herself with was "loud". On multiple occasions her writing reflected that others think of her as being loud. During our fifth week together we wrote "Just Because" form poems that ask girls to identify how they're labeled and then rebuff subsequent assumptions. Chelsey wrote,

Just because I am loud  
 Doesn't mean I'm happy  
 Doesn't mean I like attention  
 Doesn't mean I'm always loud  
 I am an outgoing person.

Just because I play sports  
 Doesn't mean I am dumb  
 Doesn't mean I don't do schoolwork  
 Doesn't mean I'm popular  
 I am human.

Here she explicitly denies the connection between playing sports and being popular, and distances herself from that label. However, being friends with popular girls, does afford someone

social capital—made visible through invitations to certain parties and casual, visible hallway conversations with the popular girls. The discrepancy between explicitly writing that she’s not popular and then later aligning herself with that group can be explained in a few ways. It’s possible that her social status rose throughout our time together, and as her friendships with the popular volleyball girls grew, she began to see herself as one of them. However, it seems more likely that she felt more comfortable in the group later, and therefore felt as if she wouldn’t be challenged or rebuffed for claiming some of the social capital allowed to her by her friendships. Her avoidance of directly stating labels is very telling. Amy Vetter asserts that “youth navigate many social positions to benefit them socially and academically,” which may be what is being demonstrated in Chelsey’s adherence to multiple labels (2010, p.3). She asserts herself as a jock when she sees fit, and is able to identify as popular as well, when that benefits her.

Most often, perhaps to allow herself most fluidity, Chelsey identifies with the label “loud” rather than a specific peer group (populars or jocks). “Loud” is something that transcends peer groups and can be understood in multiple ways. For example, in her poem quoted above, when she aligns “loud” with “outgoing,” it seems she understands how closely “loud” and “outgoing” are tied. Though she chose to write about the word “loud” as though it was a derogatory label, she demonstrates its connection to what are typically seen as positive qualities. Chelsey is aware that her outgoingness is what allows her to socialize with boys, while her best friend frequently claims shyness, at which Chelsey rolls her eyes. In volleyball, her outgoingness is what keeps her coach’s attention, and the reason she’s the one who is chosen to write the morning announcements about games and to coordinate what the girls wear. Chelsey has gained much socially because of her outgoingness, of which she’s likely aware. It seems more likely

that she has enough social understanding to know that her confidence would come across as arrogance to her un-popular peers in *Girl-to-Girl*, and therefore she uses the word “loud”.

As mentioned earlier, Vetter states that girls may occupy multiple positions as it suits them. In our seventh week together, Chelsey demonstrates just that when she writes again about being labeled “loud,” this time in a positive way. Though her writing was private (not to be shared with the group), she was clearly aware that I would read it. I could tell she anticipated me as an audience because when she was describing a situation with her “best friend” she put in parentheses, “not Jaye,” who she knows I would have assumed was her best friend. Since I told the girls we wouldn’t be sharing our pieces aloud, and because Chelsey likely didn’t need reminding who she was writing about, that parenthetical demonstrates I was her envisioned audience for the piece—or at least a part of that audience, as she hopefully was writing for herself as well. In her writing Chelsey is ranting about being called mean by a boy, and in reflecting on how unfair that is, she writes: “Like one label I get a lot is loud. Like I am loud. I want to be.” In direct opposition to her earlier writing, Chelsey now says that she likes the label. So what accounts for the flip-flop? The rhetorical dance she’s forced to do, vacillating between loving and hating being “loud” does show that she’s switching positions on this label, likely to benefit herself in different social arenas. That she feels called upon to do so indicates the demands she feels, not just as a member of our community, but in a larger sense—as a girl, to be so multi-faceted. An incredible pressure is placed on girls to be many contradictory things: as discussed earlier, girls are thought to be both vulnerable and powerful, passive as women and empowered as post-feminists. These contradictory demands are impossible to fulfill, and may explain the multiple ways Chelsey has asserted her identity.

While Olivia enacted powerful literacy to stand against typical understandings of girlhood—used writing to resist her peers’ labels for her and aligning herself with her family group--and Chelsey danced between labels and demands of popularity and self-assurance, both girls used literacy to assert an identity they thought would empower them. Because notions of girlhood are so tied up in what both of these young women were doing, or because the “personal is always political,” it seems useful to continue to think of the way the personal and the political are entrenched. That is to say that the way girls identify themselves and their social hierarchies affects their lives and access to power. Constructions of girlhood define what is valued in a girl, and influences which girls are considered to be the “right type” of girl, or a popular girl. Therefore, thinking about constructions of girlhood is useful as we continue to decipher how these young women were using literacy in our group.

### **Rendering Constructions of Girlhood Visible: Avery and Jaye**

While Olivia and Chelsey were both reacting to their culture, which is tied up in their gender, they did not reference girlhood specifically. Being a girl was most often referenced in connection to friendships and belonging by two girls in particular: Avery and Jaye. Notably, these girls’ understanding of belonging and cliques correlate to a larger understanding of what it means to be a girl. Being popular was highly gendered and, for the girls, meant dressing and acting a certain way. Those morés aren’t just established at this one Midwestern middle school; while there are likely some quirks in any school or region, what’s acceptable and fashionable is informed by a larger schema: one laid out by the culture’s understanding of girlhood. This schema is made clear in the literacy artifacts of the culture: countless teen magazines paying homage to certain types of dress, giving advice about how to conduct certain types of friendship,



and inescapably, how to appeal to certain types of boys. Girls across the country absorb this information and enact (or resist) its values in their homes and schools.

Avery, a sweet-natured girl who laughs easily and often, and Jaye, a bubbly blonde who was new to the district last year, write and talk often about girlhood. Avery wants to be well-liked by everyone, and treats everyone with kindness—occasionally reaching out to the most isolated of the girls in our group. Her family is very important to her, and is close-knit. She regularly mentions extended family members who come to stay with her family when in transition: multiple times she mentions her aunt living with them for months at a time. Unlike the more social girls, she does not treat me as an equal. The things she wants to share with me in small chat before group indicate that she wants me to see her as an intelligent and caring girl. For example, she doesn't share very much information about her time with her friends or conversations with crushes but about time she spent volunteering or with her family. However, unlike Olivia, she never speaks of being *like* her family; instead comparing herself to her friends who she says are quick to joke about things and laugh a lot. Jaye, on the other hand, is a little more surly. She has a flair for the dramatic, often rushing into the room, plopping down with an over-wrought sigh, and then gushing about her latest crisis (it's always boy-related). She and Chelsey are best friends, which both of them mention often, referring to time spent together after school (usually talking to boys). Whether it's because Chelsey paints her this way, or not, Jaye often plays the role of the damsel in distress: unable to open a water bottle, tripping over a chair and giggling while she rolls her eyes, asking directions to be repeated or explained two or three times. This ditziness isn't entirely unbecoming. She's also sweet, waiting for Avery to walk to class, asking polite follow up questions when a girl mentions she's been sick or grumpy, and smiling warmly when people talk.

Avery and Jaye grew to be friends throughout the semester we spent meeting in group, during which time the girls also had a class together. Perhaps their friendship came about because of some likeness suggested by these early writings. Avery writes,

Just because I'm a girl,

I hate shopping

I'm not popular

I can't sing beautifully

I am happy.

Similarly, Jaye writes,

Just because I'm a girl

Doesn't mean I am mean

Doesn't mean I am popular

Doesn't mean I am weak

I am a friend.

Here Jaye makes the same connection between meanness and popularity that Chelsey reacts to when she retorts that not all popular girls are mean, but she also connects girlhood with an expectation of popularity, as does Avery. In the girls' school being popular means wearing nice clothes ("they have to dress like that, because more people look at them" (Avery)), which also comes up repeatedly.

Clothes are a huge point of interest for these girls, arguably because they connect clothing with their gender. When asked what her favorite part of being a girl is, Avery said it was shopping. Though later she would say that she only dresses for comfort. These statements reveal contradictory impulses in Avery. Since she usually wore sweats and sweatshirts, it is likely true

that she chose her clothes based on comfort, but her comment reveals that she identifies her choice as something un-girl like. Unlike when Chelsey switched her statement on being “loud,” Avery’s flip-flopping may indicate that she was untruthful when she talked about enjoying shopping, and then later felt as though she could admit to not valuing clothing, despite the expectation that girls dress in a certain way, and care about the image they put forward with their clothes.

Many assumptions about girlhood were unearthed in our group. Besides the understanding that popularity, clothes, and girlhood are connected, I would add that society—through movies, t.v., and books like *The A-List*, and *Gossip Girl*-- also says that girls, as represented by popular media, are continually fighting with one another, often over boys (another assumption might be: girls are boy-crazy, or boy-centric). In our ninth week together, we took on this perception. The group role played different situations in which friends are in conflict, and then wrote about the ways each girl typically deals with conflict in their friend group. In her writing, Jaye takes up society’s portrayal of girls saying, “in movies you will see girls harass each other over a guy by making up rumors about each other that’s not true.” However, she doesn’t go on to say that this is unrealistic; she just stopped writing. Ironically, or perhaps, fittingly, on this week Avery walked in to the room and announced: “Jaye is mad at me, so you’ll probably hear some pretty funny stories.” And then, when I told them the theme of our week was “Girl Friends or Girl fights,” she laughed, looked smug, and said: “It’s about a boy.” This is the first time that Avery’s mentioned a boy, and her writing supports the idea that perhaps this supposedly boy-centered conflict has nothing to do with the boy and everything to do with Jaye, as became evident in Avery’s writing.

I asked each girl to write about a conflict, then prompted her to write who was to blame, then in whom she was most disappointed. Each girl was focused on an individual conflict they'd experienced, but Avery's was the central focus of the group, as she kept sighing and gesturing to draw attention to her conflict. In asking the girls who to blame and in whom they were disappointed, my aim was for the girls to narrativize their experience, which Gee (1985) asserts is the primary way humans make sense of experiences (p. 79). After writing the narrative, identifying who was to blame and then in whom they were disappointed would show the high expectations that girls have for one another. While most girls did write about being more disappointed in their girlfriends than boys involved in the situation, the conversation I was hoping for about why girls hold one another to high expectations and whether that's fair occurred; Avery and Jaye's conflict remained personal and grounded in the particulars—unable to transcend into higher lessons until the two of them had worked out the issue between them. To my prompting, Avery wrote:

Jaye is mad at me because she said I purposefully ran into both the guys she liked. She likes a guy named Sam. Sam was walking through the door, and so was I, and I accidentally ran into him. Then the other guy she likes is named Jean. Jean was on his phone and I tried to go to my locker and we almost ran into each other. But we didn't. I told Jaye and she was mad at me and pushed me, and I said I was sorry. Then today I told her that my locker is right next to Sam's, and she said shut up about a thousand times. I told her that it isn't my fault that my locker is there. I think that the people who caused this to happen was Sam and Jean. Jaye is disappointing me most, because she doesn't believe me when I said I didn't run into them on purpose.

Here Avery's writing about her fight with Jaye is a way of asserting her intimacy with Jaye, as mean girl culture closely ties intimacy and aggression (Simmons, 2002). Because of Avery's understanding that this fight connects the girls as friends, she appears to be an instigator in this situation. While the dialogue as she recounts it comes off plaintively enough, when imagining the interaction, it's clearly unhelpful of Avery to insist this isn't her fault while Jaye repeatedly says "Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" Also, Avery brings these boys up to her on multiple days, as indicated by her use of the marker "today"? Later, when role playing situations where girls are in conflict, Avery shrugs: "Girls always have drama and boys never fight," indicating that her instigating is related to what she assumes is a natural part of her gender. Jaye chimes in: "I love drama." To take these remarks at face value seems odd, but to brush them off as a result of the girls' socialization and ideas about what female friendships looks like seems to rob them of agency. Instead, I want to posit that the girls are aware of the "mean girl" lens through which society views these sorts of fights, and that they are capable of using this discourse to their advantage. Therefore, what happened between Avery and Jaye can be read as a reappropriation of the mean girl attitudes. Avery was purposefully emphasizing their fight, making it a marker of their friendship.

These girls, instead of saying: girl friends are always fighting with each other, say: girls who are friends fight, therefore turning the fighting into a way to express friendship with one another. Their ability to laugh, tease, and engage in tiffs with one another is a marker of their closeness. Avery's ability to strut into a room and announce Jaye is mad at her was a proclamation: Jaye and I are close friends. For Avery to then be able to write about that fight was a way of solidifying and making visible the intimacy that existed between herself and Jaye. Not unlike the chief Levi-Strauss observes in a primitive society, the writing existed as a

performance and it gave the writer power, which in the sociable world of girls come from connection to others.

### **Creating Connections, Restricting Access**

Because connectivity is so important to young women, and to all people, it surprised me how often teasing came up as a marker of intimacy. The idea of laughing with and at friends is crucial to these girls, and based on how the girls describe their cliques at school, I would guess that Avery is part of what they call “the laughing girls.” The laughing girls just laugh at everything. This is a marker of levity, but more often the girls associate laughing at one another with being close to another person and, therefore, having the “right” to laugh at them (without offending that girl). “Rights” are very important to these girls, as they continually differentiate who has the “right” to do or say something to whom. These “rights” are determined by friendships and social capital. Over the course of our group, Avery went from lightly laughing at everything to laughing and pointedly teasing Jaye, to whom she was closest. This laughing is so important to Avery in particular that when she writes about the dynamics of the group she says, a “gift is that we all laugh together at the same thing... I feel included when we laugh together.” And when asked what makes her or others feel excluded, Avery responds: “When we laugh at the person, when we think that they will laugh back, but they don’t.” When pressed on what this laughing means, the girls explain to me that friends are people you can tease and participate in negative-talk with. For example, they say that if someone says, “I’m so fat and ugly,” a stranger might say, “No, you’re not!” but a friend would answer, “I know; I’m going to throw up.” While I would think of it as a marker of comfort with one another, they see it in another light as well.

Chelsey explains that, “it’s good to say negative things outloud. You share them so they aren’t bothering you.”

Of course this teasing is supplemented by support of one another, as indicated by the girls when they check-in. When I ask them to say one high and one low from their week, Jaye often says a high is that Chelsey was supportive of her. On the one hand, this is sweet. On the other, this seems somewhat exclusionary in a group to continually single out one person. Being constantly reminded of the friendship between Jaye and Chelsey may have suggested to the other girls that theirs is a special intimacy, above that with the other members of the group. Restricted access, or selectively allowing another girl knowledge of one’s life and secrets, is a marker of friendship, though, and this is never clearer than in literacy practices. In our sixth week together, Avery and Chelsey began writing notes to one another. This connection is an odd one, as the two of them had very little voice-to-voice, or face-to-face, interaction. They rarely engaged one another in conversation, but when Jaye would still be finishing her writing, if Avery and Chelsey were both done, they’d flip their papers over and write each other notes; however they wouldn’t pass the paper, but would instead hold them up in such a way that most everyone could see the paper but me. The writing, therefore, was more about a show of private communication than actual communication. Of course, these notes were “secret” from me, and so I do not know what they said. Still, demonstrating that they were sharing information that was not shared with everyone present, especially myself, an authority figure and, therefore, an outsider, formed a bond between the girls. I refer to this practice as “connective writing,” as it functioned to link the girls in a new way: they had a secret to hold them together, and used reading and writing as a means to exchange those “secrets”. Perhaps writing here is more powerful than whispering, as writing is something that can be demonstrated, something that was literally held up before the

group as a link between these two girls as well as a barrier noting who was “inside” and who was “outside” the intimate group. Those who could see the sign (not me) were in, and I was out.

Another form of this connective writing came from Avery. In our eighth week together, after reflecting on our community, perhaps feeling more connected to her group mates because of this, she flipped over her paper and began to doodle the initials of the girls in the group. She made each girls’ first initial out of a lot of tiny stars. Significantly, doodling stars on her writing started as a sign between the girls in the study to help me distinguish their writing from the girls’ who opted not to participate in the study so that when the writings were all collected I could tell which were able to be used as data and which were not. By this meeting, Olivia, the only other research participant aside from Avery, Chelsey, and Jaye, had stopped coming to group. Therefore, although there were still other girls in the group, the symbol was only known to Chelsey and Jaye, and was able to function as a tacit connection between the three of them. Because all the other girls’ initials were included in the doodle, this writing served to connect Avery to each girl in the group. However, the secret symbol was only known and additionally significant to the girls in the study.

While doodling and note-passing seem like timeless forms of literacy (Finders, 1996), technology has added an interesting element to literacy which deserves to be acknowledged as an avenue of literacy in itself (Smith, 2012). As has been mentioned, restricted information is a way of signaling intimacy. And so it is worth noting that in our sixth week together the internet entered our circle. Jaye was gushing about a boy she’d just started dating. She’d just come to this school last year, and this boy was from her old school. She asked if I wanted to see a picture, and I said sure. Chelsey pulled out her phone and pulled up a picture from his Facebook page, then took a screenshot of it, closed Facebook, and passed me her phone. Because she’d taken a screen



shot, the picture was now saved in her pictures, instead of attached to his profile, so if I scrolled in either direction I saw pictures of her and her friends and siblings, instead of more pictures of him. Just as my access to the notes shared between the girls, in this situation, limiting my access to his photos was both a way of creating distance between me and the girls. It also functioned as a way for Chelsey to assert that she had the ability to restrict my access to Jaye's information, while she was able to see everything—in this case, pictures of Jaye's boyfriend. That Chelsey is able to do this is a way of flaunting her access and privileged position as well.

This use of technology is really important to how the girls use literacy to share, collaborate, or appropriate each other's voices and space. Technology came into play early on in our circle as well. During our second week together the girls were working on a craft, so everyone's hands were busy. Chelsey's phone buzzed (as she was the only one really permitted to text, per the girls' guidelines, because of her participation on the volleyball team). She asked Jaye to read her texts to her, which she did at a whisper. Chelsey then dictated a text to her, which Jaye typed on her behalf. Allowing Jaye to assume her voice is a mark of their closeness. However, dictation has not always signified this way. Traditionally dictation carries with it a very marked power dynamic. In the past dictation has occurred between a boss (usually a man) and a secretary (usually a woman). However, when the girls perform this act publicly in front of others, the demonstration is easy to read as one of closeness: Jaye is trusted to handle Chelsey's cell phone which contains her text messages and call log, relational information the rest of the group is not privy to. Again the girls have re-appropriated a dynamic established by the culture, and made it signify in their own way. It's interesting to note that this level of appropriation is made possible by technology, as written appropriation would be given away by handwriting, typed text and photos are able to be more anonymously authored.

The girls used writing to create connections, both explicitly through note passing, and in a more implied way, by restricting access to some girls and therefore privileging relationships with other girls. By using their personal writings and interactions to secure connections, they also won friendships with one another. Because of the social gains that resulted from their literacy practices, I would argue that these literacy events were demonstrations of agency. The girls were able to bring about action (relationships and allegiance) by saying and writing certain things and in certain ways. Their use of writing is a powerful reminder of the intelligence of these young women, as they strive for what they want: namely, connection and belonging.

#### **“Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery”: Re-appropriating Style**

Another marker of connection and friendship is imitation. Not unlike the instance where Chelsey allowed Jaye to type her text message, the girls sometimes appropriated one another's voices without explicit permission as a way of demonstrating intimacy. In this micro-culture this re-appropriation indicates a sense of belonging. The girls' speech is marked by their friendship group (laughing girls laugh everything off, according to Avery, while populars are more likely to police one another, since they have “more people watching them”). By imitating one another, they're demonstrating a similar group belonging, which can be seen as a way of asserting both identity and intimacy. For example, Avery, during our time together, began to imitate the behaviors of Jaye. I take this to be both a factor in and a marker of their growing friendship. Avery, who at first appeared to care very much about the quality of her writing, towards the end of the group would misunderstand assignments and her work ethic deteriorated. Because this does not reflect Avery's reported or demonstrated attitudes towards writing, it seems that she

was influenced by something else: perhaps her relationship with Jaye and her desire to appear a certain way to her. Jaye often demonstrated poor work ethic (or disinterest in work), putting her pen down after a few lines, putting her head on the table, looking around the room distractedly. Avery would pick up these behaviors, perhaps due to nonverbal peer pressure from Jaye to do so.

My original impression of Avery indicated that writing was an important accomplishment for her. She has a writing tutor outside of school, because last year she got a C in English. The grade may indicate a discomfort with writing, or her discomfort may have come after earning that grade, which upsets her as an otherwise very strong student (Hall, 2012). No matter the reason, she says that writing is easier for her than talking, because there's no "tripping over words" when writing, because there's time for forethought. However, she also said that it's easier to revise when you're talking—saying "Oh, never mind," instead of erasing. Even though Avery reports that she does no writing outside of school, she said the writing we did in our group was fun because it was about her. She never appeared to have a bad relationship with writing, and in fact even wrote about how she'd been chosen two times to attend a district-wide breakfast that honors students for writing an excellent paper. Despite these two excellent papers, her parents seemed to be concerned about her writing ability, perhaps because the rest of her work was not up to the same standard, though Avery's self-reporting on this is not very clear as she was easily distressed about school. Avery wrote in the exercise with dominant and non-dominant hands that she was stressed about school, and then reassured herself: "Don't cry, just do your best." Despite her past "failures" she was dedicated to continuing to work hard at writing and her school work.

"Her best," however, is not always what she gave in circle. Towards the end of our time together we began to talk about body image. The girls and I flipped through magazine images.

When I held up one with a woman in a floral dress and apron, balancing on top of heels, donned in pearls, icing a cake I asked the girls what the picture was trying to tell women. Avery responded, that you're supposed to cook. When I asked who wanted me to think that, Avery said, "The people who sell the ad want you to buy a dress or cook or something." The way she engaged with the advertisement I held up showed that she received the message from the advertisers, and understood how it was working on her. However, during this discussion, neither Chelsey nor Jaye volunteered anything. When I asked the girls to take a turn looking for an ad and thinking about the message it sent, Avery shifted her approach. She cut out a picture of a girl in a short, funky dress. When writing about what she felt about the picture, she wrote: "I would feel embarrassed to wear this dress out in public, because it's weird looking. I would only wear it if it were halloween!" She chose to blatantly misunderstand the assignment, even though she clearly grasped the premise only moments before. She turned her criticism towards the woman in the ad, rather than the advertisers. Perhaps it is not going too far to draw a connection between the sort of authority that advertisers have with the type of authority carried by peers. Both decide what or who is "in" and who is "out". And so when Avery was seeking to fit in with Jaye, is it so strange that she might not be interested in subverting the authority of those who decide who meets the axioms of girlhood and popularity? Avery chose to participate in the activity, just in a way that was subversive, imitating and performing the role Jaye generally took up of not caring about or misunderstanding the activity. Her undermining of the assignment shows not only an alignment with this type of authority, but also an imitation of Jaye's attitude towards writing and the potentially subversive conversation I was striving to facilitate. Though Jaye did not react in any particular way to Avery's understanding of the ad, it's likely that she recognized in Avery

the same aloofness she brought to the project. Perhaps these like attitudes served to further connect the girls.

As time goes on, Avery begins to mimic more and more the behaviors of Chelsey toward Jaye. As mentioned, she and Jaye grew to be friends over the semester, however the way this was signaled changed dramatically from the beginning of the term to the end. At first it was apparent in small gestures of kindness: Jaye waiting for Avery to walk to get their lunch; the next week the girls split a cookie. However, near the end of our time together, Avery started teasing Jaye as a way to demonstrate their closeness—the same sort of relational aggression Chelsey and Jaye have engaged in all along. Avery said in her exit interview that over the course of Girl-to-Girl, she's become much better friends with Jaye. For example, now she can “tell her things that are funny.” While Jaye and Chelsey always teased each other, with Chelsey teasing Jaye for such banalities as, “you're always tripping over things,” and, “you can never open your water bottle!”. Jaye plays along with this dynamic, writing in her reflection about our group (which she knew would be read aloud) that a challenge of our group interaction was “Chelsey + Avery.” The exercise was meant to be anonymous. Each girl wrote in response to a few questions about our community (see Appendix A), the papers were mixed up, and then read aloud. I explained to the girls that reflecting honestly on our relationships with one another was a way of respecting and caring for our relationships with one another. However, Jaye's name-dropping not only attached her identity to her reflection, but made an assertion about who her friends were in the group. The meaning of this subversive technique was clear. In addition to subverting my attempt at anonymity, Jaye's reflection served to connect her to Chelsey and Avery, while again restricting my and other girls' access to their privileged group. When that section was read aloud Avery and Chelsey looked at each other and at Jaye and giggled at their shared bond. The significant shift

that has occurred here is that Avery has begun to adopt the action of Jaye and of Chelsey towards Jaye. Perhaps even more note-worthy: this imitation has worked. By the end of the group, Jaye interacts with Chelsey, her best friend, and Avery, a new friend, in much the same way. Avery has demonstrated an ability to appropriate successful uses of literacy by Chelsey to secure a friendship within the group. By adopting Chelsey's voice (which is likely not unique to Chelsey, but rather represents a certain discourse of female adolescent friendship), Avery has been able to relate to Jaye in much the same way. Again, the political and the personal are deeply connected, as literacy is deeply tied to hierarchy and power.

The teasing and adoption of voice serves to create connection, but in what other ways is it meaningful? Most obviously, does this mode of connection represent an inability on the part of the girls to deeply connect to one another? This is the interpretation taken by so many scholars about girlhood (Wiseman, 2002, Orgenstein, 1995), and yet that interpretation also involves a lot of projecting onto these girls' relationships. Are they really so broken? To best answer this question, I want to return to the words of the girls.

Again and again the girls acted in ways that were traditionally respectful and supportive. Repeatedly Jaye thanked Chelsey for being there for her over the past year. When Avery mentioned that her aunt was visiting in town, Jaye demonstrated that she'd been listening in the past and showed an interest in Avery's life by asking, "I thought she was living with you?" This willingness to engage in Avery's narrative is a marker of friendship and caring that is more easily understood than the taunting the girls partake in more often. Despite my perception that the conversations the girls were having were stunted by their joking, both Chelsey and Avery reported that their favorite part of group was that they could discuss serious things, "like friendship" and "other people understand [what I'm going through]." Furthermore, each girl

reported significant changes in her relationships with the other girls, with both Avery and Jaye saying she felt “a lot closer” to the other girl. Because of these self-reported gains, I’m inclined to believe that the teasing and taunting perceived as cattiness by myself and authors of best-selling books like *Queen Bees and Wannabes* in fact serves a very real purpose in these girls lives and relationships. In a culture where the female-female relationships portrayed in movies and television are full of girl fights, the girls I worked with have found a way to re-appropriate the cattiness expected of them, and use those modes to form connections between one another.

After spending time with these girls it is my belief that they are not the passive or catty young women they are sometimes assumed to be by reactionary literature such as *Queen Bees & Wannabees*. Instead, they are thoughtful young people who use literacy to shape both the way they are perceived, and therefore, with whom they are aligned. They are capable of taking up multiple voices when it suits their needs, whether their needs are social or academic: the young women I encountered had a strong grasp on literacy. I don’t base this assessment on the quality of the grammar or construction of their writing, but instead on Gee’s understanding that anyone who can use language in a social way is literate. With this understanding, it will be useful to move forward thinking about how my experiences with these girls aligns or doesn’t with the previous scholarship around the literacy practices of young women. First, let’s revisit the intentions of the study.

### **Chapter Three: Powerful Literacy**

#### **Assessing the Goals of the Study**

While the group is meant to increase self-efficacy and to build relationships, it was my hope that writing would support those aims by asking the girls to commit to telling their stories

in writing, and to share that writing with one another. The seriousness this signals might signal the seriousness of the girls' relationships with one another. Without a real control group, there's no meaningful way to assess whether adding writing made the group "more effective," and of course such a control group is impossible to achieve, as the individuals who comprise the group determine so much of the way it functions. Though I've run girls' groups like this in the past, this particular group of girls was comprised entirely of white girls from middle to upper-middle class backgrounds, whereas the groups I have typically worked with are made up of low-income African American and Somali girls, for whom writing is entrenched in a school system that is often, for some, a source of frustration. Because this particular school is the one that was willing to work with me to obtain approval for my research, it was where the group was held. The girls' comfort with writing was both an advantage, and prevents meaningful comparison with groups I've been a part of in the past.

The socio-economic status of the girls, as described by their guidance counselor, meant that the primary discourse they learned in their homes, which is to say the way language is used, most likely, to communicate in their primary social environment, was in line with the "secondary" discourse in which they engage at school (Gee, 1989); however the purpose of the group is to get close to what James Paul Gee calls "powerful literacy," (a rigid, but useful model) in which secondary (or tertiary, and so on) discourses are used to critique a primary discourse. Therefore, the aim of a Girl-to-Girl, regardless of the population, is to promote powerful literacy. In this group, labels was a recurring topic of interest to the girls, and so it was my hope that they would think critically about their environment, for example, the cliques that dictated the shape of their daily lives. How did they fit into these cliques, or not, and how are they related to larger cultural constructions of girlhood/adolescence?



Gee points out that primary discourse influences a girl's understanding of her world—that the fact that these girls were all white, middle class, lived in the same Midwestern suburb, and attended the same top school, shaped their worldview. However, what seems more relevant is Yagelski's expansion, which allows girls to have agency in shaping the discourses in which they're engaged (rather than being passively born into a school of thought). Yagelski claims that individuals exert agency by participating in a discourse. Indeed, the girls asserted agency by engaging in a dialogue about their own identities through discussion of the labels they've been given, and making assertions about those identities/labels, creating them in the process.

### **Girls Exercising Agency**

#### **Asserting Identities.**

Literacy is frequently thought to be a mode of self-expression, and indeed the idea behind this research is underlain by my belief that writing (and speaking and identity performance) is crafted to put forth a certain message, and my belief that every junior high girl should get to have a say in the way she's perceived. However, the environment does affect a girl's ability to put forth the identity she's chosen to present. "Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process" (Bakhtin in Mitchell & Weiler, pp. 35-36). So while each girl may have rhetorical agency, that language is filtered through the perceptions of others. Olivia comes to mind as a young woman whose writing and language was "populated with the intentions of others." One writing prompt asked the girls directly to name the intentions of others, and then to re-ascribe positive value to the negative judgments others put on them. The "Just Because" form poem assignment asked girls to start with a label they'd been assigned, and

then to rebut it with three statements. The girls were given two poems in this form as an example. One of the stanzas from the example poem read,

Just because I am Mexican,  
 Doesn't mean I speak Spanish  
 Doesn't mean I'm dark  
 Doesn't mean I'm from Mexico  
 I am a cook. (Anonymous Girl)

Olivia followed the form well, though she often displayed difficulty writing—writing only a few lines while other girls wrote a full page. Perhaps the formula of this exercise helped her. She wrote,

Just Because I am smart  
 Dose not mean I am weard  
 Doesn't mean I am a nurde  
 Dosent mean I am a freck.  
 I am Different.

That Olivia began her poem with the negative labels others haven prescribed to her supports Bakhtin's assertion. The social conditions or perceptions that led Olivia to such a response speaks to the way she's labeled in her school. In the rest of her stanzas, her concluding sentence places her into a group less exclusive than the one she presented in the first line, moving towards a normalization. For example, her first stanza moves from "Just Because I am a Presbaterian," to "I am a normal Christian." While both of these are religious groups, the move to "normal Christian" is less restrictive. Similarly her second stanza begins, "Just Because I am a girl," to "I am a person." This moving between categories mirrors the structure of the presented poem,

however, Olivia’s stanza reproduced in full above does not fit this pattern. The original poem reveals that she started to write, “I am a . . .,” before changing her mind and writing only: “I am Different.” “Different” is a classification, but certainly not a group. Olivia’s choice to not place herself into another group is resisting both the conventions of the poem and the social rules of her school in which every one fits into a social group—even if those groups are marginalized, as Olivia suggests when she writes about nerds and freaks.

Instead, the discourse Olivia might be engaging in is that of her guidance counselors. Resisting group identity may be something supported by her guidance counselor, with whom she spends a great deal of time, and who in describing Olivia to me used many of the speech patterns Olivia uses to describe herself: saying that she’s “different,” but kind; “outcast,” but genuine; and that “she has a tough time in school,” but “things will be better for her later.” The discourse of school counselors is even more apparent in her next stanza, where she says:

Just because you hate me  
 Dosent mean that I care  
 Dosent mean that I will change  
 Dosent mean that I am not me  
 I am who I want to be not who you want me to be I am me.

Her comfort in resisting the social status she’s been given speaks to the way she’s been conditioned to see herself, likely in the same guidance offices that seek to help her fit in. Mike Rose in *Lives on the Boundary* (1989) writes about the damaging way school systems sort children into groups, and then treat them differently based on those categories. In Olivia’s case, if this rhetoric is borrowed from counselors, it serves to isolate her further within the group, as her audience averts their eyes and refrains from commenting on the vulnerable sharing Olivia has

just done. Rose states, “Kids *do* come to school with all sorts of linguistic differences, and some kids, like Harold, arrive on our doorstep with big problems. But what happens at school can then further define the child as unusual, as marginal” (1989 p. 128). Rose takes Bakhtin’s point that language is filtered through other’s perceptions and intentions, and applies that to authority figures within school, who have direct influence on children’s lives and sense of self.

By mixing the discourses of her peers and her counselors, as well as resisting the conventions of her school and poem, Olivia is practicing powerful literacy, critiquing the social order of her school by adopting the language of her counselors. Often asking students to bring their lived experiences into the classroom or group setting, calls for a blending of discourses, which can sometimes lead to powerful literacy (Sola & Bennett, 1985, pp.35-65). In this situation, Olivia managed “to make these discourses submit to their own intentions, and in doing so created a voice that was neither wholly of the school nor of the community, but a *bricolage* of their own creation that met particular needs in specific situations” (Sola & Bennet 1985, p.52). She may have been aware that the girls to whom she was reading were the same ones who participate in allowing her to be labeled in the negative ways she identified. By sharing her poem with her peer group, she was subverting the power structure of the labels which rendered her “powerless” at the bottom of the social totem pole.

This subversive use of literacy is well documented among girls and the adults who hold the control. For example, Finders writes about subversive literacy practices ranging from note passing to drawing on bathroom walls (Finders, 1997). In another study, Finders looks at the ways girls use instant messaging to determine the way they’re perceived by others. For example, one girl waits to respond to boys’ IMs to appear to be popular. Finders points out that though this is a sophisticated use of the literacy and technology, the girl “performed an identity that was

already scripted for her by her age and gender...(enacting) the norms expected of adolescent girls—attempting to impress boys and appear popular” (Lewis & Finders, 2002, p. 106). Olivia bravely put forth the idea that she was not popular, and in fact, was rather the opposite: different.

Most of the documentation of subversive literacy examines relationships between youth and the adults/adult systems (such as schools) that govern them. Sometimes a particularly astute writer will document subversion within cliques; however, there’s very little research around subversion within or between cliques. This could be, as the girls pointed out to me during a role play when I asked one of them to act as a “laughing girl” and another to act as a “popular girl,” that a conversation between those two girls was almost impossible to imagine, it was so unrealistic. However, I suspect that intersections between cliques happen more often than the girls may admit, for example, when they’re thrown into a common group, as they were in my study, or when they are in table groups or small groups in classrooms. Mining these situations for subversion could inform the way youth can use literacy to make more egalitarian worlds for themselves, and how the adults in charge can create an environment for that to occur.

### **Re-shaping Narrative.**

Theorist James Gee posits that humans make sense of their experiences by casting them in narrative form (1985, p. 79). Therefore, by analyzing the way stories are organized, one can tell about how one makes sense of information. Gee, building on the work of Sarah Michaels, defines two types of narration: topic-centered versus topic-associated stories. Topic-centered stories are the ones which are more commonly privileged and have a story arc in which one event lies at the center of narration. Topic associated stories have a stream-of-consciousness organization in which one event flows into another through a shared property. The girls tended to tell topic-centered stories (such as Avery’s talking about volunteering at a nursing home, or Jaye

receiving an IM from a boy she used to like), which Gee says may be indicative of their class status; however, it wasn't clear to me that they were using the narrativization to make sense of their experiences. Sometimes, I could see the girl tracing a thought through to conclusions, gaining understanding from her writing process; however, sometimes the narrativization was more a mechanism for display than anything else. For example, the day that Avery stomped into the room saying that Jaye was mad at her, her primary aim was to make that fact known. Gee tends to champion topic-associated stories, which imitate a higher art. He argues that this style of story-telling has been devalued because the groups who most commonly tell stories in this manner are marginalized. In a topic-associated story told by a child, that story starts with how he saw a dog on his way to school, and then jumps to: my neighbor has a dog named Barney, and then: Barney is my favorite television show—this story, Gee would argue, is artful in the way it involves the audience and asks them to draw conclusions and connections. Whereas topic centered stories, Gee says, do not allow listener to construct meaning.

When reading Avery's story, the reader can see that she tells about the conflict (Jaye thinks she ran into the boys Jaye liked on purpose). The piece then moves on to say it is not her (Avery's) fault, and, the people who caused this to happen were Sam and Jean (the two boys). While that seems like sense-making has taken place, the reality is that the ending to this piece was in response to my prompting. I asked the girls to write about a conflict, and then who they blamed. We were talking about whether girls were harder on their girlfriends or on boys, and I wanted the point of blame to be explicit. While it's possible that my prompting disrupted their natural sense-making process, Avery never seemed to be attempting to make sense of her situation, which is to say she never considered, as far as I could see, the motives or feelings of others and how those related to her view of what happened. Of course, she could've been using

the opportunity to process her fight with Jaye internally, however in this situation what signified the most was the performative aspect of her writing. She walked in beaming, proud that she had drama to report, and remained smug throughout group. In fact, she further dramatized that she had something to write about. When I said that we wouldn't be sharing our writing and urged the girls to be honest, she looked up pointedly, and said, "Oh, we won't be sharing? I thought we *would* be sharing," and then bent over her paper to scribble more furiously, making a show about having a girl fight occurring in her own life (to make this more clear, she wrote at the top of her page: "In my life," lest I think she was re-telling some movie). While it's possible that some sense-making occurred that was unfamiliar to me, what I saw most clearly was writing as performance. That is to say, while writing may be understood as a way to make sense of a situation, Avery was most visibly using the writing to demonstrate that she had a situation that needed to be made sense of. She was rendering the "sense-making" visible to call attention to her fight with Jaye.

In this situation, Avery was using narrative, which I had intended to be a reflective activity, one that led, as Gee suggests it does, to meaning-making, instead as a performance. In this way, Avery subverted my intentions for the exercise and asserted agency in making the activity conform to her own intentions. Because the girls often read their writing aloud, it's possible that the way Avery was using this form is closer to the way literacy scholars think about performance poetry. Though Avery knew she wouldn't be sharing this piece aloud, she knew that I would be reading it, and she used the act of writing as a way to put forth a message: she had drama, she was writing about Jaye. It's important to note that Avery had never used writing in this way before, previously using narrative as Gee writes about it: "within specific contexts, an adolescent might experiment with different roles and, based on feedback, accept or reject certain

roles or identities. This process becomes deeply connected to how an adolescent defines ‘self’ at a key, transitional time of his or her life” (Rudd, 2012). Avery, in manipulating use of narrative, is experimenting not only with her writing but with the way that writing speaks to her identity within our group. She situates her writing, and therefore herself, as deeply intertwined with Jaye. She makes a show of their connection, and even of their “fight”. Her actions support the idea that identities are always social, plural, and recognized (Rudd, 2012). This is to say, Avery’s use of narrative is not individually sense-making, but instead centered on garnering recognition of her social identity from the group.

Avery’s use of narrative points to a need for literacy research to be grounded in the particulars of audience and social context, always with an eye towards the socially constructed. Gee’s analysis may be too essentialist, in its over-emphasizing the primary discourse. Avery’s use of language is much more in line with ideas of performativity, as her writing was meant to signify something to an outside audience, rather than to be used primarily for self-reflection. It’s interesting to think about the way Avery performed writing (bending over her paper and scribbling furiously when she learned that she wouldn’t be asked to share the piece aloud). Her focus on the physical act of writing as something that could signify without the words ever being read by those interpreting her act is interesting, and it may be worth asking where being seen writing is and isn’t acceptable. Could teachers create situations in which being seen writing was viewed positively, even by some marginalized students who may otherwise distance themselves?

### **Re-appropriating “Mean Girl Behavior”.**

Understanding Avery’s use of narrative may require thinking more about how the fight she recorded signified in the group. Throughout our time together, the girls exercised agency by re-appropriating behaviors which have been cast as “catty” by such a film as *Mean Girls* and



books centered around relational aggression in girls (Simmons, 2003). By re-assigning meaning to the very actions that have garnered so much attention in the adult-run media, the girls are creating their own discourse or system of meaning making.

This re-appropriation can be seen as an act of protest against normal definitions of what it means to be an adolescent female, “which includes the following assumptions: (1) adolescents sever ties with adults; (2) peer groups become increasingly influential social networks; (3) resistance is a sign of normalcy for the adolescent; and (4) romance and sexual drive govern interests and relations (Finders, 1997, p. 28)” (104). To these assumptions of adolescence in general, female relationships in this age group are thought to be comprised of relational aggression: competition for status and favor among boys (Simmons, 2002). For example, in the tiff between Avery and Jaye, the girls were ostensibly fighting; however, Avery’s performance of writing (because the words themselves were never shared in group) functions along side this event to create connection between herself and Jaye. The act of writing, making a show of writing, allows Avery to assign meaning to the “conflict” between the two girls. The show of writing is all about looking at Jaye, looking around the room, and slumping over her paper—all of the attention of the group is on the relationship between Avery and Jaye, and while both girls are riled up, neither seem to be genuinely hurt. The whole conflict looks like a performance. While feelings may have been hurt, the only way to interpret the event is as the girls ask it to be interpreted, as a spectacle—something to be seen and paid attention to.

It’s important to note that this re-appropriation of what I’ll call “mean girl behavior” does not change the idea that these behaviors are tied up in power structures. Traditionally, mean girl behavior is used by “queen bees” or popular girls to humiliate girls of lesser social standing. These behaviors are played out in books and movies. Though it may seem silly to keep

referencing the film *Mean Girls*, it has stayed in the public consciousness because of the way it brought these behaviors into the forefront of the public eye. In the movie, the girls play cruel games, calling one another while a third girl is also secretly on the line. The caller tricks her friend into saying something hurtful about the girl who is silent on the line. This relational aggression is believed to strengthen the connection between the first girl and the silent girl by creating a common “enemy,” at least in that moment. However, the meanness I witnessed in group did not match the cruelty displayed in the media. That’s not to say it doesn’t happen, but the behaviors I did see that may seem mean, in fact, functioned to strengthen relationships—without an unwitting victim. Of course, my judgment of what seems mean versus how those actions function are biased by my background. More longitudinal studies may be useful in determining how certain behaviors function in relationships, and perhaps this could best be determined by examining multiple social groups, remembering that the culture of each school and each group is different. Therefore, I will only speak to the social climate I know: that of the group of girls I spent time with each week, from mixed social groups, forming friendships with one another as they were able.

For example, when Avery adopts the discourse of mean girls, by performing conflict through her writing, she is using it to assert a relationship with Jaye: that action is still tied up in notions of power and hierarchy. A relationship with Jaye carries social capital (as relationships do, especially since Jaye is aligned with Chelsey, who carries the social capital of the popular girls). Therefore, it is still true that that “the discourse of literacy cannot be abstracted from the language of difference and power” (Mitchell & Weiler). However, the writing of these young women have revealed that these power structures do not function for them in the way the media usually decries.

Negative talk functioned this way as well. It was something in which the girls were continually engaged, putting one another down through snide comments or sarcastic jokes. However, the way this negative talk functioned varied. During one activity, the girls revealed how negative talk functions as a way of policing one another. Various pairs of girls were given the same situation (such as, one of your friends is being physically promiscuous and you're concerned about her, what do you do?); the girls were asked to play-act an intervention as the different social groups that they identified at their school. When the girls were acting as the "mean girls," their responses centered around how the girl's negative actions impacted the way the group was seen, saying her actions were "bad for the group." This sort of negative talk is what is most in line with what is described in the scholarship (Wiseman); however, it was not the most common way I saw negative talk functioning in our group.

Chelsey was the most likely to engage in negative talk, or what may be seen as relational aggression. She was continually putting down Jaye, her best friend. However, the nature of the insults was always intimate. Jaye drops a water bottle and Chelsey says, "You're always dropping things! Last weekend you dropped...and yesterday you dropped..." Or when Jaye starts talking about her relationships with boys, Chelsey says: "you have so many problems," which functions not just to put Jaye down, but to demonstrate Chelsey's more intimate knowledge of Jaye's affairs than the rest of the audience. While it may be concerning that the way these girls express closeness is through put-downs, that being aloof is celebrated, I am hesitant to read the girl's behaviors only in terms of these negative indicators. While these actions would traditionally be viewed as a power struggle between the girls, it's important to note that these put downs are not occurring in a vacuum. They're a performance of sorts, in front

of this small group, and a way of asserting the closeness of two individuals and the outsideness of the other members of the group.

I would like to argue that the girls are capable of re-claiming this “mean girls” discourse, and using it in a way that benefits them. While the interactions between Chelsey and Jaye may be tinged with power dynamics, in which Chelsey is usually the one partaking in the negative talk at Jaye’s expense, late in our time together Avery demonstrated agency over this discourse, reappropriating it to form a connection between herself and Jaye. When Avery decries that she and Jaye are fighting, not once was Jaye put down, nor was Avery criticized; the situation—which was ripe for drama—was used to create a connection between the girls. It’s important to note that girls fighting, and particularly over boys, is still in line with what is expected from female adolescents in the traditional narrative. However, to write off this fight as “typical” would be to ignore the undercurrents of what is going on between these two girls. They aren’t fighting over boys: there’s no accusation that Avery likes these boys. The show of fighting receives all the attention, running counter to the idea that teen girls place more importance in their relationships with boys than with one another.

Angela McRobbie’s point is that postfeminism has failed in that it overemphasizes the agency of the individual, as well as understating the complexity of most discursive acts, which seldom have just one purpose. While Avery may still be acting within the gender norms for her age and sex, to ask her to do otherwise would be to ignore the very powerful patriarchal system still at work which dictates what behaviors are acceptable and unacceptable. Avery, a laughing girl who is always positive, has found a way to forge a relationship with a girl who may be socially more in demand than she is, by manipulating the expectations for her gender. Therefore, it is my understanding that these girls have exercised agency in asserting both their own

identities and in forging new relationships. So much of the understanding of teen girls as “mean girls” is based around interpretations of girls’ actions as they might signify in adult discourses, rather than in the systems in which they took place. Furthermore, actions that may signal as catty ought not to be read as reflections upon girls or so-called girl culture. In many ways, what Yagelski posits about girls having little control over systems of power is true. Though the girls may use literacy to subvert negative labels, as Olivia did, or may reappropriate what’s been deemed as typical girl behavior, as Avery did, they ultimately lack control over the patriarchal systems which create such strict gender norms in the first place. However, a reasonable place to start to dismantle these systems would be to engage in more research around understanding subcultures (such as girls) on their own terms, and by engaging them in critical discussions around their experiences.

### **Implications**

Moving forward, adolescent research would benefit from re-framing discourse about girls interacting with one another as acts of agency, while still acknowledging the systems in place that pressure girls to follow gender norms and seek popularity. However, in the current system, too much is chalked up to “peer pressure” which situates adolescents as victims and objects, keeping them from fully inhabiting the subject-positions they deserve. The most effective way to re-frame this discourse is to localize it further. While a broad study may view Avery’s budding friendship with Jaye as a popularity contest, getting to know Avery and studying the girls’ relationship in close proximity allows me to frame their interactions as a budding friendship. Girls, in research and in their lives, deserve to be treated as human beings who are complicated and full of intersecting identities and desires. Therefore, case studies take closer looks at young people’s actions and interactions (Finders, 1996, Lewis & Finders, 2002), rather than research

which studies large groups and then extrapolate that data to entire populations (Wiseman, 2002, Orenstein, 1995). Studying adolescents at the individual level allows for their multiple identities to be acknowledged, allows their motives to be more clear, and, therefore, most effectively prevents the intentions of others from populating the study.

In literacy research, scholarship around new media and technologies (such as Facebook) is a growing field of interest; however, what came up in my research was the way those technologies were made visible. For example, Jaye and Chelsey passing their phones back and forth, rendering their literary actions physical as they literally passed between their hands in front of their peers the ability for one of them to “speak” (write) for the other. Thinking of the physicality of new media, as well as the performative aspect of these exchanges could be a rich area to expand the scholarship on appropriating voice and social media/literacy.

For community groups, such as Girl-to-Girl, trying to gauge the effectiveness of adding writing to their group in order to further goals related to connectivity and self-esteem, it may be useful to work to quantify the effects of a writing component in a given curriculum. The participants in both groups could engage in pre- and post- surveys on a Likert scale to gauge self-reported gains in writing, verbal expression, connection to others, self-esteem, and critical thinking about diverse perspectives. A quantitative study, using an instrument to measure increases in writing and meaningful discussion with peers, should be supplemented with interviews that provide rich, thick descriptive information and allow researchers to understand specific mechanisms that help girls to express their agency. My research suggests that writing can be used to assert and subvert identities in a way not often reached by spoken communication. It also suggests that writing plays an important role in creating friendship groups, through

appropriating voice as well as excluding others from communications in a sometimes significantly visible way.

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Appendix A  
Exit Interview

Name:  
How old are you?

**Girl-to-Girl**

Have you ever participated in Girl-to-Girl before?

Why did you choose to be involved in this Girl-to-Girl group?

What's your favorite thing about Girl-to-Girl?

What's your least favorite thing about Girl-to-Girl?

How is Girl-to-Girl different than/the same as school? hanging out with friends?

Describe your relationship with the other girls at the beginning of the group.

Have those relationships changed? If so, how?

**Writing**

Tell me about writing in your life. At school? At home?

How much writing do you do outside of school?

Do you find the writing we do in Girl-to-Girl easy? hard? Why?

How does it feel to read your writing out loud?

How does it feel to hear the other girls read their writing?

Appendix B

Reflection on Girl-to-Girl Community

\*This reflection is confidential & anonymous

\*This is a way of taking care of each other and our relationships

\*In doing this, we're presuming good will: that everyone is already doing the best they can.

\*We won't try to "fix" anything: nothing is broken. Let's just check in honestly about what we're feeling right now.

1. Write some light and some shadow about the way our group interacts with one another (one or two gifts & one or two challenges).

2. What makes you feel included?

3. What makes you or others feel excluded, left out, unheard?

4. What do you want for or from our community?

## Appendix C

## Sample Curriculum with Modifications\*

“The thing that is really hard, and really amazing, is giving up on being perfect and beginning the work of becoming yourself.”

- Anna Quindlen

## MATERIALS

Thick/fancy paper

Markers/crayons

Decals (optional)

## OPENING RITUAL

Do the same opening ritual each time.

## THEME INTRODUCTION

Embracing your authentic self. Mention the pressures to be perfect rather than your unique self.

## CHECK IN

High and low of the week; read reflection cards from last week\*; ask how we did with our guidelines.

## ACTIVITY 1: Discussion

Define societal expectations and the word “perfect.”

- Who/what influences how you view yourself?  
Ex. Media, family expectations, friends, etc.
- What are positive influencers? What are negative influencers?
- Do you feel like these expectations fit who you are? If yes, why? If no, how can you overcome them?

Read quote and give some background about Anna Quindlen. Choose bits of information from this brief bio that follows the quote:

“The thing that is really hard, and really amazing, is giving up on being perfect and beginning the work of becoming yourself.” - Anna Quindlen

Anna Marie Quindlen was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to an Irish father and an Italian mother. She is an American author, journalist, and opinion columnist who began her career in journalism in 1974 as a reporter for the *New York Post*. Her *New York Times* column, *Public and Private*, won the Pulitzer Prize for Commentary in 1992. Quindlen left journalism in 1995 to

become a full-time novelist. Quindlen is known as a critic of what she perceives to be the fast-paced and increasingly materialistic nature of modern American life. Much of her personal writing centers on her mother who died at the age of 40 from ovarian cancer, when Quindlen was 19 years old. She has since written five best-selling novels, and three of which have been made into movies. She is now on the Board of Trustees for Barnard College, her alma mater, and has three children with her husband who is an attorney in New York City.

Anna Quindlen is an important part of the woman's literary community as she writes about real issues women face in today's society along with many stories of women, their struggles, and how they overcome. She is known for her strong voice as she speaks about her opinions on politics, the economy, and women's rights. Anna writes about her insight on how to have women be more represented and supported in order for them to gain more equal rights.

Read quote again and ask the following questions:

“The thing that is really hard, and really amazing, is giving up on being perfect and beginning the work of becoming yourself.” - Anna Quindlen

- What do you think it means to ‘begin the work of becoming yourself?’
- Why is this important? Why is it important to be yourself and improve yourself by your own standards?

Journal\* about your authentic self. Describe her. How does she act? Who does she spend time with? How do others see her/how does she see herself?

### ACTIVITY 2: Creative

Give each girl a piece of fancy/thicker paper and have them creatively write their name on it and decorate the border. Then pass the paper around the circle and have each girl write down why they appreciate each girl or why they liked having them in circle on each of the girls’ papers until the girls have their own papers back. Have each girl read over what everyone wrote to themselves and then on the back of the paper, write down why they appreciate themselves and/or what they like/value about their qualities.

### APPLICATION QUESTION

What is one thing you can do this week to work on becoming your better self?

### CLOSING

Be sure to give each girl a decal of the quote.

Do your closing ritual.

\*Writing has been added by Stentz