Growing Up Online: Identity, Development and Agency in Networked Girlhoods

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Growing Up Online: 
Identity, Development and Agency in Networked Girlhoods

by

Claire M. Fontaine

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education to satisfy the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

Growing Up Online: Identity, Development and Agency in Networked Girlhoods

by

Claire M. Fontaine

Advisor: Professor Wendy Luttrell

Young women’s digital media practices unfold within a postfeminist media landscape dominated by rapidly circulating visual representations that often promote superficial readings of human value. Meanwhile the dominant framing within educational policy and practice of digital media literacy insufficiently captures young people’s motivations for engaging in multimedia production, online gaming and blogging. In addition to using digital media for social purposes, and to navigate dimensions of social difference like race, class and gender, working class young women of color also use digital media to develop internal awareness of their selves. The processes of documenting the self, reflecting on the documented self, and laying claim to the intrinsic value of the self are expressions of identity, development and agency. These practices can thus be understood as projects of self-making operating on multiple levels: 1) as articulations of agency against contexts that suppress this agency; 2) as documentations of and reflections on change and growth over time; 3) as explorations of relationality and related themes of care and obligation; 4) and as a means of critiquing structures of power.
For my parents,

Cecile Collin Fontaine and Donald Francis Fontaine
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My husband Aaron Rutkoff has been my greatest champion. His unwavering belief in my work sustained me through many dark periods, he cooked me many delicious spicy dishes, and he never begrudged me time and space to think and write.

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My mentor and advisor Wendy Luttrell opened her home and heart to me and inspired me to imagine a collaborative ethic of knowledge production. Her belief in my potential inspired me to be better than I knew I could be. Joan Greenbaum introduced me to feminist critiques of technology and labor relations, and Ofelia García’s methods classes were instrumental in helping me to formulate this project in the early stages. The late Jean Anyon, with her fierce commitment to the material basis of the struggle for social justice, inspired me to undertake doctoral studies. Victoria Restler has been my most consistent and thoughtful sounding board and interlocutor over the course of this project. Ivana Espinet, Rondi Silva, Tran Templeton, Scott Lizama, and David Chapin, along with Victoria and Wendy, were partners in crime in learning to interpret the visual. The members of Wendy Luttrell’s advisory group provided helpful feedback over wine-splashed potlucks. Althea Erickon and Liz Stark Sylvan generously loaned me their computers when mine died at a very inopportune time.
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Within many circles of educational policy and practice, both formal and informal (Hull & Schultz, 2001; Sefton-Greene, 2004), there is a growing interest and investment in digital literacy initiatives. These are frequently formulated as educational imperatives with implications for individual and national economic competitiveness in a global marketplace. According to the New London Group, who coined the term multiliteracies, “literacy pedagogy now must account for the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies” (Cazden et al., 1996, p. 61). Among literacy scholars, the past decade has seen an increased sensitivity to multiliteracies in schools (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000) and a heightened recognition of the situated, contextualized nature of literacy practices (Street, 2003). Developments in digital technologies open up new possibilities for multimodal communication and representation (Kress, 2003), and allowing people to connect across gaps of time and space to stay in touch with intimates, for instance in transnational families (Parreñas, 2005) and between parents and teenage children (Williams & Williams, 2005).

Digital literacy initiatives are one arm of what Mark Wolfmeyer calls “the pervasive STEM education,” an acronym that “merges content from among the sciences, technology, engineering and mathematics into one set of urgent educational imperatives” (2013, p. 47) and which “lurks in all corners, growing like a cancer” (2013, p. 47). The initiatives take diverse forms, including digital literacy curricula, coaches, consultants, software, hardware, and bring your own device programs. A recent 2014 New York State ballot included a proposal, overwhelmingly approved by voters, to invest a two billion dollar bond in school technology
upgrades like interactive whiteboards, computer servers, tablets, and wireless internet. Rationales for these expenditures are typically articulated in terms of human capital and the global knowledge economy, exemplified in an argument included in the New York City 2014 Voter Guide that “the proposed bond would help our children develop the technology literacy that will prepare them to get jobs in this economy.” The close ties between proponents of initiatives like these and the philanthropic and corporate interests that stand to benefit from their deeper integration into schooling regimes should give us all pause.

The practical interventions that digital literacy initiatives justify, like after-school media production programs and school laptop programs, assume a prescriptive stance as they value and legitimate certain modes of participation as useful and productive, while devaluing others (Sims, 2014). As globalized educational policy increasingly incorporates multimodal literacies into definitions of educated personhood and estimations of human capital (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010), particular literacies are valued and privileged while others are devalued. Expertise in certain processes of digital media production, like coding, animation, video editing, sound engineering, and game design are prized, while more friendship-oriented practices, like the use of social networking sites and video chatting programs are devalued, framed as a waste of time. By developing skills in the more prestigious digital media practices, young people can locate themselves on the right side of the participation gap (Jenkins et al., 2006) or participation divide (Hargittai & Walejko, 2008) and claim status as knowers and productive citizens. But opportunities to do this are unequally distributed, as young people growing up in affluent households have much more opportunity to engage with the latest technologies (Barron, Martin, Takeuchi & Fithian, 2009).
While digital literacy initiatives are intended to reduce social inequality caused by differential access to the latest technologies and the forms of human capital (Keeley, 2007) with which they are associated, they often end up reproducing the very social divisions they presume to address (Sims, 2014). The valuing of certain practices and the devaluing of others is evident in what gets called digital literacy, and by whom. Constructions of digital literacy are not neutral, universal or autonomous, but rather ideological, which is to say, reflective of relations of power and underpinned by assumptions of moral uplift through education (Street, 2003). An autonomous notion of literacy proposes that literacy in itself will benignly enhance the life chances of disempowered populations regardless of the social and economic conditions that created the social inequality. In contrast, an ideological notion of literacy, and digital literacy by extension, assumes that what counts as literacy is necessarily embedded in power relations. Digital literacy, like literacy in general, is a function of power and as such is contingent upon mastery of the social practices and communicative codes of particular genres.

If we are to fully appreciate the ideological dimensions of literacy, the way that literacy practices and processes are shaped by relations of power, we need to go beyond gender, race and class-based critiques and consider how generation functions as a knot in the “twisted relations of power and knowledge” (Luttrell, 1997). This requires moving young people’s knowledge from the margins to the center of how we understand these dynamics (Thorne, 2002). Given the structuring of adult-child power relations and kids’ and teens’ relative lack of power to name their own experiences and have those names stick, it is worth listening carefully to young people’s accounts of their own digital media practices.
Anxiety, Insecurity and Projection: Adult Views of Growing Up Online

From trains (Schivelbusch, 1986) and watches (Thompson, 1967) to washing machines (Cowan, 1983) and televisions (Seiter, Borchers, Kreutzner & Warth, 1989), new technologies have historically been met with both fanfare and deep ambivalence. These hyperbolic responses reflect less about the particular technologies and more about different orientations to social change. In the present moment of big data, characterized by the collection, aggregation, selling, mining and analysis of the massive quantities of information that we produce online through our clicks, searches, purchases, and updates (boyd & Crawford, 2011), the discourses are similarly dichotomous. The near-ubiquity of hand held personal devices, mobile wifi, and social networking apps leads some cultural commentators to optimistically observe that we are always connected. Meanwhile others point out that this is a mere veneer of sociability, and as Stephen Marche argued in The Atlantic, that this appearance of connection prevents us from noticing that we are more lonely than ever before. Alongside the celebratory accounts of how technological innovation improves our lives by making everything easier, cheaper, better, and faster are the direly pessimistic predictions that we are becoming servants to our devices, data plans and the entities that mine our data for their own purposes and profits.

Cindi Katz argues that the current moment is characterized by a collective “ontological insecurity” about the sustainability of contemporary life. According to Katz, we manage these anxieties – about environmental catastrophe, rising global inequality, and political gridlock – by transforming them into more narrow anxieties about social reproduction and the maintenance of class privilege. And so childhood becomes “a spectacle – a site of accumulation and commodification – in whose name much is done” (2008, p. 5). Particular childhoods become
sites of investment of financial, emotional, educational and temporal resources, as a way of managing these anxieties.

From this perspective, the cultural turn toward the scientific management of parenting practices – sleep training and the vaccination wars, discipline practices and the management of school age children’s screen time – can be understood as efforts to achieve a sense of control in uncontrollable times. In the United States, 95% of teens use the internet. Youth between eight and 18 years of age average six and a half hours of screen time a day (Madden et al., 2013), and a quarter of the time, young people are using two or more forms of media at once (Rideout, Roberts & Foehr, 2010), perhaps watching television while playing a casual game on Facebook. Pediatric research casts this as damaging to young people’s development by investigating the negative effects of screen time on kids’ brains, bodies and educational trajectories. For instance, excessive media is positively correlated with obesity, lack of sleep, problems at school, aggression, declining attention spans, and other behavioral issues (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2011).

In an April 2013 Atlantic article, Hanna Rosin proposes that the "neurosis of our age" is that "as technology becomes ubiquitous in our lives, American parents are becoming more, not less, wary of what it might be doing to our children." Discourses about screen time regulation reflect Rosin’s neurosis and Katz’ ontological insecurity theses. Many adults have experienced significant changes to the social fabric with the rise of networked technologies, and anxieties about these changes are reflected in mainstream media coverage. For instance, a 2008 Frontline episode attracted a great deal of attention by focusing on cyber-bullying, public displays of precocious sexuality, and pedophilia. Media coverage often warns parents and teens that potential employers and college selection committees may Google them and refuse them jobs for
their social media presences. The implication is that young people's ability to achieve their professional goals may be stunted.

Adults may also worry about teenage girls reputed tendency for over-sharing, their proclivity for unwittingly, or perhaps wittingly, objectifying themselves by posting content that they might later regret, and their risk of falling victim to bullying. Media coverage of high profile teen suicide cases often links these cases back cyber-bullying, a term foreign to youth digital media culture, where behaviors from teasing to harassment are instead known as drama (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Young children’s possession of digital devices is increasingly framed as a matter of safety and as a condition of free range outside the home, in response to media generated fears about child predators. Even as mainstream media sources pander for ratings and spread fear that youth are vulnerable to online sexual predators who prowl, stalk, and abduct unsuspecting child victims, young people are much more likely to be sexually abused by someone known to them, and in the vast majority of cases, internet-initiated sexual contact involves teenagers who willingly meet up with adults they have met online (Wolak, Finkelhor & Mitchell, 2009).

Discourses of fear and risk threaten to circumscribe young people’s active engagement with their technological environments (Donovan & Katz, 2009) and distract from the more pervasive and systemic issues, like data insecurity, that young people face when coming of age online (Donovan, 2013). Part of my project, as I will go on to describe in more detail in Chapter Three, has been to find methodologies and conceptual tools to challenge these projections based on young people’s own knowledge.
The present moment is characterized by sustained public disinvestment in spaces for young people to gather, play and socialize (Katz, 2004; Wridt, 2004), and skyrocketing investments by private equity and venture capital in social media environments that mimic face-to-face contexts for young people to socialize. Ostensibly free to the consumer but relying on a business model of harvesting and selling personal data for profit, social media spaces are especially lucrative in teen markets. Most young people would prefer to spend time out of their homes hanging out with friends, but are often not permitted to, due to decreased access to public spaces friendly to youth and the perception by many parents that the spaces that remain are not safe.

The dynamics of freedom to move about autonomously and socialize freely in public space are gendered and historically specific. In a study of the spatial organization of childhood in 1970s suburban America, Roger Hart (1979) describes how 10-12 year old male children played outdoors in ways not structured or sanctioned by adults, while girls spent more time at home, only venturing outside to perform chores for the family. Similarly, Henry Jenkins (2006) writes about the cultural geography of video game spaces and the fit between video games and traditional boy culture, both of which prize autonomy, mastery, exploration and self-reliance. He suggests that the landscape of play offered by video games enables children to “transcend their immediate environments” (p. 332) and achieve a “growing sense of mastery, freedom, and self confidence” (p. 337). As public spaces for youth to gather dwindle and fall into disrepair and virtual social spaces proliferate, becoming increasingly easy to use and aesthetically more appealing, it is hardly surprising that young people’s leisure time is increasingly screen-based, solitary, geographically constrained, and highly mediated.
But there is resistance on the part of adults to recognizing young people’s so-called addiction to digital devices and online spaces as, at least in part, a function of social policies that have limited access to public offline spheres. The increased spatial restrictions on young people’s movement, especially girls, are linked to cultural, political, economic, geographic and technological changes affecting the fabric of American social life and are an under-recognized determinant of the form and texture of contemporary childhoods.

An Overview

Amid these debates, teenage girls' own perspectives are largely missing. Without carefully attending to young people’s points of view it is impossible to understand how they make sense of their technology-mediated social practices and the significance of these practices in their intimate lives and social worlds. And so when I approached participants, I did so asking, “What do teenage girls know about technology that adults don’t know that they know?”

My dissertation shines a light on a particular landscape of childhood inhabited by an individual participant over time, from 10 to 20 years of age, to generate a more contextualized account of girls’ development in relation to a changing technological landscape. This changing technological landscape is shaped in fundamental ways by the rise of the visual in networked social life and a postfeminist media culture, which is closely linked to neoliberal ideologies of personal responsibility and self-help. By the rise of the visual in networked social life, I refer to the rapid circulation of user-produced imagery that is the basic currency of interactions online. The influence and reach of mobile devices, social media platforms, and near-ubiquitous broadband internet service have fundamentally altered the patterns of American teens’ internet access from “stationary connections tied to shared desktops in the home to always-on
connections that move with them throughout the day” (Maddon et al., 2013). Images are constantly being produced and circulated through these connections.

A postfeminist media culture refers to a media climate that seems to acknowledge, or gesture at, feminist ideals, but in fact interprets these ideals in the narrowest possible sense, and lacks any broad critique of power and its operation. By neoliberal ideologies of personal responsibility and self help, I mean to draw attention to the ways that young women are encouraged to take personal responsibility for the careful management of their online personas through curating their online identities, and to help themselves by using the internet strategically to find information to improve their health, well-being, appearance, and career trajectories.¹ These dynamics shape teenage girls' and young women's processes of subject formation, as explored in the case studies, which examine such issues as image-making as a critical meditation on relational subject formation in a networked diaspora, living and gaming as an gendered and raced other in game worlds, and the production of a critical teenage gendered subjectivity through intimate blogging in an online diary.

In Chapter Two I discuss relevant theoretical frameworks and literatures including theories of development, critical youth studies with its focus on young people's knowledge and agency, sociocultural theory with its focus on identities constructed through social practice, girls’ digital practices, and feminist approaches to thinking about technology. Chapter Three contains a

¹ As a theory of political economic practices, neoliberalism “proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade” (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). Following from these ideals of political economic practices are neoliberal ideologies – that is, systems of ideas about how to be successful in these contexts – that promote such ways of being and habits of mind as personal responsibility, continual efforts at self-improvement, and individualized strategies of risk management. Neoliberal ideologies have a material basis in that global capitalism is quicker to discard more and more people, with men in the United States having higher unemployment rates but women being employed in lower paying and temporary jobs (Devault, 2008; Greenbaum, 2004; Weis, 2004).
detailed description of the methodology of the project, including my role as the researcher, a
reflexive discussion of my own social location, the value of the case study approach, decisions
about sampling, and the relationship of this project to Wendy Luttrell’s longitudinal
ethnographic research. In this chapter I also discuss processes of data collection, interpretive
strategies of data analysis, ways of dealing with the ethical issues raised doing internet research
on and with youth, validity, and limitations.

Chapters Four, Five and Six comprise the empirical portion of this dissertation. They
represent my response to Barrie Thorne’s call to break down the wall of silence between the new
social studies of childhood and the field of child development by studying the “complex
articulation of different types of temporality – historical, generational, chronological,
phenomenological, developmental, [and] biological” time (2007, p. 150). I explore the
development of three individual young women over ten years of childhood and adolescence in
relation to their family contexts, my own reflexive stance as a member of generation that didn’t
grow up online, and this particular historical moment. So in Barrie Thorne’s terms, I am
primarily engaging with the articulation of generational time (by exploring the tensions between
participants and myself as in part a function of generational difference), developmental time (by
drawing on the literature of developmental psychology and its critiques), historical time (by
situating their experiences in this historical moment), and chronological time (by drawing on a
longitudinal data archive). In each of these case studies, I explore how an individual participant’s
uses of social media intersect with school, family, work, and leisure.
Chapter Four is the case study of Ling\(^2\). A working class young woman of Chinese heritage\(^3\), Ling runs her family's Chinese take-out buffet, a responsibility that requires her to defer her plans to attend a four-year college. Isolated from her friends, and unable to curate an idealized version of her social life on Facebook, she instead uses the album function of Facebook to store photographs of her drawings, paintings, and non-digital photography. Ling’s multimedia production is a form of self-study of her own development in a networked diaspora, a way building relational connections, and an agentic appropriation of the Facebook social network site.

Chapter Five is the case study on Mesha, a working class African American young woman. An avid gamer since the fifth grade, she favors games with strong, tough characters embroiled in stereotypically gendered storylines. Mesha put forth an aspirational self-portrayal as an expert gamer and a future game design professional by drawing on discourses valued in the serious gaming world, like a love of combat, an interest in scores, hierarchies and rankings, and a reluctant tolerance toward narrative interludes. She described experiencing enjoyable and ambivalent identifications with strong and sexy female protagonists, and temporary release from the concerns and demands of her daily life. Although Mesha was interested in articulating a

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\(^2\) I refer to two participants, Ling and Grace, by pseudonyms, while the third, Mesha, is referred to be her real name. All participants preferred that I use their first names, but I was not able to when I drew on participants’ digital footprints, to ensure that the digital artifacts I excerpted would not be identifiable to participants. I discuss these decisions in more detail in Chapter Three.

\(^3\) I have assigned class and race/ethnicity labels to help readers understand the social locations of each participant. Ling self-identifies as Chinese, and more specifically as Fujianese. Mesha self-identifies as Black, but I refer to her here as African American to distinguish her from West Indian, Caribbean and African-born black people. Grace self-identifies as Chinese. Class is notoriously fraught in the United States (Rubin, 1976) with many people self-identifying as middle class. Because of this I did not ask participants directly about social class, but rather about parent’s occupations. More than anything else, the working-class label reflects the conditions of constraint within which the young women were acting.
feminist critique of the misogynistic treatment of female gamers and women in the industry, she lacked a vocabulary to extend a critique past the visual representations of female characters in games.

Chapter Six is the case study on Grace, a working class young woman of Chinese descent. Grace maintained an online diary on Tumblr since August 2010. Sharing intimate details of her personal life in a networked online environment, she somewhat paradoxically cultivates a critical teenage gendered subjectivity. Through this practice of intimate blogging she speaks in many voices and releases relational anger toward particular others and more generalized frustration about patriarchal impositions on Asian American femininity. Her strategic inattention toward questions of audience, evident in the decision to put her diary online, allows her to produce herself in other contexts as an upstanding citizen, model minority, good girl and hard worker.

Finally, in Chapter Seven, I discuss the implications of this research. I argue that the dominant framing of digital media literacy is a limited lens that fails to capture the ways that the digital media practices of working class teenage girls and young women or color are internally oriented, in addition to being socially-oriented. As projects of self-making, teenage girls’ digital media practices are constrained and enabled by individuals’ positioning in interlocking gender, race/ethnicity and class hierarchies. They are undertaken in relation to hopes, ambitions, desires for acknowledgement and recognition, and yearnings to grow in self-knowledge and find an internal sense of stability. These practices must be understood on multiple levels: as ways of claiming their own value and worth against senses of disempowerment in social and civic life; as projects of meaning-making and reflection on their own growth and change over time; as a means of documenting themselves in relationships with others within networks of care, and as
vehicles of critique of power relations structured by gender, race, class, and generation. These are all dimensions of development, broadly understood, and point to young people’s own stake and interest in their own development.
Chapter Two
Theoretical Frameworks

Frames of Development

Classical psychological and sociological theories of development focus on young people’s passage through developmental stages and their socialization into adult roles. For instance, Jean Piaget’s theorizes children’s predictable progression through different stages of thinking, in a particular order and at predictable ages (Piaget, 1959). Piaget’s work has provided much of the inspiration and justification for the practices of stratifying students into narrowly age-graded classes and for adopting different pedagogical practices at different ages, like center-based learning, the use of objects for physical manipulation in progressive educational settings in the preschool years, and the introduction of abstract reasoning activities later on, in the formal operational stage.

Erik Erikson’s psychosocial theory of identity development is similar to Piaget’s in that both presume a progression through stages in an orderly and predictable fashion. Erikson proposes that each stage of life is characterized by some fundamental conflict to be resolved. For adolescence that conflict is about one’s identity and that path that one will take into adulthood. The successful resolution of each conflict is predicated upon the successful resolution of prior conflicts; if an early conflict is left unresolved, or is negatively resolved, it will continue to create problems throughout the lifecycle. For example, if an infant does not achieve a sense of trust from his or her primary caregiver in infancy, this sense of mistrust will impair the developmental process going forward (Erikson, 1950).

The depiction of adolescence in Erikson is of biologically marked and time-determined phase of life characterized by the reign of hormonally driven behaviors and a primary interest in
peer relations (Lesko, 1996). This construction of adolescence justifies practices of managing adolescents in schools and in public spaces, as schools are broadly conceived of institutions responsible for the socialization of the young. These mainstream theories of development, which predominate in Western cultures, and which shape teacher education curriculum even outside of the West (Gupta, 2006), are linked to individualistic, or independent developmental scripts, and frame development as a process of growing in autonomy and independence. In contrast, interdependent developmental scripts frame healthy development in the opposite terms, as a process of coming to take responsibility for the well-being of others, and taking care of the self in order to be better able to care for others. I discuss developmental scripts in more detail in Chapter Four in relation to Ling.

According to André Turmel (2008), developmental thinking came to be the dominant frame for understanding children’s maturation around the turn of the twentieth century, in response to high rates of infant mortality and the links between infant mortality and poverty. Turmel characterizes developmental thinking as a cognitive form reliant on visual artifacts like height and weight charts that “completely reshaped the way in which the child was apprehended, moreover acted upon, from one generation to another” (p. 422). These statistical technologies permit the measurement and aggregation of data on individual children and their comparison. The concept of developmentally appropriate education and the science of child and adolescent development more generally are rooted in an intellectual history that sees the children’s development as roughly analogous to human evolution, with white adult men held in the highest regard and as the standard to which others should aspire (Walkerdine, 1984).

Carol Gilligan (1982) critiques the science of psychology and its vision of abstraction as the most evolved form of moral discrimination for its patriarchal basis. Patriarchy is not simply
men's oppression of women. It is a hierarchical system that separates some men from other men, all men from women, and fathers over women and children. It separates all people in a divide-and-conquer system that keeps accumulated wealth in the hands of a limited number of men. But most relevant for my work is the way patriarchy separates all people from parts of themselves, forcing them to deny aspects of themselves to be acceptable to a hierarchical system of ordering. This is why Carol Gilligan argues that “feminism is one of the great liberation movements in human history and it is the movement to free democracy from patriarchy.” Boys are initiated into patriarchy around the age of four or five and girls at adolescence. According to Gilligan, this makes it easier for girls to speak out against patriarchy, as they have more experience of world, more sense of self that precedes their initiation into it, when they are newly required to be selfless.

*Critical Youth Studies*

Unlike developmental frameworks, which imagine young people’s selves developing in an autonomous fashion, automatically and solely within the individual, sociocultural theories of development focus on the “development of identities and agency specific to practices and activities situated in historically contingent, socially enacted, culturally constructed ‘worlds’ ” (Holland et al., 2001, p. 7). So the object of development, and the terms in which the development is articulated, and the things that are being developed, are the identities, a sense of oneself as an agentic subject. Identities emerge over time, in practice, and take effort. In simple terms, agency is having a sense of oneself as a doer, and is built through practices, the doing of things, not once, but many times.
The critical youth studies approach, also called the new sociology of youth, is a sociocultural framework that takes young people seriously as knowers with valuable insights into their own experiences (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998). It has been increasingly taken up by scholars to examine young people’s experiences in adult-controlled institutions since the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, now ratified by all countries except the United States. This approach understands childhood and adolescence as historically specific social constructions (Ariès, 1962), the emergence of which is linked to child labor laws, compulsory education laws, and special legal institutions for the young, who are categorized as juveniles.

Attentive to the structuring of adult-child relationships within power relations, critical youth studies examines how young people’s minority group status relative to adults shapes their experience and potentially constrains their agency (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998; Qvortrup, 1994; Gaitán Muñoz, 2006). For example, in schools, practices around the management of young people’s movement through space and time, like the division of the school day into various subjects and further into work time and playtime, and the division of space into regions, exerts symbolic power over young people and counteracts young people’s conceptions of themselves as equal citizens of the school (Devine, 2002). To assume a critical youth studies approach is not to deny that hormonal shifts occur during teenage years, but to acknowledge the variability among teenagers and the contingency of their experiences, and to appreciate the work they are doing on their own being and becoming.

Youth-centered research methods can help us to see political and economic issues in new ways. For example, Marjorie Orellana (2009) explores the language brokering work that many immigrant children do in their families, schools, and communities. She argues that by translating
for adults, immigrant children play a vital role in the economy. Whether helping parents manage their financial affairs, or helping teachers in classroom situations, or aiding neighbors and strangers alike at the grocery store or post office, young people’s translation work is largely invisible and uncompensated, and yet essential to the smooth functioning of society. Taking on these roles and responsibilities challenges constructions of normalcy and deviance in adult-child relations and may be negatively judged as the adultification of children. Indeed, young people may express ambivalence about helping their parents to manage financial affairs, as Ling does in Chapter Four. And yet, Orellana ultimately argues that children’s language brokering is not incompatible with a good childhood, and that the practice encourages children’s relational development and a sense of growing in responsibility for others as opposed to growing in autonomy.

In other examples of how youth-centered methods can shift understandings of social issues, Madeline Fox and Michelle Fine (2013) explore young people’s experiences of negative interactions with police and how these are linked to gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and neighborhood as consequences of urban public policy in neoliberal New York City. Alison Pugh (2009) explores how children’s desires for consumer objects are motivated by a hunger for belonging, and Elizabeth Chin (2001) investigates how children’s consumption patterns are shaped by relationships and care networks more than self-interest, both countering the stereotype of young people’s mindless consumerism. Taken together, the youth centered methods in these studies help us to appreciate the emotional intelligence and rich and varied affective worlds of young people from urban, low-income communities of color, thus counteracting the deficit model that pervades public opinion and educational research.
Teens’ Digital Practices

According to large-scale surveys of American youth digital media practices, girls access the internet at higher rates than boys, white youth more than youth of color, older teens more than younger teens, and youth from higher-income households more than youth from lower-income households (Madden, et al., 2013; Rideout, Roberts & Foehr, 2010). The dynamics of access to technology are continually changing. At the time I was conceiving of and designing this study in 2010 and 2011, the literature indicated that youth with college-educated parents were more likely to have one or more computers in the home and to have a computer in their bedroom (Rideout et al., 2010); that upper middle class youth enjoyed disproportionate access to home computers, broadband internet access, and the leisure time for frequent, long term engagement with new and powerful multimedia technologies (Kearney, 2006; Itō et al., 2010); and that only 70% of youth internet users with household incomes under $30,000 went online from home (Lenhart et al., 2008). Since then, the dynamics of teens’ access to various technologies and preference for various platforms have shifted. Mobile phones have become critical access points, and teens’ use of social media apps is seamlessly integrated into their daily lives (Lenhart, 2011). Broadly speaking, digital technologies have become more ubiquitous in the lives of working-class youth.

Itō et al. (2010) propose a sociocultural framework for understanding how people learn with digital media. In this framework, expertise does not reside in individual bodies or minds, but in distributed networks that function as communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Digital media practices exist along a spectrum of participation. On one end of the spectrum are interest-driven practices, motivated by the desire to develop specialized forms of expertise. These tend to attract young people without strong social ties to a local friend group and facilitate
the building of social ties around particular interests. On the other end are friendship-driven practices, primarily directed at cultivating existing relationships. In the middle are self-directed experimental practices that typically unfold within an environment of technological availability and free time. If the three cases studies were plotted on this spectrum of participation, Mesha’s gaming and Ling’s multi-media production would be on the interest-driven end, and Grace’s blogging on the friendship-driven end. But the spectrum of participation model, with its presumption of an outward motivation – the desire to socialize – does not fully account for the motivations of the participants in my project, which were also inwardly focused.

*Feminist Technology Studies*

I am inspired by a rich tradition of feminist scholarship that has critiqued the culture of computing for its longstanding structural links with maleness, arguing that technological development and the integration of computers into work processes has deskill women’s jobs and reproduced relations of gender domination in the workplace (Cockburn, 1985; Hacker, 1989). Indeed, “technology is a medium of power” (Cockburn, p. 6) and its historical association with male-dominated professional roles like engineers cemented a sexual division of labor in a range of industries. Second wave feminists like Cynthia Cockburn have tended to see technology, capitalism, and patriarchy as linked, with technology leveraged by capitalism and patriarchy to further oppress women. This line of thinking reflects a certain technological determinism, conceptualizing technology change as predetermined, part of the master narrative of women’s oppression.

Computer culture is symbolically linked to hegemonic masculinity and a characteristically masculine worldview (Turkle, 1995). Indeed, “the process of systems
development,” that is, the development of computer systems to manage information flow in large organizations, “is embedded in methods that force binary thinking” (Greenbaum, 1990, p. 11). This process, in its ideal form, breaks down of large problems into manageable chunks and applies “concrete methods to make order out of chaos” (p. 12), often resulting in systems that are perfect in the abstract but highly flawed in use. These approaches to knowledge building and problem solving demean what are thought of as women’s ways of knowing and undermine the legitimacy of intuition and emotion for their longstanding historical associations with femininity in Western traditions (Fox Keller, 1982).

Early research into girls’ digital media practices reflects the kind of gender essentialism that the pioneers of feminist technology studies critiqued. This gender difference literature predates the social media era but is still reflective of methodological and epistemological blind spots that feminist technology studies addresses. According to this body of research, boys have more experiences of and positive associations with computers than do girls (Kadiejevich, 2000). Girls underestimate their technical skills, prefer to use computers for collaborative and creative projects (Yelland & Rubin, 2002), and have more computer anxiety than boys (Bannert & Arbinger, 1996; Sanders, 2006). Like the anthropological and psychological literatures that search for differences between males and females, adults and children, and civilized people and savages in hopes of ensuring the continuation of progress and the continued dominance of white, male adults (Lesko, 1996), the gender difference computing literature also draws on a deficit model, and tends to fault girls and women for their lower rates of deep engagement with computer technologies.

Studies in this research tradition are haunted by errors of construction and interpretation (Kay, 1992; Morse and Daiute, 1992). The strong tendency to construct hypothesis-driven
experimental designs around the search for difference has lead to findings of difference, but questions of the origins of this difference, whether biological, that is, inevitable, unchangeable, and naturalized, or rooted in socialization, have been outside the research scope. In addition, the gender difference literature has systematically generalized from the level of the population to the level of the individual (Caplan & Caplan, 1994). This impulse is problematic as findings of differences between males and females in aggregate cannot be reliably extrapolated to particular males and females, and whatever differences are found may be small relative to the overlap between the average male and the average female.

Indeed, a milestone report by the American Association of University Women asserts that the problem lies not with women and girls who are choosing not to pursue STEM careers, but rather with computer culture itself, defined as the “social, psychological, educational, and philosophical meanings associated with information technology… [like] the cultural emphasis on technical capacity, speed, and efficiency” (2000, p. 7). Expressing disenchantment with computer culture’s focus on the machine in itself, as opposed to the machine as a tool, the participants in this study critiqued overly enthusiastic technophilic and technoromanticist discourses (Bryson & de Castell, 1998).

Identity and the Contexts of Subject Formation

My interest in girls’ digital practices is not comparative with boys, but is directed more at expanding our understanding of growing up female, especially in terms of the links between digital media practices, identities, and processes of subject formation. Identity and subject formation are related but not interchangeable. Identities are intersectional (Crenshaw, 1991) and primarily negotiated around dimensions of social difference like gender, race/ethnicity, class,
language, immigrant status, age, dis/ability status and sexual orientation. Identities make us intelligible to the outside world, and they shape our opportunities, life chances, and the way others treat us. They are “lived in and through activity and so must be conceptualized as they develop in social practice” (Holland et al., 2001, p. 5) and in particular cultural, political, economic and historical contexts (McLeod & Yates, 2006). Digital media practices like chatting, texting, tweeting, blogging, and gaming are among these social practices. To tell stories about these practices we consciously or unconsciously take up multiple competing voices, as in the Bahktinian concept of dialogic selves (Bahktin & Holquist, 1982). Through these practices and our ways of narrating them we curate a self that is culturally intelligible. My language of curating a gendered self as opposed to, as Holland, would say, authoring a gendered self, reflects my premise about the centrality of images in this process. To curate a gendered self in this image-dominant era is to draw together visual vocabularies in personally meaningful and socially significant ways.

Subject formation is a more interior process than identity development and refers to the shaping of subjectivities, or the sense of self. Arjun Appadurai asserts that “electronic media provide resources for self-imagining as an everyday social project” (p. 4), as the imaginative resources that are the raw material for projects of subject formation circulate through networked online spaces. The rapid circulation of text and especially images of all types creates both opportunities and limitations for young people’s processes of subject formation.

My analysis of teenage girls’ and young women’s efforts to produce themselves as agentic subjects is situated within the contexts of postfeminism and the rise of the visual index in networked online spaces. Within feminist cultural critique, the language of postfeminism is used in four distinct ways: to refer to the maturing or coming of age of academic feminism; to
refer to the idea that feminist activism is a relic of the past; to refer to a backlash against feminism that locates the blame for social problems in feminism itself; and to refer to postfeminism as a sensibility (Gill & Scharff, 2011). Following Gill and Scharff, I adopt the formulation of postfeminism as a sensibility prominent in current media discourses and featuring the entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas.

Gill and Scharff draw on Angela McRobbie’s key insight that postfeminist culture takes into account and simultaneously repudiates a selectively defined feminism. According to McRobbie (2009), this “double entanglement” facilitates both a doing and an undoing of feminism, as the superficial take-up of feminist ideas is undermined by the absence of a broader feminist critique. Women are offered particular kinds of freedom, empowerment and choice “in exchange for” or “as a kind of substitute for” feminist politics (McRobbie, 2009). This relinquishment can be demonstrated by taking up an ironic stance to media artifacts that valorize certain kinds of choice, like the choice to be sexy and an object of the male gaze. These choice narratives, and especially the ideals of continual self-improvement, management of the self, and presentation of the self in visually palatable form, are propped up by a broader cultural context of neoliberalism, which promotes these same ideals.

The second contextual factor is the rise of the visual index. I highlight two dimensions of the visual index here: the increasing prevalence of big data visualization as a knowledge technique, and the rapid circulation of user-produced imagery as a means of communication, connection, and as evidence of experience. In the era of big data (boyd & Crawford, 2011), massive quantities of information are generated by and about people, things and their interactions, on Google, Facebook, Twitter, Uber, Wikipedia, Amazon, and other websites and services. Using techniques of big data visualization, these vast data sets are aggregated and
disaggregated to produce graphical representations and infographics that communicate complex and nuanced information in a seemingly simple, straightforward manner. These are then shared, circulated and consumed in networked spaces, in ways that de-emphasize context, methodology, epistemology, strategies of analysis, and research design, promoting a “god’s eye view” (Haraway, 1988) of complicated issues.

In addition to professional graphical representations, user-created imagery and text also circulate rapidly through networked publics. The concept of networked publics refers both to “the space constructed through networked technologies,” which is characterized by “persistence, visibility, spreadability and searchability” and “the imagined community that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology and practices” (boyd, 2014, p. 8). As one participant, Grace, described the image-based sharing culture, “A lot of people I know in real life, they don’t post things about the way they feel, they post pictures. Basically they just post the picture and people know what they’re talking about.” And so the image, captioned with hashtags, comes to stand in for an emotion or sentiment. The popularity of social media platforms and apps specifically oriented around the circulation of visual materials – like Instagram, Tumblr, and Snapchat, among others – are one vector through which the visual index is constituted.

Alongside the old adage that a picture is worth a thousand words, lies the newer truism and internet hashtag, #picsoritdidnthappen, in which photographic evidence is demanded to serve an evidentiary purpose and substantiate some claim – that one was somewhere, that something happened. Often claims are substantiated with selfies, a practice of self-portraiture at close range in which the face and upper part of the body are photographed from the distance of an outstretched arm, with the bulk of the remainder of the frame filled with markers of place, be they of notable landmarks or generic bathroom stalls. The visibility of the device that captures
the digital file within the frame itself serves as evidence of the “hypermediated character of one’s lived experience” (p. 8) and establishes in the viewer feelings of intimacy with the photographer, owing to the tacit admission that the moment is staged (Losh, 2012). Liz Losh theorizes selfies as a way of “marking time, disciplining the body, and quantifying the self” (2014, p. 1). This popular form of visual indexing may be seen as a form of agentic self-expression or as an instance of packaging the self for the gaze of the other.

Summary

The diagram in Figure 2.1 represents my theoretical framework. It is an adaptation of a schematic developed by Wendy Luttrell and members of the Collaborative Seeing Studio. This research collective initially came together around members’ shared interest in analyzing visual materials produced by young people. Collective members, who were in the early stages of their doctoral work, coalesced around Luttrell’s then-ongoing visual ethnography. Luttrell had previously developed a similar lens diagram to represent her approach to understanding children’s meaning making through photography (Luttrell, 2010).

My broadest lens, signified by the outermost ring, is critical youth studies. This is reflected in my research design that situates participants as experts and in my commitment to see young people as full human beings, not just becomings.
The next three concentric circles are the broad ideological, cultural and material conditions that young women navigate. The first is neoliberal schooling regimes, which shape constructions of digital literacy. In March 2015, for example, the GE Foundation announced a $3.2 million investment in a Career and Technical Education (CTE) pilot program and an enhanced STEM teacher training program in New York City public schools. Programs like these align school curricula with the needs of industry and the global knowledge economy. Digital literacy, like literacy in general, is situated in power relations. Thus neoliberal schooling regimes narrow definitions of literacy to testable competencies. This translates into the valuing of certain digital practices and the devaluing of others.
Postfeminist media landscape refers to a media environment that takes the gains of second wave feminism as given and ascribes it as a matter of individual young women’s “choice” to accept or reject these gains. A selectively defined feminism is thus simultaneously taken into account and repudiated. Within this context, young women make identity claims in part through the production and circulation of images.

By anxiety culture, I refer to the cultural discourses of danger, stunted development, internet addiction, excessive screen time, child predators, sexting, and online bullying. These discourses circulate as parenting advice and are propped up by pediatric research. They are rooted in anxieties about the sustainability of contemporary life and are projected onto young people. The case studies speak back to these frames of neoliberal schooling regimes, postfeminist media landscape and anxiety culture from a place of youth agency and expertise.
Chapter Three
Methodology

Role of the Researcher

I have spent the past twelve years thinking and working at the intersection of youth, education, inequality and digital technologies. My experiences as a teacher, a mother, a teacher educator and a digital media mentor have attuned me to the tensions and contradictions embedded in our uneasy relationship with the technologies that mediate our social worlds. My insights into adult assumptions about technology are informed by diverse experiences: five years as an English teacher, two years in teacher professional development focused on the integration of technology into content area instruction, two years advising university faculty on doing and representing research online, and now at the time of this writing, two and half years as a mother, newly attentive to the disciplining features of anti-screen time discourses.

As a classroom teacher from 2003 to 2008, I experienced firsthand the paradoxical patterns of investment and disinvestment around computers in schools. I taught English in an alternative transfer school for 17 to 21 year-old high school students, whose sense of themselves as valued and valuable had been deeply shaped by the dismal material conditions of their neighborhood schools. While teachers regularly spent their own money on markers for art projects and books for the classroom libraries, laptop carts filled with expensive new Apple laptops regularly sat unused due to teachers’ perceptions of logistical challenges and administration’s concern with liability issues and potential damage. Using blogging platforms in creative writing classes and graphic design applications in journalism classes, I began incorporating what I would now call critical media literacy across my curriculum. Through these experiences I glimpsed the potential for carving out spaces for open-ended textual and visual
expression inside a schooling regime dominated then, as now, by the trend toward the quantification of student bodies as data points rather than individuals who have a stake in their own learning and development.

Later, from 2008 to 2010, I worked in teacher professional development on the integration of technology into curriculum. Visiting elementary, middle and high schools throughout Brooklyn, I encountered teachers who expressed excitement, doubt, fear and ambivalence when faced with new tools and technologies. Despite the ubiquity of the mobile laptop cart in public schools, I found that many teachers’ and administrators’ resisted open-ended uses and seemed to prefer closed, proprietary content management systems linked to assessment software. Narrowly speaking, my job was to encourage and model ways of using a particular program known as Moodle, an open source version of Blackboard. My employer, primarily interested in demonstrating the effectiveness of the program model, accepted my broad interpretation of this mandate reluctantly. Meanwhile, teachers tried their best to avoid me. I felt dismayed (if ambivalently, as this was my livelihood) at the existence of my position. Did we really need another layer of so-called experts entering the complex environment that is any public school and asserting yet another mandate on teachers, who already entertain mandates from untold number of directions? Finally, I noticed the strong pressures on teachers and myself as the consultant to model narrow applications of flexible technologies and present ways of using them that mirrored the conventional, and testable, practices of classrooms. I came to recognize that networked technologies function as tools of control and surveillance, as accessories of rote learning, just as easily as engines of powerful and authentic learning experiences.

As a digital research fellow from 2010 to 2012 based out of the New Media Lab, in a position that would later be folded in the Digital Fellows Initiative of the Provost’s Office, I was
tasked with advising GC faculty on various types of digital scholarly projects, including the doing and representing of research in networked online spaces. These were issues I was just beginning to grapple with myself. This position asked me to claim expertise I was not sure I had, to build websites, something with which I had no experience, and to become familiar with and conversant in a wide range of technical solutions. I felt ambivalent about presenting myself as technically competent, arguably a gendered reaction on my part, although I was able to do so by drawing heavily on the collective expertise of the New Media Lab community, and a culture of information exchange and advisement that was fostered by the open layout of the room.

Reflecting on my own sense of awkwardness around the performance of technical acumen led me to the design of this research project, which I initially formulated as an investigation of how subject positions of technical expertise get taken up, or not taken up, by girls and women. As the project progressed, I became increasingly interested in broader questions about the process whereby young women come to see themselves as experts and agents of their own development.

**Social Location**

I am a middle class white female born in 1980. This project springs from my own feminist inclinations, and is aimed at figuring out how to nurture expert identities in teenage girls and create opportunities for all young women to experience themselves as powerful agents of their own development. As a beneficiary of the second wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s, I received consistent messages while growing up about the fundamental equality of girls and boys, and women and men, never considered any career off-limits due to my gender. My awareness of the politics of feminism was by in large limited to this sanitized vision of women’s equal opportunity. Meanwhile, I was influenced as an undergraduate by postfeminist messaging about
sexual agency, choice narratives, and the over-ness of feminism. As I result I feel I missed the opportunity, when I was the age of the participants in this study, to gain a critical consciousness about the struggles that preceded me. In this way, I am not unlike the participants in this research, who have also grown up in a context that assumes feminist advances but invests little energy in nurturing, articulating, and sustaining them. But I am unlike my participants in that the social media layer, now so prominent, was not a factor in my transition from high school to college.

My own whiteness, class position, and age have affected my research relationships. As I have gone about trying to untangle the twisted threads of privilege linked to race-, class-, gender- and generation-based hierarchies that shape young women’s digital media practices I have tried to be as reflective and transparent as possible. I have written myself into my analyses and been attentive to the intersecting dimensions of my own relative privilege that shape what and how I see. As a classroom teacher I addressed race directly and developed trusting relationships with young people of color by acknowledging myself as a daily beneficiary of white privilege. As Zeus Leonardo (2009) argues, whiteness not only a racial identity, something that an individual feels him or herself to be, it is also an ideology and epistemology. Whiteness as an ideology and epistemology is evident in many so-called color-blind schooling policies, like approaches to bilingualism (Flores, 2013) to name one example. And, as I argued in Chapter One, dominant constructions of digital literacy are also laden with the valuing of color blind, deracinated literacies. Whiteness is a whole system of knowledge and framework for understanding the world that casts middle class whiteness as the norm and finds other groups deviant in comparison.
I have also attended to issues of generation. I got my first email address as an undergraduate and used landlines throughout college with the exception of four months spent abroad. As a junior and senior in high school, when I was the age of the participants at the beginning of data collection, I accessed the internet through a dial-up connection hooked to a desktop computer shared by the five members of my nuclear family. I went on local message boards, met older boys from neighboring towns, chatted with them, and went on dates. It was a different experience than that of my Millennial younger brother and sister, who chatted with friends on instant messenger applications while in middle and high school, and an even more different experience from that of the participants in this research, like Grace, who used AOL Instant Messenger in elementary school. Now a mother in my mid-30s, I shudder to imagine what kind of trouble I might have gotten myself into had I been born 15 years later, a sentiment that is shared by many in my age cohort.

**A Case Study Approach**

My dissertation shines a light on a particular landscape of girlhood inhabited by an individual participant over time, from ten to twenty years of age. This landscape includes issues of family structure, relationships with parents, siblings and extended family, care arrangements, access to extracurricular activities, responsibilities in the home, culturally-defined gender roles, and the waxing and waning of family assets and fortunes. My analysis of each young woman’s participation in networked culture is thus integrally linked to the domestic vectors of inequality, which are themselves manifestations of broader systems of inequality rooted the unequal distribution of money and power within a capitalistic political economy. The small sample size of this study lends itself to an intersectional analysis and an exploration of how class, race,
language, immigrant status and gender shape attitudes toward technology and processes of subject formation. It is made possible by a research design emphasizing multiple sources of data studied over time through an in-depth, case-based approach, a more contextual approach than the older framings of the digital divide (Hargittai, 2003) and participation gap (Jenkins et al., 2006).

There are several high quality large-scale survey-based studies of youth digital media practices (AAUW, 2000; Lenhart et al., 2008; Lenhart, 2011; Rideout et al., 2010), but far fewer studies of the meaning-making processes of teenagers and the connections between digital media practices and issues of self, identity, lifeworlds and subject formation. In order to study meaning-making processes, it is necessary to take a case-based approach, and to look closely at a small number of individuals’ understandings of their selves, identities, and lifeworlds as mediated by technology, particularly in relation to the social markers of gender, race/ethnicity, social class, language, and dis/ability. As educators, we need to grasp young people’s understandings of their own practices in order to design learning environments that are reflective of the meaning these practices hold in their social worlds and inner lives. In making this shift from studying practices to studying understandings, I am responding to a call for a paradigm shift to move the focus away from the technologies and toward a focus on young people themselves (Herring, 2008).

**Sampling for Diversity**

Participants are teenage girls, now young women, from the mostly working class and immigrant communities of color in Worcester, Massachusetts. They were 17 and 18 years of age and juniors and seniors in high school when I began data collection in February 2012. I selected these participants among the 36 in Luttrell’s research because their photographs suggested diversity among them, in terms of their interests: that Mesha was interested in gaming, that Ling
had a strong artistic streak, and that Grace might have a Tumblr. See, for example, Figure 3.1, which features one archival image produced by each participant. Mesha took the first photo in the fifth grade, Ling took the second photo in the eleventh grade, and Grace took the third photo in the tenth grade.

Figure 3.1
Hints at diverse practices

Ling is first generation Chinese American, and her family owns a Chinese buffet and take-out restaurant in Maine. They were the owners of a similar establishment in Worcester for most of her life, but relocated shortly before my study began for financial reasons. Ling attended the local land-grant community college in Maine for two years while running the family business, and transferred to a residential Boston-area college in September 2014 to study accounting. While her family, part of the Fujianese merchant class, has sufficient resources to be employing and housing other, more recent immigrants, their financial dealings exist outside of
the American middle class mainstream, with investments made in cash and real estate rather than
the stock market and a heavy reliance on New York’s Chinatown-based networks for medical,
social, and financial needs. Although they own a business, her parents don’t speak English and
don’t have college degrees.

Mesha is from a working class African American family. Her father, when he was alive,
worked the overnight shift in a residential facility for people in recovery from substance abuse.
Since the death of her father in March 2012, she has been responsible for the care of her disabled
and bedridden mother, who is now hospitalized. She supplements her mother’s disability checks
by working as a manager in a fast food restaurant. After graduating from high school, she
enrolled part-time for one semester in a local community college to study interactive media.
After a year and a half hiatus from her college coursework, she recently reenrolled in an applied
arts Associates degree program.

Grace, the middle of three daughters, comes from a Chinese family she describes as very
traditional, observing all of the major Chinese holidays. Her father works the night shift, driving
a forklift truck for a cable company, and does construction jobs on the side. Her mother has
periodically taken care of children in the home, but recently had a stroke and no longer works.
Grace worked long hours while in high school as a waitress, went to trade school after high
school, and now works in a nail salon. She has ambitions to go back to school and eventually
into the field of health care, but is considering starting out as a receptionist in a hospital.

Relationship to Children Framing Childhoods and Looking Back

This research project grew out of my involvement in Wendy Luttrell’s longitudinal visual
ethnographic research, *Children Framing Childhoods* (2003-2007) and *Looking Back* (2010-
and was structured by my participation in her Visual Research with Children and Youth course in Spring 2011. In this course, we grappled with the philosophical, theoretical, methodological, and ethical issues involved in research projects that “give kids cameras” (Pini & Walkerdine, 2011; Orellana, 1999). In Children Framing Childhoods and Looking Back, Luttrell used youth-generated photographs and videos to study young people’s own knowledge and experiences of immigration, schooling, and identities over time.

Figure 3.2
Archival data
The project put still and video cameras in the hands of 36 young people to document their lives at ages 10, 12, 16 and 17, generating an extensive archive of audiovisual materials. These audiovisual materials are organized on a password-protected website that contains over 2,000 photographs, 60 hours of audio- and video-taped interviews, and 18 youth-made videos. Figure 3.2, a screenshot of some of the archival data, gives a flavor of the photographic material for a single case. Luttrell has written individual case studies and cross-case analyses about recurring “counter-narratives” of love, care, and solidarity that unfold in the young people’s representations of school, family, and friendships worlds (Lico & Luttrell, 2011; Luttrell, 2010, 2013; Luttrell, Restler & Fontaine, 2012). She has also written about the ways the children made identity claims through their photography (Tinkler, 2008), as a good student, reading or doing homework; as a grateful/loving son or daughter (Luttrell et al., 2011); as boys or girls (Luttrell, 2012); and as soon-to-be teenagers.

In the visual research course, students engage systematically with the archive, using a set of techniques that Luttrell calls collaborative seeing, as a way of exploring a particular child’s photography and video-making as a lens on her/his life across several contexts, spaces and times. This process culminates in the production of a case-based visual narrative, facilitated by students’ concurrent enrollment in a video-editing course with David Chapin. In my own work with the archive, I was immediately struck by the preponderance of screen photos. I learned that an earlier categorical analysis established that screens — boxy televisions of various sizes, tiny screens on flip-style cell phones, shared home computers, and many almost identical photos of new school computer lab — were the most frequently photographed object in the 10 and 12 year olds’ image galleries. I began by creating a typology of the kinds of screens pictured and the context of their presentation across the entire archive. In my visual narrative, a short video made
in iMovie, I explored how one child, Alanzo, spoke about the importance of extended care networks in his video game play. This insight would go on to influence my approach to data analysis.

**Data Collection: Multiple, Youth-Centered Methods**

The methodology of this study departs in significant ways from other studies of girls digital media practices, in that: 1) I draw on longitudinal visual data from ages 10-20, from archival data through digital footprints; 2) my inquiry-driven research design was not limited to a particular platform or practice but focused on the young people themselves and allowed me to make connections among practices and platforms; 3) the innovative technique of the youth-led tutorial positions the young person as an expert.

I began in September 2011 by reviewing a subset of materials from Luttrell’s password-protected archive of data from *Children Framing Childhoods* and *Looking Back*. For each participant this included 72 photos (three sets of 24 images) taken at ages 10, 12, and 16 or 17, a five-minute video diary produced at age 16 or 17, and five hours of videotaped interviews. Immersing myself in these materials, I developed a descriptive portrait of each young woman that focused on the rhythms of her daily life at school, at home, and in other places, including her family responsibilities, friendships, and leisure activities. The complexity of these daily rhythms, especially at ages 10 and 12, which Luttrell (2013) has called the “choreography of family care,” was often shaped by parents’ work schedules. I paid particular attention to how participants spoke about any screen photos that appeared in their albums. During this first phase of my project, I also identified questions about the everyday lives of participants that I planned to probe more deeply in the next phase of my research.
From February to May 2012, I conducted in-depth interviews, eliciting youth accounts of their teenage engagements with social media and an updated context of their everyday lives. Ranging in length from 90 minutes to two hours, these semi-structured interviews took place at participants’ high schools. I began with follow-up questions about archival data and especially the photographs and video diaries produced at ages 16 and 17. I then asked about their uses of a whole range of digital media practices and services, including social network sites, blogging services, microblogging services, multimedia production activities, computer gaming and video gaming, fan fiction, and anime. I maintained an open approach, asking follow up questions when participants seemed excited or like they had more to say. The interviews concluded with a conversation about the youth-led tutorial and possible directions for it. After completing each audio-recorded interview I transcribed the recordings and wrote field notes. Through the interviews I established a relationship with participants and laid the groundwork for the youth-led tutorials.

The youth-led tutorials took place between May and August 2012. I sat alongside participants in front of their personal laptop computers or television screens. Following LeCompte, Preissle, and Tesch’s (1993) recommendation to “genuinely assume a stance of naïveté – one which approximates the relationship of a novice to an expert” (p. 112), I left all substantive decisions in the hands of the youth participants and invited each to school me in a digital media platform or practice of her choosing. The video recorded tutorials lasted between twenty-five minutes, in the case of Grace, to three hours with Mesha, a variation I embraced as an additional data source. Ling’s tutorial took place in a small empty classroom at her high school, Mesha’s in the television room of her family’s home, and Grace’s in a conference room I rented in a café near her high school. Ling showed me her approach to graphic design in
Photoshop and her use of Facebook as an album of her art, Mesha introduced me to six of her favorite PlayStation 3 games, and Grace shared her use of Tumblr as an online diary. After completing each youth-led tutorial, I transcribed the recordings and wrote field notes. In the two cases (Ling and Grace) in which participants introduced online artifacts, there was the fourth data point of participants’ digital footprints. I only analyzed these materials, part of the vast assemblage of digital data generated with every click and keystroke, when participants themselves introduced me to it. Later in this chapter I discuss how I worked with the IRB to manage ethical issues around the use of digital data.

During the months of writing and revising the data chapters I was in regular contact with participants, asking further questions to check my assumptions and provide additional context. The extent and form of the contact varied as I followed the lead of each participant. Ling and I primarily interacted on Facebook, where we have exchanged 37 messages. Mesha and I have exchanged 82 text messages since data collection ended, usually in a small flurry every couple of months. Grace and I primarily correspond by email, and have exchanged 24 emails since August 2012. I also conducted an additional in-depth interview with Ling in May 2014 about her Facebook album.

Data Analysis: Transcription

My discussion of data analysis has three parts. The first part addresses transcription as a site of analysis. The second part introduces the interpretive process of collaborative seeing, which guided my process of developing themes and writing analytic memos about these themes, as recommended by Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995). In this part I describe Luttrell’s formulation of collaborative seeing, how I drew on her formulation for my work with the
archive, and how I adapted it to address my questions and data sources. Finally, I discuss some of the lenses I used in data analysis, and why.

Transcribing the interviews and youth-led tutorials and writing up field notes about each was the first instance of data analysis. During the transcription process there are many analytically significant decisions made about the representation of talk as text. Speech can be halting, confusing, difficult to make out, and often doesn’t conform to the grammatical conventions of standard or formal written English. In interview situations, people might talk over one another, interrupt each other, make meaningful gestures and eye contact, and get distracted by background noise. Each instance of managing these gaps between interactions as they are captured in the recording, and as they are represented on the page is a moment of analysis.

Because transcription implies analysis, I transcribed all my own data. This took a considerable amount of time, especially for the video recorded tutorials. While I did not include an exhaustive description of the video material in the transcripts, I included some narrative references to the videos to help contextualize the talk. I included my own words in the transcripts, and made note of interruptions and gaps in time. I did not edit participants’ speech to conform to the conventions of standard written English, but rather retained participants’ speech quirks. Later, when incorporating excerpts into the case studies, I sometimes lightly edited the excerpted parts for clarity. I also wrote field notes immediately after the in-depth interviews and youth-led tutorials.

Data Analysis: Collaborative Seeing

Collaborative seeing is an iterative and reflexive practice of inquiry that combines elements of visual and narrative analysis (Lico & Luttrell, 2011; Luttrell, 2010) to address the
structural imbalance of power between children and adults. It aims to preserve the multiplicity of meanings that are co-constructed between researchers and researched, teachers and learners.

Collaborative seeing as Luttrell formulated it has three main features (Fontaine & Luttrell, 2015).

The first is the emphasis on multiple audiencing opportunities. In the context of *Children Framing Childhood* and *Looking Back*, this is evident in a research design that provides different kinds of spaces for young people to talk about their image making, in recognition of the fact that what they choose to emphasize about their image making varies with the context and audience. My study also creates spaces for the young women to reflect on their participation in networked online spaces, though different mediums (the interviews, the tutorials, and ongoing correspondence) over time.

The second aspect of collaborative seeing as formulated by Luttrell is the particular analytic approach of a structured, sequenced immersion in the visual and then the narrative data. This strategy is intended to catalyze researcher/adult reflexivity about what is seen and interpreted about children and childhood. I first engaged this practice while a student in the visual research course in Spring 2011, and later revisited this practice when working with the archival data, and even later, with the young women’s digital footprints. In a structured, sequenced immersion, the researcher looks first at the kids’ pictures, or the young women’s image making on social media, and only later asks and listens to what the young people say about these images. This aids in identifying one’s own biases and assumptions.

In the course, Luttrell draws on Howard Becker’s guidelines for working with images. Becker writes: “Don’t stare and thus stop looking; look actively … you’ll find it useful to take up the time by naming everything in the picture to yourself and writing up notes.” After building up capacity for attention to detail, he encourages observers to engage in “a period of fantasy, telling
yourself a story about the people and things in the picture,” as a “device for externalizing and making clear to yourself the emotion and mood the picture has evoked” (1986, p. 232). This process is grounded in an awareness of how differently we are apt to interpret visual data given our own vantage point (Rose, 2007), or as John Berger writes, “we never look just at one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves” (1972, p. 9). A specific example of this approach appears in Mesha’s case study.

The third feature of collaborative seeing is a certain way of looking with and listening to young people, informed by Rita Charon’s concept of stereophonic listening. Charon is writing about narrative medicine, and what is needed in the exchange between patients who are speaking about their illnesses and the medical professionals who are committed to caring for them. To listen fully means being able to “hear the body and the person who inhabits it” (2006, p. 97). Listening stereophonically meant doing multiple readings of the transcripts, each time applying different lenses.

Data Analysis: Stereophonic Listening

I drew on the spirit of Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan’s (1992) Listening Guide in doing multiple readings of the transcripts to develop a layered analysis. I explored different ways of representing excerpts from the transcripts typographically, experimenting with line breaks in various places. I began with line breaks that reflected patterns of speech – pauses, changes of subject, stuttered transitions – and gradually, the more I worked with these poetically formatted representations of speech, the more I tweaked their form to resemble the interpretations I was developing of them, including points of emphasis, and analyses I planned to incorporate.
After this initial phase of experimenting typographically with the transcripts, I embarked on the first of four readings. In this reading, I paid particular attention to the young women’s descriptions of their own development and the ways in which they drew on different developmental scripts, which is particularly reflected in Chapters Four and Five. In some cases, I drew on Brown and Gilligan’s strategy of developing I-poems, a strategy of tracing how participants represent themselves in interviews through attention to first person statements. I-poems are thus a means of tuning into expressions of agency and constraint in narrative accounts. An example of how I used this technique appears in Chapter Five, in which I attend to shifts in subject position within and across narratives to examine Mesha’s emerging sense of herself as connected to a broader women in technology project. 4

In the second reading, I looked for claims of expertise as in the use of technicist discourses, and refusals of expertise as in the use of imprecise technical language and linguistic hedges. According to Bryson and de Castell (1998), technicist discourses allow speakers to claim power, status and knowledge in technological domains. There is an “enduring symbolic association” between masculinity and technology (Faulkner, 2001, p. 79), as the skillful engagement with computer technologies has historically been a key site for the production of masculine identities (Cockburn, 1985; Greenbaum, 1990). This skill is discursively claimed by fluency with specialized vocabularies and terminologies. Among the cases, Mesha stood out for engaging technicist discourses, and Grace for refusing them. For example, Mesha’s tutorial was peppered with gaming lingo – references to “button mashers,” “cut scenes,” “doing a thrill,” “stances,” and “taking damage,” to give some examples – that I, as the initiated, found almost

4 The term “narrative” is used in different ways in different disciplines. My usage of the term reflects the basic elements outlined by Catherine Riessman, who defines it as a form of oral storytelling in which “events perceived by the speaker as important are selected, organized, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience (2008, p. 3).
impenetrable. It was only through spending time on the message boards, websites and blogs popular among avid gamers that I came to understand her vocabulary and its significance as a claim of a gamer identity.

Conversely, I noted that Grace assiduously avoided any kind of technical explanations for her blogging. When, during her tutorial, I asked her about how she had modified her blog theme, something that is quite simple to do through the main blog interface, she replied, “The codes? I don’t bother with them.” The decision to avoid technical language and topics may be a way of aligning oneself with particular, perhaps more flexible, situated, emotionally resonant, and socially attuned ways of knowing, and may also reflect a lack of engagement with online communities of practice constituted in help forums and message boards. Grace’s imprecise language around coding and the other, more technical features of the Tumblr platform can also be understood as a form of linguistic hedging. Linguistic hedges are speaking strategy typical of white middle class female teenagers that gives their speech the appearance of being tentative and less authoritative. Linguistic hedges are associated with middle class notions of feminine propriety. When used in an interview context, they may reflect that research participants are tailoring their self-presentation to meet the anticipated expectations of the researcher, or promote a certain image of themselves (DeVault, 1990).

In the third reading, I attended to the various circulating cultural discourses the young women took up. These included the addictive potential of certain sites, anxieties about spending too much time online and therefore neglecting important responsibilities, gripes about drama in networked spaces, disagreements with parents and other authority figures about digital media use, and concerns about surveillance and data harvesting. I coded for cultural discourses, and then looked at the context of their referencing, which led to the realization that many of the
references to cultural discourses were reflective of negotiations of relationship with others. Ambivalent reflections about time spent online raise questions of autonomy and interdependence and our obligations to ourselves and others, and talk of drama between peers in networked spaces reflect young people’s creative efforts to understand how relational dynamics are shaped and configured by technical affordances and limitations.

For example, Grace commented that she deleted her Facebook account because she was “spending too much time on there” and it was “a really big distraction” from the things she was “supposed to do, like being productive and doing homework.” I coded this remark as a reference to the cultural discourses of productivity, effective time management, and limiting screen time. I then considered the context in which she said this, as part of an extended explanation of her preference for the Tumblr platform, which she likes because “like nobody at school really follows me on it, no one knows about my outside life and my problems.” Coming to see that many of these references to the cultural politics of teens’ screen time were framed by the participants as questions of relationality pushed me to focus my analysis in the direction of relational development.

And in the final reading of the transcripts, I focused on researcher reflexivity, and used this a thread to piece together the three other readings into a coherent narrative. In this reading I attended to our interactions and tried to understand my own role in shaping the data collection.

Ethical Issues in Internet Research with Youth

The process of developing the analyses that appear in Chapters Four, Five and Six was a long and challenging one. I struggled with ethical dilemmas as I sought to represent the three young women, who brought me into their lives and worlds, with integrity, compassion, honesty,
and insight. I found the ethical issues particularly challenging in the chapter on Grace, which takes her Tumblr diary as data. Although I was interested in critiquing the adultist frames of risk, danger and promiscuity that structure conventional understandings of teenage girls’ online practices, my first reactions to her blog seemed to support these views more than undermine them. I felt uncomfortable and voyeuristic reading about her daily life, and her boy, friend, and family troubles. The stereotypically teenage romantic sensibilities of the writing and the inclusion of some erotic re-blogged imagery left me with a sense that I was digging through the drawers of a vulnerable young woman from my more powerful position as a researcher and expert.

I have taken measures to protect the identities of research participants in accordance with my obligations to the research community and the Institutional Review Board. Although all participants preferred that I used their real first names, I only elected to do in the case of Mesha, for whom I did not use any online data. For the other two participants, whose digital footprints I excerpted, I use pseudonyms. My use of participants’ digital footprints is informed by the best practices in internet research (Markham & Buchanan, 2012) and online ethnographic techniques (boyd, forthcoming; Hine, 2008). I purposefully obscured data in order to remove identifying information. When incorporating images, I have whenever possible chosen images without visible faces. When it has been important to my argument to include faces or other identifying information, I have modified the images using Photoshop, blurring faces, names and other identifying details. When I have quoted text, I have slightly altered the quotations in ways that preserve the meaning but render the quote unsearchable.

I consulted with Kay Powell of the CUNY Graduate Center Institutional Review Board to inquire about filing an amendment in light of this development of excerpting digital footprints,
which I had not fully anticipated at the original filing. This consultation resulted in the decision that because the digital artifacts would not be identifiable to participants, no amendment was needed. Because no amendment was needed, no signature was required; however I did seek and secure explicit written permission from Ling to use the images from her Facebook album that appear in Chapter Four, and from Grace to use the images and textual excerpts from her Tumblr that appear in Chapter Six. Grace also provided to me some additional images of the dashboard of her Tumblr as it appears on her phone screen.

Validity

The careful development of an interactive research design is a crucial first step in establishing validity (Maxwell, 2005). In Maxwell’s model, the elements of a research design are interrelated and reinforcing. Research questions, research goals, conceptual framework, methods, and strategies for establishing validity or trustworthiness are all mutually implicated.

The conceptual framework of critical youth studies has shaped this project in important ways, theoretically as well as methodologically. Critical youth studies argues that relationships between adults and young people exist within power relations. This approach highlights the structural imbalance of power between adults and young people, evident in the organization of various institutions, including schools and families. Schools are organized to manage the movements of students through time and space through such practices as bell schedules and dedicated spaces for certain activities. These practices, designed to impose order and structure, may result in a reduction in children’s experiences of agency in school and both reflect and produce teachers’ authority over students (Devine, 2002). There are, of course, a range of approaches in schools, some more traditionally authoritative and others characterized by the
exercise of soft power, but even progressive educational approaches reflect power relations. The institution of the family also reflects adult authority, though with perhaps more variety in how this authority is manifested across lines of class and culture. Conventional, common sense knowledge about young people, grounded in these institutions, thus reflects these structures.

This commitment to critical youth studies is apparent throughout my research design. For example, the rather open-ended orientation of my project, and the decision not to focus on a particular area of social media practice, but rather to let each young person name her own focus and lead me down a path of her choice, is linked to my belief that this kind of inquiry-driven rather than hypothesis-driven design is most likely to surface findings that don’t yet appear in the literature on teenagers’ digital media practices, or provide a new twists or dimensions to existing findings.

A particular strength of this study is the thickness of the data. In addition to the original data that I collected, I also drew on an archive of data originally collected by Wendy Luttrell and her research assistants between 2003 and 2011. The archive included 72 photographs taken by each of the focal participants between fifth grade and eleventh grade, audio- and video-taped interviews about each of three sets of 24 photographs, and a youth-produced video of up to five minutes. Analysis of these archival materials gave me a sense of the participants’ childhoods, which was particularly fruitful in the chapters on Ling and Mesha. Unlike many studies, which are only able to capture a moment in time, this longitudinal data helped me to think about attitudes toward technology and how they may or may not change over time.

One of the things I found surprising and interesting was how consistent the participants seemed to be as people, in terms of both their interests and what they chose to talk about. For instance, Mesha’s strong interest in gaming and strong female protagonists, and her sense of
herself as a social outsider to her school community were apparent in the archival data.

Similarly, the shaping role of the restaurant and family expectations, and her strong artistic sensibilities, were evident in Ling’s early photographs and narratives about them. Finally, Grace’s early assumption of a gendered care-giving role is evident in her early photographs that memorialize her care of an infant as a sixth grader. Drawing on archival data helped me to build out richer understandings of the lifeworlds of participants.

My commitment to a critical youth-centered perspective is also evident in my decision to do youth-led tutorials. This open-ended research design allowed each participant to set her own agenda, helping to surface new perspectives on youth digital media practices. It also helped me move away from a directive teacher identity, by positioning the young person in control of the situation. It was thus a methodological decision that was linked to my theoretical orientation in critical youth studies. However, one drawback of this approach that I was not aware of at the time was the way it props up the myth of the digital native. In a sense, it is particularly challenging to do critical work with young people around issues of digital media practice, given the salience of the problematic concept of the digital native in the popular imagination. In addition, the youth directed approach pushed the young women toward showing me things that are show-able, which may not always reflect how they actually spend their time.

This dissertation has benefited enormously from the collective insight of other doctoral students who have studied with Wendy, assisted with the later phase of the data collection during Looking Back, and taken Wendy’s visual research course. Each student enrolled in the visual research course produced a visual narrative about one of the children. I had the good fortune of viewing many of these visual narratives and discussing them with other members of the Collaborative Seeing Studio, and this process informs some of my assertions. For instance, not
being a gamer myself, I wouldn’t have realized that Mesha’s early photographs of Yuna, the female character in Final Fantasy Ten, who she photographed numerous times in the fifth grade, contained references to advanced game play. This is just one example of the ways that my analyses built on the work of others who have engaged with the archival data over time.

While it is critical to begin a project with a well-thought out research design, validity cannot be achieved by that means alone, but should instead be approached as an ongoing process of validation (Luttrell, 2000; Mishler, 1990; Riessman, 1993). One of course tries to anticipate problems embedded in one’s research design, but challenges and unexpected developments still arise. One way of dealing with these unanticipated obstacles is to engage in frequent reflexive writing exercises during the research to process choices made along the way, trade-offs, and reasons for arriving at decisions. I did this throughout my fieldwork and analysis, using Luttrell’s “good enough methods” as a model (2000), often including reflexive segments within field notes and analytic memos. A final strategy of validation was the informal sharing of some of my ideas with participants, a form of member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Limitations**

My study is not about generalizing to teenage girls as a population, or about any particular practice or platform, but about the processes used by individual girls to make sense of their digital media practices. My findings will not be relevant outside of a Western, English-speaking context, as the conditions of access to the hardware and software that frame digital media practices vary considerably beyond this context.

The primary data collection activities took place in the northeastern United States between February and August 2012, but substantive contact with participants continued through
early March 2015. While this study focused on the end of high school and the transition to college, postsecondary training, and the world of work, it would be useful for additional studies of agency, identity and development in networked online spaces to focus on female subjects at other transitional moments of life, like becoming a mother, or embarking on international travels, as well as in periods of little externally-perceptible change.

My methods may have lent themselves more to drawing out the experiences of young women in positions of relative challenge than those of relative privilege. The method of the youth-led tutorial, in particular, invited the young women to share something underappreciated, and was an effective method to use with participants who felt in some way unseen or unheard. The relative social isolation of participants and the ways that their desire to participate in my project seemed to shift over time in inverse relation to their fortunes suggested to me that my research design may have been more effective with young people in positions of challenge and constraint than positions of privilege.
Chapter Four
Ling’s Media-Making: Subject Formation in a Networked Diaspora

From Worcester to Maine

Figure 4.1
Ghost tree

*This is actually the first picture I took with my pinhole camera. It was like a test picture. And it was around school. There was nothing to take a picture of besides school. And it was winter, as you can tell with the snow. It looks like a ghost tree.*
In below-freezing temperatures one morning in March 2012, I made my way up rural route 202 in my parents’ old Volvo sedan, gripping the steering wheel through a pair of my mom’s gloves. I was heading to meet Ling, whose family had recently relocated to Maine from Worcester, Massachusetts. Passing the local American Legion post, I scanned the front sign, which cheerfully exclaimed its status as “Home of the $1 16oz draft!” Shuttered mills and lumberyards dotted the roadsides. Now in town, I turned up the meandering hilly drive to the low-slung brick school building and was transported back to my years as a high school athlete. Memories of track meets and field hockey games at this very school forty minutes from my hometown came flooding back to me. Entering the school building, I scanned a placard, posted on the bulletin board, with clippings of the honors and high honors lists from the local newspaper. The last names of the students – Gosselin, Benoit, Chasse, Giroux – reminded me of the history of the French Canadians (white, working class, Catholic folks who are also known in Maine as Franco Americans), my own family’s heritage. Sprinkled among these typically Franco names were some other, less familiar ones, suggestive of diverse pockets of immigrants who have trickled in since I left Maine for college.

Ling’s family, like many Fujianese families, is in the restaurant business. She had recently moved to this town in Maine from the much larger and more diverse Massachusetts mill city of Worcester with her mother, father, and older brother, who speak little English. Worcester, home to diverse and shifting waves of immigrants, has “a lot of Asian restaurants, especially Chinese ones” and with the stiff competition “business had been so bad and the restaurant was kind of dying.” Ling’s family decided to cut their losses and move north to an area without an established Fujianese community, where the restaurant business would be less competitive. And so on the last day of her junior year of high school, they stuffed their earthly belongings in a
moving truck and drove two and a half hours north to take over a strip mall Chinese buffet restaurant.

Ling’s family emigrated to the United States in the mid-1990s from the rural Chinese province of Fujian, located on the southeast coast of China. Her family’s line of work, of owning and operating a Chinese restaurant, and offering housing and meals to more recently arrived Fujianese workers as part of a compensation package, is a fairly typical arrangement (Coe, 2009), as many storefront Chinese take out restaurants are owned by Fujianese people.\(^5\) Fujianese people are stigmatized within the Chinese community for a “no holds barred” work ethic and culture and a willingness to work longer hours for lower wages, creating intense competition for work within Chinese ethnic enclaves (Yip & Huelsenbeck).

Although this would be our first face-to-face meeting, I felt, strangely, like I knew her already, having immersed myself in her archival materials from *Children Framing Childhood* and *Looking Back* as discussed in Chapter Three. I thought of Ling’s love of drawing and of the subtle precision of her early photographs, which seemed to reveal a sensitive and artistic sensibility. In particular, I ruminated over her speculation, at age 16, in an interview with Wendy

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\(^5\) Some Fujianese enter the United States under the sponsorship of relatives or other contacts from China who immigrated earlier and have become naturalized citizens, or frequently, they are voluntarily smuggled into the country for hefty sums by “snakeheads” in China (for a description of the phenomenon, see Liang & Ye, 2001; for narratives of Fujianese immigrants who used snakeheads, see Lin, 2005). Fujianese are part of the third wave of Chinese immigrants to this country (Chang, 2003). The first wave, in the mid 19th century, brought unaccompanied males to California to work as laborers in the gold rush, sending money home to their families and eventually often returning to China. The second wave was composed of anti-communist elites, highly educated and wealthy Mandarin speakers, fleeing China after the 1949 Communist Revolution. The third wave, during the last two decades of the twentieth century reflects a spectrum of socioeconomic diversity and includes immigrants from rural areas like Fujian province. Whether these immigrants from Fujian provide have legal status or not, they usually have little formal education and settle in Chinatowns and work as laborer, or in restaurants, or as laborers.
that “I guess when you're growing up, your mind gets more detailed, and you can see, like, every tiny bit, and you draw it exactly.”

I remembered that in the fifth and sixth grades, she seemed embarrassed by the mismatch between her mother’s expectations and those of her teachers. Her mother expected her to navigate by foot and on the city bus between home, school, and the family restaurant. Meanwhile her teachers, caring for children’s safety and well-being, and extending their school-day practice of managing children’s bodies in space and time, felt that they should help her cross the street to the bus. I also recalled that as a fifth grader, she was pitching in at the restaurant and ringing up customers on the cash register during busy times, while noting that the customers “didn’t really trust” her and “were like, ‘Oh, you’re so young!’”

I had also been struck by her descriptions of her robust care network, which was marked by exchanges of gifts and cards with employees, her mother's habit of leaving a pot of soup on the stove at home, and the fact that her brother would carry her home if she fell asleep at the restaurant. These moments were suggestive of a deeply integrated family and work life, and of some of the benefits of this arrangement, like the distribution of care work across the restaurant community. But the integration of family life and restaurant work also had some negative implications, as the demands of work sometimes superseded the demands of family.

For example, there was a poignant moment in the sixth grade when, gazing with shy yet palpable pride at a blurry photo of her report card, she explained that she was “the only person in the class who got all A’s, no B’s.” This moment indicated her investment in the metric of grades, the currency of the “model minority,” and her use of this metric to establish her status as “a good child” and to “make my mom and dad proud because they want a good child like me.” Revealing after a long and pensive pause that she had never shared her report card with her parents, and
instead had gotten a signature from her eighteen-year-old brother, she assured the interviewer that “it is okay.” Her assertion of okay-ness, however, privileges the rules of the school, and discounts her own desire to be acknowledged by her parents for her hard work.

I also had a sense, from a video diary Ling made at sixteen during *Looking Back*, of the gendered dynamics of her family life. In the first scene of the video, her parents sit listlessly behind the check out counter of the restaurant, empty at the dinner hour. Training the camera on her father, slumped behind the cash register, eyes directed downward, Ling petitions him to “Say ‘Hello’!” but he barely reacts, shifting his gaze from the counter to the camera for a half second, not smiling, a gesture of minimal acknowledgement, before looking away again. Uttering a disappointed, “Uh, hello,” Ling shifts the camera to her mother, who seems lost in thought. “Hi!” Ling says again, brightly. Her mother looks up, flashes the camera a smile and gives a momentary wave, before glancing away distractedly.

Wendy Luttrell has written about how the children's image making highlights the gendered dynamics of parents' emotional labor (Luttrell et al., 2011), and this is no exception. In this moment, Ling’s father's refusal to put on a happy face, to acknowledge the camera and the viewers of her video diary, to play the part of the involved, emotionally available father that she is asking him to play contrasts with her mother's acquiescence to this same request, despite the fact that the husband and wife face same challenging circumstances. Of course it is impossible to know exactly what is going on in her father’s mind, what concerns he may have, or negative experiences with cameras that may haunt his memory. Nevertheless, Ling’s mother's willingness to perform this kind of emotional labor by smiling for the camera when she has other things on her mind is echoed in other differences in the ways Ling talks about her parents, like her father's disciplinary mindset, his strictness, and the demands he increasingly places on his daughter to
manage the restaurant while he pursues various entrepreneurial ventures. This footage of Ling's ruminating parents, sitting idle in an empty restaurant, also foreshadows how the gendered organization of her family life constrains her own educational trajectory. As I anticipated meeting her, I wondered how she was handling the transition to this less urban and much more homogenous environment of the town in Maine, and what the contours of her life were now.

The Gift Economy and Craft Logic of Multimedia Production

I was six and a half months pregnant on the day of the tutorial in mid-May 2012 when I met Ling at her high school. Her dad dropped her off five minutes before our appointed meeting time, and quickly drove off. When I entered the school building, Ling was chatting amicably with Nancy, one of the school secretaries. Nancy escorted us to the small “white room,” actually more yellow than white, which Ling informed me is where you go “if you get in trouble.” While I struggled to best arrange my equipment in the cramped space, she efficiently unpacked and set up her own equipment. She brought her Sony VAIO laptop, a high prestige PC line similar in cost to a MacBook, and a mouse and mouse pad. She negotiated the terms of the tutorial, asking, “Is it okay if I don’t talk the whole time?” and then launched into her lesson.

Opening Photoshop, she proceeded methodically through a process that she had clearly thought through, done before, and prepared in advance. Beginning with a plain white desktop in the Photoshop graphics editor, she began by pasting images of pandas she had downloaded from Google Image Search. She added a shadow to a larger panda holding a smaller one, and used a specially downloaded brush to create a patch of grass around the other, independent panda. She adjusted the angle and reach of the shadow, and applied a rainbow coloration effect to the grass patch. She asked me my favorite color (green) and shaded the background accordingly. She
added a bubble texture to the background in two sweeps, leaving a diagonal area across the middle bubble-free. Then, she asked me to turn away from the screen, and with my back turned she typed, “Congratulations Claire Fontaine – You’re having a baby!” She adjusted the font size, and applied a different font color to each line of text before declaring the card complete.

Figure 4.2
Panda card

Ting’s interpretation of the youth-led tutorial is interesting for at least three reasons. Firstly, she used it as an opportunity to teach me something not solely technical, but also social and relational. Even though this was only our third time ever seeing each other, she took the
opportunity to make a gift for me, making a statement about the gift logic of her multimedia production.

Secondly, the digital card resembles a template in its form and organization. Indeed, it would have been easy for her to produce a similar card using one of the many templates that are freely available for download online. Such templates typically allow for customization of color scheme, text, and sometimes graphics. Her technique of making a digital card from scratch following a particular protocol developed over time and used in other situations, for example to make birthday cards for friends, represents a craft approach to digital media production. In a craft approach, there is pleasure in the making, and the making is not simply instrumental, a means to an end. Rather, the time spent and the particularities and imperfections of the process and product are part of its charm and value. Her craft, or slow approach, to digital card making also suggests a kind of agency in the making.

Thirdly, the use of the panda clip art is indicative of the ways that Ling juxtaposes visual elements to articulate ethnic identity and build relational understandings. The emotional resonance of the artifact lies in the context of its production in a research activity for a researcher mother-to-be. Pandas are imbued with symbolic meaning in the Chinese tradition, and are associated with the qualities of great strength, nurturance, gentleness and patience. Pandas are also regarded in China as symbols of good luck. Ling draws together this culturally coded imagery in cartoon format, images that she picked because “they’re so cute,” with an element chosen by me (the green background color), with the bubble letter font and seemingly haphazard color scheme of the text. These three visual elements correspond respectively to: the cultural context she inhabits, the personal preference of the recipient, and the conventions of amateur digital media production.
Situating Her Facebook Art Album

These initial lessons learned from her tutorial would be reinforced and complicated by a Facebook album of fifteen pieces of art uploaded between February 2012 and January 2013. She showed me this album during the tutorial and I conducted a follow up interview in June 2014 that was specifically focused on it. All of the images that appear in this chapter except the panda card were drawn from this album.

At the time of my data collection, Facebook was the virtual hallway of high school, “the ‘place’ where much of the discussion, interaction, and ‘hanging out’ between teens goes on” (Marwick & boyd, 2011, p. 11). It is customary for teens to “friend” everyone in their class or school; or as another participant put it, “almost like who you would talk to just being friendly with in public.” As a result, abstention from Facebook among high school students can be read as a performance of elitism (Portwood-Stacer, 2013). By 2013, 84 per cent of adults aged 18 to 29 were Facebook users, and by 2014, 87 per cent were Facebook users (Duggan et al., 2015). Although most teens and young adults are on Facebook, most manage their networks, take advantage of privacy settings, and prune their profiles to mask information that they don’t want others to know (Madden et al., 2013b; Verni, 2012).

Facebook has an in-built “architecture of participation” (Côté & Pybus, 2007) designed to promote particular forms of social engagement (Van Dijck, 2013). Through likes, shares, wall posts, comments, and direct messages, users generate data and create value for shareholders, thus serving the profit motive (Karppi, 2013; Karpii, 2014). Facebook is notorious for frequently changing its default system settings in ways that comprise users’ privacy (boyd & Hargittai, 2010) and reveal the gap between the market logics of the corporation, to turn a profit through harvesting user data and selling this data to advertisers, and the logics of its users.
Ling did not articulate fully elaborated critiques of Facebook in particular and social media in general. Like the young people in Gregory Donovan’s dissertation research project which involved a group of youth co-researchers in a participatory design project of creating their own social network, Ling and the other participants tended to describe the internet as a “collective expression of social and material culture” (Donovan, 2013, p. 2), revealing an “intimate, if partial knowledge of the ways people, place and media are shaping one another” (p. 3). Donovan characterized his youth co-researchers as “short on vocabulary and vague in their concepts” (p. 112), with only partial knowledge of the intricacies of their informational environments in comparison to his own critique of informational capitalism and his technically expert grasp of the dynamics of privacy, property and security within proprietary environments. However, I would argue, as Donovan does about his own participants, that just because Ling’s critique does not preserve the form and specificity of expert critiques of social media spaces does not mean that she lacks a critique.

Ling’s use of Facebook is an instance of what Pinch and Bijker (1987), in an earlier period, called interpretive flexibility. Interpretive flexibility is the idea that technologies are always subject to user appropriation, despite designs that may strongly suggest particular uses. Pinch and Bijker formulated the concept as a rejection of hard technological determinism, a teleological view that “advancing technology has a steadily growing… irresistible power to determine the course of events” (Smith & Marx, 1994, xi-xii; see also Greenbaum, 2004). Technological determinism sees technological change as a primary cause of social change, a force impinging on society from the outside (Wajcman, 2009), as opposed to a process embedded in and produced by particular social, historic, economic, cultural and institutional contexts, and in response to the interests of powerful actors.
Ling’s use of the Facebook album function is an instance of interpretive flexibility and a form of agentic appropriation. Rather than circulating photos of herself hanging out with friends, the kind of image that generates likes and thus value, she instead uses it to build a personal record of her own artistic development. She recognizes it as a free tool for cloud storage that allows her a sufficient degree of control over her images for her purposes. She explains that she can “always hide the pictures” if necessary, a loophole that underscores the complexities of negotiating identity in a continually evolving social media landscape, and as a person whose life contexts, ambitions, and needs for impression management change over time.

Although there is agency in her creative appropriation of the album tool, this atypical usage is also a function of her geographic displacement, and her feeling of being “stuck” in this small town in Maine, far from her Massachusetts-based and mostly Asian friend group. Two years after the move to Maine, Ling has remained in Maine to “get the restaurant more established” despite being accepted to multiple Boston-area four year colleges. She is enrolled in the local community college and manages the daily affairs of the restaurant. The contours of her daily life – taking class a few days a week at the local commuter college, and working daily at the restaurant – are such that she has few experiences that she feels are worthy of posting about on Facebook. She is constrained in her experiences, and as a result, also constrained in her ability to represent herself and her life in a positive light in networked spaces.

Transnational Identification

The album is composed of fifteen photographs that were taken on her smart phone and uploaded to Facebook using a mobile app.
The first three were pinhole camera photographs, taken in response to assignments in a school photography class and developed in her school’s darkroom. These are a landscape of her high school (1), a still life of the hand of skeleton (2), and a self-portrait (3). Many (4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 13 and 14) are paintings. Others (10 and 11) were taken in her family’s restaurant on a traditional
SLR camera, also for her school photography class. There is one pen drawing (12), and a photo of the pinhole camera itself (15), built as an assignment for the school photography class, and given to her art teacher “to inspire other kids to do something more unique that just a shoebox” as the assignment required.

Many of the images can be interpreted as critical commentary on internet culture and memes. For instance, the pinhole self-portrait taken in the parking lot of her new school (3) can be seen as reworking of the selfie, taken from the back, with the face obscured, in an in-between space of a parking lot. The photo of the pinhole camera (15), a robot wearing a tie and crisp white button down and accessorized with a bejeweled lens cap, seems to raise questions about the intersections and overlaps of the human and the technological and almost pokes fun at the notion of agentic technologies. The slice of cheesecake drizzled with strawberry sauce (11) references the social media trope of food photography. Other of these images show traces of cultural resourcing in diasporic Asian visual culture, most notably the bonsai landscape (13).

Reflecting on her painting, Ling specifically cites the influence of the beauty guru and video blogger Lindy Tsang, known on YouTube by her handle BubzBeauty. A second-generation Chinese woman living in Northern Ireland, Bubz’s main video topics are hair styling, makeup application, and skin care techniques. Alongside these mainstays, her YouTube channel also features a strand of more meditative, vulnerable, and emotionally resonant videos of painting and drawing, with voice over narrations of reflections on daily life, including the racially-inflected challenges of living as an Asian woman in Ireland. According to her profile page, Bubz’ goal is “to help make people realize their own beauty, in their hearts.” Bubz responds promptly to the comments and questions of her participatory audience members, and as a consequence has one of the largest audiences of the YouTube beauty gurus. She seems
genuinely invested in building up the sense of self worth among her followers and deals with big issues like her struggle to define her ethnicity and citizenship (Anarbaeva, 2011).

Like the second-generation Korean American adolescents who used transnational media like movies as cultural resources through which to construct hybrid ethnic identities “situated in the local and that draw upon the transnational for symbolic ethnic meaning” (Oh, 2012, p. 262), Ling explores her own ethnic identification through her use of Bubz’ art tutorials. Ling’s various tree paintings (4, 5, 7, 13, 14) reflect the influence of Bubz’s painting tutorials, in which she paints a scene, typically with trees and forests, with meditative voiceovers about using painting to find a sense of escape and release from the tribulations of daily life. Appadurai (1996) argues that the conditions of globalization and migration open up a far wider possible repertoire of subject positioning to each individual than ever before, as we are brought into contact with many different types of others, who often have starkly different life trajectories. Appadurai asserts that “electronic media provide resources for self-imaginings as an everyday social project” (p. 4) and he argues that as each of us engages in the painstaking work of fashioning ourselves into a particular kind of subject, we draw on imaginative resources unavailable in the not-so-distant past. In the present moment, many of these imaginative resources that comprise the raw material for subject formation circulate through networked online spaces. Hence a young Fujianese woman like Ling comes to be living in Maine and goes online to YouTube to connect with the broader Fujianese diaspora. Posting photographs of her art, made using techniques informed by both traditional and contemporary Chinese art making techniques is a way of claiming identification with a diasporic networked Asian imagination.

And like the panda card she made for me, many of these art works are made for others: friends, regular customers of the restaurant, workers at the restaurant, and teachers. It is as if
through her image making she intends to inspire others, to invite them into her way of seeing, and to create and strengthen the relationships bonds that connect her to others. The album is also a digital scrapbook of her development that documents her growing skill and range as a visual artist. Overall, Ling’s image making practices speak to the deep workings of power and privilege that constrain so many talented young people's range of choices, including the young woman taking drink orders and clearing plates at the local Chinese buffet.

Relational Development

Figure 4.4
Cheesecake with strawberry sauce
I guess this represents what I want to do if I wanna run the restaurant. Like, I want a – not a high class – but one that’s for dining a little higher class than a buffet restaurant. Rather than serving a buffet I want my family to do a dine-in, where we personally make the food for each customer. I told my mom, “Mom, if I’m ever gonna open a restaurant I’m gonna open a dine-in restaurant for you, okay?”

Her photograph of the piece cheesecake swirled with strawberry sauce, a typically American dessert, references the convention of restaurant photography, a favorite topic of the conspicuous consumption foodie set. In this trope, a patron of a trendy restaurant photographs the artfully presented dish upon its delivery to the table by a server, and uploads the image to a social media platform. This practice can be understood as a claim of distinction for being the kind of person who appreciates the finer things in life, a boast about getting a table at a certain prized restaurant, or, more charitably, a genuine pleasure in the beautiful arrangement of food and a desire to share this pleasure.

Western, individualistic theories of development do not represent Ling’s experience growing up as an immigrant daughter of Fujianese restaurant owners, a process that has been marked by growing responsibilities within and for the family as opposed to increasing independence from the family. Theories of development are ideological (Walkerdine, 1984) and culturally specific (Gupta, 2006). The mainstream developmental script of independence, the American default, imagines that young people move from dependence to autonomy and independence. The concept of the teenager as rebellious, oppositional and engaged in identity experimentation draws on this script, as do popular theories of adolescence as a time of breaking away from the family and developing an independent, autonomous self (Lesko, 1996).
For instance, Erikson (1963) characterizes adolescence as a stage dominated by the struggle between identity and role confusion, in which the teenager is preoccupied with figuring out her or his adult role in society, or “how to connect the roles and skills cultivated earlier with the occupational prototypes of the day” (p. 261). Erikson’s psychosocial theory of development is based on the assumption of an independent and autonomous self, able to travel, to explore, to chart one’s own path in the world. In other words, he presumes a white, male, privileged subject. This theory, and the independent developmental scripts it promotes, focuses on the development of an individual child rather than the development of ties between and among individuals. An interdependent developmental script (Greenfield, 1994) of relational development reframes healthy development as “growing in one’s ability to take care of others, and to feel responsible for them” (Dorner, Orellana & Jiménez, 2008, p. 113).

Ling has taken on the mantle of the Fujianese restaurateur, and through her image making she is expressing her ambition to increase the prestige and distinction of her family through the opening of a “higher class” or “American” type of restaurant. Ling’s development, and coming of age, has been importantly shaped by a process of growing to feel more responsible for the care of others, as opposed to more independent, as in the dominant Western developmental script. This is exemplified by her rumination about one day opening a dine-in restaurant for her parents. She has come to align her own goals with their goals of working less and eventually retiring. And, by age 20, she has reframed her childhood working in the restaurant, not as a burden, but as something that benefited her and marked her as privileged, because her parents “always protected us” and “at our restaurant we weren’t bossed around by anybody because even though we were kids, we still kind of ran the restaurant and everyone respected us.”
If she “kind of ran the restaurant” as a kid, by age 19, she has a substantial hand in the running of the restaurant. The absence of an established Fujianese community in Maine means no network of business contacts like those who helped to manage the financial affairs of the Worcester restaurant. And so Ling does it all herself, managing the wait staff, ordering from other businesses, taking care of any problems with the telephone or utilities, making advertising decisions, handling the renewal of licenses, as well as helping to manage the daily operations of the front of the house. Her brother, who owns the restaurant on paper, but who she alternatively describes as “lazy” and “not that capable,” mostly works in the kitchen. Ling’s ability to further her education by going away to school is constrained by her brother’s marital status. He is still single at 28 years of age, which is “pretty old for getting married in our culture,” and “it’s a lot of pressure on my family so we are trying to get him a wife.” When her brother marries, Ling will train her sister-in-law in the role of the “the boss lady” so that Ling can go to college and her parents can retire. She expresses some misgivings about being in charge, in relation to her youth and her lack of formal training and prior experience in restaurant management.

Two years earlier, at age 18, during the in-depth interview in Maine, Ling reflected on her evolving relationship with her parents, and the sense of mutual obligation on which it rests.

*I think it’s just, when you’re a child, from psychology, you’re more egocentric. So you just mostly think about yourself. And then you grow older you start understanding people’s views and have empathy. So, like, I can’t read Chinese, but I watch Chinese movies and I’m horrible with titles because I can’t read it, so I need my parents’ help. And then when my parents need something with letters that are in English, I’m like, “Okay, I will help you.”*
One kind of reciprocity between parents and children is doing what is necessary to belong to one’s cultural group. In this case, she draws on her parents' language facility to enable consumption of cultural artifacts that allow her to produce herself as a recognizable member of the Asian diaspora. This relational interpretation of empathy and mutual obligation as something that her parents have extended to her and that she extends back to them was not arrived at easily, but is instead the product of sustained efforts to navigate and narrate her role. For example, at the age of 16, in conversation with Wendy during *Looking Back*, Ling remarked:

_When I was younger, I guess I was more helpful. I helped my parents a lot more. But then, I was more reluctant to help them. I hated working so much that I would hide from them when they called me to work. It was like I helped them a lot, but I hated it. And now, I’m okay with it._

She characterizes her younger self as “more helpful” for offering her help without reluctance, perhaps because it didn’t feel like work when she was younger as much as an expansion of her powers, and a privilege to be part of the public face of the family-owned business. Their task-oriented division of labor is reminiscent of the pre-industrial work pattern of doing what needs to be done, when it needs to be done, each to his or her own capacities. This approach has minimal demarcations between work and outside life and is more “humanely comprehensible” (Thompson, 1967, p. 60) than timed work, with its reliance on the clock and focus on productivity. While the lack of temporal and spatial separation between family time and work time means that her parents’ attentions are almost always divided, it also means that her elementary school self spent more time with her parents than most children with two working parents. Against this helpful elementary school self, she characterizes her early teenage self as
“reluctant,” adding that although she still “helped them a lot,” she also “would hide” and “hated it.” Finally, by the age of 16, she is becoming “okay with it” and no longer resists because she values maintaining a good relationship with her parents. She has come to accept familial unity and social cohesion as conditions of belonging to her cultural group.

While Ling’s use of Facebook to build an archive of her self and identity through art is perhaps not typical of American girls on Facebook, or at least our assumptions about how teenage girls use Facebook, it highlights several unappreciated dimensions of young people’s use of networked online spaces. The first is the under-recognized links between digital media production and care relations, which is highlighted in Ling’s description of making art to give away and to inspire others, and in the panda card she made for me. The second is the way that these practices are not so much undertaken for an audience of others, by are instead undertaken as projects of self-documentation and self-study that live in networked online spaces, because these are convenient and often free storage spaces. This is not so much a building of the self through multimedia production, but more of a meta-process, a reflection on the self. Her process of working through her own changing way of relating to her parents and family responsibilities, as discussed in relation to the cheesecake photograph, is one example of this. The third is the way her practices are informed by diverse cultural resources and linked to projects of self-making, evidenced for example in the way that her photographs of paintings of trees reflect techniques learned from Chinese artists on YouTube and suggest identification with a networked Asian diaspora.

Young people's use of networked spaces to document and reflect on their own development is an under-researched dimension of youth digital media practice. Mainstream psychological and sociological theories of development which proceed from adultist perspectives
obscure the extent to which young people are reflective about and interested in documenting their own development, an interest that is suggested in 16 year old Ling’s speculation in an interview with Wendy that “I guess when you're growing up, your mind gets more detailed, and you can see, like, every tiny bit, and you draw it exactly.” By photographing these works, uploading them to Facebook, and then giving them away, she documents her development as an artist and ensures and that others will have a physical reminder of her and her care.

And yet, in June 2014, the conditions of her daily life shifted dramatically when she graduated from her local community college with an Associate degree, highest Presidential Honors and Phi Theta Kappa distinction, wearing a gold stole and two gold cords to her graduation ceremony. In September 2014, she transferred in as a junior to a four year Boston area residential college, where she is studying corporate finance and accounting and working as a video editor and production assistant. On a temporary reprieve from daily responsibility for the management of the family restaurant, she closed her old Facebook account with the art album and activated a new account that she uses in a more typical fashion, posting pictures of dinners out with friends and selfies in notable Boston locations. This decision reflects a strategic approach to impression management, in an example of what Erving Goffman calls the “information game” and its “infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation and rediscovery” (1959, p. 8), as well as a desire to start fresh at this transitional coming-of-age moment.
Chapter Five

Gaming with Mesha: Strong, Smart, Bold

When I first approached Mesha about participating in my project, she exclaimed, “You’ve come to the right person!” Mesha seemed to immediately know what she wanted to teach me – it would have to be about her games. Self-consciously, and with an imitation of an upper class British accent, she invited me over to her house, saying that we would play games and share “tea and crumpets.” This “tea and crumpets” comment recalls Pini and Walkerdine’s (2011) account of the way working class girls put on more “posh” accents and middle-class affects in their video diaries. It suggests an awareness of the intimacy of having a researcher in one’s home and a grappling with the ways that our differences – race, class, age, and educational background – might shape our expectations of the encounter. This act of inviting me over to her house is significant in at least two other ways. It is an expression of trust, an extension of and a testament to her trust of Wendy, established over the course of their relationship, which dates back to 2003. And, as a revision of my research design, which called for the tutorials to be held at school, it is a statement of how embedded her gaming practice is in her daily life.

On a steamy day in June 2012, at noon sharp, I arrived at the triple-decker family house, typical of New England mill and factory towns as well as working class areas of Boston, where Mesha lives with her extended family. She and her mother live in the first floor apartment, her grandmother resides on the second floor, and her aunt and cousins live on the top floor. The structure was barely visible from the street behind several old growth trees. Feeling nervous, I walked up four concrete steps from the narrow and weed-sprouted sidewalk to the large and leaf-strewn front porch to knock on the front door.
She emerged from the curtain-darkened interior into the front vestibule, wearing dark-washed blue jeans and a deep black, freshly laundered and ironed t-shirt, emblazoned in white lettering with the prominent logo “Strong, Smart, Bold” – the tagline of the youth development organization, Girls Inc., with which she is involved. It occurred to me she might have chosen this garment specifically for the occasion, perhaps reflecting her desire to be seen by me in just those terms. Mesha greeted me eagerly and energetically, explaining that she had just woken up one hour earlier, at 11 am, having stayed up until 5 am gaming and talking on the phone. Winding through a family room packed with heavy furniture, and into her family’s tidy kitchen, she pointed to a small wood-paneled room separated from the kitchen by a curtain and dominated by a 65-inch television screen perched atop a metal entertainment unit, remarking in her characteristic deadpan, “This is where it all happens.”

Over the next two and a half hours, she would give me an intensive lesson in the PlayStation 3 gaming console. Her tutorial covered six different games in three distinct gaming genres: two were one-player “button masher” games, three were role-playing games (RPGs), and the last was a platform game. Game titles included: *Heavenly Sword*, *Bayonetta*, *Final Fantasy XIII-2*, *Eternal Sonata*, *Star Ocean*, and *Little Big Planet*. She opened the tutorial by appraising me of the rating system for the games, emphasizing the age-appropriateness of each game for players of various ages but admitting, or perhaps boasting, that she had been “lucky enough” to “get her hands on” these games at a younger age. In the one-player games, she would play first, and then hand the controller over to me for a turn, and in the multiple player games, we played together.
Good Screens and Bad Screens

Mesha’s decision to invite me to her house to play video games was foreshadowed by the pictures she took during Children Framing Childhoods. When I immersed myself in the retro-seeming archival images from the pre-smart phone pre-touch screen era, I found that I was uncomfortable with the many photos of televisions and gaming consoles perched atop cabinets and makeshift stands in children’s bedrooms, often amid elaborate arrangements of toys, figurines and other collectibles. The photographs in Mesha’s fifth grade gallery particularly troubled me.

Figure 5.1
Mesha’s fifth grade photos
I found these images, in particular the fact that 16 of the 23 were of television screens, suggestive of the ways television is popularly conceived of and portrayed, "as an addiction, as a passive, individual activity which precludes direct communication with others, as an impediment to fulfilling family relationships… [all of which] are thought to increase in direct proportion to the amount of time the television is turned on in the home" (Seiter et al., 1989, p. 1). I imagined Mesha’s “lonely and unsafe after-school hours” (Strandell, 2013, p. 1) in contrast to a nostalgic ideal of a “good” less mediated and commercialized childhood, one filled with long days outside, grass and bikes, suntanned faces, and dips in the kiddy pool.

Recalling Howard Becker’s (1986) advice to use storytelling to externalize and “make clear to yourself the emotion and mode the picture has evoked,” I thought of my own youth, coming up in the 1980s, in a neighborhood of working folks, modest ranch houses and old cars, in a quiet part of tiny city of Portland, Maine. I remembered spending summer days noshing on fresh-plucked lettuces, ears of corn, and heirloom tomatoes our backyard garden, and roaming the streets with the neighborhood kids until sunset. These imaginings were accompanied by a certain melancholy and a sense of loss of the Rousseauian free child – the child who enjoys spatial and temporal autonomy, and play unstructured by adults.

I also noted my own positive reaction to other types of screen photos across the archive, especially those of home computers and the many, nearly identical photo of the florescent-lit newly installed school computer lab. I imagined that these represented the children’s and their parents' pride, upward mobility, and valuing of schooling. Reflecting on this disciplined practice of looking, naming, fantasizing and storytelling, I realized that I was drawing implicitly on
dichotomy of good screens and bad screens, rooted in an evaluative teacher identity. My judgments reflected a germ of a belief in a “strong theory” of media effects (Seiter, 1999) typical of teachers and childcare professionals. This realization highlighted the ways that screens can function as symbolic scapegoats and saviors, with the wrong kinds, or wrong uses, linked in adult imaginations, popular perception and pediatric knowledge to the potential degrading of young people’s brains, bodies and educational trajectories. Meanwhile the right kinds and uses are linked to white-collar work and control of information (Scheck, 1985), upward mobility (Persell & Cookson, 1987) and enhanced human capital (Keeley, 2007), particularly for girls and women (American Association of University Women, 2000; Hill, Corbett & St. Rose, 2010; Margolis & Fisher, 2002).

Discussing these images in the interview with Wendy, ten-year-old Mesha said that she likes to play video games because “you get to beat up monsters” and “you get to be any character you like.” What had seemed at first glance photos of screens were in fact photos of a muscular female character, Yuna, the protagonist and practitioner of healing magic in the role-playing game Final Fantasy X. These were taken during cut scenes, which are cinematic interludes in

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6 The location of gaming screens with the good screen / bad screen dichotomy has shifted over time. Gaming had its origins on the computer – a “good screen,” presumed to be interactive, only later moving to consoles hooked up to televisions, a “bad screen,” presumed to be linked to passive entertainment. Of course the notion that computer screens are good and television screens bad is unfounded. It equates computer use with active engagement and television use as passive consumption, a far too simplistic characterization. Scholars working within the field of New Literacy Studies are increasingly studying the connection between gaming and literacy (Gee 2003; Gee & Hayes 2010), most especially the ways that well-designed games require gamers to navigate complex environments, learn by doing, and produce themselves as flexible learners, also criteria of the lifelong learner, a neoliberal form of governmentality. Indeed, the values of being thoughtful and productive about one’s uses of time and aiming toward continuous self improvement are deeply embedded in global educational policy and schooling ideologies. As a result of these lines of research, video games are increasingly regarded as viable educational tools.
game play that combine dramatic voiceovers, epic landscape art, and swelling soundtracks to create an immersive sensory experience.

Through these photos, Mesha was making an identity claim by signaling her identification with this powerful female protagonist. She was also documenting her advanced skill in the male-dominated world of gaming (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Kafai et al., 2008; Taylor, 2006) by photographing scenes of advanced game play. In this way she was beginning to articulate a critique of the gendered structuring of geek identity (Bucholtz, 1998, 2002; Sunden, 2009; Taylor, 2006), which casts girls’ and women’s claims of time to develop expertise in niche domains like gaming as deviant, problematic, and unfeminine. The patriarchal order of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) requires women and girls to be moderate in the pursuit of esoteric, specialized expertise, while permitting men’s and boys’ enthusiastic escape into arenas of geek pleasure.

In addition to these identity claims and budding critiques of the misogynistic culture of video games, Mesha also emphasized, in these early conversations with Wendy, the embeddedness of her gaming practices in care worlds. She spoke of her preference for social gaming, saying she has “a lot of fun” during after-school gaming sessions with friends, and describing the rituals that frame these gatherings – cleaning up wires, organizing the controllers – as a kind of social glue that binds her to others. She also spoke longingly of past afternoons with her father, who worked at that time as the house manager at a residential substance abuse treatment facility, lamenting, “He’s so busy, we don’t have that time to play together anymore.” These references to the social contexts of her gaming and the sense of connectedness they fostered would also foreshadow findings from my dissertation work.
A Relational Digital Native

In her effort to present herself as a person with valid claim on technological expertise, Mesha recounted a history of her developing skills, beginning with early elementary school. With the exception of one example, which is noted, all quotations in this section are drawn from the interview I conducted when Mesha was an 18-year-old senior in high school.

In elementary school when I first started out, they had me in advanced computer class. At such a young age, because I was learning things a lot more quicker with computers. I don’t know why, but I just happened to learn it a lot more quicker than the adults were. I don’t know how that happened but it did. And my mom actually told me that story that they placed me in an advanced computer class because I was learning so much.

To interpret this quotation, I transformed it into an I-poem, an approach derived from Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan’s Listening Guide (1992). This approach can be useful in examining agency in narrative accounts because it highlights the back and forth between what the “they” is doing and what the “I” is doing – in this case, the teachers and Mesha.

I first started out

They had me

I was learning things

I don’t know why

I just happened to learn it

I don’t know how
They placed me

I was learning so much

Mesha’s phrasing – the language of “they would have me,” “they had me,” and “they placed me” – rather than, for instance, “I was in” or “I took” – emphasizes the role of teachers and school authorities as neutral and unbiased outsiders who identified her promise. In the account of learning at the center, she alternates between statements of her quick learning and meta-statements about not knowing how or why. As an early memory, reconstructed from a piece of family lore, it may not be very clear in her mind. Or maybe the meta-statements, followed by the assurance that the mother “actually” – as in factually – told her this story, reflect her anticipation of my disbelief, as someone with more educational credentials than her and her mother.

Also interesting is her comparison of her rate of learning to that of adults, by way of emphasizing just how advanced she is, that she didn’t only compare favorably to the other kids, but to the adults as well. It is also a reference to the concept of the digital native, which was introduced into the cultural lexicon in 2001 by Mark Prensky. This is the idea that the young are naturally confident and expert users of digital technologies as compared to adults, who are positioned as “digital immigrants.” Prensky’s premise and controversial assertion is that young people, having grown up online, were in a sense “born digital,” and as a result, they think and process information fundamentally differently than adults do. Adults, he proposes, are like digital immigrants, having come to digitally mediated modes of communication after having mastered analogue modes and with a view shaped by this prior mastery. While Presnky’s pop science notion has been discredited for obscuring the links between privilege and expertise and
for lacking a basis in empirical evidence (Bennet, Maton & Kervin, 2008; Jones & Shao, 2011; Selwyn, 2009), it is still widely referenced in mainstream media outlets, and circulated in popular imagery. While the digital native framing is perhaps a useful device for talking about generational difference, it is not a youth-centered concept, but instead reflects adult preoccupations with what they perceived to be young people’s precocious uses of technology.

Even more problematically, the concept elides privilege. By making the argument that comfort with and expertise in digital technologies is primarily determined by generational status is to ignore the ways that class, race, gender, as instantiations of privilege and power, create recognized forms of expertise. The discourse of digital nativism naturalizes privilege by erasing class distinctions and presenting kids as naturally, essentially expert. Also troubling is the way the rhetoric of digital nativism, from its basis in educational technology, articulates with the data-driven assessment regime to justify massive public expenditures on hardware, software, infrastructure and devices. It deskills teachers by creating a mandate for a new kind of expert, the educational technologists, who are tasked with helping teachers overhaul their pedagogical approaches for a new generation of students and their purported needs. Nevertheless, participants in this study did have a particular kind of matter-of-fact and pragmatic orientation toward digital media practices and platforms. Rather than regarding them as transformative of social relations, or even particularly interested, they seem to see them as simply a feature of the environment.

The digital native discourse, although discredited in academic circles, retains cultural currency because it encapsulates anxieties about screens as agents disruptive of social reproduction. Screens imply moral and philosophical questions about technological development, what does or should, spur, motivate and constrain it, and the impact of intergenerational relations on social change. It reflects the cognitive turn in psychology and
seems true in an intuitive and common sense kind of way, resonating with the casual observations, as well as the anxieties and insecurities of many parents, teachers and other adults. It gives adults a language with which to express wonder, nostalgia and fear about how the world is changing, and how these changes are refracted through the experiences of young people. The cultural salience of the of the concept reflects what Cindi Katz calls our collective “ontological insecurity” (Katz, 2008) about social reproduction given rapid shifts in the geographies of childhood and the growing role of screens in contemporary childhoods.

In any case, the tension between these two interpretations of her learning narrative – being a quick learner because she is young, or being a quick learner despite her youth – suggests that the digital native concept actually undermines young people’s active efforts to narrate their development of technological expertise, for it is seen as inevitable, not the result of hard work and determination. If this first example of her early experiences with computers draws on a theory of what we might call the essential digital native – the idea that technological skill is an intrinsic feature of the young – this next account suggests that the relational digital native might be more apt framing, for it shows how her emerging sense of herself as technically competent is linked to a domestic, familial context, and is developed in relation to the dynamics of family structure and the needs of older family members.

My grandmother would constantly call on me to try to fix stuff for her, at such a young age. I’m like ten years old and she wants me to fix her VCR for her. She wants me learn how to record things on TV, and all this other stuff. They constantly call on me ‘cause my parents are very computer illiterate so I have to help them. Even though I get so frustrated.
As the youngest child and only girl, Mesha spends her afternoons at home, while her two older brothers come and go as they please. This creates a family dynamic in which she is expected to record her grandmother’s favorite shows, to troubleshoot the home computer so her mom can play *The SIMS*, and to help her father with the laptop he carries for work, a symbol of his upward mobility and newly-achieved semi-professional status. Mesha, like other participants in this study, was the main source of technological knowledge for her family. Like the Latino youth in De La Peña and Orellana’s (2007) study, they were often the ones to encourage their parents’ technology purchases, would set up and maintain the hardware and software, and coach younger siblings on its use. Assuming the role of the family’s tech guru is a labor of love, of care, and of pride, but it is also a source of worry and frustration. The frequency and the constancy of the requests for help can feel like too much responsibility. Mesha’s ambivalence about this role recalls the mixed feelings of the youth translators in Marjorie Orellana’s study (2009), who reported feeling both proud and annoyed to be translating important documents for their parents.

Knowledge Claims

In addition to being the family’s go-to technical support person as a fifth grader, Mesha, is also already an avid gamer. This came across when, at ten years old, she described her after school routine to Wendy in the following terms:

*I go home, do my homework. Sometimes I might play... well, I play the game. Then I draw, and then I play the game some more. Then I might watch a movie. And then we eat. And I might play the game some more, then draw. Between those two things, that’s it for the rest of the day.*
In this account of her daily routine, Mesha begins by establishing her credentials as a good student and child in the eyes of the interviewer. She emphasizes her prompt attention to school-related responsibilities, assuring Wendy that she does her homework as soon as she gets home. She then proceeds to narrate an after-school routine that is mostly solitary and highly mediated. The three leisure activities that she describes, playing video games, drawing video game characters, and watching movies, are all screen-based individual activities. Like many other young people growing up in American cities in the first decades of the 21st century, Mesha exists in a spatially restricted environment, a contextual factor that may have shaped her deep investment in gaming worlds.

Her affect during this video-recorded interview is also telling; her gaze is directed downward, her eyes are shifting from side to side, and her voice is quiet, as if she is aware of the politics of screen time, a hot button issue. Marjorie DeVault proposes that “halting, hesitant, tentative talk signals the realm of not-quite-articulated experience” (1990, p. 103). From this perspective, Mesha’s use of the conditional “might” hints at the challenge of capturing in language the relationship between two of the activities she describes, drawing and playing Final Fantasy X. The artistic, creative act of drawing exists synergistically with her gaming practice. While they alternate in time, they can be seen as two dimensions of a single imaginative experience – an experience that is as difficult to communicate in speech as it is to represent photographically. Together, they could be seen as an example of a participatory stance on media use, a concept that was just beginning to emerge in academic circles at the time of the interview (Jenkins et al., 2006).
Also emergent in the year of this interview, 2006, was a much-publicized recommendation in *Pediatrics*, the official journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics, advising parents of middle school age children to strictly limit weekday access to television.

These recommendations that parents monitor and manage teenage girls’ access to screens reflect assumptions about the ideal of female purity, girls’ vulnerability, and their inability to manage their own self-presentation. Thus Mesha’s halting speech — her invocation of the conditional when first raising the topic of after school gaming, followed by a pause, and then the admission “Well, I play the game” — could reflect a desire to protect her parents’ reputation in the eyes of the interviewer and imagined audiences beyond who might be critical of her long and mediated after school hours. This protective impulse would make sense in light of dominant cultural discourses that demonize screen time, find fault with parents who do not actively limit it, and, in high neoliberal style, represent screen time as a problem for individual families to manage rather than a challenge facing society writ large. Indeed, nonprofit organizations like Common Sense Media, and grassroots internet vendors like Etsy.com have screen time management charts available for purchase and free download, reflective of the cultural salience of this trend. As a defensive strategy, Mesha’s hesitant speech could also be linked to the historic distrust of social science researchers by people of color, indigenous peoples, and those from poor and working class communities (Tuck, 2009).

The next example is about Mesha’s participation, while in middle school, in an early intervention program designed to address the under-representation of low-income girls of color in STEM fields.
We learned programming. They also gave us a PDA, a free camera, and either a free laptop, which we had to program, or we had to build our own PC. We had to take notes on how to build our own PC from scratch. We had to do everything. And then we also had to make sure we had all the programs on there. And they helped us step by step with everything. They told us that if we messed up the motherboard, which is the inside of the computer that runs the whole thing, you’re pretty much done for. You can’t get your fingerprints all over it or anything. You gotta be really careful with it. And over time we built a computer.

Her recitation of the things the girls in the program had to do (“we learned programming,” “we had a choice,” “we had to program,” “we had to build our own PC,” “we had to take notes,” “we had to do everything,” “we had to make sure,” “we built a computer”) reads like a compilation of evidence. Far from the naturalized expertise implicit in the concept and rhetoric of the digital native, this account reflects an understanding of expertise actively pursued through participation in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The “we’s” – these young women being initiated into technological competence – were not left on their own to figure out the process, but were guided or scaffolded (“they helped us step by step”) in a structured way.

The shift from the “I” of the first two examples to the “we” of this third one reflects an emerging sense of herself as connected to a broader women-in-technology project. This budding identity is echoed in her self-conscious statement that “We’re slowly coming up into showing ourselves as we’re women and we love technology.” At the end of this quotation, she slides into the voice of the expert, as she issues a series of warnings as if to her younger self, cautioning: “You can’t get your fingerprints all over it” and “You gotta be really careful.” Building a computer from the inside out is giving Mesha access to an expert identity, and a sense of what
Turkle and Papert (1992) call “hard mastery” of the machine, in addition to a sense of experiential, embodied knowledge.

These three examples of recurring narratives point toward Mesha’s sustained efforts to narrate herself as a knower. Patricia Hill Collins, writing about black women’s histories and struggles for self definition in racist America, explains that “black women’s experiences… have been routinely distorted within or excluded from what counts as knowledge” (2000, p. 251). Hill Collins argues that “epistemology points to the ways in which power relations shape who is believed and why” (p. 252). For a young black working class woman like Mesha, to claim technological knowledge and expertise is to work against structures that seek to deny her right to this identity. Recall that she said of her elementary school self: “I was learning so much – I don’t know how it happened.” This statement naturalizes the work of learning, as if buying into what I have called an essential digital native framing that obscures the linkages between privilege and technological expertise. By naturalizing the learning process, and suggesting her endowment with innate gifts that were recognized and rewarded by educational authorities, she establishes a solid basis for her knowledge claims.

Mesha portrayed her ten-year old self as embroiled in a family care world in which her help is regularly sought out and her expertise cultivated by situated opportunities to help, be recognized, and be appreciated. This is a story of care, obligation and responsibility, and of the tension between the pride and frustration of being a child assisting one’s elders. It is also a story about her awareness of how her screen heavy childhood might be viewed from by outsiders. The final example showed how Mesha had come to emphasize her own active work of development in the context of her participation in a technological literacy program for girls of color that
assembles women-in-technology as a community of practice, as in her statement that, “We’re slowly coming up and showing ourselves as we’re women and we love technology.”

**Aspirational Self-Portrayal**

Mesha’s tutorial revealed her contradictory relationship with feminist critique. She wants to have a feminist critique, both of how women are represented in video games, as well as how actual women gamers and women in the industry are treated. However, having come up in a postfeminist media climate she does not have access to the language to formulate this critique. At 18 years old, Mesha’s daily routine is still oriented around gaming. If she isn’t at school, she is “usually just sitting there playing video games alone until I have to go to work or I have to go to bed.”

*It’s kind of like my getaway, like from reality. You don’t have to be stressed out about anything, just get on. You don’t have to worry about anything, just get on and go. But you still have to be worried. You have to think about who you’re talking to and make sure you don’t give a bad impression, you know? Before my dad passed he said that a lot, that I was spending too much time on it. But I told him, “You know what? In a few years, I’m gonna be majoring in this exact same thing that I love doing now, playing video games and drawing. And I’m gonna prove you wrong, that I can do something with this. (Extended pause.) So hopefully I can support my mom with that too.*

As her high school career wraps up, Mesha faces the transition from the structured life of a high school student living at home to a more uncertain future. Her beloved father is recently
deceased, her mother is disabled and bedridden, and her two older brothers now live with their respective girlfriends. For the foreseeable future, Mesha bears the responsibility of caring for her ailing mother, maintaining the house, and paying the bills with the proceeds from her part-time minimum wage job. In this challenging transitional period she speaks as if in direct dialogue with her father from beyond the grave, saying “I’m gonna prove you wrong.” This statement acknowledges his disapproval while presenting gaming as an investment of time and energy that she will make good on.

The pregnant pause between this assertion and her admission that “hopefully I can support my mom with that too” reflects her growing awareness of the tension between her ambitions, and the likely reality. Although she enrolled, for one semester, in a degree program in Interactive Media at a local community college, these programs, even if completed, rarely lead directly to professional positions in game design. Game design is a creative field that is notoriously difficult to break into, where unpaid internships are all but required of the entrepreneurial, unencumbered, flexible workforce, and one in which workers are usually employed on a contract basis without benefits. Big firms buy out independent developers and small game design firms to differentiate themselves from the competition.

Mesha’s awareness of these obstacles, gleaned from lurking on industry message boards, is evident in her admission that “It’s gonna be hard.” Even as the proportion of female gamers has increased, women’s representation in the industry has held steady at between 11 and 12 per cent for years (Miller, 2012), and female game designers are derogatorily referred to as “vaginas” (Jenson & de Castell, 2013). Mesha’s plan for dealing with the challenges presented by the aggressive and discriminatory attitudes toward women in the industry is to assume a male pen name, and for the purposes of her career, change her given name from Jamesha to James,
“but it won’t matter, it’ll still be me.” This proposed solution addresses the most obvious obstacle to her success in the industry – her gender – with an easy fix of dropping two letters from her name, going from Jamesha to James. But the bigger obstacles, like the structural and economic basis of the “new economy” and its reliance on a highly specialized and contingent work force, effectively excludes workers like Mesha, those who lack a resource cushion to fall back on.

While she argues that through her gaming she is making connections that might enable her to eventually be compensated for doing what she loves, she also acknowledges that her gaming has escapist dimensions. Mesha’s characterization of her gaming as a “getaway” from reality, but one that is never complete, is telling. The incompleteness of the escape, the fact that “you don’t have to be worried about anything” but “you still have to be worried” points to a range of tensions, contradictions, ambivalences and challenges. On the one hand, there are pleasures and advantages to playing online with other gamers, like the chance to make new friends, and enjoy the pleasures of companionship and teamwork. She typically will become deeply invested in a particular game, and spend hours playing it until she beats it. Her “rl” or real life friends, mostly people she works with, don’t play the same games that she does, and her main gaming companions are people she has met on the PlayStation network.

But online gaming is also a site where gender, knowledge, power, and privilege converge to produce women as "precarious subjects" (Jenson & de Castell, 2013), subject to hate speech, online stalking, and rape and death threats in unregulated online spaces (Consalvo, 2012; Moore & Casper, 2014). Although women comprise 47% of the American gaming market (Entertainment Software Association, 2012, p. 3), they are concentrated in certain sectors of the gaming market, especially so-called casual games, whereas Mesha’s interests are focused in the
hardcore gaming sector. Tricky situations can arise when gaming companions want to “go on mic” or webcam and sometimes they “tend to ask you for inappropriate things.” Her assurance that “my mom is worried about that,” immediately followed by the amendment “actually I don’t think she even knows, but I do let her know that I talk to people, just for my own safety” suggests that she has some experience with compromising situations and has developed strategies for managing her vulnerability as a female gamer. One of these strategies is “running with” a set group of fellow gamers, for example when she plays MMOs (massively multiplayer online games) like the recently released Final Fantasy XIV.

**Representations**

In addition to the level of industry hostility to women’s equal employment in the workforce, and female players, there is also the issue of the representation of women in video games, and much of Mesha’s tutorial was focused on issues around how female characters are portrayed within video games. Indeed, video games are widely critiqued by feminist scholars for sexualized representations of female characters and the figuring of female characters as objects rather than subjects (see for example Taylor, 2006; Sunden, 2009). Media critic Anita Sarkeesian of Feminist Frequency has a series of videos that unpack the negative representations of women in video games, most notably their positioning as damsels in distress, background decoration, or as versions of an already established male character.

Similarly, Mesha called out game designers for “being sexist” and “looking down on female characters” by positioning them as side kicks more often than protagonists. Assuming a historical perspective, she questioned the changing representations of Wonder Woman in comic books, and how she is now portrayed as “more slutty” as opposed to “back then [when Wonder
woman was] more manly.” Mesha seemed to address women’s status as subjects and not objects when she mused, “some people don’t seem to realize that women are just what they are,” as opposed to who they are imagined, or assumed, to be. Describing what draws her to a game, Mesha divulged, “The character has to be bad ass. Gotta be crashing through walls to save the day or save the damsel in distress.” Articulating a strong preference for female protagonists, she remarked, “Whenever I play online games, I don’t know why, I just tend to always want to be the female character.” Mesha’s comments – her desire to play the tough female character, and to save the weak female character – point to paradoxes within the gaming market in relation to gender.

Over the past two decades, game design firms have begun to design games for the potentially lucrative and previously untapped market of female gamers (Kafai, Heeter, Denner & Sun, 2011). Early interventions in the girls’ games movement, which began in the mid-1990s with an uneasy alliance between feminist academics and entrepreneurial-minded female game designers, produced “pink” and “purple” games that tended to reify biological notions of gender difference, focusing on themes of shopping and dress-up. The tension in this alliance was between the competing impulses to design games based on market research, reflecting girls’ existing tastes, or to design games that could help transform these tastes (Cassell & Jenkins 1998). These early efforts, which featured female characters who relied on tired stereotypes of girls’ interests based in marketing research, are now critiqued for taking the category of girl to be biologically defined rather than socially constructed. The increasing recognition of the profit potential has led to the design of games that appeal to both male and female players. But the representation of women in these games, and the storylines within which women operate in these games, reflects a particular postfeminist sensibility that works against a collective feminist
critique. Games increasingly feature female protagonists as playable characters, while game logics continue to naturalize white, male privilege (Nakamura, 2012).

*Figure 5.2*

Nariko in *Heavenly Sword*

*Heavenly Sword* was the first game Mesha introduced in the tutorial situation. The central conflict in this game world, the conflict that provides the motivation for the unfolding story, is rooted in the fact of Nariko’s birth as a girl. According to a myth in her clan, a male child was to be born of her mother, but instead Nariko was born and her mother died in childbirth, leaving the clan without a male successor. The clan considers Nariko’s birth in a female body to be a curse
that foreshadows the eventual downfall of the clan. Nariko attempts to recuperate for the original sin of her birth as a female by defending her clan from the aggressions of an enemy clan seeking to gain control of a weapon known as the heavenly sword, the game’s namesake. Whoever wields the heavenly sword will be temporarily endowed with great powers, but will die within days. Nariko, in her attempts to redeem herself in the eyes of her father and her clan, to assert her own value, and to be recognized as strong, and as good as a male heir, takes the heavenly sword as her weapon, an act that sets in motion her own sure death, five days later, after she successfully defends her clan from the aggressions of a rival clan.

There is a superficial feminist gloss on the game, which might account for its popularity with male and female serious gamers. The protagonist is a powerful and agentic female character who holds her own against an army of invading male warriors, singlehandedly defending her father and his entirely male tribe from their onslaught. Nariko is a tough if overtly sexualized heroine, complete with an ample bosom, minimal outfit coverage, make-up, and long, brilliantly colored locks. She chooses her own fate, her own death. And yet her motivation lies in her desire to prove herself worthy, in accordance with a twisted patriarchal logic wherein the birth of a female child is considered a curse as the laws of succession dictate that power pass from father to son. Nariko takes on the mantle of her own accursed birth and seeks to redeem herself in the eyes of her father and male clansmen by beating them at their own game, and being as strong and powerful as the male heir to the throne they expected.

In *Heavenly Sword*, Nariko’s choice to sacrifice her life represents a repudiation of feminism in the sense that the game is rigged. The cultural deal available to her presents her with two options, irrelevance and sure demise. She chooses to challenge the men at their own game, if she dies in the process, so be it. The game, like so many other media artifacts, represents a doing
and undoing of feminism, because it holds up the ideal of a powerful female, but her power comes at great cost. Nariko draws together both masculine and feminine qualities; she is strong, selfless, and gorgeous by the metrics of heterosexual estimations, and while powerful and assertive, she also confidently embraces typically feminine practices of grooming and self-presentation. In Nariko’s case, the exchange isn’t just a relinquishment of a collective feminist politics. She faces the choice of assuming a traditionally feminine role outside the action, or to take on a traditionally masculine role, and die. She chooses the latter. She wants so badly to be accepted into the world of men, that she will send herself to her grave, sacrifice her own life.

Five minutes into the tutorial Mesha handed me the controller, saying, “Now it’s your turn to play.” It was as if she wanted me to experience the flow states created by video games. Flow states collapse the distinctions between the game world and the gamer’s world, if only temporarily. They are facilitated by such aspects of game design as the first-person perspective, the cinematic experience of the cut scenes, or narrative interludes through which the story is told, and the vibration of the controller, which, as Mesha explained, is “making you feel what the character’s going through – so if you get hit, you feel that; if you’re doing damage to someone else, you feel that too.” Together these features encourage the gamer to identify with protagonists.

Given the way that game environments so easily produce flow states, and facilitate deep identification with gaming protagonists, and how much time many young people spend in gaming environments, it is important to interrogate not just the impact of sexualized representations of women, but also the impact on subjectivities of these ideologies and logics on young women growing up in conditions of precarity. How does a working class young woman of color make sense of her childhood and adolescence spent in these contexts? Mesha narrated her
identifications in terms of pleasure, risk, escape, and as an investment in her future. In addition, she worked hard to present herself as a knower in a domain that seeks to erase her knowledge and experience because of her social location as a working class young woman of color. Up against a precarious existence, both within gaming worlds and within the worlds of employment and higher education, she takes great pains to frame her gaming as evidence of her own value and worth as a woman and potential worker.

Contradictions

As I’ve reflected on both the explicit content of Mesha’s teaching, as well as the hidden curriculum of her tutorial, I’m left grappling with the contradictions. On the one hand, there is her aspirational self-presentation as a future game designer. This began with her retrospective presentation of her elementary school self as tech-savvy, and continued through her conduct in the tutorial. Throughout the entire two and half hours of the tutorial, she maintained a running commentary about the choices involved in game play, a commentary couched in incredible, and to me, mostly incomprehensible detail. Having little gaming experience myself, I was exhausted and overwhelmed by the time the tutorial ended when my videotapes finally ran out. Mesha, however, showed no signs of tiring. In fact, she seemed to be still gearing up! She had warned me in the lead-up to the scheduled tutorial that we would play for eight hours. At the time I thought she was joking — in retrospect, I’m not so sure. The sheer length of the tutorial, and her desire to extend it longer, is another piece of evidence of her strong desire to be recognized as a knower, and an expert, a desire that is all the more poignant in light of her structural oppression as a working-class, high school educated, black woman working in the fast food industry.
Her use of language through the tutorial was another vector through which she performed this aspirational identity as an expert technologist. Throughout the tutorial, Mesha drew on technicist discourses (Bryson & de Castell, 1998), which, like specialized discourses in general, police the boundaries of legitimate expertise, marking and empowering those whose critiques will be heard, and distinguishing them from those who can’t “talk the talk.” She used specialized lingo, expressed a dismissive attitude toward cut scenes in favor of action, and spoke of her achievement in terms of the trophies she had collected. Mesha also emphasized a love of combat, an interest in scores, hierarchies and rankings, and a reluctant tolerance toward the narrative interludes.

These are all strategies of distancing from a typically female perspective (Walkerdine, 2006), and a way of claiming power and status in light of the “enduring symbolic association” between masculinity and technology (Faulkner, 2001, p. 79). Technicist discourses are a key site for the production of masculinities and the claiming of masculine identities (Cockburn, 1985; Greenbaum, 1990) in the context of the continued underrepresentation of girls and women in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (Hill et al., 2010). Finally, her repeated offers over text message to tell me “anything else” I want to know about “any aspect” of gaming is yet another example of this desire to be seen as a knowing subject. She seemed to desire more than anything else to be acknowledged and recognized as a knower, and to present herself, her family, and female gamers in general, in a positive light.

Overall, Mesha navigates what Mia Consalvo (2007) calls a “toxic gaming culture” in which gaming capital is equated with heteronormative white masculinity. She does this by drawing on an individualistic feminist logic as opposed to a collective feminist logic. Instances of an individualistic feminist logic are apparent in Mesha’s assertions of gaming as an
investment in her future and her assumption of personal responsibility for her existence as a women in a hostile culture. In the game world of *Heavenly Sword*, feminism is taken into account by a storyline in which the heroine chooses her own fate within a patriarchal context. But the individualistic logic of choice, the notion that to have a choice is to have freedom, power, and agency, is reflective of a post-feminist stance, and begs the questions of: What are the choices? What frames the choices? And what are the stakes?

The parallels between Nariko’s accommodations to a patriarchal culture, and Mesha’s accommodation to patriarchal culture and “toxic gaming culture” are striking. Both locate the problems in themselves, their own problematic, female bodies. Mesha accepts that if she wants to go “on mic,” she is exposing herself to risky situations. Both *Heavenly Sword*, as a media artifact that reflects a postfeminist sensibility, and Mesha herself, a young person who is othered in so many dimensions of her social identity, as a working class young woman of color, articulate a narrow, individualistic kind of feminist critique rather than a collective one. Mesha is clearly interested in a feminist critique and in feminist politics, but does not have access to the language, or cultural tools that would allow her to articulate this critique. With her minimum wage, fast food industry job, the financial constraints on her ability to attend college, and the lack of clear paths or guarantees of gainful employment following an investment in higher education, Mesha’s daily life and prospects for the future are shaped by neoliberalism. She could benefit enormously from an initiation into a collective feminist politics that critiques neoliberal and postfeminist logics and structures, although such an initiation seems unlikely.
Chapter Six
Grace Vents: “It’s Basically My Diary”

Revisiting my field notes from my early interactions with Grace, I was struck by her mastery of what Erving Goffman (1959) calls the arts of impression management. She deftly performed the role of a good girl and a good student, skillfully maintaining eye contact throughout our interactions, and responding graciously and tolerantly to my sometimes-awkward questions. After my first meeting with her, I described her in my field notes as “polite and deferent to adult authority figures.” Ever poised and with a studied, feminine appearance, she wore a stylish uniform of striped shirts or loose fitting multicolor print blouses paired with dangly earrings, skinny jeans, and casual tennis shoes. At our first meeting she engaged me with seeming ease about the price of sushi rolls, a specialty of the Japanese restaurant where she waitresses, in Worcester versus New York City, while I struggled to set up my recording equipment. The first-generation middle daughter of Chinese parents, she wore her long, dark, naturally straight hair styled, partially up or in loose cascading curls, and her open face minimally made up, a splash of pastel color accentuating her eyelids.

“Not the type of person to sit in front of a computer all day, it gets boring” she prefers to be “moving around, doing different things.” As a junior in high school, she spoke of studying for finals in her advanced placement classes, participating on her school’s crew team, holding down a nightly waitressing job at an Asian fusion restaurant, and volunteering at the local senior center. Despite her disclaimers about screen time, Grace has the most robust digital footprint of the three participants and she has had accounts on many of the popular blogging, chatting, social networking and micro-blogging services since elementary school.
She looks back on older platforms with a mix of nostalgia and disdain. She originally joined Xanga (“I was like eight!”) and MySpace because “it was really popular or whatever.” She reminisced fondly about AIM and “how everything used to pop up,” referring to an earlier form on online advertising. She described first experimenting with “codes” on her MySpace profile, copying and pasting HTML to insert pictures and change text colors in an example of what Dan Perkel (2006) characterizes as a new form of literacy. But then MySpace “changed” and “got really weird, it used to be simple and then there were icons everywhere” and Grace was leaving middle school for high school and wanting to “start fresh,” and so she created an account on Facebook. Grace’s trading in of her MySpace account for a Facebook account echoes decisions made by teens nationwide as the choice of social network sites became a way of signaling cultural capital, taste and distinction, with Facebook perceived as more mature and high brow than MySpace (boyd, 2008). But by the time I met her in 2012, she was already "so over" Facebook and pegged it as a source of "high school drama" when misinterpreted status updates led to fist fights at school. She granted that without Facebook, “no one would know anyone’s birthday,” but aside from that narrow function, she saw it as “just a really big distraction.

Concurrent with her Tumblr, she also maintains accounts on other major media sharing and curation sites. She uses Pinterest to curate collections of Hello Kitty paraphernalia, Louis Vuitton luggage, and wedding planning inspiration. She has an account on Vine, a short form video-sharing service, featuring outtakes from her daily life with friends, family, and her boyfriend, and she uses Twitter to post short updates about her shifting moods.
Privacy as a Process

Tumblr is a social blogging service that allows for easy sharing of various types of media, including text, photos, quotes, links, music, and video. Grace joined Tumblr relatively early, in August 2010, the summer before her sophomore year in high school. She characterizes her Tumblr as "basically my diary," a “perfect example of what a young woman thinks and how she vents” where she goes whenever she “has time” or is “feeling down.” Grace’s Tumblr includes selfies, screenshots digital interactions with intimates, embedded popular music, re-blogged images, original images, and original text compositions. This chapter draws on selections from her Tumblr, two in-depth interviews with 17-year-old Grace about her blogging practice, and extensive subsequent email-based correspondence. I focus in this case study on her original images and original text compositions, which are directed at particular unnamed individuals, composed for a primary audience of herself, but which also have a broader resonance.

Tumblr was a popular service among young adults at the time of my main data collection in 2012 and remains popular at the time of this writing. According to the Pew Research Internet Project, about 11% of young adults between 18 to 29 years of age were active on it in August 2012 (Rainie, Brenner & Purcell, 2012). The user base on Tumblr skews younger and less affluent than many of the other popular blogging and image curation sites, like Pinterest (LaSala, 2012). Tumblr features many niche communities, and the one that Grace is most closely linked to is the community of teens, primarily but not exclusively female, who post about their trials and tribulations in romance and friendship. Grace’s participation in this loose web of teen-produced Tumblrs is articulated through her circulation of erotic images of tanned, fit, young, white, heterosexual bodies enacting an age-old story of sexual awakening.
Users update a Tumblr through a computer-based internet browser or a smart phone app. In 2012 Grace didn’t have a smart phone and used her laptop, but by 2015, she interfaces with Tumblr and her other social media accounts on her phone. Figure 6.1 shows one week’s worth of posts on Grace’s Tumblr, as viewed on a computer screen. The purple boxes are favorite songs, the image boxes are re-blogged favorites, and the text boxes are her original texts posts. Posts are organized reverse-chronologically with the design chosen by the blogger.

Figure 6.2 shows a submenu of the dashboard as it appears on a phone. The dashboard is the primary interface and has two main features. It is a live feed of recent posts from blogs that the user follows, and allows the user to comment, reblog, and like posts from these other blogs. It also allows the user to upload text posts, images, video, quotes, music, and animated GIFs.

Grace’s dashboard photo indicates that her blog has 148 followers, some of which are included in the 151 blogs that she follows. The 6516 likes refers to posts that she has liked. The 33 drafts
represents the number of posts that she has written but not posted publicly and the 260 messages refers to the number of private messages, comments or questions readers have sent her, which she doesn’t delete because she likes to “look back and reminisce.”

Figure 6.2
Tumblr dashboard
My curiosity piqued by her characterization of Tumblr as a diary, I thought of my own teenage self, and the series of journals I locked with red satin-threaded keys and hid away, rotating hiding spots to further discourage potential voyeurs. While I related to Grace's expression of cathartic release through writing, I couldn’t quite wrap my head around her rationale for doing this on a publicly accessible Tumblr blog indexed by her first and last names, on the first page of Google search results for her first and last name, featuring the prominent tagline: “I am who I am, no excuses. But I’d like people to see that there is more to me.” Grace's blog exists in a liminal space between the public and the private. It doesn’t quite fit into either of the categories neatly, at least in the ways they are conventionally understood.

Tumblr is popular among teenagers and young adults because it offers anonymity in the form of weak search protocols. Many of these users, counter intuitively, don’t actually want to be found, except by a few close friends with whom they explicitly share their blog. On Tumblr, the issue is less about public and private and more about whether you are findable and identifiable by the people who actually know you in real life (Rifkin, 2013). On Tumblr, as in other domains like museums (Stuedahl & Smørdal, 2011), the lines between audience and participants are blurred, and one generally knows who one’s audience is, because they are also participating, if only liking, or re-blogging material, the two modes of participation that the platform allows. Liking is a way of communicating to the original poster that you saw and appreciated the post, and re-blogging has a somewhat stronger connotation of approval, like seconding a statement, and it re-circulates the post on the re-blogger’s Tumblr.

When I asked her about what strategies she uses to keep it private, she responded that she “doesn’t try to keep it private;” that it “doesn’t matter” to her, that “If people see it, they see it” and that it would be “her fault” because she posted it. Embedded in my question is the
assumption that privacy is a thing, or state, that can be “kept” and that to keep this privacy is important. Her response reflects a view of privacy as a process, a balance to be negotiated. Young employ a variety of often-ingenious strategies to make accessible content meaningless to outside viewers, for instance by creating multiple accounts for different purposes, taking on pseudonyms and monikers, flash posting and then deleting content, and posting ambiguous or coded content that can only be understood by the intended audience (boyd & Marwick, 2011), all practices of what danah boyd calls social steganography (2013). Indeed, Grace describes one of her strategies: “Sometimes I write it and a couple of hours later I would just delete it.” Despite knowing little about their data travels through proprietary media ecologies, as Donovan (2013) explains it, young people care deeply about privacy (boyd & Hargittai, 2010; boyd & Marwick, 2011), and especially not compromising the privacy of others, which Grace clearly values in her explanation that “I don’t post any names or anything.”

Grace’s view of privacy does not seem to have not been shaped by the notion that is possible, or necessarily desirable, to separate contexts. The concept of the separation of spheres was dominant throughout the late twentieth century through the separation of white middle and upper class professional jobs and the separation of work and home life. The production of a professional self is achieved by minimizing the evidence of one’s home and family life through such measures as the physical separation of the workplace and the home and the wearing of different clothes (Goffman, 1959). This is especially true for mothers, who risk being judged as less committed to their professional lives and may face sanctions. But Grace does not labor under the illusion of managing, or minimizing, the intersections of different spheres. She accepts that there will be intermingling and so does not expend too much energy trying to manage boundaries that are constantly shifting and thus fundamentally unmanageable. This is not to say that privacy
is irrelevant to her; what is irrelevant is the implication that she could be ensuring her privacy, as attempts to ensure privacy in networked spaces are fundamentally futile. She can't in fact know who will have access to what she writes or the images she creates, because we all make bargains for the sake of convenience and affordability in our use of free online services.

**Imaging Relationships**

Grace’s use of images is agentic and directed at negotiating and claiming relationships with close female friends and male love interests. It also highlights the ways that young people develop particular literate practices with peers as they work to make sense of the emergent codes of social interaction in a rapidly changing contexts. They attend to the privacy concerns of others, including inside jokes and private references but coding them in ways to be understood only by the intended audience. The content of these messages is seeable to others, but not knowable. In this way these posts document and produce a history of an intimate relationship. Screenshots of messages exchanged on other media functions as an acknowledgement of an intimate relationship and provides evidence of a thick relationship across platforms.

Figure 6.3 is a screenshot taken on her computer, which she posted to her Tumblr and captioned with the text, “This is how I’m spending my snowy Saturday. Tumblr, Facebook, Facetiming my baby, and aimingggg (; lawwwlss.” This screenshot is of her and her high school best friend, Jackie, engrossed in their daily after-school routine: “If I wasn’t at her house we’d be Skyping and chatting on AIM and laughing about pointless jokes, or having a heart to heart conversation. She was my go-to girl.”
A matryoshka doll of an image, it documents their layered modes of interaction, video chatting from their respective bedrooms, while simultaneously back-channeling over instant messenger, with her Facebook wall open in the main tab, and her Tumblr blog in a second browser tab. This is an evocative depiction of the layering of platforms and practices typical of teenage super-communicators who use numerous tools and platforms to communicate with close friends, engaging in what Itō (2010) calls friendship-driven practices. It also draws attention to the intensity and intimacy of this friendship with her female friend, and the intertwining of their daily lives.

The screenshot also speaks to the new geographies of youth, issues of mobility and lack thereof, and the spatial constraints that shape young women's communication practices. The
extent of Grace’s use of social media platforms is consistent with the high end of the range of participation. Spending time in her “digital bedroom” (Sefton-Greene, 1998) is an adaptation to decreased access to public spaces friendly to youth, and the perception by many parents that the spaces that remain are not safe. Teenage girls, still living under their parents’ roofs and rules, are constrained in their ability to be physically where and with whom they want to be. What could read to adult eyes as excessively mediated interactions might in fact be accommodations on the part of young people to limits on their physical autonomy, including the lack of access to transportation, teen-friendly places to gather, and spending money.

The conditions of this image’s production and circulation also suggest an active appropriation of and identification with a relational super-communicator identity. Grace is not only engaged in multiple, layered, simultaneous modes of communication, but she is also actively engaged in the documentation and circulation of representations of these practices. In taking a screenshot of her computer screen she transforms a dynamic space featuring many discrete images and image fragments—the faces of her and her best friend, video chatting, the icons of programs at the bottom, the profile thumbnails of her Facebook friends and AOL contacts, the generic wallpaper, and the program interfaces —into a single image. The screenshot privileges the visual evidence of her close relationship with her best friend, with the instant message conversation and the video chat foregrounded, and juxtaposes this evidence against all of the other contacts available online with whom she is not interacting, to whom she appears as not available. This is suggestive of an intensive friendship, the bonds of which are strengthened by moments of documentation and circulation, like uploading the screenshot to Tumblr, where it is then re-blogged by this same best friend. Although the two are “no longer friends,” Grace still
holds this image dear and “considers this girl my best friend to this day, because she was the one who knew how fucked up my mind was.”

![Figure 6.4](image)

**Figure 6.4**
Happy couple

Figure 6.4 is another example of her agentic use of images to produce and document relationships, in this photo of her with her then-boyfriend, Thinh, and his nephew. The matching blue and white striped shirts suggest an alignment and stability in the relationship between the two teens. The arrangement of bodies, with the child in the middle, young woman on the left, young man on the right, is reminiscent of a tableau of a happy family. The setting, a generic,
clean and well-lit interior space, ceiling lights glinting off marble floors, suggests leisure time and prosperity. The photo reflects a trying on of adult roles and the aspirational production of a stable monogamous relationship, and by extension, happy nuclear family. When I asked her about this image, she spoke of her relationship with the boyfriend, and the how she can “still feel the heartbreak.” She went on to detail the highs and lows in the “three year never ending cycle with this one, since the first day of high school until the last” as their friendship evolved into a romance as they became “inseparable,” “talked every day,” and “fell asleep with one another on Skype every night” until one day he “met a freshman girl” and “from that day on” she knew she “lost him.”

Both of these photos, and the accounts she gave of them, are memorials to relationships that become asymmetrical — the friendship that is no more, the boyfriend who broke her heart — that were previously characterized by intense intimacy and near-constant communication through multiple channels. Taken together, with other posts on her Tumblr, they speak to a complex inner self – one that is a fiercely loyal friend and uninterested in friendships beyond her man, as a strong woman, a devoted girlfriend, and as family oriented while also misunderstood by family. As Grace looks back on these images from the vantage point of several years later, she expresses nostalgia for the intimate friendships and romantic relationships they reference. Both these narratives are based in romantic sentiments, but they can’t be so easily dismissed as merely romantic.

These are images of care logics, involving “involve relations of dependence and interdependence, relations of giving and receiving” (Lynch, 2007). I do not mean to argue that care, as a motivating force for digital media practices, is limited to young women and exclusive of young women. Women are not naturally, or essentially “more relational, oriented more toward
sustaining connection than achieving autonomy, and governed by interests to attend to others’ needs” (Luttrell, 1997, p. 24) although the generative and path-breaking work of early feminist theorists like Nancy Chodorow (1978) and Carol Gilligan (1982) has seemed to suggest this. And yet, part of the work of curating a gendered self online lies in representing relations of giving and receiving.

Speaking Back to Patriarchy

Intimate blogging and sharing of personal details of one’s life in networked spaces can be understood, somewhat paradoxically, in terms of developing a critical feminist teenage subjectivity. There are psychic and emotional costs to producing oneself in ways that are palatable, non-threatening, culturally- and gender-appropriate or -conforming. These costs have been explored by feminist psychologists (Brown & Gilligan 1993), who assert that girls experience a loss of voice at the transition from childhood to adolescent, and link this impasse in psychological development to the traumas of growing up in a patriarchal society. Brown (1999) argues that girls’ voices manifest differently according to class location, with working-class girls being more willing than their middle-class counterparts to articulate stringent critiques to power.

But the literature on girls’ development in adolescence has not yet properly grappled with the challenges of rethinking its constructs for this particular historical moment. Both the literature on girls’ voice and the critiques of this literature rest on an implicit broadcast model of voice, in which speaking is a privilege granted to those deemed deserving of an audience. Meanwhile, research that seeks to amplify young people's voices is criticized for failing to account for the relations of power that characterize adult researchers' work with young people (Fielding, 2001), and for conceptualizing voice as something that can be given and thus taken
(Bragg, 2007). This broadcast model is inconsistent with the conceptualization of voice as freed in networked spaces, as barriers to sharing are minimized, and boundaries between creators and audiences, producers and consumers are blurred.

Recall Grace’s statements in the previous section about the audience/participants on her blog. The concept of voice is frequently mobilized in participatory and collaborative research to argue that this research amplifies the voices of disenfranchised individuals, and that the experience of having one’s words and perspective amplified by those in positions of power is emancipatory, or somehow empowering. But Grace’s statements complicate this easy notion of voice as something given, and seem to suggest that for her Tumblr, the audience is almost expendable. Having an audience requires one to be aware of an audience and to moderate the self that one is projecting to manage other’s impressions of you.

Given that one’s actual audience is unknown and unknowable, if one were to apply the principles of impression management to the digital self, one would have to curate an online persona suitable for many possible audiences. In this context it makes more sense to cultivate comfort with ambiguity around questions of audience. Grace's maintenance of a certain distance toward questions of audience, and her decision to not attend overly, to not think overly hard about who is listening in and why, can be understood as an adaptation that frees her from the burdens of impression management.

The textual materials on Grace’s Tumblr, some of which I analyze here, engage with the problematics of patriarchy and its associated hierarchies. As a working class teenage girl and the daughter of immigrant Asian parents, Grace is often seen as quiet, cute, and easy to ignore. In her own words, “I'm sure people are definitely surprised by what they see on my blog, because
when they see me, they may look at me like an innocent girl.” Through her blog she pokes holes in this facade:

YOU THINK I’M HAPPY? Well, I’m far from that. You think I’m doing okay? I just make myself look okay. You think my surroundings don’t affect me? They do. And you’re the last person I would think who’d look at my fake smile and believe it. You say that you’re the only one who knows the “real me,” the only one who understands me. You’re wrong. I don’t even understand myself anymore. You don’t know anything about my life. I fake a smile; you believe it.

This post operates on several levels. At the level of a particular incident or interaction, it is directed at a specific you, a close friend who fails to see through her fake smile. Referring to the negative impact of her surroundings, which may include her parents’ rocky marriage and her own boy troubles, she offers a corrective to the too-rosy interpretation of her experience that she believes others have: “I fake a smile, you believe it.” The post can also be read as a critique of how she is seen by a broader audience of others: friends, family, teachers, and perhaps even me, the researcher. In this sense the post is a refutation of an Other-ing gaze and a rejection of “the White American male’s politics of representation [in which] the figure of the ‘Asian woman’ has not been her own, but rather a product of his imagination” (Whang, 2007, p. 20).

I’M TIRED. I’m tired of always being a pushover, doing anything and everything to please whoever and being neglected all the time.
Again, this post operates on multiple levels. At the concrete level, it reflects her frustration with the lack of reciprocity in her relationships, whether with boys and friends, or in the workplace. The language of being a pushover is an interesting choice of expression, reflective of the neoliberal instinct to locate problems in individual bodies and assume blame for one’s structural position. Like the previous post, this one also reflects a gendered division of care labor and is suggestive of the psychic costs of interpersonal care work, especially paid care work. Despite her college aspirations, after graduating from high school Grace began working 60-hour weeks as a nail technician.

As a manicurist working in a strip mall in western Massachusetts, Grace’s work “requires both technical expertise and adroit emotional skills to finesse strong reactions of customers to the servicing of their bodies” (Kang, 2010, p. 2). Workers in the personal service industry are required to engage in emotion work in much the same way as flight attendants (Hochschild, 2003), modulating their own emotions and self presentation to make customers feel taken care of. Arlie Hochschild defines emotional labor as that which “requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (p. 7), in the case of flight attendants, the sense of being cared for and in a convivial and safe place, and in the case of manicurists, or nail technicians, the sense of being touched, cared for, pampered. Nail work, in particularly, is overwhelmingly performed by Asian women, like Grace, “doing anything and everything to please whoever” in non-reciprocal arrangements that leave the needs and desires of the workers neglected.

Grace’s strategic inattention toward questions of audience/participants frees her to take up multiple competing voices and to articulate culturally-inappropriate sentiments, for instance of wanting to be cared for and catered to rather than the carer and caterer. It also allows her to
speak back to others’ gender-, race-, and class-based assumptions about her. Although she is aware that anyone could conceivably read her diary, and is aware, for instance, that I in fact am reading her diary and analyzing it, she is not primarily interested in or concerned by this. The concept of splitting can help explain this. Splitting, “the breakdown of the whole person into parts of a person” (Luttrell, 1997, p. 9) serves a self-preservational psychological function. Sharing intimate details of one’s life in networked spaces can be understood as a kind of splitting. It separates the unspeakable parts from the rest of the self, while allowing one to continue to experience all the parts of oneself. Saying that she has “never really thought about the adults, teachers and parents that may read my blog,” she acknowledges that she is “sure people are definitely surprised by what they see on my blog, because when they see me, they may look at me like an innocent girl… but everyone has stress built up instead them, and you have to let it out one way or another.”

Overall, Grace’s blog can be understood as an initiation into and critique of patriarchal impositions onto Asian American femininity, and an outlet for expressions of relational anger that permits her to achieve a sense of wholeness across networked and real life domains. Through these practices of intimate blogging, she engages in the identity work of producing herself as an upstanding citizen, model minority, good girl, and helper, and claims her own value and worth and goodness as a women, friend, and romantic partner. By sharing of intimate details of her personal life in a networked online environment, somewhat paradoxically, she cultivates a critical teenage gendered subjectivity in an image-dominated postfeminist media climate. With her explanation that “I can just go on it and express my feelings without anyone having to read it. But being there so I could just type it all out, like type out my anger basically,” Grace makes us think twice about overly reductive assessments of young people’s digital literacy practices,
assessments that are so often fueled by concerns with young people’s educability, employability and value, and which fail to take account of their full personhood.
Chapter Seven

Implications

The digital media practices of working class young women of color can be understood as projects of self-making operating on multiple levels: 1) as articulations of agency against contexts that suppress this agency; 2) as documentations of and reflections on change and growth over time; 3) as explorations of relationality and related themes of care and obligation; 4) and as a means of critiquing structures of power.

Ling’s approach to curating a record of her own artistic development was elaborate, laborious, multiply mediated, and structured by her inability at the time to pursue her desired path of going away to college in an urban environment. The YouTube videos that most inspired her modeled a meditative art making practice, and her adaptation of this practice had contemplative dimensions as well. In an agentic expression of interpretive flexibility, she adapted the Facebook album function to curate a record of her artistic explorations for a primary audience of herself. Her images referenced tropes in mobile photography and Asian diasporic imagery and can be understood as meditations on her own relational subject formation, and as explorations of what it means to be coming of age as a young Asian woman. The panda card can be understood similarly, as evidence of her slow, craft approach to multimedia production, her interest in producing for the purpose of building relationships or acknowledging those with whom she is in relation, and her incorporation of culturally coded elements. Contextualizing the discussion of Ling’s multimedia productions in Luttrell’s longitudinal data highlights Ling’s longstanding stake in her own development as she navigates competing developmental scripts and their different framings of obligation.
Mesha’s online gaming also has introspective and socially oriented dimensions. Against the backdrop of her a stressful family life, a school experience where she feels like an outsider, and the daily grind and monotony of her minimum wage job, game worlds offer release and escape. When she is deeply engrossed in game worlds, the sense of time’s passage falls away, her awareness of her own physical form recedes, and she enters a flow state of concentration. At the same time, whether running as part of a group in a massively multiplayer online game like Final Fantasy XIV, her latest project, or identifying with autonomous, powerful, sexy gaming heroines like Nariko in Heavenly Sword, she excels at gaming, and it gives her a chance to be part of a group, valued for her skills and indispensable to her team. Playing games over and over until she beats them gives her a sense of challenge and accomplishment, and is a way of gauging her own improvement. Although her game world companions and her real life companions do not intersect, she considers her gaming friends real friends because they share something that she holds very dear. Her critical perspective is also sharpened by her gaming, evident in the way she layers critiques of the representation of female characters in video games on top of her critiques of the obstacles facing female gamers and women aspiring to work in the industry. But while she is interested in formulating a collectivist feminist critique and asserting herself as a woman and a knower, as part of broader women in technology project, her ability to formulate such a critique is constrained by a postfeminist lens that narrows collective structural critiques to the level of visual representations.

Grace uses the networked space of Tumblr as an intimate personal diary. Here she writes what she feels must be written and stakes her claim to a little piece of the vast internet on her own terms. Understood in the context of her job as a nail technician, working primarily for tips and requiring her to be attentive to the physical and emotional demands of paying clients, she
uses her blog to demand the care and attention that she deserves. It also represents a claim of her own value and worth because it is a statement that regardless of what anyone else might think, for her own sense of wholeness and well being, she needs to vent her anger. Through her writing she critiques the construction of Asian American femininity, and the way Asian women are positioned as exotic, enticing, servile, and eager to please. Having written in this diary daily or weekly from the ages 15 to 20, it also serves a personal retrospective function, allowing her to reflect back on her experiences and how she has changed over time.

Networked online environments are the air many young people breathe and are important contexts for development and subject formation. The practices of producing, sharing and circulating images in these environments are integral to young women’s processes of producing themselves as gendered beings. Given the salience of visual culture and the currency of images, it is critical that we use visual methods to understand how young people curate gendered selves.

Supportive contexts for trying on possible identities and experimenting with possible selves are secure, structured, and predictable – rare qualities in our late capitalist globalized era. The three case studies examine how working class young women of color take up various digital media practices within networked online environments voluntarily and out of deep desires to document, reflect on, and recognize the intrinsic value of their selves. The social contexts of race, class, gender, and generation shape young women’s experiences online just as offline, and yet young women exert agency to creatively appropriate networked online spaces for their own purposes. They do this against a backdrop of precarity, with higher education increasingly expensive and out of reach, an eroded social safety net, and the encroachment of networked technologies into nearly all spheres of life.
Humanistic and social-justice educators should be vigilant about protecting the increasingly rare pockets where young people can just be. This requires resisting generational essentialism and cultivating attention to young women’s own perspectives, experiences and knowledge. Whether in the case of Ling, watching videos on YouTube, imitating the techniques, and uploading photos of these efforts to Facebook; or in the case of Mesha, spending hours on end playing the same online video game until she beats it; or in the case of Grace, blogging about her personal relationships in an online diary, it is critical to be attentive to the powerful forces of longing, complexity and contradiction to and re-center the role of constraint and difficulty, but also of the introspective impulse, in order to understand the online practices of working class teenage girls and young women of color.

We need to re-center the care ethic within digital literacy initiatives, as in school encounters more generally, to make these initiatives more relevant to the lives, concerns and values of young people. Digital literacy curricula are commonly framed in terms of helping young people obtain the skills to advance in professional life, a laudable goal, but one that needs to be balanced by a commitment to developing situated, relational, careful literacies that address universal human needs. Efforts to use digital media in educational contexts must attend to the important role of relationships – to the world without and the world within – and design interventions that honor young people’s efforts to grow in self knowledge and addition to their efforts to grow in critical awareness of society’s functioning.

Young women are diverse as knowers, and their ways of articulating, expressing and accounting for their aspirations, desires, and care worlds in their digital media practices are as varied as their experiences, social positionings, and identities. And yet, in each of these three cases, what is most notable is how the young women showed themselves to be active agents of
their own development, knowing subjects with deep stakes in projects of self-making, engaged at
the levels of cultural critique, social relations, and self knowledge. While invested in curating
idealized self-representations of themselves to others online, they are also searching for security,
a sense that things will be all right – and it is this motivation, I argue, that is the more powerful.
Our current times may ignore the inner life, the life of the universal self that has no race, class or
gender, and yet these young women showed themselves to be invested in internally directed
projects of knowing the self, and interested in achieving a sense of balance, stability, and inner
calm amid precarious conditions.
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Autobiographical Statement

Claire M. Fontaine is a researcher, teacher, mother and aspiring yogi who studies young people’s creative applications of technologies of the self. Claire holds a B.A. from Wesleyan University, a M.S.T. in Secondary English Education from Pace University, and a M. Phil and Ph.D. in Urban Education from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. She is a founding member of the Collaborative Seeing Studio, a research collaborative committed to developing methodologies and interpretive techniques for analyzing young people’s visual productions. Her doctoral studies were generously supported by a CUNY Doctoral Student Research Grant (Competition #7) and an Urban Education Program Grant, and by fellowships, including at the Bernard L. Schwartz Communication Institute at Baruch College, the Stanton/Heiskell Center for Telecommunications Policy, and the Presidential Digital Research Fellowship.