

Susan Pearlman

Reframing (Im)maturity:

Interrogating Representations of the Transition to Adulthood in Contemporary American Film and Television

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Abstract

At the turn of the twenty-first century, institutional and cultural changes caused adolescence as a life stage to become increasingly overdetermined, while simultaneously blurring its definitional boundaries. Although the concept of youth as a culturally defined category is of relatively recent origin, adolescence is culturally recognized as a biological and social necessity; a process one must go through in order to negotiate the passageway from childhood to adulthood. Problematically, the very existence of adolescence depends on the fixity of childhood and adulthood, life stages that are themselves highly contestable. Fascination with those individuals who did not conform to culturally sanctioned ideas of adolescence during this decade, classified by such terms as “emerging adulthood,” “twixters,” and “rejuveniles,” evinces the tenuous nature of life-stage categorizations and their fluctuating role in cultural understandings of individual psychosocial formation.

This thesis argues that adolescence, and consequently the subject position of the adolescent, should be understood as an assemblage of a wide array of practices employed in the management and regulation of a specific population. Accordingly, this project asserts that a shift occurred in the representation of adolescence at the beginning of the twenty-first century that worked to legitimize one particular depiction of adulthood, consequently positioning adolescents as something worth obviating and marginalizing through the censure of the performance of certain immature behaviors and attitudes. Through the exploration of “threshold moments” as represented in American film and television from 1999-2008, moments at which individuals are depicted as struggling to reach autonomy, this thesis uncovers the mechanisms that naturalize the figure of the adolescent as an attenuated individual possessing partially formed identities and skills, considering the ways in which this discursive formation operates in the new millennium as a means by which a certain type of privilege is negotiated, controlled and reasserted.

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Introduction

Saul: Look at us. I'm in my 60s and we're, like, in high school at a slumber party.

Kevin: Does high school ever end, Uncle Saul?

Saul: No, Kevin. It's like taxes. We're doomed to repeat it year after year.¹

--Kevin to his Uncle Saul in *Brothers and Sisters*

There comes a point in your life when you're officially an adult. Suddenly, you're old enough to vote, drink, and engage in other adult activities. Suddenly, people expect you to be responsible, serious, a grown-up. We get taller. We get older. But do we ever really grow up?²

--Meredith's Voiceover Narration in *Grey's Anatomy*

The two above quotes, taken from two popular prime-time U.S. television dramas airing in 2007, suggest that a cultural shift has occurred that has obscured the line between adolescence and adulthood. Moreover, they imply that there are no longer clear, culturally sanctioned markers that establish when one has finished "coming-of-age," or successfully completed the transition to adulthood. This sentiment was echoed in popular magazine cover articles and popular books published in the first decade of the twenty-first century, articulating a growing concern with the apparent changes in the transition from childhood to adulthood. Adam Sternbergh's 2006 *New York Magazine* feature, "Up With Grups," discusses what Sternbergh saw as a new phenomenon in which a group of

¹ "All in the Family," *Brothers and Sisters*, ABC, 1 Apr 2007, Television.

² "Forever Young," *Grey's Anatomy*, ABC, 15 Nov 2007, Television.

thirty and forty-year old adults whom he calls “Grups” (a conflation of the words grown-ups) were still maintaining the same lifestyle choices, attitudes, aspirations, and apparel as their twenty-year-old counterparts.³ Unlike youthful trends of the past in which individuals simply refused to grow up, Sternbergh explains,

this cascade of pioneering immaturity is no longer a case of a generation’s being stuck in its own youth. This generation is now, if you happen to be under 25, more interested in being stuck in *your* youth.⁴

Sternbergh thus describes a group of adults who do not refuse to grow up in the traditional sense, these individuals maintain successful jobs and have children. Yet, they have not only clung to the markers of youth that once separated them from the previous generation, but have continued to appropriate markers of youth delineated by the generation that followed. For Sternberg this is,

evidence of the slow erosion of the long-held idea that in some fundamental way, you cross through a portal when you become an adult, a portal inscribed with the biblical imperative, “When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: But when I became a man, I put away childish things.”⁵

Sternbergh’s observations suggest that contemporarily, adulthood no longer signals the end of the maturation process: “Grups” make the statement that entering adulthood may mean adopting certain adult responsibilities, such as sustaining jobs and starting families, without relinquishing certain aspects of adolescence.

Christopher Noxon chronicled this same occurrence, referring to this group of age-defined adults as “rejuveniles,” a term he uses to describe individuals that “cultivate tastes and mind-sets traditionally associated with those younger than themselves.”⁶

Noxon explains how rites of passage that historically marked the end of childhood have ceased to retain their significance, resulting in a large number of adults indulging in activities generally associated with childhood: toy collecting, slumber parties, trips to

³ “Grups” is a reference to a *Star Trek* episode in which the crew lands on a planet on which all the adults were killed by a virus, which also slows the natural aging process, leaving the planet to be run by children in a state of “extended prepubescence.” Adam Sternbergh, “Up With Grups: The Ascendent Breed of Grown-Ups Who Are Redefining Adulthood,” *New York* 26 Mar 2006, Web, 11 Aug 2006.

⁴ Sternbergh 2006.

⁵ Sternbergh 2006.

⁶ Christopher Noxon, *Rejuvenile: Kickball, Cartoons, Cupcakes, and the Reinvention of the American Grown-up* (New York: Crown, 2006) 4.

Disneyland. Noxon sees juveniles as enjoying a cultural “lifting of sanctions that would otherwise discourage a sudden impulse” to adopt a more youthful lifestyle.⁷

Popular media texts emerging in the first decade of the twentieth century not only reflected this absence of age-specific behaviors; they reinforced it. Touching on a theme central to this project, Noxon argues that the marketing of media products toward adults and children simultaneously created a desire among adults to stay young for fear of becoming irrelevant:

a lifelong barrage of media attention aimed at youth has created a cultural tractor beam, drawing older consumers back into the target market. By so lavishly fixating on youth, the market presents those who are no longer young with a stark choice: Buy in or be forgotten.⁸

Though there is a clear connection between consumerism, media, and this push toward youthfulness, the “cultural tractor beam” has worked both ways: child development experts have observed that the redefinition of life stages is clearly occurring elsewhere besides adulthood, noting that physical and behavioral changes that were once typical for individuals in their teen years are beginning to occur as early as eight years old.⁹ Noxon notes that children once saw themselves as kids until roughly the age of twelve, but now feel they’ve left childhood behind at eight or nine.¹⁰ He speculates, “it’s as if there’s a limited amount of room in the domain of childhood—and juveniles have taken it upon themselves to reclaim territory left vacant by all the rapidly advancing kids.”¹¹

Noxon and Sternbergh’s observations leave out one crucial piece of this puzzle: if, at the beginning of the new millennium, children and adults appropriated the cultural markers that once signified the teenage years, what became of the adolescent? Here, then, lies the essential question this project seeks to explore: if children stopped being children when they were eight or nine and an increasing number of adults symbolically took up that “territory” by adopting childlike qualities and activities, what became of the age group that lies in-between? What cultural “territory” was left for these individuals?

⁷ Noxon 3.

⁸ Noxon 13.

⁹ Martha Irvine, “10 is the New 15 as Kids Grow Up Faster,” *USA Today* 26 Nov 2006, Web, 6 Dec 2006.

¹⁰ Noxon 6.

¹¹ Noxon 7.

Thinking in broader societal terms: what happens when the cultural markers of a specific “life stage” are taken up by an increasing number of individuals outside that life stage? What was the significance of adolescence becoming increasingly claimable and performable by non-adolescents?

Framing this inclination toward immaturity from another standpoint, Lev Grossman detailed this trend in his 2005 *Time* cover feature, “Grow Up? Not So Fast,” through the examination of the lives of 20-somethings who he believed were delaying entrance into adulthood. Referring to these individuals as “twixters” (since they were “betwixt and between”), Grossman registers an assemblage of individuals in their late-twenties who had yet to settle down and were “seemingly going nowhere.”¹² Noting that this was not the first time twentysomethings had been singled out for their behavioral incongruities, Grossman argues that this new occurrence is not just a rehashing of an old trend: “Ten years ago, we might have called them Generation X, or slackers, but those labels don’t quite fit anymore.” He remarks: “Who are these permanent adolescents, these twentysomething Peter Pans? And why can’t they grow up?”

Clearly, the interest these articles exhibit in contemporary changes to life-staged behavior articulates the ways in which the traditional conceptualization of adolescence—as a stopover between the two stable life-stages of childhood and adulthood whose attributes must be shed once adulthood has been reached—no longer works as a productive description of what happens as young people come of age in postindustrial economies. Sternbergh and Noxon both frame this shift through rhetorics of choice: choice to retain the attributes of adolescence; choice to refuse to take on the mantle of adulthood; and/or choice to appropriate the attributes of childhood into the adult years. Grossman, however, questions the compulsion inherent this shift: Attempting to historically contextualize changes to the way these “going nowhere” individuals approach the maturation process, Grossman observes that twixters are not stuck or actively rejecting adulthood, but rather, “they’re spending years carefully choosing the

¹² Lev Grossman, “Twixter Generation: Young Adults Who Won’t Grow Up,” *TIME* 16 Jan. 2005, Web, 11 Apr 2011.

right path into it.”¹³ Considering this, he speculates: “you start to wonder, Is it that they don’t want to grow up, or is it that the rest of society won’t let them.”¹⁴ These contradictions initiate the investigative path for the concerns of this project: agency and constraint, opportunity and destiny, performance and ineffectuality.

This project argues that the category of “adolescence” experienced an increased prominence at the end of the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the new millennium, with its material manifestation, the “adolescent,” gaining a similar notoriety. Throughout this ten-year period, sociologists, journalists and cultural critics alike tended to view this shift in the maturation process negatively, dismissing the ostensible difficulty of making the transition from adolescence to adulthood as generational fault. By neglecting the socioeconomic realities of navigating the structural barriers to independence in a contemporary society in which college tuition is at an all-time high and entry level jobs are few, these journalists, sociologists and cultural critics negated the force of political, economic and social constraints. If the first decade of the new millennium was a period of time during which adolescence became increasingly attributable to behavior and performances that transgressed culturally designated markers of fixed life stages, this thesis asks, how should this shift in the conceptualization of adolescence be understood? How were contemporary notions of adolescence utilized to convey specific aspects of broader economic, cultural and institutional shifts? How was adolescence, as both a categorical and individual classification, mobilized in a late modern/late-capitalist era? And for what purposes? If the old cultural signifiers of adulthood no longer work in the same fashion, what acted as the transitional markers between life stages in the first decade of the twenty-first century?

This project is not concerned with creating a history of adolescence, nor is it concerned with creating a new definition for this life stage. Instead, it is the purpose of this project to examine specific modifications to the conceptualization of the coming-of-age process in order to understand the ways in which segments of the population possess

¹³ Grossman 2005.

¹⁴ Grossman 2005.

less agency, even while experiencing the weight of nominally unrestricted opportunity. As more and more of the population experiences some form of marginalization, the tension, stagnation, and impotence produced by the difficulty of making these transitions have become palpable within cultural texts as varied as *Reaper* (WB 2007-09), *Mean Girls* (Waters, 2004), *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC 2005-present), and *Employee of the Month* (Coolidge, 2006). Consequently, this project examines the representation of different transitional junctures and their relation to the American social, political and economic climate of the decade between 1999 and 2008.

Accordingly, this project is not a survey of teen film, nor is it an attempt to use representations of life-staged subjects as a means to present a categorization of film or television. Rather, the main concern for this thesis is the exploration of “threshold moments” or “threshold issues” as represented in American film and television from 1999-2008: the moments or issues at which individuals were depicted as struggling to cross the threshold from immaturity to maturity, adolescence to adulthood. Moreover, this project argues that a shift occurred in the depiction of adolescence at the beginning of the twenty-first century that reflects a broader institutional push toward more regulation and control of an increasing portion of American society at a time of heightened neoliberal rhetorics and practices. Taking this into account, these threshold moments are thus considered instances of scholarly opportunity: moments of slippage in which regulation and control can be uncovered—exposing the border zones, the barriers, and obstructions to full subjectivity.

Adolescence and (Im)Maturity

Over the last decade of the twentieth-century and the first decade of the new millennium, institutional and cultural changes caused adolescence as a life stage to become increasingly obsolete, while simultaneously extending it indefinitely. Although the concept of youth as a culturally defined category is of relatively recent origin, and the demarcation of adolescent characteristics an equally recent understanding, adolescence is

culturally recognized as a predetermined biological and social necessity; a process one must go through in order to negotiate the passageway from childhood and adulthood. Thus, problematically, the very existence of adolescence depends on the fixity of childhood and adulthood; yet contemporarily, these life stages are themselves highly contestable.

The contemporary version of adolescence was born out of early twentieth century anxieties that produced attitudes about this life stage charged with protective attitudes of concern, control, mistrust, and suspicion. The conception of adolescence as a life stage came from the newly created scientific field of psychology that formulated this period in the life cycle from research about “abnormal” youth in order to determine one “normative” and “correct” developmental path. The transition to adulthood was thus fashioned as a strict prescriptive path as a means to control proper development with any deviations from that path rendering an individual aberrant. Thus, the very notion of adolescence was coupled to the desire to create “normal” adults. Additionally, *fin de siècle* ideas about adolescence were both instructional and decisively aimed toward building a nation with a specific idea of the shape that nation would take and what would be needed for that vision to come to fruition. Thus, the contrast between “normal” and “abnormal,” “acceptable” and “aberrant” was created and shaped by the type of nation that turn-of-the-century scientific minds hoped to create. Since the adolescent, and the adolescent’s place within this nation, is deeply rooted in a recondite history of patriarchal governance at work in some form since the inception of the country, the “discovery” and “creation” of adolescence as a theoretical category should be understood as a part of this history.

Psychologist G. Stanley Hall is often cited as the first to formally develop a theory of adolescence in the early twentieth century, defining it as a universal stage of development triggered by the onset of puberty.¹⁵ Hall viewed adolescence as a “process of becoming” and a “period of transition” filled with “storm and stress,” exemplified by

¹⁵ G. Stanley Hall is typically credited with the “discovery” of adolescence in his two volume text: *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relation to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1904).

moodiness and hormonal turmoil.¹⁶ The inability to control angst, in Hall's mind, set adolescents apart from the adult world. Erik Erikson's theories of adolescence accord with Hall's in that he believed that this life stage was distinguished by confusion, though in a more positive sense. Erikson believed that adolescence was a time of "psychological moratorium," meaning "a delay of adult commitments" during which "the young adult through free role experimentation may find a niche in some section of his society, a niche which is firmly defined and yet seems to be uniquely made for him."¹⁷ The universalized nature of this account of adolescence has been heavily questioned; theories of adolescence ranging across sociological, biological and psychoanalytical domains do not present a coherent account of the maturation process. Yet, these two theorists' legacy persists through their wide-reaching influence on the popular conception of this life stage, promoting the idea that adolescence is a time for exploration and self-definition on an individual and personal level.

Adolescence, as it is culturally conceived, thus not only allows the space for identity exploration but should be understood, out of its traditional context, as a cultural marker that creates and emphasizes the necessity of this type of discovery. Consequently, as Catherine Driscoll so succinctly suggests, adolescence itself

is not a clear denotation of any age, body, behavior, or identity, because it has always meant the process of developing a self...rather than any definition of that self.¹⁸

An adolescent is thus any individual who demonstrates difficulty with the process of subjectification, defined as, "coming to be a coherent and self-aware subject."¹⁹ Accordingly, as she argues, what remains salient with regard to the contemporary conceptualization of adolescence as a cultural construction is that it is not only characterized by its "physiological and psychosocial periodization," it is also, "a

¹⁶ Christine Griffin, *Representations of Youth: The Study of Youth and Adolescence in Britain and America* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1993).

¹⁷ Erik Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1968) 156.

¹⁸ Catherine Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 6.

¹⁹ Driscoll, *Girls* 7.

separation of certain behaviors, lifestyles, interests and forms of cultural production, not only from childhood but from the subject's properly mature sphere of action."²⁰

It is this *mature sphere of action* that is of strategic concern for this project. One of the key changes to society, in this regard, is the destructuring of the life course. Over the course of the twentieth century, the standardization of social institutions, such as compulsory schooling and age of majority laws, increased the segregation of individuals by age group. At the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, this standardization produced a greater conformity and homogeneity of age norms than at any time in previous history.²¹ Additionally, the life course became less structured by social norms, supplanting institutional life course organization with individual preference for lifestyle choices.²² Consequently, the timing of life course events has become disorderly—often understood as “de-coupling of the life course.”²³ James A. Côté maintains that the result of this destructuring has produced paradoxical results: individuals who attempted to transition into adulthood (as well as individuals already in their culturally assumed “adult” years) may have experienced fewer cultural and structural limitations than in previous eras, but also had less cultural patterns to aid in achievement their goals.²⁴ Thus, as life course and age-status markers became de-coupled from their traditional life-staged spheres of action (education became de-coupled from work, training de-coupled from work, childbearing de-coupled from marriage, marriage is de-coupled from work, and so on),²⁵ and the traditional institutional support that once accompanied the realization of these markers no longer

²⁰ Driscoll, *Girls* 8.

²¹ James E. Côté, *Arrested Adulthood: The Changing Nature of Maturity and Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2000) 29.

²² Although “lifestyle” often refers to leisurely or consumerist practices, I use the term here, as Anthony Giddens suggests: “‘Lifestyle’ refers also to decisions taken and courses of action followed under conditions of severe material constraint; such lifestyle patterns may sometimes also involve the more or less deliberate rejection of more widely diffused forms of behavior and consumption.” Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991) 6.

²³ Côté 30.

²⁴ Côté 30.

²⁵ Claire Wallace, “How Old is Young and Young is Old? The Restructuring of Age and the Life-Course in Europe,” Paper presented at Youth 2000: An International Conference, Middlesborough, U.K., 1995. In Côté 31.

provided an adequate foundation, individuals found themselves assuming the burden of structuring their own lives. Thus, Côté concludes,

in the late modern era, people increasingly find themselves forced to make life-altering choices whether they want to or not or are capable of doing so. Traditional markers have become vague and irrelevant for many people and little has emerged to replace them. Many people are left in a limbo, as not quite adults and less than full citizens. This is a foundation upon which the late modern period of extended youth is based—a “generation on hold” without sufficient external guidance or internal resources with which to take stock and mature...Many people wallow in forms of immaturity characterized by partially formed ideals, identities, and skills.²⁶

It is these forms of immaturity—the “partially formed ideals, identities, and skills”—that make up the topic of this project.

Crucially, to reiterate Côté’s point, this life course de-coupling and restructuring occurred across individuals and institutions, affecting members both trying to enter “adulthood” as well as those already assumed to have reached “adult” status. Additionally, this phenomenon is not limited to America, but is rather a global phenomenon. Yet, in looking at the texts of this trend, these shifts largely play out through the figure of the “adolescent” as it is pejoratively positioned as “immature” and in need of rehabilitation. This is an easy association as the term “mature” signifies “full development.” Consequently, as chapter two of this project further explains, in the first decade of the new millennium, neurological studies emerged shedding new information on the development of the brain during an individual’s teen years, renewing the emphasis on the idea that adolescents are biologically and developmentally “unfinished.” This had the resulting effect that adolescents were marked as “erratic,” and were re-characterized as ineffectual and even dangerous. The texts examined in this project should be understood as produced within the context of cultural understandings in which adolescents, as Côté and Anton Allahar suggest, have been conceptualized as “biologically and emotionally immature and therefore unsuited to be admitted to society as full-fledged members.”²⁷ Appropriately, this project is structured to address the way

²⁶ Côté 31.

²⁷ James A. Côté and Anton L. Allahar, *Generation on Hold: Coming of Age in the Late Twentieth Century* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1994) xii.

that American cultural products navigated the slippage and incongruity produced by “immature” and “ineffectual” behavior and attitudes signified both on and through fully developed bodies in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Transitions in Transition

In a post-industrial society, the broad implementation of corporate organizational structures promoting efficiency and productivity drastically changed cultural formations of temporal order, which, in turn, changed narratives regarding personal development. Thus, while cultural expectations of adolescence adapted to allow for a greater moratorium of responsibility, pressures placed on adolescence caused the life stage to become increasingly compressed, compelling the representation of adolescence to shift from a suspension of adult accountability to a search for personal meaning. As this search for individualized meaning and fulfillment gained importance and acceptance within society, the coming-of-age process became conceived of less as a natural part of adolescence, and more as an essential process that all individuals must go through in order to achieve full subjectivity.

As the general understanding of the period of time associated with adolescence in the United States has dramatically changed since the 1950s, what used to be understood as a short, transitional phase from childhood to adulthood now carries considerably more significance, yet paradoxically, with less understanding of what that significance is. Whereas once it was thought that adolescence initiated a rather straightforward journey from dependence to independence,²⁸ in a late capitalist era, individuals are besieged by a variety of dilemmas about the stability of selfhood. After the American Revolution, a burgeoning society aspired to ensure that young American citizens would be properly educated and raised in an effort to make them suitable republicans. This led to the institution of compulsory education and the implementation of child labor laws, both of

²⁸ Joseph F. Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America 1790 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1977).

which resulted in the further segregation of young individuals from the American population at large. Subsequent to these social and institutional changes, the age of exclusion steadily increased, contributing to the decline in the economic status of those youth who were precluded from the work force, effectively creating the rise of increasingly distinct youth cultures.²⁹ As American cultural logic offered more reasons for the protection and management of the nation's youth, and as young individuals became further sequestered from the general population, a change in attitude occurred toward this grouping of individuals. As Côté explains,

The original *de jure* logic for a point of exclusion based on age (e.g., sixteen years) became *de facto* for individuals beyond that age (e.g., late teens and early twenties) as people came to assume that the younger person could not perform production roles or was not entitled to them.³⁰

The more sequestration that young individuals have endured, the further this point of exclusion has drifted, and the more this signification became concretized.

Just as our cultural perception of adolescence as a life stage is understood to be a consequence of changing economic and social conditions working in tandem to create life stage categories, the familial structure is similarly subject to historical processes.³¹ As such, adolescence is particularly susceptible to changes in our culturally constructed ideas about the family *as institution* and the adolescent's role within that institution. It is thus important to note that while the family is culturally categorized as a private institution, its cultural role is as much political as it is personal. As individual roles within families are affected by large scale societal changes, the authoritative and hierarchical organization within the family works in a reciprocal manner as it "regulates and limits the personal activities of its members while its members simultaneously shape, redirect, even dissolve and reconstruct the family to affect their role in the larger social network."³² Thus, in the way that the family works both with and against other groups in

²⁹ Côté 19.

³⁰ Côté 19.

³¹ Steven Mintz, and Susan Kellog, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: The Free Press 1998) xiv.

³² Stephanie Coontz, *The Social Origins of Private Life: A History of American Families 1600-1900* (London: Verso, 1988) 13.

society and acts as a legitimating force, it is “a symbol system that functions as ideology...and its very definition is part of that struggle.”³³ The life stage of adolescence works in much the same way by enacting both personal and political struggles through its definition and redefinition.

Consequently, the idea of the adolescent that has emerged over the past century is tightly connected to the time-specific idea of “the late-nineteenth-century view of the family as bourgeois refuge”³⁴ as well as the twentieth century notion of the ideal nuclear family. As the nation moved from a colonial agrarian society, to an industrial society, to a post-modern society, the family changed alongside: from “family-as-community,” to “family-as-refuge,” to “family-as-encounter-group.”³⁵ As went the family, so too the adolescent’s position within it: from providing necessary supplemental physical labor, to augmenting the total family wage earnings, to adding the essential component to the emotional and intellectual growth of the family unit. Thus, Stephanie Coontz contends, there is a reciprocal relationship between an individual’s role in the family and an individual’s proper place within the social order: “A family system is a tool for channeling people into the prevailing structure of obligations and rights, then attaching the tasks and rewards associated with that structure to a definition of self.”³⁶ Consequently, as the family moved from “self-sufficient survival unit” to safe haven, to consumptive unit, the family began to be viewed as an impediment to the individualized goal of self-fulfillment, enacting marked changes to definitions of family and self. The first decade of the new millennium witnessed further shifts in this trend as many individuals unable to afford to live autonomously returned to the parental home, a topic explored in chapter two of this project.

³³ Coontz 13.

³⁴ Hine 39.

³⁵ John Demos maintains that the best description of the contemporary family unit is: “the family as encounter group,” by which he means a grouping of individuals who gather together to “provide the interest, the excitement, the stimulation missing from other sectors of our experience.” John Demos, *Past, Present, and Personal: The Family and The Life Course in American History* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) 38.

³⁶ Coontz 13-14.

Similar to the ways in which definitional understandings of the adolescent's place within the family have shifted over the last century, so too have determining precepts about the adolescent's place within the patriarchal hierarchy. As chapter three of this project argues, when the cultural concept of the adolescent was generated at the turn of the twentieth century, scientific understandings of the adolescent's place within the social structure were explicitly linked to social progress, gendered social relations, and patriarchal support. The architects of adolescence as a life stage believed that male adolescents were ranked just below adult white men within the hierarchy of society, with white women and men of all other races ranked below. It was believed that male adolescents needed to be fostered, disciplined, and educated appropriately in order to produce generations of proper adult men thus ensuring the future success of the nation. Hence, the formation and cultivation of a "proper" male adolescence was part of the mechanism by which patriarchy upheld the ascendancy of white males. Male adolescents were able to fulfill this "proper" adolescence and become consummate adult citizens due, in large part, to the invisible labor of women, servants and others whose effort has always been a large part of the invention of the "self-made man." Changes to the structural support provided by educational institutions and other social organizations have made being self-sufficient both necessary and somewhat of an exercise in futility. The once well-supported white male adolescent can no longer become "self-made," even as he is still arduously held to this standard. Though adolescence as an identity category is not typically associated with civil and social rights rhetoric, it is clear that changes to discursive practices and social exclusions with regard to structuring assumptions about various identity categories have altered the ways in which equality, opportunity and access are conceptualized. While other contingent adolescent figures such as female adolescents, LGBT adolescents, and other raced and/or classed adolescents have historically faced discrimination and marginalization, typically, white male adolescents as a social category have experienced less in the way of this systematized discrimination. As this project contends, contemporarily, the structural and institutional inequalities and barriers to opportunity constituent in contemporary American society have extended

access to opportunity for some members of the population while simultaneously constructing new barriers to others.

Moreover, additional changes to the life course affected psychological aspects of the coming-of-age process. As mortality and fertility rates decreased, people had fewer children and were thus able to devote more time to them, while advances in medical technology allowed individuals to live long enough to see their children become adults themselves. Additionally, further technological advances in birth control allowed for reproductive choice, giving individuals the choice to plan the timing of their children (or even choose to forgo), thus experiencing part or all of adulthood without dependents. These developments thus allowed individuals the time and ability to turn their attention inward. As “preoccupations with inner life and its deficiencies” became a more important part of the life experience during the postwar period, the process of “finding oneself,” or “self-actualization” became more complex, with many individuals continuing this search for identity well past traditional standards of the age of adolescence.³⁷ Chapter three of this project explores the ways in which film and television texts featuring themes of transition have begun to represent this process as a search for personal destiny.

Subsequently, this thesis will address the ways in which the contemporary characterization of adolescence is produced, not only by late modern structural changes to institutions and the experience of the life course engendered by these institutions (education, work, (hetero)sexuality), but also by changes to the adolescent subject’s place in the social order as well as the ways in which a late modern portrayal of adolescence calls upon certain individuals to do distinct work on the self. These accounts of the articulation of contemporary adolescence speak to the various practices of identity formation and selfhood in circulation at the turn of the twenty-first century, practices that should be considered part of the social and historical production of the subject. In this way, this project is dedicated to revealing the mechanisms and technologies at work in

³⁷ Côté 19.

the discursive formation of the adolescent. This project argues that adolescence, and thus consequently the subject position of the adolescent, should be understood as an assemblage of a wide array of practices employed in the management and regulation of a certain population within this historical moment, not as the result of a social or scientific identification with the definition of subjectivity or even adulthood. To this end, the first chapter outlines the methodological considerations and necessary interventions this project aims to achieve. The second chapter of this project explores both the discursive practices involved in the regulation of the adolescent (bodies, attributes, performance), while the third chapter explores those practices at work in the regulation of self-identity (the process of subjectification). The purpose of examining the regulatory practices at work in the signification of adolescence and its material manifestation is to uncover the ways in which the discourses at work in the codification of adolescence operate to insist on one particular understanding of the formation of the subject that culminates in a similarly uniform version of “the self.”

Harry Blatterer asserts that reaching the age of majority is culturally understood as “a culmination of a journey during which it is assumed that competencies *accrue*, rather than arrive all at once, with physiological and psychological maturation.”³⁸ It is in a similar way, Nancy Lesko contends that, “stories of cultural evolution and of individual adolescent development prioritize the ending: they are primarily *narratives of fulfillment*.”³⁹ Within American cultural products, adolescents are often described as inhabiting a “transitional period,” traversing a “developmental pathway,” being in “transition to adulthood,” or existing “on the edge of adulthood.” Harvey J. Graff maintains that the language used to describe adolescence is heavily imbued with metaphor: as something that can rise, fall, disappear, or be created.⁴⁰ Calling them, “the

³⁸ Harry Blatterer, “Contemporary Adulthood: Reconceptualizing an Uncontested Category,” *Current Sociology* 55.6 (2007): 773, his emphasis.

³⁹ Nancy Lesko, *Act Your Age! A Cultural Construction of Adolescence* (New York: Routledge Falmer) 110, her emphasis.

⁴⁰ Examples of titles that evidence to this include: John Sommerville, *The Rise and Fall of Childhood* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1982); Timothy Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager: A New History of the American Adolescent Experience* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1999); Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), and Philip Jeremy Graham, *The End of Adolescence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), to name a few.

myths of growing up,” Graff maintains that these figurative images “provide a language and a moral, a discourse of childhood, adolescence, and youth,”⁴¹ that affects not only the way we view adolescence as a life stage and adolescents as individuals, but also affects the way policy is enacted. The metaphor connected to adolescence as well as the pervasive myth associated with the transitional period of “growing-up” is, according to Rachel McLennan, “‘essential’ to the construction of adolescence.”⁴²

In many critical discussions and dominant constructions of the subject, adolescence bears little resemblance to a stage of development experienced differently by individuals (which it is), but is in effect employed metaphorically in academic discussions as a figurative container for the uncontainable. That it is uncontainable is demonstrated by the fact that adolescence has no binary other, no exact opposite, so it can be endlessly refigured male and female, raced and classed. In its abject, in-between state, adolescence troubles all identity categories. Undefined, multiply defined and uncontainable, adolescence has been made to mean that which it is not—American identity, or the world.⁴³

Lesko speaks to this same phenomenon, claiming that the use of these metaphors constitute an “ideology of emergence,” suggesting that it is more powerful than just myth alone. Lesko contends that by placing adolescence outside of social influences, this “ideology” necessarily transforms adolescence into “a powerful and uncontrollable force.”⁴⁴ Thus, the adolescence as a figurative emblem can be called upon to represent anything, as it stands above all categorization.

Through close examination of cultural texts produced broadly from 1999 to 2008, this project endeavors to explore these “narratives of fulfillment” seeking to uncover what precise achievements are coming to completion and the tactics utilized to do so. Due to the fact that these narratives often walk the thin line between realization and disappointment, empowerment and attenuation, adolescence is often marked as dysfunctional, necessitating a successful “resolution” found only in adulthood and fulfillment. Within these texts, the prerequisite for this successful resolution, represented

⁴¹ Harvey J. Graff, *Conflicting Paths: Growing Up in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) 1.

⁴² Rachel McLennan, *Adolescence, America, and Postwar Fiction: Developing Figures* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 6.

⁴³ McLennan 27.

⁴⁴ Lesko 3.

by adulthood and fulfillment, is reinforced by narratives promoting the search for “personal destiny,” most often dispelled through therapeutic rhetoric that promotes this achievement through the work of self-discovery. That adolescence is a construction largely produced by cultural, economic, political and national interests, makes any exploration of its cultural position and symbolic meaning a large task to endeavor, yet its importance cannot be underestimated.

Contextualizing the Representation of (Im)maturity

Assuredly, the depiction of immaturity and ineffectuality characteristic of contemporary representations of adolescents is both a departure from, and successor to, portrayals of both adolescence and the adolescent that came before it. Though this project is not a history of teen film or of youth in the media, it is necessary to contextualize the representations this study evinces with those that came before. The depiction of youth, in varying incarnations, has been a part of cinematic and televisual histories since the inception of both forms, with both evincing a fascination with youth at varying times and in different manifestations over a variety of genres and productions. While the representation of youth across the history of two mediums is too large to categorize or quantify here in any totalizing capacity, some themes still emerge. This project argues that the image of adolescence on film and television in the first decade of the twenty-first century signaled a visibility of the adolescent-image that both recapitulated earlier representational contradictions while producing new ruptures and negotiations. This section outlines the figures and themes that act as antecedents for contemporary forms of the adolescent-image.

In surveying the history of the adolescent on film and television, it is clear that it comprises a long and storied narrative marked by opposing dualisms and contradiction. Often one image of American youth would rise to prominence alongside another equally visible, but entirely oppositional, portrait of youth. This was the certainly the case in films of the 1930s that featured boys as either delinquents in gangs in films like, *Boy of*

the Streets (Nigh, 1937) and *Angels With Dirty Faces* (Curtiz, 1938), or as the image of the “All-American boy” for a nation at war in the Henry Aldrich and Andy Hardy films.⁴⁵ Ilana Nash explains that this duality was similarly at work in the representation of girls in films of the 1930s, in which girls were depicted either as a “quasi angelic creature,” displaying obedience and innocence, or as an “exasperating agent of chaos,” challenging the norms of a patriarchally organized society.⁴⁶ Teen films of the 1940s featured another binary, this time between the angst produced by parental failures, or the pleasures of participating in a youth culture independent of adult society. Bobby-soxer films like, *Junior Miss* (Seaton, 1945) and *A Date with Judy* (Thorpe, 1949), produced in the 1940s celebrated “teens as a separate subculture with their own language, mannerisms, concerns, style and milieu;”⁴⁷ however, because the majority of teen films made throughout the 1930s and 1940s were not made about teens for teens, but instead were mostly geared toward adults and families, teen representation worked to shore up adult authority and harmony.⁴⁸ Much scholarship on youth in film points to the seminal film, *Rebel Without a Cause* (Ray, 1955), alongside other films of this period such as *The Wild One* (Benedek, 1953) and *Splendor in the Grass* (Kazan, 1961), as the archetypal images of youth. *Rebel* takes a compassionate stance towards its teenaged heroes, one that makes an “apology for adolescence,” unmasking the world of painful alienation that defective parenting produces, although despite the negative portrayal of adults, adult values are affirmed throughout the film.⁴⁹ As a template for future troubled-teen movies, *Rebel*’s treatment of youth and its relationship to authority figures continued to be a major theme in teen movies throughout the next several decades. And yet, as Ilana Nash explains, it was uncommon before the late 1950s for dramas to focus on primarily on adolescent protagonists. Much of the depiction of youth outside of the

⁴⁵ Jeffery P. Dennis, “Love Laughs at Andy Hardy: The Rise of the Heterosexual Male Teenager.” *Genders* 41(2005).

⁴⁶ Ilana Nash, *American Sweethearts: Teenage Girls in Twentieth-Century Popular Culture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006) 2.

⁴⁷ Georgeanne Scheiner, *Signifying Female Adolescence: Film Representations and Fans, 1920-1950* (New York: Praeger, 2000) 91.

⁴⁸ Stephen Tropiano, *Rebels & Chicks; A History of the Hollywood Teen Movie* (New York: Back Stage Books, 2006) 11.

⁴⁹ Thomas Leitch, “The World According to Teenpix,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 20.1(1992) 44.

archetypal role of the rebel was often characterized by a celebration of teen culture, rather than a deep concern for the problem of adolescence, and as a result, often portrayed youth as silly and adolescence as a life-stage as frivolous and senseless.⁵⁰ This was evinced in films of the 1960s like the *Gidget* and *Beach Party* series and successors, films in which adolescence was portrayed as an actual party. This cycle of celebratory films was notable both for its popularity and success and for the fact that most of these films both featured and focused on teen girl protagonists.

Television programs emerging in the late 1940s and early 1950s helped solidify the representation of teenagers on television by depicting teens in non-domestic situations, effectively separating teens from their adult counterparts. In the 1950s and early 1960s several girl-focused situation comedies were produced whose narrative characteristics helped to create what are now traditionally understood of as conventions of the teen sit-com:

the foregrounding of teen characters over adults, the privileging of schools over family homes, and a focus on various stereotypical coming-of-age issues, especially dating, earning spending money, and negotiating intergenerational conflict.⁵¹

Though the portrayal of teens on situation comedies labored to produce an image of teens as inhabiting their own separate culture, 1950s and 1960s era prime-time domestic comedies featuring teens privileged domestic bliss above all else, resulting in the containment of adolescent misbehavior through the fortification of the family.⁵²

Teen visibility waned in both film and television in the 1970s, and when it returned to prominence in the 1980s this same duality and bifurcation continued. The image of adolescence became less about celebrating a youth culture unique from the rest of society, and though adolescents on screen continued to wrestle with parental authority figures, these representations demonstrated parental authority with regard to adolescence in a novel way. Many of the teen films of the 1980s produced similar dramatic images of

⁵⁰ Nash 7.

⁵¹ Mary Kearney, "Recycling Judy and Corliss," *Feminist Media Studies* 4.2 (2004b): 277.

⁵² See Ella Taylor, *Prime-Time Families: Television Culture in Postwar America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), and Nina Leibman, *Living Room Lectures: The Fifties Family in Film and Television* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

adolescent lives troubled by parental dysfunction; however, unlike *Rebel* where the criticism of society lay only within parental (not societal) authority, films featuring teens in the 1980s, specifically the films of John Hughes, are critical of virtually all adults and adulthood. Thomas Leitch maintains that Hughes' teens react to this by

valorizing adolescence as an unchanging, self-justifying system of values which does not reaffirm or renew standards of maturity but simply marginalizes the adult world by ignoring any possible continuities it might have with the world of adolescence and setting goals which can be reached without goals or change.⁵³

Timothy Shary explains that by the mid-1980s teens on film were more "self aware and articulate about their crises."⁵⁴ However, as he remarks in his analysis of Hughes' film, *The Breakfast Club* (1985), the fact that the most visibly rebellious character (John Bender, played by Judd Nelson) does not return to his parents signifies a turn in the representation of youth, claiming that "youth rebellion by the mid-1980s had jettisoned the reform of family from its agenda and set out on a newly independent course."⁵⁵ Films featuring teens in the late 1980s and early 1990s ceased their exploration of the struggle with adults and authority figures (figures who were largely absent) and replaced this type of generational angst with a different attitude altogether.

While film and television texts prior to the 1990s depict teenagers as a social problem, screen teens of the 1990s are heavily figured as having problems of their own. Depictions of adolescents on television during this time found them self-obsessed and displaying "heavy bouts of on-screen self-analysis,"⁵⁶ coupled with the fact that teenaged characters on television appeared mostly in melodramas (a trend whose popularity continued for the next two decades) teenaged characters were figured on television as dramatic and constantly in crisis. Teen programming of the 1990s engaged with a "realistic look" at teenage life from the perspective of the teenager, including dealing with issues deemed "vital" to young Americans such as sex, drug and alcohol abuse,

⁵³ Leitch 45.

⁵⁴ Timothy Shary, *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary American Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002) 220.

⁵⁵ Shary 221.

⁵⁶ Simon Philo, "'Teensomething': American Youth Programming in the 1990s," in *American Youth Cultures* ed. Neil Campbell (New York: Routledge: 2004) 163.

AIDS and teen pregnancy,⁵⁷ not coincidentally, the same decades in which the adolescence as an irrational period of life heightened in visibility, as this thesis argues. Perhaps not surprisingly, given the contradictions inherent in the history of the depiction of youth, film scholar Robin Wood finds that teens in films of the 1990s displayed “a certain generalized sense of energy, a sense of “having fun.”⁵⁸ However, unlike films of years past, the films in the 1990s were not about hedonistic fun: as Doherty puts it, “profligacy is no longer what teenpics are usually about, and when teenagers do run wild, their rebellion is of a diminished capacity. The hissable enemies are bullies and prom queens, not teachers and assistant principals.”⁵⁹ As this project will show, changes to social and cultural understandings of the adolescent, alongside changes in the economy which have altered the location of the adolescent within contemporary American society, have discursively repositioned the adolescent into a figure of immaturity and ineffectuality, rather than rebellious or dangerous.

Clearly, the depiction of youth on screen has never been monolithic but rather, has reflected changing historic and cultural beliefs and attitudes. This echoes Joe Austin and Michael Nevin Willard’s sentiment who note that the image of youth is divided: either positioned as “a vicious, threatening sign of social decay,” or as, “our best hope for the future.”⁶⁰ This project argues that the figure of the adolescent has historically been positioned outside adult culture; yet contemporarily, within the depiction of adolescents, there is notable slippage. As will be demonstrated throughout this project, within the texts this thesis examines, there is no discernable youth “culture” that clearly sets adolescent characters apart from other factions of society. Additionally, many of the characters in these film or television texts are not marked as adolescent by biological age. What sets these characters apart from the rest of society is their behaviors: their performance of adolescence, a central concern for this project. As chapter three of this

⁵⁷ Philo 157.

⁵⁸ Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Regan...and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) 311.

⁵⁹ Doherty 209.

⁶⁰ Joe Austin and Michael Nevin Willard, “Angels of History, Demons of Culture,” in *Generations of Youth: Youth Cultures and History in Twentieth-century America* (New York: New York University Press, 1998) 2.

thesis argues, the contemporary articulation of the adolescent is positioned as having a penchant for coprophilia and other juvenile behaviors, including abandoning or renouncing any personal accountability. Pointedly, the contemporary male adolescent is depicted as experiencing an abatement of qualities that typically signify strength or dominance, instead, displaying charm, helplessness and bewilderment. It should be said that these descriptors are attached to many different versions of the contemporary adolescent and, as this project argues, different situations garner different renditions of this discursive formation. Additionally, each chapter identifies particular antecedents with regard to specific contingent versions of contemporary significations. Yet, it is important to point out two particular precursors that are illuminating for the larger project as a whole.

Catherine Driscoll argues that the contemporary signified adolescent is similar to its only true cinematic antecedent, The Tramp, claiming that, “the cinematic adolescent is defined less by age than by a slippery social position that juxtaposes promise and powerlessness.”⁶¹ She considers Chaplin’s figure of the tramp as a “limit case” for this argument, noting that Chaplin’s “little tramp” character is not marked by age; rather, he is “a figure of entwined innocence and experience.”⁶² Part of this denial of age specificity extends to his roles in life: he is not a parent, nor does he hold down a job, or act as provider or romantic partner. For Driscoll, this is a key aspect of his comedy: the tramp is a failure at adult roles. She states,

If adult roles escape him they also oppress him. Any exception is almost unbelievable good fortune... The tramp is necessarily mobile, permanently dissatisfied and always making do. But he is as tolerant as he is cynical, and the tramp’s triumph lies in his insistent innocence in the face of knowing exactly how the world works. In never growing up precisely because he knows the score.⁶³

I argue elsewhere in this project that the contemporary adolescent, like representations of young individuals that came before, represents the possibility of futurity, but also is implicated in its own limitations. If the tramp was marked with outsider status due to his

⁶¹ Catherine Driscoll, *Teen Film: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Berg, 2011) 15.

⁶² Driscoll, *Teen Film* 15.

⁶³ Driscoll, *Teen Film* 15.

incompetence with adult behavior, the contemporary adolescent is similarly displaced due to the difficulty of reaching self-sufficiency.

Perhaps the more pertinent precursor to the contemporary adolescent is the figure of the girl in films of the 1930s through the 1950s. Like the contemporary adolescent, Nash maintains that girls on screen are never depicted as “a whole person with her own three-dimensional subjectivity,” but rather, most often as a type or stereotype. Additionally, Nash suggests that girls and women have often been represented “through suggestions of emptiness or absence—not of experience, but of consciousness.” She makes the case for the representation of women’s subjugation being a necessary component of the project of patriarchy, noting that “A fully present woman—awake, conscious, mature, rational—challenges male dominance, while an “absent” woman facilitates it.”⁶⁴ Within popular culture, argues Nash, the image of the girl is celebrated for its “double emptiness,” which she defines as a combination of “the child’s lack of experience, and the woman’s lack of agency or rationality.”⁶⁵ As this project will show, contemporary representations of adolescents reinforce this double emptiness as a biological trait: as chapter two of this project evinces, adolescents’ knowledge and experience are managed and governed due to late-modern pathologization of adolescents as biologically or inherently irrational. Calling contemporary articulations of the female adolescent, “visual cues...[that] contribute to the construction of teen girls as insufficiently authorized to claim the dignity and respect that accompany personhood,”⁶⁶ Nash argues that this image of the contemporary female adolescent operates in the same essentializing manner:

the point is supposedly to ‘sympathize’ with the teen girl while showing her intense humiliation, thus prescribing clumsiness and public embarrassment as normative elements of teen girlhood. Indeed, such klutzy displays seem part of the girl’s very definition; we know she is a girl and not yet a woman because, like an infant giraffe, she hasn’t found her balance yet.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Nash 21.

⁶⁵ Nash 22.

⁶⁶ Nash 225.

⁶⁷ Nash 225.

This project suggests that in the first decade of the new millennium, the image of young men—those individuals that heretofore would have not only been afforded the opportunity to reach adulthood, but also encouraged and supported along the way—are contemporarily positioned in a similar manner to the ways in which girls and women have historically been represented. However, as this thesis sets out to show, the consistency with which the film and television texts of this thesis depict characters struggling over particular aspects of the transition to adulthood should thus not be understood only as an indictment of the ways in which characters are socially positioned through gender-specific ideations, but rather, as a censure of a dominant discursive climate which enacts exclusions based on many different subject positions, including age.

Reframing (Im)maturity

Using media products as a bellwether for changing attitudes and conceptions of adolescence, this project critically analyzes specific shifts in the mediatized conceptualization of the maturation process in the first decade of the new millennium and how these shifts mirrored, informed and made sense of the weakening of social agency for individuals of varying ages. While changes to the coming-of-age process affected different individuals in varying ways, mapping transformations onto age-based groups negates the force of political, economic and social constraints. As Mallan and Pearce point out, “youth cannot be seen as a fixed, preexisting entity or a unified image. Rather, it is a complex, mercurial signifier offering mixed messages and resisting a single interpretation of positioning.”⁶⁸ And yet, an attempt must still be made to register the ways youth-as-signifier has been mobilized, taking into account the ways these indices both highlight and obscure the complexities of youth.

Characterizations of (im)maturity and the subjectification process require an interdisciplinary approach to the ways in which political, economic, and social

⁶⁸ Kerry Mallan, and Sharyn Pearce, “Introduction: Tales of Youth in Postmodern Culture,” *Youth Cultures: Texts, Images, and Identities*, eds. Kerry Mallan, Sharyn Pearce (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003) x.

constraints play into, and feed off of, conceptualizations of adolescence. The first chapter of this thesis describes and outlines this interdisciplinary approach, preparing and contextualizing what follows in the remaining chapters by presenting a more thorough introduction to the key ideas, contexts and conversations within which this project is situated. Correspondingly, this chapter explains and clarifies key choices with regard to analytical boundaries and terminology, situating the project as a whole within specific intellectual perspectives including the ways in which youth has been studied within the fields of cultural and media studies. The chapter then rounds out the methodological influences of this thesis with a clarification of where this project is situated within broader conversations about culture, representation and identity.

Chapters two and three focus on the conceptualization of adolescence in the first decade of the twenty-first century by presenting genealogies of the two interdependent ways that adolescence is constituted at the turn of the new millennium. Chapter two illuminates the ways in which the larger work approaches the understanding of the increased difficulty of reaching the culturally assumed markers of adulthood, and how these difficulties should be viewed as part of wider systemic problems by situating the conceptualization of adolescence within a larger cultural and historical context. This chapter begins to problematize cultural understandings of the life-stage of adolescence through the cultural positioning and characterization of the “adolescent,” arguing that the attributes assigned to this cultural icon are not biological imperatives, but rather cultural constructions. Ultimately, this chapter provides a definition of adolescence for the larger project by situating this definition within different historical and cultural locations and pinpointing the ways that institutionalized technologies have worked to define adolescence as that which needs control or management. In this way, the chapter begins to map out the historical and cultural dimensions affecting the exclusions linked to the categorization of immaturity and the late modern transition to adulthood.

Chapter three continues this genealogical examination of the coming-of-age process by problematizing and unraveling the ways in which the traditional markers of adulthood have discursively been replaced by psychological characteristics, effectively

coding adolescence as immature. Moreover, this chapter argues that the naturalization of immaturity has been mapped onto the bodies of certain individuals through the examination of the ethos of the culturally sanctioned therapeutic quest for personal happiness and fulfillment of one's destiny as an effective tool for marginalization and privilege. By examining the practices and technologies employed in the search for the self, this chapter suggests that the contemporary representation of the affective state of adolescence has discursively become an obligation framed as an option or opportunity, a characterization that has effectively worked to define and essentialize adolescents as "unfinished" or "undeveloped." Thus, this chapter continues the interrogation of the specific practices that link subjectification with individuation to produce a version of the legitimate subject, in other words, examining subjectification as its own discursive formation.

The last three chapters interrogate three different nodal points at which issues of institutional constraint, transitional stagnation and personal agency arise. Chapter four examines the increasingly complex matrix of education, economic viability and the transition to adulthood in order to argue that the role of education in the transitional process of child to adult has shifted from its original purpose of creating citizens, to the formation of credentials and self-identity. Whereas once education was the path to success for only a select few, today college attendance has become the expectation, not the exception. Film and television texts covered in this chapter bear out anxieties produced during this era with regard to the ways that the pressure to seek and complete a college degree are made manifest. This includes films that feature the distress produced as a result of being made to rely on a system in which the reality of future success rests on a process of inclusion and acceptance that seems precarious and based on luck and chance, despite steady messages about the necessity of and for personal accountability and control. This chapter thus shows that young individuals, as they are represented in film at the beginning of the new millennium are portrayed as trapped by the pressures of credentialism, desperate to find a way to control their educational and personal destinies.

Chapter five addresses the nexus of immaturity and work, exploring the ways in which representations of labor and its attendant attitudinal rhetorics work to create generational descriptors that effectively naturalize notions of laziness and immaturity. In addition to the other pressures on adolescence, in the first decade of the new millennium film and television texts featured characters negotiating a highly constrained period in which they must “find themselves” (or at least attempt this process) through the fulfillment of work or career aspirations as a prerequisite for other forms of self-actualization. This chapter examines changes to rhetoric about white-collar work in the “New Economy,” taking stock of the ways this discourse effects the myth of a tailor-made labor force for an information era in which workers are encouraged to be self-directed, self-sacrificing and flexible. Within the examples interrogated in this chapter, representations of adolescents are examined that display the incompatibility of being a middle-class professional and being young by framing this connection in generational terms. This discursively operates to include all individuals born within a specific time frame, naturalizing the fiction of laziness and incompetence as affixed to adolescence while framing occupational stagnation as choice, rather than to construe these characterizations as manifestations of larger economic and systemic problems evident in this particular historical era.

Lastly, chapter six takes on the formation of sexual identity, examining the representational trope of virginity loss, noting that as a result of the late modern difficulties of transition to adulthood, virginity loss has taken on an increased visibility as one possible form of agentic engagement. The primary concern of this chapter is to examine the nexus of performed (visible or knowable) sexuality its relation to the boundaries of adolescence and adulthood, seeking to understand the ways in which the motif of sexual activity and agency complicates contemporary notions of maturity and destiny. By examining the tension produced between persistent rhetoric that endorses the transformational necessity of sexual knowledge, alongside similar rhetoric asserting that an individual is both too old to not have acquired this knowledge, and yet, too young to handle it, this chapter explores how the representation of young sexualities worked to

reinforce and police the agentic limits of adulthood and maturity by positioning specific versions of heterosexual adolescent sexuality as “natural” and “inevitable,” yet simultaneously abberant. Together these chapters begin to map out the ways in which, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, adolescence became as Mallan and Pearce put it, a “trap of universalizing the experiences of youth according to psychological, physical and emotional stages of development.”⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Mallan and Pierce ix.

Chapter One

Theorizing Transitions and their Subjects: A Cultural Semiotics of Maturity

The summer of 2003 ushered in an assortment of American network television dramas centered on the lives of high school teenagers. While teen-oriented programming had been a staple of network television for decades, this particular spate of television shows, ushered in by the Josh Schwartz drama, *The O.C.* (FOX 2003-07), seemingly portrayed teen characters in a new and distinct manner. In their introduction to *Teen Television: Genre, Consumption and Identity*, Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson argue that several recurrent characteristics prevail among prime-time network teen-oriented dramas of the 1990s:

a use of language which is too sophisticated of the ages of the characters; frequent intertextual references; recourse to a sense of community based on generation; a blunt, somewhat melodramatic use of emotion and aphoristic psychological reasoning; and a prominent pop music soundtrack.⁷⁰

The majority of teen-focused, prime-time dramas on-air after 2003 incorporated many or all of these characteristics; however, all of these dramas conceptualized teens' reliance on a "community based on generation" in a new and distinct way. That summer, and the following fall, more prime-time teen-focused dramas popped up on network line-ups, shows like *Joan of Arcadia* (CBS 2003-05), *One Tree Hill* (WB 2003-06, CW 2006-2012), *life as we know it* (ABC 2003-04), *Jack and Bobby* (WB 2004-05), *Veronica Mars* (WB 2004-06, CW 2006-07), adding to the assemblage of shows already on air like, *Everwood* (WB 2002-06), and *What I Like About You* (WB 2002-06). In watching these shows, I began to notice that unlike previous teen characters in various televisual formats, these contemporary characters were no longer positioned in opposition to their adult counterparts, nor did they always turn to those characters in their generational

⁷⁰ Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson, "Introduction," *Teen TV: Genre, Consumption and Identity* (London: BFI, 2004), 1.

equivalent, often displaying a deep desire and obligation for self-reliance. In this turn-of-the-millennia incarnation of the prime-time teen-oriented drama, traditional understandings of “generation” seemed to be called into question as teens and adults alike shared similarly adolescent attributes. While the portrayal of youth, teens and adolescents on both the big and small screen had historically positioned young people as a distinct group separated from the rest of society by their actions and activities, this specific wave of prime-time teen-focused programming concentrated instead on the process of coming-into-being for all their characters, regardless of age.

It soon became clear that this trend toward on-screen individuals grappling with issues previously reserved for teen-aged characters was being replicated on the big screen with characters in movies like *About a Boy* (Weitz Brothers, 2002), *The Good Girl* (Arteta, 2002), *Old School* (Phillips, 2003), *School of Rock* (Linklater, 2003), *Garden State* (Braff, 2004), and *In Good Company* (Weitz, 2004). In noticing these characters, both male and female, struggling with questions of maturity, I began to become deeply interested in how the depictions of both adolescence and adulthood had changed for both male and female representations. In contrast, the characters I witnessed in movies featuring maturationally-challenged characters, as I discuss in the introduction to this work, did not experience a generational gap in terms of opposition to social and authoritative codes, nor did they experience, as their mediated predecessors had, a kind of acquiescence to their own generational and social limits. In fact, many of these characters were technically adults themselves, still searching for some way to reach the elusive distinction of maturity.

Clearly, then, the motivation that instigated this study stemmed from this bimodal narrative approach to the configuration of both adolescence and adulthood and the resulting implications for larger cultural concerns about life-staged subject positions. That these displays of juvenility and deficiency arrived simultaneous to one of the most caustic periods in recent history for youth in terms of protection by public policy, quality of education, and opportunity for employment, clearly signaled the necessity for an intervention into this discursive trope of (im)maturity. With this imperative in mind, the

goal of this project became threefold: to examine the specific teleological and developmental trajectories that undergird contemporary representations of adolescence; to uncover the mechanisms that work to naturalize the figure of the adolescent as an attenuated individual possessing partially formed identities and skills; and to consider the ways in which this signification has worked to sanction, manage, and control the circumstances under which personal autonomy may be obtained. This chapter will focus on the methodologies this thesis draws upon and is in conversation with, beginning with the ways in which youth has traditionally been examined within the fields of media and cultural studies, ultimately working toward the methods this thesis employs to develop an account of the ways in which the symbolic practices concerning adolescence and maturity work to reproduce advantage, as well as render invisible the structural forces that influence opportunity and access.

Studying Youth

There is no set methodological tradition from which to draw when examining the representation of adolescence in cultural texts. Perhaps more troublingly, there is no established methodological tradition theorizing the representation of adulthood as its own identity category. Certainly, there are many different feminist examinations of the representation of adult women in film and television, and even a few emerging studies that have begun to parse the complexities of the representation of adult masculinities, yet neither of these types of research explicitly addresses representations of maturity in its own right. As a result, there is no straightforward starting place or framework for the study of adolescence as a culturally reproduced signifier. This is not to say that neither adolescence nor age (as an identity category) has not been studied or examined; certainly, youth and adolescence have been enthusiastically and copiously studied across multiple disciplines. Undeniably, youth has been a primary focus in psychology, anthropology, sociology, and history, and within these disciplines, scholarly work has predominantly fallen under two dominant categories: adolescence as a biological phenomenon, and

sociohistorical understandings of adolescence as a transitional life-stage. Regrettably, for the purposes of this project, these disciplines do not provide an adequate place from which to begin methodologically, as it is precisely these disciplines that provide the assumptions, knowledges and unexamined frameworks on which representations of adolescence and immaturity are typically based. Subsequently, this section of this chapter will look at how youth has traditionally been studied in academia, specifically within the fields of media and cultural studies.

As Sharon Mazzarella points out, within the field of media studies there have traditionally been two dominant, yet contradictory, types of scholarship on youth. The first is the tradition grounded in social psychology, which understands media produced for youth as a public concern, arguing for an intervention in its possible deleterious effects on young audiences. This tradition of media inquiry takes the stance that youth are a vulnerable population in need of safeguarding, a concern mitigated by the findings generated by this type of research. The other type of scholarship has historically endeavored to understand how young individuals include aspects of mass culture into their daily lives and use cultural products to create their own cultural agency. Though clearly different in tone, these two approaches to youth and media are largely audience centered, asking questions about how youth audiences interact with cultural products though, certainly, to different ends.

This second approach, most commonly referred to as, British Cultural Studies, arrived in the 1960s and took its cue from sociology's interest in the media's role in the production of social and political consent. British Cultural Studies, starting with work conducted by scholars at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham (aka "the Birmingham School"), was predominantly concerned with the ways in which, post-war, working-class Britons negotiated with cultural products in their everyday "lived" experience. Scholars at the CCCS viewed these products as largely either functioning to advance social domination or enabling people to resist and resolve their social oppression. Much of the work completed at the CCCS was built on Gramsci's model of hegemony and counterhegemony, a paradigm

that conceived of society as a “hierarchical and antagonistic set of social relations characterized by the oppression of subordinate class, gender, race, ethnic, and national strata.”⁷¹ Under this theoretical model, scholarly work like Dick Hebdige’s seminal ethnographic study posited that youth, largely oppressed by the “hegemonic bloc,” formed subcultures for the purpose of expressing their opposition through the use of style.⁷² It was then theorized by Hebdige and other CCCS scholars, that this adherence to style and attitude within specific subcultures was what allowed young people to find agency and express their own voice within an otherwise isolating and alienating culture. This expression of ideological resistance to material oppression was viewed not as “real” opposition, but rather was largely viewed as a symbolic resistance through generational consciousness which won them cultural space or agency. Additionally, Hebdige argued that, beginning in the 1950s, youth viewed itself as inherently different from the rest of society, and as a result, became “both a recognizable category and an available market.”⁷³ This posited fundamental questions about the how the youth of Britain at that time experienced their class conditions alongside larger concerns surrounding the intersection of class and age. The CCCS theorized that since everyone resided under the same material and class conditions, young Britons must have interacted with separate social institutions from their parents and that their experience of any shared institutions must have also been different from that of their parents. Thus, young individuals within subcultures were said to have formed as intrinsically different from the “parent generation,” intentionally separating themselves through dress, cultural consumption and attitude as a mode of symbolic resistance.

This work, most famously outlined in *Resistance through Rituals*, by Clarke, Hall, Jefferson, and Roberts,⁷⁴ and referred to as subculture theory, was pioneering for many reasons, not the least of which was its understanding of youth which acknowledged that

⁷¹ Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995) 31.

⁷² Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979).

⁷³ Gordon Tait, *Youth, Sex and Government* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2000) 18.

⁷⁴ John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson and Brian Roberts, “Subcultures, Cultures and Class: A Theoretical Overview,” in *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, eds. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (London: Hutchinson, 1975).

young individuals had become cultural producers, not just consumers, and that these young individuals sequestered and grouped themselves for important, often political purposes.⁷⁵ Additionally, this was a significant conceptual advance in the study of youth that, prior to the advent of subculture theory, had largely been dominated the work of the “Chicago School,” whose theories on delinquency had dominated studies on youth since the 1920s and 1930s. Under the logic of subculture theory, and within the scholarship following in the years after the CCCS’s foundational work, research on youth and media carried forward the theoretical framework set forth by subculture theory, continuing to organize youth within discrete classifications and pointing to individuals of particular groups as sharing comparable codes of behavior and attitude as performing symbolic resistance. The CCCS has been criticized for their “glamorization of youth subcultures,” and neglecting the majority of “ordinary” youth.⁷⁶ Additional criticism has been aimed at subculture theory’s significant focus on male youth cultures, class, and age, to the exclusion of other factors such as gender. More recent scholarship done by academics like Sarah Thornton and Steve Redhead has expanded upon the idea of subculture, still focusing on youth cultures themselves, but moving away from the idea of subculture as text.

Though work on youth cultures has moved away from subculture theory in the strictest sense, aspects of the work described above, including the focus on youth as separate from a parent culture, has continued to be mobilized in other ways. The idea that youth remains separate from adult or parent culture and assembles into groups based on the expression of shared frustrations resonates through several other derivations of academic inquiry. Another strain of inquiry emerging in the 1990s examines media constructions and representations of youth through a cultural studies lens with an inclination toward sociology. Work by Donna Gaines and Henry Giroux explores youth and culture by continuing the examination of teen subcultures and youth resistance

⁷⁵ CCCS theorists believed that working-class “subcultures” were different from middle-class “countercultures” in that countercultures more overtly articulated their opposition to dominant values in ideological or political ways. Clarke, Hall, Jefferson, and Roberts, 1975: 61 in Tait 17.

⁷⁶ Tait 22-3.

through cultural products. Other cultural theorists including Neil Postman, Lawrence Grossberg, and Douglas Kellner examine the postmodern paradox of youth culture, examining both the alienation of youth culture and the marketing of that alienation. Scholars like Henry Jenkins, Mike Males, Lawrence Grossman as well as both Gaines and Giroux, working from a cultural studies perspective, examine press coverage of youth and the role of the media in fostering and perpetuating specific myths about the contradictory construction of youth. Certainly, those scholars working on the history of youth, scholars such as Grace Palladino, Paula Fass, Thomas Hine and Jon Savage, have mapped out the history of the creation of a separate social category of young citizens who were set apart from the adult population by their ostensible culture, need for protection, and consumer market potential.

Commonly, however, scholarship aiming to examine a specific set of cultural products that privilege one feature of the text (in this case one particular representation of adolescents) has been accomplished through the lens of genre. Genre, meaning “type” or “kind,” is a field of study traditionally used for “producing taxonomies on the basis of ‘family resemblance.’”⁷⁷ In other words, studies about genre examine the way that films or television series fit into certain groupings based on similarities and differences, typically through features residing in the text. There are several ways to approach the study of genre: by examining the core elements that define a genre; following the history of a genre, tracing how a genre has changed over time; by considering genre films and television programs within industrial production contexts; and through the most common approach to genre which examines “textual meanings” of genres within larger social and cultural contexts. The most prominent of the studies of this kind include David Consodine’s *The Cinema of Adolescence*, Timothy Shary’s, *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary American Cinema*; Jon Lewis’, *The Road to Romance and Ruin: Teen Films and Youth Culture*; and Thomas Doherty’s, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s*.⁷⁸ These projects

⁷⁷ Stephen Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000) 12.

⁷⁸ David Consodine, *The Cinema of Adolescence* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1985); Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Winchester: Unwin Hyman,

primarily catalogue teen film as a genre or trace the representation of youth during various eras in film history, and are, for the most part, descriptive catalogues of a grouping of films featuring teen protagonists. Within the scholarship on both teen film, and to a lesser extent, teen television, most studies about genre have set out to describe and catalogue what films exist that might exemplify the teen genre by looking at both their textual features and industrial contexts.

Significantly, within this scholarship the generic demarcation of “teen” remains in question—a problem for a system of study that aims to form a cohesive survey of categorical attributes. A consensus has yet to form on what constitutes the “teen” in teen film and even a cohesive genre embodied by the term, “teen film,” has remained elusive.⁷⁹ Many of the academic considerations of “teen film” do not come to a consensus as to what constitutes the term “teen,” though Timothy Shary’s definition perhaps comes closest, defining the “youth film” as films in which youth between 12-20 both appear and are the primary focus of the narrative.⁸⁰ Though the parameters of the teen film have yet to be concretized, Catherine Driscoll maintains that there are some narrative conventions that define teen film:

the youthfulness of central characters; content usually centred on young heterosexuality, frequently with a romance plot; intense age-based peer relationships and conflict either within those relationships or with an older generation; the institutional management of adolescence by families, schools and other institutions; and coming-of-age plots focused on motifs like virginity, graduation, and the makeover.⁸¹

Despite this list of general specifications found in the teen film, the general criterion for the genre includes other aspects of the texts as well. As Catherine Driscoll notes, most approaches to teen film tend to shy away from aesthetic approaches to the genre (as in,

1988); Jon Lewis, *The Road to Romance and Ruin: Teen Films and Youth Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992); and Timothy Shary, *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary American Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

⁷⁹ Elissa Nelson, “Teen Films of the 1980s: Genre, New Hollywood, and Generation X,” diss., U of Texas, 2011. Shary maintains that even though the genre is now generally identifiable within film studies, it is still highly contested, noting that not only is there no consensus on the precise nature of the genre, but historically, there has been no consensus on the name of the genre itself with notable titles including: “Teen Movie,” “Juve’ Movie,” “Teenage Movie,” “Teenpic,” and “Youth Picture.” Shary 16.

⁸⁰ Shary 19. David Consodine’s *The Cinema of Adolescence* is the only study to greatly differ from this definition, as his work includes films in which adolescents fill secondary roles as well as primary roles.

⁸¹ Catherine Driscoll, *Teen Film: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Berg, 2011) 2.

directorial or editing styles or any specific stylistic variations), focusing instead on what teen film says about youth and the “historically changing experience of adolescence.”⁸² The question of adolescent sensibility as it pertains to genre continues to be particularly muddled given that the teen experience can be depicted within and across numerous genres. Films often considered “teen film” or “youth film” range from comedies and dramas to horror, action, science fiction and musicals. Though films that could easily be labeled “teen” are often set in institutional locations like high schools and malls, the genre is not defined by its location. Nelson makes the point that many films that might be considered “teen” films might also be considered as part of other genres, for instance, teen war films such as *Red Dawn* (Milius, 1984) and teen westerns like *Young Guns* (Cain, 1988).⁸³ As Thomas Schatz argues, the examination of genre works to unearth the “enduring relationship” between culture and society. Under Schatz’s view of genre, films are cultural products that encapsulate the values and cultural practices of the society in which they are produced, and through the process of determining what connects a grouping of films together this relationship is revealed.⁸⁴ Another view of genre, often understood as the “ritual approach” understands genre films as a product of the relationship between audience and industry, producing a cultural dialogue in the process.

This is often the approach utilized in the examination of the teen film, as often, the “teen” demarcation refers more to the purported audience of a film or television show rather than a nod to its narrative or aesthetic strategies. Much of the scholarship on teen film bears out the history of this essential connection between teen audiences and the production of the films themselves. Though the histories written by Doherty, Considine, and Shary, disagree about the specifics of exactly how and when the teen film emerges, they all agree that it emerges as a result of the film industry’s deliberate appeal to youth audiences through genre manipulation. For Driscoll, the emergence of targeted film marketing to a youth audience is one of the essential conditions for teen film.⁸⁵

⁸² Driscoll, *Teen Film* 2.

⁸³ Nelson, diss 4.

⁸⁴ See Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formula, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (New York: Random House, 1981).

⁸⁵ Driscoll, *Teen Film* 13.

Scholarship on the teen film and genre goes beyond marketing to other industrial concerns, like Shary's argument for the rise of the teen film as a result of the increase of the multiplex, or Driscoll's argument which reframes the considerations of genre by examining the MPAA delineates ratings based on age which help to define the "teen film" as a product of film censorship and classification as well as governmental and social management.⁸⁶ Similarly, the decentering of genre from the text such that audience reception and industry practices are as important as the content of the text itself is one of the key ways that teen television is understood generically.⁸⁷ Though much of what is considered teen television is drawn from other well-established television genres,⁸⁸ and "teen television" has never been formally generically categorized, as Sharon Marie Ross and Louisa Ellen Stein explain, "teen television is associated as much with its assumed audience (of teens) as with its content."⁸⁹ Again, as it does throughout the literature regarding genre and teen film, scholarship on teen television repeatedly turns to the idea that what makes a film or television program distinctly "teen" is this notion of a "teen" sensibility, and what it means to be or to understand teens.

Many of the concerns addressed in genre studies are similar to those I have set out in this project. Like genre studies, this thesis examines formal elements of specific texts, drawing out recurring and persistent narrative and thematic patterns. Furthermore, this project asks why a specific grouping of films addresses youth and the social and cultural significance of its contemporary representation. It interrogates the particular ways the films address teen representation, seeking to diagnose the questions the films

⁸⁶ Here, explains that by viewing the genre of teen film from this perspective, allows for the understanding that, "not only does defining film as 'teen film' belong to a set of definitions of adolescence as a social problem in need of management, it is a pedagogical form, for which 'teen' is the one in need of training." Driscoll, *Teen Film* 121.

⁸⁷ See Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004) for an outline of a cultural approach to television genre.

⁸⁸ See Miranda J. Banks, and Rachel Moseley for studies of the ways teen television draws on melodrama and science fiction, respectively. Miranda J. Banks, "A Boy for All Planets: *Roswell*, *Smallville* and the Teen Male Melodrama," in *Teen TV: Genre, Consumption and Identity* (London: British Film Institute, 2004) eds. Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson; Rachel Moseley, "The Teen Series" in *The Television Genre Book* ed. Glenn Creeber (London: BFI, 2001).

⁸⁹ Sharon Marie Ross and Louisa Ellen Stein, *Teen Television: Essays on Programing and Fandom* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc., 2008) 4-5.

pose about enduring conceptions of the coming-of-age process and this particular moment in history. And while these concerns of production and reception are necessary aspects of any understanding of the ways in film and television texts fit into historically specific systems of cultural power and meaning, this project does not engage with questions of production or reception, nor does it engage in industry motivations or a cultural cataloguing of the texts themselves. Additionally, because I saw changes to the tenor of the transition from adolescence to adulthood, or “threshold” issues, across both television and film texts, I wanted to be able to talk about both mediums. The production contexts, and thus the generic constraints and conditions, are different for film than for television, especially with regard to teen texts, making it difficult to study both concurrently under this methodology. The most important reason why I chose not to make this project a genre study, however, is that the very process of indicating or designating a genre entails the observation and description of repetition—it is precisely having to say: “teen film” is this because it reflects or doesn’t reflect what “teens” are or do—which is the very opposite of what my project seeks to accomplish. My belief is that defining a grouping of texts by its boundaries would have necessarily limited or concretized the subject of this study. To this end, I have chosen not to specify or limit the ages of the film and television characters I have included in this study, as to do so would be counter to the aims of this project.

With this in mind, this project regards these films and television programs as addressing something specific about the fantasy of adolescence; much in the way Driscoll suggests that,

the structure of address defining teen film is also one that dismisses the idea of teen film. It is one within which adolescence is both idealized and critiqued as a fraud; within which adolescence is a transient shimmering promise of possibilities that rarely materializes, never holds, and quickly passes away.⁹⁰

While this thesis is not a genre study, it does seek to anatomize those moments within film and television produced in the first decade of the new millennium to which Driscoll’s definition of teen film’s structure of address alludes. By examining the politics

⁹⁰ Driscoll, *Teen Film* 101.

embedded in the connection between this envisioning of an identity and its signification, this project seeks to uncover the imperatives behind the push toward a specific kind representation of adolescence in the new millennium.

Interrogating (Im)maturity: Commitments and Intentions

Clearly, youth has been the subject of many critical and popular studies, indicating the intense fascination with this transitional period. This thesis is designed to complement these existing studies through a consideration of the ways in which adolescence, as a signifying practice, has been naturalized in particular ways in the beginning of the new millennium. Rather than seeking to determine how concepts of adolescence are connected across different contexts, however, this project is an attempt to address how adolescence is articulated in specific moments. My approach to the texts this study examines is predominantly discursive rather than aesthetic. Instead of using textual or extra-textual factors like directorial or editing styles, I have sought out moments and tensions within the texts that featured an emphasis on adolescence and immaturity. As a result, this project takes a discursive approach, a method that it is interested in relations of power, not relations of meaning.⁹¹ In this way, I view both adolescence, and the adolescent-image as discourse: an interplay of encoded signs imbued with specific meaning for specific purposes. In essence, I am thus interested in the ways in which these discourses work to shore up a specific representation of a trajectory to a “successful” adulthood that elides racial, gendered, and classed differences in opportunity. In doing so, this thesis aims to produce an intersection of contemporary feminist studies, media studies, and cultural studies practices as a way of investigating how this conceptualization has come to be. This section of this chapter enumerates the challenges set forth by this project and draws out the theories and methodologies employed in its undertaking.

⁹¹ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980) 114-5.

This project has been shaped in a number of ways by certain decisions that require thoughtful clarification. The first determining element of this project is produced by the choice of including only fiction-based (narrative) American film and television programming. Since this project is focused on the tension produced by coming-of-age issues, I chose to predominantly examine both film and television dramas and comedies. It should be noted that I have left out many films, certainly those in the genre of horror, which may have fit the conditions of narrative strategies concerned with the tensions surrounding the transition to adulthood. It was my feeling that dramas and comedies tended to focus their concern on the interiority of their characters, a topic covered in chapter three, and have left the study of adolescence in horror films for another project more suitable to the proclivities of that genre. The second determinant of this study is simply one of the time-range this study encompasses. Though I specify throughout this project that this thesis examines American film and television texts emerging between 1999 to the end of 2008, I often refer to this period of time as simply the beginning of the twenty-first century or the first decade of the new millennium—despite the fact that the study does not technically include any texts from the last year of that decade. As the introduction of this chapter makes clear, it could have been an easy choice to start this project in the year 2002, as there seemed to be a turn in the tenor of the depiction of adolescence that was particularly striking at that time. However, while it is evident that the change in representation came to full fruition in 2003, clear antecedents of this trend can be traced as far back as 1999 with films like *American Beauty* (Mendes, 1999), *Big Daddy* (Dugan, 1999), *Office Space* (Judge, 1999) and *Jerry Maguire* (Crowe, 1999). Similarly, the televisual fascination with the teen drama seemed to reach a new apex in the last year of the twentieth century with the end of the nineties teen-oriented soaps like, *Beverly Hills, 90210* (FOX 1990-2000), *Party of Five* (FOX 1994-2000) and the arrival of prime-time teen melodramas like *Felicity* (WB 1998-2002); *Dawson's Creek* (WB 1998-2003); *Gilmore Girls* (WB 2000-06). Certainly, as the trend pieces that opened the introduction to this thesis evidenced, and as the next chapter will describe, characterizations of the adolescent in these film and televisual texts existed alongside an

increase in the amount of popular press focused on the changing nature of adolescence as the country entered a new century. While the reason for the emergence of this particular fascination with the American adolescent and troubles with reaching maturity cannot be drawn out of one particular social or cultural moment as this thesis makes evident, there are large sociocultural reasons for this shift, including anxieties about the turn of the new millennium, concerns brought about by new technologies, a return to conservative political philosophies and ideologies, as well as a distinct changes in identity politics.

The first decade of the twenty-first century is often noted for its post-identity politics, primarily postfeminism⁹² and postracism (also called post-race and post-racial),⁹³ both signaling to certain degrees, and in their own ways, that in the new millennium the struggle and inequality of identity movements (women's rights, gay rights, civil rights) are "comfortably in the past,"⁹⁴ and already "taken into account."⁹⁵ Articulated another way, Ralina L. Joseph describes a post-identity, "new millennium representation landscape overdetermined by race and gender and at the same time in denial of its overdetermined nature."⁹⁶ These post-isms, it is argued, present the obstacles of racism and sexism as previously transcended by highlighting the ways that women and people of color need no longer be recognized through gendered or raced rubrics while the ongoing effects of racism and sexism continue to erode social equality. Similarly, youth and its representation as the prolongation of "youthful," "immature," or "juvenile" attributes, experienced a similar kind of overdetermination in the first decade of the new millennium, as this thesis will argue. Joseph explains that post-racial ideology

⁹² See Angela McRobbie, "Post-feminism and Popular Culture," *Feminist Media Studies* 4.3 (2004): 255-264; Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, "Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture," *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007) 1-25.

⁹³ See Mary Beltran, "The New Hollywood Racelessness: Only the Fast Furious, (and Multiracial) Will Survive," *Cinema Journal*, 44.2 (2005): 50-67; Mary Beltran, "What's at Stake in a 'Post-Racial' Media?" *Flow: And Online Journal of Television and Media Culture*, June 2010; Ralina L. Joseph, "Tyra Banks Is Fat": Reading (Post-)Racism and (Post-)Feminism in the New Millennium," *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 26.3 (2009): 237-254.

⁹⁴ Hollis Griffin, "Never, Sometimes, Always: The Multiple Temporalities of 'Post-Race' Discourse in Convergence Television Narrative," *Popular Communication: The International Journal of Media and Culture* 9.4 (2011): 236.

⁹⁵ McRobbie 255.

⁹⁶ Joseph 238.

and postfeminism, while sharing certain ideas about the end of inequality, do so in different ways; namely, that postfeminism calls on “staid and what are often assumed to be biologically-based performances”⁹⁷ as the very means by which it enacts and informs the stylistic underpinnings of gender inequality, while post-racialized measures call upon a “colorblind,” or “raceless” depiction of society in order to maintain white centrism. As Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra suggest, in both cases, “difference is commodified rather than politicized within mainstream culture; such cultural processes are predicated on an implicit chronology that firmly ‘posts’ activism centered on the consequences” of both racial and gendered inequities.⁹⁸

Certainly some qualification is needed with regard to the inclusion of age within this post-identity or post-civil-rights framework. While there is a clear case to be made that the articulation of age operated of something of its own discursive system in the first decade of the new millennium, unlike the categories of race and gender, there has never been a collective social movement fighting for age equality. Consequently, this is certainly not a moment in which representations of age can be understood as “after” or “post” the importance of maturity. And yet, this was clearly an era in which issues of age and its relation to personal and individual agency became highly visible, while also being one of the worst periods in recent history for youth in terms of protection by public policy, quality of education, opportunity for employment and general societal treatment. In what follows, this project examines the ways in which the contemporary representation of age (and maturity) points, not only to changes in the categorical understanding of adolescence, but to the need for a new framework with which to understand (im)maturity in a contemporary cultural and representational landscape.

Just as the time frame of this study is both limiting and illuminating, so too is the range of texts this project addresses. Ultimately, this is a study of the representation of adolescence in American films and television programs airing between 1999 and 2008. Because I am interested in the ways in which this specific signifier was produced and

⁹⁷ Joseph 240.

⁹⁸ Tasker and Negra 8.

reproduced within various cultural metrics, I have principally drawn on and responded to scholarly work within monographs and edited collections. Additionally, I have considered articles from mainstream media outlets (often in the form of trend pieces), film and television reviews, non-academic books on adolescence and culture, and even trends across the social and biological sciences, as part of the range of knowledge from which this discursive formation is constructed. However, it should be noted that because film and television studies both have varied histories as academic disciplines, and because academic scholars conduct their interrogations from different methodological and ideological perspectives, there are times when I rely on academic work for methodological, theoretical, and historical grounding, and other times when I identify particular scholarship as reifying the discursive strategies this work endeavors to expose.

Certainly, as this is a study that examines a wide range of cultural products, this thesis aligns itself with a rich history of cultural studies scholarship that has similarly focused on the negotiation of identity in cultural forms, “commingling textual and social theory under the sign of commitment to progressive social change.”⁹⁹ As the analysis of texts and discourses is one of the central tendencies of cultural studies, both in its classic and contemporary forms, rather than examining a text’s formal or aesthetic features, cultural studies, “investigates the way in which cultural texts emerge from, and play a role in, the changing historical, political, and social context.”¹⁰⁰ While there is no one monolithic definition of, or approach to, cultural studies, Toby Miller reminds us that, contemporarily, “Cultural studies is a tendency across disciplines, rather than a discipline itself.”¹⁰¹ Thus, while cultural studies cannot be defined by a distinct focus on any narrow field of study or particular methodology, certain interests and concerns are apparent. Firstly, while there are many ways of conceptualizing cultural studies, many people credit the critical attitude of the discipline to Raymond Williams’ seminal essay, “Culture is Ordinary;” or, what Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson, and Jane Shattuc call,

⁹⁹ Toby Miller, “What it is and what it isn’t: Introducing...Cultural Studies,” in *A Companion to Cultural Studies*, ed. Toby Miller (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001) 1.

¹⁰⁰ Paula Saukko, *Doing Research in Cultural Studies: An Introduction to Classical and New Methodological Approaches* (London: Sage Publications, 2003) 99.

¹⁰¹ Miller 1.

“the symbolic beginning of what has become ‘cultural studies.’”¹⁰² In this essay, Williams, “locates culture and its analysis at the intersection of the everyday, the institutional, the historical, and the material.”¹⁰³ Unlike the scholars at the initiation of the CCCS who understood popular culture products as part of a social domination from a top-down, Marxian conceptualization, contemporary cultural studies views these products as “a site of contestation over meaning”¹⁰⁴ in which individuals negotiate their social position in and through cultural products. In this way, it is possible to understand, as Driscoll does, that, “Cultural studies...names an approach to research rather than the study of everything cultural, and what constitutes the proper research practices of cultural studies is not at all clearly established.”¹⁰⁵

As the analysis of texts and discourses is one of the central tendencies of cultural studies, both in its classic and contemporary forms: rather than examining a text’s formal or aesthetic features, cultural studies, “investigates the way in which cultural texts emerge from, and play a role in, the changing historical, political, and social context.”¹⁰⁶ One of the major reasons for this is that contemporary cultural studies’ interest in texts is, as Saukko puts it, “umbilically connected with an interest in power.”¹⁰⁷ The reason for this is, as Meaghan Morris maintains, that cultural studies is

interested in the historical and social constraints on interpretation and in the pressures that limit choices, constrain semiosis, and shape experience—constraints and pressures that are produced by human institutions and that can, and sometimes should, be changed.¹⁰⁸

Though much contemporary cultural studies scholarship may have moved past the structuralist methods of analyzing texts that popularized the field in the 1970s, structuralist analytical tools in the form of semiotics and narrative analysis continue to

¹⁰² Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson, and Jane Shattuc, “The Culture that Sticks to your Skin: A Manifesto for a New Cultural Studies,” in *Hop on Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture* eds. Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson and Jane Shattuc (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002) 35.

¹⁰³ Catherine Driscoll, *Modernist Cultural Studies* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010) 15.

¹⁰⁴ Saukko 100.

¹⁰⁵ Catherine Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture & Cultural Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 173.

¹⁰⁶ Saukko 99.

¹⁰⁷ Saukko 100.

¹⁰⁸ Meaghan Morris, “A Question of Cultural Studies,” in *Back to Reality: Social Experience and Cultural Studies* ed. Angela McRobbie (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1997) 50.

underpin much of the scholarship initiated today. However, it is clear that cultural studies “stresses the intersection of language, meaning and power” and remains centrally concerned with questions of shared meanings.¹⁰⁹ For the purposes of the research undertaken in this project, I understand culture to be the symbolic production of these shared meanings through signifying practices of language and signs within material and institutional contexts.

Though this project draws from theoretical approaches to media that broadly incorporate perspectives aligned with cultural studies, this project is most acutely aligned with approaches to representation nominally found within media studies. Among the many methodologies afforded under the discipline, broad trends in the fictional imagination of a particular cultural moment are addressed, identifying and considering those cultural discourses that significantly reproduce and contribute to the essentialization of specific cultural norms. Accordingly, media studies offers particular methodologies to better understand adolescence as an articulated subject position and how that articulation has functioned as evidence of cultural changes, regulations, and rationalizations. Yet, because this study focuses on representation, to the exclusion of production context, audience reception and generic history, instead focusing on the production of identity and an attempt to discern where difference is made, this study fits more practically within the area of feminist media studies. A discussion of methodological concerns regarding representation follows here, while the next section of this chapter will return methodologies best suited to address identity and difference.

As I’ve stated above, this project asks: what is an “articulated subject position,” and how does it culturally operate in a manner that discloses certain “signifying practices” (and what is meant by that term)? Representation is a mechanism by which an object or idea is described or depicted, yet it is also a way of symbolizing that same object or idea and has thusly been described as “the production of meaning through language.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Barker, Christopher, and Dariusz Galasinski, *Cultural Studies and Discourse Analysis* (London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2001) 3.

¹¹⁰ Stuart Hall, “The Work of Representation,” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage Publications Ltd., 1997) 16.

Culturally, words are ascribed to specific objects and ideas, and these words then come to represent the object or idea that has been culturally agreed upon. That is to say, for words to be effective at conveying meaning from one person to another, there must be a shared meaning connected to that word. Stuart Hall, noted cultural scholar, explains that, in this way, language is a *signifying practice*.¹¹¹ Languages, as systems of representation, are not important for what they *are*, but rather, for the fact that they construct and transmit meaning. Crucially, words, objects and ideas do not inherently carry their own meaning—no meaning is essential to an object or idea, but rather, that meaning is inferred through its use. In this way, language can be understood as a “system of representation,” a complex arrangement of iconography and meaning. It is this shared knowledge of language and meaning that produces culture.

This formulation of the rules of language and meaning was developed by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure who laid the groundwork for the practice of semiotics and the rules of signification. French theorist and semiotician, Roland Barthes took up Saussure’s argument about the fundamental role of representation in language, broadening it to include not just written and spoken language but also a larger field of cultural products and practices. Barthes argued that there are two systems of signification: denotation, or the descriptive or literal level of meaning generated by signs, and connotation, meanings that are produced by linking signifiers to broader cultural codes of meaning. Barthes maintained that connotations can be naturalized, that is, signifiers carrying a specific meaning can be accepted as “normal” and “natural.” Barthes is perhaps most well known for his work on myths, which he believed were not defined by their message, but instead, by how they articulated their message. For Barthes, myths reduce everything to a signifying function. Here, extricating his theory of myth from Saussure’s semiology, Barthes understands signification, not as the terminal goal of semiology, but rather, as that which, “points out and...notifies, it makes us understand something and imposes it on us.”¹¹² In this, Barthes is suggesting that myths are built on

¹¹¹ Hall, *Representation* 5.

¹¹² Roland Barthes, “Myth Today,” in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996) 102.

that which has already existed (the meaning borne by a sign whose meaning has been produced in historical context) and distanced that sign from its historical context. In this way, as he states, “what is invested in the concept is less reality than a certain knowledge of reality.”¹¹³ However, the function of myth is not to hide reality, but rather to *distort* it. That is, mythmaking happens when a complex, multilayered, concept is simplified into one singular aspect of the concept under which all other possibilities are erased.

This then, is the primary concern that underpins this project: to unpack the culturally shared conceptual map that is signified when the sign, or myth, of adolescent is mobilized. And since it is clear that these meanings are culturally constituted, this project is invested in the deconstruction of that meaning. Part of this dissection is to unravel the “codes” produced through the mobilization of these signs. Since no meaning is inherent in the object, rather, it lies within the sign or word that is culturally employed, as Hall explains, by attaching meaning to a word and then repeatedly using it in a certain manner, the word’s meaning “comes to seem natural and inevitable.” This meaning is made firm by the “code:” that which “sets up the correlation between our conceptual system and our language system.”¹¹⁴ Codes establish the correlation between cultural concepts and the language, or system of representation, thereby making it translatable or effectively communicated. However, because meaning is not inherent in an object or idea but is instead influenced by social and cultural practices, no meaning is ever decisively fixed.¹¹⁵ To clarify: my investment here is to deconstruct the ways in which the contemporary meaning of adolescence has been clearly articulated and profoundly naturalized, distorting, obscuring, and sometimes reflecting specific knowledges about identity and age.

This thesis argues that, rather than depicting youth as a social group that is overly vulnerable to the global, coercive, and uncaring effects of state power, it is more productive to address the manner in which the specter of youth is constituted and managed. In this regard, it is necessary not just to examine the ways in which youth is

¹¹³ Barthes 105.

¹¹⁴ Hall, *Representation* 21.

¹¹⁵ Hall, *Representation* 21-3.

symbolically rendered, but how that rendition has been imbued with power: not just the production of meaning, but of knowledge. Up until this point I have been describing a semiotic approach to the study of representation; however, this thesis is invested not just in understanding the meaning of the adolescent image, but also recognizing those practices that shape what is sayable and knowable about adolescence. To that end, this project takes up the work of French historian Michel Foucault who was concerned with the relations of power, not just the relations of meaning.¹¹⁶ A Foucauldian understanding of discourse views it as a group of statements which provide a language for talking about, or representing knowledge about, a particular topic, object or concern in a particular historical moment. The clear difference between semiotics and discourse analysis, then, is semiotics views language as ahistorical, while Foucault understands discourse, representation and knowledge as radically historicized and indelibly connected to the apparatuses and institutions through which any discourse might operate. Again, my aim with this project is not to chronicle a history of the concept of adolescence, but rather to illuminate the contemporary cultural understanding of the concept of both the adolescent (as the body, sign, cipher standing in for a particular cohort of individuals, real or imagined) and the concept of the affective state of adolescence (as the held attributes of a specific feeling (imagined or otherwise) of this ephemeral state of being). Thus, this project aims not to draw out a traditional history of these concepts, but rather to understand the technologies at work behind the “will to knowledge” about adolescence and how these “force relations” remain at work in the perpetuation of these ideas.¹¹⁷

In order to accomplish this, this project undertakes a “different kind of history” of adolescence, one that examines the history of an idea or concept in order to challenge the present. A genealogy is a history that investigates the ways in which certain taken-for-granted concepts, such as scientific truths, might be viewed not as unassailable, but rather, as historical constructs. Since a genealogy does not look for a moment of origin or discovery of an idea or thing, instead mapping out the way entities and concepts are

¹¹⁶ Hall, *Representation* 44.

¹¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Vol. I*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

possible in specific contexts, a genealogy can undermine the assumed truth of that same concept or thing. In order to accomplish this, genealogies do not examine and draw out sequential narratives of events or transformation, nor do they focus on who produced the knowledge in question; rather, they investigate the ways in which these knowledges operate in specific situations. Saukko argues that traditional histories tend to naturalize the subject or concept they wish to historicize. By tracing a history of “origins” and following the trajectory of an idea teleologically, the concept or thing is legitimated in the present by “finding its roots in the past.”¹¹⁸ Conversely, genealogies study the history of a concept or entity in order to challenge the established beliefs in the present. As this is a study of how adolescence as a concept has been mobilized during a specific time frame, a genealogy of adolescence helps to understand adolescence as an idea generated by, depending on, and contributing to an array of specific knowledges about this life-stage. This project as a whole seeks to understand how the ways in which knowledge about adolescence has been constructed and how that has led to contemporary imperatives of the adolescent-image. However, the following two chapters of this project are genealogical studies of the figure of the adolescent: the second chapter further explicates what a genealogical study of the idea of the adolescent might look like with regard to the institutionalization and management of a certain segment of the population, while chapter three continues to outline how various postmodern logics concerning the interiority of the subject have forged a different manner of regulation and exclusion. The remaining three chapters examine film and television texts as they relate to various contingent forms of the contemporary adolescent, locating these conditional modes within articulations of institutional constraint suggested by the threshold barriers to full subjectivity extant in education (four), work (five), and (hetero)sexual identity (six). Under the broad methodological terms outlined above, in which I explain this project’s investment in the historical, political, and social contexts from which these texts emerge, I have employed different strategies for primary analysis, evaluating discursive

¹¹⁸ Saukko 116.

interchanges and connections by drawing out emblematic tendencies within groupings of texts, as well as within the texts themselves by locating strategies within narrative elements.

Identity and Immaturity

As stated above, this project seeks to uncover the ways in which the discursive formation of adolescence produces and negotiates with newly formed subject positions and identity formations. In order to accomplish this, this thesis draws from feminist and queer theories of identity as well as cultural theories on identity and difference in order to understand the ways in which specific culturally constituted categories are constructed. Consequently, this project is situated among a host of feminist and cultural theories that provide an understanding of cultural systems, power, and the production of difference. Certainly, in this regard, the recognition of the substantial influence of patriarchy is essential to the concerns of this thesis. Accordingly, this project relies heavily on feminist theories to critique ideological configurations that work to marginalize certain sectors of American society, focusing on those structures that affect cultural conceptualizations of age. As a feminist scholar, this thesis is designed with feminist ideological underpinnings, theories that both inform the perspective through which I conducted this research, as well as help to clarify the methodological imperatives of the project. Like bell hooks and other feminist theorists, I believe feminism is not only a way of imagining the equality of the sexes, but also

a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels—sex, race, and class, to name a few—and a commitment to reorganizing U.S. society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (New York: South End Press, 1981), in Amanda D. Lotz, *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the 21st Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2014) 35.

Feminist media criticism has had a brief, but important, history of evaluating the politics of representation within film and television, interrogating textual strategies across the axes of numerous identity categories like gender, race, class and age. This project is aligned with scholarship carried out under a feminist framework that understands popular culture texts produced in the first decade of the new millennium as being produced in a dominating discursive field (sometimes referred to as postfeminist) that is deeply invested in enacting vast social exclusions while operating to gloss over social difference. Thus, this thesis draws from scholarship that speaks to this dominant discursive landscape to produce a critical approach that understands popular culture as enacting limits on specific identities and performances of those identities.¹²⁰

The introduction of this thesis mentions two different theoretical aspects of the project: that adolescence has become increasingly performable, and that these performable behaviors have become a figurative emblem that has been called upon to discount some identities while animating others. Thus, some clarification is in order to illuminate what is meant by “performativity” and “performable” and how these terms link to larger issues concerning the politics of identity. Certainly, the most notable theorist with regard to identity and performance is Judith Butler who argued that gender is, “the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity.”¹²¹ While Butler’s argument that gender is performative is widely accepted in feminist theory, the notion that age is a performed identity is quite novel: in this regard only one scholar has begun the work of mapping out the performance of age. Diedrick F. Janssen combines feminist and queer theories of performativity and subjectivity to discuss the ways that age, specifically maturity, is a performed construction. According to Janssen, “the notion of maturity...can be shown to have a political character of its own,” that communes within its own cultural semiotics of maturity—that is, the mature

¹²⁰ For a thorough overview of postfeminism as a era and cultural imperative, see Tasker and Negra, “Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture,” in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, eds. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

¹²¹ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40.4 (1988): 520.

subject as constituted by symbols and markers of maturity and immaturity.¹²² He argues that in previous attempts to examine maturity, two viewpoints have come to prominence: the first consistently privileges an “image of a silent, victimizing conspiracy over that of distributed agency, literacy and cultural legacy.”¹²³ As discussed in the previous chapter, within late capitalism’s logic, destratifications and destabilizations have occurred such that an “alleged wild-growth of maturational limbo” has happened *to* late-modern subjects, resulting in deferment along the developmental path, a topic covered in greater depth in the next chapter. The second viewpoint is a tendency in studies about “age-identity” and numerous critiques of immaturity to encourage “a reactionary gaze on what is assumed to be a suspect withdrawal from some ethical sufficiency or conformity, symptomatic of ‘youth bias,’ failed pedagogy, alienating economies or cultural stasis,” seeking out differences in age categorization while ignoring the implied performativity.¹²⁴ Here, Janssen calls for a critique of maturity in which numeric age should not necessarily indicate an age that grounds performative acts, since numeric age is entangled in its own specific administrations. Correspondingly, Janssen argues that numeric age should not reflect maturity, as “maturity” as a concept is bound to performance. Instead, Janssen suggests an undertaking in which the interrogation of maturity is equated to Butler’s analysis of gender, arguing that like gender, “maturity often insinuates binary and ordinal distributions of naturalized and discrete categories” that should more appropriately be understood as “citational routine.”¹²⁵

Though this notion of citational routine is helpful with regard to understanding maturity as performance, there are aspects of Butler’s work on gender that cannot be directly conferred to age-administered acts. Distinct from Butler’s project, whose aim was to unmask gender as “tenuously constituted in time” and “a constituted *social*

¹²² Diederik F. Janssen, “Transmaturities: Gender Trouble as Tentative Analogue for Maturity Trouble,” *Reconstruction* 9.3 (2009): 1.

¹²³ Diederik F. Janssen, “The Semiotic Predicament of Developmental Psychology,” *Subjectivity* 3.4 (2010): 391.

¹²⁴ Janssen, “Semiotic Predicament” 391.

¹²⁵ Janssen, “Semiotic Predicament” 393.

temporality,”¹²⁶ Janssen argues that maturity is acutely exposed for its “already explicitly temporal discourse of accumulation and progressive organization.”¹²⁷ Judith Kegan Gardiner further problematizes the direct connection between the performance of gender and the performance of age:

Whereas gender is usually seen as permanent, dichotomous, and stable, age is seen as changing, continuous, and unidirectional...whereas masculinity and femininity are felt as internal characteristics that define men and women not only to others but also to themselves, becoming deep and fixed aspects of individual identity, this is less true of age categories, which are sequential through the lifespan. Most people expect to live through the full range of age categories and are expected to behave in rough concordance with the conventions for each stage.¹²⁸

Thus, as Janssen attests, while it is not without risk to equate gender formulations with maturational ones, the examination of the ways in which the two intersect help to outline performances of identity. He argues that in order to begin to better map out the ways in which maturity-as-performance is solicited, staged and resisted is to draw up, “a cartography of the sites where age/maturity is marked as ‘troubled.’”¹²⁹ As contemporary representational culture is insistent on promoting specific accounts of the gendered experience of individual subjects, this project maps out these sites by parsing out the shifts occurring within contemporary representations of “troubled” life-staged subjects, producing a more complex understanding of identity and power in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

In discussing cultural studies as a discipline, Nelson et al., note that

¹²⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999) 140.

¹²⁷ Janssen, “Semiotic Predicament” 393.

¹²⁸ Judith Kegan Gardiner, “Theorizing Age with Gender: Bly’s Boys Feminism, and Maturity Masculinity,” *Masculinity Studies & Feminist Theory: New Directions*, ed. Judith Kegan Gardiner (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 94-5.

¹²⁹ Here Janssen notes the full spectrum of what he calls, “transmaturities,” such as new cultural signifiers like bois, boydykes, grrldykes, tombois etc. While it is certainly necessary to comprehend and understand the full spectrum that this age-play/performance engenders, this project is limited by space and scope, leaving others to take up this vital work elsewhere. Janssen, “Semiotic Predicament” 394.

a continuing preoccupation within cultural studies is the notion of radical social and cultural transformation and how to study it. Yet in virtually all traditions of cultural studies, its practitioners see cultural studies not simply as a chronicle of cultural change but as an intervention in it, and see themselves not simply as scholars providing an account but as politically engaged participants.¹³⁰

Certainly, it is the goal of this project to register the political nature of the contemporary cultural changes this thesis investigates; and yet, I understand and acknowledge that these same politics are at work in both my location in, and position to, the cultural developments occurring within this particular cultural, historical, and political time-frame. That is, I acknowledge that theories and methods I have utilized (and the manner in which I have employed them) are invested with as much social, political and historical agendas as the texts themselves. Thus, to critically reflect on my interpretation undertaken in this project, it is probably first and foremost important to acknowledge that part of my inclination toward this project, and toward its particular fascinations, is due in part to the fact that in many ways, I fit this categorization, and was in my early twenties during the period of time covered by this project. And yet, there is a sense that as an academic, and as one who informs a privileged position, I am outside this categorization. This double bind is doubly so for the study of youth: as many who undertake this topic affirm, there is a distinct awkwardness to studying youth while being outside it.

Though this is a project largely focused on the mobilization of adolescence as a sign, it does not endeavor to examine the ways that individuals themselves interpellate the signification of adolescence as a means to creating life-staged identities, though that would certainly be an interesting project for a later date or another researcher. Though I decided not to make this a genre study for the reasons I've listed within this chapter, a close examination of industrial practices, including audiences and production practices is a necessary component of the overall picture of how immaturity and ineffectuality has come to signify adolescence at the beginning of the new millennium. Within the field of

¹³⁰ Cary Nelson, Paula A. Treichler and Lawrence Grossberg, *Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 5.

cultural studies exist the concepts of “identity” and “self” and what these terms broadly mean within contemporary culture, topics discussed in depth in chapter three. While these are well-thought out epistemological and ontological concerns, and their place in cultural studies and the theoretical underpinnings of this project cannot be underestimated, it is of crucial importance to clarify that the “self” or “identity” that is central to this project, specifically as outlined in the third chapter, is an articulated construction of a specific subject position. Just as race, class, and gender are discursive identity performances, this thesis argues that so too is the articulation of a specific regulated performance of “self” and “identity,” or, perhaps more accurately, the performance of the struggle for this “self” and “identity.”

In many ways, this thesis examines the process behind the formation of a particular social stereotype that has existed for over a hundred years (the antecedents to this categorization are drawn out further in chapter five), one that has contemporarily been emphatically affixed to the figure of the adolescent. Certainly, as Richard Dyer argues, stereotypes offer individuals within societies a way to order and make sense of themselves and the world, even if that classification is limited and incomplete.¹³¹ Dyer argues that, ultimately,

the role of stereotypes is to make visible the invisible,” to make it clear “who belongs and who doesn’t, who is ‘in’ and who is not. Who does or does not belong to a given society as a whole is then a function of the relative power of groups in that society to define themselves as central and the rest as ‘other,’ peripheral or outcast.”¹³²

Cultural critic bell hooks echoes Dyer’s argument that what is at stake then, with cultural stereotypes is precisely that, “They are fantasy, a projection onto the Other that makes them less threatening. Stereotypes abound when there is distance.”¹³³ Indeed, stereotypes and caricatures provide the necessary distance that allows the space for a subject to become an “appropriate” target of ridicule and mockery. And when a subject becomes the target of ridicule and mockery they cease to become a subject position whose

¹³¹ Richard Dyer, “The Role of Stereotypes,” in *Media Studies: A Reader*, 2nd ed., eds. Paul Marris and Sue Thornham (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999) 247.

¹³² Dyer 248.

¹³³ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992) 170.

visibility matters. As Hall reminds us: “Above all, cultural meanings are not only ‘in the head.’ They organize and regulate social practices, influence our conduct and consequently have real, practical effects.”¹³⁴ For this reason, this project is the start of the process of anatomizing the ways in which contemporary adolescence has become signified as something worth obviating and marginalizing. In the following chapter, I begin to outline the historical and cultural dimensions of this characterization, mapping out the exclusions linked to the category of adolescence and the technologies employed in the management of this particular regulatory signification.

¹³⁴ Hall, *Representation* 3.

Chapter Two

What is an Adolescent?:

Tautological Subjects and Natural Constructions

“By marking this chronologically and developmentally construed stage, it is constructed as a metacategory, one that supersedes other ways of identifying...So, then, in terms of ‘naming to know’ the adolescent, which identity are we dangerously privileging?”

-Lisa Patel Stevens 275.

Adolescence, the transitional period between childhood and adulthood, is culturally understood as a necessary, natural, and universal part of life; yet, its veracity has been questioned almost from the outset of the term. Though frequently assumed as such, adolescence is not necessarily a fixed biological life stage: cultural conceptions about adolescence have been shaped by consumerism; industrialization; the institutionalization of compulsory education; changes to cultural views about race, class, and gender; and collective economic needs and realities. Despite this, the contemporary cultural understanding of adolescence remains quite narrow, envisioning adolescence (and the adolescent) as part of a larger maturation process that is a biological imperative. The adolescent is conceptualized as arriving at some undisclosed moment immediately following childhood and remaining in an adolescent state until the proscribed monikers of adulthood are reached: job, house, marriage, baby, financial independence. As noted in the introduction, recently, adolescence has gained cultural capital as a symbolic “marker,” acting as a designation for those individuals who demonstrate difficulty with the process of subjectification. If, then, the term “adolescence” is no longer necessarily

synonymous with a discrete time period, and can refer to any individual, regardless of age, what *is* a contemporary American adolescent?

While this chapter is titled, “What is an Adolescent?,” in many ways, the answer to this question is just as much about cultural understandings of “the adult” in contemporary American society as it is about “the adolescent,” as these categories exist in relational terms. Questions surrounding certain individuals’ ability to achieve this life stage, as well as the continual lengthening of the transition into adulthood, have brought about a new way of viewing adulthood as the culmination of a process of intellectual and emotional work. The distinction between, a person who is “biologically developed” and a person who has “attained the legal age of majority” is a significant distinction, and the one that animates the pivotal questions of this chapter: How is the figure of “the adolescent,” complete with its specific behavioral, attitudinal and categorical attributes, being mobilized in contemporary representational culture? What does its categorization and signification assert regarding power and control in the first decade of the new millennium?

Our contemporary version of adolescence was born out of early twentieth century anxieties that inexorably produced attitudes about this life stage charged with protective attitudes of concern, control, mistrust, and suspicion. The conception of adolescence as a life stage originated from the newly created scientific fields of psychology and sociology which formulated this period in the life cycle from research about “abnormal” youth in order to determine one “normative” and “correct” developmental path. The transition to adulthood was thus fashioned as a strict prescriptive path as a means to control proper development with any deviations from that path rendering an individual aberrant. Thus, the very notion of adolescence was coupled to the desire to create “normal” adults. Additionally, *fin de siècle* ideas about adolescence were both instructive and decisively aimed toward building a nation with a specific idea of the shape that nation would take and what would be needed for the vision to come to fruition. Thus, the contrast between “normal” and “abnormal,” “acceptable” and “aberrant” was created and shaped by the type of nation that turn-of-the-century scientific minds hoped to create. Since the

adolescent, and the adolescent's place within the nation, is deeply rooted in a recondite history of patriarchal governance at work in some form since the inception of the country, the "discovery" and "creation" of adolescence as a theoretical category should be understood as a part of this history.

Youth sociologist S.N. Eisenstadt maintains that the adolescent "is not yet fully acknowledged as an adult, a full member of the society. Rather, he is being 'prepared,' or is preparing himself for such adulthood."¹³⁵ Located within this example is specific value-laden rhetoric prevalent in language most used when speaking about youth. Several scholars have noted the ways in which this transitional rhetoric effectively consigns a certain segment of the population to liminal spaces. Nancy Lesko, for instance, maintains that transitional phrases and metaphors carry deeply damaging implications that "suggest an evolutionary arrival in an enlightened state after a lengthy period of backwardness."¹³⁶ Thus, adolescence is endowed with the notion that it is a transitional time in which individuals must work hard to *become* something else, suggesting that adolescents themselves are not absolute in their own right, subordinate to those individuals that are "complete." Lesko maintains that such phrases are "homiletic," meaning that they "appear to give adolescence importance but really confer greater authority on the author of the homily." In this way, scientists and educators adduce rhetoric that renders adults "positionally superior" to those not-yet-of-age:

By paying close attention to language we can begin to see the cultural weights that are put on a particular way of understanding adolescence as portentous, uncontrollable, and naturally occurring, and we see how the speakers on adolescents' transitions to adulthood are invested with authority.¹³⁷

Thus, the "transition" into adulthood is less about those transitioning and more about the retention of power for those who have already "evolved." It is the differences between who can claim rights to "completion" or "fulfillment," and in which contexts/under

¹³⁵ Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, "Archetypal Patterns of Youth," *The Challenge of Youth*, ed. Erik Erikson (New York: Anchor, 1965) 32.

¹³⁶ Nancy Lesko, *Act Your Age! A Cultural Construction of Adolescence* (New York: Routledge Falmer, 2001) 3.

¹³⁷ Lesko 3.

which circumstances that self-actualization will be sanctioned that provokes the greater questions of this chapter.

Family historian Ross Beales uniquely sums up those issues surrounding the adolescent this chapter will explore:

Adolescents and children are...distinguished from adults by the adult activities from which they are excluded: for example, marriage and the rearing of families; economic self-sufficiency; participation in the political life of the community to the extent that their sex and station permit.¹³⁸

Thus, while culturally, any singular definition of adolescent or adult may not exist, it is clear that one designation allows for cultural, social, political and economic capital, while the other necessarily obviates its subject from that same capital. Additionally, using the blanket term “adolescent” for a large grouping of diverse individuals invokes a “singular and titular axis of identity” which impedes the “autonomy that occurs when a particular identity code is invoked as an umbrella term that, in fact, casts silencing shadows across subgroups within a marginalized group.”¹³⁹ It is this metacharacterization of the adolescent that highlights the greater themes of the chapter: separation, marginalization, development and maturity.

The primary aim of this chapter is to map out the historical and cultural dimensions that have become connected to the categorization of adolescence in the beginning of the new millennium. This thesis argues that both *fin de siècle* and contemporary understandings of adolescence are rooted in biological conceptualizations of this life stage. By problematizing these understandings of the life stage of adolescence through the cultural positioning and characterization of the “adolescent,” this chapter suggests that the attributes assigned to this cultural icon are not biological imperatives, but rather cultural constructions. One of the main methods with regard to this kind of problematization, is genealogy, a way of investigating how certain taken-for-granted

¹³⁸ Ross Beales, “In Search of the Historical Child: Miniature Adulthood and Youth in Colonial New England,” *Growing Up in America: Children in Historical Perspective* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985) 18.

¹³⁹ Lisa Patel Stevens, “ReNaming ‘Adolescence’: Subjectivities in Complex Settings,” *Re/Constructing “the Adolescent”: Sign, Symbol, and Body*, ed. Jennifer A. Vadeboncoeur and Lisa Patel Stevens (New York: Peter Lang, 2004) 274.

“truths” can otherwise be viewed as historical constructs constituted at specific times for particular purposes.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, genealogy is derived from the philosophy of Michel Foucault as an approach to understanding the contradictory politics at work in the constitution of an idea. While the genealogy generated in this chapter is largely a broad characterization of this analytical methodology, a methodology that is notoriously difficult to define, the larger imperatives of a genealogical approach remain useful and salient. A genealogy can be viewed as a history not for understanding the past, but rather a history for diagnosing the present. Foucault believed that knowledges about a subject were produced and reproduced over time and that by excavating the many different influences that generated any “unchanging” or “universal” truth, the many disparities and determinative continuities of its constitution would be uncovered. Thus, instead of searching for origins of concepts and attempting to trace an unbroken continuity of meaningful past events, a genealogy uncovers the ways in which certain influences produce a body of knowledge about a subject.¹⁴⁰ As C.G. Prado explains, under this analytical approach, the advent of a concept is still examined, however, the interpretation of emergence is recontextualized:

The point of analyzing emergence is to produce accounts of whatever comes-to-be as not ‘the final term of a historical development.’ The analysis of emergence denies historical progressive evolution by showing that what comes-to-be is not a result of teleological processes but ‘is always produced through a particular stage of forces.’ What emerges or comes-to-be does so because of a compilation of disparate factors; what emerges is not the culmination of anything but is a consequence of an accumulation of factors with no inherent interrelatedness.¹⁴¹

For Foucault then, the consequence of this accumulation of factors is the production of values that sanction the domination of individuals. Here, Foucault is clear that this domination can be seen in both the establishment of hierarchies that engender the governing and management of individuals, as well as within the way that the values and

¹⁴⁰ C.G. Prado, *Starting with Foucault: An Introduction to Genealogy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995) 36.

¹⁴¹ Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon: 1984) 83, in Prado 37.

ideas utilized in effecting that government and management of the individuals are animated. For that reason, Prado explains,

It is the task of genealogy to counter the view of the emergent as inevitable by recording its lowly beginnings...Genealogy must analyze the descent and emergence of morals, ideals, and metaphysical concepts in order to show them and their like to be neither discovered truths nor preordained developments, but rather the products of conglomerations of blind forces.¹⁴²

Equipped with this understanding of genealogy, this chapter aims to examine the emergence of the scientific narrative of adolescence as produced both at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in order to understand precisely the crafted and constituted nature of adolescence.

For Foucault, the study of origins is not genealogy's exclusive enterprise. Foucault's interest lies in the ways in which subjects are constituted, arguing that subjects do not exist prior to discourse but rather are constituted within discourse. In this way, a genealogy should not be understood as the examination of "the subject" as a means of theorizing the ontology of the self, but rather, as providing a way of thinking about "the self" in relational terms. By decentralizing the subject from its conceptualization, it is thus possible to view the subject as a product of various contextualized discursive forces at work in the production of the idea of "the self," instead of viewing the self as an ahistorical agent of cognitive and affective attributes. According to Prado, this is why for Foucault, it is the body that bears the mediation of these discourses:

It is the body, in its habits and gestures, in its postures, in its speech, in how it is dealt with, that bears the emergent subjectivity that is the multifaceted total effect of regulating discourses. The disciplined body is logically prior to subjectivity. The task, therefore, is not to establish the nature of the self and to articulate that nature in a philosophical theory, but rather 'to expose a body totally imprinted by history.'¹⁴³

Consequently, this chapter outlines the ways in which the concept of adolescence, a construction created and propagated by institutions for the express purpose of regulation,

¹⁴² Prado 38.

¹⁴³ Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon: 1984) 83, in Prado 56.

is mapped onto bodies and practices at various points over the past century. In so doing, this chapter investigates the cultural categorization of adolescence in relation to concepts of childhood and adulthood as well as to discourses on maturity and immaturity, ultimately, providing a definition of adolescence for the larger project.

Throughout this chapter, I refer to the ways in which adolescence is repeatedly discursively positioned, followed by statistics that bear out a different picture of demographic patterns and circumstances of individuals inhabiting this age-range. Here, I do not wish to imply that one discourse provides “the truth” of any given situation, but rather, bearing in mind Foucault’s argument that discourses make heavy use of repetition to constitute their objects, I wish to describe the ways in which one certain version of adolescence is persistently championed while the reasons for this reiteration remain unfounded. Here, the task is to read how certain articulations of adolescence present within the contemporary media landscape are inscribed onto individuals discursively (a discursive constitution of lived experience) as yet another means of gauging the social practices and agendas to which these discourses are linked. Additionally, this approach aids in the evaluation of the political and personal repercussions of these discursive formations. Genealogy as an analytical device is decidedly useful in this regard, as it is adept at unraveling the manner in which discourses intersect with other cultural and political agendas in order to essentialize modes of signification and regulation.

Taking the understanding of adolescence as a constructed version of selfhood to its logical conclusion, Thomas Hine asks, “What would it mean to remove biological determinism from our definition of adolescence?”¹⁴⁴ Without the use of biophysical indicators to mark out specific individuals, how does a society regulate not just adolescents, but also those not traditionally marked as “adolescent?” How does it police those now be deemed “adolescent” who have been labeled such precisely due to the fact that they are able to move inside and outside those large social institutions which have been developed specifically to regulate and control their movements and experiences?

¹⁴⁴ Hine 32.

Hine answers that: “These are issues that are implicit in the project of contemporary, technologically advanced society to classify physically developed people as socially immature for a steadily increasing portion of their lives.”¹⁴⁵ In this way, this project seeks to examine how the representation of the “adolescent,” in its various contemporary incarnations, is mobilized and for what purposes. In an era facing stark socioeconomic and demographic changes, debates about changing definitions of maturity and developmental sequences absorb and reflect larger conversations about power, knowledge and truth. To that end, this chapter is an examination of the state of the American adolescent as presented in contemporary American film and television, contextualizing this representation through an overview of social, cultural, scientific and historical discourses surrounding “the adolescent.”

The Tautology of a Life Stage

This chapter argues that both the concept of the adolescent (the individual) as well as adolescence (the life stage) are cultural constructions, emerging at a specific historical moment for the express purpose of explaining and controlling both the behavior of the nation’s young as well as so-called “youthful behavior.”¹⁴⁶ As a result, the terms “adolescent” and “adolescence” possess several different meanings that come from disparate but equally influential sources whose meanings have changed over time. Currently, the designation “adolescence” can signify: the time between childhood and adulthood (which, as will be evident throughout this work, can mean anywhere from a few years to several decades); the biological period of puberty (a similarly nebulous time frame); or a “youthful” attitude or behavior. The term “adolescent” is also vague, typically referring to a teenager (itself an elastic term, as discussed elsewhere) or an individual displaying youthful attributes who may be well outside their teenage years.

¹⁴⁵ Hine 32.

¹⁴⁶ Frank F. Furstenburg Jr., Rubén G. Rumbaut, and Richard A. Settersten Jr., “On the Frontier of Adulthood: Emerging Themes and New Directions,” *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy*, eds. Richard A. Settersten Jr., Frank Furstenburg, Jr., and Rubén G. Rumbaut (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 3.

Derived from the fields of psychology, sociology and anthropology, the term “adolescence” indicates both, “a period of psychic development that precedes maturity,” and “a period between physical and social maturity.”¹⁴⁷ In this sense, adolescence is a process that, by definition, involves both mental and physical development; yet the term also connotes a “life stage,” a period of time one must inhabit as part of this process of development. This double bind imagines adolescence as simultaneously a period of stability and metamorphosis, revealing the ways in which adult culture frames adolescence as both familiar and Othered. In this regard, adolescence is coded as an experience with which all adults have first-hand knowledge, as well as an undertaking these same adults purport to no longer understand. In signifying it in this manner, *adolescence* is understood as an identity category that both exists as a place from which to draw experience as well as cultural power. *Adolescents*, on the other hand, are not privy to this power as they have yet to gain the “capital” that comes with traversing this life stage, again, an ontological essentialization that renders them Othered. This process of differentiation and exclusion casts the adolescent as “an objectified entity, in need of leadership, guidance, and control.”¹⁴⁸

The term “adolescent” first appeared in the English language in the fourteenth-century, derived from a French term meaning, “someone who was still growing.” The Latin word, “adolescere” means “to grow up,” from the root “to nourish.”¹⁴⁹ This designation for the period of time that lies in between childhood and adulthood, though seemingly universal, has been subject to tremendous historical variance. During classical times and the Middle Ages, the term “adolescent” was used to describe those who were fourteen or fifteen years of age, or just around puberty, and would continue to be referred to as such until that individual had reached the age of thirty-five or even forty-two. By the end of the Middle Ages, the term “adolescence” lost favor and was replaced by the

¹⁴⁷ Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager: A New History of the American Adolescent Experience* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1999) 9.

¹⁴⁸ Jennifer A. Vadeboncoeur, “Naturalised, Restricted, Packaged, and Sold: Reifying the Fictions of ‘Adolescent’ and ‘Adolescence,’” *Re/Constructing “the Adolescent:” Sign, Symbol, and Body*, ed. Jennifer A. Vadeboncoeur and Lisa Patel Stevens (New York: Peter Lang, 2004) 5.

¹⁴⁹ Hine 33.

term “youth,” denoting a period of life that began when children were able to take on gainful employment: this may have occurred before one had reached puberty, even as young as seven or eight. This period called “youth” ended when an individual married or became self-employed and could thus be applied to individuals anywhere from seven to thirty years of age; however, this term was usually assigned to those from ten to twenty-five.¹⁵⁰ The term “adolescent” once again reappeared at the beginning of the twentieth century when it began to take on its modern meaning as a “prolonged dependency” experienced by individuals who now had to prepare for a more complex, industrialized world through extrafamilial educational institutions in the early-nineteenth-century.¹⁵¹

This modern¹⁵² meaning of adolescence as a period separate from all other personal eras in which an individual is expected to question his or her own identity as a means of shaping this identity has become, in many ways, divorced from any relation to chronological age or life stage while still maintaining its sequential position within the life cycle. Adolescence is regarded as a disruption of childhood as well as an occurrence experienced prior to a projected adulthood.¹⁵³ In this way, adolescence is defined by its inability to fit categorically into other prescribed life stages, making its definition both retrospective (in the case of adulthood) and relative to dominant ideas of other life stages.¹⁵⁴ While adolescence connotes an evolution from childhood to full adult status, or a transition from dependent to full membership in society, the cultural understanding of this “full adult status” is similarly unclear. The traditional definition of adulthood has

¹⁵⁰ Phillip Graham, *End of Adolescence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 25.

¹⁵¹ Ruth M. Alexander, “Adolescence,” *The Encyclopedia of American Social History*, eds. Mary Kupiec Cayton, Elliott J. Gorn and Peter W. Williams (New York: Scribner, 1993) 2037; John Demos and Virginia Demos, Adolescence in Historical Perspective,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 31 (1969): 632-638; Joseph F. Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America 1790 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1977).

¹⁵² Modern can variously refer to a canonized volume of work of a certain aesthetic produced during a specific period of time, most often mid- to late-nineteenth century and prior to World War II; the emergence of a non-religious, rational world shaped by the scientific revolution, modern democracy and the Industrial Revolution; or an understanding of technological change. My usage of this term refers to the fact that adolescence, as an invention, was a necessary consequence of scientific and technological advances made during the modern period. For a detailed discussion of adolescence as a modernist invention, see Catherine Driscoll, *Modernist Cultural Studies* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010).

¹⁵³ Catherine Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture & Cultural Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 6.

¹⁵⁴ Driscoll, *Girls* 6.

customarily signified marriage, child bearing, leaving the paternal home and entering into the working life; however, the “definition of a ‘mature person’ is itself widely variable... contributin[g] to the at times bewildering variety of criteria for the end of social adolescence.”¹⁵⁵

Just as the concept of adolescence is historically relative, so too is adulthood: the etymological history of the word “adult,” perhaps not surprisingly, is similar to that of the word “adolescence.” The word for “adult,” did not appear in the English language until 1656, when the Oxford English Dictionary described the adult as having “...come to his full ripeness, force and bigness.” The word for “adulthood” did not enter the dictionary until two full centuries later in 1870.¹⁵⁶ Though it is commonly accepted that adulthood is a universal concept, English is actually one of the few languages in which the word exists, and is the only European language that has a specific word for what is considered a common life stage.¹⁵⁷ Noting that the word “adultus” means, “to have grown up,” Philip Graham notes that, etymologically speaking, “adults are defined in terms of the completion of their adolescence.”¹⁵⁸ Over the last few decades, the tautological reasoning that helped shape contemporary definitions of adulthood and adolescence similarly worked to code individuals in particular ways: the completion of adolescence and the relinquishing of so-called adolescent attributes is what defines adult status, while the lack of (or inability to) maintain adult characteristics defines adolescence and marks out adolescents. Additionally, it is particularly difficult to understand the intrinsic nature of contemporary adulthood as it constitutes the longest period of the life course and has acted as the structure by which all other life stages have been defined.

According to sociologist James A. Côté, sociologists refer to institutionalized processes such as the transition to adulthood as “structural factors” that become

¹⁵⁵ Aaron H. Esman, M.D., *Adolescence and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990) 40.

¹⁵⁶ Cheryl Merser, *“Grown-Ups”: A Generation in Search of Adulthood* (New York: J.P. Putnam and Sons, 1987) 56.

¹⁵⁷ Dorothy Rogers, *The Adult Years: An Introduction to Aging*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1982) 6-7.

¹⁵⁸ Graham 25.

“structuralized” when they become firmly entrenched and “destructuralized” when they weaken.¹⁵⁹ Saul Meghnagi explains that the first half of the twentieth century was a period of structuralization, during which time, transitions to adulthood were relatively universalized such that sociologists can cite specific ages for transitions such as leaving the education system and entering the labor market, as well as the minimum age of marriage. Due to “various interconnected phenomena, including increased control over life paths by the labor market, enterprises, and the state through the introduction of regulations on the structure, periods, and specific ages for choices of life and events,” culturally shared rules about the appropriateness of certain sequences helped determine and reinforce the social guidelines that were gradually established.¹⁶⁰ The second half of the century, however, saw the destabilization of the institutional forces that presumably helped to create differentiation in the life-course, including, gender relations, parent-child relations, ethnic/racial relations, and intergenerational commitments.¹⁶¹ The result of this destabilization was a decline in consensus with regard to the ways in which those institutions developed during the early modern and late-modern periods should be configured. Thus as these institutions became less instructive and instrumental in the transition to adulthood, so too did the standardization and stability they had once helped to guarantee.¹⁶² Consequently, there seems to be a cultural consensus that the road to adulthood has either become so complex and insecure that individuals attempting to navigate this path are inhibited for long periods of time, or that individuals along the road are lacking in some way that would otherwise allow them to complete this transition in the neat manner as those who came before them. Additionally, as the next section of this chapter will illuminate, as social institutions that once gave structure to this transition became undermined, other forms of authority took their place, working to legitimize this notion of inherent lack by binding the social to the biological.

¹⁵⁹ James A. Côté, *Arrested Adulthood: The Changing Nature of Maturity and Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2000) 29.

¹⁶⁰ Saul Meghnagi, “Joining Society: With What Certainty,” *Joining Society: Social Interaction and Learning in Adolescence and Youth*, eds. Anne-Nelly Perrety-Clermont, Clotilde Pontecorvo, Lauren B. Resnick, Tania Zittoun and Barbara Burge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 318-319.

¹⁶¹ Côté 30.

¹⁶² Meghnagi 319.

The Biopolitics of a Life Stage

Part of what is at issue with contemporary crises about adolescence, including this recent fascination with “boomerang kids,” is that ideas about adolescence, even as a socially constructed category, are complicated by the ways in which adolescence can be marked out by biological and physiological processes. This is further problematized by the fact that adolescence has historically been conceptualized through the use of developmental dictates: the very reason that “boomerang kids” are deemed “aberrant” or “not normal” is the fact that adolescence is understood in specific teleological ways. As Rebecca Raby notes, “Modern understandings of growing up have conceptualized childhood through progressive movement towards the endpoint of adulthood, with youth as a liminal, in-between phase before such adult stability.”¹⁶³ That adolescence was defined as a “stage” engendered the understanding that all individuals must necessarily undergo the adolescent “experience,” whereby unavoidably particularizing differences from one stage to another. As Patel, et al., explain, “Conceptualising maturation in defined stages made the formulation of theories and models of development more easily manageable, and the sorting of people within a type of maturational taxonomy was viewed as scientific.”¹⁶⁴ It is this scientizing of the life stage of adolescence that motivates the continued genealogical inquiry throughout this section exploring the ways “truth” has been “legitimized” through discourses of “scientific knowledge.”¹⁶⁵

Science-based propensities toward the developmental identification of adolescence have been present in its theoretical categorization since its “discovery” at the turn of the 20th century, a time rife with tremendous social change and unrest. As

¹⁶³ Raby 69.

¹⁶⁴ Lisa Patel Stevens, Lisa Hunter, Donna Pendergast, Victoria Carrington, Nan Bahr, Cushla Kapitzke and Jane Mitchell, “ReConceptualizing the Possible Narratives of Adolescence,” *The Australian Educational Researcher* 34.2(2007): 111.

¹⁶⁵ As such, this work borrows from Foucault’s understanding of the ways in which power produces discourses of knowledge, which in turn, produce regimes of truth, and these, in turn, produce criteria from which to determine “truthfulness.” Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978) In Vadeboncouer 3

America underwent structural changes due to rapid industrialization, it simultaneously witnessed social changes in the form of abolitionist movements and the start of the women's movement.¹⁶⁶ Amid growing social unrest and the weakening of religious belief, the newly introduced scientific fields of physical anthropology, psychology, biology, and medicine offered tools to better understand and make sense of rapid changes in society. One of the tools offered in this regard was the Great Chain of Being: a hierarchical structuring of society that placed European middle-class males at the top and savage tribes and animals at the bottom. As the Great Chain of Being became a popular reference point for the understanding of developmental progress, it also began to stand in for social progression "from superstition to reason," "chaos to divine law," and "simplicity to complexity."¹⁶⁷ Recapitulation theory, or the idea that each child's growth recapitulated mankind's development, worked alongside the Great Chain of Being to further the ranking of evolutionary inferiority and superiority, inciting a host of work on the nature of race, gender and civilization.

Recapitulation theory postulated the notion that, "every child reenacts the evolutionary climb from primitive to savage group and finally to civilized society," emphasizing the view that, "many travelers were waylaid or 'arrested' on their paths and never became fully civilized."¹⁶⁸ Under this rubric, children and youth were equated to primates, valued for what they could reveal about both the past and future of the human race. Lesko explains that the emphasis on recapitulation theory at the turn of the century worked to single out adolescence as *the* crucial point at which an individual "leaped to a developed, superior, Western selfhood or remained arrested in a savage state."¹⁶⁹ Consequently, adolescence became the cultural site where adulthood, rationality, and proper sexuality were contested, bound together in the very process of orderly development.¹⁷⁰ As science became the new moral authority scientific determination was valorized as "*the* nonpolitical, unbiased arena of knowledge" during the late 1800s,

¹⁶⁶ This is most often cited as the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention.

¹⁶⁷ Lesko 22.

¹⁶⁸ Lesko 22.

¹⁶⁹ Lesko 34.

¹⁷⁰ Lesko 50.

giving these developmentalist discourses that much more weight.¹⁷¹ Crucially, as Lesko shows, through the use of science and the theory of recapitulation,

adolescence was deemed a crucial divide between rational, autonomous, moral, white bourgeois men and emotional, conforming, sentimental, or mythical others, namely primitives, animals, women, lower classes, and children. Adolescence became a social space in which progress or degeneration was visualized, embodied, measured, and affirmed.¹⁷²

Thus, since the inception of the term as categorical classification, adolescence has acted as a kind of repository for ideas about nation, future, and progress as well as each corresponding antipode. As a result, the category has been discursively mobilized to manage that which is otherwise beyond institutional control for the express purpose of regulation.

Throughout history, this categorical management has been legitimized through the use of various other scientific and medicalized justifications. Donna Haraway's compelling study on primatology is an exposition on how science is, at its very foundation, a product of the ways in which we understand ourselves as human beings and how we view our place in the world. Haraway uses the study of primates as an inroad to these ideas, maintaining that primates occupy "border zones:" contestable spaces that "exist on the boundaries of so many struggles to determine what will count as knowledge."¹⁷³ Haraway reiterates that the late 1800s was a seminal era in terms of its contribution to the classification and promotion of scientific knowledge:

In this period the organism—animal, personal, and social—became the privileged natural-technical object of knowledge. Organisms were structured by the principles of the division of labor. The special efficiencies derived from the separations and functional management of the new scientific entities called race, sex, and class had particularly strong effects.¹⁷⁴

Thus, the classification of objectifiable knowledge established and created a particularly effective mode of social management through the parceling out of race, sex, and class. Haraway maintains that within this formation of modern science and medical rubrics,

¹⁷¹ Lesko 30-31, her emphasis.

¹⁷² Lesko 35.

¹⁷³ Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989) 12.

¹⁷⁴ Haraway 289.

The marked bodies of race, class, and sex have been at the center, not the margins, of knowledge in modern conditions. These bodies are made to speak because a great deal depends on their active management.¹⁷⁵

Haraway explains that the biological body is not the “unmediated natural truth of the body,” but rather, “a particular cultural form of appropriation-conversation:” that through the construction of the biological organism as “convention,” the natural body acts as the site of discussion and contestation of power.¹⁷⁶ The body must be reduced to its (constructed) universalized basic functions as a means of appropriating and limiting its possibilities. Like gender and race, the framework for limitation is built into the very definition of the contemporary category of age and its attendant stages.

The primacy of the biopolitics of difference continues to demonstrate this active management through the marked body of the adolescent, even after the naturalization of other identity categories has been contested. Despite the understanding that adolescence is a culturally constructed category, its conceptualization remains highly connected to biological processes: adolescence is still often viewed as synonymous with the process of puberty, a view that has helped define the boundaries between child and adult, actualized and incomplete, particularly with regard to female youth.¹⁷⁷ Christine Griffin notes:

As with gender, sexuality, “race” and nineteenth-century assumptions about class, “common sense” ideas about age stages in general and youth in particular are founded on biological determinism. Since the onset of puberty is taken to be the key-defining feature of adolescence, the category is almost immune from effective challenge or deconstruction, since the biological domain is assumed to be inherently “natural,” inevitable and irrevocable. It was this “natural” process that became embedded in the scientific and medical ways of knowing about young people that universalized “adolescence” and “adolescents.”¹⁷⁸

As the field of anthropology entered the scientific conversation of adolescence, it legitimated and disseminated the cultural awareness of puberty as “a cross-cultural phenomenon” by identifying puberty in past historical periods, helping to confirm a

¹⁷⁵ Haraway 289.

¹⁷⁶ Haraway 355.

¹⁷⁷ See Driscoll *Girls*.

¹⁷⁸ Christine Griffin, *Representations of Youth: The Study of Youth and Adolescence in Britain and America* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993) 10.

foundation for beliefs about “natural” human development.”¹⁷⁹ Thus, the physiological changes of puberty fit into this “natural” understanding of adolescence, viewed as corporeal evidence of a biological maturation that precedes the experience of adolescence. As a consequence, puberty has historically been conflated with adolescence due to the ways in which the classical version of adolescence was “confined to the arrival of physical change and its effects.”¹⁸⁰ In actuality, the term *puberty* refers only to those specific biological changes that occur during the early teen years (early adolescence),¹⁸¹ the onset of which can occur as early as nine years-old for girls, and ten or eleven years-old for boys—an age most would agree is far from adolescent. Similarly, the end of puberty, better described as, “the achievement of reproductive maturity and the complete acquisition of secondary sexual characteristics” typically occurs any time from fifteen to seventeen, again, far from the contemporary end of adolescence.¹⁸² Puberty is a long-term, gradual process, beginning and ending at different times for different individuals and is thus a poor means of firmly establishing any age period or life stage.

Driscoll argues that, to the conceptualization of adolescence, the field of anthropology added its own hypothesis “that puberty is a process of physical disruption and then stabilization that extends into the social.”¹⁸³ That is, with the introduction of this anthropological view, late modern ideas about puberty now include the assumption that bodily disruption, and its attendant psychosocial issues, should be resolved through the course of puberty. While modern models of adolescence are no longer based on the onset of physiological change and its effects, puberty still heavily informs contemporary notions of the transition from childhood to adulthood via the link between the biological and psychological:

¹⁷⁹ Driscoll, *Girls* 82.

¹⁸⁰ Driscoll, *Girls* 82.

¹⁸¹ Just as there are many debates about the supposed new life stages occurring between adolescence and adulthood, so too are there similar debates about changes to late childhood/early adolescence.

¹⁸² Jeanne Brooks-Gunn and Anne C. Peterson, “Problems in Studying and defining Pubertal Events,” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 13.3 (1984): 184.

¹⁸³ Driscoll, *Girls* 82.

The representation of adolescence as identity formation and identity crisis relies on the physiological trauma and psychological crisis of puberty, and ideas about puberty have in turn helped define distinctions between child and adult. Puberty both defines the boundaries of adolescence and asserts its importance.¹⁸⁴

Valerie Walkerdine contends that it is in this way that trying to find the “truth” of the developing individual produces this individual itself: “the ‘real’ child of child development is not a matter of uncovering a set of empirical facts or epistemological truths which stand outside, or prior to, the conditions of their production.”¹⁸⁵ Thus, developmental psychology, and other sciences that seek to “figure out” the adolescent, produce the very object they attempt to study. As a result, argues Vadeboncoeur, “when scientific knowledge becomes socially axiomatic and taken for granted, as a society we cease to challenge it.”¹⁸⁶

Despite the fact that it is now well known that other factors contribute to confirm the “fact” of adolescence, there is a remaining insistence on linking this stage to the biological. While puberty may no longer be understood as synonymous with adolescence, other biological links beyond puberty have taken up the cause. A bevy of new research “shows” the biological “evidence” of adolescence: biological origins of gender differences, and biological influences on temperament have reinscribed enough significance in the biological as to make the biological relevant again. Part of this new specious “significance” is that the “truth” of the biology of adolescence is said to extend to species other than our own: animal ethnologists have noticed “something akin to adolescence” in primates, in “the departure of primates from their family, the organization and stratification of peer-dominated age groups, and ‘acting out’ behaviors of youthful primates.”¹⁸⁷ Stevens, et al., explain that other issues such as “panics over ‘teenage pregnancy,’ ‘adolescent homosexuality,’ conduct disorders, learning disabilities, and issues associated with body image” continue to show the “dominance of biology and

¹⁸⁴ Driscoll, *Girls* 81.

¹⁸⁵ Valerie Walkerdine, “Developmental Psychology and the Child-Centered Pedagogy: The Insertion of Piaget into Early Education,” *Changing the Subject: Psychology, Social Regulation, and Subjectivity*, eds. Julian Henriques, Cathy Urwin, Wendy Hollway, Couze Venn, and Valerie Walkerdine (New York: Methuen, 1984) 165. In Vadeboncoeur 8.

¹⁸⁶ Vadeboncoeur 8.

¹⁸⁷ Frank F. Furstenburg, “The Sociology of Adolescence and Youth in the 1990s: A Critical Commentary,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 62.4 (2000): 897-8.

the pathologization of young people.”¹⁸⁸ Similar to the ways in which discourses of eighteenth-century natural science emphasized, as Robyn Wiegman puts it, “race as a constituted ‘fact’ of the body—as a truth that not only can but must be pursued beyond the realm of visible similarities and differences,” the physiological differences that incite the Othering of adolescents create the visual economy of their distinction.¹⁸⁹

Extending the Biological into the Social: The “Teen Brain” Story

Historically, biological, physical and psychological “traits” of adolescence have been linked as a means to substantiate the necessity for adolescent control. Côté and Allahar remind us that, “the psychopathology attributed to adolescence was used to legitimate the juvenile justice system in the United States and the suspension of rights imposed by that system.”¹⁹⁰ Social scientists at the end of the nineteenth century, in an attempt to prevent juvenile delinquency, propagated the assertion that delinquency was hereditary, and furthermore, indicated “the presence of a defective or feeble-minded person.” The anthropometric school, led by Cesare Lombroso, believed that physical features, such as, “a small or an abnormally large head, heavy lower jaw, receding forehead, deformities of the face, and so forth,” were the identifying marks of criminals.¹⁹¹ These theories were later refuted; however, it bears noting that it was the study to find out why some youths became delinquents and how to prevent delinquency from occurring that began the interest in the mind of the adolescent. As Victoria Getis points out, “This group of experts, using the rubric of science, defined the abnormal adolescent by assuming that there was a normal adolescent, a normal mind in a normal environment.”¹⁹² In the

¹⁸⁸ Stevens et al., “ReConceptualizing” 114.

¹⁸⁹ Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995) 23.

¹⁹⁰ Côté and Allahar 7.

¹⁹¹ Victoria Getis, “Experts and Juvenile Delinquency, 1900-1935,” *Generations of Youth: Youth Cultures and History in Twentieth-Century America*, ed. Joe Austin (New York: New York University Press, 1998) 24.

¹⁹² Getis 31.

following years, this approach to the definition of the adolescent has continued as those individuals who “deviate” from the norm are “adjusted” to the standards of society.

This quest for the definition of the “normal” adolescent has intensified in the past two decades concomitant with a rise in the investment in the study of the “teen brain.” The characterization of adolescents as “moody,” “reckless,” and “impulsive,” was once considered only a description, but has become almost an axiom in the past decade. It is now acknowledged within the medical community that, “Adolescence is a developmental period characterized by suboptimal decisions and actions that give rise to an increased incidence of unintentional injuries and violence, alcohol and drug abuse, unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases;” an assumption for which there is now medical “proof.” Statistics from the National Center for Health Statistics such as: “there are over 13,000 adolescent deaths in the United States each year...70 percent of these deaths result from motor vehicle crashes, unintentional injuries, homicide, and suicide,”¹⁹³ are repeatedly offered up as evidence that individuals engage in risky behaviors as part of the condition of being adolescent. In the 1990s, researchers set out to unravel the now ubiquitous question, in the words of one book’s title, “*Why do they act that way?*”¹⁹⁴ With recent advances to “non-invasive brain imaging technology,” particularly the use of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), researchers have collected a host of cognitive and neurobiological theories for why adolescents might engage in “suboptimal choice behavior.”¹⁹⁵

Prior to the release of these studies, it was thought that the “hardwiring” of the brain was mostly completed by the time an individual reached the age of four. The fMRI studies overturned these assumptions, revealing a “further major period of neuronal

¹⁹³ L.K. Eaton, S. Kinchen, J. Ross, J. Hawkins, W.A. Harris, R. Lowry et al., “Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance—United States, 2005, Surveillance Summaries,” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 55 (2006): 1-108. In B.J. Casey, Sarah Getz, Adriana Galvan, “The Adolescent Brain,” *Developmental Review* 28 (2008): 62.

¹⁹⁴ David Walsh, *Why Do They Act That Way?: A Survival Guide to the Adolescent Brain for You and Your Teen* (New York: Free Press, 2004).

¹⁹⁵ B.J. Casey, Sarah Getz, Adriana Galvan, “The Adolescent Brain,” *Developmental Review* 28 (2008): 63.

growth and pruning beginning in early adolescence.”¹⁹⁶ Additionally, these studies showed that maturation of the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for “the so-called executive functions of planning, judgment and impulse control,” is not finalized until at least an individual’s mid-20s.¹⁹⁷ Other research conducted at this time claimed that for certain tasks requiring memory, teens use smaller areas of the cortex than adults.¹⁹⁸ Through this research, it has been posited that “‘adolescents have brains that are ‘different’ to adults.’”¹⁹⁹ Judith Bessant explains that

Given that the prefrontal cortex plays a part in executive decision-making and judgment, it has been suggested that structural differences between the adolescent and adult brains explains why young people fail to exercise self-constraint and thus tend to get themselves into a lot of trouble.²⁰⁰

This research has led to a widespread and well-accepted belief that adolescents, as a group, are more prone to risky and reward-seeking behavior²⁰¹ than either children or adults, and that this is a fundamental part of their biological makeup.²⁰² Additionally these studies further assert that until this prefrontal cortex maturation is complete, individuals “must rely on less sophisticated areas of the brain for processing emotions and interpreting social situations.”²⁰³

Monica A. Payne suggests that as this data began to be published, this evidence was taken up not only as support for a psychological model of “delayed adulthood” but also exploited as “evidence for its *biological authorization*.”²⁰⁴ Payne chronicles the ways in which interpretation of this newfound scientific evidence was quickly and uncritically embraced by the medical community (including leading adolescent psychologists) and “widely disseminated in (often questionable) advice for the general

¹⁹⁶ Monica A. Payne, “Teen Brain Science and the Contemporary Storying of Psychological (Im)maturity,” *Times of our Lives: Making Sense of Growing Up & Growing Old*, eds. Harry Blatterer and Julia Glahn (Freeland, UK: Inter-disciplinary Press, 2010) 57. Digital File.

¹⁹⁷ Payne, “Teen Brain” 55.

¹⁹⁸ Robert Epstein, “The Myth of the Teen Brain,” *Scientific American* 17 (2007): 68.

¹⁹⁹ Bessant, Judith. “Hard Wired for Risk: Neurological Science, ‘The Adolescent Brain’ and Developmental Theory.” *Journal of Youth Studies* 11.3 (2008): 349.

²⁰⁰ Bessant 350.

²⁰¹ Casey, et al. 73.

²⁰² Casey, et al. 71.

²⁰³ Payne, “Teen Brain” 57.

²⁰⁴ Payne, “Teen Brain” 55.

public.”²⁰⁵ Payne explains that the most likely reason why this new evidence caught on so quickly was its compatibility with “the visions of adolescence offered by its earlier eminent theorists, Hall and Erickson.”

The pictures they supplied of adolescents as—either ideally or unavoidably—moody, stubborn, rebellious, risk-taking, irresponsible and unpredictable was well established as the discourse into which Western (perhaps particularly Anglophone) teenagers were being socialised. Interpretations of teen brain research were instantly at home in this discursive environment and served to expand and reinforce it. In addition, these studies, even when small and exploratory, appeared to be offering neutral and objective ‘hard science’ that could be accorded *a priori* legitimacy.²⁰⁶

Payne’s study cites examples of how this information has been disseminated, maintaining that this evidence of a “lack of a *fully* mature prefrontal cortex” has been employed by scientific literature, media, policy makers, and educators to suggest that adolescents have “almost zero ability to plan ahead or make good decisions.”²⁰⁷

As Payne further describes, this seemed to explain teens’ erratic behavior and thus “confirm the ‘fact’ of their behavioural unpredictability.”²⁰⁸ “Teen brain science” has thus been mobilized to explain why teenagers are unable to multitask,²⁰⁹ do not possess empathy,²¹⁰ and are irrational like “toddlers” or “crazy people.”²¹¹ As Judith Bessant suggests, this recent reappropriation of biological traits for the express purpose of regulation and policy implementation needs to be critically examined since

this research has potentially serious implications for how we know and treat young people and how ‘youth’ is experienced. This research is used to encourage governments and others (i.e. schools, courts) to extend their governance of young people.²¹²

This characterization of the adolescent brain corresponds with the increasing neurologization of the person that has emerged in recent years, one that increasingly

²⁰⁵ Payne, “Teen Brain” 55.

²⁰⁶ Payne, “Teen Brain” 58-9.

²⁰⁷ Payne, “Teen Brain” 57.

²⁰⁸ Payne, “Teen Brain” 57.

²⁰⁹ L.B. Chamberlain, “The Amazing Adolescent Brain: Translating Science into Strategies,” *Institute for Safe Families* (2008). In Payne, “Teen Brain” 60.

²¹⁰ Sara Goudarzi, “Study: Teen Brain Lacks Empathy: Area of Brain Associated with Higher-Level Thinking Underused in Youths,” *MSNBC* 8 Sep 2006, Web, 12 Dec 2012. In Payne “Teen Brain,” 60.

²¹¹ Michael J Bradley, *Yes, Your Teen Is Crazy! Loving Your Kid Without Losing Your Mind* (Gig Harbor, WA: Harbor Press, 2003). In Payne, “Teen Brain” 60.

²¹² Bessant 348.

“recode[s] the duties, rights, and expectations of human beings in relation to their...life itself, reorganize[s] the relations between individuals and their biomedical authorities, and reshape[s] the ways in which human beings relate to themselves as ‘somatic individuals.’”²¹³ However, as has been made clear at various points throughout this chapter, while the specifics of the research may be new, the claim is one that has been made for centuries, and fits in with a “long history of scientism that has seen scientific research used against vulnerable groups.”²¹⁴

In this way, it is not hard to see how this neurologization of the adolescent is part of this long history of scientism:

Indeed, claims that young people are naturally irrational or anti-social entails the same kind of prejudice displayed by those who spoke of the “Jewish brain,” the “female brain” or the “Negro brain” to explain how these groups were both different and problematic.²¹⁵

Payne rightly points out that unlike raced or sexed characterizations of biological determinism, the characterization of the teen brain “differs from its other prejudiced counterparts in not constituting a handicap ‘for life;’” however, she continues, “it is worth considering what purpose this exaggerated picture of second decade incompetence performs in relation to psychology’s re-construction of developmental stages and tasks for the third and fourth decades of life.”²¹⁶ Moreover, claims Payne, popularized interpretations of ‘the teen brain’ as

‘a work in progress’ energized a new discourse of developmental immaturity incorporating propositions of severe and expectable problems of intellectual and emotional incompetence, temperamental unpredictability and poor self-control, even beyond the teenage years.”²¹⁷

²¹³ Nikolas Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007) 6. Rose defines as “somatic” individuals as, “beings whose individuality is, in part at least, grounded within our fleshly, corporeal existence, and who experience, articulate, judge, and act upon ourselves in part in the language of biomedicine. I would argue that as adolescents are increasingly defined by their so-called “brain” limitations, among a host of other biochemical pathologizations such as ADHD, they are certainly being treated as, and trained to understand themselves as, individuals who conceptualize their individuality through their biomedical selves.

²¹⁴ Bessant 349.

²¹⁵ Bessant 357.

²¹⁶ Payne, “Teen Brain” 61.

²¹⁷ Payne, “Teen Brain” 55.

It is the utilization and extension of these conceptualizations of adolescence as incomplete and inept that have recently broadened to include those in their thirties and forties that are of particular interest for this project. More specifically, the rest of this chapter is interested in the ways in which the extension of this designation of “troubled adolescent” became manifest in different gendered, raced, and classed ways in the first decade of the new millennium.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Judith Kegan Gardiner maintains that unlike gender, which is traditionally viewed as permanent and deeply individual, the experience of age is understood as temporary and ephemeral.²¹⁸ Whereas it may cross cultural boundaries of acceptability to expect individuals to adhere to and perform raced or sexed notions of identity, these same behavioral imperatives of individuals in various life stages are not only expected, they are required. The film and television landscape of the first decade of the new millennium exhibited several junctures at which trouble along the maturational pathway was articulated. As contemporary representational culture is insistent on promoting specific accounts of the gendered experience of individual subjects, this project endeavors to begin to map out these sites by parsing out what kinds of shifts are occurring within contemporary representations of troubled, “life-staged” subjects. While further chapters of this project interrogate other moments of maturity trouble, the rest of this chapter is concerned with the dual ways that adolescence became a site of concern and maintenance with regard to the psychosocial and biological propensity toward a specific, narrowing understanding of the cultural view of adolescents. As evidence of the way that the scientizing, legitimizing discourse of adolescence became effectively coded onto bodies of a certain segment of the American population, the rest of this chapter will explore the two discursive manifestations of the adolescent at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first: the violent and aggressive signification of both the male and female adolescent, and its contemporary counterpart, the ineffectual or “maturationally-challenged” individual.

²¹⁸ Judith Kegan Gardiner, “Theorizing Age with Gender: Bly’s Boys Feminism, and Maturity Masculinity,” *Masculinity Studies & Feminist Theory: New Directions*, ed. Judith Kegan Gardiner (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 95.

The Violent Inevitability of Masculine Adolescence

As explained above, the creation and definition of the cultural category of adolescence was based on developmental rubrics that were highly raced and gendered. Certainly, the “architects” of the life stage of adolescence viewed the proper maintenance of white, male adolescence necessary for the proper preservation of the America’s success. Hall believed that the “normal adolescent was a person undergoing momentous changes, both emotional and physical, but one who could fulfill his or her promise and become a virtuous adult.”²¹⁹ It was up to institutions created for the proper maintenance of youth to make sure that youth were placed on a proper path of development. As a result, progress through these institutions has suggested “increased maturity and (eventual) stabilization of identity...[that] has historically been applied predominantly to conceptions (both theoretical and popular) of developing manhood.”²²⁰ Thus, adolescents, as culturally perceived today, are filtered through “conditions, behaviours, and practices [that] are viewed through the lens of ‘normal’ development, whose strongest antecedent is the white, middle class male.”²²¹

Recapitulation theory, the aforementioned theory that proffered that all individuals recast the act of evolution in their journey to adulthood, stated that boys had to “proceed through lower stages, that is, through emotionality and other savage and/or feminine states” in order to become reasoning adults.²²² Under these terms, the specter of perpetual juvenescence was held up as *the* threat against the improper developmental evolution of white, adolescent males who remained too emotional or sentimental. It is thus clear that adolescence should be viewed as a technology of whiteness and virile masculinity since white, bourgeois men within this rubric are placed at the pinnacle of civilization and concerns about adolescent boys the predominant focus. While white,

²¹⁹ Getis 23.

²²⁰ Driscoll, *Girls* 6.

²²¹ Stevens et al., “ReConceptualizing” 114.

²²² Lesko 62.

bourgeois females (of all ages) were believed to be above savages in this hierarchal structure, they were never considered on par with white men and boys. It is under this reasoning that Rachael McLennan makes the claim that, “G. Stanley Hall’s work on adolescence comes close to arguing that any individual not white and male might be denied access to ‘adulthood.’”²²³ This can certainly be seen, and will be discussed further in chapter three, in the extended appellation of the term “girl” in the first decade of the new millennium.

To reiterate, it is clear that much of the project of (male) adolescence has been bound up in evading the possible immaturity trap of remaining in a feminine state. As a result, the task of male maturation is complicated by the ways in which masculinity can be proven or performed to allay any angst about its nonexistence. In this regard, according to Michael Kimmel and Matthew Mahler, the project of masculinity involves a call to “violence, both the willingness to see it as a legitimate way to resolve conflict and its actual use,”²²⁴ to prove this masculinity. Kimmel and Mahler explain that the inclusion of violence has been a part of the concept of male maturation since its inception: even Hall, himself, believed that “a nonfighting boy was a ‘nonentity.’”²²⁵ This aspect of male development was further complicated in the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first due to the fact that part of the neurologization of adolescence relied on the notion that the contemporary adolescent is “biologically” driven to risk-taking and criminal offending. This aspect of the contemporary adolescent was particularly evident in the first decade of the new millennium, as there was a rise in school shootings, bullying “epidemics,” and an increase in reported incidents about widespread hazing. The perceived relationship between youth and violent crime is certainly not new—youth has historically been socially understood through the lens of deviance. However, certain shifts in the cultural management and understanding of this correlation reveal the ways in which age, coupled

²²³ Rachael McLennan, *Adolescence, America, and Postwar Fiction: Developing Figures* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 157.

²²⁴ Michael S. Kimmel and Matthew Mahler, “Adolescent Masculinity, Homophobia, and Violence: Random School Shootings, 1982-2001,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 46.10 (2003): 1450.

²²⁵ Kimmel and Mahler 1450.

with gender and biology, was mobilized for the further control and policing of a large segment of the American population.

During the 1980s and 1990s, an epidemic of youth violence surfaced in the media, shifting the youth-oriented focus from production of youth-specific cultures in the 1970s to a renewed categorization of youth as deviance and a menace. While youth violence had declined overall by 1995,²²⁶ the media attention had not. For male adolescents in the late 1990s, stories about gang violence were quickly replaced by stories about “white suburban teens seeking revenge against their classmates” in the form of school shootings.²²⁷ Kimmel and Mahler contend that since the 1980s, there have been two distinct waves of school violence. The first wave occurred from 1982 to 1991, during which time the shootings were non-random (the perpetrators specifically targeted their victims), committed in urban, inner-city schools and involved students of color. Instances of school shootings of this ilk, while not entirely gone, have declined dramatically since the early 1990s. The second wave of shootings started in 1992 (22 separate instances from 1992 to 2003), and was comprised of incidents committed in suburban schools by White individuals. In both waves, male students committed each of the conflicts.²²⁸

Kimmel and Mahler assert that as the race and class of the perpetrators shifted, so too did the public perception of school shootings:

As the shooters have become White and suburban middle-class boys the public has shifted the blame away from group characteristics to individual psychological problems, assuming that these boys were deviants who broke away from an otherwise genteel suburban culture—that their aberrant behavior was explainable by some psychopathological factor.

They explain that similar acts by African-American boys, or boys of color were viewed as part of the effects of the culture of poverty or “the ‘normality’ of violence among

²²⁶ See Mike Males, *Framing Youth: 10 Myths about the Next Generation* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1999) for a detailed explanation.

²²⁷ Meda Chesney-Lind, and Katherine Irwin, “From Badness to Meanness: Popular Constructions of Contemporary Girlhood,” *All About the Girl: Culture, Power and Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 49.

²²⁸ Kimmel and Mahler 1442-3.

inner-city youth.”²²⁹ Framing these shootings in these disparate ways, they maintain, underscores the role that race and class play in the depiction and understanding of these phenomena. According to Henry Giroux, historically, “poor kids and children of color have been considered to be beyond the boundaries of both childhood and innocence,” often viewed as a threat to the innocence of white, middle-class children.²³⁰ Giroux claims that this portrayal of youth changed in the 1990s when white suburban kids “increasingly face[ed] the wrath of adult authorities, the media, and the state,” through the growing notion that all young individuals were now at risk.²³¹ Under the specter of mass school shootings, the threat of violence became ubiquitous while the blame became individualized.

The story of Columbine is now well-worn: two male high school students, tired of being bullied and ostracized, walked into their suburban high school in Highlands Ranch, Colorado, on April 20, 1999, injuring 23 students and teachers and killing 15 (including themselves) as retaliation for the bullying and alienation. For years, the narrative voiced with regard to the tragedy was that of the difficulty of high school: difference, acceptance, and the importance of paying attention to troubled students; “a major spectacle of alienated youth gone horribly wrong.”²³² It is now known that this was not the real story behind the events at Columbine: the perpetrators of the violent shooting had planned a large-scale attack, similar to Timothy McVeigh’s Oklahoma City bombing in size and scope, intending to create as much damage as possible, none of it intended as personal retaliation.²³³ That the story of alienation and bullying stuck is part of the furthering trend toward the media construction of “at-risk” adolescents and the reciprocal necessity for their protection, continued segregation, and management.

Despite abundant evidence that violent youth crime drastically declined throughout the nineties, the continued raced and aged mediatization of youth violence

²²⁹ Kimmel and Mahler 1443.

²³⁰ Henry Giroux, *Stealing Innocence: Corporate Culture’s War on Children* (New York: Palgrave, 2000) 9.

²³¹ Giroux, *Stealing* 9

²³² Benjamin Frymer, “The Media Spectacle of Columbine: Alienated Youth as an Object of Fear,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 52.10 (2009): 1387.

²³³ David Cullen, *Columbine* (New York: Twelve, 2009).

helped usher in a host of “zero tolerance policies,” aimed at reducing violent crime and heightening the protection and maintenance of young individuals. These policy changes were both a result of, and contribution to, the rise of the prison industrial complex. As Nancy Heitzeg notes, “During the past 40 years, there has been a dramatic escalation [in] the U.S. prison population, a tenfold increase since 1970” which, according to her, can be traced to the War on Drugs and “the rise of lengthy mandatory minimum prison sentences for drug crimes and other felonies.”²³⁴ According to Heitzeg, the media portrayal of youth as violent and criminal set the stage for the justification of legislation that

Criminalized a host of ‘gang-related activities,’ made it easier (and in some cases) mandatory) to try juveniles as adults, lowered the age at which juveniles could be referred to adult court, and widened the net of juvenile justice with blended sentencing options that included sentences in both the juvenile and adult systems.²³⁵

Heitzeg argues that this rise in incarceration was not a, result of a rise in crime, but rather due to both policy changes and the rise of the profit motive of the prison industrial complex, which relies on a constant supply of “raw materials”²³⁶ to guarantee the long-term growth of the prison industry. Events transpiring at the end of the 1990s helped to continue to expand the need for greater resources allocated for the safekeeping and management of American youth.

Simultaneous to this change in the coverage of youth violence in the media, violence prevention legislation and prevention programming changed from zero-tolerance policies in the 1990s to an emphasis on anti-bullying programs in the 2000s. By May 2003, “thirty-three U.S. states had passed anti-bullying laws, most of which required school districts to adopt anti-bullying policies.”²³⁷ These anti-bullying policies should be seen as part of the broader cultural and educational policy climate in which

²³⁴ Nancy A. Heitzig, “Education or Incarceration: Zero Tolerance Policies and the School to Prison Pipeline,” *Forum on Public Policy* 2 (2009).

<http://forumonpublicpolicy.com/summer09/archivesummer09/heitzeg.pdf>. 5.

²³⁵ Heitzig 5.

²³⁶ Steven R. Donziger, *The Real War on Crime: Report of The National criminal Justice Commission* (New York: Perennial, 1996) 87, in Heitzig 2009.

²³⁷ Chesney-Lind and Irwin 49.

“current educational practices have increasingly blurred the distinction between school and jail,” and under which students’ risk of being suspended, expelled or arrested for petty infractions have increased.²³⁸ Nancy Heitzeg explains that this has created a “school-to-prison pipeline” for students in which a growing number of students are directly and/or indirectly tracked out of school and into disciplinary institutions.

Several sociologists argue that bullying, as a phenomenon, is not intrinsic to adolescence, and is instead a phenomenon that exists within the population as a whole. Jessie Klein, author of *The Bully Society*,²³⁹ points out that the contemporary bullying epidemic is really an epidemic of the culture as a whole, not just adolescents. Mike Males echoes this sentiment by pointing out the fact that while the media is fixated on the supposed epidemics of bullying and cyberbullying, teenage violence has actually decreased. As Karen Sternheimer makes clear, bullying has existed for generations; however, the heightened media awareness of bullying, in addition to relatively recent economic restructuring that rendered young people unnecessary in the workforce (a topic covered further in chapter five), created compulsory institutional settings in which young individuals were sequestered from the rest of the population and surrounded primarily by individuals of the same biological age.

Sternheimer explains that this economic shift is the primary cause for creating this hidden world of adolescence that is so often named as the object of fear and opportunity in stories about bullying.²⁴⁰ A world hidden away from the protective eyes of adult authority features prominently in film and television texts produced in the first decade of the new millennium. This shift in attention to the suburban adolescent male in the first decade of the new millennium occurred in youth representation in film and television as well. Films like *Swimfan* (Polson, 2002), *Elephant* (Van Sant, 2003), *Disturbia* (Caruso, 2007), and *Eagle Eye* (Caruso, 2008), explore worlds in which young

²³⁸ Heitzeg 1.

²³⁹ Jessie Klein, *The Bully Society: School Shootings and the Crisis of Bullying in America’s Schools* (New York: New York University Press, 2012). Sociologists such as Karen Sternheimer, *Kids These Days: Facts and Fictions About Today’s Youth* (Landham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006); Murry Milner, Jr. *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids: American Teenagers, Schools, and the Culture of Consumption* (New York: Routledge, 2004)], and Mike Males echo this viewpoint.

²⁴⁰ Sternheimer 82-83.

men play both victim and perpetrator, locked away in hidden worlds where adults neither trust nor listen to them. However, the majority of film and television addressing this shift in the perception of contemporary adolescents can be seen in films that depict an attenuated male adolescence that does not include violence (which will be discussed in the next chapter), and to another spate of films which focus on a newfound fascination with girls' aggression.

The Hidden Pathology of Feminine Adolescence

Fascination with the so-called "secret" lives of teenagers is certainly not new; this has been the primary lens through which girls have traditionally been viewed. Simon Frith's *Sound Effects*²⁴¹ was "one of the first contemporary studies of teenage girls' cultural practices," and as such, Mary Celeste Kearney reminds us, "helped solidify the popular and intellectual understanding of female youth leisure activities as operating in a privatized, domestic 'bedroom culture.'"²⁴² Culturally and historically, girls have traditionally been positioned as in need of protection; a characterization that intensified as both the figure of the adolescent and the life stage of adolescence became increasingly staged and regulated in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the majority of the media fascination with youth, as explained above, primarily concentrated on boys. Yet, the popular press also took note of an increase in violence perpetrated by girls: from 1991 to 2000, girls' arrests increased 25.3 percent while boys' arrests actually decreased.²⁴³ The record of girls' acts of violence increased across the board, with upsurges in referrals to juvenile courts, the number of delinquency

²⁴¹ Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure and the Politics of Rock* (London: Constable, 1983).

²⁴² Mary Celeste Kearney, "Producing Girls: Rethinking the Study of Female Youth Culture," *Delinquents & Debutantes: Twentieth-Century American Girls' Cultures* ed. Sherrie A. Inness (New York: New York University Press, 1998) 285. Kearney notes that though scholars such as Angela McRobbie's and Jenny Garber did similar (and more significant) work, McRobbie's scholarship was less widely published and accessed in the 1980s: Kearney 306.

²⁴³ Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Crime in the United States 2000* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2001). In Meda Chesney-Lind and Katherine Irwin, "From Badness to Meanness: Popular Constructions of Contemporary Girlhood," *All About the Girl: Culture, Power and Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 46-7.

cases, and arrests of girls for serious violent offences, including a 77.9 percent increase in the arrests of girls for “other assaults.”²⁴⁴ The fact that girls’ arrest rates were increasing faster than that of boys’ instigated new media debates about the nature of girls and aggression, shifting the discourse from one of vulnerability to one of instigation: as Maria Gonick claims, contemporarily, “the vulnerable girl has...been replaced by the ‘mean girl’ in public consciousness.”²⁴⁵

As Anita Harris explains, in an era of intense/dramatic social, cultural, and political transformation, the figure of the girl has been signaled as the ideal subject best suited to handle these rapid changes. In Harris’ words:

The appropriate ways to embrace and manage the political, economic, and social conditions of contemporary societies are demonstrated in the example of young women, through the ideal of the ‘future girl.’²⁴⁶

Implicit in this construction of the “future girl” is the hope for her success; as in her accomplishment lies the realization of the nation’s continued success. However, similarly inherent in this construction lies an anxiety about obstacles or barriers impeding the feasibility of this success. Thus, the contemporary construction of young girls as “exemplars of new possibility”²⁴⁷ stands at the crossroads of moral panics about technology and the future under rapidly changing social and economic circumstances.

Simultaneous to this media trend, a spate of films emerged presenting young female individuals as perpetrators of social aggression. Films like, *American Beauty* (Mendes, 2000), *10 Things I Hate About You* (Junger, 1999), *Cruel Intentions* (Kumble, 1999), *Jawbreaker* (Stein, 1999), *Never Been Kissed* (Gosnell, 1999), *She’s All That* (Iscoe, 1999), *Bring It On* (Reed, 2000), [*Bring It On Again* (USA, 2004), *Bring It On: All or Nothing* (Rash, Direct to DVD, 2006), *Bring It On: In It to Win It* (Rash, Direct to DVD, 2007; ABC Family, 2008)], *Sugar & Spice* (McDougal, 2001), *Get Over It*

²⁴⁴ Chesney-Lind and Irwin 47.

²⁴⁵ Marnina Gonick, “The ‘Mean Girl’ Crisis: Problematizing Representations of Girls’ Friendships,” *Feminism & Psychology* 14.3 (2004): 395. In Jessica Ringrose, “A New Universal Mean Girl: Examining the Discursive Construction and Social Regulation of a New Feminine Pathology,” *Feminism & Psychology* 16.4 (2006): 406.

²⁴⁶ Anita Harris, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 2.

²⁴⁷ Harris 1.

(O'Haver, 2001), *John Tucker Must Die* (Thomas, 2006) and, perhaps, most explicitly in *Thirteen* (Hardwicke, 2003) and *Mean Girls* (Waters, 2004) negotiate with this new characterization of the white, middle-class "mean girl," in which girls, "in their efforts to be popular and powerful...inflict lifelong damages on their victims."²⁴⁸ In a highly managed and surveilled society, these texts represent, enact, and mobilize the concern about what girls do when they are not being monitored, an anxiety that has escalated in a digital era in which the participation and utilization of new electronic and digital media place girls further from adult and parental authority.

According to Jessica Ringrose, "the figure of the mean girl is firmly rooted in feminist cultural theories of feminine difference, through which a developmental psychology debate over girls' 'indirect' and 'relational' aggression has been staged."²⁴⁹ Simultaneous to the concern over male students' bullying and violence in the late 1990s and early 2000s, research on youth aggression turned its interrogative eye on girls, unearthing a so-called new discovery: that girls were using their intimate relationships to "hurt and psychologically injure those they are close to,"²⁵⁰ by damaging "girls' social status and relationships."²⁵¹ Calling it, "relational aggression," developmental child psychologists Nicki Crick and Jennifer Grotpeter explain that what researchers discovered is that this enmity is "the deliberate manipulation on the part of a child 'done with the intention of damaging another child's friendship or feelings of inclusion within a social group; and to 'thwart or damage goals that are valued by their respective gender peer groups.'"²⁵² Under this pronouncement, social antagonism is positioned in contrast to overtly aggressive children whose combative behavior is directed toward those external to the friendship rather than directed internally at a member of the group. Jessica Ringrose astutely points out that this diagnosis, "takes on the guise of a pathological feminine behavior," constituting, "a near total objectification of the girl for whom

²⁴⁸ Chesney-Lind and Irwin 49.

²⁴⁹ Ringrose 406.

²⁵⁰ Ringrose 410.

²⁵¹ Chesney-Lind and Irwin 45.

²⁵² Nicki R. Crick and Jennifer K. Grotpeter, "Relational Aggression, Gender and Social-psychological Adjustment," *Child Development* 66.3 (1995): 710. In Ringrose 410.

gender-differentiated behavior is invented through scales that pathologize subjects via their approximation to relational aggression.”²⁵³ Additionally, this pathologization positions girls and their supposed “indirect, repressed and aberrant” behavior in direct relation to so-called neutral, normative masculine aggression.²⁵⁴ In this way, the discourse of female aggression (a performative trait) remains within the biological, while operating as a discourse of the uncontainable, thus necessitating management and control.

This “discovery” was popularized in a series of highly celebrated books, such as *Reviving Ophelia*,²⁵⁵ *Queen Bees and Wannabes*,²⁵⁶ and *Odd Girl Out*,²⁵⁷ and then further popularized by the aforementioned film, *Mean Girls*, which itself was based on a *New York Times* article.²⁵⁸ Ringrose argues that the discourse of meanness, as developed by psychologists, “hinge on the premise that girls’ aggression is ominous, because it is secret and hidden,”²⁵⁹ the danger of which is that in its very repression, it is hidden from parents and teachers. Moreover, the concealed nature of relational aggression is invoked as the reason why girls’ aggression can lead to dangerous and violent consequences such as murder and suicide. In this way, the construction of relational aggression, “constitutes a new way to pathologize successful, middle-class, white girls and to regulate girlhood, but with different effects for different girls.”²⁶⁰ The class- and race-specific categories of femininity the concept of “relational aggression” extend have had dramatic consequences for girls, and particularly for girls of color, for whom families and communities may not necessarily have the resources with which to challenge this pathologization.

The mediated distortion of teen behavior has dire consequences; according to Mike Males, contemporarily, “just about anything young people from the ages 10 to 19

²⁵³ Ringrose 411.

²⁵⁴ Ringrose 411.

²⁵⁵ Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: Balentine, 1995).

²⁵⁶ Rosalind Wiseman, *Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends and Other Realities of Adolescence* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2002).

²⁵⁷ Rachel Simmons, *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls* (New York: Harcourt, 2002).

²⁵⁸ Margaret Talbot, “Girls Just Wanna Be Mean,” *New York Times Magazine* 24 Feb 2002, Web, 15 Jan 2011.

²⁵⁹ Ringrose 408.

²⁶⁰ Ringrose 408.

do—even feeling too good—can be recast as a “teenage crisis.”²⁶¹ For some school districts and advocacy groups, “bullying” is defined to include not just chronic physical or psychological torment, but any unwanted remark, glance or even a rolled eye. “Cyberbullying” can mean any online conflict that makes a person feel uncomfortable.”²⁶² The end result of this media distortion is that it obscures the actualities of the challenges that American teens face.

For teens, this type of moral panic attitude is well worn and the narrative about the need for further monitoring is also considerably acknowledged, even if these particular articulations of moral panic are unique to this cultural and historical time period. And yet, as the insistent litany surrounding the aggression “inherent” in the adolescent reiterates the need for continued legitimization of the biologized, scientized and neurologized regulation of the adolescent, the costs of this authorization is far reaching. The following chapter will argue that, concurrent to the articulation of the adolescent as one particular discursive construction of the self, the interior self (the signification of subjectification) has also been subject to the production of discursive formations through relational knowledge about interiority. And yet, as this next section argues, there seems to be a space in which the behavior of certain individuals is representationally codified in a manner that walks a line between the biological and the social. The previous two sections of this chapter have investigated the aggressive articulations of the adolescent subject that reached peak visibility in the 1990s. As evidenced above, these representations serve as legitimizing practices in the medicalized and neurologized regulation of specific raced and classed bodies. Biological codifications of a discourse are compelling and effective for the express reason that any argument for social or political factors that may contribute to any such pathologized behavior can be discarded on the basis of its biological origins. This next chapter section will explore the ways in which behavior that cannot be medicalized or neurologized—“behavior” that is the result of political processes like reduced support in the form of

²⁶¹ Mike Males, “Behaving Like Children,” *New York Times* 28 Jan 2011, Web, 14 May 2012.

²⁶² Males 2011.

social welfare and a capitalistic system that only benefits those at the top of the food chain—becomes pathologized, based on performative qualities easily ascribable to anyone of any age yet characterized as generational peculiarities. While I argue elsewhere in this project that youth of the 1990s were often categorized based on generational sensibilities, as the next section will illuminate, the dominant discursive forces of the first decade of the new millennium have worked to position individuals through negative character and attitudinal traits, thus illuminating the most recent articulation of the adolescent subject and the continued legitimization of restrictions to opportunity and access.

Maturity Trouble

In the beginning of the new millennium, American media culture, as I've argued in the introduction of this project, experienced a kind of cultural confusion about adolescence, adulthood and the transition from one to the other. While the media hinted at this issue in the 1990s with its fixation on slackers, a recent flurry of both popular press and academic scholarship emerged throughout the aughts, speaking to a fomenting crisis about a global generation's troubles with the maturation process. Adam Sternbergh's aforementioned *New York Magazine* feature, "Up With Grups," discusses what Sternbergh recognized as a new phenomenon in which a group of thirty and forty-year old adults whom he called "Grups" (a conflation of the words grown-ups) were still maintaining the same lifestyle choices, attitudes, aspirations, and apparel as their twenty-year-old counterparts.²⁶³ Lev Grossman's *Time* article, "Twixter Generation: Young Adults Who Won't Grow Up," covers the trend of 20-somethings, referring to them as "twixters" since they are "betwixt and between" adolescence and adulthood.²⁶⁴ Most recently, a *New York Times* article by Robin Marantz Henig entitled, "What is it About

²⁶³ Adam Sternbergh, "Up With Grups: The Ascendant Breed of Grown-Ups Who Are Redefining Adulthood," *New York* 26 Mar 2006, Web, 11 Aug 2006.

²⁶⁴ Lev Grossman, "Twixter Generation: Young Adults Who Won't Grow Up," *Time* 16 Jan. 2005, Web, 11 Apr 2011.

20-Somethings?” covers roughly the same subject matter, evidencing a mounting concern about the apparent changing nature of adolescence, adulthood and the coming-of-age process.²⁶⁵

Several books published in the first decade of the twenty-first century speak to different aspects, effects, and causes of this same so-called disruption of the life course. Some books make the claim that this phenomenon is a celebratory rejection of previous stringent ideas of adulthood taken up through the markers and symbols of childhood.²⁶⁶ Authors such as Tamara Draut²⁶⁷ and Anya Kamenetz²⁶⁸ published books addressing the economics of why young people seem to be stuck on their way to financial autonomy. Others make the claim that it is not only American twentysomethings that are demonstrating trouble reaching adulthood, but that this is a phenomenon emerging in many First World nations as a result of globalized market logics²⁶⁹ and that these same globalized market logics have worked to create an “infantilist ethos,” infantilizing American culture as well as its people.²⁷⁰ While still others argue that, rather than any full-blown cultural or market-based phenomenon, it is the character and attitudes of the individuals that make up the generation currently navigating the transition from adolescence to adulthood that are causing them to fall short during the transition to adulthood. Some claim that this generation has been coddled, leading them to suffer from over-ambition,²⁷¹ while others argue that this same coddling has led to a generational sense of entitlement and a false sense of confidence.²⁷² Still other books

²⁶⁵ Robin Marantz Henig, “What is it About 20-Somethings?” *New York Times Magazine* 18 Aug 2010, Web, 10 Apr 2011.

²⁶⁶ Christopher Noxon, *Rejuvenile: Kickball, Cartoons, Cupcakes, and the Reinvention of the American Grown-up* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006).

²⁶⁷ Tamara Draut, *Strapped: Why America's 20- and 30-somethings can't get Ahead* (New York: Double Day, 2006).

²⁶⁸ Anya Kamenetz, *Generation Debt: Why Now is A Terrible Time to be Young* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2006).

²⁶⁹ Richard A. Settersten and Barbara E. Ray, *Not Quite Adults: Why 20-somethings are Choosing a Slower Path to Adulthood and why it's Good for Everyone* (New York: Bantam Books Trade Paperback, 2010).

²⁷⁰ Benjamin R. Barber, *Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007).

²⁷¹ Barbara Schneider and David Stevenson, *The Ambitious Generation: America's Teenagers, Motivated but Directionless* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

²⁷² Jean M. Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

emerged arguing that, rather than market logics, it is demographic changes are driving this trend,²⁷³ and that this demographic shift has, in turn, changed family dynamics.²⁷⁴ While it may not be clear precisely what this phenomenon is, or the exact ways in which it works, there has been a clear rupture, over the last decade or so, in the way American (as well as global) cultures understand youth and the period of the life span that individuals of a certain age inhabit.

Both Hollywood and the American televisual landscape during this time offered similarly conflicted interpretations of what was happening to persons of a certain age. As America has increasingly grown “widely unequal and less responsive to the needs of ordinary citizens” offering less help by the way of public policy, leaving the nation’s younger individuals to fend for themselves while expecting them to shoulder more financial burden and risk than previous generations.²⁷⁵ Monetary and public support for high schools fell dramatically during the 1980s and 1990s, concurrent with a group of films that emerged concerning those youth marginalized by the lack of governmental and societal support: *Stand and Deliver* (Menéndez, 1988), *Lean on Me* (Avildsen, 1989), *Dangerous Minds* (Smith, 1995), and *Freedom Writers* (La Gravenese, 2007). In these films, (typically urban) high school students labeled as “troubled” or “deviant” have nearly been forgotten by the rest of society until one “extraordinary” adult educator comes to their rescue. Often didactic in nature, and usually nostalgic in tone, these films presumably strive to incite more civil action from their audiences, as well as condemn the public school system for its lack of accountability. Yet, the persistence of films of this nature speaks to the continuation of the marginalization of high school students. The films *Take the Lead* (Friedlander, 2006), and *Step Up* (Fletcher, 2006) *Step Up 2: The Streets* (Chu, 2008), change this formula in rather telling ways, speaking to the continued disregard for the welfare of American youth. In *Take the Lead* “troubled” students have been sequestered from the rest of their high school, giving the impression that even the

²⁷³ Paul Wallace, *Agequake: Riding the Demographic Rollercoaster Shaking Business, Finance and our World* (London: Nicholas Brealey, 2001).

²⁷⁴ Katherine S. Newman, *The Accordion Family: Boomerang Kids, Anxious Parents, and the Private Toll of Global Competition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012).

²⁷⁵ Draut 6.

schoolteachers and administrators have given up on them. Thus, it is up to a concerned citizen to rehabilitate these forgotten children's lives. More telling still, the concerned citizen, Pierre Dulaine (Antonio Banderas) restores these students sense of self-worth, and thus their place in society, by teaching them ballroom dancing. Using a similar dance-as-rehabilitation theme, *Step Up* (as well as the first of its three sequels, *Step Up 2: The Streets*), portrays a world where adult assistance is almost non-existent as the salvation of a forgotten urban youth is left to yet another young individual. In this bleak view of adult participation and investment in the lives of forgotten youth, it seems that Henry Giroux's prediction that "the next generation will have to take care of itself since adults have too much to worry about already,"²⁷⁶ has already come to fruition, at least in cinematic representation.

Thus, as less and less governmental and societal aid was available to youth, the experience of adolescence became further marginalized. Young people have been exploited by the American service economy for years, working the most undesirable jobs for the lowest amount of money. Accordingly, while many more young people enrolled in college in the first decade of the new millennium, those youth who could not afford to attend college were peddled into an "army of cheap labor," a continuing exploitation with no near end.²⁷⁷ In an advanced industrial era, there are few jobs left outside of the service industry; yet, as immigrants become increasingly crucial to the health of the service class and the structure of the service economy,²⁷⁸ jobs once heavily relied on by young adults with no access to education, have become increasingly difficult to acquire. As a result, more and more of the nation's youth were forced to fight for jobs to which they had little or no access, reinforcing the primacy of a college education.

A report conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics in 2010 disclosed an increase in college-level enrollment, from 7.1 million undergraduate

²⁷⁶ Henry A. Giroux, *The Abandoned Generation; Democracy Beyond the Culture of Fear* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003) xv.

²⁷⁷ James A Côté and Anton L. Allahar, *Generation on Hold: Coming of Age in the Late Twentieth Century* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1994) 66.

²⁷⁸ For a detailed investigation of the increase in urban immigrant populations and their role in the new service economy, see Jennifer Parker Talwar, *Fast Food, Fast Track: Immigrants, Big Business, and the American Dream* (Cambridge, MA: Westview Press, 2004).

students in 1970 to 13.2 million in 2000, and 16.4 million in 2008,²⁷⁹ claiming that this steady rise was a result of an increased tendency for high school graduates to enroll in college immediately following graduation.²⁸⁰ Draut explains that young adults “have been given the signal loud and clear that getting a degree is now the only way into the middle class.” Yet, due to the increase in volume of applications and the cultural capital of an elite degree, entrance into top universities in the first decade of the millennium became even more select.²⁸¹ High school students with exceptional credentials were often rejected from top institutions like Harvard, an institution that notoriously rejects 50 percent of its applicants who have earned perfect SAT scores.²⁸² Second-tier (or “new Ivy-league”) schools became similarly selective do to the spillover from rejections at the top institutions: in 2007, nine out of ten applicants to the most prestigious institutions were rejected.²⁸³ Early millennial films, *Orange County* (Kasdan, 2002), *The Perfect Score* (Robbins, 2003), and *Accepted* (Pink, 2006) feature high school students so desperate to get into college that they are willing to lie, cheat, and break into public property to do so. As the value of educational certification has becomes crucial, the pressure to attain this accreditation became intensified and reinforced, clearly at the expense of the some of the nation’s young, a subject this project covers in depth in chapter four.

When individuals emerged from their now almost compulsory education,²⁸⁴ there was little waiting for them in terms of well-paying jobs. “Entry level” jobs in the information and service industry require, at the very least, a bachelor’s degree and are often filled by employees overqualified for their positions, leaving many recent

²⁷⁹ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics *The Condition of Education 2010* (NCES 2010-028) Indicator 7.

²⁸⁰ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics *The Condition of Education 2006* (NCES 2006-071) Indicator 31.

²⁸¹ In the past few years this trend has affected women more than men due to the fact that women outnumber men in university enrollment. See Don Peck, “The Selectivity Illusion,” *The Atlantic Monthly* Nov 2003: 128-130.

²⁸² James Fallows, “The New College Chaos,” *The Atlantic Monthly* Nov 2003: 116-118.

²⁸³ Alan Finder, “Ivy League Crunch Brings New Cachet to Next Tier,” *The New York Times* 16 May 2007, Web, 16 May 2007.

²⁸⁴ This topic is more thoroughly covered in chapter four.

graduates with large debts and no way to repay them.²⁸⁵ The American job market, and subsequently the economic status of its citizens, is akin to an hourglass: job growth has occurred primarily where there are the highest and lowest paying jobs (the top and bottom of the hourglass), while jobs in the middle rapidly disappeared. Rising immigration, increased security, declining educational quality, persistent housing crises, the globalization of the job market, and rapid changes in technology have all been major forces in the loss of economic viability for Americans coming of age in the late 1990s and 2000s. Economic changes increased the difficulty for many members of society to become financially independent. Individuals aged 25 to 34 made dramatically less money in aughts (proportional to standard of living) than those in their age group were making in the 1970s: in 1972, males in this age range possessing a high school diploma typically earned \$50,672 (in 2008 dollars),²⁸⁶ while a male high school graduate in 2008 earned a discouraging \$32,400.²⁸⁷ Access to increasingly scarce “entry level” jobs, alongside a decrease in jobs providing a viable middle-class salary has increased the value on educational credentials; yet, college graduates did not fare any better: from a typical wage of \$61,913 in 1972 to \$53,600 for males and \$42,200.²⁸⁸ Most strikingly, while the decade from 2000-2010 is now referred to as “the Lost Decade” due to the fact that total wage and salary payroll employment (both in the public and private sector) did not experience any net growth over the entirety of the decade, young adults aged 16-29 were worse off, across all gender and race categories, than any other age group.²⁸⁹ An historically unprecedented “age twist” occurred during these years at which time the employment rates for 16-29 year olds were substantially lower in 2010 than they were in 2000 (20-26 percent for 19 to 21 year-olds; 44-60 percent for 16-19 year-olds), while the

²⁸⁵ The average cost of a college education in 2007-8 put the typical student around \$23,200 in debt. Anya Kamenetz, *DIY U: Edupunks, Edupreneurs, and the Coming Transformation of Higher Education* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2010) 20.

²⁸⁶ 1972 statistics taken from Draut 11, adjusted for 2008.

²⁸⁷ Median annual earnings of full-time, full-year wage and salary worker ages 25-34. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *The Condition of Education 2012* (NCES 2010-045), Table A-49-1.

²⁸⁸ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *The Condition of Education 2012* (NCES 2010-045), Table A-49-1.

²⁸⁹ Children’s Defense Fund, “The Deterioration in the Labor Market Fortunes of America’s Young Adults During the Lost Decade of 2000-2010,” Sep 2011.

employment rates for every group of persons 55 and older were higher in 2010 than they were in 2000, with substantial increases for those aged 62-70.²⁹⁰

Clearly, salaries in the first decade of the new millennium did not rise to meet the increased cost of living, and as such, home-ownership ceased to be an option for many young adults due to housing prices rising faster than inflation. In New York, renting became the norm for many people who once would have been thought too old for roommates. A January 2007 article in the *New York Press* entitled: “How New York City is Forcing a Generation of Adults to Share the Rent in the Name of Survival,” explains that low vacancies drastically changed the housing market in the summer of 2006. If a typical studio apartment in Manhattan (somewhere around 500 square feet) cost from \$2,200 to \$3,500 a month, and a tenant’s annual salary had to be forty to fifty times his or her monthly rent, that tenant must have earned between \$90,000 and \$175,000 a year in order to qualify for this housing. Unfortunately, in 2006-7, the average salary in the New York metropolitan area was closer to \$43,277, not enough to qualify to live in a studio apartment alone. Thus, many Manhattanites well into their late 30s and 40s chose to cohabitate with roommates, a situation once deemed only acceptable for those in their early 20s.²⁹¹

Televised portrayals of roommates during the recessions years of the 1970s, found in such shows as *The Odd Couple* (ABC 1970-75), *Laverne and Shirley* (ABC 1976-83), and *Bosom Buddies* (ABC 1980-82), disclose shifts forced by economic hardships while coming to terms with greater social changes involving divorce, autonomy, and class status. When, during the 1990s, there was a return to televised depictions of roommates, the images revealed the presence of a different social phenomenon. *Friends* (NBC 1994-2004), *Melrose Place* (Fox 1992-99), and the later seasons of *Beverly Hills 90210* (Fox 1990-2000), all featured individuals living together to offset the isolation and cost of living during the transition from college to adult life. The first decade of the 2000s continued this trend of adults living together in shows such

²⁹⁰ “The Deterioration” 2011.

²⁹¹ Kari Milchman, “The 40-Year-Old Roommate: How New York City is Forcing a Generation of Adults to Share the Rent in the Name of Survival,” *New York Press* 10-16 Jan 2007: 14.

as *Felicity* (WB 1998-2002), *Girlfriends* (UPN 2000-06, CW 2006-08), *Scrubs* (NBC 2001-09, ABC 2009-10), *Entourage* (HBO 2004-11), *Four Kings* (NBC 2006), *Modern Men* (WB 2006), *Chuck* (NBC 2007-12), *Welcome to the Captain* (CBS 2008) but also witnessed a new variance of this trend in such shows as *Get a Life* (Fox 1990-92), *That Was Then* (ABC 2002), and *The Winner* (Fox 2007), shows that featured adult men living at home, the premise of which relies on the fascination this aberrance provides.

Troubled Departures: Residential Autonomy and the Dilemma of Maturity

Variously called, “Boomerang Kids,” “Boomerang Generation,” “YUCKIES” (Young Unwitting Costly Kids),²⁹² “KIPPERS” (Kids In Parents’ Pockets, Eroding Retirement Savings),²⁹³ or “KIDDERS” (Kids In Debt, Diligently Eroding Retirement Savings),²⁹⁴ those individuals who returned to their parental home became part of the continuing story of how adolescence became contemporarily articulated and modulated through this particular crisis. Complicating contemporarily notions of what it means to be an adult and the proper ways in which to reach maturity, numerous books with titles like, *Boomerang Kids: A Revealing Look at Why So Many of Our Children Are Failing on Their Own and How Parents Can Help*; *When Our Grown Kids Disappoint Us: Letting Go of Their Problems, Loving Them Anyway, and Getting on with Our Lives*; *How to Really Love Your Adult Child: Building a Healthy Relationship in a Changing World*, (which includes chapters entitled: “When Your Adult Child is Not Succeeding,” and “When Your Nest isn’t Emptying”), subtly implied that parents (or, at the very least, parenting techniques) are either to blame for this societal disorder, or might be the only corrective. Numerous popular accounts even offered up such catchwords as, “Babyglomers,” describing those members of the Baby Boom generation who must now support these financially hindered younger individuals.

²⁹² Ben Schott, “Schott’s Vocab: YUCKIES,” *The New York Times* 1 Mar 2010, Web, 6 Dec 2012.

²⁹³ Ben Schott, “Schott’s Vocab: K.I.D.D.E.R.S” *The New York Times* 22 Jan 2009, Web, 6 Dec 2012.

²⁹⁴ Schott 2009.

According to the Pew Research Center, since the 1980s, there has been a revival of the return of the multi-generational household.²⁹⁵ Spurred on by changes to the median age of marriage and the resultant prolongation of single years prior to marriage, large waves of immigration from Latin American and Asian countries and worsening economic factors, the number of adults living in multi-generational family households increased from 12 percent of the total population in 1980 to a record 16 percent (49 million) living in a family household containing at least two adult generations by 2008.²⁹⁶ Though the trend affected adults of all ages, the most widely effected group was individuals aged 25-34: in 2008, 20 percent of adults of this age range (23 million)²⁹⁷ lived in multi-generational households, while just 11 percent of adults this age did in 1980.²⁹⁸ The faltering economy, beginning in 2007, significantly affected this trend, increasing the amount of those 25-34 returning to the natal home by a full percentage point, or 2.6 million individuals. This trend was true across all ethnicities, including native-born and immigrant populations,²⁹⁹ with Hispanics (22 percent), blacks (23 percent), and Asians (25 percent) all significantly more likely to live in a multi-generational home than whites (13 percent). Additionally, men of the 25-34-age range (22 percent), were more likely to have returned to, or remained in, the parental home than women (18 percent).³⁰⁰

²⁹⁵ The Pew Research Center defines a “multi-generational household” as that which includes, under the same roof, “two generations: parents (or in-laws) and adult children age 25 or over; three generations: parents (or in-laws), adult children (and spouse or children-in-law), grandchildren; “skipped” generation: grandparents and grandchildren, without parents (including step-generation); more than three generations. The Pew Research Center, “The Return of the Multi-Generational Family Household,” *Pew Social and Demographic Trends*, Web, 21 Nov 2012.

²⁹⁶ “The Return of the Multi-Generational Family Household” 4.

²⁹⁷ The Pew report states that, “Of the 49 million Americans living in a multi-generational family household, 47% live in a household made up of two adult generations of the same family (with the youngest adult at least 25 years of age).” “The Return of the Multi-Generational Family Household” 8.

²⁹⁸ “The Return of the Multi-Generational Family Household” 7.

²⁹⁹ The Pew report includes data for Hispanics, blacks and Asians, noting that 18.8% of people living in immigrant households in the U.S. live in multi-generational households, compared with 14.2% of native-born households; however, the native-born populations of Hispanics and Asians reported having a tendency to be multi-generational than the foreign-born populations. “The Return of the Multi-Generational Family Household” 5.

³⁰⁰ “The Return of the Multi-Generational Family Household” 6.

The 2006 film, *Failure to Launch* (Dey), is, professedly, about this phenomenon: the film was ostensibly produced as a reaction to this trend,³⁰¹ yet clearly also speaks to the ways this phenomenon is more of a complication for parents or Boomer adults. Tripp (Matthew McConaughey) is a thirty-five year-old man who still lives at home and whose parents hire a life-coach for reluctant nest-leavers (Paula, played by Sarah Jessica Parker) in order to get him out of the house once and for all. The film opens on Tripp and a woman companion on what is clearly a date. After the woman makes an overt gesture at long-term commitment, Tripp takes the woman back to his house, only to be interrupted by his father: a discovery that provokes the intended response from the date as she subsequently races out of the house. This series of events is apparently so regular that even the parents are in on the routine. This sequence is followed by another that is meant to code Tripp as immature, coddled, entitled, and brazenly unapologetic or embarrassed about still living in the parental home: his mother cooks, cleans, shops and does his laundry.

Tripp's immaturity is reinforced by his friendship with his two best friends from childhood, Ace (Justin Bartha) and Demo (Bradley Cooper), whose juvenile-sounding nicknames are a further nod to an immature status. In an early scene in the film, the three men have brunch and discuss their living arrangements. Each man chides the other for still living at home: ace teases Tripp for being afraid of love, Demo mocks Ace for living in his mother's basement, and Ace, returning the banter, says, "at least I'm not sponging off my parents so I can afford to get laid on every continent." Demo quickly quips that he understands that "a child is a parent's greatest joy," claiming that he can't leave his parents' house because they would miss him too much. They collectively begin to denounce the way they are misunderstood: Demo complains, "In America, we're shunned for our lifestyle," to which Tripp adds, "When we should be celebrating our lifestyle... We're men who still live at home. We're not here to apologize for who we are, or how we do it, or who we live with. I'm looking around this table, hombres, and I see

³⁰¹ A DVD featurette, "The *Failure to Launch* Phenomenon," (including cast and crew interviews) about the phenomenon of "boomerang kids" evidences the fact that the production was aware of this trend.

three winners.” The film clearly construes boomerang kids, embodied by these three men, as intentionally adopting this “lifestyle” for personal gain. This conversation, along with the fact that Paula describes the “root cause” of young men not wanting to leave the home as “a lack of self esteem,” something she assists her clients with by helping them to build self-esteem through simulating a relationship—the place where self-esteem is developed best (and the place where all Romantic-Comedy drama is produced), situate the film squarely in line with the cultural response to this trend.

Katherine S. Newman contends that the cultural reaction to the phenomenon of individuals in their thirties still living at home is directly related to the *moral culture* of the United States.³⁰² According to Newman, Americans are “on the fence about the moral status” of those who choose to live at home and those who let them continue to live there. She maintains that,

In general, our evaluations hinge on the reasons why our young people are still in the family nest and the degree of effort our children are making to move ahead in the world. If there is a positive purpose that justifies delayed adulthood, then we are all for it. Absent that purpose, however, the underlying cultural affection for the work ethic kicks in and creates a gnawing anxiety that our children are taking advantage of parental largesse.³⁰³

Newman further explains that the pressures that force younger individuals to prolong adolescence similarly elongate the period of active adulthood: in 1997, only 4.7 percent of Americans over seventy-five were still working, while ten years later in 2007, 6.4 percent (or, over one million more septuagenarians) staying in the labor market.³⁰⁴ And while living at home (or the possibility of moving home) may be available to middle-class Americans, for the working-class, “survival requires holding onto every wage earner and, where possible, lowering costs by avoiding multiple rents or mortgages.”³⁰⁵

The conventional definition of adulthood has traditionally comprised a notion of maturity and autonomy that has been “problematically measured” through the dominant

³⁰² Newman uses the term “moral” in the sense that Emile Durkheim conceived it, as a connection between the beliefs of individuals, and their decisions to act based on these beliefs, “express fundamental aspects of the surrounding society.” Newman, *Accordion* 83.

³⁰³ Newman, *Accordion* 114-5.

³⁰⁴ Newman, *Accordion* 127.

³⁰⁵ Newman, *Accordion* 196-7.

(white, middle-class and heteronormative) narratives of career, house, marriage, and family.³⁰⁶ These narratives and their attendant end goals have become more tenuous and less suitable in light of recent economic, cultural and demographic shifts. Youth has traditionally been the focus of moral panics personifying “a given society’s deepest anxieties and hopes about its own transformations.”³⁰⁷ At the beginning of this new millennium, changes to the racial makeup of the middle-class illuminate the ways that the category of adolescence is being mobilized, changed and interpreted. Nan Mooney notes that,

Today’s educated professional middle class looks nothing like its counterpart fifty years ago. It’s Hispanic, African American, Asian, Caribbean, and Native American. As of 2005, the middle class was 72% white, 11.6% black, 3.3% Asian, and 11.3 % Hispanic, numbers that come close to reflecting the population as a whole.³⁰⁸

Additionally, the changes to class affect this conceptualization as well: as the middle-class has shifted, changing its make-up in terms of race and position, the necessity of fitting in to an “ideal” middle-class mold has changed. Furthermore, without a job, or with temporary, part-time or contract jobs, many individuals around the age of 25 have no access to health care. Home ownership is not just a question of status, either: “Home ownership helps to ensure access to good schools, public libraries, open spaces, and other amenities that are tied to the local tax base.”³⁰⁹ Katherine S. Newman maintains that, “globalization has insured that the economic conditions that underwrote the earlier, more traditional, road to adulthood no longer hold.”³¹⁰ International competition for goods and jobs has resulted in a contingent labor force, downsizing, offshoring and other restructuring responses to globalization, which, in turn, has resulted in global wage stagnation and insecurity. As Newman points out, “this is most evident in the lives of the

³⁰⁶ Rebecca Raby, “Theorising Liminal Selfhood and its Consequences for Childhood, Youth and Adulthood,” *Times of our Lives: Making Sense of Growing Up & Growing Old*, eds. Harry Blatterer and Julia Glahn (Freeland, UK: Inter-disciplinary Press, 2010) 70. Digital File.

³⁰⁷ Sunaina Maira and Elisabeth Soep, “Introduction,” *Youthscapes: The Popular, the National, the Global*, eds. Sunaina Maira and Elisabeth Soep (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005) xv.

³⁰⁸ Nan Mooney, *(Not) Keeping Up With our Parents: The Decline of the Professional Middle Class* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008) 36.

³⁰⁹ Katherine S. Newman and Victor Tan Chen, *The Missing Class: Portraits of the Near Poor in America* (Boston, Beacon Press, 2007) 26.

³¹⁰ Newman, *Accordion* xix.

least powerful: new entrants to the labor market, immigrants, and low-skilled workers.”³¹¹ And while this economic and demographic data seems clear, this information has been discursively positioned as a fundamental shift in the way that life stages are experienced rather than social, economic and demographic changes and hardships.

Toward the end of *Failure to Launch*, it becomes apparent that while Ace lives with his mother, he has actually achieved such financial success that he has purchased his mother’s home, thus unburdening her of the financial strain of maintaining a house while allowing him to simultaneously skirt the inheritance tax. Demo, it is explained, is a man of the world, whose home is not a physical location, but rather his heart, so he too, is justified in his stay-at-home status. It is only Tripp whose “lifestyle” of living at home and not ponying up to his residential autonomy is deemed “unnatural.” It is precisely in this manner that *Failure to Launch* understands, and makes judgments upon its main characters. The film goes so far as to claim that Tripp’s choice to remain in the parental home is so unnatural that it is rejected by nature. At several points in the film, Tripp, Ace and Demo are out participating in some kind of extreme outdoor activity, Tripp tries to get in touch with nature by literally interacting with it (feeding a chipmunk, petting a dolphin, rock climbing next to a vegetarian lizard) only to be bitten by each animal. Demo tells Tripp that this is occurring because his “life is fundamentally at odds with the natural world. Therefore, nature rejects you.” While it is clear that the film is making the statement that Tripp’s continued stay in the parental home is what is unnatural, this stigmatization of ineffectuality as in opposition to nature is crucial to the understanding of contemporary adolescence as a technology of governance. The persuasive linking of social practices to “natural” hierarchal orders effectively sequesters a large population of the American public from political or social support and reinforces their continued management.

³¹¹ Newman, *Accordion* xx.

Conclusion

The beginning of this chapter introduced the question asked by Thomas Hine: “What would it mean to remove biological determinism from our definition of adolescence?” In an attempt to address this inquiry, this chapter uncovered historical consistencies and inconsistencies embedded within the discursive formation of the adolescent, as well as unpacked the ways in which biological determinism remains a persistent part of more contemporary understandings of this particular articulation of the adolescent subject. Additionally, this chapter examined the problems that surfaced as American culture became further invested in deliberately reinforcing the connection between adolescence and biology—even for individuals outside the age-range to which adolescence has traditionally been associated. The changing socioeconomic experience of adolescence has had a wide-reaching influence on a myriad of life-staged phenomena resulting in the increased visibility and attention of some articulations of the adolescent, while reinforcing the race- and class-based illegibility of others.

While the decline of economic opportunities for young individuals over the first decade of the twenty-first decade was well documented, members of other generations also struggled with economic constraints. Even the Baby Boomers felt the hit from the lack of government help, evidence that traditional notions of adulthood became ever harder to reach, even for “adults.” Over 15 million adult children became the caretaker for their aging parents, typically paying for all or part of their parents’ housing, medical supplies and other expenses. Those adult children whose parents had too much money to qualify for government help in the form of Medicaid were forced to bear the brunt of their parents’ expenses out of their own pockets. At a time when old age had never lasted so long nor been so costly, the government was slow to respond to the needs of its citizens, preferring to encourage long-term insurance among other private sector solutions.³¹²

³¹² Jane Gross, “Elder-Care Costs Deplete Savings of a Generation,” *New York Times* 30 Dec 2006, Web, 1 Jan 2007.

Additionally, it is interesting to note that the life-stage of adolescence was created at time of rapid immigration to the United States. As Sternheimer notes, this large influx of people occurring at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, drove up the ranks of enrollment at urban schools, leading to “the creation of more age-based organization of schools.”³¹³ Moreover, at the turn of the century, young people in their teenaged years, about 18 percent of ten to fifteen year-olds (more than 26 percent of the boys and 10 percent of the girls), were working to provide for themselves and their families. When new forms of industrial technology displaced these young individuals, the adult population managed them either through school enrollment or through reformation programs designed to get working-class youth off the streets. It was at this time that the “so-called child savers” such as Charles Loring Brace, “became deeply concerned with the lives of the young men found in legitimate and semilegitimate street-based businesses, and...juvenile delinquency became a matter of public concern.”³¹⁴ While the rate of immigration was relatively low for the first half of the twentieth century, the second half of the century saw increasing numbers of new immigrants to the United States, culminating in large numbers of new émigrés to this country again at the turn of the twenty-first century. Again, the pattern seems to be the same as schools and juvenile detention centers are overrun with young individuals who have, for second time, been displaced from the productive sphere and have no where else to turn.

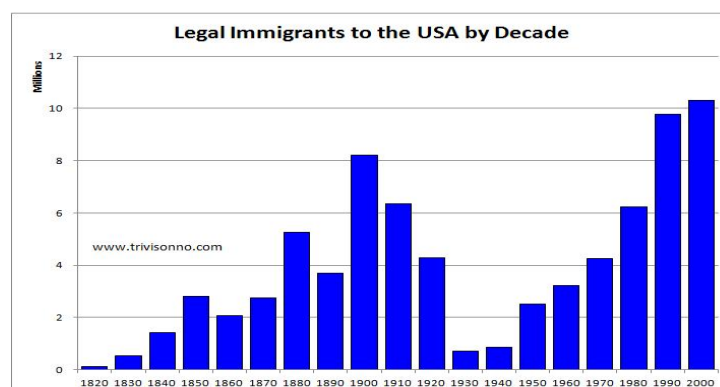


Figure 1: Immigration by Decade

³¹³ Sternheimer 82.

³¹⁴ Hine 130-131.

Despite the fact that the national crime rate fell over the first decade of the new millennium, and that the incarceration rate fell along with it, according to the Pew Center, by 2008, one in one hundred U.S. adults was behind bars.³¹⁵ When this statistic is broken down by both race and age, the numbers are quite dramatic: one in every fifty-six men, aged 18 or older; one in every one-hundred six white men over 18; one in every thirty-six Hispanic men over 18; one in every fifteen African American men over 18; and shockingly, one in every nine African American men aged 20-34.³¹⁶ It is not hard to see how Giroux comes to the conclusion that “young people have never been persecuted with such methodical zeal as they are” at the turn of the twentieth century, and more to the point, that certain youth are actively criminalized while others are merely chastised.

Adding the construction of the discourse of age to the ongoing cultural critique of the ways in which young people are identified by socially constructed categories of race and gender adds one more element to unpacking the social mechanisms at work in the propagation of inequality at the beginning of the new millennium. As Stevens reasons,

Age/stage labels are attempting to perform the same functions, in terms of chronologically and biologically hued stages of development, that the labels of African American, Hispanic American, Asian American and European American are invoked to perform for race and/or ethnicity for some people in the United States.³¹⁷

Only by beginning to appraise the ways in which discourses about youth work in these categorical ways can the notion of identity at any age be understood. Patel Stevens, et al. suggest a way in which this might be accomplished:

Whether understood as hormonal, unfinished, oppressed or unruly, young people are still understood through a singular lens, a view of identity that staunchly traces its roots back to a fixation upon static concepts of identity and self. The maintenance of this undergirding conceptual structure then delimits the ability for any of these paradigms to make significant departures from commonplaces understandings of young people. To shake these paradigms, a generative space must purposefully begin with the young person’s body, but in such a way as to target the reconstruction of embodied subjectivities within complex, shifting social contexts...By reclaiming and reckoning with the body as a necessarily

³¹⁵ Adam Liptak, “1 in 100 U.S. Adults Behind Bars, New Study Says,” *New York Times* 28 Feb 2008, Web, 15 Jan 2012.

³¹⁶ The Pew Center on the States, *One in One Hundred: Behind Bars in America 2008* (Washington, DC: The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2008), <http://www.pewstates.org/research/reports/one-in-100-85899374411>.

³¹⁷ Stevens, “ReNaming” 272.

complex conduit for lived experience, the concept of subjectivity allows us to talk generatively about young people as subjects.³¹⁸

It is with this in mind that this chapter has begun to explore the ways in which the figure of the adolescent was controlled by these still “static concepts of identity and self,” concepts that have been shored up by the scientization of the adolescent’s developmental and teleological trajectory and the contemporary neurologization of the adolescent brain. Such restrictions of young people not only effectively control young people’s relationships and opportunities, but also ultimately, their possible life pathways.³¹⁹

The next chapter is a study of adolescence and subjectivity, examining representations of adolescence constructed through the more subjective lens of identity—a “psychological” idea of adulthood and adolescence. It will endeavor to illustrate that, even as the culture shifts to a more subjective understanding of adulthood, subjectivity, and adolescence, young people and their mediatized representation are further controlled and restricted. As contemporary culture continually restricts actual possibility for young and marginalized individuals, discourses surrounding adolescence evince the necessity for other ways of envisioning the possible.

³¹⁸ Stevens et al., “ReConceptualizing” 120-121.

³¹⁹ Vadeboncoeur 2.

Chapter Three

Destiny as Destination: The Fantasy of Stability and the Mature Self

You do not choose your destiny, it chooses you. And those that knew you before Fate took you by the hand cannot understand the depth of the changes inside.

--Heroes "Nothing to Hide"³²⁰

"Identity is what makes one move with direction; identity is what gives one reason to be."
--Kroger 63.

Reaper (CW 2007-09), a short-lived but well-received comedy, ostensibly revolves around a twenty-something, going-nowhere, middle-class, white male who works a dead-end job at a big-box home improvement store, lives with his parents, and is in love with a girl who is unaware of his feelings. The pilot episode³²¹ outlines the narrative conceit for the series: the protagonist's parents sold his soul to the Devil before he was born, and now that Sam Oliver (Bret Harrison) has reached his twenty-first birthday, the Devil is back to collect his due. Even though the pact with the Devil was made by Sam's parents without Sam's knowledge or agreement, and was made with the best intentions (Sam's father was very ill and the Devil offered to cure him in trade for his first born son, a son the parents never intended to have), it is Sam who must now deal with the repercussions of their actions. This plot device works nicely, if heavy handedly, as a felicitous metaphor for the ways in which the youth of today must fend for themselves in a culture in which others have defined the parameters of their lived existence. Consequently, Sam is forced work for Satan (Ray Wise) in "the Earthly Realm" by acting as a bounty hunter, trapping "escaped souls" and bringing them back to Hell. Thus, even though Sam will be technically working for The Devil, he will be "doing humanity

³²⁰ "Nothing to Hide," *Heroes*, National Broadcasting Company, 6 Nov 2006.

³²¹ "Pilot," *Reaper*, The CW Network, 25 Sept 2007.

a favor by putting bad guys back where they belong.”³²²

Crucially, for the purposes of this chapter, *Reaper* figures Sam and his friends in terms that mark them as lazy, complacent, and slackers: terms that currently carry significant meaning in contemporary representational culture.³²³ Sam explains that he began working at The Work Bench when he was 16, only attended one semester of college (“it made him sleepy”), and went right back to work at his old job when he dropped out. Significantly, the series juxtaposes Sam and his self-examination with that of his best friend, Bert “Sock” Wysocki (Taylor Labine), who is happy to remain at The Work Bench and do as little as possible. *Reaper*’s use of specific representational tropes position Sam as an underachieving youth, surrounded by the trappings of an arrested development. The pilot begins with a brief survey of the protagonist’s bedroom, in which Sam wakes up in his childhood bed surrounded by the accouterments of a stunted adolescence: pictures of himself as a young boy, manga posters, old trophies and a ribbon reading “ninth place.” As Sam wakes up, he sets his feet on the carpet next to his bed, amidst dirty clothes, the clutter of old take-out containers, and a book entitled, “The Sick Day Handbook: Strategies and Techniques for Faking It.”



Fig 2: Sam's bedroom floor in *Reaper*, 2007.

These tropes, executed by director by Kevin Smith, who became famous through his constructions of earlier representations of “slackers” in films such as *Clerks* (1994), *Jay*

³²² “Pilot,” *Reaper*, The CW Television Network, 25 Sep 2007.

³²³ The explicit connection between the “slacker” representation and work in the texts this project covers is explored in depth in chapter five.

and *Silent Bob Strike Back* (2001), *Clerks II* (2006), and *Zach and Miri Make a Porno* (2008), help to mark out the territory of the liminal space between adolescence and adulthood by signifying it, as the prior chapter began to elucidate, as a time period during which individuals are presented as irresponsible and reckless. While certainly not violent or impudent, these tropes of a (frequently male) individual living in squalor, having an obsession with the trappings of childhood, needing praise for minor accomplishments, and refusal to take on adult responsibilities became solidified as the hallmarks of individuals of a certain age in the 2000s.

As Sam eats breakfast in the family kitchen before going to work on the morning of his twenty-first birthday, his father (Andrew Airlie) asks Sam's brother, Kyle (Kyle Switzer) if he's wished Sam a happy birthday. Kyle replies, "The guy's 21, lives with his parents, and wears an apron for a living. There's no 'happy' in that birthday, Dad." In this derisive way, Sam is introduced as an individual on the cusp of a transition, struck by the feeling that his life should change, somehow, but not knowing how to change it. On the way to work, Sam explains to Sock his dilemma of selfhood: after his fruitless month in college, Sam explains, he did not even attempt to change his life or try a different life-course strategy, instead choosing to return to The Work Bench where he has been employed since the age of sixteen. He wonders if, by not consciously choosing a life path, he has inadvertently become stuck in an unsatisfying life instead, asking, "Is this where we want to be in five years?" Here, on the cusp of what is clearly designed as a transformational moment in Sam's biography, the pilot episode presents Sam with several options, any one of which might change his life path trajectory or possibly assist in the attempt at metamorphosis: being a dependable and caring sibling to his younger brother, going on a date with the girl of his dreams, and/or winning the sales contest at his work. Instead, Sam achieves personal self-realization by engaging and accomplishing tasks only recognized by the revelation of his destiny: Sam's first task as The Devil's bounty hunter is to track down a fugitive arsonist who is currently posing as a fireman, setting fires around town.

A discussion at the end of this pilot episode can be seen as a reflection of two

competing attitudes that contemporary representational culture has toward individuals who display trouble and stagnation on the path to maturity. After Sam and Sock have “sent a monster back to hell,” they reflect on the events that have transpired. As Sam sits astounded by his future as The Devil’s bounty hunter, Sock reminds him that he still has the option to “blow this whole thing off,” of telling Satan to, “Eat it.” Vocalizing the derelict attitude that life-stage-troubled individuals are meant to embody, Sock continues, “If it’s something you don’t want to do, you don’t have to do it.” Notably, with this statement, Sock epitomizes the social and cultural attitudes expected of this category of individuals: lazy, self-serving, and entitled. Sam’s response, however, is illustrative of the ways in which contemporary American media portrays the life-staged subject’s response to the outcome of experiencing one’s “true” destiny: “After all this, I feel like a grown-up, I mean, kinda. I feel...responsible now.” Though Sam has attempted various methods of “growing up:” maintaining a steady job, attempting college (though not completing a degree), there is one thing that has made him *feel* like an adult: fulfilling his personal destiny.

Bearing this example in mind, this chapter examines films and television programs emerging between 1999 and 2008 in which the acquisition of maturity is the key narrative obstacle, signaling the necessity of a psychological and developmental resolution found in the nexus of maturity and destiny. Catherine Driscoll maintains that maturation, as a primary narrative focus, is part of the generic formulation of teen film, noting that within the genre, maturity has acted as “a question and a problem... rather than a certain set of values.”³²⁴ Furthermore, according to Driscoll, teen film, though often mischaracterized as films about the process of maturation, has long been “less about growing up than about the expectation, difficulty, and social organization of growing up.”³²⁵ While adolescence within teen film parallels the cultural understanding of the life-stage as a gradual transition in need of management and discipline, Driscoll maintains that this understanding of a gradual transition was “always accompanied by an

³²⁴ Catherine Driscoll, *Teen Film: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Berg, 2011) 66.

³²⁵ Driscoll, *Teen Film* 66.

idea of adolescence as dramatic transformation associated with the anthropological concept ‘rite of passage.’” Often represented within the genre through signifiers such as prom or graduation, the rite of passage, as Driscoll contends “is an experience of limits rather than coming of age.”³²⁶

Here, I would like to suggest, that the characters that populate the films and television texts this chapter examines are largely too old for the established representational symbols of traditional rites of passage and that these traditional markers have been largely abandoned. Within this grouping of texts, specifically, I argue that the trope of the discovery of personal destiny has taken up the mantle as the transformational moment in which an individual crosses the threshold from immature to mature. These texts portray maturationally challenged individuals who experience little to no generation gap in terms of opposition to social and authoritative codes (i.e. no collective “youth movement” or “youth culture” is established), as well as a kind of acquiescence to their own generational and social limits. Additionally, adolescents in this representational wave, as in the example from *Reaper*, are depicted as disconnected from their work and their occupational future, held back from reaching their potential, and unaware of both what it is that holds them back as well as the very fact that their potential is being constrained. While some of these characters are aware of the course of action they must take in order to become self-realized, the large majority of these life-staged individuals are accorded their path to subjectivity through an intervention of some kind: sometimes an external force that lets them see or discover their own ability, sometimes by uncovering an internal ability that had been heretofore unknown. In this way, *Reaper*, alongside the other texts this chapter explores, does not extol the merit of an extended adolescence wherein responsibilities and hallmarks of adulthood are deferred. Rather, it promulgates the idea that the traditional path to maturity may no longer be a viable route to traditional adulthood, instead promoting the discovery and fulfillment of individual personal destiny as the preferred course for the coming-of-age

³²⁶ Driscoll, *Teen Film* 66.

process.

Vital to understanding this formulation of the search for personal destiny as the replacement for the coming-of-age process is the notion that adulthood represents a transition into stability. This sense that individuals inhabiting the life stage of adulthood are self-possessed is what necessarily legitimizes the marker of “adulthood,” thus necessarily conferring the status of attenuation or instability on those who find themselves troubled by threshold issues. As Kerry Mallan and Sharyn Pearce note:

The reward of adult status carries with it the mythical virtues of maturity, independence, stability, and *above all a secure identity*: One which is whole and not troubled by the uncertainties that characterize the transience of youth, especially in these times of profound global economic social change.³²⁷

Their point is particularly germane to this chapter as it is contemporarily culturally accepted that adolescence necessitates a period of uncertainty that ends in identity stability. It is the characterization of the fixity of the self and the ways in which this discursive formation has been mobilized for the regulation of a specific grouping of individuals that motivates the larger concerns of this chapter.

The pervasiveness of the narrative of identity permanence belies the ways in which, in a post-fordist, neoliberal era Americans face little in the way of personal security and a life beset by anxieties has become the norm. The destabilizing effects of globalization have had social, political, and economic consequences such that the perception of speed, scale and cognition have reaffirmed this need for security, while simultaneously undermining the possibility of obtaining stability. In this regard, according to Mikki McGee, “The less predictable and controllable the life course has become, the more individuals have been urged to chart their own courses, to ‘master’ their destinies, and to make themselves over.”³²⁸ Accordingly, it is this mandate for a singularized command over the individual life course that creates the fantasy of stability: a fictive wholeness that confers adult status. Thus, in this particular historical, social and

³²⁷ Kerry Mallan and Sharyn Pearce, “Introduction: Tales of Youth in Postmodern Culture,” *Youth Cultures: Texts, Images, and Identities*, eds. Kerry Mallan, Sharyn Pearce (Westport, CT: Praegar Publishers, 2003) ix, emphasis mine.

³²⁸ Micki McGee, *Self-Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life* (New York: University of Oxford Press, 2005) 11.

cultural moment, dominant discursive practices work to map a specific understanding of psychological maturity (and conversely, immaturity) onto the body of the adolescent, legitimizing one kind of maturity (or adult-image) while delegitimizing all others.

In the previous chapter, I argued that the “adolescent” is a construct, claiming that the idea of the life-staged subject is an accumulation of discursive practices that work to regulate the social, cultural and biological knowledge about a certain population. This chapter will argue that, rather than considering the psychological self as something inherent to all individuals, the idea of a “true inner self” is just as much a historical contingency as the construct of “the self.” Thus, just as chapter two outlined the various regulatory practices at work in the discursive formation of the contemporary adolescent, this chapter will demonstrate the social institutions and regulatory processes invoked in the formation of the psychological self. Consequently, this chapter contends that through the use of specific discursive formations, broadly outlined for the sake of argument here as “destiny” (as well as the concomitant search for this certainty), the very interior nature of the coming-of-age process has been codified to suggest an attenuated personhood.

Within the texts examined in this chapter, tropes connected with the idea of interiority, and the self-work required to reach full-subjectivity, are championed as a necessity and also used to shore up uncontested notions of legitimate personhood. Some qualification is needed here as, although I discuss theoretical notions of identity and post-modern subject positions throughout this chapter, the “identity” under discussion should not be understood as an expression of personal characteristics, but instead recognized as a discursive formation. For this reason, it should be reiterated that the discursive relations of this particular era are not interested in theories of identity, changes to identity, or even identity itself. In fact, popular culture during this time emphatically encouraged one very narrow, traditional notion of what personhood entails, including the particular version of the process of individuation necessitated by the formation of the subject. It is this process of recruiting individuals into agendas of self-

reformation, which encourage these self-same individuals to rehabilitate themselves, that is the primary means by which individuals are contemporarily managed.³²⁹

This chapter approaches the investigation of “identity formation” or “individuation” as a discursive formation through what Nikolas Rose calls, “a genealogy of subjectification.” This type of genealogy, rather than chart the history of the self as a psychological entity, focuses on the “individualized, interiorized, totalized and psychologized understanding of what it is to be human” as a historical problem, rather than as an object of historical study.³³⁰ As Rose suggests, this approach works towards an explanation of how a “modern ‘regime of the self’” is generated through various social practices and processes. Within this framework, a specific version of the subject, bolstered by technologies of the self, thus emerges not as the end result of scientific or philosophical effectuations realized over time. Instead, this framework seeks to

unpack the way in which ‘the self’ that functions as a regulatory ideal in so many aspects of our contemporary forms of life...is a kind of ‘irreal’ plan of projection, put together somewhat contingently and haphazardly at the intersection of a range of distinct histories—of forms of thought, techniques of regulation, problems of organization and so forth.³³¹

Rose suggests that this genealogical approach to subjectivity must, drawing from Foucault, recognize that “the self” as a discursive formation, and thus examine the “being’s relation to itself” not as an aspect of culture, but rather as a governing practice, claiming,

Our relation with ourselves...has assumed the form it has because it has been the object of a whole variety of more or less rationalized schemes, which have sought to shape our ways of understanding and enacting our existence as human beings in the name of certain objectives—manliness, femininity, honour, modesty, propriety, civility, discipline, distinction, efficiency, harmony, fulfillment, virtue, pleasure—the list is as diverse and heterogeneous as it is interminable.³³²

This is an account, then, of how techniques and practices of subjectification whose objectives are to contemporarily constitute the subject position of adolescence have been

³²⁹ Tait 160.

³³⁰ Nikolas Rose, “Identity, Genealogy, History,” in *Questions of Cultural Identity* ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: SAGE Publications, 1996) 129.

³³¹ Rose 129.

³³² Rose 130.

mapped onto the bodies of a certain grouping of individuals at the beginning of the new millennium. This chapter is organized as an interrogation the specific practices that link subjectification with individuation to produce a version of the legitimate subject as an individual who has fully completed the individuation process and has fulfilled her destiny. Consequently, the figure of the immature individual (otherwise expressed as the adolescent, or even, “extended adolescent”) operates in the new millennium as a means by which a certain type of privilege is negotiated, controlled and reasserted.

This trope of “mastering one’s destiny” is easily identifiable within numerous popular cultural texts produced in the first decade of the new millennium. “Fate,” and “destiny” are ideas broadly conceptualized as the outcome of a situation or life determined by an outside force acting upon the subject of said situation. Whereas “fate” implies predetermination, that is, the outcome of a situation happens *to* the subject, “destiny” implies some modicum of agency. Thus, the search for personal destiny, under this definition, implies that the outcome is preordained, but that the subject participates in this process and the outcome is in some way directly related to that subject. I argue that this is related to two different groupings of texts based on the agentic process of the search for individual personal destiny: active destinies, in which the protagonist must do the psychological, emotional, or consumerist work required to find their destiny; or, passive destinies, in which the protagonist’s destiny is either bestowed upon him or her by some outside force, or is uncovered as a power that has always resided within him or her. Just as adolescence is a constructed category heavily invested in biological and teleological understandings, the notion of subjectivity is a similarly constructed category informed by culturally discursive directives specifying how these self-making processes should be maintained. In the interest of clarity and brevity, this project is concerned with the ways in which these texts speak to the negotiation of the line between immaturity and maturity, forgoing many important questions about gender, class and race, although I have tried to touch on them when possible. In what follows, I elaborate on these two groupings, drawing out the implications of constructed subjectivities on contemporary understandings of transition to adulthood.

Changes to the Conception of Adulthood

Sociologist James A. Côté argues in his book, *Arrested Adulthood*, that while late modern cultural understandings of adulthood changed over the last two decades of the twentieth century, the contemporary understanding of maturity is not necessarily unique to this era, maintaining: “the adulthood characteristic of the early-twentieth-century Western societies and now taken for granted is not the historical norm.”³³³ In actuality, the only time in American history during which individuals reached all the markers of adulthood concomitantly was the short period of time after World War II when the abundance of newly created jobs allowed individuals to marry, enter careers, and begin families directly proceeding the cessation of schooling. It was this increase, in the “age uniformity in the timing of transitions, with those to adulthood becoming more uniform and orderly,”³³⁴ maintains Côté, which allowed for this anomalous configuration of adulthood in the first half of the twentieth century.

Presently, the American cultural conception of the transition to adulthood is actually more closely related to its conceptualization prior to the second industrial revolution when achieving self-sufficiency was a long, gradual process. As social historian Tamara Hareven makes clear, for most of the nineteenth century, both the sequence and length of time devoted to the completion of transitions (such as getting married and starting a career) were non-sequential and more varied. This was due, according to Hareven, to the regulation of the timing and sequence of these transitions, which were structured according to familial needs and obligations rather than due to specific age norms.³³⁵ Sociologists Furstenburg et al., contend that the connection between nineteenth century transitions to adulthood and twenty-first transitions is that, “Attaining self-sufficiency then was a gradual process of semi-autonomy,” with the

³³³ James A. Côté, *Arrested Adulthood: The Changing Nature of Maturity and Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2000) 27.

³³⁴ Côté 27.

³³⁵ Tamara K. Hareven, “Aging and Generational Relations: A Historical and Life Course Perspective,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 20 (1994): 445-448.

difference being that now “early adulthood” is increasingly regulated by social institutions outside the family, specifically higher education.³³⁶

Around the turn of the twentieth century, changes to the institutionalization of education systematized the growing-up process and brought individuals of similar ages together, forcing the maturation process to become homogenized and normalized. While many, if not most, of the characteristics of “youth” had been recognized before, the culmination of these social and economic forces helped to foster new understanding of a separate life stage between childhood and adulthood at the turn of the twentieth century. Through the first half of the twentieth century, then, adolescence was recognized as an “organized life stage that permitted young people to receive more schooling, explore options, and forge a sense of self.”³³⁷ As such, during this time period from the turn of the twentieth century to the end of World War II, adolescence was conceived of as a relatively brief period of time during which individuals were given a reprieve from traditional adult responsibilities and were encouraged to explore their individual identities.

In reality, relatively few individuals were actually able to take a break from helping to provide for their family or participating in other active household and familial duties. During the first half of the twentieth century, America’s involvement in two World Wars meant that many men were off fighting during this time period while women were busy taking on double the responsibility at home. Furthermore, a university education, and even completion of a high school education, was still only available to a privileged few. By the end of World War II, the timing of marriage and childbirth was typically simultaneous with the cessation of an individual’s educational career. As Furstenberg et al. make clear, throughout the postwar boom, “high-paying industrial jobs were plentiful,” which allowed the majority of young people to “become socially and

³³⁶ Frank F. Furstenburg Jr., Rubén G. Rumbaut, and Richard A. Settersten Jr., “On the Frontier of Adulthood: Emerging Themes and New Directions,” *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy*, eds. Richard A. Settersten Jr., Frank Furstenburg, Jr., and Rubén G. Rumbaut (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 17.

³³⁷ Furstenberg et al. 4.

economically independent by the end of their teens.”³³⁸ This meant that most young people were “socially recognized as adults” by their early twenties,” and were “more or less indistinguishable from men and women in their thirties or forties.”³³⁹

As a result of this clear and well delineated transition from one life stage to another, behavioral expectations were similarly coherent: it was assumed that once an individual met the five goals of adulthood, that individual would relinquish the “hallmarks of adolescence, including dependency on parents, ‘immature’ behaviors that reflect experimentation with roles, and indecision about one’s identity.”³⁴⁰ After relinquishing these adolescent roles, individuals were then expected to assume “adult” roles and behaviors, which would presumably be the opposite of these “adolescent” behaviors: economic independence and a firm sense of one’s own identity. Thus, although only a small number of privileged individuals were able to take advantage of the time period of adolescence to explore their identity, adolescence as a life-stage became virtually synonymous with this period of identity moratorium, and any deviation from this course or its expected outcome was pathologized. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, this idea of identity moratorium and adolescence have become at once homologous and in stark contention. The notion that individuals utilize the period of adolescence as a time to “try on different identities” has become so deeply culturally naturalized, that it is, contemporarily, an imperative rather than an option. In this way, adolescence has become signified as an obligation packaged as a choice: a forced moratorium in which the institutions that were built to facilitate these moratoria now define and essentialize adolescents as “unfinished” or “underdeveloped,” a stigmatization that, as this project argues, works to control and restrict a wide assemblage of individuals.

³³⁸ Furstenberg et al. 4.

³³⁹ Furstenberg et al. 4.

³⁴⁰ Michael J. Shanahan, Erik J. Porfeli, Jeylan T. Mortimer, and Lance D. Erickson, “Subjective Age Identity and the Transition to Adulthood: When Do Adolescents Become Adults?” *On The Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research and Public Policy*, eds. Richard A. Settersten Jr., Frank F. Furstenberg Jr., and Rubén G. Rumbaut (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005) 225.

As the tenor of adolescence transformed over the last few decades of the twentieth century, sociologists followed suit, reconceptualizing contemporary understandings of the transition to adulthood, as well as adulthood *itself*, as a psychological state rather than a conclusive or definitive category. As explained in the introduction of this project, Western societies have become destructured, meaning that the social markers that connote or confer adulthood have become de-coupled from rigid, age-based developmental strata. Côté contends that as a result of this destructuralization, “people are expected to carve out major aspects of their own adulthoods by means of self-directed maturational processes.”³⁴¹ Thus, adulthood, as acknowledged by sociologists, has become recognized as “more a psychological state than a social status”³⁴² as the importance and clarity of previous social markers of maturity has abated while (seemingly) opportunities for self-development have increased. Put more simply (and with great emphasis), contemporarily, sociologists contend that adulthood is now identified as a “feeling,” rather than as a social marker. Côté argues that, in this regard, the difficulty that individuals experience with the transition from adolescence to adulthood in contemporary Western societies is due less to difficulties with reaching traditional markers of maturity, and more to do with the difficulties encountered as a result of the psychological process of individuation.³⁴³ Thus, while individuals are clearly struggling to attain financial and residential autonomy, there is an additional aspect of late modern social organization that is likewise producing new complexities with regard to the transition to adulthood. It is this interior, psychological aspect of the contemporary coming-of-age process that is the subject of this chapter, with the following section a genealogical exploration of this psychological aspect, or interiority, of the discursive formation of adolescence.

³⁴¹ Côté 31.

³⁴² Côté 31.

³⁴³ Here, Côté warns against the conflation of “identity” with “developmental individualization,” where identity is easily confused with marketplace options offered by the “restructured consumer-corporate society,” and developmental individualization is “a long-term process whereby people invest in themselves by first honing their aptitudes, skills, and personality resources and then trading these later in the various late modern marketplaces.” Côté 35.

Identity Formation and Maturity

Côté acknowledges that part of the complexification of the conceptualization of late modern adulthood is due to “the vagaries” with which it is associated, “vagaries” which exist due to “the process of individualization and destructuralization, by which the onus is put on individuals to be agents of their own destinies in poorly structured contexts.”³⁴⁴

As chapter two of this thesis made clear, the institutionalization of the life stage of adolescence was conceptually linked to the notion of identity formation. While G. Stanley Hall’s theories about storm and stress have largely been discredited, the contemporary psychological view of adolescence continues to regard this life stage as a period of cognitive and emotional development.³⁴⁵ The association of adolescence with these psychological views can additionally be attributed to Erik Erikson, developmental psychologist and formative theorist on child development, whose ideas about identity formation have influenced nearly all contemporary articulations of identity.³⁴⁶ Alleging that individuals advance through eight different developmental stages from childhood through adulthood, Erikson’s theories of development were rooted in Freudian ideas of the “superego,” “ego,” and “id.” However, unlike Freud’s theories of development, which were focused on development as a series of resolutions to internal neurotic crises, Erikson claimed that identity development was equally affected by biology, psychology and socio-historical context. Erikson postulated that proper identity formation created security in the life of an individual: though interpersonal relationships, social roles, and contexts changed throughout the duration of an individual’s life, Erikson argued that it was the attainment of a sense of identity that enabled an individual to experience, as Jane Kroger phrases it, “a continued sense of self and role commitments across time and place.”³⁴⁷ In other words, according to Erikson, the necessary consequence of identity

³⁴⁴ Côté 53.

³⁴⁵ James A. Côté, and Anton L. Allahar, *Generation on Hold: Coming of Age in the Late Twentieth Century* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1994) 6.

³⁴⁶ Côté, *Arrested* 119.

³⁴⁷ Jane Kroger, “Identity in Formation,” *The Future of Identity: Centennial Reflections on the Legacy of Erik Erikson*, ed. Kenneth R. Hoover (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004) 62.

formation is that, if done properly, an individual will not only feel a sense of security, but will be able to maintain that sense of security despite other changes in their life: as Côté elucidates, “Once a sense of ego identity is established, people are buffered and protected from the vicissitudes of social conflicts and tensions.”³⁴⁸ Crucial for this chapter, Erikson’s conceptualization of identity formation regarded the continuity and self-sameness that proper self-identity provided as fundamental to a fulfilling life.³⁴⁹

However, within Erikson’s formulation of identity formation, an individual not only must realize his or her own agentic and capable self, but additionally, this self must align with a community that holds similar values and encourages its members to embrace these same values. Côté explains Erikson’s argument thusly:

the crux of identity stability lies in the interplay between the social and the psychic. That is, a person requires a *viable social identity*, and when the person develops a workable social identity within a particular culture, the psychological sense of temporal-spatial continuity—the *sine qua non* of ego identity—should be nurtured.³⁵⁰

In this manner, Erikson conceives of identity formation as, a process “located *in the core of the individual* and yet also *in the core of his communal culture*, a process which establishes, in fact, the identity of those two identities.”³⁵¹ In other words, an individual must locate a stable identity in order to become a fully actualized person (any other possible outcome, according to Erikson, leads to certain crisis); however, this individual’s self cannot properly come to fruition unless the established identity is operable within the parameters of the society in which the individual resides. The essential condition of identity lies in its temporal-spatial continuity, which, as this chapter elucidates, is key to the managerial capacity of the conceptual category of adolescence and youth. Thus, as a part of Erikson’s legacy, identity formation is still culturally assumed to be a natural cognitive process that all must necessarily go through no matter an individual’s station, class, race, gender or life experience. Additionally, it is culturally understood that, as part of the process of identity formation, the transition to

³⁴⁸ Côté, *Arrested* 121.

³⁴⁹ Kroger 62.

³⁵⁰ Côté, *Arrested* 121.

³⁵¹ Erik Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1968) 22.

adulthood will produce a singular identity: one that will provide stability, peace of mind, and security, as long as it is a particular identity that is supported by the encompassing culture.

These antecedent notions regarding identity and identity formation are visible in contemporary conceptualizations of the self in late modernity. The breadth and scope of theories on post-modern identities is far too great to be covered in any real depth here, yet, a brief introduction of their significance is key to this chapter's understanding of late modern transitions to adulthood. Much of the literature on late or post-modernity stands in contention with other aspects of this same body of literature (indeed, even on what to call this period of time, post-modernity, high modernity, late modernity); yet, there are features of the scholarship that seem to accord. Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck and Scott Lash, in accordance with the aforementioned notion of the destructuralization discussed in the introduction of this work, argue that the industrial era was characterized by certain predictabilities and certainties and that this more stable world-view has been replaced by a new set of risks and dangers brought to bear by globalization. This view maintains that much of late modernity is characterized by what these sociologists refer to as "reflexive modernization" or "reflexivity." Within this framework, society is understood as reforming that which already exists; in other words, progress occurs as a product of reorganization and reform. This maps on to individuals and self-identity in the ways in which individuals reflexively understand themselves. Individuals in late modernity have become "disembedded" from communities in which ascriptive or non-voluntary roles were once fixed, meaning that they are reflexively "increasingly called upon to invent their own structures," a process referred to as "individualization." Giddens relied on Erikson³⁵² for his formulations of identity in high modernity, emphasizing the connection between identity, reflexivity and security:

Self-identity for us forms a *trajectory* across the different institutional settings of modernity over the *durée* of what used to be called the 'life cycle'...Each of us

³⁵² According to Kinnvall, in this regard, Giddens' work depended on Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1950). Catarina Kinnvall, "Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity and the Search for Ontological Security," *Political Psychology* 25.5 (2004): 746.

not only ‘has,’ but *lives* a biography reflexively organised in terms of flows of social and psychological information about possible ways of life.³⁵³

Thus, according to Giddens, in late modernity, “The self is seen as a reflexive project, for which the individual is responsible. We are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves.”³⁵⁴ For Giddens, this project of the self is dependent on those undertakings that individuals enact for the purpose of constructing their lives. Far more than just “‘getting to know oneself’ better,” for Giddens, subjectivity is “subordinated to the more inclusive and fundamental aim of building/rebuilding a coherent and rewarding sense of identity.”³⁵⁵

Ulrich Beck puts this another way: he maintains that “*The individual himself or herself becomes the reproduction unit for the social in the lifeworld,*” meaning, that it is no longer in individual’s social class status or family that provides both the stability and the framework for stability.³⁵⁶ Rather, individuals “become the agents of their livelihood mediated by the market, as well as of their biographical planning and organization.”³⁵⁷ Despite this agentic burden to create individual biographical planning, according to Beck, there is a concurrent “standardization” of governmental institutions such that individuals in late modernity now live under the “contradictory double face of *institutionally dependent individual situations.*”³⁵⁸ In other words, individuals living in a society in which risk is heightened must navigate an “*institution-dependent control structure* of individual situations,”³⁵⁹ in which, ultimately, as Beck argues, “how one lives becomes the *biographical solution of systemic contradictions.*”³⁶⁰ For Beck, then, individuals in late modernity are obliged to make sense of the complexities and contradictions of a society in which day-to-day living conditions are experienced as out of individual control.

³⁵³ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991) 14.

³⁵⁴ Giddens 75, his emphasis.

³⁵⁵ Giddens 75, his emphasis.

³⁵⁶ Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London; Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1992) 130, his emphasis.

³⁵⁷ Beck 130.

³⁵⁸ Beck 130.

³⁵⁹ Beck 131.

³⁶⁰ Beck 137.

Adolescence, as the process of maturation in the psychological sense of finding one's inner being, is discursively iterated within representational culture as this burden to create and effectuate individual biographical planning. As the rest of the chapter will make clear, this mandate for a specific kind of agentic mastery as a means of resolving systemic contradictions effectively calls upon certain individuals to not only create their own means of subjectification, but also bear the prosperity of the social. And yet, this articulation of legitimate personhood is qualified by the completion of the necessary work required to achieve this agentic state, thus creating the paradox of contemporary adolescence: self-work is required for entry into adulthood, yet the execution and performance of this labor acts as the very impediment to this access. As follows, the rest of the chapter interrogates the ways that the tropes of active and passive destinies have been mobilized as a resolution to this contravention.

Active Destinies

The notion of the "biographical solution," suggests not only that an individual must create her own pathway from adolescence to adulthood, but also that she must understand this trajectory, in ontological terms, as developmental progress from insecurity to security. In this sense, the process of seeking out one's personal destiny requires hard work and dedication to the task of self-actualization. McGee explains that in a late modern society beset by anxieties and insecurities about individual security, individuals are encouraged to manage this anxiety not just by working harder, longer, and smarter, but "also to invest in themselves, manage themselves, and continuously improve themselves."³⁶¹ Kinnvall contends that individuals experience different levels of security relative to their perception of their structural position of power. The more insecure they feel, the more they "attempt to *securitize subjectivity*, which means an intensified search for *one* stable identity (regardless of its actual existence)."³⁶²

³⁶¹ McGee 12.

³⁶² Kinnvall 748-749.

Numerous scholars have identified the ways in which contemporary cultural products reinforce this idea of the necessity of making over the self, specifically with regard to making over one's image. More applicative for this project, a number of scholars have examined the ways in which issues of age and aging are managed and necessitated within contemporary cultural products. In a postfeminist cultural climate, the representational landscape is populated with images that reside in as, Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra maintain, and as I mention in the second chapter, "a dominating discursive system" in which various consumptive strategies have been employed in the service of "the production of the self," which itself been successfully mobilized as a strategy to "gloss over" social difference.³⁶³ Within this critical approach, contemporary media, such as the film and television texts considered in this project, are understood as residing within a culture deeply invested in enacting vast social exclusions: as Tasker and Negra contend, "postfeminism is in many ways antithetical to the notion of an open society in which all members are valued in accordance with their distinct identities."³⁶⁴ While most scholarship on postfeminism is interested in the ways in which postfeminist cultural products promote these identities through consumerism and gendered consumerist offerings, points this chapter takes up later on, here I am interested in the ways in which a push to discount certain raced, classed, gendered and aged identities both animates certain subjectivities while working to dismiss others. As Kinnvall reminds us, "The fact that individuals search for one stable identity does not mean, however, that such identities exist."³⁶⁵ In this regard, it is advantageous to look at how the undertaking of the search for personal destiny reinforces these exclusory representational practices.

As I discussed elsewhere, theories of adolescent development are connected to rubrics of understanding that view the maturation process through metaphors of temporal progress. Similarly, time and temporality play distinct roles in the construction of rubrics

³⁶³ Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker, "Introduction," *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, eds. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007) 2.

³⁶⁴ Tasker and Negra 2.

³⁶⁵ Kinnvall 747.

of understanding with regard to identity formation. Tasker and Negra explain that postfeminism's portrayal of adult women is similarly preoccupied with the "temporal...to such a degree that female adulthood is defined as a state of chronic temporal crisis."³⁶⁶ Postfeminist popular culture offers only one panacea in this regard, as Negra argues that, "postfeminism suggests that symbolic forms of time mastery...will provide the key to the reclamation of self."³⁶⁷ These time pressures to which Tasker and Negra refer are the pressures of fulfillment—certainly, a gendered fulfillment of how to be an adult "woman," a contingent form of the self that is beset by its own categorical set of issues. However, this thesis argues that these same dominant discursive correlations are instructively at work in the male subject in the first decade of the twenty-first century as well.

McGee reminds us that the idea of the self-made man has long been propped up by the labor of women and other domestic workers. In a late modern era in which individuals (speculatively) have access to the opportunity of self-making, this once blanket term has become exposed as a masculinist notion.³⁶⁸ In this regard, as fewer individuals have access to both state-sponsored support and the unpaid labor of other individuals, the notion of the self-made individual and self-made success must be reexamined. As adulthood is becoming increasingly conceptualized as a psychological state rather than a social category in the sense that "identity work" must now be done in order to attain adult status, it has become clear that adulthood, and the correlative transition to this life stage, are now understood primarily as "a reflection of individualistic criteria" that rests on subjective self-evaluations."³⁶⁹ John Stephens argues that within teen film, "what is largely at stake in crossing the border [separating childhood from adulthood] is a development of subjective agency from the lesser potentiality of childhood to the greater potentiality of adulthood," a point at which "an

³⁶⁶ Tasker and Negra 10.

³⁶⁷ Negra 53.

³⁶⁸ McGee 23.

³⁶⁹ Shanahan et al. 226.

adolescent is especially vulnerable to abjection.”³⁷⁰ Examining teen films that thematize abjection from several generic standpoints, Stephens argues that many contemporary teen films, “include a thematizing of the narrative dichotomy between subjectivity which becomes abjected and the abjected character who struggles back to subjective agency.”³⁷¹ Essentially, Stephens is arguing that when individuals within these teen films do not move toward maturity and adult agency, they are affectively “cast into abjection.”³⁷² While Stephens identifies several different generic ways in which this occurs, often with different agentic conclusions depending on genre, overall he argues that, “the development from abjection to agency...[is] pivotal for the human transition from teen to agential adult.”³⁷³ What Stephens calls “abjected,” I am terming here “immature,” however, the implications are the same: those that have not achieved a specific agentic status cannot achieve subjectivity and are therefore discounted and excluded from society.

Cultural texts reproducing these themes of interiority and the search for the self arguably began to emerge in the mid-1980s with the popular show, *thirtysomething* (ABC 1987-91), whose portrayal of adults struggling with issues of self-definition and identity formation naturalized the coming-of-age process as an integral part of adulthood within televised drama. *thirtysomething*’s “coming-to-terms-with-our-parents, coming-of-age narratives”³⁷⁴ helped usher in several other 1990s serials that continued to propagate the cultural understanding that identity formation was no longer confined to adolescence, including *Northern Exposure* (CBS 1990-95), *Friends* (NBC 1994-2004), and *Sex and the City* (HBO 1998-2004). Teen-oriented dramas, such as *My So-Called*

³⁷⁰ Stephens defines his use of abjection³⁷⁰ in this context as, as it is for Kristeva, “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.” Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) 4. In John Stephens, “‘I’ll Never Be the Same After That Summer’: From Abjection to Subjective Agency in Teen Films,” *Youth Cultures: Texts, Images, and Identities*, eds. Kerry Mallan and Sharyn Pearce (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003) 125.

³⁷¹ Stephens 123.

³⁷² Stephens 125.

³⁷³ Stephens 135.

³⁷⁴ Jane Feuer, *Seeing Through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995) 71. Quoted in Simon Philo, “‘Teensomething’: American Youth Programming in the 1990s,” *American Youth Cultures*, ed. Neil Campbell (New York: Routledge, 2004) 163.

Life (ABC 1994-95) and *Dawson's Creek* (WB 1998-2003), followed *thirtysomething's* formula, bringing the angst typically associated with adolescence back to the figure of the adolescent. In the 2000s, a hybridized formula emerged on shows such as *Once and Again* (ABC 1999-02), *Everwood* (WB 2002-06), *The OC* (Fox 2003-07), and *One Tree Hill* (WB 2003-06, CW 2006-present) in which narratives followed both adults and adolescents as they concurrently performed the labor of self-making. *My So-Called Life* and *Once and Again* both utilize the interior psychic states of their characters to drive the drama through the intradiagetic, confessional, direct address inserts during which a character explains to camera what he or she is thinking during the situation occurring in the narrative. In this way, these shows make use of the inner lives of the main characters to move the plot forward not by external events, but rather, through the emotional development of the characters. Jane Feuer argues that, unlike the confessional mode of address utilized by reality programs like *Survivor* (CBS 2000-present), the emotional development of these prime-time dramas is the *subject* of the show, not just a means to provide context and background for particular motives of individual characters.³⁷⁵ *My So-called Life* and *Once and Again* communicate their characters' psychic states by using different "subjective techniques to convey interiority," but ultimately heavily utilize the language of psychotherapy.³⁷⁶ Fundamentally, as Feuer suggests, through the use of direct address confessions and confessional inner monologues acting as voice-overs, "all three shows find salvation in the language of psychotherapy;" thus, no matter from whose perspective the episode or program was communicated, each of the characters participated in confessional moments.³⁷⁷ In this way, it is clear that within these texts, "subjectivity...[is] the whole show;" that is, interior matters of the self, self-reflection and self-growth (rather than exterior events) create and maintain the motive behind the narratives of these programs.³⁷⁸

³⁷⁵ Jane Feuer, "The Lack of Influence of *thirtysomething*," *The Contemporary Television Series*, eds. Michael Hammond and Lucy Mazdon (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 27.

³⁷⁶ Feuer, "The Lack" 27.

³⁷⁷ Feuer, "The Lack" 34.

³⁷⁸ Feuer, "The Lack" 35.

Clearly then, popular film and television texts have registered the heightened push toward self-making through the use of therapeutic acts of transformation in a variety of ways. A spate of television shows, produced in the first decade of the new millennium, explored this interiority and self-development by envisioning the possibilities of re-doing ones life: *Do Over* (WB 2002), *Tru Calling* (Fox 2003-5), *Samantha Who?* (ABC 2007-9), *The Kid* (Turteltaub, 2000), *High Fidelity* (Frears, 2000), *Freaky Friday* (Waters, 2003), and *50 First Dates* (Segal, 2004) take the notion of self-making beyond the traditional coming-of-age story by playing out fantasies that transcend the limitations of both time and aging, and in so doing, open up an interesting space for the examination of the representation of late modern maturities. In some ways, the contemporary spate of films recognized by this project share similarities with a grouping of films Lesley Speed refers to as the sub-genre of the “nostalgic teen film.” Speed points out that, unlike other categories of teen film, which typically highlight and speak from the teenage point of view, the nostalgic teen film “reveals tensions between youth and adulthood at the level of narration.”³⁷⁹ While the contemporary texts recognized by this project are certainly not categorized as teen movies, much less nostalgic teen films, they share this motif of a recollective “mature” point of view (though not necessarily narration) that, as Speed suggests, can be understood as the vehicle that drives the quest to contain the adolescent experience.³⁸⁰ Similarly, as with the nostalgic teen film, these films and television programs equate the acquisition of maturity with a “greater understanding of past events, and a new capacity to face the future.”³⁸¹ It is this desire to revise the past as a way to shore up the future that illuminates a cultural desire for, as Speed puts it, “moral and ideological security.”³⁸²

In a society heightened by the specter of risk, this trope of reinventing oneself through the literal revision of the past in order create a preferable alternate (adult) outcome, can be understood as a signification of the late modern need for a “constant

³⁷⁹ Lesley Speed, “Tuesday’s Gone: The Nostalgic Teen Film,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 26.1 (1998): 24.

³⁸⁰ Speed 24.

³⁸¹ Speed 25.

³⁸² Speed 25.

reinterpretation of identity” as individuals are “constantly forced to reconstruct their biographies in the light of changing experiences.”³⁸³ To return to the cultural notion of adult identity influenced by Erikson’s understanding of identity from above, *adult* identity must be “stable” to be considered complete or mature. This cultural desire for stability, even while fantasizing about retrospective identity revisions, evinces a deep cultural contradiction: the transition to adulthood must simultaneously culminate in an identity that is stable, yet also able to withstand biographical changes. Thus crucially, it is only through this fanciful reimagining of a detemporalized life experience that adolescence and self-making are freed from the regulatory trajectory of the late modern, teleological abstraction of adolescence and (im)maturity.

Thus, as neoliberal governing practices have been shored up through the device of the transition to adulthood (development from immaturity to maturity), therapeutic rhetoric has acted as the signifier for this process. Much in the way that biological markers are utilized as signifiers of physical immaturity, the use of therapeutic or confessional rhetoric (or, more appropriately, the need for the use of this rhetoric),³⁸⁴ in many ways, has been mobilized as a signifier of psychological and emotional immaturity. Jillian Sandell argues that under an oppressive system, therapeutic rhetoric speaks to an overarching “belief that individual acts of transformation can transcend the power and influence of institutions,” while simultaneously conveying that these same institutions of oppression cannot be changed.³⁸⁵ As therapeutic culture has achieved widespread acceptance, permeating and influencing cultural texts such as the ones described here, Sandell argues, therapeutic culture has become coded as “a realm of indulgence and abdication of responsibility,” serving only to, “see the realm of interpersonal relations as somehow separate from social and economic relations.”³⁸⁶ Thus, as individuals are encouraged to seek out their own identities through the use of therapeutic language and

³⁸³ Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel, *Young People and Social Change: Individualization and Risk in Late Modernity* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2007) 10.

³⁸⁴ To be clear, the need for therapeutic rhetoric should not be confused with the need for therapy.

³⁸⁵ Jillian Sandell, “Adjusting to Oppression: The Rise of Therapeutic Feminism in the United States,” *“Bad Girls”/“Good Girls”: Women, Sex & Power in the Nineties*, eds. Nan Bauer Maglin and Donna Perry (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996) 21.

³⁸⁶ Sandell 32.

practices as a way of attaining maturity, they are simultaneously charged with acting in an immature manner that reinforces the validity of the abdication of accountability and obligation.

Infantile Citizenships/Infantilizing Subjects

Lauren Berlant's work on citizenship in the post-Reaganite era is particularly illuminating with regard to identity, stability and maturity. In her book, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*,³⁸⁷ Berlant asserts that as a result of the Reagan administration's implementation of conservative governmental strategies, anxieties about the nation's future were mapped onto the figure of the child. Arguing that a figurative national crisis was established as truth, within this imagined nation-in-crisis Berlant maintains that, "a citizen became defined as a person traumatized by some aspect of life in the United States."³⁸⁸ Though individuals began to experience social hierarchy as intensely individuating, Berlant contends that it also made them public and generic, claiming that this new experience of social positioning "turns them into *kinds* of people who are both attached to and underdescribed by the identities that organize them," turning them into "citizen-victims."³⁸⁹ Calling this a "paradox of partial legibility," Berlant argues that it both speaks to individuals in that it incites personal and political anger; yet, simultaneously, conceals fundamental differences between modes of identity. Berlant sees this as the express intent of a conservative cultural politics whose desire was to dilute the "oppositional discourses of the historically stereotyped citizens—people of color, women, gays, and lesbians."³⁹⁰ The consequence of this attenuation is of crucial concern for this project:

Against these groups are pitted the complaints not of stereotyped peoples burdened by a national history but icons who have only recently lost the

³⁸⁷ Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

³⁸⁸ Berlant 1.

³⁸⁹ Berlant 1.

³⁹⁰ Berlant 2.

protections of their national iconicity—politicians who are said to have lost their “zone of privacy”; ordinary citizens who are said to feel that they have lost access to the American Dream; white and male and heterosexual people of all classes who are said to sense that they have lost the respect of their culture, and with it the freedom to feel unmarked.³⁹¹

She explains that the identity politics of the nineteen-sixties worked to reveal the inequities of patriarchy by making identities public, resulting in the fact that several years later, previously unmarked citizens felt exposed and vulnerable:

They feel anxious about their value to themselves, their families, their publics, and their nation. They sense that they now have *identities*, when it used to be just other people who had them.³⁹²

Berlant claims that there have been two responses to this apprehension: the first is the desire for the nation to recommit itself to the project of an equal society, and the second is to “forge a scandal...of ex-privilege...and with it, a desperate desire to return to an order of things deemed normal, an order of what was felt to be a general everyday intimacy that was sometimes called, ‘the American way of life.’”³⁹³ In this way, the “narratives of traumatized identity” and “rhetorics of a traumatized core national identity” were mobilized by the conservative coalition formed in the Reaganite years, with the express purpose of privatizing U.S. citizenship, and whose influence can be felt resonating throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and arguably continuing through the first decade of the new millennium.

Central to the reconceptualization of the contemporary adolescent, Berlant further argues that these narratives “reinvigorated” the idea of the American Dream, an idea central to this project, and one that is taken up in more detail in relation to the transition to adulthood and heightened credentialism in chapter four of this project. Berlant maintains that, as a cultural fantasy, the American Dream welds personal prosperity to national success; it promises that in return for conviction of (heteronormative) purpose and hard work, the nation will offer security and dignity. Thus, in its very construction, argues Berlant, the story of the American Dream

³⁹¹ Berlant 2.

³⁹² Berlant 2.

³⁹³ Berlant 2.

is a story that addresses the fear of being stuck or reduced to a type, a redemptive story pinning its hope on class mobility. Yet this promise is voiced in the language of unconflicted personhood: to be American, in this view, would be to inhabit a secure space liberated from identities and structures that seem to constrain what a person can do in history.³⁹⁴

Here, she explains that in order for this paradox to exist, the complexities, incongruities and inequalities of national life must be subjugated or made to seem unexceptional: that American culture is now a “reactionary culture of imperiled privilege.”³⁹⁵

It is in this way, maintains Berlant, that American society became a nation whose primary imagined citizen became the “infantile citizen:” an emblematic citizen who “figure[ed] a space of possibility that transcend[ed] the fractures and hierarchies of national life.”³⁹⁶ Narratives of the symbolic national identity were recast through fictive figures that embodied an inherent ignorance and innocence of the social and cultural codes that ostensibly threatened to unravel the project of a homologous national enterprise. Berlant suggests that the process of identifying with an “American way of life,” “increasingly involves moral pressure to identify with a small cluster of privatized normal identities.”³⁹⁷ In a time of increased family values rhetoric, as she maintains, these “normal identities” are white and heteronormative. This project takes up Berlant’s concerns with public and private sexualities and their connection to the transition to adulthood in chapter six; however, the broader concerns of her argument about infantile citizenship resonate here in that in order to erase the complexities of identities and persons in the American polity that reside outside these “normal” identities, an image of a harmonious future United States that at once portrays all identities while simultaneously erasing the “traumas” of these identities must be cast. To this end, Berlant claims that the “prepolitical child and other infantile and incipient citizens have become so important because the image of futurity they convey helps fend off more complex and troubling issues of equity and violence in the present.”³⁹⁸

³⁹⁴ Berlant 4.

³⁹⁵ Berlant 6.

³⁹⁶ Berlant 27.

³⁹⁷ Berlant 192.

³⁹⁸ Berlant 219.

Accordingly, the national imagined citizen became one who was not only *not* marked and thus not marred by “identity,” but furthermore, was innocent and ignorant of these complexities. It was within this inverted utopic logic that the nation projected a future—one in which the problems of identity and the attendant identity politics no longer exist, in order to maintain the impression of a nation in which everyone has access to the American Dream. Berlant’s understanding of this new approach to the national project of citizenship sheds light on the ways in which a notion of futurity was newly expressed within the idea of citizen-making (in other words, coming to being), an evocation of self-identity that was fundamentally at odds with lived identities at the time.

The Unavoidable Immaturity of Late Modern Subjectivities

Berlant’s conceptualization of futurity and citizenship in America in the 1980s is not that dissimilar from the initial conceptualization of adolescence produced at the turn of the twentieth century. Fundamentally, for the argument of this thesis, the conceptualization of adolescence was bound up in the very idea of the *proper* process of maturation. Embedded within the categorical definition was an intentionally specific prescribed path whose completion was necessary in order for boys to become “proper” adults and citizens (and, again, according to Hall and his followers, women would never reach this apex of adulthood). As David I. Macleod points out, under the rubric of recapitulation theory, individuals were not only reenacting the journey from savagery to civilization when they reached adulthood, but were also recreating other “prior” adulthoods. In other words, in order to become an adult, a *male* individual would have to pass through a biologically determined stage (or stages) that “resemble[d] culturally the adults of earlier societies” through inherited instinctual drives.³⁹⁹ Hall maintained that each stage of progress toward maturity brought with it a “massive infusion of new instincts:” the age of adolescence would instinctually beget a “product similar to men of ancient and

³⁹⁹ Macleod points out that this belief existed prior to Hall as German educators applied it to education reform in the late nineteenth century. David I. Macleod, *Building Character in the American Boy: The Boy Scouts, YMCA and Their Forerunners, 1870-1920* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1983) 99.

medieval times—imaginative, emotional, capable of idealism and sympathetic participation in community life, but still not fully modern.”⁴⁰⁰ Thus, an individual would have to master the waves of the congenital forces of the future while attempting to hurdle the dynamisms of the past in order to “ride the crashing waves farther up the beach than anyone before him.”⁴⁰¹ It was the practice of undertaking this process and following it to its natural completion that would affirm the security of the nation’s future.

For Hall and his followers, it was imperative that an individual assimilate these new instincts and characteristics of adolescence, as failure to do so “‘almost always’ led to ‘retrogression, degeneracy, or fall,’”⁴⁰² resulting in deterioration of both the individual and the nation. Hall believed that the best boys for the task of coming-of-age were therefore middle-class boys who had the time for slow maturational growth. Consequently, Macleod maintains, “Hall’s ideal adolescence would have been impossible without a large class of economically dependent teenagers who could forego work for the sake of broader development.”⁴⁰³ In this way, the notion of development, maturity, and proper adulthood have been discursively linked to a national masculine heteronormative project for over a century. As the terms of a dominant and stable adulthood changed over the first decade of the new millennium, and the task of heteronormativity was both questioned and complexified, the path to male maturity became less distinct and its position as nation’s salvation further complicated. Understood in these terms, it is clear from its historical legacy that adolescence, as a concept, is as bound up in the project of masculinity as it is maturity.

American national mythologies are steeped in a kind of unease with our “boundless” opportunities and marked by our national fascination with those individuals who are able to harness them. Narratives about personal uplift, such as Horatio Alger stories, have long emanated from the nexus of nation building, national identity and

⁴⁰⁰ Macleod 99.

⁴⁰¹ Macleod 99.

⁴⁰² G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education*, Vol. 2 (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1904) 72. In Macleod 99.

⁴⁰³ Macleod 100.

personal identity, much like national histories of adolescence. Jeffrey Louis Decker contends that the initially character-based narratives of self-making at the end of the nineteenth century were displaced by personality-based stories at the turn of the twentieth century as the nation moved from a production-oriented to consumer-driven society. In the late modern era, the tenor of these stories shifted once again, as stories motivated by personal image, “collapsed the distinctions between image and reality, private and public selves.”⁴⁰⁴ As these narratives evolved, so too did the conceptualization of American identity, from an abstraction of self based on values set forth by the Protestant ethic (hard work, deferred gratification, and frugality), to a biological categorization equating selfhood with ascriptive or non-voluntary identities (such as nationality, gender, and ethnicity). In the late modern era, the concept of identity has once again been challenged and transformed by consumerist offerings, altering ideas about opportunity, self-invention and success.

As McGee notes, the turn of the twentieth century brought new pressures to the figure of the self-made man: as women and other social groups who had traditionally been excluded from the promises of reinvention were allowed access to these privileges, the fundamental gendered fault lines of the self-made man and his attendant notions of success were exposed. McGee aptly points out that the traditional ideal of the self-made man has only existed as a result of “the privileged positions afforded to men,” a position historically propped up by the unwaged labor of women’s daily lives, including bearing and raising children, caring for the ill and infirm, as well as managing innumerable domestic activities.⁴⁰⁵ Additionally, McGee recognizes that the image of success championed by the traditional ideal of the self-made man included particularly masculine characteristics: “independence, strength, dominance, invulnerability, and muscular vigor.”⁴⁰⁶ As the civil rights and women’s movements extended the ideal and possibility of self-invention, “resources that had been devoted almost entirely to cultivating the

⁴⁰⁴ Jeffrey Louis Decker, *Made in America: Self-Styled Success from Horatio Alger to Oprah Winfrey* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1997) 112.

⁴⁰⁵ McGee 13.

⁴⁰⁶ McGee 13.

success of (usually white) men now had to be shared.”⁴⁰⁷ As a result, the notion of a secure and stable male adulthood became precarious and conflicted, as those figures who would have otherwise achieved material success were suddenly busy inventing and reinventing themselves.

In the aughts, a large spate of films emerged giving prominence to depictions of (predominately white) male characters engaging in “laddish” behaviors and characteristics, focusing on, as David Hansen-Miller and Rosalind Gill put it, “the trials and tribulations of a young man or men as they grow up and make their way in the world (usually in North America or the UK).”⁴⁰⁸ These lad flicks include, but are certainly not limited to: *Big Daddy* (Dugan, 1999); *High Fidelity* (Frears, 2000); *Saving Silverman* (Dugan, 2001); *About a Boy* (Weitz & Weitz, 2002); *Old School* (Phillips, 2003); *School of Rock* (Linklater, 2003); *Without a Paddle* (Brill, 2004); *Wedding Crashers* (Dobkin, 2005); *Hitch* (Tennant, 2005); *The 40 Year-Old Virgin* (Apatow, 2005); *Grandma’s Boy* (Goossen, 2006); *You, Me, and Dupree* (Russo & Russo, 2006); *Failure to Launch* (Dey, 2006); *Tallegda Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby* (McKay, 2006); *Superbad* (Mottola, 2007); *Knocked Up* (Apatow, 2007); *Good Luck Chuck* (Helfrich, 2007); *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (Stoller, 2008); *Drillbit Taylor* (Brill, 2008); *Zack and Miri Make a Porno* (Smith, 2008); *Role Models* (Wain, 2008); *Step Brothers* (McKay, 2008).

Focusing specifically on the difficulties facing contemporary masculinity, these films mobilize a “predominantly white, entirely heterosexual, and generally lower middle class masculinity...as a point of crisis.”⁴⁰⁹ Crucial for the understanding of these films, as well as for the larger purposes of this chapter, as Hansen-Miller and Gill point out that early films within this generic category “wedded humour with elements of melodrama.”⁴¹⁰ Yet, as the genre evolved, these melodramatic elements subsided, largely giving way to infantile forms of comedy, deriving from what Hansen-Miller and Gill deem these films

⁴⁰⁷ McGee 14.

⁴⁰⁸ David Hansen-Miller and Rosalind Gill, “‘Lad Flicks;’ Discursive Reconstructions of Masculinity in Popular Film,” *Feminism at the Movies: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Popular Cinema*, eds. Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringer (New York: Routledge, 2011) 36.

⁴⁰⁹ Hansen-Miller and Gill 39.

⁴¹⁰ Hansen-Miller and Gill 39.

depiction of: “the juvenile nature of culturally identifiable masculine values and ideals.”⁴¹¹

This genre of films emerged alongside television programs such as *MTV's Jackass* (MTV 2000-02); *Viva La Bam* (MTV 2003-05); *Entourage* (HBO 2004-11); *Bam's Unholy Union* (MTV 2007-07); and *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (FX 2005-present) featuring several analogous generic characteristics, namely: the penchant for coprophilia and/or other supposed “immature” or “juvenile” behaviors; the abandoning or renouncing of personal accountability; the naturalness of demonstrations of incompetence; and the abatement of qualities that typically signify masculine strength and dominance in exchange for a focus on charm, helplessness, and bewilderment. While some academic attention has been paid to these texts, this consideration has been (appropriately) interested in the ways these films interact with contemporary discourses about feminism, women (and the depiction of women in these films especially with regard to how they act as foils for the male characters), and the attendant anxieties with which these texts are understood to be in negotiation.⁴¹² While these are important arguments, and certainly essential interventions into the understanding and negotiation of gender and power in a postfeminist era, these conversations will largely be left out of my analysis here. Instead, what is of interest for this project is the supposed “juvenile nature” of these “infantile” depictions (even as they are highly gendered) and how they fit into the wider themes of this thesis: that is, how the figure of the immature individual is positioned within the texts of this trend as a trope for larger concerns about power, possibility, futurity and a national project in contemporary American life.

Though these films articulate the naturalization and essentialization of masculinity and immaturity in some novel ways, the immature male figure depicted in

⁴¹¹ Hansen-Miller and Gill 39-40.

⁴¹² See Hansen-Miller and Gill's “Lad Flicks;” Peter Aililunas, ““Male Masculinity as the Celebration of Failure: The Frat Pack, Women and the Trauma of Victimization in the ‘Dude Flick,’” *Mediascape* (2009); Sean Brayton, “MTV's *Jackass*: Transgression, Abjection and the Economy of White Masculinity,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 16.1 (2007): 57-72; Fintan Walsh, “The Erotics and Politics of Masochistic Self-Abjection in *Jackass*,” *Gender Forum: Gender Disguised* 18 (2007); Lesley Speed, “Loose Cannons: White Masculinity and the Vulgar Teen Comedy Film,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 43.4 (2010): 820-841.

these texts is certainly not new. Often considered an analogue for the “lad,” are “dudes:” underachieving male characters considered: “slobs, slacker, idiot savants whose achievements are fated and manifest.”⁴¹³ John Troyer and Chani Marchiselli trace the history of the “dude” in America, discovering that the “historical” dude has stood in, throughout cinematic history, as a “means to justify a specifically American sense of entitlement.”⁴¹⁴ The “dudes of today,” they claim, are “socioeconomic products of progressivism...free from the responsibilities of a self-conscious adulthood.”⁴¹⁵ And yet, as Speed argues, the young, white, middle-class males of the 1980s and 1990s vulgar teen comedies can be read as negotiations with class and social privilege: “suggesting a declining belief in hedonistic liberation and a less favorable social positioning of youth.”⁴¹⁶ The contemporary depiction of the “man-child,” the “lad” or “dude’s” twenty-first century incarnation, lives in this inherent contradiction between presumed entitlement, waning social position, the rejection of responsibility, and gendered predeterminations.

Tellingly, the resurgence in the visibility and extension of adolescence that happened from the late 1990s through the 2000s occurred in conjunction with what is often seen as a continued crisis of masculinity. Imelda Whelehan gives the “Classic” account of the “crisis in masculinity” as:

changes in women’s lives and aspirations over the past thirty years have offered new identities for women, but precious little for men. The price of female self-determination and steady strides towards formal equality is, it seems male nihilism. The struggle for gender equality, rather than being pictured as a pair of scales, is more like a see-saw: if women go up, men must hit rock bottom.⁴¹⁷

Diederik Janssen makes the point, however, that male immaturity has become, in the first decade of the new millennium, the stand-in for “a waxing controversy over how to evaluate the postures and symbols of maturity irrespective of gender, specifically

⁴¹³ John Troyer and Chiani Marchiselli, “Slack, Slacker, Slackest: Homosocial Bonding Practices in Contemporary Dude Cinema,” *Where the Boys Are: Cinemas of Masculinity and Youth*, eds. Murray Pomerance and Frances Gateward (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005) 265.

⁴¹⁴ Troyer and Marchiselli 264.

⁴¹⁵ Troyer and Marchiselli 267.

⁴¹⁶ Speed 829.

⁴¹⁷ Imelda Whelehan, *Overloaded: Popular Culture and the Future of Feminism* (London: Women’s Press: 2000) 113.

regarding the stylistic encroachment of the Anglo-American teen.”⁴¹⁸ Referencing a spate of books published in the aughts such as Michael Kimmel’s *Guyland*, Gary Cross’ *Men to Boys*, and Joe Carmichael’s *Permanent Adolescence*,⁴¹⁹ Janssen argues that the recent increase in cultural anxieties about masculine excess translates into anxieties about “manhood,” commentary which he maintains, “refers at once to both axes of habituated privilege:” adulthood and masculinity.⁴²⁰ Judith Kegan Gardiner concurs, noting that the “crisis of masculinity” that appeared prominent in the last decades of the twentieth century was, “in fact a crisis of patriarchal entitlement,” arguing that, “boys become men in more complicated ways” than just biological maturational development, and as such, the development into manhood needs to be theorized beyond biological binaries.⁴²¹ Certainly, as this thesis suggests, agentic possibility at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first has been beleaguered by many economic, social and psychological difficulties.

Alilunas argues that this spate of films foregrounds explorations of what Susan Jeffords would call the “internalized masculine dimension.”⁴²² According to Alilunas, the part of this internalized dimension these films explore is the predominant impression of *victimization* the characters in these films typically express: that these characters believe there is something keeping them from transitioning into “successful” manhood. Alilunas’ interrogation aptly describes the ways in which the narratives of these films portray male characters as surviving in a culture that “no longer seems to appreciate or approve of their status as ‘men.’” While Alilunas makes many astute and accurate assessments about the very deliberate ways in which these films assign this blame “quite

⁴¹⁸ Diederik Janssen, “The Coming of Gender of Coming of Age,” *Journal of Boyhood Studies* 3.1 (2009): 91.

⁴¹⁹ Michael Kimmel, *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008); Gary Cross, *Men to Boys: The Making of Modern Immaturity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Joe Carmichael, *Permanent Adolescence: Why Boys Don’t Grow Up* (Far Hills, NJ: New Horizon Press, 2009).

⁴²⁰ Janssen 98.

⁴²¹ Judith Kegan Gardiner, “Theorizing Age with Gender: Bly’s Boys Feminism, and Maturity Masculinity,” *Masculinity Studies & Feminist Theory: New Directions*, ed. Judith Kegan Gardiner (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 91.

⁴²² Susan Jeffords, “Can Masculinity Be Terminated?” *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, eds. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (New York: Routledge, 1993) 245. In Alilunas 2009.

forcefully to women,” I think there are distinct ways in which these films can be read as an attempt to claim a secure adult identity in a discursive climate that is just as forcefully controlling their ability to reach subjectification. As this chapter has argued, masculinity is just as much a project of maturity as it is gender, suggesting that these films should be read with the understanding that subjectivities are products of their cultural context. Consequently, just as these films express a desire for gendered containment and a return to patriarchal dominance, so too do they express a desire for the reclamation of a secure sense of adult identity and a return to the security of a society in which the path to adulthood (including distinct gendered adult identities) is straightforwardly organized.

The ways in which this trend focuses on the positioning of male characters as failures within the context of jobs and financial autonomy is taken up in greater detail in chapter five of this project, yet as this thesis has argued, there are other ways these male individuals are positioned as attenuated. In all of these critiques, it is the “stability” of adolescence or “immaturity” that is consistently advanced as the reason for these characters’ codification as ineffectual. Film critic Anthony Lane notes that Ben Stone (Seth Rogan), protagonist of Judd Apatow’s 2007 film *Knocked Up*, most likely believes that “responsibility is a fine and terrible thing.”⁴²³ Tim Walker notes that protagonists of these films “tend to be immature and ambition-free beta males, stuck in a spiral of pornography and junk food, and forced to grow up when they encounter women, children and responsibilities.”⁴²⁴ But perhaps, *Time*’s Joel Stein states it most critically when he says, “Imagine *Porky’s* if, instead of getting revenge on the strip club, Pee Wee and Meat had a long talk about life goals, met nice girls and raised children.”⁴²⁵ In this way, Stein evokes the immaturity that is so central to this trend: the immaturity of the need for therapeutic intervention with regard to the transition to adulthood. Elaine Swan notes that the increase in therapeutic cultures and new forms of subjectivity are often viewed as “culturally feminine,”⁴²⁶ perhaps touching on some of the gendered aspect of

⁴²³ Anthony Lane, “Men at Sea,” *The New Yorker* 4 Jun 2007, Web, 10 Feb 2011.

⁴²⁴ Tim Walker, “King of Bromance: Judd Apatow,” *The Independent* 19 Aug 2009, Web, 10 Feb 2011.

⁴²⁵ Joel Stein, “Taking Judd Apatow Seriously,” *Time* 30 Jul 2009, Web, 10 Feb 2011.

⁴²⁶ Elaine Swan, “‘You Make Me Feel like a Woman’: Therapeutic Cultures and the Contagion of Femininity,” *Gender, Work and Organization* 15.1 (2008): 89.

these texts' portrayal of immaturity. Each of these editorial appraisals of the performance of adolescence demonstrates the discursive contradictions residing within both the cinematic representation of the male adolescent and their concomitant cultural response.

Lane admits that though Apatow's films look like they are about sex, "their true subject is age," noting that the main characters in *Knocked Up* often lament their loss of youth, describing the many scenes in which their ages do not harmonize with what they sense is their maturity level. Tasker and Negra explain that despite the driving imperative within postfeminism to seek out and attain only a few specific (white, middle-class, young) identities, postfeminist representation culture is, "acutely age conscious," with many texts being "exceedingly precise about the ages of their female protagonists" while simultaneously promoting a certain indetermination about aging.⁴²⁷ Sarah Projansky contends that "postfeminism is by definition contradictory," championing one aspect of female lives while simultaneously endorsing that which delimits this same life characteristic. With regard to issues of age and aging, postfeminism is adept at promoting youthfulness and the unlimited potential of girlhood while deftly narrowing the limits of female adulthood:

If the postfeminist woman is always in process, always using the freedom and equality handed to her by feminism in pursuit of having it all...but never quite managing to reach full adulthood, to fully have it all, one could say that the postfeminist woman is quintessentially adolescent...no matter what her age.⁴²⁸

Much of this ambivalence is due to the ways that the limited set of identities that postfeminism induces cultivates one particular understanding of youth: put simply, that youth is performed as a practice of subjectification and self-identification. Remarking on the various popular commentaries on contemporary male immaturity, though equally applicable to the texts and commentary of this trend, Janssen maintains that, "despite their explicit focus on male maturities current works are not characterized by a careful disentanglement of these axes."⁴²⁹ Tait adds another dimension to Janssen's comment,

⁴²⁷ Tasker and Negra 11.

⁴²⁸ Sarah Projansky, "Mass Magazine Cover Girls: Some Reflections on Postfeminist Girls and Postfeminism's Daughters," *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, eds, Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007) 45.

⁴²⁹ Jansen 98.

noting that, “the various problematizations that specify the object youth also have parallel implications for subject-formation,” signaling the need for closer examination of texts such as these from both gendered and life-staged aspects.⁴³⁰ As destiny has come to signify adulthood, it is clear that the usage of this trope works to resolve social and cultural contradictions of subjectification as well as elides the difficulties of reaching the traditional social markers of adulthood. This stop-gap resolution is further reflected the film and television texts of the next section in which the appeal toward self-work is circumvented in favor of easy outcomes and solutions found in the bestowal of passive destinies.

Passive Destinies

If the idea of an active destiny is one that entails actively creating a pathway from adolescence to adulthood in order to view ones own teleological progress as a progression from insecurity to security, then the notion of a passive destiny is the idea that an individual can acquiesce to their fate. In lieu of the psychological work that often accompanies finding an active personal destiny, for those that experience destiny in a passive sense, their destiny is bestowed or gifted. In an era where mastery of one’s environment may be highly difficult due to the limitations on contemporary American adolescence, an uncovered or preordained destiny rectifies this contingency.

Representational culture in the first decade of the twenty-first century prominently featured characters discovering or uncovering destinies that implied chance, luck and other benevolent outside forces. Films such as *The Princess Diaries* (Marshall, 2001), *What a Girl Wants* (Gordon, 2003), and *A Cinderella Story* (Rosman, 2004) bestow their young female protagonists with a fairy tale life by exposing their true exceptional identities after years spent in “ordinary” existences. In these instances, the discovery of royal pedigree is treated as an almost magical endowment of power.

⁴³⁰ Gordon Tait, *Youth, Sex and Government* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2000) 144.

Two other films released in the first decade of the new millennium bestow a similar privilege to their protagonists through the use of sorcery. *Just My Luck* (Petrie, 2006) and *It's a Boy Girl Thing* (Hurran, 2006), reorient their protagonists' perspective such that they might understand another's destiny as a way of discovering their own. In *Just My Luck*, popular and fortunate Ashley Albright (Lindsay Lohan), and unlucky and afflicted Jake Hardin (Chris Pine), switch "lucks" when they kiss at a party. The film culminates in the two main characters having lived life both with and without the ease and security of fortune, deciding that having love is better than having luck. *It's a Boy Girl Thing* follows the same narrative formula as other body-swap movies, such as 2003's *Freaky Friday* (Waters), in which a mother and daughter switch bodies and lives after eating an enchanted fortune cookie, while 2002's *The Hot Chick*, in which an enchanted pair of stolen earrings facilitates the switch of Clive (Rob Schneider), a 30 year-old petty thief and teenage cheerleader Jessica (Rachel McAdams). *Boy Girl Thing's* Woody Deane (Kevin Zegers) and Nell Bedworth (Samaire Armstrong), have the (mis)fortune of arguing in front of a statue of the Aztec god, Tezcatlipoca, while on a class field trip to a museum, only to wake up the next morning in one another's bodies. By exploring lives from different points of view, these films endow their characters with a different understanding of the world, thus changing their destinies. In this way, these films evince the acute interconnectivity of destiny and self-hood through the alteration of dysfunctional states in a destructured risk society.

The Reluctant Hero and The Ineffectuality of The Late Modern Self

A sense of destiny bestowed by outside forces is clearly not the only sense of destiny offered by contemporary texts in which the coming-of-age process is highlighted. Perhaps the most prominent trend in these films is the trope of the reluctant hero, featuring a protagonist who has been granted special superpowers and is then called upon to perform some sort of task, always for the greater good of the community or the world, as seen in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB 1997-2003), *Charmed* (WB 1998-2006),

Smallville (WB 2001-6, CW 2006-present), *Jake 2.0* (UPN 2003-4), *Joan of Arcadia* (CBS 2003-5), *Tru Calling* (Fox 2003-5), *Supernatural* (WB 2005-6, CW 2006-present), *Heroes* (NBC 2006-10), *Reaper* (WB 2007-9), *Chuck* (NBC 2007-present), *The Matrix Trilogy* (Wachowski Brothers, 1999; 2003; 2003), *Spiderman Series* (Raimi, 2002; 2004; 2007), *Jumper* (Liman 2008), and *Wanted* (Bekmambetov, 2008). As discussed elsewhere in this project and this chapter, developmental rubrics as set forth by psychologists such as G. Stanley Hall and Erik Erikson have been, as Jennifer Vadeboncoeur reminds us, “described and constructed through a theory that emphasizes developmental achievements over the course of sequential and cumulative stages.”⁴³¹ In this sense, identity development is envisioned as a forward movement with distinctly systematic modes of execution that work to “rank individuals according to their placement in time,” a practice that enables the organization and processing of these individuals by institutions charged with their management.⁴³² Nancy Lesko points out that the creation of adolescence and the creation of “uniform world clock time” were generated during the same historical moment, thus indelibly linking the conceptual development of adolescence to the modern temporal order.⁴³³ Explaining that though the steam engine is often cited as the marker of modernism, Lesko argues that the true marker ought to be the clock, due to the ways it effectuated “temporalization of experience.”⁴³⁴ Becoming *the* defining quality of modernization, time was measured “in order to use it,” reasons Lesko, adding that the standardization of a world clock was essential to the development of capitalism and an American capitalist society.

Piggybacking off Michel Foucault’s theory of panoptical control from his work, *Discipline and Punish*,⁴³⁵ and the totalizing and normalizing control that is produced as a result, Lesko describes the ways in which theories and rubrics of adolescent development

⁴³¹ Jennifer A. Vadeboncoeur, “Naturalised, Restricted, Packaged, and Sold: Reifying the Fictions of ‘Adolescent’ and ‘Adolescence,’” *Re/Constructing “the Adolescent:” Sign, Symbol, and Body*, eds. Jennifer A. Vadeboncoeur and Lisa Patel Stevens (New York: Peter Lang, 2004) 1.

⁴³² Nancy Lesko, *Act Your Age! A Cultural Construction of Adolescence* (New York: Routledge Falmer, 2001)

113-4, her emphasis.

⁴³³ Lesko 107.

⁴³⁴ Lesko 108.

⁴³⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

act as a means to govern, watch, and manage behavior. She asserts that developmental rubrics, deeply rooted in the idea of “panoptical time,” were used to evince the way that adolescence, specifically with regard to development,

emphasizes the endings toward which youth are to progress and places individual adolescents into a temporal narrative that demands a moratorium of responsibility yet expects them at the same time to act as if each moment of the present is consequential.⁴³⁶

Thus, as adolescence became institutionalized through the social institutions of education, organized leisure (through associations like the Boy Scouts), and juvenile justice policies, capitalism, management, productivity, and futurity were bound in the conception of a new life-stage that evoked perpetual “becoming.” Thus, as Lesko maintains, youth (or those in the process of coming to be) are conceptually trapped in the “conflicted experiences of ‘becoming but not being,’” waiting for an unknown future to happen *to* them.⁴³⁷ Under this confinement in the present, the waiting for something to happen, “the suspension of temporal identity and ability to act and master one’s environment can be ‘salvational.’”⁴³⁸ Thus, the concept of destiny stands in for both the acquisition of control, as well as the redemption and liberation from the entrapped state of contemporary adolescence.

The connection between individual control over identity and the concept of “salvation” traces back to the beginning of American history when identity was entirely bound up in religious doctrine, specifically that of Protestantism, the dominant religious influence in the founding of the nation. The Protestant ethos’ emphasis on redemption through individual action, as well as its focus on self-improvement as a means to personal salvation, has been a key influence in this regard. Additionally, the ideological structure of the United States has been heavily influenced by liberalism, which emphasizes the importance of the individual and the rights of the individual to seek prosperity within society. Closely linked to this is capitalism, which advocates a free market economy wherein citizens are free to pursue this prosperity through individual

⁴³⁶ Lesko 107.

⁴³⁷ Lesko 123.

⁴³⁸ Lesko 131.

means. Embedded in this ideology is the view that personal success has little connection to fixed (classed, raced, gendered) status, as success under capitalism is touted as a result of individual worth and personal determination.⁴³⁹

As corporate culture increased privatization and the government abandoned support for its constituents, governmental institutions were disregarded as a means of addressing basic social problems. Thus, as privatization and market-based initiatives became the only solution offered as an antidote to public ills, and as the public sector became increasingly devoted to the needs of corporations, excessive individualism was championed at the expense of responsible collective public action. That so many of these texts emerged within a short span of time and seem to have resonated so deeply, perhaps speaks to just how difficult the actualities of reaching a sense of subjectivity in the first few years of the twenty-first century had become. Though film has long been a medium that produces fantasies about heroes and heroic action, at the turn of the new millennium, mainstream representational culture produced fantasies about social responsibility resting on the heads of individuals and the kinds of power believed necessary to overcome individual ineffectuality.

As with all the forms of contemporary adolescence presented throughout this project, the character bestowed with a preordained destiny has prior cinematic antecedents whose exploration is advantageous with regard to the contextualization of the contemporary adolescence. Robert Ray explains that throughout the history of American cinema, certain cultural myths were produced and reproduced through the invocation of problems, with their resolution acting as a way of resolving real-life concerns. According to Ray, character foils were produced and assimilated as a means of overcoming dichotomies: “Often, the movies’ reconciliatory pattern concentrated on a single character magically embodying diametrically opposite traits.”⁴⁴⁰ The most significant of the character types that exemplify competing myths, and the one that

⁴³⁹ Sandell 22.

⁴⁴⁰ Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema: 1930-1980* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985) 58.

cinema traded in most heavily was, Ray maintains, the “reluctant hero.”⁴⁴¹ Significantly, Ray argues that the reluctant hero combined the characteristics of the outlaw hero (the adventurer, explorer, gunfighter) who embodied self-determination and freedom from entanglements, with the characteristics of the official hero (teacher, lawyer, politician, and family man), who represented the American belief in collective action and objective moral righteousness.⁴⁴² Thus, the reluctant hero encapsulated a figure whose ultimate willingness to help the community satisfied the hero’s necessary moral decency, but whose temporary involvement preserved the values of individualism and personal choice.⁴⁴³

Reluctant heroes of the first decade of the twenty-first century continue to walk this fine line between the outlaw hero’s “childishness and propensity to whims, tantrums, and emotional decisions,”⁴⁴⁴ and the official hero’s embodiment of, “the best attributes of adulthood: sound reasoning and judgment, wisdom and sympathy based on experience.”⁴⁴⁵ Evidenced in characters such as Tru (Eliza Dushku), in *Tru Calling*, the contemporary reluctant hero continues to negotiate this dualism of obligation and choice. While working in a morgue to gain experience before attending medical school, 22 year-old Tru discovers that she has the ability to live the last day of a dead person’s life, helping him or her to avoid their impending death. As in other texts of this trend, after Tru discovers her gift, she feels burdened by both the gift and its responsibility though she enjoys being able to save lives. This point is recurrently driven home by the fact that Tru is only able to help those corpses who ask for her help, making her gift random, disruptive, and not in her control. The show plays with the ways in which Tru’s gift helps her change her life for the better (redoing a bad date so that it turns out well, remembering a friend’s birthday after having forgot it the first time), but also interferes in such a way that the majority of the time Tru must forgo the important things in her life in lieu of saving someone else’s (such as missing the MCATs). Additionally, due to the

⁴⁴¹ Ray 59.

⁴⁴² Ray 63-65.

⁴⁴³ Ray 65.

⁴⁴⁴ Ray 59.

⁴⁴⁵ Ray 60.

nature of Tru's gift (i.e., she has foreknowledge of future events), the people she is trying to help do not know that they need her help and are often reluctant to let her help and dismissive of her advice.

In this way, Tru can be seen to display some reluctance about her situation, but continues to save those who ask for her help, as it is her destiny. In many ways, this can be seen as analogous to what McGee calls "beleaguered selves." McGee argues that in a late modern society, the self is perceived as increasingly isolated, and that work on the self is a largely individual undertaking. Individuals, in this way, are thus culturally understood not only to be in charge of their identities and secure senses of self, but also their psychological happiness, which has contemporarily increasingly been equated with success. Accordingly, McGee notes, "With the emergence of an emphasis on self-fulfillment, one finds there is no end-point for self-making: individuals can continuously pursue shifting and subjective criteria for success."⁴⁴⁶ Certainly, this trend is evident in the emergence of several lone, reluctant heroes populating screens in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Moreover, like Tru (and Sam from the example at the opening of this chapter), many of the characters featured in texts of this trend are endowed with magical powers that allow them to navigate their newfound destinies, and by extension, their subjectivities. Characters in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Charmed*, *Tru Calling*, *Supernatural*, *Heroes*, *Reaper*, *Spiderman Series*, *Jumper*, and *Wanted* are all cast as reluctant heroes, fighting for good, usually by themselves, and often in secret. The insularity of the figure of the reluctant hero aligns with current understandings of individuation and the advancement of individuality in a neoliberal era; yet, representationally, the additional aspect of this trend in which these figurative heroes rely on allotted gifts or powers can be seen in accordance with other aspects of contemporary self-making discourse. McGee argues that one of the keys to maintaining the appearance of self-mastery is the possession or display of enthusiasm. Unlike

⁴⁴⁶ McGee 19.

authenticity, which is often considered the goal of subjectification, enthusiasm, which she defines as, “the suggestion that one is infused with ‘theos,’ or supernatural inspiration,” acts as a legitimating force in the search for the self. Furthermore, enthusiasm conveniently, and I would argue, passively, acts as a substitute for authenticity, as “enthusiasm does not rely on any claim of origins.”⁴⁴⁷ McGee even alludes to the benefit of being “infused with divine authority,” as is the case with Joan, from *Joan of Arcadia*, asking: “what could be more authentic and masterful than [that]?”⁴⁴⁸

Toby Miller argues that there is a rift between young and old in twenty-first century America. Miller contends that older Americans believe in the “severe moral decline” of the young, in part, because young Americans supposedly have a more skeptical and critical attitude toward contemporary America than older Americans. This is so much the case that, according to Miller, only 19 percent of the adult population in 2002 believed that young Americans knew the difference between good and evil.⁴⁴⁹ As has been argued throughout this chapter, neoliberal policies at work since the 1980s have affected self-management and personal subjectivization through cultural means. Miller asserts that the paradox of these policies is that they force “self-reliance and possessive individualism” by “valuing self-absorbed accumulation and identifying malefactors supposedly responsible for social dislocation.”⁴⁵⁰ Moreover, as risk is now a requisite part of individual life and civic organization, risk society registers the psychological impact of these systemic and economic changes. Miller asserts that within this social framework, economic deregulation “with all its attendant risks, was twinned with a moral reregulation, with all its attendant panics.”⁴⁵¹ In this way,

Moral panics become means of dealing with risk society via appeals to ‘values,’ a displacement from socioeconomic crises and fissures...But rather than being mechanisms of functional control that necessarily displace systemic social

⁴⁴⁷ McGee 167.

⁴⁴⁸ McGee 167.

⁴⁴⁹ Toby Miller, “A Risk Society of Moral Panic: The US in the Twenty-First Century,” *Cultural Politics* 2.3 (2006): 300.

⁴⁵⁰ Miller 302.

⁴⁵¹ Miller 312.

critique onto particular scapegoats, moral panics have themselves been transformed by the discourse of risk society.⁴⁵²

As risk society produces moral panic, people, living in a society that keeps governance at arms length and emphasizes “national, personal risk” over “global, collective solidarity,” will turn to “religiosity and other forms of superstition and ahistorical politics.”⁴⁵³ Miller contends that moral panics have historically been (dis)placed onto the youth of America. As a result of the discourse mobilized in a risk society, this moral panic emerging in the first decade of the new millennium, according to Miller, is infused with superstition and religiosity.⁴⁵⁴ Douglas Kellner echoes Miller, arguing that,

When individuals perceive that they do not have control over their lives and that they are dominated by powerful forces outside themselves, people are attracted to occultism...[as it becomes] an efficacious ideological mode which helps explain unpleasant circumstances or incomprehensible events with the aid of religious or supernatural mythologies.⁴⁵⁵

In light of Miller and Kellner’s arguments, it is clear that youth, embodied in the figure of the immature individual, has become bound up in ways of making sense of late modern subjectivities while simultaneously being condemned by these same sense-making apparatuses.

Conclusion

According to Beck, risk in late modern global society is unequally distributed, thereby dispensing an unequal vulnerability. As Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel maintain, “Social inequality continues to exert a powerful hold over people’s lives, but increasingly does so at the level of the individual rather than the group or class.”⁴⁵⁶ Thus, according to Furlong and Cartmel, Beck contends that there has become an individualization of risk, meaning that situations that would have once led to political

⁴⁵² Miller 312.

⁴⁵³ Miller 312.

⁴⁵⁴ Miller 312.

⁴⁵⁵ Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and Postmodern* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995) 126.

⁴⁵⁶ Furlong and Cartmel 5.

action are instead interpreted as necessitating individual and personal action.⁴⁵⁷ This is especially pertinent for the categorization of youth and for the greater themes of this chapter, since, as this chapter has shown, the search for resolutions to entrenched inequalities has become fixated on individual ‘deficiencies’ rather than reassessing social and economic causes and solutions. Furlong and Cartmel gesture toward the perils this situation engenders, noting that, “an increase in social inequality may be associated with an intensification of individualization as more people are placed in unpleasant situations which they interpret as being due, in part, to their own failures.”

For young individuals, this is not just a matter of “interpreting” unpleasant situations as personal failure, but rather, as this chapter (and certainly chapter two) has shown, youth as a social, cultural, and conceptual category has been deliberately impugned for what are presented as personal deficiencies. Even without any recognition of the ways in which young individuals have been implicated in their own failure, Furlong and Cartmel contend that due to the myriad opportunities for maturation, of which the both the pursuit and discovery of personal destiny add countless additional prospects, young individuals would still face this inequality of opportunity in other ways:

The traditional links between the family, school and work seem to have weakened as young people embark on journeys into adulthood which involve a wide variety of routes, many of which appear to have uncertain outcomes. But the greater range of opportunities available helps to obscure the extent to which existing patterns of inequality are simply being reproduced in different ways.”⁴⁵⁸

This chapter (and the larger thesis) is an attempt to chart out the ways in which these patterns of inequality have taken up signification as they are increasingly mapped on to an ever-increasing portion of the American population through the use of emotional and psychological markers of immaturity.

Thus, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the concept of “identity moratorium” and adolescence could be understood as at once homologous and in stark contention. That individuals were meant to utilize adolescence as a trial period in which to “try on different identities,” is a notion that had become so heavily ingrained in

⁴⁵⁷ Furlong and Cartmel 6.

⁴⁵⁸ Furlong and Cartmel 9.

American culture that it has become an essential part of the contemporary transition to adulthood. Consequently, adolescence has become an imperative embedded in a process of selection: a compulsory moratorium in which the institutions that were built to facilitate these moratoria now define and essentialize adolescents as “unfinished” or “undeveloped,” a stigmatization that works to limit access to full subjectivity. In the following chapters, these patterns of inequality and agency will be examined looking at specific doorsteps leading to opportunity and subjectivity or limiting these potentialities.

Chapter Four

Under Pressure:

Education, The Transition to Adulthood, and the American Dream

Society has rules. And the first rule is: you go to college. You want to have a happy and successful life? You go to college. If you want to be somebody: you go to college. If you want to fit in: you go to college.

-Accepted

The myth of the American Dream promulgates the idea that America is the land of opportunity and that those who work hard enough and apply themselves will achieve success. In the last century, higher education, and its attendant promise of individual betterment became a deep-seated part of the Dream's internal logic, promising equal opportunity to those who are accepted into its fold. Whereas once education was the path to success for only a select few,⁴⁵⁹ contemporarily, college attendance has become the expectation, not the exception. Certainly, higher education's new cultural standing is a reaction to changes in a contemporary labor market within which a greater number of jobs now require a college degree. Furthermore, this cultural primacy can be seen as another aspect of the contemporary dominant discursive field in which cultural imperatives are prescribed as part of the system of exclusion that has created the dilemma that is the late modern transition to adulthood. Social and political discourse states, as the next chapter will argue, that in order to be a successful adult, one must discover and realize his or her career aspirations; yet, opportunities for occupational

⁴⁵⁹ In 1910, 13.5 percent of persons aged 25 and over had completed high school and 2.7 percent had received a Bachelor's degree or higher. Nearly one hundred years later, 85.7 percent of the nation's individuals 25 and over had completed high school while 28.7 percent had a Bachelor's degree or higher. Stephen J. McNamee and Robert K. Miller, *The Meritocracy Myth* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009) 109.

participation and fulfillment are predicated on a determined educational merit available to only a select few who have obtained credentials from certain enshrined educational institutions.

As detailed in the second chapter of this project, there are five traditional markers of adulthood: moving out of the parental home, marriage, conferment of a degree, having a child, and starting a career. Attached to these markers are five primary institutions that govern these transitions, and, according to James Côté, have done since the 1800s: “family, religion, education, the state, and the market economy (first in its industrial phase, and more recently in its corporate phase).”⁴⁶⁰ In the early 1800s, family and religion were the key institutions that provided normative structure for the transition to adulthood for much of the American population. Since that time, the role of religion as an institutional influence on the coming-of-age process has greatly diminished, while the family's role has gone from a central structural influence to assuming what was once the state's role of providing financial protection.⁴⁶¹ In late modernity, education and the market economy have taken the place of family and religion, becoming *the* key systemic and structural institutions that directly influence and govern the success or failure of the transition to adulthood. One of this project's primary assertions argues that the subject formation of the contemporary adolescent is constructed by discursive practices in the regulation of the self. Unlike other chapters of this project in which behavior and attitude are the primary considerations in an individual's ability to successfully cross the threshold from adolescence to adulthood, education remains the one barrier where attaining eligibility to cross this threshold exists outside individual control.

Furthermore, in addition to the transitional hurdle that is the college acceptance process, many of the barriers presented in the film and television texts of this chapter are economic barriers rather than institutional ones. Anya Kamenetz, author of, *Generation Debt: Why Now is a Terrible Time to be Young*, contends that part of the reason that young individuals had trouble reaching financial autonomy in the aughts was due to an

⁴⁶⁰ James Côté, *Arrested Adulthood: The Changing Nature of Maturity and Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2000) 163.

⁴⁶¹ Côté 163.

economic shift “to a labor market that reward[ed] only the highly educated with livable and growing wages.”⁴⁶² The birth rate in the United States has continually increased since the mid-1970s, leading to the largest high school class in history in 2008.⁴⁶³ As a result, receipt of coveted spots at any university, let alone an elite university, became harder to obtain as individuals came of college-age at a time when “a bachelor’s degree has come to be widely regarded in the same way a high school degree was thirty years ago—the baseline for getting a livable job.”⁴⁶⁴ As Tamara Draut frames it, the contemporary attitude toward youth, education, and success has become a “story of downscaled dreams;”⁴⁶⁵ and in many ways, the representation of the experience of education on American film and television in the first decade of the millennium articulates this. Within the popular texts examined in this chapter, institutional barriers are reframed as personal, immutable limitations. Consequently, individual dreams are altered, maneuvers which are then championed as empowering.

Film and television texts of the new millennium foreground anxieties produced by contemporary educational prescriptions portraying individuals as confused and misled about higher education and its potential for individual success. Throughout this project, I have argued that the traditional markers of adulthood have become more difficult to reach in a neoliberal era in which individuals have lost traditional means of social and cultural support. This, as I have argued, has naturalized the depiction of the transition to adulthood as the journey of self-realization, in which personal failures are codified as personal choice. In the following two chapters, I will argue that this is signified through contingent versions of adolescents, or immature individuals, in the form of occupational and (hetero)sexualized identities. These conditional personhoods, and the barriers to their formation, are more easily fashioned into the portrayal of failure due to personal choice since both occupational and sexualized identities require a certain kind of

⁴⁶² Anya Kamenetz, *Generation Debt: Why Now is a Terrible Time to be Young* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2006) 4.

⁴⁶³ Kamenetz “*Generation Debt*,” 20.

⁴⁶⁴ Nan Mooney, *(Not) Keeping Up With Our Parents: The Decline of the Professional Middle Class* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008) 44.

⁴⁶⁵ Tamara Draut, *Strapped: Why America’s 20- and 30-somethings Can’t Get Ahead* (New York: Doubleday, 2005) 28.

accompanying performance of success, as will be made clear in subsequent chapters. The texts interrogated throughout this chapter differ in that, as I assert, there can be no performance of academic success when what is needed for that realization is an actual conferment of a credential dependent upon obstacles under institutional control. Here, unlike the discursive regulations evinced throughout the other chapters of this thesis, the texts examined in this chapter provide conditions in which there are actual gatekeepers to crossing the threshold of maturity.

Much academic scholarship exploring school or college films tends to define films that fit into this category as those movies whose narratives take place within the setting of junior high, high school and/or a college or university campus. Timothy Shary, contends that the “school film” (which he considers a subgenre of the teen film genre) is defined by

its focus on the actual socialization process at the school, as opposed to other youth issues which are less integral to the school setting, such as crime, sex, terror, or family (although these issues are often developed in films around school settings).⁴⁶⁶

While this is certainly one approach to the study of college on film, this chapter is instead concerned with interrogating how the trope of college admissions works to illuminate larger concerns about late modern life-staged subjects and subjectivities. To that end, the films and television programs this chapter examines do not necessarily take place at schools or campuses, but are concerned with the intersection of education and adolescence, expressing frustration over the educational system by juxtaposing the difficulty of operating within a system that does not deliver on its “promises,” with rhetoric about the necessity of education in the process of individual development.

Ultimately, as this chapter argues, this spate of films negotiating the transition to adulthood through the themes of college admissions and the necessity of a degree points to changes in the cultural value of education and credentials. As Henry Giroux argues, within the contemporary educational system, schools are no longer concerned with

⁴⁶⁶ Timothy Shary, *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary American Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002) 27.

teaching and learning, but rather with the concerns of the market place. Educational reform enacted in the last decade of the twenty-first century has altered schools from public institutions concerned with the welfare of civil society, to corporatized models of education that promote market logics and individualism. Giroux further contends that the educational system under neoliberalism promotes citizenship as an “utterly privatized affair that produces self-interested individuals.”⁴⁶⁷ In what follows, this chapter maps out the ways in which, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, these changes to educational institutions have evinced representations of the adolescent-image which both speak to constructions of selfhood, personal identity and generational characterizations. Thus, the transition to adulthood can be understood through the double bind offered by college entrance and completion as a means to prosperity and opportunity while simultaneously (seemingly or otherwise) acting as a barrier to these same opportunities.

Credentialism and Subjectification

At the end of the twentieth century and throughout the first decade of the twenty-first, jobs ranging from those in the information economy to those in the service economy required a college degree—even jobs that may not have seemed intellectually demanding or required years of training. While it may not have seemed necessary for an individual to have held a college degree to perform his or her particular job duties as a coffee shop barista, contemporary labor market logic demanded otherwise. During the aughts, more individuals obtained college degrees while the number of jobs providing a livable wage decreased. As jobs in the service sector multiplied, job pools began to fill with applicants with college degrees, whether or not the job itself demanded a skill set provided by a degree, resulting in a labor market comprised of jobs requiring a certain skill set and applicants with degrees connoting an entirely different set of skills. Certainly, the

⁴⁶⁷ Henry A. Giroux, “Neoliberalism, Corporate Culture, and the Promise of Higher Education: The University as a Democratic Public Sphere,” *Harvard Educational Review* 72.4 (2002): 425.

numbers make getting a degree seem worthwhile: college graduates earn, on average, 67 percent more than those without a degree and have an easier time finding a job.⁴⁶⁸

The resulting importance and pressures of obtaining a college degree are referred to as what Randall Collins calls, “credentialism:” “the monopolization of access to the more rewarding jobs and economic opportunities by the holders of degrees and certificates.”⁴⁶⁹ This logic is circular: as soon as specific credentials are established as a requirement for hiring, inflationary pressures to obtain credentials intensify, heightening the need for further credentials. Thus, the desire for social mobility can significantly intensify credential requirements, producing a kind of credentials inflation, which according to McNamee and Miller, results in “the proliferation of specialized occupational jurisdictions that are off limits to anyone without the accepted credentials.”⁴⁷⁰

The contemporary rationale of the Dream, however, counters this claim by maintaining that a college degree is the only legitimate avenue to opportunity and access. In their book, *The Meritocracy Myth*, Stephen J. McNamee and Robert K. Miller contend that within the myth of the American Dream, education is the great equalizer: it is the “engine” of meritocracy and the key to success, animated by the notion that, “education identifies and selects intelligent, talented, and motivated individuals and provides educational training in direct proportion to individual merit.”⁴⁷¹ In this way, education is framed as the great equalizer, providing all individuals, regardless of their upbringing or circumstances, equal access to all opportunities that education might afford. Following this logic, the clearest, most direct, and simplest path to success is therefore through higher education, a narrative that has engendered the perception that acceptance into

⁴⁶⁸ Anya Kamenetz, *DIY U: Edupunks, Edupreneurs, and the Coming Transformation of Higher Education* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2010) 51.

⁴⁶⁹ Randall Collins, *The Credential Society: A Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification* (New York: Academic Press, 1979). In Stephen J. McNamee, and Robert K. Miller, Jr., *The Meritocracy Myth*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009) 111.

⁴⁷⁰ McNamee and Miller 111.

⁴⁷¹ Stephen J. McNamee and Robert K. Miller, Jr., *The Meritocracy Myth* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009) 107.

college is the most important starting point on the path to success (and within the greater argument of this thesis, maturity).

Outside this narrative, the role of education as a gatekeeping institution is different from the depiction the logic of the Dream presents. Instead of affording all individuals the opportunity to get ahead, McNamee and Miller contend that education, “largely reproduces existing inequalities across generations.”⁴⁷² Indeed, McNamee and Miller explain that despite the conviction that education is meritocratic, children are largely educated in direct proportion to their social-class standing.⁴⁷³ This discrepancy between the necessity of a college degree and its value to future adult possibility is unambiguously made in several films of the first decade of the twenty-first century that highlight the contradiction that education offers in the way of reaching full-subjectivity.

At the end of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first, jobs ranging from those in the information economy to those in the service economy now require a college degree, even jobs that may not be intellectually demanding or require years of training. While an individual may not seem to need a college degree to perform his or her particular job duties as a coffee shop barista, contemporary labor market logic demands otherwise. During the aughts, more individuals obtained college degrees while the number of jobs providing a livable wage decreased. As jobs in the service sector multiplied, job pools began to fill with applicants with college degrees, whether or not the job itself demanded a skill set provided by a degree, resulting in a labor market comprised of jobs requiring a certain skill set and applicants with degrees connoting an entirely different set of skills. Certainly, the numbers make getting a degree seem worthwhile: college graduates earn, on average, 67 percent more than those without a degree and have an easier time finding a job.⁴⁷⁴

The resulting importance and pressures of obtaining a college degree are referred to as what Randall Collins calls, “credentialism:” “the monopolization of access to the

⁴⁷² McNamee and Miller 107.

⁴⁷³ McNamee and Miller 107.

⁴⁷⁴ Anya Kamenetz, *DIY U: Edupunks, Edupreneurs, and the Coming Transformation of Higher Education* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2010) 51.

more rewarding jobs and economic opportunities by the holders of degrees and certificates.”⁴⁷⁵ This logic is circular: as soon as specific credentials are established as a requirement for hiring, inflationary pressures to obtain credentials intensify, heightening the need for further credentials. Thus, the desire for social mobility can significantly intensify credential requirements, producing a kind of credentials inflation, which according to McNamee and Miller, results in “the proliferation of specialized occupational jurisdictions that are off limits to anyone without the accepted credentials.”⁴⁷⁶ The tension produced by the large gap between the myth of education as a meritocratic system and the reality of its class reproduction was evinced through the trope of college acceptance, acting as the primary narrative motivation for film and television texts featuring educational concerns produced within the first decade of the new millennium. Films like *Orange County* (Kasdan, 2002), *The Perfect Score* (Robbins, 2004), and *Accepted* (Pink, 2006), play out the tensions stemming from the increase in pressure due to credential inflation, coupled with the confusion and stress of getting in. Though the plots of these films are clearly about college acceptance, they focus on how the significance of the college acceptance process will both affect their futures as well as what the process says about who they are as individuals.

The Perfect Score, takes place in Princeton, New Jersey, the home of Educational Testing Services, the company that administers the SAT Reasoning Test. Previously known as the Scholastic Aptitude Test, then the Scholastic Assessment Test, the SAT⁴⁷⁷ was deemed inadequate as a means to assess intelligence, thus, currently, SAT is now an empty acronym. The gravity of the test, as opposed to its relative importance to an individual’s life, is the subject of the film as six high school students devise a plan to break into ETS to steal the answers to the SAT. Each student has a different reason for wanting the answers, two of whom believe that despite their otherwise accomplished resumes, they will not be accepted into the college of their choice due to their low test

⁴⁷⁵ Randall Collins, *The Credential Society: A Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification* (New York: Academic Press, 1979). In Stephen J. McNamee, and Robert K. Miller, Jr., *The Meritocracy Myth*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009) 111.

⁴⁷⁶ McNamee and Miller 111.

⁴⁷⁷ The SAT is owned, published and developed by the College Board, a non-profit organization.

scores. The six students pull off the break in, but do not find the answers only the test's questions. In their desperation to better their futures, they work together to take the test. While the film is ostensibly a commentary on the unfairness of standardized tests and the pressures of the application process, clearly, the main concern of the film is the characters' perception of the homogenizing effect of standardized testing.

The film begins with a voice over explanation of the SAT exam by remarking that two million kids took the exam "last year," with scores ranging from "500: you're going to community college and driving a bus," to "1600: you're Ivy League, driving a Porsche." The voice over then explains that the SAT exam is a "standardized test: standardized meaning, they see us all the same. A kid, is a kid, is a kid." With each mention of "a kid," an image of three very different students emerges onscreen: a white male student in a suit and tie, a black female student being manually scanned at security, and a pregnant female student.



Figure 3: "A kid, is a kid, is a kid."

Then the voice over then introduces the main protagonist, Kyle (Chris Evans), proclaiming, "he's a good guy who knows where he wants to go in life. But for now, the SAT is standing in the way of Kyle's dream: It's telling him, "You're just average."

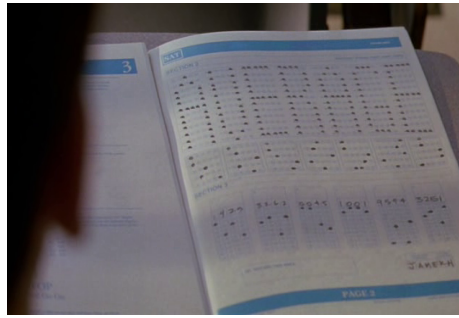


Figure 4: "You're just average."

While it is true that standardized tests do not allow for individualized answers (at least outside the essay portion of the test, certainly), in fact, this type of testing ostensibly exists for the exact purpose of removing outlying factors to make comparison easier. The voice over continues to explain how the SAT can be perceived as a homogenizing apparatus: "You could be the class brain, a kid in the middle, or dumb as a post. When you walk into this room, it's not about who you are. The SAT is about who you'll be."

This voice-over monologue acts as the prologue for a film about the desperation various students have over needing to achieve scores that will allow them access to the colleges, and futures, of their choice. While the film reminds us that the SAT is only one component of the application process, the film likens the exam to *the* primary barrier to access to college. Moreover, the film invokes the reason the SAT acts as this barrier due to its inability to allow for distinct individuality or to display personality traits. This is reinforced by the ending of the film in which, after the break in has been carried out, each of the six students decide they either are no longer going to retake the exam, or will take the exam without the answers they worked so hard to obtain. The film takes care to depict these decisions as positive, constructive resolutions, even for Kyle, the student whose desperation to get into Cornell to become a successful architect was the films' narrative motivation. Kyle's decision comes as a surprise to the other students involved in the break in; however, when asked if he is sure he wants to forsake a guarantee on his dream, Kyle responds: "If they want to put a number on it then to hell with them. I know who I am." The narrative device of downscaling dreams, affirming modified choices,

and deflecting the barriers the system erects by changing personal perceptions, attitudes and expectations works to position the outcomes and encumbrances of institutional exclusionary practices onto individuals. Within the circumstances depicted in films interrogated in this chapter, this discursive repositioning of accountability falls onto individuals comprising an entire generation.

This depiction of a generation's misgivings about the college entrance process and the resolutions offered by popular culture as a panacea for these apprehensions are in line with pervasive rhetoric signaling contemporary value-laden cultural characterizations toward generational attitudes. As examined in previous chapters, contemporary discursive rhetoric surrounding maturationally-challenged individuals reinforces and circumscribes judicious reactions to attendant economic, social and cultural changes as legitimating evidence for continued management and regulation. Members of the Millennial generation (those born from 1981 to 1996⁴⁷⁸) entered college beginning in the year 2000, with the first of those members graduating in 2004. Neil Howe and William Strauss' characterization of this Millennial cohort speaks to this contemporary discursive construction, as they forewarn that Millennials possess seven core traits that separate them from previous generations which will accompany their entrance to college: they have been taught they are special, they are sheltered, confident, team-oriented, conventional, pressured, and achieving.⁴⁷⁹ The general message communicated about this "Generation Me"⁴⁸⁰ cohort of undergraduates is that individuals comprising this age-range often act entitled to a specific level of attention and guidance. This reigning generational discourse asserts that Millennials have been told they can "do anything," as long as they remain true to themselves, the notion of which, the previous chapter has argued, is a cultural construct in itself. Thus, as is

⁴⁷⁸ As defined by The Pew Research Center.

⁴⁷⁹ Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Go to College: Strategies for a New Generation on Campus: Recruiting and Admissions, Campus Life, and the Classroom* (Great Falls, VA: LifeCourse Associates, 2007).

⁴⁸⁰ Jean M. Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

asserted by dominant discursive logic, any failure to reach maturational status should be read within this context as diagnostic personal failure.

The SAT, and other standardized tests such as the ACT, have long been criticized for raced, classed and gendered biases;⁴⁸¹ however, as Monty Neill, FairTest deputy director argues, the more important concern is how the scores are utilized in the admissions process. Neill contends that the issue is not whether the test is an accurate or unbiased measure of an individual's skill, but rather, whether or not it is used as one piece of evidence in the admissions process or used as a baseline on which applications are read or discarded.⁴⁸² These concerns about the admissions process are certainly more critical at a time in which the amount of applications increased while acceptance and yield rates decreased. The years leading up to 2008 successively produced the largest graduating classes on record,⁴⁸³ and accordingly, by 2008, the college admissions market became larger and more competitive than in years prior. Despite the increase in the demand for enrollment, the most elite universities did not significantly expand their enrollment. According to a 2009 report from the National Association for College Admission Counseling, for the fourth year in a row, "three-quarters of four-year colleges and universities saw an increase in applications over the previous year."⁴⁸⁴ While there was a clear increase in number of applications, acceptance rates at four-year institutions fell from 71.3 percent in 2001 to 66.8 percent in 2007.⁴⁸⁵

The confusion engendered by the application process is similarly the fodder for the film *Orange County*, the main conceit of which revolves around a mix-up of Shawn Brumder's (Colin Hanks) application with another, less intelligent student. It has always

⁴⁸¹ See Roy O. Freedle, "Correcting the SAT's Ethnic and Social Class Bias," *Harvard Educational Review* 73.1 (2003): 1-43; and Maria Veronica Santelices and Mark Wilson, "Unfair Treatment? The Case of Freedle, the SAT, and the Standardization Approach to Differential Item Functioning," *Harvard Educational Review* 80.1 (2010): 106-134.

⁴⁸² Jessica Prois, "Does the SAT Have a Racial Bias?" *Huffington Post* 25 April 2011, Web, 10 Sept 2012.

⁴⁸³ Although the nation continues in a long-term population growth pattern, previous projections have indicated that the size of the nation's high school graduating classes would reach a crest in 2007-08. Updated data used for these projections mostly bear that forecast out. However, the data also show that while the nation's supply of high school graduates was projected to fall slightly in the subsequent years, it is predicted to rise again and exceed the 2007-08 level by 2021-22.

⁴⁸⁴ Eric Hoover, "The State of College Admissions: Full of Uncertainty," *The Chronicle of Higher Education, Admissions & Student Aid* 20 Oct 2009, Web, 7 Sep 2012.

⁴⁸⁵ Hoover 2009.

been Shawn's dream to be a writer and he knows that the only place where he can work under the man whose writing has always inspired him is at Stanford. Having worked and planned for years to assure his spot in Palo Alto, and knowing that the mix up has already taken place, Shawn has no recourse but to drive to Palo Alto to the Admissions Director's (Harold Ramis) house to show him Shawn's real transcript. That the sum of a person could not only fit on one page, but could easily be confused and exchanged, is clearly a terrifying proposition; however, what seems truly upsetting to Shawn in *Orange County* and echoes the anxieties produced in *The Perfect Score*, is the reality that the future these characters have been told is so important and so precarious rests in a system that can so easily be confused and manipulated.

The cultural confusion surrounding the complexities of not only the process of acceptance but also how this process engenders specific selfhoods is the motivation for the narrative of the film *Accepted*. After receiving rejection letters from every school to which he applied, Bartleby Gaines (Justin Long) is so fearful of his parents' disappointment that he invents a college to assuage their distress. To legitimize this falsehood, Bartleby must produce material evidence of this fake institution, producing letterhead, a web site, and eventually a physical institution itself, fabricated out of an old, abandoned mental hospital. As an unintended consequence, the fake website receives admissions and enrolls hundreds of other rejected students. Eventually, the students of South Harmon Institute of Technology (SHIT), as Bartleby has named his now-materialized institution, decide to take their education into their own hands, becoming the students and the teachers and creating their own curriculum. Eventually, South Harmon becomes too large for the established university across town to ignore, and Bartleby must fight to achieve accreditation in order to keep his institution open and running.

In the final scene of the film in which Bartleby must present his case to the State of Ohio Board of Accreditation, the students of South Harmon explain their non-traditional methods of approaching the university experience. As part of the hearing,

South Harmon must present their university curriculum to the Board, which turns out to be a large whiteboard chaotically filled with college courses.



Figure 5: South Harmon Institute of Technology's Curriculum

The head of the State of Ohio questions this choice of university course programming, claiming that he finds no merit or scholastic value in what is listed on the board. Bartleby then asks the students of South Harmon to explain what their coursework entails, at which point, several students stand up and describe such courses as, “Skateboarding 204” in which students “build a ramp which teaches us about engineering and physics and aerodynamics.” After the Board is made aware that students are the teachers at South Harmon, Bartleby can see the writing on the wall. He discontinues answering the Board’s questions and tells them that he knows that they will reject South Harmon’s application for accreditation, as he is “an expert in rejection.” He then continues, “It’s too bad that you judge us by the way we look, and not by who we are,” arguing that he is tired of being compared to other schools, and is proud of the fact that South Harmon and its students are not like other schools and other students. When he is then accused of being a criminal for creating an unlicensed school to which other students paid tuition, Bartleby retorts that traditional education is the “real crime because [it] rob[s] kids of their creativity and their passion. That’s the real crime.” This speech then becomes the impetus for the individuals in the room who are not students of South Harmon to

question their path in life, as Bartleby asks them if the traditional educational system made them the kind of people they wanted to be. The scene ends with Bartleby professing that he did prevaricate, deceiving students and teachers about the legitimacy of the school, a transgression he committed out of desperation. And yet, Bartleby claims, out of this desperation came something good: “Something so amazing that was full of possibilities. And isn’t that what you want for us?” While certainly liberatory in tone, this scene in *Accepted* echoes similar moments evidenced in *The Perfect Score* and *Orange County* in which the pressures of rising credentialism are evoked in an adolescent-image who must circumvent a broken system through the production of alternate institutional support, in the process creating individual educational destinies and by extension, individual personhoods and actualized futures.

Paying a Penalty to Become

Making this double bind of the education imperative that much more complicated, paying for college became one of the largest hardships facing young individuals (and their parents) at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century. Obtaining proper credentials in the new millennium became not just necessary in order to be competitive in the contemporary labor market, but also proved to pay off in material terms: the wage gap between those with only a high school degree and those with an undergraduate degree is growing, with college grads earning sixty-seven to seventy percent more than non-grads.⁴⁸⁶

McNamee and Miller note, the correlation between education and opportunity for financial success has only recently been linked. They explain that in the middle of the nineteenth century, at a time when most inhabitants of the United States had little formal education, the idea of opportunity as it relates to the American Dream expressed “the possibility for a person to grow to full potential, unfettered by the limits of class

⁴⁸⁶ Anya Kamenetz, *DIY U: Edupunks, Edupreneurs, and the Coming Transformation of Higher Education* (White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2010), 51; Mooney 43-4.

background or older feudal relations.”⁴⁸⁷ That is, opportunity allowed a man to become successful on his own terms without formal or structural limitations. McNamee and Miller note the stark contrast between this view of the opportunity for success and the contemporary idea of “moving up,” a concept contemporarily associated with the American Dream and education. By the end of the nineteenth century, opportunities for self-made success abated due to “continuing industrialization, technological change, the rise of large corporations, and the closing of the frontier.”⁴⁸⁸ Thus, individuals had fewer chances to work for themselves and make their own success, as large, bureaucratically structured work organizations became a formidable force. Consequently, as the family farm or business became less solvent, education replaced business as the promise of individual or self-made success, or, as Andrew Carnegie saw it, education was to be the “ladders upon which the aspiring can rise.”⁴⁸⁹ Education as a social institution was thus purposely cultivated as a “mechanism to keep the American promise of opportunity at the very time when fundamental changes in the economy were threatening to destroy it,”⁴⁹⁰ with direct consequences on some of America’s youth.

Young people thus turned toward the opportunities ostensibly provided by higher education as “an alternate and less risky means to upward mobility,” and as a means of obtaining newly formed white-collar jobs. Over the next century, newly formed industries and jobs created increasing incentives for continuing education as a less risky means to upward mobility as the proportion of white-collar jobs almost doubled from eighteen percent in 1900 to thirty-one percent in 1940, and again with professional and managerial jobs from 1940 to 1979, almost doubling from fourteen to twenty-seven percent. This change in attitude toward the benefits of education was reflected not just in the rise in college enrollment, but in the increased public support for the expansion of

⁴⁸⁷ McNamee and Miller 108.

⁴⁸⁸ McNamee and Miller 108.

⁴⁸⁹ Andrew Carnegie, “Wealth,” *North American Review* 148 (1899): 663. In McNamee and Miller 109.

⁴⁹⁰ Steven Brint and Jerome Karabel, *The Diverted Dream: Community Colleges and the Promise of Educational Opportunity in America, 1900-1985* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) 3-6. In McNamee and Miller 109.

secondary schools and colleges as well as the institution of federal financial aid for those wishing to receive the benefits of college yet lacked the economic means.⁴⁹¹

Accordingly, the contemporary investment in education has become almost a given: a taken for granted necessity in order to get ahead. Today, the American educational system has become a “debt-for-diploma” system as tuition has risen two to three times faster than the rate of inflation over the last three decades,⁴⁹² jumping 439 percent from 1982 to 2007.⁴⁹³ This rise in tuition occurred simultaneous to a decrease in public funding for higher education. At the beginning of the 1980s, public aid in the form of grants was greater than the aid students’ received through loans: 52 percent in the form of grants, 45 percent of all federal undergraduate financial aid was received in loans. Two decades later, at the end of the 1990s, this was reversed: 58 percent of aid given to undergraduates was in the form of loans while 41 percent of aid was made up of federal grants. By 2006, nearly two-thirds of college students were borrowing to pay for school with the average undergraduate carrying between \$17,600 and \$23,485 in loan debt.⁴⁹⁴ The massive increase in student loans is harrowing: in 1977, students borrowed, in 2002 dollars, about \$6 billion,⁴⁹⁵ by 2005, the amount of loans accrued by undergraduates was over \$85 billion—over fourteen times as much.⁴⁹⁶ These statistics might be less shocking if the investment in higher education had advantageous outcomes; however, by 2004 there were more unemployed college graduates than high school dropouts.⁴⁹⁷

Anxieties about obtaining the funding for college are played out within contemporary film and television texts through the motif of crime. *Stealing Harvard* (McCulloch, 2002) follows the misadventures of John Plummer (Jason Lee) who made a promise to his niece that if she worked hard and got into college, he would pay her

⁴⁹¹ McNamee and Miller 110.

⁴⁹² Kamenetz, *Generation Debt* 19.

⁴⁹³ Kamenetz, *DIY* 50.

⁴⁹⁴ Kamenetz, *Generation Debt* 18-9.

⁴⁹⁵ Draut 33.

⁴⁹⁶ Jonathan D. Glater and Karen W. Arenson, “Lenders Sought Edge against U.S. in Student Loans,” *New York Times* 12 Dec 2006. In Mooney 57.

⁴⁹⁷ Tamara Draut and Javier Silva, *Generation Broke: The Growth of Debt among Young Americans* (New York: Demos, 2004) 7. In Mooney 51.

tuition. Fourteen years later, Noreen (Tammy Blanchard) has been accepted at Harvard, bolstered by the knowledge and expectation that her uncle will pay for her education. Unfortunately John has forgotten his promise and has spent his adult life savings, enough money to buy a modest house, which he now wants to gift to his affianced. Stuck between the moral dilemma of paying for his niece's education or using the money to begin his own adult life, John decides to turn to crime to finance both his new house and his niece's college education. Similarly, *21* is inspired by the true story of a Massachusetts Institute of Technology student who is accepted to Harvard Medical School but cannot afford the \$300,000 tuition. Ben Campbell (Jim Sturgess) is invited to join a team of MIT students and a professor who fly to Las Vegas and Atlantic City counting cards and earning hundreds of thousands of dollars in the process. That a college or graduate degree has become so expensive the payment of which justifies a deliberate turn to crime connotes the pressure and anxiety that higher education evinced in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

The growth of credentialism is concurrent to the growth of large organizations that must find efficient ways of processing information on large pools of applicants with relatively similar relevant qualifications. McNamee and Miller suggest that educational credentials have come to act as objective "evidence" that can "be presumed to indicate potential for success."⁴⁹⁸ While only a component of the application review process, McNamee and Miller claim that educational credentials signify to employers that

their holders are more likely than other people to behave in organizationally valued ways. Thus, educational credentials have proven a cost-effective way to limit the pool of eligible and to aid in the hiring of people presumed to have qualities that organizations value.⁴⁹⁹

⁴⁹⁸ McNamee and Miller 111.

⁴⁹⁹ McNamee and Miller 112.

In this manner, the argument for higher education is not only about the knowledge acquired within the coursework completed to achieve a degree, but rather that the completion of a degree signals to employers that a person can be punctual (get to class on time) and organized (studying and writing papers). Within this organizational rationale, success in the university setting, as a “stifling bureaucratic organization,” transfers easily to the work environment: a college degree indicates “the ability to handle nonroutine or self-directed work, and the ability to conform to the direction and desires of superiors,” all highly desirable qualities.⁵⁰⁰ Education, in terms of what it can provide for career preparation, does not offer a guarantee that one will acquire the skills necessary to succeed, but rather the skills necessary not to screw up.⁵⁰¹ As a result, employers are often less concerned with the possession of specific information and technical skills than with possession of cultural capital (arbitrary knowledge, manners and decorum, styles and tastes representative of privilege) and noncognitive characteristics such as discipline, steadiness, and responsibility.

In the middle of the first act of *The Perfect Score* another primary character, Matty (Brian Greenberg), gives a speech about why he feels the SAT is unfair. Matty feels that standardized testing is baseless since it only tests academic knowledge, not practical knowledge. For Matty, this discrepancy is a problem because, as he argues, the outcome of the test is not an accurate picture of who he is as a person and thus why he would be a great candidate for any school or job. He explains that questions featuring practical skills and knowledge should be tested rather than academic knowledge, as that kind of apprehension is what college is ultimately for. Furthermore, Matty argues, academic intelligence is not what will get him a job:

Look, I show up for a job interview. There’s a science geek, there’s a math nerd. Who’s gonna get the job? The guy who can throw down at the water cooler! The guy who’s heard the new Ataris disc! The guy who yakked in the back seat of your Cutlass after the Radiohead show. Me. Me. That’s me. I get the job.

⁵⁰⁰ McNamee and Miller 112.

⁵⁰¹ Robin M. Blackburn and Michael Mann, *The Working Class in the Labour Market* (London: Macmillan, 1979), 108, in McNamee and Miller 112.

Couched in this speech is the notion that the contemporary dominant discursive field insists on certain personality traits that are not necessary for educational certification and instead that these traits are more effective in the cultivation of success in the workplace, a condition the next chapter will explore.

Clearly the skills valued by higher education and the skills desired by the labor market do not necessarily align. Nan Mooney aptly describes this misalignment:

There isn't a skilled job for every skilled college graduate, and the economy can't be expected to shift to make room for more degree-holders just because they exist. A rise in college-educated workers doesn't ensure more widespread financial security. Instead, it means many wind up in jobs that are below their qualifications, and earn corresponding salaries.⁵⁰²

As this chapter has shown, young individuals as they are represented in film at the beginning of the new millennium are portrayed as trapped by the pressures of credentialism, desperate to find a way to control their educational and personal destinies. As I have stated elsewhere in this thesis, much of the biological and attitudinal construct of adolescence was forged as a means of legitimizing the newly formed social sciences. Education as an industry has similarly repudiated the wellbeing of the young by propping up its own industry at the expense of those in need of the credentials education supplies, the consequences of which have fallen on the responsibility of individuals of a specific age-range. As individuals are increasingly coded as "immature" and "ineffectual," the necessity for further segregation and management is effectualized. Education has acted as the primary means of this segregation and control as successive generations of youth have been restricted within the confines of schooling, effectively heightening their importance as dependents. The following chapter explores the way that entrance into the labor force, while evincing its own complications, continues to leave young individuals without a support along the transition to adulthood.

⁵⁰² Mooney 52.

Chapter Five

The Cost of Becoming an Adult: The Socio-Economic Reality of Adolescence and the Changing Labor Market

As long as the satisfaction of human needs is subject to a social division of labor with inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities, and organized to privilege profit-taking over meeting human needs, any version of occupational satisfaction is double-edged, with the desire for vocational happiness serving as a powerful means of social control.

-McGee 130.

In a scene early in the film, *A Lot Like Love* (Cole, 2005), Oliver (Ashton Kutcher) and Emily (Amanda Peet) get to know one another over drinks in a Greenwich bar. Much of their flirtatious dialogue concerns Oliver and his reluctance to enter into a relationship, as he feels that certain accomplishments need to be attained beforehand, “Like job, career, house, future.” From their exchange, it is clear that Oliver believes that he will not be ready for a relationship until his plan (getting his “ducks in a row”) comes to fruition. Like many individuals living in an age of uncertainty, Emily sees the flaw in his plan, asking Oliver:

Emily: “What if you don’t get your ducks in a row?”

Oliver: “I’ll get my ducks in a row.”

Emily: “What if it takes twenty years?”

Oliver: “It’s not gonna take twenty years. It’s gonna take five years. Six, maybe...max.”

Emily: “You don’t even have a job. You don’t even have an inkling of a job.”

Set against the backdrop of an undetermined time-frame but with enough loose references to place it in the late-1990s to around 2005, the film *A Lot Like Love* explores the anxieties ostensibly felt by those just entering the contemporary labor force during a time in which uncertainty and flexibility are the norm, and in which finding ones career identity precludes reaching adulthood. It is telling, then, that the tension provided in the

film emerges from the friction produced by the attempt to create certainty out of uncertain times. Whereas once, adolescence was conceptualized as a time filled with insouciant dating and courtship, contemporary film and television texts feature characters negotiating a highly constrained period in which they must “find themselves” (or, at least, attempt this process) through the fulfillment of work or career aspirations as a prerequisite for other forms of self-actualization.

The connection between work and self-hood is, perhaps, one of the most crucial aspects of the discussion about contemporary understandings of adolescence. Part of this is due to the fact that one must have the means to meet the basic financial requirements to fulfill four of the five traditional markers of adulthood: moving out of the parental home, buying a house, starting a family, and launching a career. Additionally, late modern notions of work (in both the sense of one’s career as well as the concept of labor itself) inform contemporary ideas of identity and subjectivity as well as the attainment of adulthood. Thus, this chapter explores the subject of work and how it affects contemporary definitions and understandings of both the transition to adulthood and adolescence as a discursive category.

Some of the connections between work, adolescence and adulthood are clear: children below the age of fourteen are prohibited from working altogether and are restricted on the types of labor and number of hours they may work before the age of eighteen,⁵⁰³ even in those states where compulsory education ends at sixteen. Thus, if an individual chooses not to continue to further her education, the end of adolescence necessarily marks a transition into the productive public sphere. Those individuals who do go on to further their education must enter the labor force when they graduate. Therefore, despite the varying age ranges, students are often categorized as “non-adults” for the very fact that they are enrolled in an institutional setting, such as high school or university, rather than participating in the work force.

⁵⁰³ "YouthRules!" *YouthRules!* U.S. Department of Labor, n.d. Web. 25 Feb. 2012.

Thus, this is the discussion that motivates the concerns of this chapter: what are the issues at play in the consideration of work and the boundaries of adolescence? How do recent changes to the kind of work available in America heighten, clarify or muddle these issues? How do contemporary notions of work (and attendant work ethics) negotiate with neoliberal demands on the project of the self? As I argue throughout this chapter, some of these issues are codified such that they appear to be part of an ongoing generational struggle. This chapter will thus interrogate the ways in which contemporary discourses at the intersection of work and age are complicated by long-held cultural beliefs about labor and selfhood, while conjointly investigating how the cultural attitudes that arise from the production and reification of these discourses work to justify wage and privilege differentials. What I am interested in, here, are the ways in which rhetoric and imagery concerning adolescence and jobs works to privilege the productive role of certain individuals over others (in other words, to reproduce advantage), as well as render invisible the structural forces that influence opportunity and access. In what follows, I demonstrate that the cultural containment of adolescents is no longer managed through traditional material and spatial limitations associated with youth, but rather through an ongoing obligation to make and remake the self. While the necessity for self-invention has always been both a part of the conception of adolescence as well as a part of the myth of success in America, this imperative has contemporarily intensified across age, gender, race and socioeconomic categories as a necessity to achieve financial and personal success.

Very little academic scholarship has been written explicitly about the intersection of adolescence, work and its representation in cinema and television. The dearth of scholarship on adolescents and work is perhaps due, in part, to the fact that academics have focused primarily on teens and “teen culture” which removes work from the conversation in two ways. Firstly, within film and television texts, teens are very rarely portrayed as having jobs, and when they are, it is often as a vehicle to confine, and perhaps offset, other teen activities. Second, as I maintain in the second chapter of this project, most discussions on teen representation in media and cultural studies have been

read through the conditions outlined in subculture theory which understands youth via cultural production, viewing this production as both a reaction and a response to the conditions of an “adult,” or “parent,” society: cultures which were invested in creating definition through opposition. Through this lens of subculture, youth was understood as organized around the peer group and defined by leisure as its very symbol of non-adult status, thus excluding work and the world of work from the conversation. Scholarship on the intersection of work and youth is essential for the understanding of how adolescence functions as both a discursive category and subject position, thus providing a means to contextualize the mobilization of adolescence within the greater cultural, economic and political landscape.

Previous iterations of youth representation have traditionally marked out and reproduced the limitations of youth through the mobilization of specific physical spaces: malls, parks, schools, and bedrooms. Unlike the material constraints evident within previous representational renderings of the adolescent, contemporary discursive practices operate to both establish and recapitulate limitations, as this chapter explores, through the use of identifiers and identity categories like “Generation X or Y,” and “slacker.” Film and television texts featured in this chapter mark individuals as incompetent and ineffectual by employing the adolescent-image as shorthand for these characteristics. As has been made evident throughout earlier chapters of this project, in contemporary American society an individual is expected to be agentic in the sense that she demonstrates both self-regulation as well a mastery over her own subjectification, broadly defined throughout this project as destiny. In what follows, this chapter explores the ways in which this destiny is complicated by discourses about occupational identity, personal success and subjectivity.

Getting Lost on the Path to Success

The struggle for success in the workplace has been a constant theme throughout Hollywood’s history. Jack Boozer, through his investigation on success ideology in the

workplace within the genre of what he calls the “business career film,” argues that, as presented within these films, not much has changed in the way of basic individual initiative required for success; however, it is the work environment and the communications technology that has been altered.⁵⁰⁴ As career paths have become less stable and more elaborate, so too has the presentation of success ideology within these films. As the American work environment changed from one that offered a clear pathway to success in the workplace to a vision of this success that is much more complex, so too has the image of the self-made man and its attendant version of personal and occupational success. The “classical corporate executive film,” as Boozer refers to the epitome of this genre, was established just after World War II and was concluded by 1958. Culturally and economically, this was an era of increased bureaucratization and departmentalization of workplaces, often in the name of increased compartmentalization and efficiency. Within American industry at that time, image-conscious company presidents and corporate executives created a new “managerial revolution” to replace aging industry and company founders.⁵⁰⁵ Thus, argues Boozer, within the emblematic films of this era, the primary character must “project the right mix of selfless ambition and moral concern for his family and society at large” as a means of personalizing the economic and organization tumult occurring at this time.⁵⁰⁶

Boozer further argues that since the conclusion of this classical era of the career film, attitudes toward business within film changed. In the transitional period of film from the 1960s to the 1970s, business films displayed an increasing inclination toward cultural critique and a resistance toward institutionalized attitudes about, “racism, misogyny, the Vietnam War, and ‘the establishment’ of big business as well as big government.”⁵⁰⁷ Films featuring concerns about business produced in the 1980s and 1990s are characterized by an “encrusted cynicism” and “isolation.” Additionally, characters within these films, according to Boozer, are given fuzzy guidelines about their

⁵⁰⁴ Jack Boozer, *Career Movies: American Business and the Success Mystique* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2002) 238.

⁵⁰⁵ Boozer 19.

⁵⁰⁶ Boozer 21.

⁵⁰⁷ Boozer 5.

actionable goals leaving them, “pessimistic and defensive about their purpose and/or their institutional reward systems.”⁵⁰⁸ Despite this, characters within these films are expected to present themselves as aligned with the way the company presents itself whether or not they believe in the company’s bottom line. As Boozer argues, the business movie “has continued to affirm the belief in vertical promotion as a sign of career attainment,” revealing “the continually rising expectations of the image necessary to represent public success.”⁵⁰⁹ Certainly, this is the case for films set in the workplace featuring adults, and films of the 1980s and 1990s featuring youth entering the workforce (or displaying entrepreneurial tendencies in their teens) echoed these sentiments as well.

While the 1980s experienced a kind of a renaissance for teens in films, the portrayal of teens in these films was primarily relegated to activities and interactions within the physical locations of high school, home, car interiors and malls. Of the films of the 1980s that take place in workplace settings and do not focus on teens, the issue of work and adolescence is approached in two separate ways, exploring two ends of a spectrum of cultural anxieties and notions about success. One end of this spectrum exhibited films that explored the oppositional forces of morality and power in an age of excess such as, *Wall Street* (Stone, 1987), in which rising star Bud Fox (Charlie Sheen) hitches his wagon to infamous arbitrageur, Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas); films which present a specific kind of personal empowerment myth that, according to Boozer, was symbolic of both American youth, who, characteristic of the era, distanced their individual notions of career success from their connection with family and community.⁵¹⁰ On the other end of the spectrum lie films like *Nine to Five* (Higgins, 1980) and *Trading Places* (Landis, 1983), which convey the “possibility of somehow holding the most exploitative elements of corporate capitalism at bay while trying to preserve one’s personal integrity and a meaningful career life at the same time.”⁵¹¹ As

⁵⁰⁸ Boozer 184-5.

⁵⁰⁹ Boozer 238.

⁵¹⁰ Boozer 5.

⁵¹¹ Boozer 6.

Boozer has made clear, both groupings of films are, at their core, critiques of big business and the excesses of the era. Implicit in this oppositional positioning is a division between an understanding of youth as disconnected to families and familial history (which, within the films is portrayed as ineffectual), necessarily standing in opposition to that which proves to be successful in the plight against corporate interests. J. Emmett Winn argues that both *Wall Street* and *The Firm* (Pollack, 1993) are key examples of films produced during this time that position their protagonists as impotent by “blaming the protagonists’ failure to achieve upward mobility on greed,” a trait which the films equate with personal failure. Additionally, both Bud Fox and Mitch McDeere (Tom Cruise), the protagonist of *The Firm*, are identified as working-class, thus characterizing their failure as personal, rather than structural, by the very fact that they forsake their ostensibly working-class morals:

The films suggest that these characters, from working-class families, cannot successfully integrate the different elements of materialism and moralism that constitute the American Dream. As they attempt to pursue materialistic success, they lose their moral base—a personal; thus, these characters are denied access to the fully integrated American Dream.⁵¹²

Within these assessments of two groupings of 1980s films, it is possible to see how both groups utilize the specter of youth to pit the fallibility of inexperience against the moralism of age and capability, while ostensibly wrapped in the guise of lessons about class and (upward) mobility.

This division, in some ways, can be attributed to the disunion between the “old” morality of work and the “new” ethic of “lifestyle,” and lifestyle choices in the shift from Fordism to a post-Fordist society. Postwar industrial changes, including the decline of manufacturing and the emergence of a substantial service class, altered the cultural foundations on which identity and self-worth had previously been built, creating a “new lifestyle morality” which celebrated a life of liberation from the “traditional morality of discipline, constraint, and self-control.”⁵¹³ Sam Binkley maintains that this shift from

⁵¹² J. Emmett Winn, “Every Dream Has its Price: Personal Failure and the American Dream in *Wall Street* and *The Firm*,” *Southern Communication Journal* 68:4 (2003): 308.

⁵¹³ Sam Binkley, “Everybody’s Life is Like a Spiral: Narrating Post-Fordism in the Lifestyle Movement of the 1970s,” *Cultural Studies* ↔ *Critical Methodologies* 4.1 (2004): 75.

a traditional middle-class hegemony, rooted in professionalism, repressive self-discipline, and a faith in institutional expertise and technical rationality, was overturned by a vital new morality of individuality, authenticity, and therapeutic release.⁵¹⁴

This, Binkley argues, brought about, “a change of moral outlook in which doing was replaced by being.”⁵¹⁵ The connection between this novel work philosophy and its ties to commercialized leisure and the youth market are both extensive and intentional: as Bill Osgerby argues, advertisers in the 1960s effectively “deployed the concept of ‘youthfulness’ as a shorthand signifier for self-fulfillment” and as a means to appeal to “the new consumer value systems that aspired to break away from stodgy conformity and explore new horizons of individuality and excitement.”⁵¹⁶ Discursive practices in all mediatized arenas thus provide evidence of new pressures for individual occupational success in the form of identity exploration and self-fulfillment.

For Elizabeth Traube, this reformulation of success ideologies in workplace cinema is evident in the emergence of a new version of the “success hero,” who, as she explains, was implicit in the making of the new middle classes in the 1980s. While older versions of self-made men and Horatio-Alger narratives spoke to an “open, mobile society where individuals rise through talent and achievement,”⁵¹⁷ a modern America struggled with an expanding emphasis on individualism in a highly organized and bureaucratized society, thus promoting a version of the self-made man that “urge[d] us to...live, in short, according to the standards of the corporate world of bureaucratic organizations.”⁵¹⁸ This new success hero, apparent in films like *All the Right Moves* (Chapman, 1983), *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* (Hughes, 1986), *Nothing in Common* (Marshall, 1986), and *The Secret of My Success* (Ross, 1987), advanced a certain kind of “greed is good” attitude by attaching it to the figure of youth: touting a “cool, breezy,

⁵¹⁴ Binkley 73.

⁵¹⁵ Binkley 73. Binkley’s larger argument is that most people understand this shift as emerging from the “yuppies” of the 1980s as the pioneers of this new lifestyle ethic; however, he maintains that this shift began in the lifestyle movements of the 1970s.

⁵¹⁶ Bill Osgerby, *Playboys in Paradise: Masculinity, Youth and Leisure-style in Modern America* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2001) 115. See also Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

⁵¹⁷ Elizabeth Traube, *Dreaming Identities: Class, Gender, and Generation in 1980s Hollywood Movies* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, Inc., 1992) 71.

⁵¹⁸ Traube 95.

highly verbal, yet distinctly boyish style of rebellious independence.”⁵¹⁹ According to Traube, these male characters are part of a long-standing tradition of middle class men who adapted to the demands of an advanced consumer economy by taking on “visual codes premised upon youthful hedonism and conspicuous consumerism.”⁵²⁰ In this way, films featuring individuals entering the work force provided a depiction of how young men might be successful in “the context of an increasingly organized, consumption-oriented, corporate capitalist society.”⁵²¹

It is within the changing context of a consumer-oriented society that alterations to the signification of the self-made man took place. Throughout America’s modern history, Osgerby argues, “the young man of style and affluence remained a figure who, perhaps more than any other, encapsulated the ideals and desires of a culture steadily oriented around the imperatives of commodity consumption.”⁵²² This figure was capitalized upon within popular culture as a means of authenticating a new image of business success. For example, Timothy Shary points out that though often viewed as part of the early 80s cycle of films about the quest for sex, *Risky Business* (Brickman 1983), should be understood as a celebration of “Joel’s business education” rather than of his sexual conquest: “Joel can be viewed as the teen baron of Reagan-era capitalism, which is justified by the gratification it provides to the masses, and his image as a slick, successful dealer is an explicit inspiration for young men to continue the tradition of patriarchal economic practice.”⁵²³ These examples speak to what, Traube suggests, is feature of a bureaucratic ethic that understood that work alone was not enough to achieve success, but that personality was a necessary and important component of this possibility for achievement. Traube maintains that these specific images of 1980s young men evinced an “idealized performing of the self of the bureaucratic ethic, the version of success as self-fulfillment,”⁵²⁴ addressed to the middle-class and accomplished through

⁵¹⁹ Traube 68.

⁵²⁰ Osgerby 203.

⁵²¹ Traube 67.

⁵²² Osgerby 4.

⁵²³ Timothy Shary, *Teen Movies: American Youth on Screen* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005) 64-6.

⁵²⁴ Traube 74.

auspicious and artful stagings of the self. Thus, as changes to the conditions of success necessitated specific presentations of attitude and personality, the performance of that personal embodiment of success changed within film.

White-Collar Attenuation: *Elizabethtown*, *In Good Company*, and *The Loop*

This association of youthful characteristics with the performance of success in business worked in favor of the young male success heroes in the 1980s. However, films of the aughts found young men no longer benefiting from the same behavioral and performative devices. Anxiety over the role of work in individual lives preoccupied the latter half of the twentieth century; one of the largest predicaments of white-collar work and work in large corporations was the problem of alienation caused by disconnection from material production and its effect on man's role in society and the home. It is worth clarifying that the crisis about the corporation and its effects was always about men, and predates the feminist boom: this alleged crisis began in the 1950s with books like *The Organization Man* (William Whyte), *The Lonely Crowd* (David Riesman) and *White Collar* (C. Wright Mills), as American culture began to work out what it meant for the standardization of office jobs and white-collar work. This supposed crisis of the modern corporate man continued through the 1970s as women entered the labor force in large numbers for the first time and is, as Latham Hunter describes, "symptomatic of an ongoing process through which the patriarchy broadcasts a fragility that has never really come to fruition."⁵²⁵ As the makeup of the workforce adjusted to include women and people of color, this perceived occupational threat was signified through dilemmas of masculine performance in the workplace.

This shift is often conceptualized as another manifestation of the crisis of masculinity. Films of the late 1980s and early 1990s explore this manifestation through the disconnection from the production of material things and its connection to the

⁵²⁵ Latham Hunter, "The Celluloid Cubicle: Regressive Constructions of Masculinity in 1990s Office Movies" *The Journal of American Culture* 26.1 (2003): 74.

performance of masculinity. Latham Hunter argues that films of the 1990s sought to rectify this ostensible divide between the performance of masculinity and occupational endeavors through the use of characters who find resolution in a kind of throwback to more tangible forms of work. Hunter explains that films like *City Slickers* (Underwood, 1991), in which men dissatisfied with jobs that have become disconnected from the production of material goods go on a cattle drive to recapture their lost masculinity and regain a sense of self, and *Pretty Woman* (Marshall, 1990), in which the main protagonist resolves his own unhappiness by transforming his business of making money by “buying, disassembling, and selling companies” into a company that builds ships are exemplars of this trend.⁵²⁶ This cinematic strategy in which the purported crisis of masculinity is resolved by negotiating social change through performative gender behaviors and norms, while certainly a staple throughout media history, perseveres as a discursive practice complicated by the naturalization of the adolescent-image as immature and ineffectual in the new millennium.

At the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, wealth, and its attendant displays still reigned as the cultural signifier of success; however, there was a general sense that material wealth was not enough to signify true success, rather, one also had to become self-realized through work. Micki McGee explains that

the late-twentieth-century emphasis on fulfilling career as the right—and responsibility—of each and every individual, irrespective of gender, race, or ethnicity, served to motivate a workforce that experienced shattered job security, frequent unemployment, declining real wages, and when employed, greatly increased work time and productivity expectations.⁵²⁷

This impetus to meld one’s occupational self with one’s identity has taken on a particular urgency during this time. McGee explains that in an advanced consumer society in the face of uncertainty and insecurity, self-invention becomes the “only reliable insurance against economic insecurity.”⁵²⁸

⁵²⁶ Hunter, “Celluloid Cubicle” 74.

⁵²⁷ Micky McGee, *Self-Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 111-112.

⁵²⁸ McGee 13.

Several films of the first decade of the twenty-first century featured characters struggling with their own self-invention as the primary means to attain success. Cameron Crowe's 1999 film, *Jerry Maguire*, is an exemplar of this trend: Abigail Cheever argues, company and self become the same project of self-realization, as the film presents "no difference between founding a company and forging a self."⁵²⁹ After feeling disillusioned with the dishonest practices of the sports agency of which Jerry is an employee, Sports Management International, Jerry writes a manifesto and subsequently quits the firm, starting his own agency representing sports personalities. *Jerry Maguire* invokes the way actual work and the labor of self-invention are intertwined in contemporary society, as Jerry's efforts to build a successful business hinge entirely on his ability to successfully manage his identity as an enterprise. Cheever explains:

In a world where we build brands as if they were identities and build identities by way of our favorite brands, Jerry's efforts to define the identity of his company end up as efforts to determine the nature of his self...Or to put it more concisely, Jerry abandons his concern for the self in favor of his concern for the company, and then that company produces the self he wanted all along.⁵³⁰

In this light, Jerry only becomes a fully realized person, not by being at work or being good at his job, but rather, by taking up the *process* of reinventing himself through his job, and only in embarking on this process is he able to fully realize his full adult potential. That part of Jerry's journey to self-realization is predicated on his recognition that connection to family and relationships are central to this success becomes an essential component of the films of this trend.

As occupation and personhood became conflated in the beginning of the new millennium, managerial philosophies and corporate attitudes shifted to encourage this new modality of subjectification. Work has historically been conceptualized as an arena in which sincere feelings and values are temporarily eschewed in favor of capitalism's larger pursuits, situating individuals in a position that can be understood as alienating and exploitative. Contemporary managerial philosophies, however, have begun to

⁵²⁹ Abigail Cheever, "'The Man He Almost Is': Jerry Maguire and Judith Butler," *Arizona Quarterly* 62.4 (2006) 71.

⁵³⁰ Cheever 86.

abandon these more contradictory perspectives. Evident in contemporary writings about “liberation management” in popular management books such as, *Authentic Business: How to Make a Living by Being Yourself*,⁵³¹ and *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want*,⁵³² lies the almost anti-managerial view that: “Rather than deny the rich multiplicity of real individuals in favour of a contrived, staid, and uniform identity, employees are now ‘free’ to just be themselves.”⁵³³ While this managerial approach purports to offer opportunity, time, and support for individual self-actualization, the implementation of these workplace philosophies evinced a different story. According to Andrew Ross, in the U.S., “the amount of leisure time available to workers has been in steady decline since the early 1970s, and...chronic overwork...is the primary feature of the labor landscape,”⁵³⁴ a fact that has been incorporated into this new managerial ethos. By advocating for workplace organizational structures in which there are no managerial hierarchies, employees are thus, according to Ross, “empowered” to conceptualize their workplace as “fluid and recreational,” while work itself should be perceived as “liberated from rigid, bureaucratic constraints.”⁵³⁵ Ultimately, Ross maintains, the appropriation of this conflicting logic has worked to blur the lines between work and leisure, creating a tailor-made labor force for a post-industrial, information era in which workers are encouraged to trade freedom and autonomy (in the form of temporary or contract positions) in exchange for little to no workplace benefits. Begun in the 1970s, high-paying, stable jobs began a steady decline, normalizing a low-wage, temp sector that encompassed a large portion of the labor force. While certainly some of the members of this new information economy were well compensated, happy to trade the security of benefits and pension packages for the freedom and independence offered by this new occupational structure, others did not enter into this contract so willingly. According to

⁵³¹ Neil Crofts, *Authentic: How to Make a Living by Being Yourself* (West Sussex: Capstone Publishing Limited, 2003).

⁵³² James H. Gilmore and Joseph B. Pine II., *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2007).

⁵³³ Peter Fleming, *Authenticity and the Cultural Politics of Work: New Forms of Informal Control* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 2.

⁵³⁴ Andrew Ross, “No-Collar Labour in America’s ‘New Economy,’” *Socialist Register* 37 (2001), 77.

⁵³⁵ Ross 77.

Ross, between 1973 and 1993, part-time employment rose from 16.6 percent of the general workforce to 18.8 percent, almost all due to “involuntary, contingent, and most of it in temporary-help employment.”⁵³⁶ This characterization of a flexible, autonomous labor pool that seeks out authenticity over security clearly obscures social practices that limit, rather than expand, opportunity. On screen, as depicted in films and television programs of the first decade of the twenty-first century, this characterization becomes naturalized as the necessity for self-transformation.

Two films, released in 2004-05, feature middle-class male protagonists negotiating careers in corporate sectors that have implemented tactics touted under New Economy rhetoric that encourage creative innovation while simultaneously espousing neoliberal business models that favor market logic and individualism. *In Good Company* (Weitz, 2004) and *Elizabethtown* (Crowe, 2005) showcase two young men on the fast track to successful careers only to discover that they have sacrificed their agency, and thus, their personhood, at the expense of their careers. 2005’s *Elizabethtown* follows the life of Drew Baylor (Orlando Bloom), a typical young, late-1990s, middle-class, white-collar worker who has been promised success in return for sacrificing his personal life to the creation of a new and revolutionary sports shoe. The film begins as Drew learns that his shoe, the Späsmotica, is destined to be an enormous failure, projected to lose the company one billion in sales globally, due to a “miscalculation” about the American psyche as the basis of commercial trends. Drew must take the fall for this company failure, and in so doing, loses the personal identity indelibly tied to his work. In the opening monologue of the film, Drew describes, via voiceover, that the athletic shoe company he works for promotes the philosophy that its employees are “denizens of greatness,” individuals who produce footwear that conveys the message that: “A shoe is not just a shoe. It connects us to the earth. The right shoe can transport us, make us believe we are capable of more.” While it is clear that the company, Mercury (which Drew informs us is really just the CEO, Phil (Alec Baldwin)), wants to communicate the

⁵³⁶ Ross 78.

message of self-transformation, Drew represents the inverse correlation this situation engenders.

The same day of the Späsmotica recall, Drew learns that his father has passed away while visiting his estranged family, and thus must travel to Kentucky to take care of the funeral arrangements, meeting his love interest Claire Colburn (Kirsten Dunst) along the way. Through Claire's help, and with the aid of his Kentucky family, Drew learns to appreciate life in a new way by reconnecting to his personal history. Tellingly, Drew's newfound appreciation for life is less a process of understanding his own history, and more a process of understanding a commodified history of the South and the United States. The film suggests that the answer to this new crisis in subjectification can be found in the connection between national and personal identity. At Claire's suggestion, Drew drives home to Oregon from Kentucky along a route that Claire has previously laid out, acting as a kind of historical retelling of American history. Historic landmarks such as the Mississippi River, muse to Mark Twain, and the Lorraine Motel, where Martin Luther King Jr. was killed, punctuate Drew's journey. At each of the historical sites he visits Drew chooses to spread some of his fathers' ashes tying his personal past to the nation's past while searching for his future in the understanding of the history of cultural production. *Elizabethtown*, in line with arguments made in the third chapter of this thesis, thereby implicates self-making with the nation's past history and future possibility. In this instance, and throughout the texts this chapter investigates, the film calls for the adolescent subject to enact the process of subjectification by equating occupational identity with the notion of personal destiny, self-discovery, and national futurity.

The film's underlying masculism equates the fate of the culture and the nation with the fate of Drew's ability to properly take up his place as man who suitably understands his role as a creative producer. At the end of the film, an article about the Späsmotica debacle hits the stands in a prominent business magazine featuring a picture

of Drew riding a diving athletic shoe as it falls from heaven in flames exclaims (complete with caption), “He set me free to do whatever I wanted.”⁵³⁷



Figure 6: Magazine Cover Story of Drew's (Orlando Bloom) Debacle

This juxtaposition between the new philosophy of encouraging originality and giving employees a sense of autonomy is set in contrast with the risks inherent in a global economy in which the consequences are deemed greater. In this way, failure itself (real or not) takes on greater magnitude: Phil, Mercury CEO, explains to Drew that the company is about to lose \$972 million dollars, and as a result, various company operations will have to be shut down and jobs will be lost. Phil, standing in for the logic of corporate capitalism, is at a loss, telling Drew that he has “no rule-book for this situation” and “is ill-equipped in the philosophies of failure.” Yet, the one thing he is equipped for is letting Drew take the blame for the miscalculations of business in a globalized economy. Though *Elizabethtown* clearly repudiates corporate labor, even in a creative environment such as Mercury, in favor of pursuing one’s own unique life course, the film gives no alternative for Drew to progress along a “proper” career-based, maturational path, and in so doing, accords vague directives about success and clear warnings about failure.

Similarly, *In Good Company* follows two generations of male, white-collar workers as they transition through a company’s reorganization. The film tackles issues similar to *Elizabethtown* in the way that it calls upon tropes of corporate instability

⁵³⁷ <http://www.ericrosenbergdesign.com/index.php?/projects/-elizabethtown/>.

versus the substance and authenticity of family and interpersonal connection though, admittedly, in a more explicit manner. Dan Foreman (Dennis Quaid) has worked for “Sports America,” a sports magazine, for 20 years when Globcom buys it out, sending 26-year-old hotshot, Carter Duryea (Topher Grace), to take over Dan’s position as head of sales. The film makes a clear distinction between generations, framing Dan, Dan’s coworkers, and Dan’s sales technique, as outdated “dinosaurs,” while Carter and his Globcom colleagues speak in acronyms and use corporate jargon, thus highlighting the anxieties and flux generated by late-capitalist corporate strategies. Similarly, the film makes distinctions between the responsibilities held by these two men, intensifying the generational gap they are meant to embody. And yet, while the film encourages a distancing between the men along the lines of generation, it does so in order to spell out the necessity of their increasingly paternal attachment and relationship. In other words, only by dramatizing their differences, can the film necessarily demonstrate Dan’s value as the model for proper occupational identity formation leading to full-subjectivity.

Hunter argues that throughout cinematic history the father/son relationship has been used as a signifier of patriarchal succession. Specifically within the film cycle of what she terms, “office movies” of the 1990s, the office becomes a focal point of renewed social anxieties “about the shifting fortunes of the white, middle-class male.”⁵³⁸ While this has been a common theme throughout cinematic history, Hunter argues that office films closely secure this paternal relationship to capitalism, maintaining that they link “a male protagonist’s success or failure as a father ...to his success or failure as a late capitalist worker.”⁵³⁹ Certainly we see this link in Drew’s need to reconnect with his father (there represented by his cross-country journey and reconnection with his family), a connection equally relevant in *In Good Company* as Carter is only able to understand his occupational self, and thus reach full-subjectivity, through his paternal relationship

⁵³⁸ Hunter defines “office movies” as movies not necessarily set in an office, but rather, films that “let us know that the protagonists are caught in the middle rungs of an increasingly corporate culture, usually somewhere in the cubicle class.” Latham Hunter, “Fathers, Sons, and Business in the Hollywood ‘Office Movie,’” *Performing American Masculinities: The 21st Century Man in Popular Culture*, eds. Elwood Watson & Marc E. Shaw (Bloomington; Indiana University Press, 2011) 76.

⁵³⁹ Hunter, “Fathers” 78.

with Dan. As I have just argued above, this association is necessary to prove Dan's worthiness to both the company as well as to his relationship with Carter; however, the end result of this depiction is a paternalistic relationship that affirms Carter's incompetence.

Part of this portrayal of ineffectuality comes through not only in the way that Carter is comparatively depicted in his relationship with Dan, but in the way that he is shown as failing at his other personal relationships. Throughout *In Good Company*, Dan's anxieties are met with empathy, while Carter is depicted as not only "scared shitless," as he says to Dan's daughter (Scarlett Johansson) in the elevator before his first day at Sports America, but also incapable of properly taking up signifiers of success. After Carter is offered his promotion, he treats himself to a new Porsche, immediately getting into a car accident while driving it off the lot.



Figure 7: Carter (Topher Grace) gets into an accident in his new Porsche

When Carter arrives home in his beat up car, his wife (Selma Blair) is waiting with packed bags, leaving her marriage to Carter again (this time after only seven months) due to their clear disconnect. Carter thus turns to his work to fill this newly created void only to find yet another area of interpersonal estrangement, not as a result of generational differences, but rather, attitudinal ones. Clearly, these examples point to the ways in which characters positioned as immature must navigate their own self-actualization and subjectification through attitudinal and character traits as means of avoiding the stigmatization of ineffectuality, a designation they seem hard pressed to evade.

Under contemporary cultural logic, these films are clearly conflicted about corporate restructuring in the form of the exchange of “freedom from routine” and the contemporary provocation to explore and define selfhood through work. White-collar corporate labor in the new millennium has been structured such that it endorses specific beliefs about freedom, hard work and success, beliefs that have indelibly been tied to youth. Such modifications to the workplace in which the lines between work and leisure have blurred, it is argued, are “liberating” workers by encouraging creativity and individuality in the workplace while providing meaningful and non-alienating work for a grateful, and thus indebted, workforce.⁵⁴⁰ Yet it is clear that this workforce, though perhaps “liberated” from mindless drudgery, is not emancipated from the pressures of labor and self-making. Rosalind Gill maintains that within the neoliberal rhetoric of the New Economy, this freedom is seen as ““an existential test of character”⁵⁴¹ inviting people to be exhilarated by the ‘thrill of proving themselves by finding out if they have what it takes to prevail’ within the conditions of radical uncertainty.”⁵⁴² Such rhetorical provocations emphasizing character and biographical strategies help to destabilize the once fixed conceptualization of maturity in exchange for new-capitalist strategies aimed at a workforce burdened with the preparation and planning for a life of uncertainty and adaptability.

Within these new strategies aimed at creating the visage of new managerial philosophies is the theoretical model of a new flexible, self-directed, self-sacrificing, workforce that will not only secure the continued prosperity of the nation, but will also act as ““new model workers”” of the future.⁵⁴³ Within this ideation, workers in the new millennium are envisioned as living lives in which the focal point is work and are used as “poster girls and boys for a future in which the need to constantly train and retrain,

⁵⁴⁰ Ross 83.

⁵⁴¹ Daniel H. Pink, *Free Agent Nation: How America's New Independent Workers are Transforming the Way we Live*. (New York: Warner Books, 2001) in Rosalind Gill, “Life is a Pitch: Managing the Self in New Media Work,” *Managing Media Work* ed. Mark Deuze (London: Sage, 2010).

⁵⁴² Andrew Ross, *Nice Work If You Can Get It: Life and Labor in Precarious Times* (New York: New York University Press, 2009) in Gill 2010.

⁵⁴³ Gill 2010.

updating skills and knowledge, will be an ongoing requirement.”⁵⁴⁴ Located within this rhetoric about the need for constant self-invention and training lies a specific connection to cultural notions about youth and adolescence. Certainly, cultural understandings of adulthood are tied to the idea that reaching maturity signifies a completion of the work of adolescence (the work of self-invention), thus rendering individuals that must continue this process somehow less than complete. Furthermore, within new capitalist frameworks, rhetoric about innovation and freedom are indelibly tied to adolescent notions of play and imagination. These concepts promise new kinds of industriousness when tied to productive labor; however, when play and imagination are tied to the portrayal of young workers they instead become at odds with professionalism, specifically within a representational culture that views young males as irreverent, feckless, and irresponsible.

The television show, *The Loop* (Fox 2006-7), demonstrates the contemporary disconnect between the vagaries of the contemporary labor market and mediated portrayals of (male) adolescents. The central conceit of *The Loop* relies on cultural assumptions about the incompatibility of being an educated, middle-class professional while simultaneously being young. The show revolves around the day-to-day life of Sam Sullivan (Bret Harrison), a twentysomething male just out of college, attempting to juggle his social life with the demands of his corporate job: Sam is hired by TransAlliance Airways as “the youngest executive ever” solely based on the strength of his undergraduate senior thesis. Sam lives in an apartment somewhere in Chicago with three roommates of similar ages, all of whom fit more conventional descriptions of contemporary twentysomethings: his brother, a “slacker” who roams from service job to service job never holding onto one for longer than a week or so; a friend from college who is currently in graduate school; and another roommate currently working as a bartender. Sam’s position within TransAlliance Airways is depicted as perching precariously on the edge of both employment and employability. Though he is touted by

⁵⁴⁴ Gill 2010.

the CEO of the company as the only employee with “imagination,” and is frequently called upon to make decisions that the other executives are unwilling or unable to make, his job within the company never seems secure. Sam’s older colleagues are, as in *In Good Company*, repeatedly depicted as woefully out of touch and obsolescent, especially in contrast with Sam, whose innovative ideas (typically based on something he has experienced in his social life) help the airline stave off total collapse. In order to stay competitive within this market, TransAlliance rolls out its own low-cost carrier, “Jack” (after ascertaining that “the youth market responds to single-syllable men’s names”), including, United’s “Ted” Airlines, Apple’s “Mac,” and “even some guy out there with a list, called, “Craig.” As the geriatric head of advertising presents the slogans for the new carrier, it becomes clear that he (and the room full of older executives at the meeting) are unaware of the name’s alternate usage as a euphemism for masturbation, and Sam must save the company from a potentially devastating public relations fiasco.

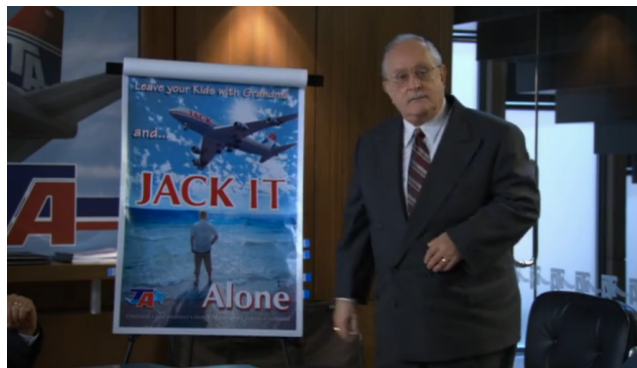


Figure 8: Airline executive's promotional campaign for a new low-cost airline.

Sam is repeatedly depicted as rescuing the company with his resourcefulness, ability to think on his feet, and understanding of contemporary cultural caprices. This formulation of youthful dexterity (cool, breezy, rebellious) certainly draws from earlier portrayals of the professional young male in films of the eighties as discussed previously, and is aligned with current conceptualizations regarding an incoming workforce, a topic explored further in later sections of this chapter.

What is notable about the representation of work and maturity in *The Loop* is the ways in which the show is predicated on understanding that specific attributes of adolescence can be appropriately or inappropriately performed. While earlier representations of successful young men in the workplace showed them using their “youthful rebellion” as a means for success, Sam, instead, tries desperately to succeed by fitting in. The main challenge presented in *The Loop*, and indeed that which drives the plot of the series, is that Sam must don specific performances of “youth” (innovation, flexibility, ability to multitask, connection to the youth market and current neologisms), while discarding any signs of “youth” (partying, slacking, anything that aligns him with his peers) that might hint at incompetence. Time after time, Sam must negotiate his role at work where his coworkers assume that since he is young he cannot take his job seriously, while simultaneously, Sam must negotiate his friends’ demands on his social life as they constantly thwart his ability to get work done outside of the office. This fixation on Sam’s necessary negotiation of these performances is highlighted in the opening credit sequence of the show in which Sam, driving to hang out with his friends, changes from his work suit into more casual clothes while still driving. Just as the series suggests that individuals just entering the world of work are unable to negotiate productive professional lives while simultaneously successfully navigating their twenties, Sam arrives at home having forgotten to change from his work socks and shoes into his casual footwear. Accordingly, it is this kind of imagery that *The Loop*, and other films of this trend, reiterate time and again, emphasizing the necessity for both the successful display and negation of certain kinds of youthful identities.

At a time when individuals entering the workforce are persistently framed as undisciplined and petulant, contemporary representations of the changing professional work place in a new capitalist economy portray the need for flexibility and the ability for successful self-invention as a precondition to attaining professional success. The juxtaposition of these two objectives is most clearly resolved in the most profuse and dependable of all the contingent iterations of the discursive construction of the

contemporary adolescent: the slacker. In what follows, the second half of the chapter will map out the various codifications and indications of this version of the adolescent-image.

Working-Class, Adolescence, and Low-Rent Futures

Profound changes to the global labor market shifted a once robust manufacturing economy to an economy dominated by technology and communications industries, a hugely powerful financial sector and a large service sector. As Anita Harris argues, these global market developments in conjunction with contemporary changes to the management of youth education and employment have created a “critical ideological shift,” that “seeks to construct a new subject for these circumstances.”⁵⁴⁵ Within this ideological shift, young people are expected to be both skilled and flexible to fit with contemporary labor market demands. Harris maintains that this

notion of *flexibility* carries a range of meanings: that the person can easily change work locations unencumbered by family or other commitments; is untroubled by flux such as downsizing, irregular hours, or retraining; will negotiate individual rates of pay and conditions without union or award interventions; and will perform a variety of tasks not limited to a traditional job description and duties list.⁵⁴⁶

Within the framework of this new global economy the labor process has become mobile including capital, production processes, and workers. The notion of a life-long career has been replaced by contract work, working from home, part-time and flex-time, creating instability even in the best of working circumstances. As I have argued in the chapter three of this project, the circumstances of a risk society and a neoliberal economic climate confers success only on those individuals who are able to negotiate tremendous insecurity by reframing their subject position through discourses of autonomy. Unsurprisingly, it is those individuals in the middle-class that have the ability to withstand this instability in order to project the valued characteristic of flexibility. For

⁵⁴⁵ Anita Harris, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (New York & London: Routledge, 2004) 39.

⁵⁴⁶ Harris 39.

those not in the middle-class, and thus, not able to endure this uncertainty, flexibility is coded as laziness, slovenliness and unproductivity.

It is perhaps possible to view these two conflicting versions of youth as expressing the class warfare that America has experienced since the 1980s: as Douglas Kellner argues, during that time there was “massive redistribution of wealth from working and middle-class sectors to the rich and an era of high fear of unemployment, downward mobility, and crisis for the working classes.”⁵⁴⁷ Kellner maintains that the working-class was rarely featured in films of the 1980s, as Hollywood instead focused on the middle- and upper-classes (as I have also outlined above), but that “the working class was often presented as threatening others to middle-class life and...was often negatively stigmatized in genres like the horror film.”⁵⁴⁸ Here, I would also argue that youth has been similarly negatively stigmatized through the use of class signifiers disguised as personal attributes and characteristics. As Jon Lewis claims of films of the 1980s which “render comical the economic bind faced by...adolescents,”⁵⁴⁹ this relatively consistent portrayal marks youth as “downwardly mobile” with “diminished expectations” for their futures,⁵⁵⁰ pointing out that 80s films like *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, *Repo Man* (Cox, 1984), and *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*, all feature characters that “share the same low-rent future.”⁵⁵¹ This is, perhaps, the double bind of youth of this time: like Ferris Bueller, youth represent both the possibilities of success in their attributes, but these attributes are also suggestive of, and implicated in, their limitations. Even if the protagonists in these films are shown to be heroic and successful, the films are much less certain about their futures. Lewis reminds us that the male hero of *Fast Times* (Brad Hamilton, played by Judge Reinhold) may be a supportive brother

⁵⁴⁷ Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and Postmodern* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995) 126.

⁵⁴⁸ Kellner 126. See Kellner 1995 for analysis of the representation of working-class as threatening middle-class life in 1980s horror films.

⁵⁴⁹ Jon Lewis, “The Body’s in the Trunk: (Re-)Presenting Generation X” in *American Youth Cultures* ed. Neil Campbell (New York: Routledge, 2004) 194.

⁵⁵⁰ See Jon Lewis, 2004; See also, Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, “Beavis and Butt-Head: No Future for PoMo Youth,” *Youth Culture: Identity in a Postmodern World*, ed. Jonathon S. Epstein (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998) 74-99.

⁵⁵¹ Lewis 194.

and mini-mart savior, but still “aspires only to a future in management in the fast food industry;” Jeff Spicoli, slacker hero of the same film, saves Brooke Shields’ life but “squanders the money in a desperate effort to forestall adulthood;” and even though perennial eighties hero Ferris Bueller may be able to win the hearts and minds of an entire Chicago suburb through his charm, his best friend believes he will turn out to be “a fry cook.”⁵⁵² This double bind of possessing specific attributes that are both needed to facilitate success as well as work to an individual’s disadvantage maintains its visibility throughout the 1980s and then becomes central to the depiction of youth and work in the 1990s. Implicit in this double bind is the suggestion that youth were disconnected from the realities of work therefore necessarily disconnecting youth from the project of the self, rendering individuals stuck in a perpetual adolescence.

While these examples feature adults negotiating dissatisfaction with their well-established careers, films emerging within this moment began to feature teen characters struggling with similar questions regarding their careers, even before they had begun. 1989’s *Say Anything...* (Crowe), features the teen protagonist Lloyd Dobbler, whose refusal to choose a career path is portrayed as an obvious disappointment to an older generation. At a dinner with his girlfriend Diane, her father James, and a few of her father’s friends, James asks Lloyd about his plans for the future. Lloyd replies:

I don’t know. I’ve thought about this quite a bit, sir. And I would have to say, considering what’s waiting out there for me, I don’t want to sell anything, buy anything, or process anything as a career. I don’t want to sell anything bought or processed, I don’t want to buy anything sold or processed, or process anything sold, bought or processed. Or repair anything sold, bought, or processed. As a career, I don’t want to do that.⁵⁵³

This indecisiveness about work and the ethics of working was to become the hallmark of a generation, signaling a mediated generational panic. As recent challenges to the architecture of the patriarchal hierarchy have questioned the legitimacy of the self-made man, the adolescent-image of the young entrepreneur who is able to manifest his own self-fulfillment through both opportunity and self-making, as asserted in this section,

⁵⁵² *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*, dir. John Hughes, Paramount Pictures, 1986. See Lewis 194.

⁵⁵³ *Say Anything...* dir. Cameron Crowe, 20th Century Fox, 1989.

contemporarily stands in contrast with male characters who purportedly choose to have less-suitable careers marked by dead-ends and no future prospects. The codification of this situation as personal choice informs the investigation of the texts in the next section.

Generational Panic Gets a Name

The stock market crash of 1987 and the resultant recession of the late 1980s/early 1990s coupled with the beginning of the Gulf War, helped to heighten anxieties about America's youth: the media spoke to a rising fear that America's youth seemed ill equipped to handle the future, and worse, did not seem to care. While not the only cover story written about the onset of this generation, *Time Magazine's* "Proceeding With Caution," expressed concern over a generation that had just come into its adulthood. Stunned into an almost paralytic state by "racial strife, homelessness, AIDS, fractured families and federal deficits,"⁵⁵⁴ the article describes a generation of individuals who "have trouble making decisions." It further suggests that these twentysomethings have low expectations: have decided to postpone growing up due to the fact that they recognize that the American Dream is much tougher to achieve and no longer buy into the idea of long-term career longevity. Outlining a "young work force that is considered overly sensitive at best and lazy at worst," and characterized by the fact that they "are not driven from within, they need reinforcement," Cross and Scott explain that this generation has a different attitude toward work than those that came before them. They "reject 70-hour workweeks" and "do their work in modest ways," refusing to climb the corporate ladder in search of the yuppie dream: members of this generational cohort want job gratification above all else, willing "to leave careers in middle gear, without making that final climb to the top." The article continues to describe a workforce of tens of millions who feel entitled to what seem rather sane working conditions like, "access to decision making and a return to the sacredness of work-free weekends," all while only

⁵⁵⁴ David M. Gross and Sophronia Scott, "Proceeding with Caution," *Time* 16 July 1990, Web, 2 Feb 2008.

being ambitious enough for second place. Despite this characterization, the article makes clear that the real problem these twentysomethings presented was the problem of categorization, mostly marketers who wanted to generalize in generational terms and were having a tough time “trying to reach a generation so rootless and noncommittal,” a generation who, it seemed, wanted to “get more for less.”⁵⁵⁵

This notion of a generation of individuals with little prospect for success but a large sense of entitlement wore on as the characteristics of this new generation began to find traction. The release of the novel *Generation X: Tales of an Accelerated Culture*, by Douglas Coupland in 1991 gave the generation a name and a finalized characterization. The book identified those individuals born roughly between 1963 and 1978 as ambivalent about the future, trying desperately to find some sort of meaning in their lives but ultimately finding none. Gen Xers were commonly conceived of as lazy, aimless, having no ambition, conviction, or purpose, and viewing the world through a cynical lens that allowed them to achieve an ironic distance from that which would define them. Youth, in this context, was clearly not understood biologically or developmentally, but rather as a social formation; however, unlike youth cultures of the past, this was a designation distinctly placed on Gen Xers by marketers and the media, not one they produced for themselves. Jonathon I. Oake argues that Generation X was aligned with a specific type of media savvy and spectatorship. Following logic set forth by Simon Frith and Celia Lury who argue that “youth subculture in general—even the category of ‘youth’ itself—might be usefully redefined as ‘spectatorship’ rather than as ‘spectacle.’”⁵⁵⁶ Oake suggests that, “such a critical move signals a shift away from viewing ‘youth’ (or in [his] analysis, Generation X) as a concrete collection of individuals and more as a performative subjectivity, that is, a category of historically enabled behavioral norms.”⁵⁵⁷ Thus, as Generation X became confused with a set of consumption practices, the notion of youth was effectively removed from age and

⁵⁵⁵ Gross 1990.

⁵⁵⁶ Jonathon I. Oake, “Reality Bites and Generation X as Spectator,” *The Velvet Light Trap* 5.1 (2004): 89-90.

⁵⁵⁷ Oake 90.

aligned with a specific kind of conduct. Oake maintains that the term Generation X suggested a “middle-class, white-boy angst;”⁵⁵⁸ but more often than not, in the media, the term became an axiomatic moniker, uncritically conflating generation with youth, race, class and age, not taking into account variances and discrepancies in individual experiences and circumstances.

Derived from antecedents forged in films of the 1980s through characters like the fun-loving, clueless, Jeff Spicoli in Amy Heckerling’s *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), a new stock character of the “slacker” emerged in films of the 1990s who emulated this idea of a generation of unambitious, unmotivated, cynics. Films of the 1990s included slacker characters like Troy Dyer in *Reality Bites* (Stiller, 1994), and perhaps, most iconically, in films such as Richard Linklater’s *Slacker* (1991), and Kevin Smith’s *Clerks* (1994), films which continued the sentiment begun in the films of the 1980s that take this indecisiveness and lack of a viable future one step further, suggesting that, as Lewis claims, “the dominant condition of youth today is an aimless locomotion from one grungy rental unit to the next, from deep sleep to a job that requires little more than a pulse-rate and maybe a sense of humor.”⁵⁵⁹

Though the term did not come into wide usage until more recently, the concept has long been a part of American consciousness. Tom Lutz, slacker historian, explains that the slacker figure is a fairly recent invention that has only been in existence for the past two and a half centuries and that the figure was, until recently, always male.⁵⁶⁰ Historically, the slacker, and its other twentieth Century predecessors, the idler, loafer, and lounge, were individuals who fought against the traditional Protestant ethic that championed enterprise and elbow grease, instead extolling the virtues of non-work. According to Lutz, slackers as cultural figures appear when attitudes toward work become ambivalent, something that usually coincides with large scale changes to the economic, political and social climate of an era. In this regard, slackers often stand in for

⁵⁵⁸ Oake 83.

⁵⁵⁹ Lewis 183.

⁵⁶⁰ Tom Lutz, *Doing Nothing: A History of Loafers, Loungers, Slackers, and Bums in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006) 13.

the large-scale topics of: industrialization versus (un)civilization, work versus laziness, and almost always acts as a metaphor for class tension.

Contemporarily, the term “slacker” is used to refer to “someone with a distaste for work,” or “people whose identity involved their refusal to believe in the value of work.”⁵⁶¹ The accompanying slacker ethic, then, is the “ironic, countercultural virtue of not working.”⁵⁶² Richard Linklater, the unintentional author of contemporary cinematic slackers, explained that he did not like the way the media had begun to characterize slackers, instead maintaining that they, “feel the urgent personal obligation to make sure what they’re doing is worthwhile.”⁵⁶³ Within film and television texts of the 1990s, a few characters from films such as *Singles* (Crowe, 1992) and *Reality Bites* (Stiller, 1994) depict twentysomethings trying to attain occupational and personal satisfaction through meaningful work. Steve Dunne (Campbell Scott) and Linda Powell (Kyra Sedgewick) both feel their jobs are important, but like the end of the movie, characters within representational culture at the end of the 1990s have given up on getting meaning out of their jobs, opting to find meaning in their relationships.

Other media texts emerging at this same time portray the “plight of contemporary youth in disintegrating families, with little education, and with no job possibilities” as well as the “dead-end prospects for many working-class and middle-class youths.”⁵⁶⁴ Kellner explains that the MTV show, *Beavis and Butt-Head*, about two aimless youth whose daily lives are entirely consumed by the activities of making fun of television and destroying things, was part of a new phenomenon of “loser television,” which included *The Simpsons* (Fox 1989-present), *Roseanne* (ABC 1988-97), and *Married...With Children* (Fox 1987-97). Thus, while Linklater and Lutz may have felt that the slacker is a redemptive character, believing in the influence of the virtue of not working, the image reproduced within the media displayed the opposite of this characterization: the denigrating notion that slackers are worthless, lazy and dysfunctional, and that these

⁵⁶¹ Lutz 14-15.

⁵⁶² Lutz 13-16.

⁵⁶³ Richard Linklater, DVD commentary quoted in Stephen Tropiano, *Rebels and Chicks: A History of the Hollywood Teen Movie* (New York: Backstage Books, 2006) 218.

⁵⁶⁴ Kellner 149.

characteristics are favored by these individuals, effectively naturalizing this signification. As Lutz points out, however, this characteristic is deeply woven into American beliefs about class, explaining that earlier slacker figures such as idlers and loafers arose at specific historical moments when generations faced different economic futures: “Despite slurs about laziness in the lower classes, slackers are almost entirely drawn from the middle class or are on their way down to meet it.”⁵⁶⁵ In this way, the rise of the prominence of the slacker figure in the first decade of the twenty-first century speaks to rapidly changing economic circumstances for American youth.

Contemporary (Not)Working Slackers As Failed Citizen?

Valerie Walkerdine, Helen Lucey and June Melody suggest that diminished economic opportunities coupled with rhetoric espousing the outcomes of these opportunities as personal choice, “create the appropriate subject of a neoliberal democracy.”⁵⁶⁶ With this in mind, it is worth asking what happens to those individuals who are unable to rely on families or other kinds of monetary and structural support in order to take on the risk that this new climate has created? As Walkerdine et al. argue, under the rhetoric of neoliberalism, job insecurity is hidden within the language of choice and individual self-making, which in turn refigures insecurity as the availability of choice and opportunity. Faced with the end of permanent careers and a culture of uncertainty, this kind of life-long pursuit of satisfaction through continual self-invention, they argue, “provides a way to manage...potentially unruly and disaffected subjects.”⁵⁶⁷ Thus it is clear, as Harris states so succinctly, that this discourse “has proved to be a very powerful one; it has been central in creating and limiting the ways young people can talk about their circumstances and opportunities.”⁵⁶⁸ And this gets played out in numerous ways within contemporary film and television. Making something of oneself, being a self-made man is an indelible

⁵⁶⁵ Lutz 52.

⁵⁶⁶ Valerie Walkerdine, Helen Lucey and June Melody, *Growing Up Girl: Psychosocial Explorations of Gender and Class* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001) 2.

⁵⁶⁷ Walkerdine, et al., 2.

⁵⁶⁸ Harris 40.

part of the American Dream and American films, especially, have historically been invested in narratives of success. Through countless Westerns, heist movies and films set at the workplace, these American allegories emphatically stated: the higher the risk, the larger the reward. This recent spate of film and television shows featuring twentysomethings, however, show them assuming the risks, but not reaping the reward.

The salience of this cultural predilection is clear in the anxieties borne out through films featuring supposed slackers and their attitudes that work to hide both their limiting and limited economic circumstances. Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody remind us that traditional definitions and boundaries of class have broken down since “what used to be the working class is now dispersed into the service industry.”⁵⁶⁹ In this way, the working-class “losers” of the 1990s, said to be occupationally slumming, morphed into any member of society working in a service industry job, regardless of his or her aspirations or work ethic. A number of films and television programs emerging the 2000s featured twentysomething protagonists stuck in jobs they considered dead-end. *Reaper* (WB 2007-09), *Chuck* (NBC 2007-2012), *Employee of the Month* (Coolidge, 2006), *Clerks 2* (Smith, 2006), *The Good Girl* (Arteta, 2002), *Waiting* (McKittrick, 2005), *The Nanny Diaries* (Bulman and Pulcini, 2007), all take place within the protagonists’ place of work (all of which are in the service industry) and feature main characters who believe their work is beneath them, yet feel stuck in their jobs for a variety of reasons. These shows contribute to a culture in which only certain types of jobs are extolled while other types of work are pathologized in terms of the way they can or do provide for successful futures. And due to the fact that these careers cannot provide for successful futures, a large portion of the American public is thus marginalized to immature or adolescent cultural positions by the very fact that they work a service industry job.

The 2006 film, *Employee of the Month*, is emblematic of this trend. Set in an anonymous big box/warehouse store, the film follows two men, one the perpetual

⁵⁶⁹ Walkerdine, et al. 1.

outstanding worker, and the other the self-proclaimed slacker, as they vie for the affections of the new cashier who purportedly only dates the Employee of the Month. The film labors to set up the main protagonist, Zack (Dane Cook), as a slacker type, not invested in his work or future, trying to get away with working as little as possible, taking advantage of the store and living with his grandmother. The film plays with, and upon, the stereotype of “slacker” constructing Zack in opposition to Vince (Dax Shepard) who takes pride in his work and his accomplishments. The film makes it clear that Zack, and his retreat from responsibility is pathological and must be rectified, a point the promotional poster for the movie makes painfully clear:

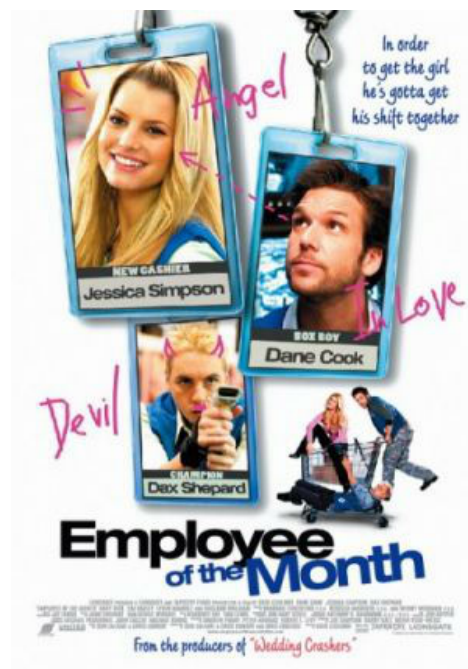


Figure 9: Caption reads: “In order to get the girl, he’s gotta get his shift together.”

We find out later in the film, however, that Zack wasn’t always a slacker and that his choice to work at the “Super Club” wasn’t necessarily his choice at all. After their first date, Zach tells Amy (Jessica Simpson) that he founded a dot-com start-up company: “I was a hot-shot, straight outta college. I thought I knew everything, but, boy, was I wrong.” He explains that in order to start his company he had to borrow a lot of money to get it started and then he lost it all. Mimicking advanced capitalist logic, Amy replies,

“People know there’s a risk,” to which Zack explains that the money he borrowed was not from some venture capitalist, but rather, from his grandmother who could not afford that risk and lost everything. As a result, Zach took his grandmother in, inverting the notion of the contemporary man-child who still lives off the wealth of his parents. Zach continues to explain that as a result of that failure, he decided to “do something with a little less responsibility, something that wouldn’t jeopardize anybody’s future.” And again, standing in for contemporary cultural logic, Amy replies, “except your own.”⁵⁷⁰ Even though Zack claims that he’s “doing something with a little less responsibility,” it is clear from this scene that he actually takes care of his grandmother while trying to account for his past mistakes, yet the way Amy frames her response—that he’s jeopardizing his future in his reluctance to take on any more risk—speaks to our contemporary cultural misunderstandings about the reality of the lived experience for people of this ever-increasing age range.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the labor participation rate rose steadily for over five decades, peaking at 67.1 percent of all Americans participating in the labor force in 1999. Since then, that rate has declined, and has done so across gender and age. However, the participation rate among 16- to 24-year-olds—especially 16- to 19-year-olds—dropped the most dramatically. The BLS explains that, the labor participation rate for 25 to 54 year-olds decreased beginning in 1999, but that this rate is different for men and women. The rate of participation for women of this age cohort declined for the first time since it began rising steadily when women entered the work force in large numbers five decades earlier, while the rate for men of this age group continued to decline, reaching an all-time low in 2005. However, during this time, the labor force participation actually increased for those individuals aged 55 and over.⁵⁷¹ This situation has particularly important implications when interrogating the portrayal of adolescence (or the extension of adolescent attributes) as presented as a conscious choice, as there is a clear compression of job participation for individuals of a specific age-range.

⁵⁷⁰ *Employee of the Month*, dir. Greg Coolidge, Lionsgate, 2006.

⁵⁷¹ All statistics taken from a survey completed in 2006. See Abraham Mosisa and Steven Hipple, “Trends in labor force participation in the United States,” *Monthly Labor Review* October 2006. 35.

On the surface, the decline in percent of new workers joining the workforce may read as greater opportunity for those entering the labor market in their twenties, fresh out of college. And this is certainly how this is framed within contemporary representational culture: the onus is always on the individual—those who do not get a job, or who have trouble getting a job, are responsible for their own failures. McGee contests that in an insecure job environment it is necessary to make workers feel secure: “One solution to this is to place the onus of employment security on the individual worker by making each and every worker responsible for his or her own ‘career.’”⁵⁷² Deeply imbedded within the set of slacker attributes, however, lies a “sardonic distance on conventional career planning,” making this sense of security not only difficult to maintain, but difficult to attain.

According to Lutz, the slacker is often constructed as a sort of tragicomic figure, miscomprehending his abilities, skills and the amount of work it takes to accomplish goals. In a 1999 article in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* titled, “Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One’s Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments,” Justin Kruger and David Dunning maintain that young people overestimate their abilities and that this occurs, in part, because unskilled people, “not only...reach erroneous conclusions and make unfortunate choices, but their incompetence robs them of the metacognitive ability to realize it.”⁵⁷³ This kind of “ambition paradox”⁵⁷⁴ can be seen in Zack’s case where he thought he was a “hot shot” out of college and underestimated his ability to run a successful start-up. Not incidentally, this is the same plot device used in *A Lot Like Love*, to go back to Oliver and his ducks. Oliver eventually does get involved in “All That Stuff Going on With the Internet,” and forms an online diaper delivery service (diaperrush.com). We witness his firm obtain its venture capital money, only to see the company fail a year or

⁵⁷² McGee 133.

⁵⁷³ Justin Kruger and David Dunning, “Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One’s Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 77.6 (1999): 1121. In Lutz 292.

⁵⁷⁴ Barbara Schneider and David Stevenson, *The Ambitious Generation: America’s Teenagers, Motivated but Directionless* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

so later. The film resolves with Oliver's rather stark realization, and to again draw the parallel with Zack in *Employee of the Month*, that he is loveable despite his miscalibrations. This same sort of construction of the slacker who misunderstands his abilities (usually in some sort of internet or tech capacity) and therefore must negotiate with lessened aspirations (which are always present in the form of slacker character traits) stands in for these diminished aspirations. Similarly, the titular character Chuck Bartowski (Zachary Levi) of *Chuck* (NBC 2007-2012), was kicked out of Stanford in his senior year and as a result uses the skills he learned at a top university to fix personal computer problems for The Nerd Herd at the Buy More, a fictional big-box electronics store. When Chuck's old Stanford roommate sends him a file filled with the merged secrets of the CIA and the NSA that embeds in his brain via encoded images (making him like a human hard-drive), the Brigadier General of the United States Air Force and ranking official for the NSA exclaims, "Our most valuable secrets have been sent to an idiot."⁵⁷⁵

These representations should be viewed as part of an ongoing trend of the re-categorization of negative attributes of an economic climate into generational sensibilities. American popular press has continued its aptitude for highlighting new workforce trends for the incoming class of Generation Y/Millennials (and even for the microgeneration in between, dubbed, Generation Catalano).⁵⁷⁶ According to the popular press, this generation is narcissistic, entitled, and "hellbent on making it by their own rules."⁵⁷⁷ They want jobs with flexibility and don't care about success in the traditional sense, but rather want to get meaning out of their work and are willing to work long hours to do so. Thus, according to McGee,

perhaps, most important, for an economic system that requires the ongoing reduction of production costs, an emerging ideology of creative self-fulfillment in

⁵⁷⁵ "Pilot." *Chuck*. National Broadcasting Company, 24 Sept 2007.

⁵⁷⁶ Doree Shafrir, "Generation Catalano: We're Not Gen X. We're Not Millennials" *Slate* 24 Oct 2011, Web, 29 Oct 2012.

⁵⁷⁷ Alexandra Le Tellier, "Redefining the Millennials: Lazy? Try Enterprising, Creative, Resilient," *LA Times* 18 Nov 2011, Web, 29 Oct 2012.

work, even without compensation, emerged as more and more women entered the labor force.⁵⁷⁸

She maintains that since women were no longer willing to work for no compensation, that gap had to be filled by others willing to do so, a gap that according to McGee was filled by artists of “the creative class.” Here I am arguing that the adolescent-image of the ineffectual, immature worker stepped in to fill this need as well. The difference, here, is that the creative class took jobs that were ostensibly still white-collar, while in this case, slacker or “adolescent” jobs are service and working-class jobs. In essence, this categorization of specific jobs as relegated for those who are slackers, which stigmatizes them as incompetent, deceptively elides rather large disparities in income and the availability of opportunities while pathologizing these working- and service-class jobs.

Youth is Wasted on the Young: Ben Stone and *Knocked Up*

That all these male characters are in some way connected to the Internet and technology isn’t coincidental, nor is the fact that these narratives of Millennial anxiety are mapped out onto Gen X bodies. Framing this trope as generational panic works to discursively reconfigure the blame onto a sweeping collective construct that simultaneously implicates all individuals born within a specific time frame rather than highlight specific economic and social problems occurring at one historic moment. In other words, the utilization of generational and youthful tropes naturalizes the fiction of laziness and incompetence as affixed to adolescence while obscuring actual economic, class, age and gender disparities inherent in a new global economy.

By the 2008 release of the film *Knocked Up*, the representational trope of presenting men as incompetent and ineffectual proved to do the quick discursive work of naturalizing a specific image of adolescence. The effectiveness of this essentialized subject formation can be seen throughout reviews published about the film at the time of its release. Described by critics as a portrayal of “the ‘American Pie’ generation growing

⁵⁷⁸ McGee 112.

up and settling down, but only with the very greatest reluctance,”⁵⁷⁹ reviews of the film focus heavily on those aspects of the character, and the main character Ben Stone (Seth Rogan), in particular, which demonstrate immaturity and inadequacy. The film itself is ostensibly about a mix-matched couple whose one-night stand turns into life-long commitment when Alison (Katherine Heigl) discovers she is, as the title suggests, knocked up. Various descriptions of Ben as a “tubby slacker,”⁵⁸⁰ “a twentysomething non-achiever,”⁵⁸¹ and “a La-Z-boy in human form,”⁵⁸² Ben is called out as the “little boy who’s reluctant to grow up,”⁵⁸³ who “lives with four emotionally stunted losers, better known as friends,”⁵⁸⁴ on his “slouching progress toward grown-up status.”⁵⁸⁵ If the language employed by critics to describe the film and its characters seems astringent, it is meant to: Ben’s immaturity is central to the film’s conceit, arduously utilizing his puerility and irresponsibility as *the* obstacle that must be overcome on the film’s path to resolution, and the film reviews which pick up on this device are clear responses to this troubled depiction. While this immaturity is constructed in several ways throughout the film (Ben still lives with roommates, he does not have a cell phone, he seems unembarrassed by the fact that he is Canadian and lives in the country illegally thus allowing him to shirk the responsibilities of taxes) the chief manner in which the film constructs Ben as juvenile is through his failings with regard to work.

The film features two prominent scenes that work to construct of Ben as immature through his relation to concerns about paid labor. The morning after Ben and Alison spend the night together they go out for breakfast, during which time Alison asks Ben what he does for a living. Ben replies that he and his friends are “starting an Internet website,” a trope that writer/director, Judd Apatow, clearly utilized to signal immaturity by gesturing toward cultural exchanges surrounding the advent of new technologies and

⁵⁷⁹ Tom Charity, “‘Knocked Up’ a top-rank comedy,” *CNN* 1 June 2007, Web, 24 May 2012.

⁵⁸⁰ Stephanie Zacharek, “Knocked Up,” *Salon* 1 June 2007, Web, 24 May 2012.

⁵⁸¹ Charity 2007.

⁵⁸² Anthony Lane, “Men at Sea,” rev. of *Knocked Up* and *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World’s End*, by Judd Apatow and Gore Verbinski, *The New Yorker* 4 June 2007, Web, 10 Aug 2009.

⁵⁸³ Zacharek 2007.

⁵⁸⁴ Lane 2007.

⁵⁸⁵ Richard Schickel, “*Knocked Up* Delivers Old-Style Comedy,” *Time* 1 June 2007, Web, 24 May 2012.

their connection to youth. By the early 2000s, the media had already created a flourishing narrative that described how a “new breed” of entrepreneur was changing the face of business success story. Propelled by the success of young entrepreneurs like Michael Dell (founder of Dell Computers), Jeff Bezos (founder of Amazon.com), and Shawn Fanning (inventor of Napster), the stereotype of youth as slacker began to fracture, allowing for a new form of Horatio Alger story to emerge. Previous entrepreneurial success stories in American history traditionally involved “pulling oneself up by the bootstraps” and other similar nods to hard work and elbow grease. Writing for *Newsweek*, Steven Levy speaks to how new apocryphal stories of dot-com-made men showcased their youth by describing how the new magnate “launches his first start-up in middle school, and somewhere between the campus computer-science lab and a move to Palo Alto hacks up a Web site where users provide fun or useful entertainment.” The “myth of the peachfuzz billionaire,” as Levy calls it, proliferates “the suspicion that the young are capable of seeing opportunities that the older folks can’t get, particularly when it comes to inventing stuff for a medium that they grew up with.”⁵⁸⁶ Couched within this particular discursive iteration of the contemporary adolescent, technological acumen is considered “natural” to those born into a digital world. Coined, “digital natives,”⁵⁸⁷ individuals born prior to 1980 are thought to, as Bennett et al. maintain, “possess sophisticated knowledge of and skills with information technologies.”⁵⁸⁸

Just as in all other technological eras, new advances to Internet and electronic technology ushered in new moral panics about youth attached to innovation and anxiety, success and failure, possibility and limitation. By the mid 2000s, this trope had solidified with the rapid success of male entrepreneurs who built flash-in-the-pan companies like Friendster, MySpace, Craigslist, Twitter and, of course, the well-mythologized, Mark

⁵⁸⁶ Steven Levy, “The Peachfuzz Billionaires; Not just the business plans, but the fashion preferences and dating habits of this young tech cohort are followed voraciously,” *Newsweek* 24 Dec 2007: 24.

⁵⁸⁷ See Marc Prensky, “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants,” *On the Horizon* 9.5 (2001) 1-6.

⁵⁸⁸ Sue Bennett, Karl Maton and Lisa Kervin. “The ‘digital natives’ debate: A critical review of the evidence.” *British Journal of Educational Technology*. 39.5 (2008): 777. See Bennet, et al., for an overview of debates about education and “digital narratives.”

Zuckerberg, alongside the further proliferation of the workplaces of technology start ups and powerhouses that seemed to be an extension of the “creative class.” Within the mythology of a new technological frontier accompanied by an expanding digital economy, the office was re-figured as a kind of a playroom for a labor pool who wanted creative incentive but little to no responsibility: environments in which, as Ross describes, “whiz kids didn't have to grow up and leave the never-never land of adolescence where the thrill of exploration and invention was unsullied by the external, social world.” Ross reiterates the larger themes of this chapter by arguing that for those who championed the New Economy, these work environments were “the ultimate physical embodiment of all the 'flexibility' talk that has dominated corporate culture for the last twenty years.”⁵⁸⁹

The codification of the contemporary adolescent as naturally and uniquely suitable for success within the digital economy, and signified through the discursive formation of the “digital generation,”⁵⁹⁰ created a picture of a generation of (primarily) male entrepreneurs,⁵⁹¹ who naturally possessed the technological knowhow to be successful and whose misfortunes when they did arise, could only be a result of their inability to find the right inspiration or be hit with, as Levy states, “the genius of youthful ignorance.”⁵⁹² Accordingly, it is within this context that, back at the diner, Ben explains to Alison how he is able to live without paid labor. After being hit by a truck, Ben was awarded a modest settlement, allowing him to live very modestly (he eats a lot of spaghetti) for the past few years. He is not entirely without ambition, however, explaining that he and his friends started a website that features information for finding the precise moment of nude scenes in famous Hollywood movies. He explains later in the film that this is his job even though he and his roommates do not “technically get

⁵⁸⁹ Ross, “No-Collar” 78.

⁵⁹⁰ David Buckingham defines this as “a generation defined in and through its experience of digital computer technology.” David Buckingham, “Is There a Digital Generation?” *Digital Generations: Children, Young People, and New Media*, eds. David Buckingham and Rebekah Willett (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006) 1.

⁵⁹¹ The ranks of young Internet innovators and moguls were not always populated with only white individuals, (though predominantly so) but have long been exclusively male.

⁵⁹² Levy 2007.

money for the hours we put in, but, it is our job.”⁵⁹³ In the end, it turns out that some other company has already come up with the idea for the website. In light of the rhetoric surrounding youthful conceptualizations of innovation and digital aptitude, Ben and company’s shortsightedness is easily used as fodder for the construction of their immaturity due to its absurdity and incongruity: only ineffectual individuals would be unable to cash in on their latent digital abilities.

Clearly this example is complicated by the nature of the film and larger context of this characterization as a part of Judd Apatow’s “Frat Pack.” As Peter Alilunas suggests, part of the point of marking out the male characters in these films as ineffectual is to “repeatedly construct scenarios in which men initially cannot ‘prove’ themselves, yet eventually find ways to redefine failure as ‘success.’”⁵⁹⁴ Failure is redefined as success within these films, Alilunas argues, through placing blame for their vulnerability, “quite forcefully on women.” In this way, “successful” manhood is achieved by “finding escape routes and places where white male masculinity can recuperate and celebrate its insecurities and failures without incessant female judgment and evaluation.”⁵⁹⁵ While I agree with Alilunas’ reading about the ways male characters must overcome the trauma that the film evokes as a way of reclaiming patriarchal status, as I have argued elsewhere, adding age to this equation makes it clear that this trope of failure speaks to the influence of other structural factors, even as cultural myths declare otherwise. As Steven J. McNamee and Robert Miller explain,

The American Dream assumes vast and almost unlimited demand for everyone who has merit. However, the numbers and types of jobs available affect not only levels of opportunity, competition, and social mobility but the very meaning of merit itself. That a job maximizing any particular set of skills becomes available for that person when he or she is ready for it is, at least to some degree, a matter of luck. While individuals do have some control over how skilled they are, they do not have control over what kinds of jobs are available, how many jobs are available, or how many others are seeking those jobs.⁵⁹⁶

⁵⁹³ *Knocked Up*, Dir. Judd Apatow, Universal Pictures, 2007.

⁵⁹⁴ Peter Alilunas, ‘Male Masculinity as the Celebration of Failure: The Frat Pack, Women and the Trauma of Victimization in the ‘Dude Flick,’” *Mediascape* (2009).

⁵⁹⁵ Alilunas.

⁵⁹⁶ Steven J. McNamee and Robert Keith Miller, *The Meritocracy Myth* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009) 19.

In the case of Ben Stone, the film does not give us clues to his skillset or educational background. Ben tells his dad, in a moment of poignant desperation, that he does not know how to take responsibility for himself, a moment that perhaps in other films, like *Jerry McGuire*, would be the whole film's journey. In the very next scene, it seems as though Ben has resolved all his issues: in preparation for the arrival of his baby, Ben moves out of his roommates' place into a place of his own and gets a job at a web design firm. This seemingly simple act takes all of one short montage to accomplish effectively making it clear that Ben could have had any well-paying job all along if he had just chosen to do so and applied himself. The ending to *Knocked Up*, in this way, exemplifies a contemporary dominant discursive logic that clearly portrays adolescent economic marginalization as choice. Here, Ben's lack of financial security is magically resolved when he ostensibly decides to grow up and fulfill his duty as a father; and yet, as this chapter has argued, there are significant barriers to any reproduction of this situation outside the world this film and the dominant discursive landscape imagines. This film, and others of its ilk, proposes the idea that the only step needed on the path to maturity is to simply just decide to just "grow up." Alilunas concludes his piece by suggesting that the endings to these films, "rather than illustrating the 'success' these men find, merely *reinforce* their weakness and vulnerability...[feeling like] desperate attempts to visualize the fantasy of white male security in narratives otherwise obsessively filled with images of instability and disappointment." For the purposes of this project, this last sentiment is key: the fantasy fulfillment of seeking and finding security can be viewed as part of shifting social, cultural and economic circumstances such that ever larger portions of the American population are being marginalized, including young, white males who, within previous patriarchal logic, were once immune from this marginalization.

Conclusion

Drew Baylor, venerable protagonist of *Elizabethtown*, proclaims at the beginning of the film: "There's a difference between a failure and a fiasco. A failure is simply the non-

presence of success. Any fool can accomplish failure.”⁵⁹⁷ In a contemporary representational landscape in which the dominant discursive construction of these subjects presents them as almost incapable of accomplishing achievements, it is clear that everyone is a fool and failure is the great success of the era. As previously stated, this failure, particularly in light of the sheer number of representational examples that have emerged within the first decade of the new millennium exhibiting a particular representation of predominately white, middle-class males wedged in between limited opportunity and unrestrained freedom, speaks to the tenuousness of coming of age in a global economy in which uncertainty and flexibility have become normalized.

The narrative patterning of the texts explored in this chapter conform to a contemporary discursive logic that conceives of the self as a project that must be undertaken in order to reach an elusive adult status. These films and television programs reinforce the idea that this mythical adult status is conferred only on those who are able to reach this position, one which is increasingly difficult to achieve. This is made additionally harder by the very fact that the moniker of adolescence contemporarily connotes a double-bind when connected to the idea of work: youth are disconnected from the realities of work and are therefore disconnected from the project of the self. Under this rubric, how can an individual striving for wholeness ever reach an eventual conclusion?

One answer to this question lies in attitudinal rhetoric espoused within neoliberal and therapeutic strategies of self-invention. As Nan Mooney argues, a successful and lucrative financial destiny is within one’s control as long as an individual possesses the right attitude “that a positive and proactive attitude alone can generate a life of plenty.”⁵⁹⁸ This same rhetoric challenges individuals to use the unprecedented opportunities of the logics of the New Economy espouses to their advantage, thus placing the onus for failure on the shoulders of the individual when these opportunities are no longer available. Certainly there is an underlying masculism to these discourses,

⁵⁹⁷ *Elizabethtown*, Dir. Cameron Crowe, Paramount Pictures, 2005.

⁵⁹⁸ Nan Mooney, *(Not) Keeping Up With our Parents: The Decline of the Professional Middle Class* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008) 15.

especially as they are presented within contemporary mediated representations of the adolescent, equating the fate of culture with that of the male and his ability to achieve career fulfillment and success. By surveying the ways in which young individuals are categorically and discursively positioned, a clear picture of the continued marginalization of a wide range of individuals emerges. Nevertheless, even though, as I have claimed throughout this project, white males are losing access and privilege that was once seemingly their birthright, they continue to possess more opportunity and access than female adolescents or adolescents of color. Crucially, while the dominant discourse maintains focus on the white male, continuing its campaign to shore up the specter of futurity and stability, the make-up of the middle-class has contemporarily transformed. Nan Mooney reports that,

Today's educated professional middle class looks nothing like its counterpart fifty years ago. It's Hispanic, African American, Asian, Caribbean, and Native American. As of 2005, the middle class was 72% white, 11.6% black, 3.3% Asian, and 11.3 % Hispanic, numbers that come close to reflecting the population as a whole.

The strategies presented of and for middle-class, white, educated males both highlight and obscure the realities of opportunity and access for this demographic. Perhaps more importantly, it further conceals diminishing opportunity for women and young people of color, exactly at a time in which income disparity has increased. According to Mooney and Wheary,

the net worth of black and Hispanic college graduates is similar to the net worth of high school graduates. And it's a nation where the median wealth of Hispanic households is \$11,450, and of black households is \$19,010, while—in a stunning disparity—the median wealth of white households is \$86,100.⁵⁹⁹

Thus, as the late twentieth-century representational culture espouses fulfilling careers as a right for all citizens, late-capitalist, neoliberal market logic has done the opposite, limiting opportunity, income equality and marginalizing an ever-increasing number of American citizens.

⁵⁹⁹ Mooney 15.

Chapter Six

Invisible Transformations: Sexual Maturity and the Elusive Threshold of Virginity Loss

Being publicly sexual has become the only acceptable way for girls to demonstrate maturity.

-Wendy Shalit, *Girls Gone Mild*, xxiv

Located in the middle of its television run, the HBO series *Sex and the City* (hereafter SATC; HBO 1998-2004) aired an episode at the end of its third season titled, “Hot Child in the City.” Thematically, the episode revolves around the idea of childhood, revisiting certain pleasures and anxieties that accompany this life stage and marveling at the differences between childhood and adulthood. For much of the episode, the four main protagonists encounter varying aspects of childhood in their adult lives: a comic book store, a cafeteria themed restaurant, and even adult braces. In the episode, thirteen-year-old Jenny Brier (Kat Dennings) hires Samantha (Kim Cattrall) to plan her upcoming Bat Mitzvah. While Samantha, Carrie (Sarah Jessica Parker) and Miranda (Cynthia Nixon) are eating lunch, they run into Jenny and two of her friends. Jenny immediately recognizes Carrie from her sex column and proclaims that Carrie is fabulous because her “column on ‘secret sex?’ Hello! My life!” After Jenny explains the degree to which she could relate to the column, detailing how her “ex was so completely about the sex when we are alone, but at school, in the hallway, I didn’t exist,” Jenny and her friends leave, and Carrie, Samantha and Miranda reveal their astonishment at how much these thirteen year-old girls mirror their own behavior, language and dress. Back in her apartment, Carrie wonders (via voiceover) if these teenagers are trying to act her age, or are women her age trying to act like teenagers? This then becomes the impetus for Carrie’s weekly

column as she types on her laptop, “In today’s youth obsessed culture, are the women of my generation growing into mature responsible adults, or are we 34 going on 13?”⁶⁰⁰

It has been well documented that the women of SATC walk a fine line between empowered and retrogressive through their “girly” attitudes,⁶⁰¹ and while this particular moment in the series is noteworthy for its self-reflexivity, its importance for this chapter lies in the fact that Carrie et al., see themselves as “grown teenagers” at the precise moment when they are confronted with Jenny’s frank remarks about her own sexual activity. Tellingly, it is the frank talk about sex that makes these adult women uncomfortable and dismayed. Put another way, something about this situation blurs the line between adult and juvenile behavior when it comes to sexual activity and discourse. As I have argued throughout this project, adolescence became codified as the performance of specific behaviors. If, as Wendy Shallit’s quote from the beginning of the chapter suggests, being publically sexual was the only way for young female individuals to display maturity in the first decade of the twenty-first century, what should be made of the cultural investment in the performance and display of mature sexual identities and how might these performances complicate contemporary notions of (im)maturity? Moreover, if public sexuality was the primary option afforded young female individuals to demonstrate maturity, how then should the display of young male maturity and sexuality be understood? Furthermore, what does contemporary American media’s (and film in particular) almost obsessive focus on male virginity loss convey about the significance and signification of mature sexual identities?

SATC was, in many ways, a seminal text with regard to the “sexualization” or “hypersexualization” of popular culture occurring since the mid-nineties. Much has been written about SATC’s significance as a watershed text in this regard, and the above scene points to a specific cultural moment in which questions of sexuality, maturity, age and performance are brought to bear. As Angela McRobbie maintained in 2004: “we are

⁶⁰⁰ *Sex and the City* Season 3, Episode 15, “Hot Child in the City.”

⁶⁰¹ Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (Los Angeles; Sage, 2009).

witness to a hyper-culture of commercial sexuality,”⁶⁰² one which as Evans, Riley and Shankar argue, experienced, “a dramatic rise in the resexualization of women’s bodies in the media” and the mainstreaming of sexual explicitness.⁶⁰³ Writing in 2005, journalist Ariel Levy describes what she calls “raunch culture,” remarking:

If you were to put the last five or so years in a time capsule, womanwise, it would look like a period of explosive sexual exhibitionism, opportunism, and role redefinition. These were the years of *Sex and the City*, Brazilian bikini waxes, burlesque revival, thongs—the years when women learned how to score, or at least the years when popular culture spotlighted that behavior as empowering and cool.⁶⁰⁴

Levy thus describes a cultural trend occurring since the turn of the twenty-first century, during which American cultural products evinced a marked rise in sexual explicitness. Films, television programs, popular music, fashion, and even toys demonstrated this increased explicitness, a trend that has been conceptualized as both liberatory and exploitative. Evidenced by the extensive media attention to such acts as: the rise of virginity pledges, teen pregnancy pacts, young girls selling their virginity online, the rise of girl on girl explicit acts in film and television, and the rise in accessibility and acceptability of pornography, the cultural schizophrenia surrounding contemporary adolescent sexuality in the first decade of the twenty-first century signaled a deep cultural rift in the ways in which adolescent sexuality was understood, interpreted and signified. Media for and about adolescents produced in the first decade of the new millennium was particularly conflicted in this regard, often making attempts at “progressive” representations of “healthy” adolescent sexuality, yet ending up with depictions of sexuality that reproduced the same conservative tropes of objectification and sexual inequality the “progressive” images had set out to correct.

In their comprehensive study of teen sexuality in American media from 1950 to 2005, including both qualitative and quantitative studies of movies, music, television and the Internet, Susannah Stern and Jane D. Brown find that, “the media do not now and

⁶⁰² Angela McRobbie, “Post-feminism and Popular Culture,” *Feminist Media Studies* 4.3(2004): 259.

⁶⁰³ Adrienne Evans, Sarah Riley and Avi Shankar, “Technologies of Sexiness: Theorizing Women’s Engagement in the Sexualization of Culture,” *Feminism & Psychology* 20.1 (2010): 114.

⁶⁰⁴ Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (New York: Free Press, 2005) 118.

have not ever sent consistent messages about sexuality,” however, they do acknowledge that there has been a “trend toward increasing frequency and explicitness of sexual portrayals across media directed toward young audiences.”⁶⁰⁵ Stern and Brown contend that media produced in the first decade of the new millennium is generally characterized by an “ambiguity” about teen sexuality: in 2008, for example, they argue that the mediated cultural message asserts that teens should wait to have sex “but often expect that they will, nevertheless, engage in sexual activity.”⁶⁰⁶ Stern and Brown cite Robert C. Bulman’s 2005 study of over 185 films about high school in which Bulman argues that teen sexuality featured in film, in particular, has “rarely been consistently portrayed on the big screen, with important differences often hinging on characters’ race and class, as well as their gender.”⁶⁰⁷

Genre-based scholarship on teen films has interrogated this aspect of teen representation under assumptions, like the one from which Timothy Shary operates, that the conditions of adolescence unquestionably exist, first of all, and that film made for and about young individuals reflects these conditions, not the cultural conditions under which they were produced:

A large part of working through puberty to adulthood is the struggle to recognize and cope with the emotional and physiological changes that arrive with the onset of secondary sexual characteristics: young people develop crushes and question their sexual impulses as they witness their bodies changing, members of the opposite (and/or same) sex becoming more attractive, and their friends becoming more occupied with aspects of dating. Because adolescent sexuality is so confusing for those who experience it and is still difficult to be understood by those who have endured it, the topic provides ripe tension and drama for films about youth.⁶⁰⁸

⁶⁰⁵ Susannah Stern and Jane D. Brown, “From Twin Beds to Sex at Your Fingertips: Teen Sexuality in Movies, Music, Television, and the Internet, 1950 to 2005,” *The Changing Portrayal of Adolescents in the Media Since 1950*, eds. Patrick E. Jamieson, Daniel Romer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) 335.

⁶⁰⁶ Stern and Brown 335, 314.

⁶⁰⁷ Stern and Brown 318. See Robert C. Bulman, *Hollywood Goes to High School: Cinema, Schools, and American Culture* (New York: Worth, 2005).

⁶⁰⁸ Timothy Shary, *Teen Movies: American Youth on Screen* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005) 1.

While this certainly provides one way of looking at films about teens, as Shary and others have demonstrated,⁶⁰⁹ interrogating film and television from a perspective in which behavior is removed from age-based definitions seeks to avoid large stage-of-life generalizations that work to mask substantial systemic inequalities. Previous chapters of this thesis argue that the cultural definition of adolescence underwent significant changes in the first decade of the twenty-first century such that large segments of the American population became excluded from traditional notions of agency and maturity. This chapter contends that in a late capitalist society where image often matters more than substance, young individuals are insistently offered only one form of agentic engagement in the form of a narrow expression of sexuality, one that registers as a display of immaturity. As this thesis argues, biological determinism remains a persistent part of contemporary understandings of the adolescent, and previous chapters have made clear the ways in which American society has become deeply invested in purposefully reinforcing the connection between adolescence and biology. This chapter endeavors to continue this investigation through the examination of American media's characterization of life-staged subjects, focusing on the nexus of contemporary understandings of the transition to adulthood and sexuality in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

The first chapter of this project concluded with a quote from Lisa Patel Stevens, et al. who suggest that in order for there to be any possibility for a departure from conventional understandings of young people, a “generative space must purposefully begin with the young person’s body” by targeting “the reconstruction of embodied subjectivities.” They argue that only by “reclaiming and reckoning with the body as a necessarily complex conduit for lived experience” can young people be understood as subjects in their own right, rather than figures who encompass various other agendas.⁶¹⁰

⁶⁰⁹ See Timothy Shary, *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary American Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); David Considine, *The Cinema of Adolescence* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1985).

⁶¹⁰ Lisa Patel Stevens, Lisa Hunter, Donna Pendergast, Victoria Carrington, Nan Bahr, Cushla Kapitzke, and Jane Mitchell, “ReConceptualizing the Possible Narratives of Adolescence,” *The Australian Educational Researcher* 34.2 (2007): 120-121.

Previous chapters of this thesis have also argued that late-modern shifts in the narrativization of the transition to adulthood as a process tied to biology work to obscure the difficulties individuals in the aughts faced trying reaching financial and residential autonomy, as well as in negotiating increased credentialization. Additionally, this thesis argued in the third chapter that life-staged subjects in the first decade of the new millennium experienced pressure to find stable identities in the form of the search for personal destiny. This chapter argues that the project of regarding young people as subjects whose bodies do not encompass “various other agendas” is particularly germane to the complexities of sexual identities in the twenty-first century. The primary concern of this chapter is to examine the nexus of performed (visible or knowable) sexuality its relation to the boundaries of adolescence and adulthood as displayed in films released from 1999-2008, seeking to understand the ways in which the motif of sexual activity and agency complicates contemporary notions of maturity and destiny. By examining the tension produced between persistent rhetoric (visual and otherwise) that endorses the transformational necessity of sex, alongside similar rhetoric that asserts that an individual is both too old to not have acquired this knowledge, and yet, too young to handle it, this chapter explores how the representation of young sexualities worked to reinforce and police the agentic limits of adulthood and maturity by positioning specific versions of heterosexual adolescent sexuality as “natural” and “inevitable,” yet simultaneously aberrant.

Adolescent Sexuality: A Policed State

At the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, mainstream representational culture evinced this contradiction through the continued visibility of the contemporary heterosexualized adolescent. As American culture experienced this marked rise in the visibility of sex, much of it focused on the bodies of young individuals (both the visibility of sex projected onto actual corporeal figures as well as the performance of sexuality through youthful bodies), the combination of adolescence and

sexuality became even more contradictory. Furthermore, that these significations of adolescence were produced in postfeminist era during which, as Evans et al. explain, “full embodiment in sexualized culture is contextualized as an expression of empowerment”⁶¹¹ proves to complicate this situation further.

While it may be clear that American cultural products have become increasingly sexualized since the mid- to late- nineties, debates continue with regard to what this “sexualization” entails. “Sexualization” can refer to a myriad of things, as Feona Attwood details:

a contemporary preoccupation with sexual values, practices and identities; the public shift to more permissive sexual attitudes; the proliferation of sexual texts; the emergence of new forms of sexual experience; the apparent breakdown of rules, categories and regulations designed to keep the obscene at bay; [and the] fondness for scandals, controversies and panics around sex.⁶¹²

Additionally, this wave of sexualization has been conceptualized as “youthful” as well as linked to contemporary notions of proper individual sexual development as it pertains to the health of the self. As, Attwood maintains,

Sex is increasingly linked to youth and consumer cultures; sexual discourse is increasingly linked to youth and consumer cultures; sexual discourse is increasingly organized by new cultural intermediaries and, in particular, is articulated in terms of a ‘therapeutic’ culture which promotes a focus on sexuality and the self as a means to personal development and fulfillment.⁶¹³

As Attwood makes clear, contemporary forms of sex and sexual discourse have effectualized new modes of expression that convey a sense of fulfillment, completion and maturity. In accordance with Attwood, and striking a chord with the larger themes of this thesis, Kenneth Plummer argues that modern narratives of sexuality are teleological in tone, constructing the truth of sex as something that is waiting to be discovered,⁶¹⁴ yet, uncovering this legitimacy is neither clear, nor straightforward, nor necessarily based on individual activity. Confusingly, without proper sexual development, an individual in modern society cannot become a fully actualized adult; yet, as Gordon Tait contends,

⁶¹¹ Evans, et al. 119.

⁶¹² Feona Attwood, “Sexed Up: Theorizing the Sexualization of Culture,” *Sexualities* 9(2006): 81.

⁶¹³ Attwood 80.

⁶¹⁴ Kenneth Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995) 132.

unlike the process of self-discovery in which the onus of finding the self resides with the individual in question, the process of finding the sexual self must rely on adult guidance. As Tait argues, “In the specific case of sex, the successful creation of the well-balanced adult is often deemed to rely upon appropriate expert management of the adolescent’s sex.”⁶¹⁵ Additionally, adolescent sex has historically been managed in a totalizing manner, influencing all forms of institutionalized youth administration at the turn of the twentieth century such as the segregation of genders in schools and character building programs established to manage the secrets habits of America’s future leaders. In this way, as Tait elucidates, “The machinery of sexuality...play[ed] a strategic role in the marking out of caste boundaries.”⁶¹⁶ Contemporarily, these status boundaries are still managed and policed through medicalized rhetoric as well as “hierarchical observation and normalizing judgment.”⁶¹⁷

In *The History of Sexuality*,⁶¹⁸ Foucault argues that modern Western civilization produced and implemented a new apparatus for managing sexual relations. Under this new organization, sexuality was codified through the use of the confessional as a means to produce truth. Though the church and various state apparatuses have used the confessional since the middle ages for this purpose, contemporarily, the confessional is deployed throughout various cultural practices as a means to uncover the fundamental truth of sex. In this way, Foucault contends that sexuality is the product of this process, emerging out of the success of the mechanism whose objective is the search for the truth of sex, eventually becoming the truth of our being. Consequently, according to Foucault, “the formation of knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power.”⁶¹⁹ As follows, for the purposes of this chapter, “sexuality” does not simply refer to an analysis of some of the wider imperatives associated with the management of adolescent

⁶¹⁵ Gordon Tait, *Youth, Sex and Government* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2000) 72.

⁶¹⁶ Tait 81.

⁶¹⁷ Tait 87.

⁶¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1., Trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

⁶¹⁹ Foucault 105-106.

sexuality, but rather, an interrogation of broader issues regarding *the management of sex*. As Tait suggests, this can refer to “the formation, differentiation, and regulation of specific sexed identities...[occurring] in part, through the accumulation of various practices of self-formation.”⁶²⁰

Certainly, this is not the first time that American culture witnessed a rapid escalation of the availability of sexualized imagery and consumption. The late 1920s and early 1930s, the late 1940s and early 1950s, as well as the late 1960s and 1970s all witnessed a convergence of mediated representations of adolescents and newly redefined boundaries of sexual mores. Each historic spike in sexuality coincided with eras that witnessed fundamental changes to the conceptualization of youth alongside large cultural upheavals in the form of economic or political turmoil. Janice M. Irvine aptly points out the incongruous nature of contemporary rhetoric regarding adolescent sexuality, adult fear of this sexuality, and a hypersexualized cultural climate, noting,

we expect adolescents to eschew a range of activities that have enormous cultural salience. We demand that they ‘just say no’ to sex, despite the ubiquitous message that it will transform their lives.⁶²¹

Thus, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, with new sexualities and sexual identities having become available since the sexual revolutions of the nineteen-sixties, there are theoretically more sexual identities from which to choose. Yet, the more accessible non-traditional sexualities become, argues Atwood, so too becomes the availability for their regulation.⁶²² Thus, the way that adolescence is framed in late-modern societies necessarily compresses the time period of appropriate sexual identity formation, centralizing identity formation around sexuality, but even more specifically, a highly regulated form of heterosexuality. Moreover, adolescent sexuality is mobilized as a paradoxical concept: by cultural definition adolescents are asexual, and thus, to acknowledge adolescent sexuality is, in many ways, to desire its absence. How then, can

⁶²⁰ Tait 4.

⁶²¹ Janice M. Irvine, “Cultural Differences and Adolescent Sexualities,” *Sexual Cultures and the Construction of Adolescent Identities*, ed. Janice M. Irvine (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994) 5.

⁶²² Atwood 82.

mature sexuality be performed on immature bodies, and how is this managed within the representational landscape of the first decade of the twenty-first century?

Male Virginity Loss: Caught Between Immaturity and Maturity

If adolescence is conceptualized as a developmental transition from one life stage to another, a relatively clear understanding of the end point of adolescence must exist in order to discern the onset of adulthood. In this regard, virginity loss has acted as one of the markers or signposts that allowed individuals to cross the threshold from active sexuality to visible and active sexuality. Part of the impetus behind confining the act of sex to adulthood comes from the very responsibilities associated with sexual activity. Despite relatively recent medical gains in reproductive technology that allowed women to reconceive of sexual activity as something free from consequence, reproductive sexual capacity remains, as Hanne Blank argues, “the lynch pin around which we organize the assumption of social adulthood.”⁶²³ No strict definition of the term has been culturally agreed upon, historically conveying conflicting messages about what constitutes virginity loss. Little scholarship exists on virginity as a cultural phenomenon, and what scholarship does exist is quite conflicted when it comes to both the definition of virginity loss and its contemporary cultural meaning(s). This dearth of scholarship seems disproportionate considering the intense focus that American institutions, including mass media, medical science, schools, religious institutions, public policy organizations, and the government have placed on virginity loss as “one of, if not *the*, most meaningful events in an individual’s sexual career.”⁶²⁴

Contemporary American popular culture is quite conflicted when it comes to virginity. Though there is a distinct difference between virginity and losing one’s virginity, popular culture more often than not conflates the two: as Blank reminds us, “Virginity *is* because it ends.”⁶²⁵ Virginity loss in American cultural products tends to be

⁶²³ Hanne Blank, *Virgin: The Untouched History* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007) 98.

⁶²⁴ Carpenter 5.

⁶²⁵ Blank 97.

referenced as a moment, not a process. This has been epitomized in the now common trope of characters giving themselves or others an ultimatum, often one night (prom) or the transition from high school to college, seen in films such as, *American Pie* (Weitz, 1999), *Can't Hardly Wait* (1998), *What Women Want* (2000), *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (Apatow, 2005), and *Superbad* (Mottola, 2007). Despite the fact that virginity loss holds so much weight in American culture that “of all the firsts that people can experience, only virginity loss is designated by a special term,”⁶²⁶ the general focus on virginity in American culture tends to be on heterosexual women, to the exclusion of men, gay men, lesbians and other sexual minorities.⁶²⁷ Tamar Jeffers McDonald maintains that, “virginity is not personal but social, not private but public, not natural but constructed, and not obvious but invisible,” and specifically, virginity in American film causes cultural anxieties “predicated on ‘showing.’”⁶²⁸ These anxieties about virginity and “showing” feature prominently in three films released in the first few years of the aughts.

The 2008 film, *Step Brothers* (McKay) follows the lives of two adults, ostensibly in their 60s, who fall in love, decide to remarry, and discover that blending their families together is difficult due to the fact that each has a middle-aged son still living at home. Similar to other films released in the first decade of the 2000s focused on the management of middle-aged men still evincing maturity troubles, this film’s two main protagonists Brennan and Dale (Will Ferrell and John C. Reilly, respectively) display specific adolescent characteristics: neither character has a job, both live at home, and their interests lie only in the realm of leisure and entertainment. Additionally, *Step Brothers* goes one step further in that these characters have been scripted such that they do not seem to possess the mental capacity necessary for self-sufficiency: they ask their parents for permission to do simple tasks and throw temper tantrums when forced to make decisions. The insistence on characterizing these men (who are clearly in their forties) as adolescent is easily seen in the promotional poster for the film in which both

⁶²⁶ Carpenter 5.

⁶²⁷ Carpenter 5.

⁶²⁸ Tamar Jeffers McDonald, “Introduction,” *Virgin Territory: Representing Sexual Inexperience in Film*, ed. Tamar Jeffers McDonald (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010) 2.

men pose for what is clearly a reference to a primary school picture with the ironic tagline reading, “They grow up so fast.”



Figure 10: *Step Brothers* Promotional Poster

In a move uncharacteristic of other films of this trend, *Step Brothers* includes a scene in which one of its main protagonists loses his virginity. While the virginity loss itself is not an unusual occurrence, this moment in *Step Brothers* is unique for the fact that it happens without so much as a passing nod to its significance. In this rather throwaway scene, Dale has his first sexual experience in the bathroom of a restaurant with his new stepbrothers' wife, Alice (Katherine Hahn). The scene begins when Alice surprises Dale in the bathroom of a restaurant where the whole family is celebrating her husband Derek's (Brennan's brother, played by Adam Scott) birthday.



Figure 11: Dale's First Sexual Experience

Throughout the scene Alice is the aggressor, unbuttoning Dale's pants and essentially hoisting herself onto an unwitting and unknowing Dale who is shown as entirely clueless as to what is happening to his person. In this film, Dale's virginity is never discussed and his passing from a virginal to non-virginal state is never addressed. Dale's exclamations of "It's all slippery!" and "It's getting tingly! Something's gonna happen!" signal both his inexperience with, and ignorance about, the act of sex. While the fact that Dale is still a virgin in his 40s is never explicitly addressed in the film, it almost does not have to be—the fact that he is coded as helpless and developmentally stunted throughout the rest of the film allows for the easy acceptance and naturalness of his virginal status. Within this scene we can see how both adolescence and virginity can be visible and invisible, knowable and unknowable. The legibility and significance of adolescence and virginity are both culturally and historically relative and both are beset by anxieties produced around questions of visibility.

As I have mentioned elsewhere in this chapter, the formation of a sexual identity has become an essential component of individual identity and personal fulfillment. Tait argues that the contemporary conventional and pervasive understanding of youth is one that "betrays a familiar set of domain assumptions concerning the self."⁶²⁹ Tait maintains that, inherent in this particular conceptualization of youth exists an analogous assumption that adolescence is also a time period during which "young people seek to find the truth of their sexuality."⁶³⁰ This imperative toward individual sexuality is perceived, Tait maintains, as an "inner verity, a component of...true selves."⁶³¹ Moreover, Tait maintains that culturally it is believed that, "It is only when the sexual conduct of an individual is aligned with their real sexual nature, that an individual can be happy and balanced," just as it is aphoristically understood within the conceptualization of the individual's "true" concept of self. These two conceptualizations similarly share the discursive framework under which it is believed that any disconnect between the true

⁶²⁹ Tait 135.

⁶³⁰ Tait 136.

⁶³¹ Tait 136.

nature of the individual and the individual's true sexual nature has the possibility of resulting in dire consequences.⁶³²

In the same way that the self is a historical construct, as argued in chapter three of this thesis, so too is the construct of the self's sexual identity. Irvine accords with Tait, noting that, "The historical and cultural nature of sexuality means that sexual identities are not biologically fixed but are 'fictions' by which we manage the complexities of life."⁶³³ These fictions are constructed such that their fixity is equated with necessity, as Tait notes,

the concept of sexuality has consistently been represented as the most fundamental axis of life. It appears to furnish a bedrock for the process of self-definition and is the most obvious conduit between humankind and nature.⁶³⁴

As Tait powerfully points out, the perceived fundamental "naturalness" within the conceptualization of sexuality:

presupposes more than just the existence of a fundamental human sex drive, it also assumes that this impulse manifests itself in terms of a unified sexuality. Humans are deemed to have a sexuality in the same way that they have a personality. It is depicted as a singular, bounded sphere, a demarcated capacity. Just as youth is understood and utilized as a coherent category, so sexuality seems to describe an unproblematic thing-in-itself, a fact of nature—everyone has a sexuality.⁶³⁵

In this way, the transformation from immature to mature sexuality is understood as both a natural and necessary process. Of profound importance to this construction of transformation is the necessary act of fulfilling pubertal destinies that culminate in sexual consummation in order to fully reach adulthood; in other words, an individual cannot reach "proper" adulthood without becoming (or being) sexually active. Consequently, even as adolescence may no longer always be read as virginal, virginity will always be read as adolescent.

This contemporary cultural construction of sexual destiny is explicit in a film released three years prior to *Step Brothers* in which the protagonist's middle-aged

⁶³² Tait 136.

⁶³³ Irvine 14.

⁶³⁴ Tait 73.

⁶³⁵ Tait 74.

virginal status is so central to the film's conceit that it is, in fact, its title. Judd Apatow's film, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* explores the cultural obligation toward heterosexual sex in the development and performance of maturity. In *Virgin*, the main character, Andy Stitzer (Steve Carell) is still, as the title suggests, a virgin at 40 years of age. The film's primary running gag relies on the understanding that culturally, male virginity is after a certain age is monstrous. To this end, much of the first act of the film is concerned with the ways in which virginity and virginal status can be read or concealed on the body. Andy's inability to become a sexualized being has marked him as anti-social: stuck in a perpetual adolescence of video-game playing, action-figure collecting, and other solo hobbies, Andy's is depicted as a recluse and an introvert—so much so that one of his co-workers believes him to be a “serial murderer.” Even the promotional poster for the film features Andy by himself, posing for what looks like a grade school photo, much like the promotional poster for *Step Brothers* (above). The poster features Andy's face filled with innocent and juvenile enthusiasm, bordering on loopy or delusional, the clear intention of which is to code Andy as immature from the outset.

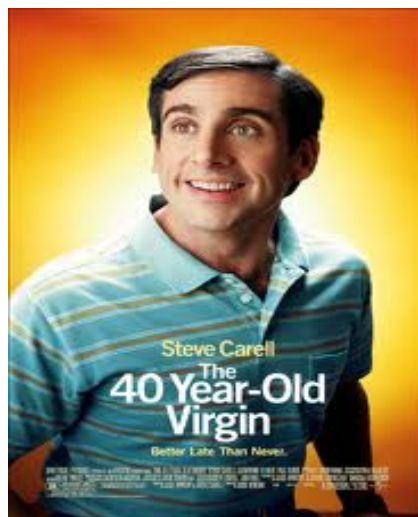


Figure 12: Promotional Poster for *The 40 Year-Old Virgin*

Crucially, the film does not code Andy as immature in the other ways that immaturity has been marked out in other films this thesis examines: Andy has a nice apartment that he takes good care of; he is invested in his own self-care; and is portrayed as respectful

of his friends, coworkers and neighbors. In this regard, Andy's adolescent status is entirely coded as a result of his lack of sexual knowledge/activity: his juvenile status and virginal status are directly proportional in that the closer he gets to losing his virginity, the more "mature" tasks he takes on. In the beginning of the film, Andy works in the stock room of an electronics store, and as the film proceeds, he is promoted to salesman and then floor manager. Through the help of his new girlfriend, Trish (Catherine Keener), Andy sells his collection of toy paraphernalia, shedding the accoutrement of youth and earning a half a million dollars as a result—enough money for him to realize his dream of owning his own electronics store. In this regard, Andy's entry into the world of sexually active adults isn't just an inroad to his sexual life; it creates the *only* access to his adult life.

As a historical and cultural concept, virgins have long been conceptualized as having no sexual history. Greg Tuck, in his exploration of virginity in contemporary American film, maintains that within American cinematic history, these "pure" or "absolute" virgins are usually described "in relation to a subject who lacks not merely sexual experience, but also sexual knowledge and, most important of all, sexual desire."⁶³⁶ Against this chaste definition of the virgin "there appears to be a range of more culturally negotiated definitions of virginity and virgins...who have not had a particular form of sex, penetrative sex, and even more specifically, people who have not had heterosexual penetrative sex."⁶³⁷ Thusly, Tuck outlines the ambiguousness of virginity, even as it is discursively positioned as categorical. Even 40-year-old Andy has sexual experience with women, he has just never had "sex." Andy explains throughout the film that he made attempts at sex before, and the film even provides visual evidence through a montage of various unsuccessful attempts. At the end, however, the event that unburdens Andy of the moniker of "virgin" is vaginal penetration; he does not even have to complete the act.

⁶³⁶ Greg Tuck, "Orgasmic (Teenage) Virgins: Masturbation and Virginity in Contemporary American Cinema," *Virgin Territory: Representing Sexual Inexperience in Film*, ed. Tamar Jeffers McDonald (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010) 158.

⁶³⁷ Tuck 158. Tuck refers to these figures as *Orgasmic Virgins*.



Figure 13: "Whoa. You're officially not a virgin."

For Andy, the only clear path to maturity was not through financial or residential autonomy, as he possessed these things from the beginning. Moreover, Andy did not *need* to get married or to start a family in order to reach adulthood, even though he chooses to get married before having sex. For Andy, the only path to adulthood, and in fact, normality, was through the act of losing his virginity.

The 40 Year-Old Virgin and *Step Brothers* are both cinematic examples in a long line of what William Paul has termed, "Animal Comedies." In his book, *Laughing Screaming*, Paul argues that Animal Comedies reached mainstream popularity in the 1980s, though their clear antecedents are films from the 1960s. Paul maintains that these films found their largest audience "among young males ranging in age from late adolescence to college age, which together represent a group our culture has called 'animals'—kids aggressively pursuing the dictates of their newly felt hormonal urges."⁶³⁸ Characters in Animal Comedy, as outlined by Paul, "are defined chiefly in terms of their sexual desires," and that "character typology concomitantly moves along lines of sexual interest."⁶³⁹ Films such as *Porky's* (Clark, 1982), *The Last American Virgin* (Davidson, 1982), *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (Heckerling, 1982), and *Bachelor Party* (Israel, 1984) epitomize this generic cycle with their unabashed drive for sex and their grotesque and explicit willingness to push the boundaries of filmic comfort.

⁶³⁸ William Paul, *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror & Comedy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) 86.

⁶³⁹ Paul 110.

Though these films are clearly about sexual initiation, Paul points out that, for the male characters in these comedies, sex is a matter of life and death.⁶⁴⁰ While Paul clearly means, here, that the act of losing one's virginity takes on a dramatic overtone, I would argue that, like the example of Andy in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, for male characters in these comedies, sex and sexual activity is a prerequisite to joining any sphere of mature action, or adult life.

Within the history of film, Celestino Deleyto contends, the display and exploration of male virginity "has not been exactly rare in the history of romantic comedy," and while Deleyto argues that male virginity is "relatively familiar to the spectator" of these more contemporary films, he does argue that within *Virgin*, this motif is "more openly stated and more explicitly a matter of worry."⁶⁴¹ Deleyto contends that Andy's "teenage mentality," as evidenced by the mise-en-scène, "conventionally introduces him as a comic hero in urgent need of maturation."⁶⁴² Despite the fact that the film problematizes Andy due to his virgin status, Deleyto maintains that he is normalized by "the mildness of his attitude to other people, his relaxed politeness, his sense of humor, and especially his respect for women...all related to his virginity."⁶⁴³ This is especially apparent, according to Deleyto, as Andy's character is set against the "more caricatured personalities" of the film's other male characters. Whereas Deleyto argues that the film takes a positive view towards Andy's virginity, considering it as "a celebration of its decisive contribution to the attainment of true love," I argue that this portrayal of virginity, while perhaps celebrated, continues to disavow Andy's maturity.

Hanne Blank, in quite possibly the only contemporary social history to be written on virginity, explains that, for men, losing one's virginity has long been a public activity: "Men have always commemorated virginity loss and the acquisition of sexual experience on a peer-to-peer basis," noting that, "the bulk of any young man's sexual learning traditionally comes from other men."⁶⁴⁴ Blank also notes that, "Men are mutually

⁶⁴⁰ Paul 101.

⁶⁴¹ Deleyto 258.

⁶⁴² Deleyto 259.

⁶⁴³ Deleyto 259.

⁶⁴⁴ Blank 101.

complicit in one another's sexual upbringings." As soon as Andy's co-workers discover that he is a virgin, they collectively take up the challenge of helping Andy to lose his virginity, prompting his coworker Jay (Romany Malco) to proclaim, "From now on, your dick is my dick." Despite the fact that Andy does not want, and in the end, does not need, their help, each of the three foils to Andy's character, Jay, Cal (Seth Rogan), and David (Paul Rudd, again), try to help Andy lose his virginity in the way that worked for each respective character. Yet, what becomes clear is that these men, despite being sexually knowledgeable, are not any less mature than Andy.

This trope of heterosexual education through male companionship resonates through the 2007 film *Superbad* (Mottola), as the two main characters, Seth (Jonah Hill) and Evan (Michael Cera) work together to create the perfect scenario in order to finally lose their virginity. In *Superbad*, however, the over-the-top crassness of the main characters is what gives these characters their, as film critic Christopher Orr calls, "an almost infantile innocence."⁶⁴⁵ *Superbad* follows a day in the life of two nerdy best friends, Seth (Jonah Hill) and Evan (Michael Cera), and their even nerdier friend, Fogell (Christopher Mintz-Plasse) as they concoct a plan to obtain alcohol for an end of school party thrown by their respective love interests. Seth and Evan communicate with one another through lewd banter, explicitly commenting on female anatomy, drawings of penises and what porn sites to frequent. Yet, in this film, instead of reading as braggadocio and misogyny as it does coming from Cal, Jay and David, it comes off as immature in a manner that suggests an insecurity that comes with inexperience: as Orr puts it, "These are boys who know nothing about girls and not much more about themselves, whose overdeveloped awareness of sex is a thin mask over their terror of it."⁶⁴⁶ In *Virgin*, Andy is the character who is coded as immature throughout the film due to his lack of sexual knowledge, yet proves to be the more mature character due to his respectful attitude towards women and himself. While Andy's coworkers are sexually experienced they are revealed as immature in their own way due to their lack of respect

⁶⁴⁵ Christopher Orr, "The Movie Review: 'Superbad,'" *The Atlantic* 22 Sep 2008, Web, 12 Nov 2012.

⁶⁴⁶ Orr 2008.

for themselves and others. Seth and Evan of *Superbad*, lastly, are coded as immature due to their lack of sexual knowledge as well as their crassness and lack of respect for women. In this manner, the clear messages that these two films provide is that sexual knowledge is a prerequisite for maturity, yet, clearly, the attainment of sexual knowledge is not a guarantee of maturity. As Deleyto contends, *Virgin*, offers only two options for male sexuality (romantic heterosexual love that involves intimacy and respect between two individuals, or heterosexual sexual activity in which sex is the primary, and sometimes singular, goal), and that both sexualities are really just “expressions of male infantile fears of their own sexuality.”⁶⁴⁷ Clearly, within these films, sexuality is aspirationally constructed as a path to maturity, one that can only be completed by a mature, heterosexual individual, and thus, one that leads to frequent failure.

Lesley Speed maintains that the vulgar teen comedy (her term for what Paul calls “animal comedies”) was successful at a time when there was a separation between the lived reality of the middle-class and its representation in popular culture in the 1980s. Speed argues that the hedonism in the vulgar teen comedies of the 1970s, as Paul has also argued, was linked to the idea of making private acts public, and as such, was considered subversive and liberatory. By the 1980s, these films still championed hedonism but subordinated social themes, noting that these films “center on youth’s presumption to unrestricted liberty,” but due to the absence of a social perspective revealed a “crisis of male youth privilege.”⁶⁴⁸ Additionally, Speed links the failure of the sex quest, so prevalent in 1980s and 1990s iterations of the vulgar teen comedy, to a foregrounding of “the limited scope of white youth hedonism.”⁶⁴⁹ In so doing, it becomes clear that within this cycle of vulgar teen comedies, “the repeated humiliation of protagonists exposes to scrutiny the presumed social freedoms of white, middle-class males.”⁶⁵⁰ Whereas Speed links this failure of the male sex quest to alterations in class privilege, Peter Alilunas argues that this reconfiguration of success and failure should be

⁶⁴⁷ Deleyto 266.

⁶⁴⁸ Lesley Speed, “Loose Cannons: White Masculinity and the Vulgar Teen Comedy Film,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 43.4 (2010): 826.

⁶⁴⁹ Speed 827, 828.

⁶⁵⁰ Speed 831.

read as a reassertion of patriarchal authority (though, to be sure, Alilunas is not specifically referring to the aspects of these films that speak to heterosexual performativity).⁶⁵¹ As I have argued throughout this chapter, virginity is constructed as explicitly non-adult, thus rendering adolescence the codification of the lack of sexual knowledge. By arguing that the performance of heterosexuality has become a necessity in the performance of subjectivity and the reassertion of the “adult” aspect of patriarchal authority, this chapter offers a necessary contribution to this conversation by addressing how contemporary films enact exclusionary practices inherent in these discursive articulations.

Female Virginity Loss: A Crisis of Futurity

Clearly, with regard to the signification of contemporary adolescence, sexual maturity (when it is attained) only refers to adult heterosexuals to the exclusion of gays, lesbians, and teenagers: anyone, that is, who is not utilizing their heterosexual reproductive function.”⁶⁵² Alongside scholarship on sexual identities, several scholars have taken to task the way that sexuality plays a role in people’s constitutive forms of citizenship.⁶⁵³ In some ways, the idea of the sexual citizen is something of a contradiction in terms⁶⁵⁴ as it applies the concept of citizenship to a sphere of behavior traditionally understood as exclusively belonging to the private sphere. This is in direct opposition to the traditional idea of citizenship--a notion necessarily bound up in public action and activity. Typically, the concept of sexual citizenship is used to discuss the ways in which citizens are barred from equal rights based on their sexuality; however, for the purposes of this chapter, sexual citizenship is a useful way of thinking through issues of adolescence as well.

⁶⁵¹ Peter Alilunas, ‘Male Masculinity as the Celebration of Failure: The Frat Pack, Women and the Trauma of Victimization in the ‘Dude Flick,’” *Mediascape* (2009).

⁶⁵² Tuck 159.

⁶⁵³ See Jeffrey Weeks, “The Sexual Citizen. *Theory, Culture & Society* 15.3 (1998): 35-52; David Bell and Jon Binnie, *The Sexual Citizen: Queer Politics and Beyond* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000); Brenda Cossman, *Sexual Citizens: The Legal and Cultural Regulation of Sex and Belonging* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

⁶⁵⁴ Jeffrey Weeks, *Invented Moralities: Sexual Values in an Age of Uncertainty* (New York: Columbia Press, 1995).

Several scholars have recently noted the ways in which the girl has begun to stand in for the figure of the nation's future health.⁶⁵⁵ Lauren Berlant argues that since the Reagan administration and its implementation of neo-liberal strategies, anxieties about the nation's future have been consistently mapped onto the figure of the child in the contemporary notion of citizenship. While these scholars find that it is true for all aspects of present-day American citizenship, for Berlant, this is particularly true with regard to sex and citizenship. Berlant argues that the only thing a nation truly possesses is its past, and in order for it to secure its future a nation must develop methods in the present to protect its potential. She argues that as part of this country's method to secure this future, citizenship has been re-envisioned as personal, directed toward the family sphere, and "inhabit[ing] a secure space liberated from identities and structures that seem to constrain what a person can do in history."⁶⁵⁶ Berlant maintains that this is a direct response to the perceived threat of any sex acts that "do not aspire to the privacy protection of national culture, or to the narrative containment of sex into one of the conventional romantic forms of modern consumer heterosexuality."⁶⁵⁷

As I've mentioned in chapter three, Berlant is arguing that to perform this correct kind of contemporary citizenship means to take up the mantle of "unconflicted personhood" or "dead citizenship," by which she means any metaphor or figure that has become so conventionalized it is no longer open to history: "not live, or in play, but dead, frozen, fixed, or at rest."⁶⁵⁸ Crucially for this chapter, it is the young girl who acts as the signifier for who should be both be protected in order to ensure the national future, but must also carry the mantle for this same project. The girl must be both asexual and emblematic of the sexual and reproductive capacity of the nation. Berlant maintains that "straight sex" is the only sex "authorized by national culture and that engaging in this

⁶⁵⁵ See Anita Harris, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2009); and Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

⁶⁵⁶ Berlant 4.

⁶⁵⁷ Berlant 62.

⁶⁵⁸ Berlant 60.

private act any American is “practicing national heterosexuality.”⁶⁵⁹ Thus, contemporarily, virginity as closure of sexuality only necessitates a claim to social value if it is performed in such a way that it holds up the heteronormative core national culture.

As Irvine argues, the twentieth century brought about change to the ways in which sexual meanings are culturally processed: “The seemingly inevitable link between sexuality and reproduction has weakened; the contemporary emphasis is on sex as an integral component of individual identity and personal fulfillment.”⁶⁶⁰ Irvine notes that adolescent sexuality has always been “framed as a social problem,” and that for decades, this problem has largely been focused on adolescent girls as the “source of public anxiety and the target of social control.”⁶⁶¹ The manifestation of this anxiety has traditionally been teenage pregnancy, and while teenage pregnancy was still a major concern in the first decade of the new millennium, the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and the rise of sexually transmitted infections has, as Irvine contends, “reified the discourse on adolescent sexuality as one of risk, disease, and death.”⁶⁶² Additionally, argues Irvine, this anxiety has intensified as a result of research that finds a correlation between earlier sexual activity and a heightened risk of negative outcomes.⁶⁶³ It would seem that these findings leverage an ever-increasing management and control of adolescent sexuality, and particularly for young female individuals who bear the brunt of this management.

Historically, Americans have viewed men’s virginity as a stigma to be quickly discarded, and conceptualized women’s virginity as a gift to be protected—the very definition of the sexual double standard.⁶⁶⁴ Susan Douglas points out that, prior to the 1960s, messages about girls were always the same: “Girls, who didn’t have much, if any, sexual desire, had to protect themselves from boys, who were, from the age of fourteen, completely governed by their crotches.”⁶⁶⁵ The Kinsey reports, alongside the sexual

⁶⁵⁹ Berlant 80.

⁶⁶⁰ Irvine 4.

⁶⁶¹ Irvine 5.

⁶⁶² Irvine 5.

⁶⁶³ Irvine 5.

⁶⁶⁴ Carpenter 141.

⁶⁶⁵ Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Times Books, 1994) 63.

revolution, helped to erode this double standard, while simultaneously evoking cultural that panics that played out most explicitly within “pregnancy melodramas,” like *A Summer Place* (Daves, 1959), *Splendor in the Grass* (Kazan, 1961) and *Love with a Proper Stranger* (Mulligan, 1963), films in which girls wanted to have sex, had sex, got pregnant, and after some turmoil and torment, ended up with men who wanted to be fathers and fell in love. Despite gains made due to the sexual revolution, gendered differences about virginity loss have yet to recede.

In the 1990s, the hit television series *Beverly Hills 90210* (Fox 1990-2000) featured a character, Donna Martin (Tori Spelling) who was outspoken about her desire to remain a virgin until marriage.⁶⁶⁶ Almost seven years later, *One Tree Hill* (WB 2003-2006, CW 2006-12) a different series about American High School teens set in Tree Hill, North Carolina, featured the character Haley James (Bethany Joy Galeotti) who wants to wait until marriage to have sex for the first time. Instead of waiting for several years (or television seasons) to debate the value of virginity as Donna Martin did, Haley and her boyfriend Nathan (James Lafferty) are married at sixteen, thusly reconciling their issues with premarital sex. For the most part, however, young females in films are depicted as bearing the brunt of adolescent sexual indiscretion in films like *Save the Last Dance* (Carter, 2001) in which the protagonist’s love interest’s sister has a child while still attending high school; religious satire, *Saved!* (Dannelly, 2004), where the protagonist gets pregnant in an attempt to restore a friend’s heterosexuality; and television shows like *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* (ABC Family 2008-present) in which Amy Juergens (Shailene Woodley) gets pregnant after losing her virginity at band camp. Though the teenage pregnancy rate has continually declined since 1991,⁶⁶⁷ it is still a consistent trope acting as the visible manifestation of teen girl sexuality. As Harris contends, “The panic over teen motherhood is a prime example of the regulatory focus

⁶⁶⁶ Donna remained a virgin until season seven when she eventually lost it to her future husband after their college graduation, though they were not married at that time (5/21/1997 Episode 32, Season 7 “Graduation Day (2).” Donna and her boyfriend eventually get married, though Donna has sexual experiences with other men before this.

⁶⁶⁷ United States, US Dept of Health and Human Services, National Center for Health Statistics, *U.S. Teenage Birth Rate Resumes Decline*, By Stephanie J. Ventura and Brady E. Hamilton, Centers for Disease Control, Feb. 2011, Web, 10 Feb 2013.

on a disordered pattern of consumption and the personalizing of failure.”⁶⁶⁸ This fixation on female sexuality’s visible expression reveals the way that sexual performativity is both that which causes exclusion for the adolescent as well as the only mode of inclusion—the very paradox that is adolescent sexuality.

Conclusion

In the late-modern era, the cultural obsession with the policing of sex has intensified dramatically with a newfound focus on performativity, often conflating differences between sexual acts, sexual imagery, sexual activity and sexuality. As social, economic and cultural changes happened to the category of individuals that fall under the widening umbrella that has become adolescence, clearly issues of maturity and immaturity, self-hood and sexual identity have become more complex and more difficult to navigate. I have argued throughout this thesis that age, in the beginning of the twenty-first century, is no longer the only key determinant in the signification of adolescence. Moreover, this project has argued that the construction of adolescence has historically been bound to the idea of a masculine project as a way of securing the future success of the nation. As two of the five traditional markers of adulthood require heterosexual coupling (marriage and parenthood), the performance of successful heterosexuality, here signified as the loss of virginity, takes on a fundamental imperative acting as a stand in for the discovery of personal sexual destiny.

The introduction of this chapter references a moment in SATC that I claim blurs the line between adult and juvenile behavior when it comes to sexual activity and discourse. Anita Harris maintains that shows such as *Sex and the City* “reinforce images of young women assertively taking their place in the public ‘man’s world,’...as sexual agents.”⁶⁶⁹ In this instance, while Harris is referring to the four main characters of the program who are in their mid- to late-thirties, she rightly points out that whereas once

⁶⁶⁸ Harris 30.

⁶⁶⁹ Harris 102.

women were, “expected to construct their identities exclusively around the home and domestic life,”⁶⁷⁰ women are now able to form their identities in public arenas as well, including forging their sexual identities. In the case of the example from the beginning of the chapter, it is clear that what makes the adult women of SATC so uncomfortable is not the frankness of the talk/language, but rather it is the privilege these young girls (ostensibly 13 years-old) are exercising to not only have sexual lives and agencies at such a young age, but to be so publicly open about it.

Other parts of this chapter have discussed the ways in which the representation of male virginity loss and the resulting portrayal of mature male sexual identities speak to certain kinds of entitlements and privileges. Alilunas contends that the narratives of films like *Virgin*, *Step Brothers*, and *Superbad*,

spend the vast majority of their time establishing their primary male characters as ‘victims’ through their failures, weaknesses, vulnerabilities, inabilities, and incapacities.... Yet, in the end... these men still emerge victorious... But this apparent maturity occurs *according to their terms*. They dictate the rules, the methods, and the parameters. In effect, they rig the game.⁶⁷¹

While I agree with Alilunas that these male characters do find success at the end of these films, as well as with his assertion that this “success” often only serves to, “reinforce their weakness and vulnerability...[in an] attempt...to visualize the fantasy of white male security in narratives otherwise obsessively filled with images of instability and disappointment.”⁶⁷² Yet, as this chapter has shown, these films negotiate with a crisis of privilege in terms of mature sexualities. Catherine Driscoll maintains that, “The virgin is both emblematic of the future and has no future of her own if the only possible future for a girl is sexual activity ostensibly unavailable to virgins.”⁶⁷³ While certainly virginity for young male individuals is not emblematic of the future, or at least symbolic in the same way, the kinds of expectations placed on mature male sexual performance and knowledge can certainly be understood as experiencing similar pressures and restrictions

⁶⁷⁰ Harris 105.

⁶⁷¹ Alilunas 2009.

⁶⁷² Alilunas 2009.

⁶⁷³ Catherine Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture & Cultural Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 41.

in the first decade of the twenty-first century in the form of performing sexual identities as a means to protect and advance a heteronormative national project. In this way, the mobilization of virginity as a marker of this (highly regulated) form of identity formation performs the necessity of the heteronormative transition from immaturity to maturity.

Conclusion

Fittingly, just as this project came to a close, yet another popular magazine article was published disparaging a cohort of young individuals. Joel Stein, writing in a May 9, 2013 article in *Time*,⁶⁷⁴ decries millennials as those who are, as of the early 2010's, teens and 20-somethings. Stein's major argument for why this generation is worthy of disfavor is that millennials are guilty of narcissism, more so than any previous generation. Stein bolsters his claim with what he terms, "cold, hard data:" namely, enumerating details about incidence of narcissistic personality disorder, a generational obsession with fame, and, of course, stunted development. Stein gives two reasons for their developmental arrest, first, noting now well-worn statistics about 18 to 20-year-olds living with their parents, and second, claiming that they are occupationally lazy: "In 1992, the nonprofit Families and Work Institute reported that 80% of people under 23 wanted to one day have a job with greater responsibility; 10 years later, only 60% did."⁶⁷⁵ While, certainly, as has been shown throughout this project, this specific perception of this generational cohort is not new. Indeed, as chapter one of this project points out, the teleological and developmental trajectory that has been mapped onto contemporary adolescence has facilitated the naturalization of "unformed" individuals possessing partially formed ideals, identities and skills. The propagation of this essentialization has worked to sanction, manage, and control the circumstances under which not only financial and residential autonomy may be obtained, but under which conditions, as chapter three points out, the process of self-actualization can occur.

Thus, while Stein's article may be rehashing recognized tropes, what is unique about this article is the reaction it garnered. *The New Republic*'s Marc Tracy, in a reaction piece to the *Time* cover story, critically engages with this generational account, noting that, "*Time* and Stein reveal themselves to be guilty of taking culturally and

⁶⁷⁴ Joel Stein, "Millennials: The Me Me Me Generation," *Time* 9 May 2013, Web, 10 May 2013.

⁶⁷⁵ Stein 2013.

ethically specific ideas about how people should live their lives as normative facts,” a critique I find striking given the general lack of understanding about generalized mobilizations of age that are still so persistent in the American representational landscape in the second decade of the twenty-first century.⁶⁷⁶ When Stein notes of the millennials that “Their development is stunted: more people ages 18 to 20 live with their parents than with a spouse, according to the 2012 Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults,” Tracy points out that Stein’s use of the word, “stunted,” is problematic:

Stein is making not only a forensic observation, but also a moral judgment. Millennials are delaying maturity, leaving home, marriage, having children, and the rest—and that is *wrong of them*. Thank God Joel Stein is here to set us right.⁶⁷⁷

Tracy continues to diagnostically unpack the rest of Stein’s article, noting that that Stein calls millennials “financially responsible” only to extenuate this description by acerbically noting that financial responsibility is manageable when one remains in the parental home. Tracy retorts,

“Responsible,” too, is a moral word masquerading as an empirical one. To write an article about young people that minimizes student debt at a time when it, indeed, is at a record high, is astonishing enough. To imply that, in contrast to low household and credit-card debt, all of this student debt is not “responsible” betrays an incredibly poor understanding of how student debt has gotten as high as it has.

Alex Balk wonders if it is precisely the kinds of contemporary generalized notions of self-understanding and individual significance at work here in the characterization of a grouping of individuals who are understood as being technologically savvy, and one that is often considered entitled:⁶⁷⁸

⁶⁷⁶ Marc Tracy, “Millennials in Our ‘Time:’ What the Magazine Mangled in its Controversial Cover Story,” *The New Republic* 9 May 2013, Web, 10 May 2013.

⁶⁷⁷ Tracy 2013, his emphasis.

⁶⁷⁸ Alex Balk, “‘Time’ Makes Smart Move In Trolling Generation That Does Nothing Else But React On Social Media,” *The Awl* 9 May 2013, Web, 10 May 2013.



Figure 14: Caption on theawl.com reads: “Man, you really have to wonder where millennials ever got the idea that they mattered in the first place.”

Tracy concurs, speaking as a millennial himself, claiming that that non-millennials “are comfortable thinking of us as entrepreneurs only when the innovations have to do with the Internet,” thus directly connecting a generalized view of young individuals, success and self-knowledge to perceptions of technology.⁶⁷⁹

Alyssa Rosenberg, while having issues with Stein’s article, has a larger dispute with the accompanying cover image, or as she puts it, the way the article is “being sold to the public: namely, with a picture of a well-dressed young woman, gazing into her iPhone, seemingly taking a picture of herself.”⁶⁸⁰



Figure 15: Caption reads: “Millennials are lazy, entitled narcissists who still live with their parents. Why they’ll save us all.”

⁶⁷⁹ Tracy 2013.

⁶⁸⁰ Alyssa Rosenberg, “Why *Time* Magazine Put A Woman On The Cover Of Its Issue Complaining About Millennials,” *ThinkProgress* 9 May 2013, Web, 10 May 2013.

Rosenberg notes that one of the reasons why the *Time* cover is so tedious is that it suggests that millennials are different because they are coded as feminine. That the article is primarily about narcissism, that the figurative stand-in for millennials is a woman, and that this woman is taking a “selfie,”⁶⁸¹ suggests to Rosen that,

Dependence, interiority, and the careful construction of fantasy lives aren’t solely the provenance of girls and women of course, but they’re traits that are coded as feminine. And technology and economics have made those traits much more visible when men and women display them.⁶⁸²

Rosenberg comments that she cannot find any research suggesting that women exhibit these traits in greater numbers than men: “If anything, Millennial men and women are coming into alignment in certain ways.” By illuminating the assumptions that undergird these generational descriptions, Rosenberg underlines the greater arguments of this thesis:

If what irritates non-Millennials about the current generation of young adults, male and female alike, isn’t just that they are self-absorbed, or entitled, or dependent, but self-absorbed, entitled, and dependent in *feminine* ways, that’s telling.⁶⁸³

As further evidence of the way that these generational normativizations are beginning to be culturally interrogated, the *Time* cover went viral as a meme, pointing to the ways in which this generational trope may have run its course (although, it should be noted that the internet, and the use thereof, is pointedly raced, classed, and aged in its own regard):



Figure 16: Variations on the *Time* cover meme.

⁶⁸¹ A “selfie” is a picture of oneself taken by oneself.

⁶⁸² Rosenberg 2013.

⁶⁸³ Rosenberg 2013, her emphasis.

The period of time this thesis covers spans from 1999 to the end of 2008, a deliberate choice made for two reasons. The first was the election and subsequent inauguration of President Barack Obama. This seemed like a significant sea change in that it was the end of the Bush era and, what was assumed to be, the beginning of a change in conservative policy making. The second reason behind ending this study at the end of 2008 was that, although the Great Recession technically began in 2007, in many ways the beginning of a society-wide recognition of a large-scale recession began in September of 2008 with the fall of Lehman Brothers. These two major cultural, social and economic events occurring simultaneous to one another appeared to be a good time at which to end the period of study for this project.

Undoubtedly, the effects of the recession have both diminished the economic realities for young individuals in America, as well as brought to light some of the issues that young individuals have been facing since the turn of the twenty-first century. While every group of workers from 16 to 54 years was less likely to be employed in 2010 than in 2000, young adults aged 16 to 29 fared the worst. According to The Children's Defense Fund, in 2010, the employment rate of young individuals aged 16 to 29 was 55.3 percent, in contrast to the employment rate of this age group which stood at 67.3 percent in 2000. The CDF claims that the 2010 employment number is "the lowest such rate for all youth in this age group combined since the end of World War II."⁶⁸⁴ This decline in labor market outcomes affected young individuals across every race-ethnic group, while young males experienced a higher rate of decline in their employment rate than young females (14 versus 10 percentage points). And, of course, employment rates do not convey the quality of jobs available to young individuals: according to The Center for American Progress, "half of all recent college graduates are in jobs that do not require a four-year degree, and 37 percent are in jobs that require no more than a high school diploma."⁶⁸⁵

⁶⁸⁴ Children's Defense Fund. "The Deterioration in the Labor Market Fortunes of America's Young Adults During the Lost Decade of 2000-2010." Sep 2011.

⁶⁸⁵ "The High Cost of Youth Unemployment," The Center for American Progress, 5 April 2013.

While a high rate of unemployment is a problem for young individuals in general, it is an even bigger problem for young American individuals of color. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate for all teenagers is 25.1 percent. For black teens this rate is 43.1 percent, and an alarming half of black males ages 16-19 are looking for work and finding none. Considering that in 2008 young black men between 18 and 34 were six times as likely to be incarcerated as young white men,⁶⁸⁶ and the number of men in the penal system are excluded from these unemployment statistics, it is clear that the number of young, black males without a job is much higher than even these statistics confirm (additionally, being an ex-con means about a 40 percent decrease in annual earnings).⁶⁸⁷

Even if young individuals were not losing years of income and work experience, the cost of raising a child has become almost comically high. Nadia Taha calculated the expense of having a child in 2012 by being as “conservative as possible.” Using the Agriculture Department’s figures for the cost of “food, transit, clothing and miscellaneous expenses (personal care items, entertainment, reading materials) for children in a two-parent household in the urban Northeast with a combined income of over \$103,350,” Taha calculates that the cost of having a (middle-class child) comes out roughly to \$1.8 million dollars, including saving over \$5,000 each year from the child’s birth to 18 years-of-age to cover the cost of *half* the tuition at “an average-price four-year public university. Taha’s figure accounts for tuition as priced in 2012, however, considering that the cost of college has experienced a 500% inflation rate since 1985, it is not hard to imagine that this portion of the child-cost budget will rise dramatically in 18 years.”⁶⁸⁸

In light of these statistics, it seems even more daunting that, according to projections put together by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, over the next few years a college degree will no longer suffice for highly competitive jobs, as “Jobs requiring a

⁶⁸⁶ Tyjen Tsai and Paola Scommegna, “U.S. Has World’s Highest Incarceration Rate,” Population Reference Bureau Aug 2012.

⁶⁸⁷ Albert R. Hunt, “A Country of Inmates,” *New York Times* 20 Nov 2011, Web, 17 Apr 2013.

⁶⁸⁸ Steve Odland, “College Costs Out of Control,” *Forbes* 24 Mar 2012, Web, 17 Apr 2013.

master's degree are expected to grow the fastest, while those requiring a high school diploma will experience the slowest growth over the 2010–20 timeframe.”⁶⁸⁹ And, of course, with more necessary credentials and schooling, there will be more need for student loans. In March of 2012 the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau undertook the large task of figuring out the total amount of private student loan debt held by American citizens. Adding to the already sobering total of federal outstanding student loan debt (\$870 billion), the total of outstanding private and federal student loan debt, according to CFPB, surpassed the one trillion mark in early 2012.⁶⁹⁰ These statistics evince a grim future for young American individuals, one in which financial autonomy and security are continually held at arms length while cultural and societal obligations are packaged as the pursuit for “personal growth,” “identity exploration,” or the “maturation process.”

In retrospect, the decision to conclude this study at the end of 2008 seems, unfortunately, more like an act of optimism on my part than a response to any real cessation of a trend. While changes to the representation of the transition to adulthood have occurred since then, in many ways, this trend has continued on through 2012 and looks poised to continue through at least the rest of 2013. I suggest at various points throughout this project that the figure of the immature individual is, in many ways, coded as male. While the representation of immature males continued in films such as *The Hangover* (Phillips, 2009); *Funny People* (Apatow, 2009); *The Hangover Part II* (Phillips, 2011); *Horrible Bosses* (Gordon, 2011); *Hall Pass* (Farrelly Brothers, 2011); and *The Change-Up* (Dobkin, 2011), this juvenilization has since spread to female characters in both film and television texts. The immature characterization of male individuals in the early- to mid-aughts was rarely figured in or through female characters as it was with attenuated male

⁶⁸⁹ United States. Bureau of Labor Statics. *Overview of the 2010–20 Projections*. 29 Mar 2012, Web, 13 Oct 2012.

⁶⁹⁰ Rohit Chopra, “Too Big to Fail,” *Consumer Financial Protection Bureau* 21 Mar 2012, Web, 17 Apr 2013.

characters, until 2011, with the release of *Bridesmaids* (Feig). *Bridesmaids* positions its female characters in much the same way that the Lad Flicks/Dude Flicks so central to this trend situate their characters. By reframing some of the conventions that have shorn up the formulaic narratives of typical rom-coms the film accentuates the economic and psychological difficulties of late modern maturity. Unlike other films with female leads in a postfeminist era, Annie (Kristen Wiig) is not figured as needing to curb her ambitions in order to find happiness thorough romance and marriage. Instead, Annie is positioned in much the same way as her male counterparts within other films of this trend in that her downward spiral into failure is depicted by the loss of occupational control: Annie tried to achieve her life-long dream of owning her own bakery; yet, her decision to open a business in the middle of a recession resulted in the subsequent closure of the bakery, a failure she internalizes as personal rather than systemic.



Figure 17: Annie's defunct bakery.

While more conventional romantic comedies of the beginning of the twenty-first century presented female maturity as a culmination of inevitable and enviable heterosexual coupling, the chief conceit of *Bridesmaids* mimics the male films of this trend, focusing on the difficulties of sustaining and maintaining homosocial friendships (this time, female friendships) in the face of impending nuptials. Although there is slightly less emphasis on the negativity of the inevitability of maturity, *Bridesmaids* underscores the difficulties of growing up in, presumably what it considers uniquely feminine ways. And yet, it aligns itself with many of the more immature aspects of the lad flicks, utilizing

gross out humor and an emphasis on the portrayal of failure to accomplish its version of immaturity. Tom Charity of *CNN* notes in his review of the film that audiences are “not used to such unhinged vulgarity in a girls’ night out movie,” but acknowledges that within the narrative of the film, this use of the coprophilic does not feel like pandering. Instead, Charity maintains,

Wiig and company are acutely aware of the discrepancy between what is considered ladylike and what women are really like, especially when the chips are down. That’s the wellspring for much of the comedy, whether it reveals itself in messy emotional dynamics or risqué physical antics.⁶⁹¹

That the film was more successful than *Knocked Up* (and not just financially),⁶⁹² garnering critical acclaim including two Academy Award nominations,⁶⁹³ signals a change in the way the acceptance of depictions of female attenuation has been culturally negotiated. Over the course of the five years between 2008 to the time of this writing, the combination of both the emotional and the grotesque emerging within films featuring female leads gestures toward a change in the infantilized portrayal of women that aligns with the portrayal of ineffectual males so heavily mobilized in the aughts. This trend of female attenuation and vulgarity (even if of a more “feminized” tenor), coupled with interiority coded as failure, is evident in other films released since 2009. *Young Adult* (Reitman, 2011) features a 37 year-old, divorced woman who conveys adolescence through narrative voiceover. The film follows Mavis Gary (Charlize Theron) as she struggles to write the last book in a series of young adult novels that she has ghostwritten, using first-person narrative voice over as a vehicle to convey her interiority. While clearly not a new device, *Young Adult* is unique in that it features Mavis’ young adult writing as her inner monologue, literally using the language of adolescence to convey Mavis’ interiority. HBO’s *Girls* (2012-present) can be seen as a part of this trend, even if

⁶⁹¹ Tom Charity, “Review: ‘Bridesmaids’ Marries Women and Wit,” *CNN* 13 May 2011, Web, 7 May 2013.

⁶⁹² *Bridesmaids* grossed \$288,383,523 worldwide/\$169,106,725 domestic (with a production cost of \$32.5 million) making it the highest grossing Apatow to date. In contrast, *Knocked Up*, the previous highest grossing Apatow production made \$219,076,518 worldwide/\$148,768,917 domestic (costing \$30 million to produce). BoxOfficeMojo.

⁶⁹³ Best supporting actress, Melissa McCarthy; and best original screenplay, Kristen Wiig and Annie Mumolo.

its primary characters are younger, exploring and presenting the portrayal of the hardships of traversing the transition to adulthood even for privileged, white, middle-class individuals. These films and television programs added to the trend outlined in this thesis, further propagating stage-of-life generalizations that mask large-scale inequalities.

This is certainly not to overlook the rash of films and television programs produced at this time that aimed to incorporate women into films with more bawdy humor, like *Bad Teacher* (Kasdan, 2011),



Figure 18: Tagline reads: "She doesn't give an 'F'," signaling numerous double entendres of sexual prowess and apathy.

No Strings Attached (Reitman, 2011), and *Friends With Benefits* (Gluck, 2011).⁶⁹⁴ Nor should this obscure the network television shows that followed suit with portrayals of attenuated female characters in shows like *Whitney* (NBC 2011-13); *2 Broke Girls* (CBS 2011-present); *New Girl* (Fox 2011-present); and *Don't Trust the B---- in Apartment 23* (ABC 2012-13), or the way that network television sent the message that open contempt for young female individuals is socially acceptable with the alarmingly titled, *I Hate My Teenage Daughter* (Fox 2011-12).

⁶⁹⁴ It is interesting to note that these three examples are films directed by men who had previously directed successful lad flicks—Kasdan directed *Orange County*, *Undeclared* and *Freaks and Geeks*; Gluck executive produced *The Loop*; Reitman directed *Stripes* and *Meatballs*, arguably two main precursors to the Apatow oeuvre, as well as executive produced *Old School*.

As part of this continued derision of young female individuals, the cultural enthusiasm over mean girls and relational aggression addressed in chapter one continued, acting as fodder for teen-oriented programming. The cable network ABC Family seemed propelled by this fixation as it produced several different shows preoccupied with the mysterious lives of girls. Through the production of the shows, *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* (2008-present); *The Nine Lives of Chole King* (2011-11); *The Lying Game* (2011-present); and *Pretty Little Liars* (2010-present). *Pretty Little Liars*, the network's most successful show is a murder mystery propelled by an anonymous bully (and possible murder victim, back from the dead), named "A," who controls and manipulates the four main protagonists through blackmail and extortion received primarily through texts. Executive producer, Oliver Goldstick, explains why according to him, this trend is both successful and culturally relevant, revealing the continuation of larger themes of management, agency, and identity interrogated throughout this project:

With teenage protagonists, everybody is lying; that's what's interesting. The books tapped into something organic because we're all trying on identities, but at that age it's daily. You're posing and you're praying no one's going to call you out. The 'A' of it all is also a huge part of today's culture, where people—because of the internet and blogs—aren't taking responsibility for their actions in the same way.

The contemporary implication that individuals in their thirties and forties are incapable of personal responsibility, lost in juvenile worlds of self-involvement and failure, thus clearly trickles down to representations of younger individuals, justifying ever-increasing surveillance, control and management.

Other films emerging at this time similarly negotiated with themes of the secret pressures that young female individuals face with regard to sex. As chapter five of this project has argued, virginity contemporarily signifies a closure of sexuality only as it necessitates a claim to sexual value if it is performed in such a way that it maintains a national heteronormative project. In the 2010 film *Easy A* (Gluck), Olive Pendergast (Emma Stone) discovers the power of the performativity of sexual experience. A contemporary adaptation of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, *Easy A* continues the push for heteronormativity, but explores the negative and limiting aspect of such a

narrow understanding of sexuality. In an age of ubiquitous technology, Olive discovers that a harmless white lie told to a friend quickly goes viral, changing her status from virginal to slut and rocketing her to both popularity and infamy. Olive meets and befriends Brandon, a classmate who confides to her that he is still closeted about the fact that he is gay. Together they realize that they will not stop being harassed for their hidden sexualities (for Brandon, his orientation, for Olive, her visible adult sexuality), deciding that it is not enough to “act straight” or to “get by” with rumors, that they must instead perform their virulent heterosexuality for the largest possible audience.

Easy A should be read alongside a new rash of sex quest films emerging post-2009 that, while ostensibly portraying the perils and pleasures of losing one’s virginity, actually speak to larger concerns about technology and the visibility and performance of mature sex. Films such as *Sex Drive* (Anders, 2008); *American Virgin* (Kilner, 2009); and *The Virginity Hit* (Botko and Gurland, 2010) evince rising moral panics over purity, promiscuity and the ubiquity of technology. As Toby Miller argues with regard to moral panics,

The pattern is that whenever new communications technologies emerge, children are immediately identified as both pioneers and victims, simultaneously endowed by manufacturers and critics with immense power and immense vulnerability.⁶⁹⁵

Thus, these films continue trends set forth in chapter five, adding technology to already aggravated panics over sexuality, invoking the need for further surveillance and management.

This thesis has surveyed threshold moments as they are portrayed in film and television at the turn of the twenty-first century, examining the way that the process of subjectivity is actualized; the way school facilitates or detracts from this self-actualizing pathway; careers are initiated and sustained; and sexual subjectivities are explored. Having described the way that young individuals in America are contemporarily conceptualized

⁶⁹⁵ Toby Miller, “A Risk Society of Moral Panic: The US in the Twenty-First Century,” *Cultural Politics* 2.3 (2006): 308.

and how this depiction has positioned young individuals as increasingly attenuated, it is worth speculating about the ways in which the continued portrayal of these individuals as unfinished, incompetent and attenuated contributed to the casting aside of an entire generation of workers. In light of evidence presented in this project confirming that employment for this age-group was in decline well before the recession, it is additionally worth questioning if the American investment in a future for a generation of innovators, educators, and workers would not have been greater had American culture not already maligned a large cohort of individuals as “narcissistic,” “lazy” and “stunted.”

Changes to the way that life-staged subjects grapple with difficulties in obtaining financial, residential and psychological autonomy is not limited to the United States; rather, it is a global phenomenon. As global competition continues and intensifies, economic pressures in labor market forces are provoking large-scale changes in the social structure of advanced societies around the world. As the recession unveiled, numerous governments are facing budgetary crises leading to austerity measures that have removed welfare and safety nets for many of each nation’s respective citizens. Stories of idle young individuals are not limited to America, with European, Japanese and Chinese youth apparently evincing arrested maturity, laziness and apathy, leading to further generalizations about generation and age rather than globalized structural and systemic inequality.

One of the most striking characteristics of the global recession was the resulting high unemployment rate of young individuals across many European nations. And yet, while the incidence of unemployment remains high in Europe, it seems that the unemployment situation in America has been, and continues to be as weak, if not weaker. According to David Leonhardt, “Over the last 12 years, the United States has gone from having the highest share of employed 25- to 34-year olds among large, wealthy economies to having among the lowest.”⁶⁹⁶ While it appears that Europe may be beginning to understand the dire nature of this high unemployment and is working

⁶⁹⁶ David Leonhardt, “The Idled Young Americans,” *The New York Times* 3 May 2013, Web, 10 May 2013.

toward finding a resolution,⁶⁹⁷ America still seems clueless about its rising youth problems and effects. With the larger themes and arguments of this thesis in mind, it is clear that the spread of the depiction of a generation of young individuals more worried about their Facebook status and their sense of entitlement will obscure and naturalize the ways that neoliberal global economic policy continues to work to make the transition from dependence to maturity difficult for young individuals around the world. Moreover, I fear that the familiarity with a global attenuated adulthood will only work to further naturalize these representations of laziness, narcissism and unreliability, thus continuing the necessity for the derision, mistrust and control of young individuals as part of late modern understanding of the transition to adulthood.

⁶⁹⁷ Jack Ewing and Melissa Eddy, "European Leaders Grapple with Youth Unemployment," *The New York Times* 13 May 2013, Web, 14 May 2013. This article does acknowledge the lingering anxiety that a large number of unemployed youth produces in a country (and in surrounding countries) that remembers that mass unemployment was a major factor in the rise of the rise of Hitler Youth and Nazis in the 1930s.

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Saving Silverman. Dir. Dennis Dugan. Columbia Pictures, 2001.
Say Anything.... Dir. Cameron Crowe. 20th Century Fox, 1989.
School of Rock. Dir. Richard Linklater. Paramount Pictures, 2003.
The Secret of My Success. Dir. Herbert Ross. Universal Studios, 1987.
Shallow Hal. Dirs. Peter Farrelly and Robert Farrelly. 20th Century Fox, 2001.
She's All That. Dir. Robert Iscove. Miramax Films, 1999.
Singles. Dir. Cameron Crowe. Warner Bros., 1992.
Slacker. Dir. Richard Linklater. Orion Classics, 1991.
Splendor in the Grass. Dir. Elia Kazan. Warner Bros. 1961.
Spider-Man. Dir. Sam Raimi. Columbia Pictures, 2002.
Spider-Man 2. Dir. Sam Raimi. Columbia Pictures, 2004.
Spider-Man 3. Dir. Sam Raimi. Columbia Pictures, 2007.
Stand and Deliver. Dir. Ramon Menéndez. Warner Bros., 1988.
Stealing Harvard. Dir. Bruce McCulloch. Columbia Pictures, 2002.
Step Brothers. Dir. Adam McKay. Columbia Pictures, 2008.
Step Up. Dir. Anne Fletcher. Touchstone Pictures, 2006.
Step Up 2: The Streets. Dir. Jon M. Chu. Touchstone Pictures, 2008.
Stick It. Dir. Jessica Bendinger. Touchstone Pictures, 2006.
Sugar & Spice. Dir. Francine McDougal. New Line Cinema, 2001.
A Summer Place. Dir. Delmer Daves. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1959.
Superbad. Dir. Gregg Motola. Columbia Pictures, 2007.
Swimfan. Dir. John Polson. 20th Century Fox, 2002.
Take the Lead. Dir. Liz Friedlander. New Line Cinema, 2006.
Talledaga Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby. Dir. Adam McKay. Columbia Pictures, 2006.
Thirteen. Dir. Catherine Hardwicke. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2003.
Trading Places. Dir. John Landis. Paramount Pictures, 1983.
Very Bad Things. Dir. Peter Berg. PolyGram Filmed Entertainment, 1998.
Waiting.... Dir. Rob McKittrick. Lionsgate, 2005.
Wanted. Dir. Timur Bekmambetov. Universal Pictures, 2008.
Wedding Crashers. Dir. David Dobkin. New Line Cinema, 2006.
What a Girl Wants. Dir. Dennie Gordon. Warner Bros., 2003.
What Women Want. Dir. Nancy Meyers. Paramount Pictures, 2000.

Without a Paddle. Dir. Steven Brill. Paramount Pictures, 2004.

You, Me, and Dupree. Dir. Anthony and Joe Russo. Universal Pictures, 2006.

Young Adult. Dir. Jason Reitman. Paramount Pictures, 2011.

Young Guns. Dir. Christopher Cain. 20th Century Fox, 1988.

Zach and Miri Make a Porno. Dir. Kevin Smith. The Weinstein Company, 2008.