Precarious Girlhood: Problematizing Reconfigured Tropes of Feminine Development in Post-2009 Recessionary Cinema

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ABSTRACT

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Following the 2008 Global Recession, there was a significant change in the cinematic depiction of at-risk girls and the telos of their girlhood development. Unlike films released between 2000 and 2008, about girls engaging in risky behavior or rendered vulnerable by difficult circumstances, these new representations failed to offer recuperative conclusions showing the protagonists reflecting on lessons learned or disavowing their dangerous involvements. Rather, this new body of films about at-risk girlhood portrayed girls who appeared to be empowered but were unable to overcome their precarious positioning and achieve appropriate adult femininity.

Identifying this trend in post-2009 recessionary festival films from the United States, Canada, France, Peru, and China, this dissertation performs dialogical textual analyses of similarly themed works about precarious girlhood development. This work looks closely at relationships between worsening inequalities under neoliberalism and the ideology's increased emphases on individual responsibility and the cultivation of resilience and flexibility. At the same time, it examines how this interrelationship reconfigures the significant roles that mother/daughter relationships, domestication, consumption and female best friendship traditionally play in girls' enculturation into adult femininity onscreen. Using an intersectional feminist phenomenological approach, this project pursues two lines of inquiry investigating the emergence of new feminine subjectivities within late modern and recessionary risk

environments: firstly, how these marginalized girls understand and navigate their precarity, and secondly, how the girls' self-understanding changes as they fail to achieve traditional markers of successful feminine development.

Concentrating on similarities between postfeminism and neoliberal governmentality, each chapter examines how a subset of similarly themed films interrogate the notion that success and failure are solely the results of individual choices and efforts. The first chapter explores the reconfigured mother/daughter relationships in *La teta asustada* (Claudia Llosa, 2009, Spain/Peru) and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* (Jeff Barnaby, 2013, Canada), two films about Indigenous girls whose close involvements with their mothers' corpses mediate their healing from intergenerational trauma and their subject formation. The second chapter examines the reimagining of the symbolic value of the notion of "home" and the process of domestication in three American independent films about economic and housing precarity: *Precious: Based on the Novel 'Push' by Sapphire* (Lee Daniels, 2009, USA), *Winter's Bone* (Debra Granik, 2010, USA), and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (Benh Zeitlin, 2012, USA). The third chapter analyzes how the disordered consumption patterns of the lead female characters in *Spring Breakers* (Harmony Korine, 2012, USA/France), *Bande de filles* (Céline Sciamma, 2014, France), and *Guo chun tian* (Bai Xue, 2018, China) reconfigure the roles of best friendship and the makeover in girlhood development. Given the pedagogical function of neoliberal postfeminist media targeted primarily at female audiences, each chapter also argues that this dynamic is entangled with the heuristic purposes of the coming-of-age narrative, thus offering the implied female spectators opportunities to cultivate traits that are related to the films' reconfiguration of traditional, heteronormative tropes of feminine development.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2014, *Bande de filles*/*Girlhood*, the final film in Céline Sciamma's youth trilogy, opened to widespread critical acclaim at the Cannes Film Festival and earned four César Awards nominations, including Best Director and Most Promising Actress for Karidja Touré, its lead actor, in her first film role. Conspicuous for its centering of black teenage girls, a demographic noticeably absent in mainstream French cinema, *Bande de filles* continues Sciamma's intimate exploration of socially marginalized girlhoods—framed in *Naissance des Pieuvres*/*Water Lilies* (2007, France) as teenage lesbian desire and in *Tomboy* (2011, France) as prepubescent gender nonconformity—and the lived experience of otherness. While each film presents its lead character's experimentation with different ways of being in the world as a significant aspect of her subject formation, *Bande de filles* is especially unique in its depiction of joyfulness as a mode of young, black female self-expression. The first twelve minutes of the film establish the youthful, nurturing female world of its protagonist, sixteen-year-old Marieme (Karidja Touré), introducing us to her all-girl American football league and her affectionate relationships with younger sisters Mini (Chance N'Guessan) and Bébé (Simina Soumaré), and constructing male characters, such as their abusive older brother Djibril (Cyril Mendy), as unknowable, distant figures.

In an early scene, Sciamma's film defines what is at stake for this girl's difficult transition from girlhood to adulthood. The scene begins *in media res*, showing Marieme bargaining with a school administrator to avoid placement in the vocational training track by either repeating the school year or advancing to high school. Unfortunately, having previously repeated the year, neither of these requests are viable options for Marieme. When questioned about her persistent academic failure, the girl is either unable to articulate the confluence of

factors contributing to her delinquency, or unwilling to give cause for state intervention into her family life. Instead, Marieme pleads, "I don't want to. I want to be like others. Normal."[1] This line of argumentation reveals that her comprehension of the situation is twofold. First, Marieme considers the vocational training track a vehicle for an abnormal life trajectory. In the French educational system, immigrant and French-born children of immigrants are more likely to be tracked into vocational programs and to be educationally disadvantaged in their transition from lower secondary to upper secondary school due to a combination of factors, which include issues with integration and socioeconomic exclusion.[2] Second, Marieme believes that it is still possible for her to overcome the obstacle of poor academic performance and pursue a "normal" life trajectory. However, much to her surprise, the school administrator responds, "It's a bit too late for that," thus ending their conversation. But rather than present this exchange in a series of shot/countershots, *Bande de filles* emphasizes the narrative importance of Marieme's perspective by centering her within the frame of a lingering, static medium shot. Throughout the film, adult figures are largely absent, which conveys the personal significance of Marieme's peer groups. However, in this scene, the school administrator's facelessness takes on additional layers of meaning, gesturing toward mechanisms of discrimination within an education system that directs immigrant and second-generation girls in France into low-paying employment typically reserved for these sectors of the population, such as cleaning service, domestic, and care-giving jobs.[3]

The school administrator's statement about it being too late for Marieme to get back on track illustrates how a major tenet of the "at-risk" narrative, one of the dominant discourses

[1] French-to-English language translation provided by the film's subtitles.
[2] Hector Cebolla Boado, "Primary and Secondary Effects in the Explanation of Disadvantage in Education: The Children of Immigrant Families in France," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 32, no.3 (2011): 407-430.
[3] See, Sara R. Farris and Sara de Jong, "Discontinuous Interactions: Second-Generation Immigrant Girls in Transition from School to Work," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37, no. 9 (2014): 1505-1525; and, Trica Keaton, "Arrogant Assimilationism: National Identity Politics and African-Origin Muslim Girls in the Other France," *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (December 2005): 405-423.

about contemporary girlhood, renders girls precarious by their circumstances as failures-in-progress and excludes them from normative, successful "can-do" girlhood. As Anita Harris explains in *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century*, "[y]oung women who are deemed to be at-risk are cut off from the imagined majority of successful girls, and their problems tend to become the ways in which they are universally defined."[4] Since at-risk and can-do discourses are entangled with notions of ideal citizenship, this foreclosure of Marieme's future societal integration also affects her diegetic "grievability," which Judith Butler defines as a "precondition" of life and the "presupposition" that a life matters.[5] The imbrication of grievability with politics of immigration, Butler argues, manifests in the ways that we see certain populations as "eminently grievable, and others whose loss is no loss, and who remain ungrievable."[6] In this context, educational sidelining determines the stakes of Marieme's girlhood development by resigning her to precarious socioeconomic conditions with little chance for upward social mobility, and marking her life as ungrievable.

Given the historical figuration of societal integration as the telos of the classical coming-of-age journey,[7] it is of little surprise that *Bande de filles*, which Sciamma describes as a "strong narrative with the classical plots of the emancipation novel," shows Marieme still struggling to define her identity in its conclusion.[8] Marieme's inability to take advantage of the freedoms and possibilities achieved by feminism, symbolized by her access to higher education, causes this missed opportunity to be "normal" to become an object of loss that she refuses to abandon. As a

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[4] Anita Harris, "The 'Can-Do' Girl Versus the 'At-Risk' Girl," in *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 26.
[5] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2016).
[6] Ibid., 24.
[7] Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland, eds., *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1983).
[8] Julie Bramowitz, "Céline Sciamma's Newest Film, *Girlhood*, Changes the Face of the Coming-of-Age Story," *Vogue*, January 30, 2015, https://www.vogue.com/article/girlhood-movie-celine-sciamma-changes-coming-of-age-story.

result, her quest to define her identity, which is visualized in the film as a series of changes in comportment and appearance, becomes the driving force of the narrative. Her quest positions Marieme as a "postfeminist melancholic subject"—a young woman lamenting the disjunction between her "already-empowered" neoliberal positioning and the constraints of her intersecting sociocultural identities—and situates Marieme's at-risk acting out as a form of mourning that becomes a vehicle for her disordered empowerment.[9]

While celebratory reviews and marketing highlighted Sciamma's auteurship and *Bande de filles*' portrayal of "(black) girl power," critics interrogated the white director's reliance on controversial tropes found in other female-focused *banlieue* films.[10] *Bande de filles*, like *La Squale* (Fabrice Génestal, 2000, France) and *Samia* (Philippe Faucon, 2000, France), for example, feature teen girls from immigrant backgrounds who endure abuse from patriarchal black/brown male characters and achieve autonomy by transgressing their subcultures' gendered moral codes. For these other filmic protagonists, and for Marieme, personal development is contingent on self-emancipation from dysfunctional families and the disavowal of immigrant backgrounds.[11] But *Bande de filles* is also part of a broader trend in post-2009 recessionary

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[9] Taking up Judith Butler's notion of gender melancholia, Angela McRobbie outlines how feminism has become a lost object of desire for girls and young women, while Marnina Gonick uses this notion to explore how melancholia operates, not as a mode of suffering, but as a mode of subversive agency. Angela McRobbie, "Illegible Rage: Post-Feminist Disorders," in *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (Los Angeles and London: SAGE, 2009), 94-123; Marnina Gonick, "Indigenizing Girl Power," *Feminist Media Studies* 10, no. 3 (2010): 305-319.

[10] Régis Dubois, « Bande de filles » : Safari sur la Croisette, le sens des images : cinéma, pop-culture et société, October 23, 2014, http://lesensdesimages.com/2014/10/23/bande-de-filles-safari-sur-la-croisette/; Fanta Sylla, "Carefree Black Girls, Interrupted: on *Girlhood*, a Film By Céline Sciamma," December 2014, http://www.blackgirlstalking.com/annex-home/2015/8/5/carefree-black-girls-interrupted, available on https://cargocollective.com/littleglissant; Sara Gharsalli, "*Girlhood*: Stereotypes Within Stereotypes," Artefact, May 27, 2015, http://www.artefactmagazine.com/2015/05/27/film-girlhood-stereotypes-within-stereotypes/; Clemence Bodoc, « Bande de filles », un film encensé pour de mauvaises raisons, *Madmoizelle*, May 22, 2016, https://www.madmoizelle.com/bande-de-filles-probleme-294696; Will Higbee, "'Beyond Ethnicity' or a Return to Type? *Bande de filles/Girlhood* and the Politics of Blackness in Contemporary French Cinema," in *Post-Migratory Cultures in Postcolonial France*, eds. Kathryn A. Kleppinger and Laura Reeck (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018), 166-182.

[11] Carrie Tarr, "'Grrrls in the banlieue:' Philippe Faucon's *Samia* and Fabrice Génestal's *La Squale*," *L'Esprit Créateur* 42, no. 3 (2002): 28-38.

girlhood cinema involving melancholic girl protagonists whose attempts to overcome their bodily and economic precarity are never fully realized, much like their coming-of-age processes. Like Marieme, these lead female characters are excluded from normative girlhood despite being driven, flexible, and resilient, attributes that neoliberal postfeminism promises are vehicles for avoiding and escaping the at-risk designation.[12] I argue that despite putting an optimistic spin on the girl protagonists' futile attempts to self-actualize, these films present an implicit critique of the failures of neoliberal postfeminism.

In addition to *Bande de filles*, my cinematic corpus includes *La teta asustada*/*The Milk of Sorrow* (Claudia Llosa, 2009, Spain/Peru), *Precious: Based on the Novel 'Push' by Sapphire* (Lee Daniels, 2009, USA), *Winter's Bone* (Debra Granik, 2010, USA), *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, (Benh Zeitlin, 2012, USA), *Spring Breakers* (Harmony Korine, 2012, USA/France), *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* (Jeff Barnaby, 2013, Canada), and *Guo chun tian*/*The Crossing* (Bai Xue, 2018, China). This project groups similarly-themed films released during the Global Recession and places them in conversation.[13] It concentrates on linkages between the precarious conditions created under neoliberalism and the ideology's increased emphasis on individual responsibility after the global financial crisis of 2007-2008. It examines how this interconnectedness reconfigures the roles that mother/daughter relationships, domestication, consumption and female best friendship traditionally play in the achievement of adult femininity onscreen. Because my project does not see neoliberal postfeminism in strictly historical terms as a backlash against feminism, but also as a contradictory cultural sensibility that circulates

[12] Harris, "The 'Can-Do' Girl Versus the 'At-Risk' Girl," 13-36.
[13] In 2009, global financial market events indicated the extent and ongoing effects of the financial crisis of 2007-2008. See, Floyd Norris, "Steep Market Drops Highlight Despair Over Rescue Efforts," *The New York Times*, March 1, 2009, https://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/03/business/worldbusiness/03markets.html; and, Megan Davies and Walden Siew, "45 Percent of World's Wealth Destroyed: Blackstone CEO," *Reuters*, March 10, 2009, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-blackstone/45-percent-of-worlds-wealth-destroyed-blackstone-ceo-idUSTRE52966Z20090310.

transnationally, it offers a broader analysis of how this neoliberal culture constructs precarious girlhood onscreen than most feminist studies, which tend to focus on Anglo-American and Western-European texts. Further, in keeping with Catherine Driscoll's definition of the girl as "an assemblage of social and cultural issues and questions rather than a field of physical facts," and description of late modern girlhood as having more to do with cultural anxieties about social changes than specific age ranges or developmental stages, this dissertation looks at younger and teenaged girl protagonists as well as young women, which expands the scope of its inquiry.[14]

Using an intersectional feminist phenomenological approach, this dissertation pursues two overarching questions concerning the emergence of new feminine subjectivities within late modern and recessionary risk environments as they pertain to the films' representations of precarious girlhood development. First, I explore how these marginalized protagonists understand and navigate their precarious social positioning within a dominant culture. Second, I question what happens to the characters' self-understanding during their pursuit of goals that are traditionally entangled with girls' enculturation into adult femininity. I concentrate on similarities between postfeminism and neoliberal governmentality, chiefly their shared emphases on cultivating "entrepreneurial, competitive, and commercial" citizenship,[15] and examine how the films depict the girls' individual efforts as the best responses to their experiences of overlapping forms of precarity.[16] Moreover, because Rosalind Gill has urged scholars to account for the "affective and psychic" effects of neoliberalism and postfeminism in their analyses of how film and media shape viewers' subjectivities, I also look closely at the affective and

[14] Catherine Driscoll, "Girls Today: Girls, Girl Culture and Girl Studies," *Girlhood Studies* 1, no. 1 (Summer 2008): 14. See also, Alison Winch, *Girlfriends and Postfeminist Sisterhood* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
[15] Jeremy Gilbert, "What Kind of Thing is 'Neoliberalism?'," *Formations* 80/81 (2013): 9.
[16] Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker, eds., "Introduction: Gender and Recessionary Culture," in *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in an Age of Austerity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 2.

embodied experiences the films' neoliberal postfeminist tropes create.[17] Given the films' heuristic function as female coming-of-age narratives, I theorize how the viewing experience might facilitate a parallel mode of precarious feminine development for their inscribed female viewers.

What's Old is New Again: Surveying Cinematic Tropes of Female Delinquency

While much of the scholarship on teen films and girlhood cinema situates the historical emergence of their commercial markets in the 1950s and 1990s, respectively, as analytical starting points, my study begins in the 1920s, when images of at-risk girls first proliferated onscreen.[18] According to Georganne Scheiner, understanding the cultural legacy of classical Hollywood images of adolescent girlhood is a prerequisite for understanding its representation in contemporary cinema. Scheiner writes, "the period from 1920 to 1950 grounds virtually all our contemporary images of [female] adolescence. Later films might use, amplify or amend representations of 1920 to 1950, but they do not substantially alter them…it is impossible to understand current film depictions of female adolescence unless we start well before World War II."[19] Indeed, the case studies analyzed in Chapters 2 and 3 find their discursive antecedents in this earlier time period, whereas the films about precarious Indigenous girlhoods centered in Chapter 1 are excluded from this kind of comparative discursive analysis due to Indigenous girls' historical exclusion from conceptualizations of normative girlhood on and offscreen. This section

[17] See, Rosalind Gill, "The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism: A Postfeminist Sensibility 10 Years On," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no. 6 (2017): 606-626; Rosalind Gill and Akane Kanai, "Mediating Neoliberal Capitalism: Affect, Subjectivity and Inequality," *Journal of Communication* 68 (2018): 318-326.

[18] Georganne Scheiner argues this sudden spike in films about delinquent girlhood was a calculated response to moral reform campaigns' claims that film corrupted young people. Scheiner, *Signifying Female Adolescence: Film Representations and Fans, 1920-1950* (Westport, CT and London: Praeger, 2000), 24.

[19] Ibid., 3.

of the introduction aims to map shifts in filmic discourses about at-risk girls and draw out parallels between the attribution of causation for teen girl delinquency and expectations for these pop-cultural and actual historical girls to direct their own development.

Film scholars examining representations of girlhood in contemporary cinema have noted the ongoing figuration of the girl as a vehicle through which difficult national histories, as well as societal anxieties about cultural norms and changes, are explored.[20] Historically expressed in films exploring teen girl delinquency, these societal concerns helped to define normative girlhood on and offscreen, by encouraging white girls to be sexually attractive and sexually unavailable. However, given the historical representation of black girls and women as sexually promiscuous, black female sexuality was already aligned with delinquency within the Western cultural imaginary, prompting the creation of a politics of respectability within African-American middle-class communities.[21] Other notable destabilizing female figures during this period included the "sexual delinquent" flapper of the 1920s and the 1940s bobbysoxer whose madcap antics indirectly challenged her father's authority.[22] Films such as *Way Down East* (D.W. Griffith, 1920, USA) and *The Road to Ruin* (Norton S. Parker, 1928, USA), for example, portrayed premarital sexual behavior as the defining feature of female delinquency, while others included criminality, albeit to a lesser degree. Addressed to adult audiences, these sensationalistic cautionary tales largely tended to portray parental neglect as the primary cause for at-risk girlhood. As Georganne Scheiner points out, the notion that "there were no bad

[20] Fiona Handyside and Kate Taylor-Jones, eds., *International Cinema and the Girl: Local Issues, Transnational Contexts* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
[21] Bryana H. French, "More than Jezebels and Freaks: Exploring How Black Girls Navigate Sexual Coercion and Sexual Scripts," *Journal of African American Studies* 17, no. 1 (2013): 35-50; Corinne T. Field, Tammy-Charelle Owens, Marcia Chatelain, Lakisha Simmons, Abosede George, and Rhian Keyse, "The History of Black Girlhood: Recent Innovations and Future Directions," *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 9, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 383-401.
[22] Georganne Scheiner, "Are These Our Daughters?: The Image of Female Adolescence in film, 1920-1970" (PhD diss., Arizona State University, 1990), 278.

children, only bad parents" circulating in American cinema was grounded in extradiegetic delinquency theories which later shifted blame to mothers who were absent and overprotective or, during the 1940s, working outside of the home.[23] At the same time, East Asian films about girlhood, such as *Minato no nihon musume/Japanese Girls at the Harbor* (Shimizu Hiroshi, 1933, Japan), sensationalized young female delinquency, partly due to influences of Hollywood and European narrative cinemas, but also reflected culturally-specific gender ideologies and conceptualizations of modern femininity.[24]

Following the 1934 introduction of the Production Code, American films about white adolescent girlhood traded their exploitative depictions for escapist representations that emphasized girls' resilience and ability to successfully manage complex, adult problems. This trend continued into the forties alongside the emergence of both the teen film genre and white American adolescent girlhood as a unique subculture and film audience with spending power. In a similar vein, Japanese cinematic images of idealized, nationalistic girlhood that were produced between the late 1940s and the 1960s reconstructed feminine norms that were in flux after the war.[25] Exploitative images of at-risk adolescent girlhood returned to cinemas in the 1950s, along with the recognition of women as modern subjects and an increased public interest in psychoanalytic accounts that "managed simultaneously to express anxieties about the social meaning of female delinquency yet contain the meaning of that behavior safely within the matrix

[23] Scheiner, "Are These Our Daughters?," 277-282.
[24] Peter Rist, "Visual Style in the Shanghai Films Made by the Lianhua Film Company (United Photoplay Service): 1931-1937," *The Moving Image* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 212; Jianhua Chen, "D.W. Griffith and the Rise of Chinese Cinema in Early 1920s Shanghai," in *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Cinemas*, eds. Carlos Rojas and Eileen Chow (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 23-38.
[25] Deborah Shamoon, "Misora Hibari and the Girl Star in Postwar Japanese Cinema," *Signs* 35, no. 1 (Autumn 2009): 131-155.

of the family."[26] This framing of teen girl delinquency as a consequence of dysfunctional family dynamics reemerged during the 1980s, with American screen girls actively challenging gender norms and Eastern and Central European films, such as *Malenkaya Vera/Little Vera* (Vasili Pichul, 1988, Soviet Union), using young female sexuality as a site for exploring shifting economic and social climates.[27]

This discursive linking of parental neglect and young female delinquency persisted into the early 1990s and was reconfigured through a new iteration of moral panic about teen girls' failures to become ideal neoliberal subjects. This variant assigned a shared responsibility for a girl's performance of normative girlhood to parents, teachers, and healthcare professionals on the one hand, and to the girls themselves on the other. The goal was to ensure that girls took advantage of opportunities hard-won by feminist activism and fulfilled their potential to succeed. Meanwhile, this same time period saw a dramatic increase in the production of stories and images about girls in popular culture, as well as many parental guides exploring this new conceptualization of female delinquency.[28] In *Making Connections: The Relational Worlds of Adolescent Girls at Emma Willard School*, Harvard psychologists Carol Gilligan, Nona P. Lyons, and Trudy J. Hanmer argued that teen girls experienced a significant loss of self-confidence and connection with others during their transition into womanhood. Along similar lines, the American psychologist Mary Pipher's internationally best-selling book *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* argued that all girls, which, in this case, were discussed as white,

[26] Rachel Devlin, "Female Juvenile Delinquency and the Problem of Sexual Authority in America, 1945-1965," in *Delinquents and Debutantes: Twentieth-Century American Girls' Cultures*, ed. Sherrie A. Inness (New York and London: New York University Press, 1998), 84-85.
[27] Anikó Imre, "The Age of Transition: Angels and Blockers in Recent Eastern and Central European Films," in *Youth Culture in Global Cinema*, eds. Timothy Shary and Alexandra Seibel (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 71-86.
[28] Marnina Gonick, Emma Renold, Jessica Ringrose and Lisa Weems, "Rethinking Agency and Resistance: What Comes After Girl Power?," *Girlhood Studies* 2, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 1-9.

middle-class girls, were at risk of failure if not watched closely and supported to overcome their struggles with self-esteem and mental health issues. Pipher's book popularized "Girl Power" and "Reviving Ophelia," two discourses about girlhood that initially appeared to oppose each other but which Marnina Gonick has argued are interdependent: the first term referred to an assertive, confident mode of femininity and the second to self-censoring, vulnerable girlhood. According to Gonick, "both Girl Power and Reviving Ophelia participate in the production of the neoliberal girl subject with the former representing the idealized form of the self-determining individual and the latter personifying an anxiety about those who are unsuccessful in producing themselves in this way."[29] In emphasizing girls' individual responsibility, both modes of girlhood used notions of personal choice and character traits to obfuscate structural inequalities. Unlike *Making Connections* and *Reviving Ophelia*, Peggy Orenstein's *Schoolgirls: Young Women, Self Esteem, and the Confidence Gap* expanded the demographic of its sample group beyond white middle-class girls to perform a comparative study with other eighth-grade female students from low-income, ethnic-minority schools; the book presented first-hand accounts that gave parents and mental health professionals insights into the psychological conditions plaguing these girls.

Sarah Projansky analyzes the interrelationship of these psychological manuals and the pop-cultural texts released during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in *Spectacular Girls: Media Fascination and Celebrity Culture*. This comprehensive study of hundreds of girl-centered films, magazines, and television programs highlights how the Girl Power and Reviving Ophelia narratives—which Projansky refers to as "can-do" and "at-risk" respectively—spectacularized fictional and actual historical girls in media and political landscapes. Can-do girls were ambitious, confident, determined, empowered, and self-motivated;

[29] Marnina Gonick, "Between 'Girl Power' and 'Reviving Ophelia:' Constituting the Neoliberal Girl Subject," *NWSA Journal* 18, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 2.

as such, they were deemed most likely to withstand late modernity's risk environment and become ideal neoliberal subjects.[30] At-risk girls, on the other hand, were considered to be at risk of failing to develop into this idealized subject. Projansky's argument centered on the discursive and economic implications of spectacularizing girls, which, invariably, reinforced the "intense publicness of contemporary girlhood," making them objects that were always available for consumption, worry, and scrutiny.[31] This spectacularization, Projansky elaborates, was not performed in the same way for all girls but was structured by a color-blind ideology that aligned the can-do designation with white girls and at-risk with black and brown girlhoods both on and offscreen.[32] A consequence of this racialization of celebrated girlhood norms was that girl celebrities of color were spectacularized for having achieved the neoliberal postfeminist promise that girls could avoid becoming at-risk if they worked hard enough,[33] while many others were unable to overcome the discursive pathologization arising from this racialized designation.[34]

As Marnina Gonick, Emma Renold, Jessica Ringrose, and Lisa Weems note, "while girl power emerged within the economic, socio-political context of the 1990s where girls *could* be active, in the 2000s, they are now *expected/demanded* to be fully self-actualized neo-liberal subjects."[35] This expectation that girls direct their own development required them to self-regulate and take advantage of new opportunities in education and employment in order to avoid delinquency. This requirement further decreased parental responsibility for young female delinquency.

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[30] Harris, "The 'Can-Do' Girl Versus the 'At-Risk' Girl," 13-36.
[31] Sarah Projansky, *Spectacular Girls: Media Fascination and Celebrity Culture* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2014), 6-7.
[32] Treva B. Lindsey, "'One Time for my Girls:' African-American Girlhood, Empowerment, and Popular Visual Culture," *Journal of African American Studies* 17, no. 1 (2013): 22-34.
[33] Projansky, *Spectacular Girls*, 5.
[34] Alison Fyfe, "News and the Social Construction of Risky Girls," *Girlhood Studies* 7, no. 1 (Summer 2014): 46-64.
[35] Gonick, et. al., "Rethinking Agency and Resistance," 1-9.

There is a striking difference in the representation of girlhood's "end" in American female coming-of-age films featuring girls who were engaging in risky behavior or rendered vulnerable by difficult circumstances produced between 2000 and 2008, and those released after the 2008 Global Recession. The films produced in the first eight years of the twenty-first century constructed their protagonist's disavowal of high-risk conduct and reflection on lessons learned or speculation about the future as the telos of her girlhood development process. In addition to depicting the protagonist's teleological cultivation of knowledge about herself and her place in the world as the means by which she achieves appropriate femininity, some of these films show authority figures reincorporating the repentant girl into traditional social institutions. Although not an exhaustive list, these films include *Crazy/Beautiful* (John Stockwell, 2001, USA), *White Oleander* (Peter Kosminsky, 2002, USA), *Blue Car* (Karen Moncrieff, 2002, USA), *Thirteen* (Catherine Hardwicke, 2003, USA/UK), *Speak* (Jessica Sharzer, 2004, USA), *Havoc* (Barbara Kopple, 2005, USA/Germany), *Quinceañera* (Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland, 2006, USA), *Stephanie Daley* (Hilary Brougher, 2006, USA), *Juno* (Jason Reitman, 2007, USA), *Nothing is Private/Towelhead* (Alan Ball, 2007, USA), and *Hounddog* (Deborah Kampmeier, 2007, USA).[36] The films' shared understanding of teen girl development as a precarious process fraught with temporary divergences from normative girlhood resembles the therapeutic model designed to recuperate can-do girls who exhibit at-risk traits, which threaten their well-being and future success. In *Spectacular Girls: Media Fascination and Celebrity Culture*, Sarah Projansky references the high-profile scandals of popular girl celebrities, such as Britney Spears and Lindsey Lohan, to illustrate the interdependence of can-do and at-risk discourses in media

[36] *Easy A* (Will Gluck, 2010, USA) is an exception to the temporal limitations I have set for American millennial female coming-of-age films featuring a can-do protagonist whose at-risk behavior is disavowed during the conclusion.

fascination with "the can-do girl who has it all, but who—through weakness and/or the inability to live with the pressure of celebrity during the process of growing up—makes a mistake and therefore faces a spectacular descent into at-risk status." As such, these girls constitute what I have termed "at-risk, can-do" girlhood.[37]

Crucially, these interdependent neoliberal postfeminist discourses about girlhood categorize recipients of these at-risk and can-do designations along racial and class lines: can-do girlhood is most often aligned with white middle- and upper-class girls, whereas black and brown girls or white girls from under- and working-class backgrounds are perceived as being at-risk.[38] Because these designations are grounded in claims that one's success or failure is the result of individual choices and efforts, problems arising from structural disadvantages are deemed the result of poor personal choices, while links between girls' differential access to material and social resources and their capacity to become ideal neoliberal subjects are excluded. As a result, when can-do girls *can't do*, their potential failure is just a temporary setback. At-risk girls, on the other hand, are perceived as having low self-esteem and continuously engaging in self-destructive behavior and dysfunctional relationships: they are at-risk of jeopardizing their futures. As such, their potential for failure is viewed as an inescapable inevitability. As Marnina Gonick argues, "[w]hile upper- and middle-class families have the resources to fill the gap in providing their daughters with the support they may need to 'make it,' daughters of those who

[37] Sarah Projansky, Anita Harris, Sean Fuller and Catherine Driscoll, and Stéphanie Genz offer different designations for these struggling can-do girls: the "crash-and-burn" girl, the "never-good-enough" girl, the "girls who should-be-able-to-but-don't," and the "can't-do" girl. Projansky, *Spectacular Girls*, 4; Harris, *Future Girl*, 33; Fuller and Driscoll, "HBO's *Girls*: Gender, Generation, and Quality Television," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 29, no. 2 (2015): 257; and, Genz, "'I Have Work… I Am Busy…Trying to Become Who I Am': Neoliberal *Girls* and Recessionary Postfeminism," in *Reading Lena Dunham's* Girls: *Feminism*, *Postfeminism*, *Authenticity and Gendered Performance in Contemporary Television*, eds. Meredith Nash and Imelda Whelehan (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2017), 22.

[38] Within my list of millennial can-do female coming-of-age films, *Quinceañera* and *Nothing is Private/Towelhead* both have redeemable protagonists who are girls of color.

are not positioned as dominant may have no such extra assistance."[39] In this respect, can-do girls' inability to fail is essentialized rather than attributed to their access to economic and social resources that ensure their private rehabilitation, whereas at-risk girls' problems with limited resources are managed in public by criminal and legal authorities. I argue that the troubled protagonists in this earlier group of films most resemble the can-do figure of late modernity who is at risk, but through vigilance and regulation can create a successful life trajectory. These films show us at-risk, can-do girls who can escape precarious girlhood. The paucity of contemporaneously released U.S. films depicting an analogous redemption of at-risk girls, who exhibit can-do traits, reflects the kinds of marginalization performed by critical, political, and popular discourses about girlhood since the 1990s.[40]

This dissertation aims to draw attention to a group of post-2009 recessionary films from the United States, Canada, France, Peru, and China that do not present a defined telos for their girl protagonists' coming-of-age processes. Unlike the at-risk, can-do girls in the aforementioned body of films released between 2000 and 2008, the lead characters in my selected case studies are "can-do, at-risk" girls who are unable to escape precarious girlhood, despite their "can-do" attempts to take charge of their lives, make the most of opportunities, and achieve their goals.[41] On one hand, this designation is quite controversial: by engaging problematic variants of traditional tropes of feminine development, these girls "misuse" their individual choice and freedom to create life trajectories that cannot approximate the successful, appropriate femininity celebrated in mainstream political and popular discourses. On the other hand, because the best possible future conceptualized for at-risk girls differs from that of the can-do girl, it could be

[39] Gonick, "Between 'Girl Power' and 'Reviving Ophelia,'" 6.
[40] See, Projansky, *Spectacular Girls*.
[41] Harris, *Future Girl*, 1.

argued that the protagonists in the selected films are just at-risk girls with "misaligned ambitions."[42] But a closer look at the girls' characterization as ambitious, desiring subjects alongside the central premise of neoliberal postfeminist girlhood, which claims that girls can avoid failure and achieve their goals through individual hard work, reveals that my "can-do, at-risk" designation is warranted.[43] If we take seriously the idea that new opportunities for individual choice and empowerment within neoliberalism enable girls and young women from all backgrounds to succeed equally, then the protagonists in my selected case studies *should* be able to break free from the at-risk designation, as Anita Harris explains:

> The state of at-risk is depicted as a set of personal limitations that can be overcome through sufficient effort. However, it also acts as a warning to all young women that failure is an ever-lurking possibility that must be staved off through sustained application.[44]

By showing filmic protagonists who are unable to prevent or alleviate their precarity through individual effort, these films interrogate the idea that the state of at-risk is solely the result of personal failings. A central preoccupation of these texts is the girl protagonist's fluctuating feelings of empowerment and disempowerment as she pursues alternative modes of agency and resistance. While the experience of intersecting forms of precarity is framed as an obstacle to the girls' enculturation into appropriate adult femininity, its emergence as a shared condition of girlhood across films from culturally-diverse contexts draws out connections between differential social capital and the gendering of risk and recessionary environments. Contemporaneously released films about precarious boyhood development, such as *The Selfish Giant* (Clio Barnard, 2013, UK), *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016, USA), and *Beach Rats* (Eliza Hittman, 2017, USA),

[42] Ibid., 26.
[43] Sarah Projansky argues that can-do girlhood is "a fantasy promise that if girls work hard, not only can they avoid becoming at-risk, but they can achieve anything." Projansky, *Spectacular Girls*, 5.
[44] Harris, *Future Girl*, 27.

are far less common and tend to connect their protagonists' difficult transitions to adulthood with their queer sexual identities.[45]

There are, however, narrative films predating the Great Recession that portray girlhood development as an ongoing transition that never reaches completion. The works of Sofia Coppola and Catherine Breillat, for example, center on young white girls and young women who are ambivalent about their enculturation into adult femininity and the films' conclusions either end the characters' lives prematurely or portray their futures as unknowable.[46] Caitlin Yunuen Lewis attributes this developmental aimlessness in Coppola's first three feature films—*The Virgin Suicides* (1999), *Lost in Translation* (2003), and *Marie Antoinette* (2006)—to the protagonists' postfeminist melancholia about the constraints of their white, affluent femininity.[47] Noting how the role of emerging female sexual desire in Breillat's *Une vraie jeune fille*/*A Real Young Girl* (1976, France), *36 fillette*/*Virgin* (1988, France), and *A ma soeur!*/*Fat Girl* (2000, France/Italy), Lynsey Russell-Watts argues that this "transition is shown to be remarkably fraught, just as the process of viewing these films can be painful, and also to be not at all a transition with an obvious or simple conclusion."[48] Scholarly analyses of millennial cultural texts which foreground the precariousness of feminine subject formation, such as Mia Hansen-Løve's early films and the popular television series *Girls* (HBO: 2012-2017), have offered readings of

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[45] Earlier films about boyhood precarity include *El Bola* (Achero Mañas, 2000, Spain), *Sweet Sixteen* (Ken Loach, 2002, UK), *Pure* (Gillies MacKinnon, 2002, UK), *Bullet Boy* (Saul Dibb, 2005, UK), *This is England* (Shane Meadows, 2006, UK), *London to Brighton* (Paul Andrew Williams, 2006, UK), and *The Selfish Giant* (Clio Barnard, 2013, UK).

[46] The protagonists in *The Virgin Suicides* and *Marie Antoinette*, for example, escape these constraints through death, albeit Marie Antoinette's (Kirsten Dunst) demise is connected to the French Revolution and remains offscreen in the film's conclusion.

[47] Caitlin Yunuen Lewis, "Cool Postfeminism: The Stardom of Sofia Coppola," in *In the Limelight and Under the Microscope: Forms and Functions of Female Celebrity*, eds. Su Holmes and Diane Negra (New York and London: Continuum, 2011), 190.

[48] Lynsey Russell-Watts, "(Re)Viewing Resistance: The Psychoanalytic Encounter in Breillat, Calle, Denis and Duras," (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2005), 39, quoted in Emma Wilson, "Precarious Lives: On Girls in Mia Hansen-Løve and Others," *Studies in French Cinema* 12, no. 3 (2012): 277.

this process that range from characterizing it as a natural occurrence, or as the result of recessionary postfeminism.[49] But little consideration has been given to the incomplete coming-of-age processes of non-white, non-Western girls and young women onscreen, or those excluded from norms of contemporary girlhood such as Indigenous girls.

Neoliberal Postfeminism: Primary Concerns and Theoretical Exclusions

My rationale for expanding analysis of this representational logic beyond white girlhood and American cinema is twofold: first, feminist scholars have largely tended to characterize postfeminism as a philosophy implicating only middle- and upper-class white girls and women living in the West/Global North; second, postfeminism is circulated transnationally through globalization, hailing girls and women living beyond the West in the Global South. I first identified a shift in the depiction of girlhood's end in three critically-acclaimed American independent female coming-of-age films exploring the entanglement of economic and housing insecurities: *Precious: Based on the Novel 'Push' by Sapphire* (hereafter *Precious*), *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (hereafter *Beasts*). Placing these films in conversation revealed that they deployed neoliberal postfeminist tropes to present their impoverished, at-risk protagonists as resilient heroines overcoming tremendous obstacles. In doing so, these films reconfigure postfeminism's class and racial politics in service of rehabilitating America's reputation following the global Great Recession, which was triggered by its subprime mortgage crisis (2007-2010), and the failure of its financial institutions.

Given the extensive fallout of the global financial crisis and the recurring figuration of the girl as a symbol of national progress and anxieties in popular culture, I sought to explore

[49] For examples, see, Wilson, "Precarious Lives," 273-284; and, Genz, "'I Have Work… I Am Busy…Trying to Become Who I Am,'" 17-30.

analogous reconfigurations of neoliberal postfeminism in relation to precarious girlhood within other national cinemas. Scholarly analyses of postfeminist tropes in narrative cinema are mainly confined to Euro-American texts with a feminine address, such as "chick flicks," girl teen films, and romantic comedies that favor white female protagonists. This is because feminist scholars tend to treat postfeminism as a strictly Western phenomenon that hails affluent white girls and women. Ongoing methodological debates about what postfeminism *is* contribute to the range of contexts in which the term is used, including as a backlash against the failures of ("second-wave") feminism to deliver its promises, a historical shift, an analytic perspective, a political response to feminist accounts of gender difference, a cultural discourse, and even as a sensibility. Regardless of the varying uses of the term, the consensus among feminist scholars of postfeminism is that its celebration of female empowerment involves the taking for granted second-wave feminist gains, and the belief that feminism is no longer a necessary or desirable political stance.

However, as Angela McRobbie points out in *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change*, there are clear resonances between postfeminism and third-wave feminism, which describes second-wave feminism as an oppressive movement that forced women to suppress their individuality, feminine qualities and enjoyment of conventionally feminine pursuits such as commercial consumerism, wearing makeup, nail polish, and high heels.[50] For Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, third-wave feminism is a natural progression in the fight for women's freedom: it recovers young women's voices and provides opportunities to reclaim feminine culture, girlishness, heterosexual romance, and sexual freedom

[50] McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 157-159.

as valid and *powerful* expressions of one's feminist convictions.[51] Hilary Radner presents an interesting alternative to the notion that the failures of second-wave feminism are responsible for the Western postfeminist cultural landscape, by arguing that the intertwinement of neoliberalism and neo-feminism, a movement that developed alongside second-wave feminism, has influenced "girly" pop-cultural texts that emphasize the role of consumerism in women's processes of self-definition.[52]

I agree with Rosalind Gill's conceptualization of postfeminism as a contradictory cultural sensibility that is comprised of interrelated anti-feminist and feminist themes, inextricably entangled with neoliberalism, and circulated extensively within popular media culture and recessionary self-help resources addressed to female audiences.[53] Writing in 2007, Gill outlines the most salient elements of this contemporary sensibility as the encouragement of girls and women to concentrate on making authentic, self-pleasing choices; a preoccupation with femininity as an essential bodily property; the encouragement to embrace traditional notions of gender difference; the characterization of girls and women's sexual self-objectification as personal empowerment; and the promotion of commercial consumption, self-surveillance and discipline as enriching forms of self-improvement.[54] Gill revisits feminist debates about postfeminism in a 2016 article, noting that new emerging feminisms and the increased visibility

[51] Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, "Feminism and Femininity: Or How We Learned to Stop Worrying and love the Thong," in *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, ed. Anita Harris (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 59-68.
[52] Hilary Radner, *Neo-Feminist Cinema: Girly Films, Chick Flicks and Consumer Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011).
[53] See, Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (2007): 147-166; Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad, "The Amazing Bounce-Backable Woman: Resilience and the Psychological Turn in Neoliberalism," *Sociological Research Online* 23, no. 2 (2018): 477-495.
[54] Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture," 147-166.

of feminist social-media activism have presumably ushered in a post-postfeminist era that renders postfeminism obsolete or redundant as an analytical category.[55]

I view postfeminism as a transtemporal cultural sensibility that emerged within the West in response to feminism, albeit in the 1920s, which is a much earlier timeframe than is often theorized. Sarah Projansky and Susan Bordo have argued that an early instantiation of postfeminism emerged during the 1920s among professional American women, in response to the gains of first-wave feminism, shortly after receiving the right to vote. In her taxonomy of postfeminist discourses, Projansky describes how the term's "post" prefix situates postfeminism historically as a backlash against second-wave feminism, but also notes its transtemporal operations as "an always available hegemonic response" that reworks feminism.[56] Along similar lines, Bordo points out that many of the professional women during the same period repudiated the feminist activism of an earlier generation, its emphasis on gender difference and direct critique of patriarchal institutions, preferring instead to use a gender neutral approach to advocate for the erasure of prescriptive gender roles.[57] Noting how parallels between our contemporary cultural context and the conditions facing women during the 1920s and 1930s reveal postfeminism's discursive adaptability to co-opt and rework feminist ideals, Projansky and Bordo remove postfeminism from its constraining linear narrative and conceptualization as a philosophy aiming to replace feminism. Further, as Projansky observes, recognizing postfeminism as a flexible discursive strategy allows us to identify how it hails both "actual" and "fictional" female figures indiscriminately.[58] This understanding of postfeminism, as a flexible

[55] Rosalind Gill, "Post-postfeminism?: New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times," *Feminist Media Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016): 610-630.
[56] Sarah Projansky, "The Postfeminist Context: Popular Redefinitions of Feminism, 1980-Present," in *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2001), 88.
[57] Susan Bordo, "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender-Scepticism," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 151-152.
[58] Projansky, "The Postfeminist Context," 88-89.

cultural discourse emerging in 1920s America, therefore provides the theoretical foundation for my dialogical analyses of post-2009 recessionary precarious girlhood development films, and the basis for comparison with the representational force of spectacular young, gendered figures and female coming-of-age films that circulated globally during the interwar period.

It is worth noting that many scholars situate the emergence of neoliberalism, or neoliberal governmentality, as a political ideology within the 1930s, but note its ascendancy in Chinese, American, and European governments during the early 1980s.[59] "Neoliberalism," David Harvey explains, "is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong property rights, free markets, and free trade."[60] Noting the ideological entanglements of neoliberal and postfeminist discourses, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff draw out parallels between the "autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism" and the "active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subject of postfeminism" to affirm that postfeminism is both a sensibility and a backlash against feminism.[61] These insights highlight how the ideals of neoliberal postfeminism define the contours of identity formation in late modernity.

[59] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*, trans. Graham Burchell, ed. Michel Senellart (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 132.
[60] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 61.
[61] Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, eds., "Introduction," in *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 7.

Defining Precarity

There are important parallels between the socioeconomic climate leading up to and during the Great Recession and the interval between World War I and World War II, which was marked by the increasing interconnectedness of global financial markets and growing anti-interventionist, political and racial nationalisms.[62] Most significantly, these contradictory forces, combined with regulatory discourses about the real and figurative 1920s/1930s Modern Girl's involvement in commodity culture, depiction in cultural texts, sexuality, as well as her representation of national ideals and fears. This combination presents a unique point of comparison to explore how the interplay of class, cultural, gender, national, and racial identities intersects with economic uncertainty to make the achievement of adult femininity an "always incomplete and precarious activity that transforms 'identity' from a 'given' into a 'task.'"[63]

As a result, one of the primary ways that the films analyzed in this dissertation engage with the notion of precarity is through their protagonists' subject formation. While precarity is often discussed in relation to low wages, job instability, and underemployment, the filmic forms of girlhood precarity addressed in this project include bodily vulnerability, economic insecurity, and varying degrees of social marginalization as well as the construction of feminine development as a difficult process that lacks both a clear direction and a definitive goal. As Judith Butler observes, precariousness and precarity overlap conceptually, with the former being a facet of life itself, and the latter referring to a "politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death."[64] For many of the protagonists in my case

[62] The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group, eds., "The Modern Girl as Heuristic Device," in *The Modern Girl Around the World* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 9.
[63] Genz, "'I Have Work… I Am Busy…Trying to Become Who I Am,'" 21.
[64] Butler, *Frames of War*, 25.

studies, bodily precariousness is more than just ontological, it is also profoundly gendered and includes threats and experiences of sexual assault. But as Anita Harris observes, this lack of certainty about girls' futures is presented positively within neoliberalism as a matter of individual expression, choice, and freedom. The argument is that girls from all backgrounds are now empowered equally to make decisions about their lives and pursue their passions. Harris writes that:

> In today's risk society individuals are expected to be flexible, adaptable, resilient, and ultimately responsible for their own ability to manage their lives successfully. One's own life becomes a personal project much like a do-it-yourself assemblage or…a 'choice biography' that can be crafted as one desires, rather than a fixed set of predictable stages and experiences.[65]

This description of "forced improvisation" is relevant for my analysis of the selected films because it contextualizes their characterizations of girlhood's end and establishes the link between neoliberalism's emphasis on individuality and its institutionalization of precarity.[66] But perhaps more importantly, these remarks help to illuminate a neoliberal postfeminist tendency in recessionary media culture that Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker argue situates the redress of precarity on the individual level rather than on the governmental.[67] Under neoliberalism, the dissolution of long-term relationships and community bonds that were historically linked to the cultivation of self-knowledge and self-location requires individuals to adopt an entrepreneurial approach for subject- and meaning-making.[68] While the films studied within this dissertation all portray their protagonist's self-regulation as the best method for addressing experiences of precarity, each girl's degree of success in alleviating her problems is dependent on her

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[65] Harris, *Future Girl*, 8.
[66] Lauren Berlant, "Austerity, Precarity, Awkwardness," Paper presentation, *Sensing Precarity* panel, American Anthropological Association, November 25, 2011, https://supervalentthought.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/berlant-aaa-2011final.pdf.
[67] Negra and Tasker, eds., "Introduction: Gender and Recessionary Culture," 2.
[68] Harris, *Future Girl*, 4-6.

proficiency navigating risks and creating alternative means for self-transformation. In this respect, there are few instances to consider how the communities portrayed in these fictional onscreen worlds might transform their girl protagonist's precarity, but even these moments are constrained by the texts' postfeminist cultural sensibilities.[69]

Reading these similarly-themed films together creates space to consider how their depictions of precariousness as an inescapable way of being calls the neoliberal postfeminist emphasis on individualism into question. For Fausta (Magaly Solier) and Aila (Kawennáhere Devery Jacobs), the female protagonists of *La teta asustada* and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* respectively, their precarious positioning is doubly articulated through their exclusion, as Indigenous girls, from contemporary girlhood norms and through a confluence of colonial and neocolonial forces that disproportionately affect their Indigenous communities. Fausta's understanding of her precarity involves the fashioning of an unconventional tool of self-preservation that becomes a symbol of her potential flourishing. In a similar vein, Aila's self-protection is only achievable through unorthodox means, however, the possibility of achieving adult femininity is dependent on her individual choices and ongoing surveillance by a community elder. Precious (Gabourey Sidibe), Ree (Jennifer Lawrence), and Hushpuppy (Quvenzhané Wallis), the lead female characters of *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* intentionally eschew institutional interventions and learn to draw on individual inner strength to overcome the threats constructing their precarity; while the protagonists in *Bande de filles*, *Guo chun tian*, and *Spring Breakers* take matters in their own hands through their exploration of criminal behavior as a vehicle for acquiring desirable goods and recreational experiences.

[69] In *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* Judith Butler argues that the experience of life as precarious requires a "social ontology" rather than an "ontology of individualism." Butler, *Frames of War*, 19.

Precarious Politics of Representation

While my dialogical analysis concentrates on festival films that center the contradictions of this interdependent at-risk/can-do discourse in thematically similar ways, only a subset of this selected group has garnered controversy for its precarious politics of representation: *La teta asustada*, *Precious*, *Beasts*, and *Spring Breakers*. These representations of gendered precarity prompted debates amongst critical and audience reviewers about whether they objectified their protagonists or offered realistic, and sometimes inspirational, portrayals of important social issues. I argue that these controversies are ignited by the protagonists' embodiment and enactment of these mutually-constitutive narratives about girlhood. Scholarly analyses of *La teta asustada*, for example, pointed to the ways the film structured an exoticizing gaze and drew on recurring racist cultural tropes of indigenous Peruvian young women, while simultaneously highlighting the unique agency of Fausta (Magaly Solier), its traumatized girl protagonist and the legacy of Peruvian state violence.[70] Much of the controversy about *Precious* concerned its offensive stereotyping of African-American precarious girlhood and social pathologies, which some critics read as markers of its cultural address to white audiences; others identified an implicit narrative critique of Reaganomics and the harmful policies that marginalized black communities during the 1980s.[71] In its first iteration as the one-act play *Juicy and Delicious*, Lucy Alibar's semi-autobiographical account of a child confronting its taciturn father's illness

[70] See, Iliana Pagán-Teitelbaum, "Glamour in the Andes: Indigenous Women in Peruvian Cinema," *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* 7, no. 1 (2012): 71-93; Maria Chiara D'Argenio, "A Contemporary Andean Type: The Representation of the Indigenous World in Claudia Llosa's Films," *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* 8, no. 1 (2013): 20-42; Rebeca Maseda, "Indigenous Trauma in Mainstream Peru in Claudia Llosa's *The Milk of Sorrow*," *Dissidences: Hispanic Journal of Theory and Criticism* 6, no. 11 (2016): 13.

[71] See, Courtland Milloy, "*Precious*: A Film as Lost as the Girl It Glorifies," review of *Precious: Based on the Novel 'Push' By Sapphire*, by Lee Daniels, *Washington Post*, November 18, 2009, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/11/17/AR2009111703465.html; Darryl Lorenzo Wellington, "Looking for Precious," *Crisis* 117, no. 1 (2010): 26-30; Felicia R. Lee, "*Precious* Spawns Racial Debate: She's Demeaned or Angelic," *The New York Times*, November 21, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/21/movies/21precious.html; Mia Mask, "The Precarious Politics of *Precious*: A Close Reading of a Cinematic Text," *Black Camera* 4, no.1 (2012): 96-116.

and death featured a white boy named Hushpuppy living in a fantastical community in the American South. The casting of a black actor, six-year-old Quvenzhané Wallis, in the lead role of *Beasts* simultaneously sparked controversy for the film's portrayals of what many perceived as racist stereotypes of black male violence, poverty, and child endangerment, and praise for the film's endearing "bootstrap" narrative.[72] Finally, *Spring Breakers*' persistent images of topless and bikini-clad young women binge-drinking, using illegal drugs, and involved in risky situations caught the attention of reviewers who debated whether the film presented an empowering feminist message or objectified its female characters.[73] While these discussions help make sense of the ways these films rely on progressive and regressive elements to construct their protagonists' agency and subjectivities, these critiques also inadvertently demonstrate that postfeminism is not, as Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra have argued, Western "white and middle class by default."[74] This dissertation aims to show that through their incorporation of racial and class differences and their engagement with feminist and anti-feminist themes, these

[72] See, Manohla Dargis, "At Sundance, 'Beasts of the Southern Wild' is a Standout," *The New York Times*, January 27, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/28/movies/at-sundance-beasts-of-the-southern-wild-is-standout.html; Steve Friedman, "Lucy Alibar: From Broke to Phenomenon," *Elle*, October 16, 2012, http://www.elle.com/culture/movies-tv/a12541/lucy-alibar-interview/; Franz Lidz, "How Benh Zeitlin Made *Beasts of the Southern Wild*," *Smithsonian Magazine*, December 2012, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/how-benh-zeitlin-made-beasts-of-the-southern-wild-135132724/; Katie Walsh, "'Beasts of the Southern Wild' Writer Lucy Alibar on Turning the Play into a Film, Visions of the Apocalypse & More," *IndieWire*, December 21, 2012, https://www.indiewire.com/2012/12/beasts-of-the-southern-wild-writer-lucy-alibar-on-turning-the-play-into-a-film-visions-of-the-apocalypse-more-250021/.

[73] For a small sample of reviews debating the portrayal of female characters in the film see, David Edelstein, "Three New Films Examine What It Means When Girls Act Out," *Fresh Air*, NPR, March 15, 2013, *https://www.npr.org/2013/03/15/174322481/three-new-films-examine-what-it-means-when-girls-act-out*; Josh Eells, "Inside 'Spring Breakers,' the Most Debauched Movie of the Year," *Rolling Stone*, March 15, 2013, https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-news/inside-spring-breakers-the-most-debauched-movie-of-the-year-184469/; Richard Roeper, "Review: Spring Breakers," *Roger Ebert*, March 20, 2013, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/spring-breakers-2013-1; Heather Long, "Spring Breakers Isn't Just a Terrible Movie, It Reinforces Rape Culture," *The Guardian*, March 28, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/mar/28/spring-breakers-movie-wild-girls-rape-culture;

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

narratives of precarious girlhood offer a broader analysis of how postfeminism hails white and non-white girls and young women living in and beyond the West.

Rationale for Selection and Limitations of the Cinematic Corpus

The narrative feature films that I selected for analysis were released between 2009 and 2018 and received prestigious awards during their circulation within the international film festival network. In 2009, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) formally identified the global downturn caused by the 2007-2008 American subprime mortgage and international banking crises as a Global Recession.[75] Although the effects of this recession were experienced differently throughout the world, Western government responses were, for the most part, similar, with European countries and the United States introducing austerity measures and/or bailouts to financial institutions with taxpayer funds. These effects and measures continued well into the first decade of the millennium. These events, alongside critiques of neoliberal postfeminist girlhood's failure to deliver upward mobility and the ability to avoid becoming at-risk through hard work,[76] make the chosen timeframe for the selected films ideal for exploring how the notion of precarity reconfigures conventional themes of girlhood development and obfuscates the telos of this difficult process.

The dissertation demonstrates that female-led Anglo-American and Western-European films and television programs with a feminine address are not the sole provenance of these tropes. It also highlights the appearance of neoliberal postfeminist discourse in different film genres. Second, engaging with these case studies allows for an intersectional analysis of the

[75] Bob Davis, "What's a Global Recession?," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 22, 2009, https://blogs.wsj.com/economics/2009/04/22/whats-a-global-recession/.
[76] Sarah Projansky argues that can-do girlhood is "a fantasy promise that if girls work hard, not only can they avoid becoming at-risk, but they can achieve anything." Projansky, *Spectacular Girls*, 5.

cultural and political questions raised by postfeminism as they pertain to matters of agency, choice, empowerment, and resistance in different national contexts. As a result, my project has clear limitations in terms of the selected films' central themes, release dates, levels of critical acclaim, and involvement in the international film festival.

Concentrating on festival films was a strategic choice, given their global cultural capital and lauded portrayals of girls undergoing irregular coming-of-age processes. Circulated as prized national texts within the international film festival circuit, these coming-of-age films have undergone their own significant rites of passage through their selection for festival programming, their participation in festival rituals, and their receipt of prestigious festival awards.[77] As Marijke de Valck has argued, not only is this cultural industry a pathway to films' cultural legitimization, it is also the means of bestowing hierarchical symbolic value, with financial implications, through the festivals' differing power relations.[78] The films this dissertation analyzes have received recognition at one or more of the major film festivals,[79] which speaks to their aesthetic and cultural achievements, and also reflects their successful address to a globalized audience.[80] Their shared cultural positioning and unconscious thematic intertextuality place them in conversation, forming an unintended cinema of precarious girlhood that constitutes a rich site of analysis.

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[77] In *Film Festivals*, Marijke de Valck draws on Victor Turner's work on rites of passage to characterize film festivals as "a zone, a liminal state, where the cinematic products can bask in the attention they receive for their aesthetic achievements, cultural specificity, or social relevance." de Valck, *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia* (Amsterdam University Press, 2007), 37. In this light, the films' coming-of-age journeys are more complete than the processes of development they depict.

[78] Ibid., 36-41.

[79] The "Big Three" film festivals are Festival de Cannes, The Berlinale/The Berlin International Film Festival, Venice International Film Festival, with Toronto International Film Festival considered a major determinant of Academy Award contenders. It is worth noting that *Winter's Bone*, *Precious: Based on the Novel 'Push' by Sapphire*, and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* all premiered at the Sundance Film Festival.

[80] Marijke de Valck writes, "[b]ecause there is a hierarchy within the international film festival circuit and some film festivals have a higher status than others, the cultural value-adding process at film festivals is closely related to the relational status of festivals." Ibid., 38.

However, these case studies do not comprise an exhaustive list of contemporary films exploring precarity or neoliberal postfeminist themes in relation to female adolescence. Within the festival network, contemporaneously-released precarious girlhood films about queer adolescence, teen marriage, or motherhood present a range of experiences that exceed and trouble (hetero)normative categories of childhood. The smart cinema of Sofia Coppola, the action-adventure heroines of the *Kick-Ass* (2010, 2013), *The Hunger Games* (2012-2015), and the *Divergent* (2014-2016) film franchises engage the "failing" can-do discourses of neoliberal postfeminism in different ways. Coppola's oeuvre features young female protagonists whose struggle to achieve adult femininity constitutes a psychological form of precarious girlhood that only afflicts privileged white girls; the action-adventure heroines depict a self-defining, resistant strain of this gendered designation; and, *Girls'* white, privileged, university-educated protagonists strive to become financially-independent of parental support and secure the markers of successful adulthood.

Although there are a few contemporary films depicting queer and trans girlhood development as a perpetual becoming that "refuses to arrive,"[81] there are gaps in the representation of how unstable social and economic landscapes might affect this process.[82] This gap, along with pervasive postfeminist representational strategies that privilege heteronormativity, limits the forms of girlhood precarity this dissertation explores. Critically

[81] Clara Bradbury-Rance traces the emergence of the lesbian figure in film and television from the 1980s through the early 2010s. Using *Naissance des pieuvres*/*Water Lilies* (Céline Sciamma, 2007, France), *Apflickorna*/*She Monkeys* (Lisa Aschan, 2011, Sweden), and *Circumstance* (Maryam Keshavarz, 2011, France/USA/Iran) as case studies, Bradbury-Rance identifies a representational shift in the figuration of adolescent sexuality involving new modes of subjectivity and desire. Bradbury-Rance, "Figuring the Lesbian: Queer Feminist Readings of Cinema in the Era of the Visible" (PhD diss., University of Manchester, 2016).

[82] While Lucia Puenzo's *El niño pez*/*The Fish Child* (2009, Argentina/France/Spain) explores both class difference and female same-sex desire it does not emphasize individual responsibility as a solution to economic and social precarity. In *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (Desiree Akhavan, 2018, USA), the protagonist's girlhood precarity is constructed by the homophobia of her small-town Christian community and abusive conversion therapy program.

acclaimed films about queer adolescence, such as the semi-autobiographical *Pariah* (Dee Rees, 2011, USA) and *52 Tuesdays* (Sophie Hyde, 2014, Australia) which emphasize the role of changing familial dynamics in the girl protagonists' difficult cultivation of self-knowledge are welcome complements to this study. However, given their engagement with themes only recently recurrent in girlhood cinema, rather than conventional themes of feminine development, they exceeded the scope of the project. In *Pariah*, Alike (Adepero Oduye) is a queer, black teenage girl from a middle-class family whose attempts to self-define are initially disorienting experiences and eventually result in a break from familial dysfunction and expectations. After learning that her mother is gender transitioning, *52 Tuesdays*' protagonist Billie (Tilda Cobham-Hervey), a white Australian teenage girl, tests the limits of their familial relationship and explores her sexuality through a sexual relationship involving a male and female student from her high school. It is worth noting that unlike many contemporary films about teenage same-sex or bisexual attraction released during the same period, *Pariah* and *52 Tuesdays* do not make coming-out synonymous with coming-of-age, nor do they rely on sensationalistic sex scenes to mark transitions from innocent girlhood into experienced adult femininity.[83] For these reasons, a dialogical reading of the films could create opportunities to challenge the heteronormativity of neoliberal postfeminist discourses and to examine the ongoing process of queer girlhood development in relation to these philosophies.[84] However, their failure to address economic unpredictability and social fragmentation as intertwined issues affecting the passage to adulthood necessarily excludes them from analysis in this project.

[83] By way of comparison, consider the sex scenes in *Black Swan* (Darren Aronofsky, 2010, USA) and *Blue is the Warmest Color* (Abdellatif Kechiche, 2013, France/Belgium/Spain).
[84] McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 58.

There may be other female coming-of-age films released after 2009, which foreground the bodily and economic precarity of their marginalized protagonists, however not all of these present potential critiques of neoliberal postfeminist tropes and make spectators privy to the emotional and mental processes of these girls. *Rebelle*/*War Witch* (Kim Nguyen, 2012, Canada) and *Grzeli nateli dgeebi*/*In Bloom* (Nana Ekvtimishvili and Simon Groß, 2013, Georgia/German/France), for example, foreground matters of girl agency and resistance by using their wartime contexts to reframe two gendered public markers of this transition from childhood to adulthood: motherhood and marriage. Through voiceover narration addressed to her unborn child, *Rebelle*'s Komona (Rachel Mwanza) reflects on her abduction by rebel forces in sub-Saharan Africa, and her experiences as a clairvoyant child soldier, as a wife/widow, and as a military sex slave. Despite their class differences, *Grzeli nateli dgeebi*'s adolescent best friends, Eka (Lika Babluani) and Natia (Mariam Bokeria) both grapple with food shortages and they discover an unconventional method of protecting themselves against male violence and the threat of bride kidnapping. While the dialogical analysis of these films would enable readings problematizing the legitimacy of marriage and motherhood as definitive social markers of the achievement of adult femininity, their treatment of the imperiled girl figure as shorthand for deciphering complex global conflicts conforms to prevailing constructions of victimized Global South girlhood.

While Sofia Coppola's first three feature films and the action-adventure dystopian franchises also depict precarious girlhood development as a contingent process that is fraught with ambivalence and difficulties, they treat the circumstances contributing to their protagonists'

precarity as escapable.[85] The texts' construction of precarity as temporary, rather than as the sustained bodily and social conditions portrayed within my case studies, is indicative of the way that neoliberal postfeminism frames can-do girls' potential for failure. Moreover, given their centering of white American girls, their variants of precarious girlhood reproduce, rather than critique, the centering of white can-do girlhood as both normative and aspirational, as I demonstrate in the next sections.

The protagonists of Sofia Coppola's early feature films unintentionally epitomize the "off-track" can-do girlhood that concerned educators and psychologists throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s. Speaking of *Marie Antoinette* (2006), Coppola notes its similarities to *The Virgin Suicides* (1999) and *Lost in Translation* (2003), and she characterizes their depictions of feminine development as a "kind of wandering around, trying to grow up."[86] During the 1990s, many experts medicalized this aimlessness and can-do girls' feelings of overwhelm, arising from expectations that they become successful, as symptoms of mental health issues. They recommended the girls be monitored and treated therapeutically to ensure their rehabilitation and future success.[87] The dreamy aestheticization of precarious girlhood in Coppola's debut feature, *The Virgin Suicides*, unintentionally countered this idea that the can-do girl-in-crisis could be recuperated through increased surveillance and regulation. Set during the 1970s in a Michigan suburb, the film recounts the events leading up to the unexplained suicides

[85] *Lost in Translation* (2003) is the exception in this grouping of Coppola's films, which includes *The Virgin Suicides* (1999) and *Marie Antoinette* (2006), because its protagonist does not die. In the dystopian film series, the girls escape their precariousness through personal choice and effort.
[86] Kristin Hohenadel, "French Royalty as Seen by Hollywood Royalty," *The New York Times*, September 10, 2006, https://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/10/movies/moviesspecial/10hohe.html.
[87] See, Carol Gilligan, Nona P. Lyons, and Trudy J. Hanmer, eds., *Making Connections: The Relational Worlds* (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1994). Another influential book, which was also the inspiration for the film *Mean Girls* (Mark Waters, 2004, USA), is Rosalind Wiseman's *Queen Bees and Wannabes*. Wiseman, *Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2002).

of five sisters (Cecelia/13, Lux/14, Bonnie/15, Mary/16, and Therese/17) through the childhood recollections of an unidentified male narrator who, like other boys from the neighborhood, continues to be infatuated with the girls twenty-five years later. The girls' parents, Mr. (James Woods) and Mrs. Lisbon (Kathleen Turner), become progressively overprotective after their youngest daughter does not survive a second suicide attempt: they forcibly confine the remaining girls to the family home when Lux (Kirsten Dunst) misses her curfew after having sex with her prom date, and they attempt to limit the girls' access to pop-cultural influences with a disastrously failed record burning. The girls' difficulties managing expectations related to their performance of appropriate femininity are expressed on an individual and on a collective level: Lux has sex with boys on the roof of the house at night, while the girls share a series of coded pop-cultural exchanges with their teenage boy admirers, and later fulfill a suicide pact.

Although less grim in its characterization of the existential despair plaguing white can-do girls' who feel burdened by their prescribed roles, *Lost in Translation* follows Charlotte (Scarlett Johansson), a recent university graduate and newlywed, who is accompanying her celebrity photographer husband on a Tokyo work trip. Scenes highlighting the nature of Charlotte's journey of self-discovery create parallels between her aimless exploration of a foreign culture and her unsuccessful search for meaningful personal experiences; they also draw attention to her feelings of alienation by showing moments in which she is unable to conceal her disdain for the superficial interactions that comprise her husband's professional life. Charlotte's relational disconnection is further underscored when she confesses her desperation to a friend during an emotional phone call and instead of being comforted, is encouraged to enjoy her vacation. Connection with a kindred spirit appears in the form of a brief, chaste romance with the film's secondary protagonist, Bob Harris (Bill Murray), an aging American actor filming a whisky

commercial in Japan. This relationship offers Charlotte a temporary respite from an existential despair that the film ultimately never resolves.[88]

In a similar vein, Coppola's rock music-driven biopic *Marie Antoinette* frames her excessive consumption of pleasurable commodities as a mode of self-exploration and as a coping mechanism to manage the expectations of white, upper-class femininity. Like Charlotte, *Marie Antoinette*'s eponymous heroine (Kirsten Dunst) is an unhappy, young newlywed; however, her relational disconnection from her husband, Louis XVI (Jason Schwartzman) has greater implications given the public scrutiny of the royal court: their marriage remains unconsummated for much of the film and she is required to produce an heir. Crucially, the film makes the facts of Marie's expenditures, the political climate, and her public execution extratextual; and, through these omissions, the film's conclusion situates her, like the Lisbon girls and Charlotte, in a suspended state of perpetual at-risk, can-do girlhood.[89]

Brave New Heroines: The Serial-Queens of *Kick-Ass*, *The Hunger Games*, and *Divergent*

The end of the first decade of the twenty-first century ushered in another version of white "at-risk, can-do" girlhood onscreen.[90] Unlike the melancholic, hyperfeminine protagonists in *The Virgin Suicides*, *Lost in Translation*, and *Marie Antoinette*, who despite occupying positions of

[88] Anna Backman Rogers' reading of *Lost in Translation*'s ending, wherein Bob whispers in Charlotte's ear and they briefly kiss, is a striking departure from much of the critical writing and scholarship about this moment. Rather than see this as an optimistic exchange pointing to Charlotte's positive future, Backman Rogers argues the film encourages viewers to recognize the meaninglessness of life and its lack of coherence. Backman Rogers, *Sofia Coppola: The Politics of Visual Pleasure* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2019), 70-71.

[89] Given this erasure of Marie Antoinette's demise, I disagree with Sofia Coppola's claim that this character achieved adult femininity, unlike the figures of *The Virgin Suicides* and *Lost in Translation*, who were "always sort of on the verge." Hohenadel, "French Royalty as Seen by Hollywood Royalty."

[90] It is important to note that my term "at-risk, can-do" girlhood differs drastically from Sarah Projansky's "crash-and-burn" can-do girls who through bad decision-making squander their opportunities and earn the at-risk designation. Projansky's taxonomy of the "crash-and-burn" girl includes "train wreck" girl celebrities such as Britney Spears and Lindsay Lohan, who became embroiled in scandals during their transitions from child to adult actor. Projansky, *Spectacular Girls*, 4.

privilege are unable to exercise their personal agency meaningfully, this new figure directly confronts the circumstances that construct her marginalization. Precariously situated in society, yet highly agentic and empowered, she heroically navigates dramatic sociopolitical changes and epitomizes the paradoxical construction of girlhood-as-social problem/progress. Most serendipitously, this new "at-risk, can-do" girl emerged during the Global Recession, in the wake of the United States' subprime mortgage crisis, through top-earning film franchises such as the *Kick-Ass* series (2010, 2013), *The Hunger Games* quartet (2012-2015), and the *Divergent* trilogy (2014-2016).[91] Given the socioeconomic context of their release dates, I read these cultural expressions of new feminine subjectivity as neoliberal narrative apologia, insofar as they celebrate self-governing characters who refuse to rely on the state for their welfare and development. As such, I discuss these dystopian films to establish how the agentic recessionary feminine subjectivities they portray differ from the ones depicted in the films analyzed in this project.

Although released contemporaneously with the cinematic corpus this dissertation examines, these blockbusters could not be more different in their construction of precarious girlhood development. In the first installment of the graphic novel-to-film adaptation of *Kick-Ass*, former cop Damon McCready/ Big Daddy (Nicolas Cage), trains his eleven-year-old daughter Mindy McCready/ Hit-Girl (Chloë Grace Moretz) to become a violent vigilante and get revenge on Frank D'Amico (Mark Strong), the crime boss who destroyed their pre-superhero lives. Hit-Girl later avenges her father's brutal murder and is shown continuing her fight against injustice in the second film by defeating crime bosses and school bullies. *The Hunger Games*

[91] Unadjusted worldwide earnings for the *Kick-Ass* series are $157 million USD, *The Hunger Games* are, $2.968 billion USD, and for the *Divergent* trilogy are $765.4 million USD. Box Office Mojo, accessed June 24, 2019, https://www.boxofficemojo.com.

(hereafter *Hunger Games*) and *Divergent* film franchises are both adapted from best-selling young-adult post-apocalyptic novels. The *Hunger Games* series is about Katniss Everdeen's (Jennifer Lawrence) unintentional instigation of a national revolution against a totalitarian government as well as her efforts to end its state-sanctioned reality television show, which forces child representatives from twelve zoned districts to "Fight to the Death until a lone victor remains."[92] The *Divergent* film trilogy concentrates on Tris Prior's (Shailene Woodley) discovery of her unique set of skills, which enable her to lead an uprising and uncover the truth about the regimented, heavily surveilled society in which she lives.[93]

Within the films' dystopian worlds, Hit-Girl, Katniss, and Tris destabilize an unjust status quo, posing problems for their oppressors and, for the down-trodden, symbolizing progress toward more equitable futures. Indeed, the heroines' bodily and social precarity form the crucible that facilitates their feminine self-actualization and their ability to overcome the circumstances that put them at risk. These representations of courageous young femininity re-signified feminist politics and engaged a multitude of discourses about appropriate young femininities and the disruptive potential of "girl power." Hit-Girl's transgressive girlhood, for example, became a

[92] Text appearing onscreen during the film's prologue outlines the stakes of Panem's turbulent history, as well as the provenance and rules of the annual Hunger Games.

[93] Considering thematic similarities between the *Divergent* trilogy and *The Hunger Games* film series, it is no surprise that a few audience reviews and articles foment a rivalry between the franchises and their lead actors, often describing *Divergent* and Woodley as poor imitations. For examples, see, "Copy Katniss: 6 Ways Shailene Woodley is Basically Trying to Be the New Jennifer Lawrence," *InTouch*, October 20, 2017, https://www.intouchweekly.com/posts/6-ways-shailene-woodley-is-basically-trying-to-be-the-new-jennifer-lawrence-38051/; Luchina Fisher, "How Shailene Woodley is Following in Jennifer Lawrence's Footsteps," *ABC News*, March 13, 2014, https://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/shailene-woodley-jennifer-lawrences-footsteps/story?id=22897218; Tatiana Siegel, "'Divergent' Star Shailene Woodley: The Next Jennifer Lawrence?," *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 5, 2014, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/shailene-woodley-is-divergent-star-685842; Kristina Lucarelli, "9 Reasons Shailene Woodley is the Next Jennifer Lawrence," *Buzzfeed*, February 12, 2014, https://www.buzzfeed.com/kristinalucarelli/shailene-woodley-is-the-next-jennifer-lawrence; "*Divergent* (2014): User Reviews," IMDb, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1840309/reviews?ref_=tt_ov_rt.

discursive lightning rod in Western critical and audience reviews of the film,[94] prompting then-preteen actor Chloë Grace Moretz to emphasize her parents' involvement in the selection of her film roles and to publicly distance her "real-life" (star) persona from the character.[95] Much of the criticism involved Hit-Girl's violent crime-fighting approach and coarse language—that is, her misuse of girl agency—and the potential negative influence of this depiction on young female viewers.[96] Indeed, as Anita Harris reminds us, "[y]oung women are…taught that while girlpower is about being confident and assertive, it should not be taken too far."[97] Hit-Girl's characterization sparked discussions about what it means to be an empowered girl in contemporary society, however, there was little mention of the effects of Hit-Girl's racial identity on readings of her disordered girl power, which is not surprising given postfeminism's white-centered racial politics. For example, Martin Zeller-Jacques notes, in an article entitled "Daddy's Little Sidekick: The Girl Superhero in Contemporary Cinema," that *Kick-Ass* "gained notoriety in part because of its representation of the girl superhero, Hit-Girl, which… troubles the lines between hero and victim and between protection and abuse, dramatizing the costs and

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[94] For a few examples of reviews highlighting Hit-Girl's transgressive representation, see, Peter Travers, "Kick-Ass," *Rolling Stone*, April 15, 2010, https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-reviews/kick-ass-251995/; Roger Ebert, "Kick-Ass," RogerEbert.com, April 14, 2010, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/kick-ass-2010; and, Karina Longworth, "Kick-Ass, Faster Than a Speeding Internet," *The Village Voice*, April 13, 2010, https://www.villagevoice.com/2010/04/13/kick-ass-faster-than-a-speeding-internet/; Christopher Tookey, "Don't Be Fooled By the Hype: This Crime Against Cinema is Twisted, Cynical, and Revels in the Abuse of Childhood," *Daily Mail*, April 2, 2010, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/reviews/article-1262948/Kick-Ass-Dont-fooled-hype--This-crime-cinema-twisted-cynical-revels-abuse-childhood.html; "Family Outrage at Film *Kick Ass* Violence and Swearing," *Daily Telegraph*, January 12, 2010, https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/entertainment/sydney-confidential/family-outrage-at-film-kick-ass-violence-and-swearing/news-story/6f4f0640ce6ecf17b4928ac7752265bf.

[95] See, Andrea Hubert, "Interview: Kick-Ass 2 star Chloë Moretz on Carrie, Controversy, and Other C-Words," *The Guardian*, August 10, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/aug/10/chloe-motetz-kick-ass-2; and, "My Mother Allowed me to Use the C-Word in Kick-Ass, Says 13-year-old Star Chloe Moretz," *Daily Mail*, March 31, 2010, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-1262331/Kick-Ass-child-star-Chloe-Moretz-says-mother-allowed-say-C-word-controversial-film.html.

[96] In her exploration of the role that film classification plays in defining "teen film," Catherine Driscoll draws attention to the disruptive comedic significance of Hit-Girl's age in relation to matters of agency and responsibility. Driscoll, *Teen Film: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2011), 123.

[97] Harris, *Future Girl*, 29.

compromises of empowerment for a girl in a world that is powerfully defined by patriarchy, as embodied in the overbearing figure of Big Daddy."[98] But it is also worth noting that the liminal positioning Zeller-Jacques describes is also due to the perceived dissonance between Hit-Girl's characterization and a long-standing representational logic in the Western cultural imaginary that equates young, (blonde) white femininity with innocence and that constructs this notion of girlhood as an aspirational ideal. It is this cultural legacy of "white girling" normative feminine behavior that enabled Moretz to easily distance herself from the Hit-Girl character during interviews for the film and to realign her star persona with can-do girlhood.[99]

We see similar expectations regarding white, can-do girlhood's pedagogical function for young female viewers when looking at the heroic girl agency celebrated by the marketing and representational strategies of the *Hunger Games* and *Divergent* series, which are reminiscent of the female-led action movie serials of the mid-1910s. Noting the ideological significance of the action-adventure serial-queen melodramas and their emphasis on heroic femininity, Ben Singer argued that they were "the prime vehicles through which the modern imagination explored a new conception of womanhood."[100] According to Singer, the "serials gave narrative preeminence to an intrepid young heroine who exhibited a variety of traditionally 'masculine' qualities: physical strength and endurance, self-reliance, courage, social authority, and freedom to explore novel experiences outside the domestic sphere."[101] Primarily addressed to a female audience, these serials drew on their connection to female-centered popular fiction published in women's

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[98] Martin Zeller-Jacques, "Daddy's Little Sidekick: The Girl Superhero in Contemporary Cinema," in *International Cinema and the Girl: Local Issues, Transnational Contexts*, eds. Fiona Handyside and Kate Taylor-Jones (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 197.
[99] By "white girling" I am referring to the symbolic power and invisibility of this racialized and gendered construction and to its shaping of a "colorblind" ideology that reifies whiteness and grants certain black and brown girls access to can-do girlhood.
[100] Ben Singer, "Power and Peril in the Serial-Queen Melodrama," in *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University, 2001), 221.
[101] Ibid.

magazines and girls' book series, involved cross-media promotion and opportunities to win free trips.[102] In a similar vein, the *Hunger Games* and *Divergent* series harnessed the female readership of their popular novels, using commercial tie-ins, sweepstakes, and celebrity features in girl teen mass magazines to draw an under-21 female film viewership, as well as a remarkable digital marketing campaign. For example, key *Hunger Games* promotional strategies involved classical-style portraiture film posters, a British contest to win a restaurant dining voucher for correctly guessing the film's opening weekend box office earnings, a U.S. sweepstakes promising to bring movie fans onto the film set in North Carolina, a collaboration with humanitarian organizations targeting hunger that offered autographed film posters in return for donations, opportunities to access a secret website where site visitors could make Panem District Identification passes as if they were residents of the film's fictional country, and digital scavenger hunts for exclusive posters.[103] Many feature articles and op-eds pointed to similarities between the lead actors and characters' personalities,[104] highlighting their authentic femininities

[102] Ibid., 223.
[103] See Cara Kelly, "'Hunger Games' Promo Images Borrow From Classical Portraiture," *The Washington Post*, March 11, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2013/03/11/hunger-games-promo-images-borrow-from-classical-portraiture/?utm_term=.f13747af277d; "Competition: Guess America's Appetite for The Hunger Games," *The Guardian*, March 22, 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/film/competition/2012/mar/22/the-hunger-games-competition; "44 Ways 'The Hunger Games' Social Media Campaign Increased the Movie's Odds of Success," *Portent*, March 21, 2012, https://www.portent.com/blog/social-media/hunger-games-social-media-campaign.htm; Brooks Barnes, "How 'Hunger Games' Built Up Must-See Fever," *The New York Times*, March 18, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/19/business/media/how-hunger-games-built-up-must-see-fever.html?mtrref=www.google.com.
[104] While this aspect of cinematic celebrity fan culture is not exclusive to the *Hunger Games* and *Divergent* franchises, its celebration of a specific brand of heroic, but "soft" femininity, on and off screen, is very similar to what we see with early cinema's serial-queens. For more information please see, Shelley Stamp, *Movie-struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture After the Nickelodeon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 142.

and praising them for being positive feminist role models for girls.[105,106] Katniss and Tris are especially attractive role models for the films' young female viewers because of the role that self-reliance—not heterosexual romance—plays in their (self-directed) development, unlike what we see depicted in the popular *Twilight* book and film series.

In the end, what makes the *Kick-Ass*, *Hunger Games*, and *Divergent* series unsuitable as case studies is their representation of individual choice and efforts as guaranteed pathways to success. Through their individual desire and determination, Hit-Girl, Katniss, and Tris embark on heroic journeys of self-definition that show us their precarity does not define or limit them, so much so, that these girls are able to change the circumstances that rendered them precarious.[107] These same personal attributes yield very different results for the "can-do, at-risk" protagonists in the precarious girlhood films analyzed in this dissertation. Within the risk societies of *La teta*

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[105] Examples of this overwhelmingly favorable *Hunger Games*/Jennifer Lawrence press include: Kimia Madani, "On Screen: All the Reasons Katniss Everdeen is Our Ultimate Role Model," *Livingly*, October 22, 2015, http://www.livingly.com/On+Screen/articles/YETTue-x2nw/Reasons+Katniss+Everdeen+Ultimate+Role+Model; Justine McGrath, "6 Reasons Why Katniss Everdeen is the Ultimate Girl Power Hero," *Teen Vogue*, October 15, 2015, https://www.teenvogue.com/story/katniss-everdeen-girl-power-hero; "A Role Model for Our Times: Katniss Everdeen's Unassuming Heroism," *Makers*, November 19, 2014, https://www.makers.com/blog/role-model-our-times-katniss-everdeens-unassuming-heroism; Samantha Ellis, "Why the Hunger Games' Killer Katniss is a Great Female Role Model," *The Guardian*, August 12, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2014/aug/12/why-hunger-games-killer-katniss-is-a-great-female-role-model; Suzanne Moore, "Op ed: Why the Hunger Games' Katniss Everdeen is a Role Model for Our Times," *The Guardian*, November 27, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/nov/27/why-hunger-games-katniss-everdeen-role-model-jennifer-lawrence; A.O. Scott and Manohla Dargis, "A Radical Female Hero From Dystopia," *The New York Times*, April 4, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/08/movies/katniss-everdeen-a-new-type-of-woman-warrior.html; Sandie Angulo Chen, "Why Katniss Everdeen is a Kick-Ass Role Model," MTV News, March 22, 2012, http://www.mtv.com/news/2810724/katniss-hunger-games-role-model/; Rachel Stark, "Why Katniss is a Feminist Character (And It's Not Because She Wields a Bow and Beats Boys Up)," Tor.com, March 21, 2012, https://www.tor.com/2012/03/21/why-katniss-is-a-feminist-character-and-its-not-because-she-wields-a-bow-and-beats-boys-up/.

[106] Despite publicly rejecting the title "feminist," Shailene Woodley was still hailed a positive *feminist* role model for girls. For interviews and profiles emphasizing Woodley's feminism and authenticity, see, Krista Smith, "Shailene Woodley and the Next Wave of Hollywood Stars," *Vanity Fair*, June 24, 2014, https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2014/06/shailene-woodley-next-wave-portfolio?verso=true; Eliana Dockterman, "Shailene Woodley on Why She's Not a Feminist," *Time*, May 5, 2014, https://time.com/87967/shailene-woodley-feminism-fault-in-our-stars/; and, Eliana Dockterman, "Why Hollywood Desperately Needs Shailene Woodley," *Time*, March 18, 2014, https://time.com/27165/why-hollywood-desperately-needs-shailene-woodley/.

[107] As a wanted murderer, Hit-Girl continues in her precarity in *Kick-Ass 2*'s conclusion, but is also shown charting her own path by fleeing to another city.

asustada, *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*, *Winter's Bone*, *Beasts*, *Precious*, *Spring Breakers*, *Bande de filles*, and *Guo chun tian* there are limits to what girl desire and determination can do to suspend experiences of bodily and social precarity. Placing these thematically similar case studies in conversation emphasizes neoliberal postfeminism's failure to fulfill its promises that girls can overcome the designation of at-risk if they try hard enough. The new feminine subjectivities portrayed in the *Kick-Ass*, *Hunger Games*, and *Divergent* series do little to challenge dominant understandings of neoliberal postfeminist girlhood as normative, and even less to draw attention to the real, extradiegetic structural inequalities that determine access to resources and create conditions that make certain populations precarious. The result is that they reinforce rather than trouble the notion that girls can overcome tremendous obstacles through take-charge attitudes and individual hard work.

Using an Intersectional Feminist Film-Phenomenology

The case studies selected for this dissertation lend themselves to a detailed descriptive mode of textual analysis as well as to embodied modes of film viewing. *La teta asustada*, *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, *Beasts*, *Spring Breakers*, *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*, *Bande de filles*, and *Guo chun tian* use their aesthetic, formal, and narrative spatial qualities to emphasize the experience and precarious nature of feminine subject formation within changing socioeconomic landscapes and of girlhood itself. This representational logic comprises what I term "phenomenological filmmaking." I derive this designation from Vivian Sobchack's phenomenological account of embodied spectatorship in *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*. Drawing on the insights of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Sobchack describes how films convey their discrete experiences of profilmic realities:

> …the moving picture makes itself sensuously and sensibly manifest as the expression of experience by experience. A film is an act of seeing that makes itself seen, an act of hearing that makes itself heard, an act of physical and reflective movement that makes itself reflexively felt and understood. Objectively projected, visibly and audibly expressed before us, the film's activity of seeing, hearing, and moving signifies in a pervasive, primary, and embodied language that precedes and provides the grounds for the secondary significations of a more discrete, systematic, less "wild" communication. Cinema thus transposes, without completely transforming, those modes of being alive and consciously embodied in the world that count for each of us as *direct* experience…[108]

Indeed, each film can be described as "observing the unfolding of action alongside, rather than always in front of" its protagonist(s), which, I argue, creates space for the viewer to make observations and discoveries *with* the female figure(s) as she cultivates self-knowledge and negotiates new relations to her environments and others.[109] Most often demonstrated through lingering close-ups, point-of-view shots, and through framing techniques simultaneously showing the protagonist and the object(s) of her gaze, this representational proximity to the girls' emotional and mental processes illustrates the complexities of their specific lived experiences, and demonstrates the significance of the body and sensorial perception for knowledge production. My analyses perform what Sobchack refers to as the "thick and radical description of experience:" I take note of key scenes featuring the girls' approximation of can-do girlhood and moments in which their precarity is emphasized in order to draw attention to the aesthetic and formal features that enrich the films' heuristic function as female coming-of-age narratives.[110] The goal is to identify the ways the films mediate the affective and psychic registers of neoliberal

[108] Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 3-4.
[109] Jenny Chamarette, "Embodying Spectatorship: From Phenomenology to Sensation," in *The Routledge Companion to Cinema and Gender*, eds. Kristin Lené Hole, Dijana Jelača, E. Ann Kaplan, and Patrice Petro (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2017), 318.
[110] Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, xv.

postfeminism to offer their inscribed female viewers opportunities for self-discovery or self-transformation.[111] In their insightful essay, "Mediating Neoliberal Capitalism: Affect, Subjectivity and Inequality," Rosalind Gill and Akane Kanai argue persuasively that increasing precarity under neoliberalism has sparked new pop-cultural forms of self-improvement discourses which affectively encourage female viewers to develop flexibility, resilience, positivity, and self-confidence. As such, these films must also be read in terms of their treatment of girlish plasticity, which I define as the neoliberal postfeminist logic underlying the thematically grouped films' reconfiguration of traditional tropes of girlhood development.

Feminist phenomenologist Iris Marion Young has argued that the gendered body-in-situation "experiences herself as looked at in certain ways, described in her physical being in certain ways, she experiences the bodily reactions of others to her, and she reacts to them."[112] Each of the selected films invites viewers to pay close attention to the girls' concerns, desires, emotions, and observations, as well as their reflections on personal experiences that are shaped by the constraints and opportunities of their intersecting class, gender, and racial identities. Through its sonic and visual elements, each case study makes manifest its protagonist's understanding of how her precarity is intertwined with an inherited body schema that is structured and orientated by the historical dimensions of her social identity categories.[113] Whether in depictions of tense encounters between the Mi'kmaq teen heroine Aila and a corrupt Indian agent in *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* or the *Spring Breakers* girls' interactions with lusty young men, these films show us lead female characters negotiating and reflecting on the horizon

[111] Gill and Kanai, "Mediating Neoliberal Capitalism," 318-326.
[112] Iris Marion Young, "Lived Body vs. Gender: Reflections on Social Structure and Subjectivity," in *On Female Body Experience: 'Throwing Like a Girl' and Other Essays*" (Oxford University Press, 2005), 17.
[113] Sara Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (2007): 153.

of their situations, as experiencing subjects and as objects that others look at and act upon.[114] While the degree to which the intersections of gender and other social identity categories are foregrounded varies amongst these case studies, placing the films in conversation enables me to explore how the interplay of the protagonists' sociocultural specificities structures their ways of seeing and being in the world.

Placing these similarly themed case studies in conversation illuminates the sociocultural specificities informing the protagonists' contemplation of their situated, bodily and emotional experiences and invites an intersectional feminist phenomenological approach to film. In "For White Girls Only?: Postfeminism and the Politics of Inclusion," Jess Butler urges scholars of postfeminism to integrate insights from queer and nonwhite theorists to examine how this culture and philosophy works in conjunction with varying forms of discrimination to reproduce oppressive power dynamics, rather than myopically continuing to focus primarily on gender.[115] In a similar vein, Jenny Chamarette calls for film analyses to use intersectional theory and "go beyond" the limits of feminist phenomenology and account for "the political and cultural ramifications of how bodies experience limitation and disempowerment."[116] Limiting the body of international films selected for analysis to texts about heterosexual girlhood makes sexual difference less of a singularly defining feature for this study; rather, what emerges from placing these films in conversation are the ways that race and class, along with gender, shape postfeminist culture transnationally. Postfeminist culture, Simidele Dosekun argues, hails non-Western girls and women and even takes effect in contexts that have not experienced Western

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[114] Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 95.
[115] Jess Butler, "For White Girls Only? Post-Feminism and the Politics of Inclusion," *Feminist Formations* 25, no. 1 (2013): 35-58.
[116] Jenny Chamarette, "Overturning Feminist Phenomenologies: Disability, Complex Embodiment, Intersectionality, and Film," in *Rethinking Feminist Phenomenology: Theoretical and Applied Perspectives*, eds. Sara Cohen Shabot and Christinia Landry (Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), 204-205.

feminist "waves."[117] So, if we take Céline Sciamma's *Bande de filles* as an example, placing it in conversation with other similarly-themed films and using an intersectional feminist phenomenological approach reveals the ways the film prompts viewers to reflect on two interrelated issues: first, the different responses to varying permutations of Marieme's classed, gendered, and racialized identities; and second, the ways these identity categories shape neoliberal postfeminist culture. After Marieme's all-girls football game, the athletes walk home together, their voices reverberating joyously in the darkened spaces of their neighborhood. When they enter a space dominated by male members of their immigrant communities the girls suddenly fall silent, demonstrating their shared awareness of the environment's gendered logic. In this context, sexual difference is most pronounced, whereas in a later scene depicting an encounter between Marieme and a young white salesclerk in a clothing store, the protagonist's class and racial differences are prioritized. Meanwhile, the scene described at the beginning of this chapter, which detailed Marieme's exchange with an unseen school administrator, emphasizes her perceived otherness in relation to ethnocentric notions of French national identity, while also highlighting how the state education system sidelines immigrant and second-generation, French-born students into vocational tracks, limiting their access to upward mobility.[118]

[117] Simidele Dosekun, "For Western Girls Only?" *Feminist Media Studies* 15, no. 6 (2015): 960-975.
[118] See, Richard Alba, "Bright vs. Blurred Boundaries: Second-Generation Assimilation and Exclusion in France, Germany, and the United States," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28, no. 1 (2005): 20-49; Nacira Guénif-Souilamas, "The Other French Exception: Virtuous Racism and the War of the Sexes in Postcolonial France," *French Politics, Culture & Society* 24, no. 3 (Winter 2006): 23-41; Roxane Silberman, Richard Alba, and Irène Fournier, "Segmented Assimilation in France? Discrimination in the Labour Market Against the Second Generation," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30, no. 1, (January 2007): 1-27.

"Can-Do, At-risk" Girls in Narrative Liminal Spaces

These examples of how Marieme understands her social positioning and how she is viewed across a range of contexts are indicative of what we see in the other case studies. As such, they resemble what bell hooks described as a way of seeing reality "both from the outside in and from the inside out."[119] According to hooks, this perspective is unique to those living in the margins but is unattainable to those preserving social inequality. The phenomenological description presented in her article, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," highlights the precarious nature of this subject position, insofar as it is "a profound edge" where someone "is always at risk," and stresses the importance of viewing marginalization as a site of resistance, not just deprivation.[120] The case studies visualize this duality through the recurring placement of their protagonists in liminal narrative spaces, such as bathrooms, hotel rooms, hallways, and train platforms. These transitional spaces provide the context in which my dialogical analyses investigate notions of precariousness and, to a lesser degree, displacement, and their reconfiguration of traditional themes of feminine development. I consider how liminality relates to the at-risk girl protagonists' "can-do" attempts to direct their own paths.

Most significantly, this spatial representation of the girls' incomplete coming-of-age processes is reminiscent of a subgenre of feature films about displacement under globalization, which use liminal narrative spaces to visualize their refugee or economic migrant protagonists' feelings of suspension in-between their "home" and "host" countries, as well as their ongoing attempts to forge new identities.[121] Indeed, the lead female characters in my case studies grapple

[119] bell hooks, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 36 (Jan 1, 1989): 20.
[120] hooks, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," 19-21.
[121] Bishnupriya Ghosh and Bhaskar Sarkar, "The Cinema of Displacement: Towards a Politically Motivated Poetics," *Film Criticism* 20, no. 1/2 (1995): 102-113.

with "placelessness" and are shown constantly negotiating new relations to their environments, others, and to themselves. This never-ending negotiation, in conjunction with the girls' spatialized economic insecurity and cultural marginalization, is most like refugees' experiences of statelessness under neoliberal globalization. As Zygmunt Bauman explains in *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* these individuals are:

> …cast in a condition of 'liminal drift,' with no way of knowing whether it is transitory or permanent. Even if they are stationary for a time, they are on a journey that is never completed since its destination (arrival or return) remains forever unclear, while a place they could call 'final' remains forever inaccessible. They are never to be free from the gnawing sense of the transience, indefiniteness and provisional nature of any settlement.[122]

The open-ended conclusions of my case studies convey this sense of feminine development as a never-ending activity and the achievement of can-do, adult femininity as an elusive target. The girls' futures remain unknowable despite their desires and efforts to take charge of their lives. In this respect, the protagonists in my cinematic corpus are further distinguished from other films about precarious girlhood, such as Sofia Coppola's Young Girls trilogy and the dystopian action-adventure film franchises, through the imbrication of their precarity and displacement.[123]

Chapter Breakdown

Chapter 1 studies two films about Indigenous girlhoods and the intergenerational transmission of trauma, *La teta asustada* and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*, arguing that there are significant parallels between the protagonists' complicated coming-of-age journeys and the models of

[122] Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (Cambridge, 2004), 76.
[123] R. Barton Palmer has termed *The Virgin Suicides*, *Lost in Translation*, and *Marie Antoinette* as Coppola's Young Girls trilogy. Palmer, "Some Thoughts on New Hollywood Multiplicity: Sofia Coppola's Young Girls Trilogy," in *Film Trilogies*, eds. Claire Perkins and Constantine Verevis (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 35-54.

healing favored in these texts. In making Indigenous girls the subject of this chapter, this dissertation makes a clear intervention in contemporary girlhood cinema scholarship given their historical exclusion from norms of Euro-Western femininity, and their constructed invisibility in girl power and post-girl power discourses. Both films feature unconventional mother/daughter relationships and engage tropes typically associated with the horror film genre, which I argue problematizes the tenets of future-orientation within neoliberal postfeminist girlhood, illuminates the overlapping effects of colonial legacies and neocolonial forces, and creates space to contemplate alternative forms of girl agency, empowerment, and resistance beyond the Global North model favored in development, political, and popular culture discourses. In addition to using intersectional feminist phenomenology to examine the girls' lived experiences of precarity, I draw from Melanie Klein's object relations theory, which highlights the significance of the maternal body for a child's psychical and physical sustenance, in order to understand how the girls' relationships with their mothers' corpses affects their development and healing. Klein's theory also allows me to theorize how the films might operate as bodies of healing and recuperation for their inscribed female viewers.

Chapter 2 explores the reconfiguration of the domestication trope of feminine development and celebration of resilient girlish plasticity in three American independent films about economic and housing precarity: *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts*. The young protagonists in these films are prematurely burdened with caregiving and domestic responsibilities that resemble parental roles, and they are constructed as precarious through community and familial dysfunctions, such as abuse, crime, drugs, and violence, which make their homes vulnerable to institutional interventions. Studied individually, these films provide opportunities for feminist readings through their focused attention on the girls' Herculean efforts

to create domestic stability. However, when placed in conversation, the films' neoliberal postfeminist sensibilities emerge more clearly, though not through false promises of upward mobility or requirements to participate in consumer culture. The films depict structural disadvantages as the effects of poor decision-making and celebrate the protagonists' cultivation of resilience and their optimistic self-alignment with their dysfunctional homes' symbolic value. Noting significant parallels between the case studies' treatment of fantasy, their linking of plucky girl figures and the idea of home and what we see in *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939, USA), I concentrate on the ways this film group engages these postfeminist regulatory ideals of compulsory positivity and resilience as necessary parts of the ongoing process of post-recessionary girlhood development. I look closely at scenes highlighting the girls' innocence and understanding of their "placelessness" as well as moments in which these characters decide to accept the limitations of their circumstances. This focus leads me to examine the films' inspirational cultural function in relation to the similar economic and social climates in which they were released, and their potential for recuperating the United States' extradiegetic self- and global images following global financial crises. This potential recuperative function lies in the films' melodramatic mode of storytelling and the neoliberal affective and psychic registers of the girls' journeys, which, I argue, contributes to the films' positive reception as inspirational texts. Following from this, I theorize the cultivation of personal resilience and adoption of compulsory positivity as an inscribed parallel mode of development for the embodied female spectator.

Chapter 3 performs close dialogical readings of three films that highlight the role of consumption in precarious feminine identity formation and that construct best female friendship, teen girl makeovers and mischief as technologies of the neoliberal self. The protagonists of *Spring Breakers*, *Bande de filles*, and *Guo chun tian* feel disenchanted and constrained by their

circumstances and discover that committing crimes allows them to access empowering fantasy spaces and feel liberated from the confines of their social identities. My analysis highlights the importance of adaptability and malleability, as attributes of girlish plasticity, for the film protagonists' sampling of a range of agentic femininities, as well as their navigation of undefined processes of subject formation and constantly shifting relational dynamics within their best friendship groups. In addition, because these films explicitly signpost national narratives in relation to the girls' transgressive self-emancipation, this chapter also concentrates on the ways the protagonists' disordered patterns of consumption emphasize the importance of place in the appropriation and construction of new gendered subjectivities in late modernity.

The chapter points to the significance of homosociality, as a recurring theme of feminine development in contemporary cinema, and its long-standing entanglements with markers of can-do and at-risk girlhoods, such as the commercial makeover or mischief-making. I argue that *Spring Breakers*, *Bande de filles*, and *Guo chun tian* reimagine these linkages, between can-do girlhood, best friendship, and commercial makeovers, on the one hand, and at-risk girlhood, best friendship, and mischief-making, on the other, in order to depict criminal involvement as both a transformative act akin to a consumption-oriented makeover and the means by which their protagonists can acquire the capital to enjoy aspirational commodities and spaces. Drawing parallels between the fetishization of labor in the makeover sequences of 1980s-2010s Hollywood girl teen films and the mischief makeover sequences in my selected films, I look closely at scenes in my case studies that evoke the experience of the makeover montage. I argue that these scenes represent a major shift in the temporality of feminine self-improvement processes onscreen. Whereas conventional portrayals of the makeover in postfeminist media culture are future-oriented and signify a *process* of achieving adult femininity, these later

iterations construct the girls' transformations as both material/immediate/temporary *and* attitudinal/future-oriented/long-term. Following from this, I suggest that inscribed female spectators of the case studies are invited to enjoy and appropriate the protagonists' "common sense" assumption of risk as they undergo mischief makeovers' aspirational modes of being and navigate the difficulties of living under neoliberalism.

Thus, through dialogical analysis of the selected films, I underline the importance of reevaluating both the history of cinematic girlhood tropes, which, I argue, are reconfigured into new forms within late modernity, and the slippery nature of neoliberal-inflected "feminism" as a liberatory transnational discourse. A key thread running through these chapters involves the role of fantasy and horror genre filmmaking in the critique of neoliberal postfeminism and its promises. Chapter 1's necro-reimagining of the mother/daughter relationship in *La teta asustada* and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* is central to their portrayals of the biopolitical implications of pervasive colonial legacies and neoliberalism on Indigenous subjecthood. Chapter 2 looks closely at how the fantasy sequences in *The Wizard of Oz*, *Precious*, and *Beasts* demonstrate the inescapability of precarious subject-making processes, and the futility of imagining other ways of being in the world. Finally, Chapter 3 explores fantasy-like sequences in *Spring Breakers*, *Bande de filles*, and *Guo chun tian* that use their formal qualities to evoke the affective pleasures of "performative shamelessness" in relation to the girls' demonstrated confidence in their autonomy, immunity to social disapproval, and self-defense against criticism.[124]

[124] In defining performative shamelessness, Amy Shields Dobson is referring to the hyper-agentic behavior of girls and young women in digital spaces. There are significant similarities between the online personas Dobson describes and the depictions of agentic femininity in the "offline" diegeses of my selected case studies, despite these differences, which make my use of the term appropriate. Dobson, *Postfeminist Digital Cultures: Femininity, Social Media, and Self Representation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 129.

CHAPTER 1

Reconfiguring Mother/Daughter Relationships Onscreen: Trauma Recovery as Girlhood Development in *La teta asustada* and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*

Introduction

Feminist scholars have argued that it is necessary to develop new, nuanced theoretical frameworks to understand how girls' agency and resistance are articulated globally amidst precarious economic, political and social landscapes. During the "girl power" era of the 1990s, girls were encouraged to exercise their feminist political agency as cultural producers and economic actors. And as the visibility of girls and girlhood increased in Western popular culture, the notion of empowerment—as it related to feminism—became commodified and depoliticized. As a result, in the "post-girl power" era of the 2000s, girls were constructed as being "already empowered" and they were required to self-actualize into ideal neoliberal subjects. In a 2009 article exploring the question "what comes after girl power?" Marnina Gonick, Emma Renold, Jessica Ringrose, and Lisa Weems suggested that new theorizations of gendered agency and resistance must contend with issues of globalization while also accounting for intersecting sociocultural differences and the body.[125] Taking up this same question in 2015, Amy Shields Dobson and Anita Harris examined how terms often used in feminist scholarship to conceptualize girl agency—such as "choice, empowerment, and voice"—were reconfigured by the neoliberal postfeminist logic of the post-girl power era, compelling girls to view personal choice as the key determinant of their life trajectories and limiting their abilities to recognize systemic and structural oppressions as sources of inequalities.[126] Following from this, they

[125] Marnina Gonick, et. al, "Rethinking Agency and Resistance: What comes After Girl Power?" *Girlhood Studies* 2, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 1-9.

[126] The focus here is on sexism, but the same dynamic of "silencing" occurs through multicultural discourses that constrain definitions of racism, preventing racialized girls from articulating their experiences of discrimination. See,

argued that post-girl power mandates for girls and young women to see themselves as already empowered presented individual choice, self-confidence, and self-expression as forms of feminist resistant agency.[127] Within the same journal issue, Sandrina de Finney drew attention to Indigenous girls' omission from girl power *and* post-girl power analyses, noting how narrow conceptualizations of girl agency, empowerment, resistance and even girlhood itself, constructed them as being inherently at-risk and failed to account for their political engagements in decolonization and sovereignty movements.[128] A primary concern of de Finney's critique is that the exclusion of Indigenous girls from girlhood scholarship impoverishes our conceptualizations of girls' resistant agency. And so, new conceptual frameworks must also eschew multicultural approaches that read Indigenous girls as just "girls of color" and neglect the ways that neocolonial forces combine with intergenerational colonial effects to shape Indigenous girls' subject formation and their roles as cultural producers and economic actors differently.

This chapter will explore the question "what comes after girl power?" while accounting for sociocultural difference and the body, by examining the post-girl power representations of resistant agency and empowerment in *La teta asustada*/*The Milk of Sorrow* (Claudia Llosa, 2009, Spain/Peru) and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* (Jeff Barnaby, 2013, Canada), two coming-of-age films centering Indigenous girlhoods.[129] Exhibiting what I term a "phenomenological style of filmmaking," *La teta asustada* closely observes the situated, lived bodily experiences of Fausta (Magaly Solier), an Andean teen girl suffering from "la teta asustada," a hereditary

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for example, Sandrina de Finney, "'We Just Don't Know Each Other:' Racialized Girls Negotiate Mediated Multiculturalism in a Less Diverse Canadian City," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 31, no. 5 (2010): 471-487.

[127] Amy Shields Dobson and Anita Harris, "Post-girl power: Globalized Mediated Femininities, *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 29, no.2 (2015): 145-156.

[128] Sandrina de Finney, "Playing Indian and Other Settler Stories: Disrupting Western Narratives of Indigenous Girlhood," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 29, no. 2 (2015): 169-181.

[129] In this chapter, I use the term "Indigenous" to refer to a wide range of distinct original people groups, while also recognizing this term is a construction of settler colonialism.

psychological condition that was transmitted in utero and through her traumatized mother's breast milk (Figure 1.1).[130] Aila (Kawennáhere Devery Jacobs), the protagonist of *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*, is an extraordinarily courageous Mi'gmaq teenager living on the Red Crow reserve (Figure 1.2). Through her resourcefulness, Aila avoids forced enrollment in residential school, a Canadian colonial institution that separated generations of Indigenous children from their families, and exposed them to severe forms of abuse. Both narratives articulate the girls' agency and resistance in relation to the historical and ongoing impacts of colonization, which are illustrated through the traumatic experiences of the girls' mothers: Fausta's mother was brutally sexually assaulted by soldiers during the Peruvian civil war, and Aila's mother was unable to cope with the abuse she received at St. Dymphna's residential school.[131] It is no small thing that *La teta asustada* and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* make the women's traumatic experiences factors that shape their daughters' self-understanding and the girls' relations to their environments and other people: Fausta lives in constant fear that she will be sexually violated while Aila devotes her energies to ensuring she stays out of the residential school system. This chapter argues that these entanglements must be read in two connected ways: first, by attending to the films' depictions of the mothers' roles in their daughters' feminine subject formation; and second, by exploring how the girls' coming-of-age processes engage issues of intergenerational trauma, healing, and "survivance," which Gerald Vizenor defines as "a native sense of presence, the motion of sovereignty and the will to resist dominance."[132] Considering these films together makes heterogeneity among girls and Indigenous societies visible and creates space to examine

[130] "The frightened breast." (Author's translation).
[131] Although characters in the film do not explicitly identify the perpetrators of these sex crimes against Indigenous women, a scene showing Fausta's fearful response when she sees a military official's photograph points to the army's involvement.
[132] Gerald Vizenor and A. Robert Lee, *Postindian Conversations* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 93.

how Fausta and Aila's resistant agency and quests for identity might expand neoliberal postfeminist accounts of normative girlhood.

Figure 1.1. When answering the door buzzer, Fausta (Magaly Solier) fearfully peeks through a window in a scene from *La teta asustada* (Llosa, 2009).

Figure 1.2. In *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* (Barnaby, 2013), Aila (Kawennáhere Devery Jacobs) draws a picture as her zombified childhood friend Tyler (Louis Beauvais) watches.

In addition to creating thematic parallels between the girls' modes of healing and their coming-of-age processes, *La teta asustada* and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* use their conclusions to imagine better, albeit dramatically different, Indigenous futures. Through their conclusions' futuristic emphases, the selected films offer images of girl agency and resistance that are significantly different from the models portrayed in feature-length festival favorites such as *Wadjda* (Haifaa Al-Mansour, 2012)[133] and *Ginger and Rosa* (Sally Potter, 2012),[134] which concentrate primarily on the personal dimensions of feminist agency and empowerment. In making the ends of Fausta and Aila's traumatic development journeys starting points for Indigenous futurist imaginings, these precarious girlhood case studies supply my point of entry, as an Afro-Latina emerging girlhood scholar, in the shared task of Afrofuturism and Indigenous

[133] According to the film's IMDb page, production company locations include Saudi Arabia, Netherlands, Germany, Jordan, United Arab Emirates and the United States. "Wadjda," IMDb, accessed August 9, 2019, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2258858/?ref_=nv_sr_1?ref_=nv_sr_1.
[134] According to the film's IMDb page, production company locations include the United Kingdom, Denmark, Canada, and Croatia. "Ginger & Rosa," IMDb, accessed August 9, 2019, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2115295/?ref_=nv_sr_1?ref_=nv_sr_1.

futurisms. Danika Medak-Saltzman defines the task of Afrofuturism and Indigeouns futurisms as the creation of unique opportunities to explore the past and present and to imagine a range of possibilities that best illustrate how we understand ourselves, our place in the world, our responsibility to others and our environments.[135] I also ground the phenomenological film analysis that follows in a tradition of fruitful critical engagement between black and Indigenous intersectional feminist theorists, especially within the area of racialized girls' strategies of resistance and empowerment.[136]

La teta asustada's international critical success marks a watershed for Peruvian cinema: its director was the first Peruvian filmmaker awarded the prestigious Golden Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival, and it was the first Peruvian film to receive an Academy Awards nomination for Best Foreign Language Film. The film garnered numerous prestigious prizes from international film festivals. Also the recipient of positive critical attention, Jeff Barnaby's *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* received prestigious awards and nominations from the Canadian Screen Awards and various film festivals, including the Tribeca Film Festival's Creative Promise Award for Narrative and Best Canadian First Feature at the Vancouver International Film Festival. In this chapter, I argue that despite being dissimilar in their geographic and temporal diegeses, these critically acclaimed coming-of-age films challenge a key tenet of globalized postfeminist girlhood: that individual choice and efforts are the best possible means of navigating economic, ontological and social precariousness. By showing how neocolonial forces and the effects of colonialism shape Indigenous girls' subject formation and empowerment, *La*

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[135] Danika Medak-Saltzman, "Coming to You from the Indigenous Future: Native Women, Speculative Film Shorts, and the Art of the Possible," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 143.
[136] See, for examples, Nia Michelle Nunn, "Super-Girl: Strength and Sadness in Black Girlhood," *Gender and Education* 30, no. 2 (2018): 239-258; and, Natalie Clark, "Opening Pandora's Box: Girls' Groups and Trauma-Informed Intersectional Practice," in *Moving the Addiction and Mental Health System Towards Being More Trauma-Informed*, eds. Nancy Poole and Lorraine Greaves (Vancouver: British Columbia Centre of Excellence for Women's Health, 2012), 151-163.

teta asustada and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* reveal the shortcomings of using a multicultural approach to the study of Indigenous girls, which cannot account for deeply entrenched structural inequities.[137]

The goal of the chapter is twofold: it aims to challenge discourses of at-risk girlhood that pathologize Indigenous girls' resistant agency and to offer new ways of conceptualizing empowered girlhood beyond the individualized, neoliberal postfeminist model. This chapter is comprised of five main sections. The first section explores how the commercialization of "girl power" during the 1990s contributed to the widespread linking of female empowerment and consumerism in media and policy discourses as well as the exclusion of Indigenous girls from norms of empowered girlhood. The second section introduces the film narratives and uses Red Intersectionality, an intersectional, trauma-informed Indigenous framework, and the notion of "survivance" to examine major themes and the modes of resistant agency the film protagonists employ but which are pathologized in dominant discourses of girlhood. In keeping with this dissertation's aims of examining how the precarious social and economic conditions of late modernity reconfigure traditional female coming-of-age narrative tropes, the third section addresses the idea that a too-close mother/daughter relationship impedes girlhood development. Drawing on Melanie Klein's maternal object relations theory, I perform textual analyses of the film protagonists' uniquely too-close relationships with their mothers' traumatized bodies to determine the roles they play in the girls' cultivation of self-knowledge. The fourth section looks at how this psychoanalytic theory enables us to understand the ways that male/father figures guide these girls through the final stages of their development. The final section draws from diverse intersectional feminist Indigenous scholarship and uses an existential phenomenological

[137] For more information about these shortcomings, please see de Finney, "'We Just Don't Know Each Other,'" 471-487.

approach to theorize how the case studies' narrative and representational qualities might orient the inscribed female viewers toward specific models of healing and self-discovery.

1 Selling "Girl Power"

In what follows I concentrate on the ways that empowered girlhood is defined within media and policy discourses to establish what is at stake for the protagonists of *La teta asustada* and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*. In keeping with Sandrina de Finney's discussion of the colonial roots of contemporary girlhood norms, this section explores the ways the commodification of girl power renders invisible the cultural and political contributions of many Indigenous girls.[138] The marginalization of diverse Indigenous girl backgrounds, histories and perspectives is particularly troubling given the proliferation of discourses, images and narratives about girls, girlhood, and postfeminism in the twenty-first century.[139] As Sarah Projansky points out, in her study of girls' increased post-1990 cultural visibility, the privileging of middle-class whiteness combined with can-do and at-risk—the dominant narratives of contemporary normative girlhood—to marginalize, stereotype, and pathologize racialized girls within media and political cultures.[140] Projansky closely analyzed numerous American mass-market magazine covers, teen television programs, as well as hundreds of U.S. and international films with girl lead characters released in America between 2000 and 2009. She observed that at-risk girlhood was most often associated with black and Hispanic girls, but that a color-blind, multicultural ideology conferred the can-do designation on celebrity girls of color, while also downplaying their racial identities.

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[138] de Finney, "Playing Indian," 172.
[139] See, Gonick, et. al, "Rethinking Agency and Resistance," 2; and, Sarah Projansky, "Mass Magazine Cover Girls: Some Reflections on Postfeminist Girls and Postfeminism's Daughters," in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, eds. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 42.
[140] Sarah Projansky, "Introduction: Finding Alternative Girlhoods," in *Spectacular Girls: Media Fascination and Celebrity Culture* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2014), 1-23.

During the same period, few narrative films featuring Indigenous girls as leads or co-leads were released in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the Nordic region, with even fewer securing major distribution and sales deals in international markets.[141] These feature-length films include *Beneath Clouds* (Ivan Sen, 2002, Australia), *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Phillip Noyce, 2002, Australia), *Whale Rider* (Niki Caro, 2002, New Zealand/Germany), *Madeinusa* (Claudia Llosa, 2006, Peru/Spain), *Turquoise Rose* (Travis Holt Hamilton, 2007, USA), *Princess Kaiulani* (Marc Forby, 2009, USA/UK), and *La Teta Asustada* (Claudia Llosa, 2009, Spain/Peru).[142] The depiction of can-do, empowered Indigenous girlhood in Niki Caro's 2002 film adaptation *Whale Rider* proved to be an exception to this trend, prompting both film festival and box office success as well as numerous reviews celebrating its racialized, neocolonial brand of "girl power." The film's girl protagonist, Pai (Keisha Castle-Hughes), is born into a patrilineal Maori tribe that traces its lineage to Paikea, a noble ancestor who rode a humpback whale to escape an assassination attempt and founded Aotearoa (New Zealand). With Pai's father refusing to take up tribal leadership, and the loss of Pai's twin brother and mother during childbirth, the cultural future of their community is threatened. Despite Pai's ability to outperform her male peers during training, her grandfather refuses to encourage her interest in this leadership role because of her gender. This twelve-year-old girl ingeniously overcomes these barriers by working within

[141] Subsequent releases include *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* (Jeff Barnaby, 2013, Canada), *Ixcanul* (Jayro Bustamante, 2015, Guatemala/France), *The Saver* (Wiebke von Carolsfeld, 2015, Canada), *The Sun at Midnight* (Kirsten Carthew, 2016, Canada), *Sami Blood* (Amanda Kernell, 2016, Norway/Denmark/Sweden), *Juliana & The Medicine Fish* (Jeremy Torrie, 2017, Canada), *Kayak to Klemtu* (Zoe Hopkins, 2017, Canada), and *Tia and Piujuq* (Lucy Tulugarjuk, 2018, Canada).

[142] Much of Indigenous girl-centered moving image storytelling is presented in short-format films, animation, and web series, reflecting disparities in funding, coproduction, and distribution opportunities in major international markets, but also indicating the viability of online platforms for helping Indigenous screen-based projects reach global audiences. For information about the Indigenous screen sector initiatives in Australia, Canada, Denmark, New Zealand, Norway, and Sweden, see the 2019 imagineNATIVE report "Pathways to the International Market for Indigenous Screen Content: Success Stories, Lessons Learned from Selected Jurisdictions and a Strategy for Growth," http://www.imaginenative.org/publications-1.

cultural strictures, eventually proving she is the rightful leader and winning the respect of her grandfather and community (Figures 1.3 and 1.4). For Marnina Gonick, Pai's variant of empowered girlhood is constructed through its dual representation of cultural transition and preservation, which "infuses the discourse of girl power with an indigenous sensibility."[143] Pai embodies the inspiring future orientation of can-do girlhood, insofar as her taking the mantle of leadership suggests a new direction for the community, while also affirming the value of her community's gendered cultural traditions. In this respect, her empowerment is linked to her self-actualization.

Figure 1.3. In *Whale Rider* (Caro, 2002), Pai (Keisha Castle-Hughes) retrieves the whale tooth her grandfather threw into the ocean, proving she is worthy of becoming the leader of her community.

Figure 1.4. After coaxing the largest of the beached whales to return to the ocean, Pai (Keisha Castle-Hughes) rides it underwater in a scene from *Whale Rider* (Caro, 2002).

In her writings about the U.S. press reception of the film, Sarah Projansky notes the self-congratulatory tone many reviewers used to contrast Pai's "sexist" Maori community and the United States, which had, presumably, already "resolved" issues of gender (and racial) discrimination.[144] Most significantly, the reviewers' instrumentalization of Maori racial and cultural differences recalls the nineteenth-and twentieth-century metonymic figuration of

[143] Marnina Gonick, "Indigenizing Girl Power," *Feminist Media Studies* 10, no. 3 (2010): 313.
[144] Sarah Projansky, "Gender, Race, Feminism, and the International Girl Hero: The Unremarkable U.S. Popular Press reception of *Bend it Like Beckham* and *Whale Rider*," in *Youth Culture in Global Cinema*, eds. Timothy Shary and Alexandra Seibel (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 192.

blackness in the American cultural imaginary, whereby blackness and black characters were the metaphorical means by which Americans chose to talk about themselves.[145] Indeed, as Projansky points out, these reviews were part of a broader trend in popular film criticism, which centered white girlhoods and reinforced the othering of screen girls of color by objectifying their cultural and racial identities, thus perpetuating their ongoing isolation from normative empowered girlhood.

As inspiring and subversive as Pai's Indigenous girl power is, *Whale Rider*'s definition of young female empowerment bears little resemblance to the "dislocated, individualized and atomized" consumer-oriented and sexual self-subjectification models centered in majority media and policy discourses about neoliberal postfeminist girlhood.[146] Feminist ethicist and phenomenologist Iris Marion Young offers two interrelated definitions of the term empowerment that are useful starting points for exploring its commodification within girl power and post-girl power media and policy discourses, as well as the attendant exclusion of young Indigenous femininities. The first meaning of the term encompasses the cultivation of self-confidence, self-government, and self-regulation whereas the second interpretation concerns "the development of a sense of collective influence over the social conditions of one's life."[147] Young argues the second definition is more beneficial because it not only emphasizes the importance of taking responsibility for the circumstances and trajectory of one's life, but speaks to the necessary intertwinement of individual and collective action and well-being.

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[145] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA and London, UK: Harvard University Press, 1992).
[146] Rosalind Gill, "Media, Empowerment and the 'Sexualization of Culture' Debates," *Sex Roles* 66, no. 11-12 (2012): 741.
[147] Iris Marion Young, "Punishment, Treatment, Empowerment: Three Approaches to Policy for Pregnant Addicts," *Feminist Studies* 20, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 48.

We see a shift from the secondary conceptualization of empowerment to the first within girlhood discourses during the 1990s, which coincided with the transition from second- to third-wave feminism. Writing about the role this transition played in the commodification of female empowerment, Ellen Riordan details how the complicated, seemingly contradictory, nature of third-wave feminist politics allowed for different expressions ranging from "girlies" to "Riot Grrrl," with the former reclaiming traditional femininity and the latter promoting grassroots activism.[148] Two key premises of Riot Grrrl's feminist activism were that girls and young women should support each other and embrace their roles as cultural producers, not just as passive economic participants. In so doing, these girls would pose a challenge to patriarchal capitalism through the democratization of cultural production and distribution and demonstrate the societal *value* of girls and girl cultures, which would, in turn, presumably also solve the problem of girls' low self-esteem.[149] Since white middle-class girls were the most visible in popular media culture, they were perceived as those most in need of being empowered.[150]

According to Riordan, this emphasis on the therapeutic benefits of *valuing* (white) girls helped drive the incorporation of girl power into the dominant culture and the transformation of its "use value" into an "exchange value," therefore commodifying a feminist approach to girls' conjoined individual and collective empowerment.[151] By universalizing girl power's message, this co-optation further increased the visibility of girls and girl cultures and appealed to a broader audience, which could then be mobilized as a commodity and sold to advertisers.[152] So, rather than empower girls, both individually *and* collectively, to challenge structural inequities directly

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[148] Ellen Riordan, "Commodified Agents and Empowered Girls: Consuming and Producing Feminism," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 25, no. 3 (July 2001): 279-297.
[149] Ibid., 288.
[150] Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 27.
[151] Riordan, "Commodified Agents and Empowered Girls," 290-291.
[152] Ibid., 279-297.

through their civic, political, and cultural participation, commodified girl power individualized empowerment through commercial consumption. As Anita Harris explains in *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century*, "empowerment and consumption are thus closely linked through the associations made between products for young women and being confident, strong, assertive, a leader, a role model, and in charge. Consumption is a shortcut to power."[153] In other words, consumerism facilitates girls' empowerment and their development. By drawing a direct line between commercial consumerism, self-actualization, and empowerment, advertisers limited the forms of power available to girls living in the West and especially disadvantaged those without disposable income or cultural capital. I explore the consequences of at-risk girls' exclusion from this consumption process more fully in Chapter 3 of this dissertation and consider the entanglements of girls' presumed responsibility for their economic self-determination and notions of citizenship.[154]

What this neoliberal postfeminist definition of girl power means for many Indigenous girls living in Western settler states is that the conjoined individual and collective modes of empowerment arising from the girls' cultural and political involvements in decolonization and sovereignty movements remain unacknowledged. This oversight, in addition to barriers created by neocolonial forces and the compounded effects of colonial oppression, prevents many Indigenous girls from engaging successfully in approved consumption patterns, thus causing their girl power and post-girl power processes of subject formation to differ from white girls.[155] Indigenous girls and women are also displaced from consumer culture and its subject-making effects through their positioning, not as people who purchase goods and services, but as

[153] Anita Harris, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 90.
[154] Ibid., 90-91.
[155] de Finney, "Playing Indian," 171.

premodern objects that are also available for consumption. Liz Conor's study of racist cartoons in the 1920s and early 1930s Australian publications reveals cultural anxieties that Aboriginal women's engagements with modern fashion threatened white femininity: these women were often constructed as belonging to a primitive, "dying race" and ridiculed for their "failure" to reproduce the Modern Girl's look. [156] Within our contemporary context, the Western colonial imaginary manifests through the commodification of Indigenous femininities as prehistorical, sexualized objects by high-profile brands and pop music artists, which denies the subjecthood of Indigenous girls and women.[157]

Meanwhile, all over the world, Indigenous girls and women are the demographic most adversely affected by economic globalization, which manifests in forms such as environmental injustice, the disruption of traditional economies, and forced displacements from territories because of resource extraction.[158] During the 19th and 20th centuries racist assimilation policies in Australia, Canada, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and the United States sanctioned the mass removal of Indigenous children from their homes, and their placement in colonial boarding/residential schools, and domestic service and manual labor "apprenticeships." In Australia, the forced separation of Aboriginal children from their families continued into the 1970s. Although Canada's "Sixties Scoop," a state practice that placed First Nations children in the welfare system and with white families throughout North America, ended in the 1980s, there are ongoing crises in Indigenous foster care. Government and privately funded studies have traced the high

[156] Liz Conor, "'Blackfella Missus Too Much Proud:' Techniques of Appearing, Femininity, and Race in Australian Modernity," in *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization*, eds. The Around the World Research Group (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 220-239.
[157] de Finney, "Playing Indian," 175-176.
[158] See, Rauna Kuokkanen, "Globalization as Racialized, Sexualized Violence: The Case of Indigenous Women," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 10, no. 2 (2008): 216-233; de Finney, "Playing Indian," 171; and, Mercedes González de la Rocha and Agustín Escobar Latapí, "Indigenous Girls in Rural Mexico: A Success Story?" *Girlhood Studies* 9, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 68.

rates of incarceration, substance abuse, and welfare system placement among Indigenous peoples to the compounded trauma of colonization and forced removals.[159] In addition, many First Nations people living on reserves must contend with the ongoing effects of the Indian Act, which most visibly manifest through the absence of basic infrastructure, including but not limited to the lack of passable roads, clean drinking water, electrical grids, and housing, and an epidemic of chronically underfunded health and education services for children. Moreover, inadequate legal and research frameworks that homogenize Indigenous girls and essentialize them as being always-already in crisis contribute to this ongoing marginalization, including state disregard for missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada.[160]

We find little difference in the humanitarian and policy discourses that make girls' economic self-determination synonymous with their personal empowerment and self-actualization. Many of the campaigns devoted to addressing the unique challenges facing girls globally define empowerment differently for Indigenous girls than they do for girls living in the Global North *and* South. This is the case because, as Ofra Koffman and Rosalind Gill have shown, in an article about the "girl powering" of development and humanitarian campaigns,

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[159] See, for example, "Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action," accessed August 22, 2019, http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf. Also consider statistical comparisons of Indigenous peoples in Canada and Australia who are incarcerated or in the welfare system. "Aboriginal Expertise the Key to Ending Over-Representation in the Justice System, Says Canadian Expert," Victoria Legal Aid, last updated March 7, 2016, https://www.legalaid.vic.gov.au/about-us/news/aboriginal-expertise-key-to-ending-over-representation-in-justice-system-says-canadian-expert.

[160] See Pamela J. Downe, "Aboriginal Girls in Canada: Living Histories of Dislocation, Exploitation and Strength," in *Girlhood: Redefining the Limits*, eds. Yasmin Jiwani, Candice Steenbergen, and Claudia Mitchell (Montreal and New York: Black Rose Books, 2006), 1-14; Hannah McGlade, "Aboriginal Women, Girls, and Sexual Assault," *ACSSA Newsletter* (September 12, 2006): 6-13, https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2006/10/apo-nid879-1085911.pdf; Kerry Carrington and Margaret Pereira, *Offending Youth: Sex, Crime and Justice* (Federation Press, 2009); Anette Sikka, "Trafficking of Aboriginal Women and girls in Canada," Aboriginal Policy Research Consortium International (APRCi) (2010): 201-231; Carrie A. Rentschler and Claudia Mitchell, "The Re-description of Girls in Crisis," *Girlhood Studies* 7, no. 1 (2014): 2-7; Sandrina de Finney and Johanne Saraceno, "Indigenous Girls' Everyday Negotiations of Racialization under Neocolonialism," in *Girls, Texts, Cultures*, eds. Clare Bradford and Mavis Reimer (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2015), 113-138; and, Jaskiran K. Dhillon, "Indigenous Girls and the Violence of Settler Colonial Policing," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 4, no. 2 (2015): 1-31.

global initiatives such as the United Nations Foundation's *Girl Up* and the Nike Foundation's *Girl Effect* promote a notion of universal girlhood between Global North and Global South girls that posits they possess the same potential for success, which can be realized if they work hard, invest in their educations, and delay childbearing.[161] In other words, under globalization, Global South girls are expected to exhibit can-do girlhood traits to disrupt cycles of intergenerational poverty and stimulate the financial growth of their countries. Whereas social policy programs focusing on empowering poor rural Indigenous girls through education, such as *Saqilaj B'e: A Path to Assert the Rights of Indigenous Adolescent Girls* in Guatemala and *PROGRESA-Oportunidades* in Mexico, aim for girls to enter a specialized, but discriminatory, labor market and to provide specialized solutions to community problems.[162]

Also important for this exploration of why Indigenous girls are excluded from norms of empowered girlhood in humanitarian and policy discourses is a consideration of how these campaigns stress the national importance of self-made, economically independent girls. I argue that acknowledging how Indigenous girls' political involvements in decolonization and sovereignty movements constitute girl empowerment problematizes this girl-power inflected notion of citizenship. Writing about how late modern girlhood has replaced the symbolic figuration of adolescence in the Western cultural imaginary, Anita Harris has argued that markers of can-do girlhood, such as flexibility and self-actualization, are now aligned with ideals of national citizenship and progress.[163] Angela McRobbie similarly claims these connections

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[161] See, Ofra Koffman and Rosalind Gill, "'The Revolution will be Led By a 12-year-old Girl': Girl Power and Global Biopolitics," *Feminist Review* 105, no. 1 (2013): 83-102; and, Ofra Koffman, Shani Orgad, and Rosalind Gill, "Girl Power and 'Selfie Humanitarianism," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 29, no. 2 (2015): 157-168.
[162] See, "Stories," Impact, Girl Up, accessed April 6, 2019, https://www.girlup.org/impact/stories/#sthash.utw2g8hk.dpbs; also, de la Rocha and Latapí, "Indigenous Girls in Rural Mexico," 65-81.
[163] Harris, *Future Girl*, 2.

between female empowerment, citizenship, and national futures, in conjunction with the increased visibility of girls in popular media culture, cause girls and young women to be "recognized as one of the stakes upon which the future depends."[164] Within this context, it seems that recognizing Indigenous girls' empowering cultural and political engagements in their communities destabilizes the legitimacy of neoliberal postfeminist conceptualizations of girl agency, development, and empowerment as they relate to the futures of neocolonial Western national projects. But if we are to take seriously neoliberal postfeminist girlhood's claim that "self-making, resilient, and flexible" girls and young women are the best suited to withstand dislocation as well as economic, political, and social unpredictability, then we find a contradiction in its erasure of Indigenous girls in the West, for whom survival in this described state of affairs has been both a historical and ongoing reality.[165]

Starting with brief synopses of these case studies, the next section will discuss how the conceptualization of trauma as a strategic colonial weapon enables a more fulsome understanding of its systematic attack on Indigenous sovereignty and its neocolonial effects on Indigenous girl subjecthood. To be sure, the ways we conceptualize trauma has serious implications for the ways we define empowerment and resistant agency, as my dialogical analysis of the selected films will demonstrate. But they also have consequences for the protagonists' subject formation, as I will show in the third section of this chapter.

[164] Angela McRobbie, "Sweet Smell of Success? New Ways of Being Young Women," in *Feminism and Youth Culture: From 'Jackie' to 'Just Seventeen'* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 201.
[165] Harris, *Future Girl*, 6.

2 Conceptualizing Trauma and Trauma Recovery Onscreen

2.1 Post-Girl Power Requirements for Self-Actualization and Healing

La teta asustada and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* demonstrate that there are significant parallels between the neoliberal requirement for girls to self-actualize and expectations that Indigenous girls be responsible for their own healing.[166] As Sandrina de Finney argues, new iterations of colonial trauma perpetuate policies of Indigenous disenfranchisement and the construction of Indigenous girls as "ungrievable lives,"[167] which Judith Butler defines as lives that are deemed "worth destroying."[168] The communities to which Fausta and Aila belong have been designated "worth destroying." As such, the representation of trauma as a form of female disempowerment in *La teta asustada* and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* has significant implications for the films' depicted models of healing and development.

La teta asustada is adapted from *Entre Prójimos: El conflicto armado interno y la política de la reconciliación en el Perú*, medical anthropologist Kimberly Theidon's documentation of testimonials by Indigenous women who were systematically gang raped by the Peruvian military and *Sendero Luminoso* guerrilla rebels during the nation's 1980s and 1990s internal conflict. Made five years after the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission report, the film concentrates on the cultural belief that children born to these women were afflicted by a widespread condition called "la teta asustada." *La teta asustada* draws a direct line between its Andean girl protagonist's self-actualization and trauma recovery: Fausta must overcome her intimate connection to a traumatic historical event or risk stunting her own development. Witness to her mother Perpetua's (Bárbara Lazón) brutal rape whilst in utero,

[166] Sandrina de Finney, "Under the Shadow of Empire: Indigenous Girls' Presencing as Decolonizing Force," *Girlhood Studies* 7, no. 1 (Summer 2014): 10.
[167] Ibid.
[168] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Ungrievable?* (London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2016), 22.

Fausta struggles to manage her fears of suffering the same fate despite the war "officially" ending in 1992, seventeen years before the setting depicted in the film. This apprehension defines Fausta's engagement with her environment and others, but it also affects her relationship with herself. Much of the film shows Fausta singing to calm her fears; and, having internalized her mother's trauma, the girl inserts a potato in her vagina as a form of self-protection and refuses to walk unaccompanied. Unable to pay for a burial following Perpetua's sudden death, Fausta becomes a live-in domestic worker for Miss Aída (Susi Sánchez), a wealthy Peruvian pianist who is lacking the inspiration to compose original music for an upcoming recital. Upon hearing one of Fausta's improvised songs, Miss Aída strikes an exploitative bargain with the girl: if Fausta teaches her the song, she will receive a string of pearls as payment. Unbeknownst to Fausta, Miss Aída plans to present the song at the recital as her own work, which introduces the theme of appropriation into the film as a contemporary mobilization of colonial power dynamics. Eventually, this arrangement renders Fausta even more vulnerable, becoming the crucible from which her self-actualization materializes.

Even though the 1970s setting of *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* predates the emergence of girl power and post-girl power discourses, I see within the film's construction of Aila's heroic resistant agency and navigation of extremely difficult circumstances an engagement with postfeminist notions of individualized girl agency, choice, and empowerment. Like Fausta, Aila must negotiate a relation to her mother's trauma that is entwined with the trajectory of her girlhood development. Deeply affected by her mother's suicide as a child, Aila endeavors to avoid forced placement in the residential school that traumatized her mother and her now-imprisoned father. The film establishes the cultural and political significance of Canada's Indian Residential School system by drawing a direct line between an excerpt of the Indian Act,

appearing as onscreen text in the film's prologue, and the material realities of intergenerational trauma, which are represented as substance abuse coping mechanisms, suicide, and imprisonment. Between 1876 and 1996, this colonial assimilationist policy formally sanctioned the forced abduction of indigenous children and their mandatory enrolment in Canadian boarding schools, authorizing Indian agents to imprison people who interfered with this process.[169] Aila uses her earnings from drug dealings to pay a "truancy tax" to the Indian agents running the school; this bribe serves to prevent Aila and her friends from being forcibly inducted into St. Dymphna's residential school. Her resourcefulness and determination recall the bravery of other Indigenous girl protagonists contending with racist colonial institutions in films such as *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and *Sami Blood* (Amanda Kernell, 2016, Norway/Denmark/Sweden).[170] When the Indian agents steal Aila's money before she can pay the truancy tax, she enlists her friends in performing a heist of St. Dymphna's and they take in a larger than expected haul of cash. Later, under torture, one of the friends reveals Aila's leadership role in the heist and she is admitted to the school against her will. During her time there, Aila learns of additional horrors that many children endured in residence and this discovery, in conjunction with previous distress about her involvement in others' deaths, prompt the girl to choose between suicide and "survivance."

2.2 Indigenous Modes of Resistant Agency and Empowerment

In light of these thematic resonances, what makes *La teta asustada* and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* ideal dialogical partners for my exploration of empowered girlhood beyond white, middle-class femininity is the films' portrayals of the unique demands of historical colonial and neocolonial policies on Fausta and Aila's subject formation. I argue these depictions invite

[169] Holly A. McKenzie, et. al, "Disrupting the Continuities Among Residential Schools, the Sixties Scoop, and Child Welfare: An Analysis of Colonial and Neocolonial Discourses," *The International Indigenous Policy Journal* 7, no. 2 (2016): 1-24.
[170] *Sami Blood*, however, concerns its heroine's efforts to assimilate into white Swedish culture.

contemplation of the economic and sociopolitical conditions structuring post-girl power expectations for girls' self-actualization. These shared approaches to precarious feminine development provide sufficient grounds for dialogical analysis and this chapter is concerned with the ways that *La teta asustada* and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* represent the role of the mother/daughter relationship in the formation of their girl protagonists' gendered subjectivities. Most strikingly, Fausta and Aila's mothers die in the beginning of both films and the narratives concentrate on how the girls' bodily interactions with mothers, whose deaths were just as profoundly marked by trauma as their lives, constitute specific forms of remembering, self-determination, and healing. In *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith attests to their intertwinement by noting that:

> The remembering of a people relates not so much to an idealized remembering of a golden past but more specifically to the remembering of a painful past and, importantly, people's responses to that pain. While collectively indigenous communities can talk through the history of painful events, there are frequent silences and intervals in the stories about what happened after the event. Often there is no collective remembering as communities were ripped apart, …often turned inward and let their suffering give way to a desire to be dead. This form of remembering is painful because it involves remembering not just what colonization was about but what being dehumanized meant for our own cultural practices. Both healing and transformation become crucial strategies in any approach which asks a community to remember what they may have decided unconsciously or consciously to forget.[171]

Crucially, *La teta asustada* and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* corroborate Tuhiwai Smith's position in three interconnected ways. First, these case studies raise questions of how best to heal when confronted with traumatic memories, and they situate this inquiry within the context of a fraught transformation process. How the films define trauma provides the starting point and trajectories of both the healing and development processes. I suggest that *La teta asustada* engages a

[171] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Zed Books Ltd., 1999), 146.

medicalized, psychoanalytic framework more closely, through its individualization of the effects of traumatic violence; the film's title refers to a condition that is considered an illness affecting communities and individuals.[172] However, the film only concentrates on Fausta's individual interventions as she grapples with Peru's history of racialized/sexualized violence against Andean women. For Fausta's uncle Lúcido, and the other Indigenous characters appearing onscreen, the time of extreme violence is but a distant memory. In this respect, they are shown to suffer from "collective amnesia" while Fausta is shown still reflecting on this tragedy.[173] In making Fausta the only character, after her mother's death, who retains the extremely traumatic memories of the civil war, Llosa's film downplays the role sexual assaults played as "strategic weapons of war" against a community and makes it something like an individual's psychosomatic illness or mental health issue.[174] In contrast, the conceptualization of trauma that we see in *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* is more in line with the intersectional model of "individual and collective bio-psycho-social-cultural-spiritual" intergenerational trauma that is centered in much of Indigenous scholarship.[175] This approach takes into consideration the colonial and contemporary weaponization of trauma, which destabilizes the psychoanalytic divide between the personal/collective and subjective/historical. We see Aila directly challenging colonial policies and officials, but more importantly, *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* draws attention to collective acts of remembering: between Aila and her adopted grandmother Ceres (Katherine Sorbey), Aila and her mother, Aila and Gisigu (Stewart Myiow), a man who fought in World War II alongside her grandfather, and between Aila and her father.

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[172] A doctor denies the possibility that *la teta asustada* is a real medical condition.
[173] Carolina Rueda, "Memory, Trauma, and Phantasmagoria in Claudia Llosa's *La teta asustada*," *Hispania* 98, no. 3 (September 2015): 442-451.
[174] Ibid., 453.
[175] See, Ramona Beltrán and Stephanie Begun, "'It is Medicine:' Narratives of Healing from Aotearoa Digital Storytelling as Indigenous Media Project (ADSIMP)," *Psychology and Developing Societies* 26, no. 2 (2014): 155-179.

Indigenous community-based scholars working with girls draw on notions of "presence" and "survivance" to illuminate the resurgent modes of agency and resistance that Indigenous girls living in the West have employed in response to intersecting forms of systemic and structural oppression. Their work points to the colonial impulses of Western medical models of trauma that pathologize Indigenous girls' coping mechanisms and regulate their behavior through criminalization, medication, and placement within the welfare system, thus suppressing their expressions of resistant agency.[176] In "Under the Shadow of Empire: Indigenous Girls' Presencing as Decolonizing Force," Sandrina de Finney loosely describes how girls' acts of presence complicate the individualistic models favored in girlhood and trauma scholarship:

> …girls' everyday acts of presence—avoiding, protecting, contesting, laughing, hoping, dreaming, connecting, documenting, imagining, challenging—are not singular, simplistic examples of rational agency; they are messy, contradictory, inherently diverse. This diversity brings to light other conceptualizations of trauma and place with which we can engage to enact a praxis of girlhood that challenges feminist analyses of structural barriers which leave little room for honoring girls' everyday engagements with hope, desire, humor, and possibility.[177]

Key to this description is de Finney's refusal to attempt an exhaustive list of the ways that Indigenous girls reconnect to cultural epistemologies and ontologies and disrupt the dominant girlhood discourses that construct them as both at-risk and disposable. This refusal broadens, rather than restricts, the many ways that girls can choose to exercise their power far beyond the neoliberal postfeminist channels of consumerism and sexuality typically centered in girlhood media and policy discourses. In a similar vein, Natalie Clark's Red Intersectional framework shows that "naming and noting," a witnessing practice that helps Indigenous girls identify and analyze the processes that shape their experiences and societal norms, empowers them to

[176] Natalie Clark, "Red Intersectionality and Violence-informed Witnessing Praxis with Indigenous Girls," *Girlhood Studies* 9, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 51-52; and, de Finney, "Under the Shadow of Empire," 10.
[177] de Finney, "Under the Shadow of Empire," 8-26.

recognize personal strengths and to cultivate safe trauma resistance strategies.[178] While this practice builds on bell hooks' "oppositional gaze" theory by encouraging girls to counter stereotypes with culturally-affirming images and narratives, it also reflects hooks' description of a marginalized, but empowered way of seeing reality "both from the outside in and from the inside out."[179]

What is more, "naming and noting" affirms Indigenous girls' healthy impulses to resist abuse—which are often pathologized given their expression through self-blame and harmful coping mechanisms—by channeling these impulses into communal and creative acts of presencing. *La teta asustada* initially shows us that "naming and noting" can be an empowering form of female resistant agency for Perpetua as she sings about her assault to her daughter, but later pathologizes Fausta's solitary continuation of this practice by aligning it with her maintenance of the vaginal suppository's tubers. In *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*, Aila's "naming and noting" is performed through sketching and painting techniques she learned from her mother and through Anna's art, which enables her to discuss the legacy of the residential schools with Ceres. But the film diegetically isolates this creative decolonizing work from Aila's drug-dealing, a criminal activity enabling others in her community to practice the "art of forgetfulness" through substance abuse coping strategies. *La teta asustada* depoliticizes Fausta's resistant agency by pathologizing its individual expression, whereas *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* contextualizes Aila's drug-dealing as a way of navigating the oppressive residential school system and, while it distinguishes this criminal activity from her active "naming and noting" artistic practices, it neither excuses nor pathologizes the behavior. Through "naming and noting,"

[178] Clark, "Opening Pandora's Box," 151-163.
[179] bell hooks, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 36 (Jan 1, 1989): 20.

we see a conceptualization of empowerment that resonates with Iris Marion Young's second definition of the term, insofar as "presencing" and "naming and noting" encourage "the development of a sense of collective influence over the social conditions of one's life."[180] But we also see a corrective to the widespread difficulties "already empowered" girls face identifying and articulating structural oppressions in the globalized postfeminist era. As Amy Shields Dobson and Anita Harris explain in "Theorizing Agency in Post-girl power Times:"

> [T]erms and subject positions from which to describe experiences of victimhood, oppression, lack, limitation, and what we might call, 'suffering-marked-by-structure' are not readily available to young women, particularly of the post-girlpower generation. Identifying structural oppression appears to require a vocabulary, a subject position, and/or an emotional and embodied state that is not currently in-vogue in mainstream cultural discourse, and not often one young women readily identify with in describing their own experiences and life paths.[181]

In making these remarks, Shields Dobson and Harris remind us that the empowerment discourse of the post-girl power era is not detailing a utopian feminist reality; but rather, it is obscuring the constraints of girls' lived situations through gendered language that overemphasizes the opportunities of the globalized social order. In this respect, what makes these Indigenous participatory practices of "presencing" and "naming and noting" especially significant for this chapter's analysis of post-girl power resistant agency is how these strategies incorporate the acknowledgment of pervasive structural inequalities and their far-reaching effects into a model of holistic trauma recovery.

At this point, is it necessary to point out that "trauma recovery," as it is defined in Indigenous scholarship, is radically different from neoliberal self-help discourses that recast adversities as learning opportunities, and from traditional narratives of female development

[180] Young, "Punishment, Treatment, Empowerment," 48.
[181] Dobson and Harris, "Post-girl power," 145-156.

which frame painful experiences as "growing pains" that are necessary parts of girls' enculturation into adult femininity and hegemonic governmentality. Rather, this recuperative work is entangled with decolonization and self-determination processes that center intergenerational truth-telling—which addresses past, present, and future generations—and the development of resilience. Gerald Vizenor's concept of "survivance" is especially useful for understanding how the notion of presence interrogates the categories of domination and victimhood that are implicated in trauma discourse. According to Vizenor:

> Survivance is not just survival but also resistance, not heroic or tragic, but the tease of tradition, and my sense of survivance outwits dominance and victimry. Survival is a response; survivance is a standpoint, a worldview, and a presence. [182]

With this definition in mind, the task of this chapter's dialogical textual analysis is to note Fausta and Aila's standpoints and the ways that the films present two distinct paths to trauma recovery that have different ideological implications. In using a medicalized definition of trauma, *La teta asustada* emphasizes the tragic nature of Fausta's resistant agency and calls on her to develop personal resilience as part of her healing/development. *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*, by contrast, positions trauma recovery as an ongoing, community and individual project, and resilience as a quality that is passed down through generations.[183] As a result, this latter understanding of resilience is not individualistic or self-regulatory, as it is conceptualized within the context of neoliberal austerity. Chapter Two takes up this neoliberal treatment of resilience as a mode of

[182] Vizenor and Lee, *Postindian Conversations*, 93.
[183] In the press kit's Director's Statement, Barnaby talks about *matnaggewinu*, the survivor-warrior figure, and the real-life, heroic indigenous women who served as inspirations for his protagonist. "My entire life, I've wanted to tell a story about this kind of Indian," he writes, "to have them encounter all the things that makes living Indian ugly, and to represent all the things that make surviving it beautiful." *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*: Press Kit, http://rhymesforyoungghouls.com/RFYG-PRESS-KIT.pdf

girlish plasticity emerging in response to the post-recessionary destabilization of American exceptionalism.

A second way that *La teta asustada* and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* corroborate Tuhiwai Smith's characterization of historical trauma's devastating impacts is by engaging with horror film tropes. Because colonial linkages between land and Indigenous female bodies cast both as "readily available for conquest,"[184] the corpses' onscreen presence points to the necropolitical realities of the women's sociocultural contexts.[185] The corpses bring issues of corporeal and territorial sovereignty to the fore and visualize how trauma transforms bodies into "historical processes and sites."[186] Adam Lowenstein, in his discussion of the relation between cinematic horror and historical trauma, describes this mode of representation as a way to "recognize events as wounds…in the fabric of culture and history that bleed through conventional confines of time and space."[187] *La teta asustada* and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* are attentive to the overlapping temporality of trauma and visualize this continuity between the past and the present in striking ways. In depicting Aila's mother Anna (Roseanne Supernault) as a zombie, Jeff Barnaby's film uses this representational logic to counter national narratives that the intergenerational trauma of the residential school system is "a horror of colonial past from which the country has now recovered."[188] Anna's calls for vengeance and her necrotic body, which symbolizes trauma endemic in survivors of the residential school system, indicate otherwise (Figure 1.5). Similarly,

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[184] Michelle H. Raheja, "Ideologies of (In)Visibility: Redfacing, Gender, and Moving Images," in *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film* (University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 48.
[185] J.-A. Mbembé and Libby Meintjes, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 11-40.
[186] Kimberly Theidon writes, "[m]emories also sediment in our bodies, converting them into historical processes and sites." Kimberly Theidon, "The Milk of Sorrow: A Theory on the Violence of Memory," *Canadian Woman Studies* 27, no. 1 (2009): 10.
[187] Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (Columbia University Press, 2005), 1.
[188] de Finney, "Under the Shadow of Empire," 12.

the mummification of Fausta's mother Perpetua speaks to the importance of memorializing a horrific extradiegetic event, which government officials, at the time of the film's release, still refused to grant historical and national importance (Figure 1.6).[189] In haunting these film screens, Anna and Perpetua signal the ways that Indigenous knowledges reveal the fragility[190] of the Eurocentric epistemic frame and disrupt its historical whitewashing effects, potentially instigating a "decolonizing of the screen."[191]

Figure 1.5. In *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* (Barnaby, 2013), Aila (Kawennáhere Devery Jacobs) approaches her mother's grave as Anna's (Roseanne Supernault) zombified hand erupts from the ground.

Figure 1.6. In the foreground of this scene from *La teta asustada* (Llosa, 2009), Fausta (Magaly Solier) prepares to cut the potato tubers being extruded from her vagina. In the background, her mother's "mummified" corpse lies on the bed.

Lastly, the formal aspects of *La teta asustada* and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* make manifest Linda Tuhiwai Smith's remarks about the "frequent silences and intervals" in stories about painful historical events and their aftereffects.[192] *La teta asustada* shows this aspect of traumatic storytelling by disrupting continuity editing and the pairing of sound and image, while *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* inserts vignettes that temporarily interrupt overall narrative progression. As

[189] Rueda, "Memory, Trauma, and Phantasmagoria," 442-451.
[190] Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 13.
[191] Merata Mita, "The Soul and the Image: Colonizing the Screen," as cited in Marnina Gonick, "Indigenizing Girl Power," *Feminist Media Studies* 10, no. 3 (2010): 305-319.
[192] Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 146.

Cathy Caruth has argued in her book *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, using Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985, France/UK) as an example, film can pursue truth about painful events, such as the Holocaust, through elements such as repetition, nonlinear temporality, and silence as well as through its address to an audience.[193] Drawing on a psychoanalytic framework, Caruth poses the question "In what ways has *Shoah* (both in its content and in its procedures) opened up new ways for an understanding of culture, politics, and the trauma of our century?"[194] The final section of this chapter pursues a similar line of questioning as it explores how the case studies' formal features reflect and prompt different conceptualizations of trauma and trauma recovery within the context of precarious girlhood development.

3 My Mother, Myself: "Fusional" Mothering

In what follows I think through *La teta asustada* and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*' treatment of the question, "How does it feel to be a problem?" W.E.B. Du Bois posed this question in his phenomenological theorization of how the experience of black American subjecthood, as constructed by white American racism, involved seeing oneself as 'other' to a normative notion of personhood and citizenship.[195] I look at early scenes that introduce how trauma is weaponized and evoke the experience of what it is to be constructed as ungrievable: a body without value.[196] Then, I explore how the films portray the mothers' strategies of survivance as structuring principles for the girls' subject formation. This section lays crucial groundwork and is comprised of two subsections: the first subsection establishes how the case studies' lead female characters and their mothers understand and navigate their constructed ungrievability; and, the second

[193] Cathy Caruth, "The Obscenity of Understanding: An Evening with Claude Lanzmann," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995), 201.
[194] Ibid.
[195] W.E.B. Du Bois and Shawn Leigh Alexander, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," in *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), 1-12.
[196] Butler, *Frames of War*," 22.

subsection explores how the girls' attachments to their mothers' corpses visualize their girlhood development under a western neocolonial state.

3.1 Navigating Ungrievability

3.1.1 *La teta asustada*

Figures 1.7. and 1.8. The subtitled song lyrics that Perpetua (Bárbara Lazón) sings offscreen in *La teta asustada* (Llosa, 2009).

La teta asustada opens by centering a firsthand account of what it is for an indigenous woman to be designated ungrievable: it simultaneously immerses viewers in a character's experience of herself as a "problem," and calls this violent designation into question.[197] Unaccompanied by visual images, a tremulous high-pitched voice sings in Quechua as subtitles detail the singer's recalled experience of gang rape, and awareness of dissonances between her echoing screams and people's laughter. The dark screen, offscreen presence of the singer, and subtitled song lyrics point to the "unseeable and unsayable" nature of profound trauma, while the singer's expressed hopefulness that her hearer(s) will one day understand her pain underscores the importance of Indigenous self-narration and attunes viewers to its pedagogical role (Figures 1.7 and 1.8).[198] As the subtitles state:

Perhaps some day you will understand,
how much I cried,

[197] Du Bois' phenomenological description of this mode of viewing is that it is a "peculiar sensation." Du Bois and Alexander, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," 3.
[198] Emma Wilson, *Cinema's Missing Children* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2003), 50.

I begged on my knees to those poor bastards.
That night I screamed, the hills echoed and people laughed.
I fought with my pain saying…
a bitch with rabies must have given birth to you…
and that is why you have eaten her breasts.
Now you can swallow me,
now you can suck me,
like you did to your mother.
This woman who sings was grabbed, was raped that night.
They didn't care about my unborn daughter.
They raped me with their penises and their hands,
with no pity for my daughter, watching them from inside.

The film's first images do more than show us the singer is an elderly woman on her deathbed, they also present the long-term impacts of this horrific event and give force to her revelation that this woman was pregnant when gang raped and tortured. When the singer concludes her testimonial, Fausta, *La teta asustada*'s protagonist, leans into the film frame to comfort the singer and addresses her as "mother," who we later learn is named Perpetua.

In documenting her assault, Perpetua's song engages concepts of agency and resistance that are useful for understanding her role in Fausta's precarious girlhood development.[199] Perpetua's song performs several functions: it demonstrates that remembering is both a form of agency and a form of resistance; it affirms her existence and counters the designation of ungrievability that facilitated her rape and torture; it presents oral evidence of a suppressed national history; it creates another layer of intimacy between mother and daughter; and it initiates Fausta's phenomenological apprenticeship in the world as her mother experienced it.[200] Indigenous self-narration is threatening to the colonial order because it affirms the existence, as

[199] By contrast, some critical analyses of the film have read Perpetua's song as a racist caricature of Indigenous womanhood and as an indication that she did not have agency. While I am interested in how this film's construction of maternal agency relates to other Latin American cinematic narratives about mother/daughter relationships, that study exceeds the scope of this present project.
[200] Rueda, "Memory, Trauma, and Phantasmagoria," 453.

well as the intellectual and political validity, of Indigenous subjectivities.[201] Perpetua's song is also evocative of mothers' routine practice of singing to their children songs that comfort them or orient them to the world and their own bodies. In her study of children born of wartime rape, Kimberly Theidon identifies this song as an instance of *qarawi*, a lyrical and improvisational historicization of events performed by elderly Quechua-speaking women, noting its instructive function in the film as a way of helping Fausta understand the origins of her fearful disposition.[202] Theidon explains that many pregnant Andean women who were assaulted during the Peruvian internal conflict assumed unique relationships with their unborn children: firstly, the women believed that the transmission of their trauma in utero or through breast milk created severe childhood developmental issues; and, secondly, because the women were warned that they would be stigmatized or disbelieved should they disclose their rapes, many of them considered their unborn children the only witnesses who were sympathetic to their traumatic experiences.

One of the first indications that Fausta has adopted her mother's perspective is when she responds to Perpetua's song in kind, lyrically noting the memories' physiological effects and urging her mother to eat. And, as we see in due course, Fausta continues using this lyrical mode of self-expression to articulate and manage her fears, especially when confronting vestiges of Perpetua's oppression firsthand, in the form of military portrait photographs, and the transposing of its exploitative dynamics into her own relationship with a wealthy employer. But within this scene, *La teta asustada* emphasizes that Fausta has taken up her mother's experience of the world as her own when it cuts to another vantage point that visually isolates the girl and places

[201] See, for example, Aman Sium and Eric Ritskes, "Speaking Truth to Power: Indigenous Storytelling as an Act of Living Resistance," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2, no. 1 (2013): iv.
[202] Kimberly Theidon, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Children Born of Wartime Sexual Violence," *Current Anthropology* 56, no. 12 (December 2015): S191-S200.

Perpetua offscreen but does not constitute a countershot. In this new vantage point, a large open window faces a mountainside. The image frame gradually tightens to align with the window frame as Fausta pops in and out of view, lyrically narrating her actions for her mother. Most strikingly, the girl's discovery that her mother has passed away coincides with the visual alignment of the film image and window frames, symbolically articulating how Fausta's identification with her mother's trauma informs how she experiences her sociocultural context. A cut to black and the sudden appearance of the film title in oversized lettering announces the name of Fausta's condition, while the sequence that follows shows how it informs her experience and performance of precarious girlhood.

Immediately following this title screen, Fausta exhibits *la teta asustada* symptoms, such as nosebleed and fainting, and she is taken to the hospital where a physician discovers a more pressing medical issue: Fausta has a potato suppository that is growing tubers and causing a vaginal infection. After leaving the hospital, Fausta tells her uncle Lúcido a story about one of her mother's neighbors who used a potato suppository to repulse potential rapists and safeguard her future. Despite her uncle's assurances that present-day Lima poses no such threats to her bodily integrity, Fausta chooses to negotiate a relation to the world as it was experienced by Andean women during the Peruvian internal conflict. The implicit critique in this scene and throughout the film is that Fausta is holding on to a history that does not serve her well, which she must relinquish to thrive in modern-day Peru. But what is especially noteworthy about this scene is how Lúcido's assurances generalize the events of the civil war: they fail to specify who committed these atrocities against Andean women. In this respect, historical amnesia is presented as the vehicle for Fausta's flourishing and reproduced in the film's postfeminist address to its

inscribed viewers.[203] By making Fausta's personal reconciliation with this difficult national history a prerequisite for her healing and self-actualization, *La teta asustada* individualizes the effects of this twelve-year period of extreme violence and disavows its impacts on Andean peoples collectively as well as the nation. As a result, the film's individualistic approaches to girlhood development and the questions of intergenerational trauma and recuperation are strikingly different from what we see in *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*.

3.1.2 *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*

Like *La teta asustada*, *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* begins with the question of what it feels like to be constructed as a problem. Onscreen text also sets up the film's exploration of trauma's intergenerational effects; however, rather than appear as subtitles, this text presents a paraphrased version of the Indian Act, which legislated the forced enrolment of physically able First Nations children between the ages of 5 and 16 in residential schools. Forcibly removed from their homes, many of these children were denied contact with their families, forbidden to speak Indigenous languages or participate in cultural activities, with many who died while at school being buried in unmarked graves. While religious groups managed the colonial education of Indigenous children before the Canadian Confederation, the federal government assumed control during the 1880s and began closing schools during the late 1970s, with the last residential school closing in 1996.[204] Contextualizing the narrative events that follow, this paraphrased legislation declares:

> Her Majesty's attendants, to be called truant officers, will take into custody a child whom they believe to be absent from school using as much force as the circumstance

[203] Moreover, those unfamiliar with the details of the Peruvian civil war prior to screening the film will have to turn to other sources to fill in gaps about the causes and perpetrators of these sexual crimes against Andean women.
[204] Robert Carney, "Aboriginal Residential Schools Before Confederation: The Early Experience," *Historical Studies* 61, no. 1 (1995): 13-40.

> requires. A person caring for an Indian child who fails to cause such a child to attend school shall immediately be imprisoned, and such person arrested without warrant and said child conveyed to school by the truant officer.
>
> —Indian Act, by will of her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada

Where *La teta asustada*'s magical realist account of violence against indigenous people individualizes the internal conflict's impacts and avoids the historical specificity of naming perpetrators, *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*' direct citation of this violent assimilationist policy makes full use of film's ability to pursue and give rise to truth.[205] Indeed, the film's citation of the Indian Act and depiction of the ways that trauma operates on personal and communal levels makes a critical historical intervention, which many critics cautioned could be triggering for certain viewers. Like Fausta, Aila has her own unconventional means of self-protection: Fausta uses a potato vaginal suppository to ward off the imagined imminent threat of sexual assault, whereas threats to Aila's bodily integrity are very present and real. She uses funds from her drug-dealing to bribe Popper (Mark Anthony Krupa), the corrupt Indian Agent, to overlook her residential school truancy. *La teta asustada* and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* interrogate their protagonists' chosen vehicles and forms of girl empowerment by emphasizing the limitations of each girl's efforts at self-preservation: Fausta's suppository causes her health to worsen, and Aila's truancy scheme is foiled when Indian Agents steal her earnings. Following from this, they present alternative vehicles and forms of empowerment for their protagonists: Fausta's development requires that she disavow not just Perpetua's "fusional" mothering, but also her traumatic experiences, while Aila must confront continuities between her mother's trauma and her own, with the help of her Mi'kmaq community.

[205] Caruth, *Trauma*, 202.

The aesthetic features of *La teta asustada*'s opening scene serve to negotiate understandings of trauma, represent precariousness, and reflect the troubling but important role of memory recall, whereas *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* uses editing to bring to light connections between the mandate of the Indian Act, the Red Crow reserve's social and material conditions, and Aila's familial dysfunction. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues:

> Often there is no collective remembering as communities were systematically ripped apart, children were removed for adoption, extended families separated across different reserves and national boundaries. The aftermath of such pain was borne by individuals or smaller family units, sometimes unconsciously or consciously obliterated through alcohol, violence and self-destruction. Communities often turned inward and let their suffering give way to a desire to be dead. Violence and family abuse became entrenched in communities which had no hope. White society did not see and did not care.[206]

The difficulties of forgetting lie at the heart of the film, providing a striking counterpoint to *La teta asustada*'s depiction of how Perpetua and Fausta strive to remember. The opening scene shows the protagonist's uncle Burner (Brandon Oakes) and her parents, Anna and Joseph (Glen Gould), drinking and getting high, behaviors which Aila later characterizes as both "the art of forgetfulness" and as a uniting force in her community. Towards the end of the party, Burner joins a very young Aila (Miika Bryce Whiskeyjack) and her friend Tyler (Louis Beauvais) outside, where they are looking at artwork in Anna's journal.[207] Gesturing toward St. Dymphna's residential school, which looms in the background, Burner narrates its voracious consumption of indigenous bodies by describing the priests as zombies and noting the large number of children who disappear while enrolled at the school. To reassure Tyler, a boarder at the residential school, Aila intervenes and tells a story about Gunnar, one of her mother's drawings, which foreshadows

[206] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 146.
[207] Much of the writing about this scene identifies Tyler as Aila's younger brother. However, when trying to assuage Tyler's fears about residential school dangers Aila says "I have something that will protect you, my mom drew it for me." She makes the distinction of calling Anna "my mom," which suggests that she is not Tyler's mother.

both her heroism and the film's depiction of the recuperative potential of Indigenous storytelling. Joseph and Anna stumble drunkenly out of the house; at Burner's suggestion, Anna encourages Aila to sit on her lap to drive the car, resulting in Tyler's accidental death.

Figure 1.9. In *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* (Barnaby, 2013), a young Aila (Miika Bryce Whiskeyjack) discovers her mother's body.

The next morning Aila witnesses her father's arrest and as she discovers her mother's suicide her teenage voiceover declares: "The day I found my mother dead I aged a thousand years" (Figure 1.9).[208] As we saw with Fausta in *La teta asustada*, the discovery that her mother has died is marked as a defining moment for Aila's self-understanding. We are not made privy to any understanding of themselves that is not directly related to their mothers. Most strikingly, the deaths in both films remain offscreen and we are encouraged to note both the daughters' contemplation of these events and the ways they determine how the girls negotiate a relation to their sociocultural contexts. Michael Taussig sees such moments as being crucial to meaning-making and subject-making. "The space of death is crucial to the creation of meaning and consciousness," Taussig writes, "nowhere more so than in societies where torture is endemic and

[208] There is another character in the film, Gisigu (Stewart Myiow), whom Aila describes as also aging a thousand years, however World War II was the event that precipitated his change.

where the culture of terror flourishes."[209] What this means for my analysis of *La teta asustada* and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* is that the trajectory of Fausta and Aila's development is determined by the ways they process their mothers' deaths and their mothers' construction as ungrievable objects.

Although much of *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*' narrative concerns Aila's efforts to recover her stolen drug money and to escape the residential school system, the film draws attention to the ways the girl's connection with her mother instigates insurgent and resurgent moments. As Sium and Ritskes put it, insurgence draws attention to instances of colonial violence and Indigenous resistance to it, while resurgence involves reclaiming knowledge that colonial projects sought to erase.[210] A flashback scene showing Anna secretly teaching six-year-old Aila how to paint Indigenous figures functions as an instance of insurgence through the lesson's explicit challenge to the Indian Act's prohibition of Indigenous self-representation and meetings.[211] But Anna's lesson also functions as a strategy of resurgence through its affirmation of Indigenous self-determination and "presence." In *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence*, Leanne Simpson draws out connections between precolonial acts of creation—such as storytelling, making clothing or songs and dances—and acts of presence, which she argues are necessary for Indigenous resurgence. Simpson makes a crucial distinction between the modes of empowerment on offer within Indigenous societies and Western consumer culture, wherein the former affirms connection with Ancestors and actively creates new, better realities and the latter is self-serving, requiring "both absence and wanting

[209] Michael Taussig, "Culture of Terror—Space of Death. Roger Casement's Putumayo Report and the Explanation of Torture," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26, no. 3 (July 1984): 467.
[210] Sium and Ritskes, "Speaking Truth to Power," iii.
[211] Occurring later in the film, it helps contextualize the events of an early scene when Popper destroys Aila's freshly-spray painted image of a female warrior on the side of a van as retaliation against her barely-concealed contempt for his truancy extortion.

things in order to perpetuate itself."[212] Within this context, Anna's impartation of the importance of creating speaks to a conceptualization of identity and empowerment that exceeds the neoliberal postfeminist model affirmed in *La teta asustada*. In the next section, I show how thinking through Melanie Klein's object relations theory enables us to understand the ways the films' maternal necropolitical figurations orient Fausta and Aila's personal journeys and mediate their responses to trauma.

3.2 A Kind of Totality

In their representation of the girls' closeness with their mothers' corpses, *La teta asustada* and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* explore how intergenerational trauma and the mother/daughter relationship inform feminine subject formation, while also posing the question of what empowered girlhood looks like for those grappling with cultural and political disenfranchisement. Feminist psychoanalytic theorists exploring feminine subject formation in pre-Oedipal Freudian object relations have argued that mothers' close identifications with their daughters cause the girls to experience themselves, at least in part, as extensions of their mothers; and, as I have argued, girlhood self-knowledge operates in these films in a similar way. Drawing on Melanie Klein's pioneering object relations theory, which recognized the maternal body as the child's original source of psychical and physical sustenance, this section concentrates on scenes in both films that emphasize the significance of their mothers' corpses for the girls' embodied experiences of their environments. I aim to demonstrate how the post-death presence of Perpetua and Anna makes it possible for their daughters to move beyond the constraints and opportunities of their precarious social positioning toward other possibilities.[213] The women's

[212] Leanne Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2011), 92-93.

[213] I am thinking here, of Iris Marion Young's phenomenological concept of the lived body as a as a "way of articulating how persons live out their positioning in social structures along with the opportunities and constraints

necropolitical narrative presence, I suggest, reveals "the space of death as a threshold…whose breadth offers positions of advance as well as of extinction," provided that Fausta and Aila rightly interpret their relations to these maternal objects.[214]

In addition to conveying Fausta's grief over her mother's death, *La teta asustada*'s phenomenological style of filmmaking makes us privy to how Perpetua's body exists for Fausta as what Melanie Klein has described as "a kind of totality which was experienced as the whole of existence."[215] When she returns from the hospital, point-of-view shots, close-ups, and Fausta's nondiegetic singing to her mother convey her understanding of how her uncle perceives her, and how she contracted *le teta asustada* in utero. As she continues her lyrical justification for using the potato vaginal suppository as a tool of self-preservation, a medium shot shows her lying in bed beside her mother, peeking under the blanket covering Perpetua's body and nestling close beside her. For Klein, the availability of the mother's breasts and body determines the child's relationship to her mother and view of the breast as a good or bad object: available breasts are loved, good objects whereas absent breasts are hated, bad objects. Klein states:

> The baby's first object of love and hate—his mother—is both desired and hated with all the intensity and strength that is characteristic of the early urges of the baby. In the very beginning he loves his mother at the time that she is satisfying his needs for nourishment…But when the baby is hungry and his desires are not gratified, or when he is feeling bodily pain or discomfort, then the whole situation suddenly alters. Hatred and aggressive feelings are aroused and he becomes dominated by the impulses to destroy the very person who is the object of all his desires and who in his mind is linked up with everything he experiences—good and bad alike.[216]

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they produce." Iris Marion Young, "Lived Body vs. Gender: Reflections on Social Structure and Subjectivity," in *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 25.
[214] Taussig, "Culture of Terror—Space of Death," 467-468.
[215] Meira Likierman, *Melanie Klein: Her Work in Context* (London and New York: Continuum, 2001), 39.
[216] Melanie Klein, "Love, Guilt and Reparation (1937)," in *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921-1945, Volume 1* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 306-307.

Within the unconscious mind, the good breast takes on qualities that exceed its physical function and offset harsh social and material realities, which then cause the maternal body to provide a person with "the foundation for hope, trust, and the belief in goodness."[217] What we see with Fausta is her understanding of Perpetua's constructed ungrievability is intertwined with her experience of the maternal body, and, by extension, her world. Scenes depicting Fausta's overclose proximity to her mother's corpse illustrate her self-perception of unindividuated continuity with her mother on multivalent levels with respect to gendered subjecthood, nationality, and her own ungrievability as a fetal witness to trauma. By visually pairing Perpetua's progressively decaying body with the practice of remembering, the film emphasizes her out-of-placeness and interrogates the durability and disruptive potential of Indigenous knowledge. One such scene shows Fausta caressing her mother's hair, which is splayed across a pillowcase bearing the embroidered words "*no me olvides*," as it detaches into her hands, while other scenes pair Fausta's lament over her condition with the grooming of the suppository's tubers.[218] In this way, the parallel intensification of her vaginal infection and emotional distress, as expressed through *qarawi*, call the benefits of remembering, as it pertains to national atrocities and memory, into question. This symbolism matters because, if Claudia Llosa mobilizes indigenous representation in her films to convey national ideals, as Patricia White suggests,[219] then this disavowal of remembering, which is figured here as a form of agency with "an indigenous sensibility,"[220] problematizes Llosa's depiction of empowered Andean/Peruvian girlhood. As Marnina Gonick explains in her reading of *Whale Rider*, the film's refusal to define

[217] Likierman, *Melanie Klein*, 173.
[218] "No me olvides" means "don't forget me." (Author's translation)
[219] Patricia White, "Claudia Llosa's Trans/national Address," in *Women's Cinema, World Cinema: Projecting Contemporary Feminisms* (Duke University Press, 2015), 189.
[220] Gonick, "Indigenizing Girl Power," 313.

normative Indigenous feminine development as the disavowal of cultural histories and practices, while also affirming the possibility that deep respect may allow for the revision of tradition, produces a more robust understanding of girlhood and empowerment.[221]

After Fausta reclaims withheld wages from her exploitative employer, she decides to have the suppository removed which suggests the film situates personal choice as the only appropriate way to reconcile historical trauma. Although postfeminist in its characterization of Fausta's responsibility for her healthy girlhood development, *La teta asustada* eschews an explicit alignment with neoliberal principles by having its protagonist redress the neocolonial dynamics of her employment.[222] What is most striking about this thematic concern with personal responsibility is that, through its portrayal of Fausta's symbolic preservation of historical trauma as life-threatening, the film presents a colonial model of recuperation that excludes restitution to the harmed. The possibility for Fausta to reorient her self-understanding, relation to the world and its objects lies in what she does with her mother's corpse, which diegetically serves as an ongoing reminder of human rights violations against indigenous women. The film's concluding sequence begins by showing the family en route to bury Perpetua, when Fausta, struck by an idea, asks her uncle to stop the vehicle. Empowered by her recent, suppository-free self-discovery, Fausta treks across sandy dunes with her mother's corpse on her back, then stands along the shoreline where she self-narrates a new song that orients her mother towards her own perspective (Figures 1.10 and 1.11). A cut to black is followed by a scene in which Fausta is

[221] Ibid., 315.

[222] Fausta's employer, Miss Aída (Susi Sánchez), is a concert pianist lacking inspiration. When she overhears Fausta singing *La sirena*, a *qarawi* about a mermaid, she brokers a deal to learn the song in exchange for pearls from a broken necklace. Unbeknownst to Fausta, Miss Aída plans to debut the song as her own creation at an upcoming recital.

gifted a potted potato plant, which underscores the film's stance on the place of historical trauma in national memory.

Figure 1.10. In *La teta asustada* (Llosa, 2009), Fausta (Magaly Solier) carries her mother's corpse across the sand.

Figure 1.11. Fausta (Magaly Solier) encourages her deceased mother to adopt a new perspective in *La teta asustada* (Llosa, 2009).

Through *La teta asustada*'s reimagining of the role Perpetua's body plays in her daughter's feminine development, we can, and should, make three interrelated inferences about the significance of this process from the film's concluding sequence. First, given Llosa's use of young Indigenous femininity as a vehicle for exploring Peruvian national identity, Fausta's process of individuation—which involves distancing herself from the site (her mother's body) and legacy (the ungrievability of her own Indigenous body) of historical trauma—must embody ideals of national progress.[223] As Anita Harris explains in *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century*, within late modernity, girlhood is constructed as an important part of a nation's successful transition into a new economic, political and social order while girls are expected to personify ideal citizenship.[224] In this way, *La teta asustada* uses Fausta's precarious girlhood development to address a problematic national history and compel citizens, especially those whose families were directly affected, to share responsibility for managing its cultural

[223] Patricia White argues that Claudia Llosa associates Peruvian national identity with Indigenous femininity in her films. White, *Women's Cinema, World Cinema*, 188.
[224] Harris, *Future Girl*, 2.

legacy. Second, in making the vaginal suppository's removal both Fausta's decision and patently necessary for her psychical and physical health, the film transposes the post-girl power requirement for girls to self-actualize without relying on the state into a narrative about a girl who must manage her own healing/development, make right choices, and adapt to changing times.[225] While this view of girl empowerment does not engage consumer culture, its emphasis on Fausta's personal responsibility to reinvent her way of being in the world and become an ideal modern subject is decidedly in-step with neoliberal notions of the flexible, self-made girl. Finally, as a life-threatening contaminant, Fausta's vaginal suppository symbolizes the dangers of forming a personal connection with the trauma of previous generations. Throughout the film, Fausta attends to the suppository's tubers, which inflame and emerge from her vagina. It is only after the suppository's removal and transplantation into the soil that it can grow into a flourishing potato plant. The suppository's transformation suggests that its function as a personal memorial to historic trauma was initially mishandled and that it needed to be abstracted from lived bodily experience. In other words, Fausta must both eschew a personal connection to her mother's trauma and to its historical fact to become individually empowered. Indeed, when discussing this treatment of Peru's violent history, Llosa has stated that the collective fear arising from this historical event "needs to be addressed and at the same time left behind us."[226]

Unlike *La teta asustada*'s disavowal of the intergenerational transmission of trauma, *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* shows its young protagonist learning to honor the experiences of her ancestors, while also differentiating between their pain and her own, and to imagine a better communal future. Although there is no shortage of residential school-related necropolitical figurations in

[225] Ibid., 2-3.
[226] Claudia Llosa, "*The Milk of Sorrow*: An Interview with Claudia Llosa," interview by Jessica Spokes, Birds Eye View Film, May 4, 2010, https://www.birds-eye-view.co.uk/the-milk-of-sorrow-an-interview-with-claudia-llosa/.

Rhymes for Young Ghouls, it is Anna's first appearance to Aila, as a zombie, that changes how the girl processes trauma and relates to others and her environment.[227] This distinction creates an opportunity to consider what nourishment, if any, Anna's corpse provides Aila for her girlhood development and empowerment. Following its opening sequence, the film advances seven years and shows us that Aila has become involved in the practice of forgetting, not by personally engaging drugs and alcohol, but by working in her uncle Burner's drug operation and helping others to manage trauma through the art of forgetfulness. Our first glimpse of teenaged Aila reminds us that her self-understanding is bound up in her relation to her mother: we see her spray-painting Gunnar, a female warrior drawn by Anna, onto the side of a van. Although less phenomenologically overt in its formal and aesthetic representation of Aila's experiences, *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* aligns us with its heroine's perspective through camerawork that tracks her movements, and through her voiceover narration which details rules for survival and contextualizes harassment from the Indian Agents. The film uses these elements to draw attention to Aila's marginal way of seeing reality and they make "a spectacle of colonial violence and Indigenous peoples' resistance to it," by temporarily slowing narrative progression. This way of seeing creates space to reflect on the ways Aila's acts of remembrance constitute her agency and resistance, as well as the political potential of disruptive filmmaking techniques.[228] Most strikingly, the insurgent moment in this scene exposes the dynamics of colonial necropower and sets up the film's horror-themed historical intervention. When Popper and his colleague arrive unexpectedly to collect the truancy tax, Aila, speaking in Mi'gmaq, secretly mocks the Indian Agent by disclosing the money was retrieved from a latrine. In retaliation, Popper throws Anna's

[227] Aila sees her friend Tyler zombified and after her induction into St. Dymphna's residential school she discovers a mass grave containing the bodies of children who died at the school.
[228] Sium and Ritskes, "Speaking Truth to Power," iii.

artwork on the ground and defaces the recently spray-painted figure, recalling the woman's suicide and noting similarities between the mother and daughter. Here, *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* shows us that Aila's understanding of Anna's constructed, ungrievability is intertwined with her self-understanding of ungrievability.

Popper's remarks are clearly intended to cause harm, but they can also be read as an invocation of zombie Anna who appears not long after Aila's truancy tax savings are stolen. What makes Aila's interactions with her mother significant is the way they make colonial violence visible, emphasize Indigenous resistance, and demonstrate the durability of Indigenous epistemologies. Anna's first appearance as a zombie speaks to the epidemic nature of trauma created by the residential school system and her demand for vengeance effectively excludes the model of recuperation favored in *La teta asustada*. Heeding her mother's call, Aila rallies her friends around a plan to break into the residential school, take revenge on Popper, and steal the school's savings. Their next encounter recalls Klein's characterization of the mother's body as "a kind of totality" for the child: Anna laments not being visited in the cemetery and Aila answers that it isn't necessary because her mother is everywhere (Figure 1.12).[229] Another instance of Anna's post-death appearance is portrayed as a flashback, but presents teenaged Aila watching her mother and herself as a child in the woods at night, secretly painting a man wearing a headdress. Illuminated by firelight, Anna helps her daughter perfect her painting techniques while teaching her about the importance of self-determination and the subversive nature of Indigenous self-representation (Figure 1.13). Despite deviating from the explicitly necropolitical logic of representation used in Aila's encounters with her post-death mother, this scene illustrates how Indigenous storytelling operates as decolonization theory-in-action.[230] In this sense, we can

[229] Likierman, *Melanie Klein*, 39.
[230] Sium and Ritskes, "Speaking Truth to Power," ii.

see how Aila's memories and interactions with her zombie mother nourish spaces for productive resistance, whereas Perpetua's corpse is depicted in *La teta asustada* as depriving Fausta of the nourishment she needs to overcome her stunted development.

Figure 1.12. In *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* (Barnaby, 2013), zombie Anna (Roseanne Supernault) encourages Aila (Kawennáhere Devery Jacobs) to visit the grave.

Figure 1.13. In the background, teenage Aila (Kawennáhere Devery Jacobs) watches a flashback of herself as a child (Miika Bryce Whiskeyjack) and her mother (Roseanne Supernault) in *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* (Barnaby, 2013).

4 A Girl's Turn to the Father

While both films concentrate on the dynamics of the mother/daughter bond in feminine subject formation, they do not neglect consideration of how fathers, or male figures, are involved in the process. *La teta asustada* shows us Fausta's uncle Lúcido indirectly triggers her decision to recover withheld wages, and when Fausta decides to remove the suppository, it is Noé (Efraín Solis), an Andean coworker at Miss Aída's "big house," who helps Fausta get to the hospital. *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* is much more explicit in its affirmation of male involvement in girlhood development and Indigenous futurisms. A curious thing happens at the end of Aila's in-person flashback that bears consideration: Anna discloses she secretly paints Indigenous figures with child Aila, despite the congregation of Indigenous people being illegal, because it is important to Joseph, Aila's father. When Anna encourages the little girl to ask her father why he values this practice, the camera changes placement, causing teenage Aila to exchange positions

with the figures in this memory vignette. Anna and her young daughter turn to look behind them at teenage Aila who also turns toward the camera to look offscreen. Importantly, the transition to the next image continues the blurred temporal boundaries of this in-person flashback and gives Aila an opportunity to heed Anna's directive. In the next scene, which takes place during the daytime, Joseph enters the film frame from the right, almost forming an eyeline match to Aila's searching gaze at the end of the previous scene. We discover, along with Joseph, that Aila is preparing to hang herself: she is overcome by the belief that she caused her mother's suicide and that her recent actions contributed to the deaths of others. His assurances of her innocence and the role of Anna's residential school trauma in her suicide, lead to a discussion about whether Aila still is or has ever been a child, and the ways his absence has affected her development. Joseph sees the teenaged Aila as "just a little girl," whereas Aila sees herself as never having been a little girl. Their difference of opinion causes the scene to engage discursively with the always shifting category of girl, semiotically, in terms of the screen girl figure's representation of troubled national histories and social issues, and affectively, by linking colonial and neocolonial violence with this once-heroic protagonist's suicidal transformation.[231] But it also has implications for Aila's understanding of a coming-of-age process that can result, not in a movement toward increased autonomy and self-knowledge, but in erasure.

[231] In her essay about filmic Australian Aboriginal childhoods, Kristina Gottschall notes the significance of these three registers for spectatorial meaning-making in relation to the persistent "deficit model" often associated with these childhoods. Gottschall, "'Black Kid Burden:' Cultural Representations of Indigenous Childhood and Poverty in Australian Cinema," in *The 'Poor Child:' The Cultural Politics of Education, Development and Childhood*, eds. Lucy Hopkins and Arathi Srprakash (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 53-55.

Figure 1.14. In *La teta asustada* (Llosa, 2009), Fausta (Magaly Solier) inhales the scent of the flowering potato plant.

Figure 1.15. Aila (Kawennáhere Devery Jacobs) contemplates her next steps in *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* (Barnaby, 2013).

In characterizing a girl's turn to the father as a "feminine change of object," Nancy Chodorow highlights its inevitability as the next step of her subject formation and the means by which the girl escapes the overattachment of the pre-Oedipal mother/daughter relationship.[232] Chodorow's thought is particularly illuminating here because it enables us to understand that Joseph's address of Aila's emotional interpersonal issues is a necessary part of her development. It enables Aila to extricate herself from a mode of self-perception and being intimately tied to her mother's ungrievable body. Popper's violent interruption of this meaningful exchange triggers the conclusion of the film's treatise on Indigenous self-determination, durability, and futurisms. Popper knocks Joseph unconscious, then brutally assaults and attempts to rape Aila. Her salvation comes from Jujijj (Shako Mattawa Jacobs) a young friend, who kills Popper, and later from Gisigu, an older man in the community, whom Aila respects, vowing to ensure Aila never sells drugs again. In contrast to *La teta asustada*'s final images, which place Fausta's future, literally, in its symbolization as a flowering potato plant, in her own hands, *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* does something different: it demonstrates the interdependence of Aila and the community's futures, while also affirming that she has a say in what that future looks likes

[232] Nancy J. Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (University of California Press, 1999), 119.

(Figures 1.14 and 1.15). To be sure, both protagonists must negotiate new relations to their mothers' necrotic bodies, relations which invariably include new understandings of their inheritance of intergenerational trauma and new ways of being and relating to others in the world. The films show us that the girls must see themselves as separate from Perpetua and Anna and recognize that their mothers have their own experiences and responses to trauma, in order to reorient their journeys of transformation. However, through their coming-of-age journeys, both protagonists present different paths to healing and recuperation which have implications for theorizing the parallel modes of spectatorial engagement and feminine development that are fashioned by the films. In the last section of this chapter, I will therefore look closely at the ways *La teta asustada* and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*' aesthetic and formal elements mediate the affective and psychical registers of neoliberal postfeminism associated with contemporary girlhood and orient their inscribed female viewers toward opportunities for self-transformation that correspond with the protagonists' personal journeys. Given the films' differing conceptualizations of trauma and trauma care, this work will involve a consideration of the forms of resilience these models offer viewers as ideal ways of navigating personal and social precarity.

5 Theorizing Spectatorial Healing and Development

Each of the films under consideration in this chapter are trying to orient their inscribed viewers to the same understanding of healing and development as their protagonists. Among the many questions *La teta asustada* and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* raise, the matter of how best to heal from intergenerational trauma emerges as a primary concern for their protagonists and the embodied experiences the films create. The filmic formal qualities convey the experience of remembering painful events and evoke hopefulness about the girls' futures, thus offering forms

of viewing pleasure that coincide with the protagonists' stages of feminine development. This section explores how the filmic medium's presentation of profilmic events constitutes a form of presencing, which, given *La teta asustada* and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*' emphases on Indigenous storytelling, positions the films as potential agents of decolonization and healing.[233] However, given the films differing treatments of both trauma and healing—insofar as Fausta must relinquish her connection with her mother and historical trauma to flourish, and Aila must reframe her coping mechanisms through acts of presencing that foster connection with her ancestors and community—it follows that the affective modes of self-discovery offered to inscribed viewers also differ.

Returning to *La teta asustada*'s opening sequence, we see how foregrounding sound and withholding visual images present to viewers orally transmitted evidence about human rights violations against Andean women during the Peruvian internal conflict. In contrast, immersive formal attributes of subsequent scenes enable us to see the world from Fausta's frightened perspective, priming its protagonist and inscribed viewers for catharsis. Whether through the alternating point-of-view and medium tracking shots following Fausta's winding journey through the market as she races to reclaim her wages, or through the disorienting extreme close-ups of her face and amplified sounds of birdsong when she struggles to maintain consciousness, *La teta asustada* conveys the urgency and immediacy of the moment as Fausta experiences it. Her need for relief from her condition becomes our need for relief from this representational proximity and intensity. So, when Perpetua's burial scene arrives, the framing and mise-en-scène used to depict Fausta's journey provide respite from the claustrophobic, dark images of the previous scenes,

[233] However, as Sium and Ritskes remind us, the matter of "*who* does the storytelling, remains an important question in decolonization work;" in this respect, the films' recommended paths to healing will elicit consideration of the filmmakers' cultural identities. Sium and Ritskes, "Speaking Truth to Power," iv.

visually signifying Fausta's less constrained relation to the world. Given this signification, it is especially noteworthy that this scene does not constitute the film's conclusion. Indeed, the film's understanding of recuperation lies in its final image, wherein Fausta demonstrates a new orientation toward the now-flourishing symbol of historical trauma, which resembles what Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad have described as a "bouncing back from adversity and embracing a mind-set in which negative experiences can-and-must-be reframed in upbeat terms."[234] Now potted and blooming, Fausta's former suppository is free from the confines of her vaginal canal, from the site of historical trauma. And by extension, with its displacement from her body, the blooming potato plant also represents Peru's freedom from the personal significance of its difficult national history. Fausta's new hopeful orientation toward an undefined future is most acutely represented as she lowers her face to the potato plant's flowering buds, which at their most promising and delicate stage of floral development gesture towards continued growth.

La teta asustada orients Fausta and its inscribed female viewers to a postfeminist understanding of catharsis by individualizing the impacts of historical trauma and affirming the importance of personal responsibility for a successful journey of transformation. The model of recuperation depicted in the film suggests that meaningful healing is possible without acknowledgment of harm caused or the involvement of those who performed the injury. Most surprisingly, it enacts what David L. Eng has described as the "colonial dimensions" of Melanie Klein's object relations theory of child development. As Klein explains in her 1937 essay "Love, Guilt and Reparation," reparation is the psychic process that enables an infant to negotiate a new relation to his mother after constructing an internal image of her unavailable breast as a bad

[234] Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad, "The Amazing Bounce-Backable Woman: Resilience and the Psychological Turn in Neoliberalism," *Sociological Research Online* 23, no. 2 (2018): 477.

object.[235] The infant has unconscious guilt for causing harm to his mother because he sees her as a hated object, and fears that its aggression has also destroyed the loved maternal object. However, because the infant is unable to fully resolve fears that he has destroyed this much needed and loved object, a new object relation is needed. Klein argues that the infant's new relation to the mother is made possible through his acceptance of her existence as a separate object with its own agency and she claims that this new relation to the mother also extends to the world and its objects. But as Eng observes, the infant's new relation emerges from the realization of his precarious state and from his guilt about harming the object on which his life depends: the mother, in this scenario, is unaware of the infant's impressions.[236] Following from this, Eng astutely draws out Klein's own connections between settler colonialism and this developmental psychic process, highlighting her remarks about the infant's ability to selectively recuperate certain "bad" objects while retaining his violent attitudes toward others:

> In his pursuit the explorer actually gives expression to both aggression and the drive to reparation. We know that in discovering a new country aggression is made use of in the struggle with the elements, and in overcoming difficulties of all kinds. But sometimes aggression is shown more openly; especially was this so in former times when ruthless cruelty against native populations was displayed by people who not only explored, but conquered and colonized. Some of the early phantasied attacks against the imaginary babies in the mother's body and actual hatred against new-born brothers and sisters, were here expressed in reality by the attitude towards the natives. The wished-for restoration, however, found full expression in repopulating the country with people of their own nationality.[237]

Klein's likening of an infant's aggression toward his mother and the colonizer's violence against the colonized is especially relevant for my analysis of development/healing in *La teta asustada*

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[235] Klein, "Love, Guilt and Reparation (1937)," 306-343.
[236] David L. Eng, "Colonial Object Relations," *Social Text* 34, no. 1 (126) (2016): 9.
[237] Melanie Klein, "Love, Guilt and Reparation," in *Love, Hate and Reparation, by Melanie Klein and Joan Riviere* (New York: Norton, 1964), 55-119, quoted in David L. Eng, "Colonial Object Relations," *Social Text* 34, no. 1 (126) (2016): 12.

given the film's racial politics and Peru's colonial history. But Eng's observations about this passage raise an even more compelling point of comparison for this case study: because Klein's genocidal colonizer continues to see Indigenous peoples as a "bad object," they warrant his hate and must be destroyed in order to preserve the "good object," those with whom he identifies and loves. Although lengthy, Eng's conclusions are worth reading because they encapsulate the limitations of a model of reparation that is much like what we see in *La teta asustada*:

> The figure of the Indian appears in this passage only to disappear, written out of Klein's psychic account of reparation. In its place, the European colonizer monopolizes both sides of the psychic equation: he is both the *perpetrator* of violence and the traumatized *victim* deserving of repair, short-circuiting legal notions of trauma and injury, of reparation and human rights, which demand a clear distinction between these key terms in law and political theory. In the process, we witness the consolidation of proper boundaries not only of the liberal subject but also of European family, kinship, and nation as a closed circuit of injury and repair. In my account of Klein, reparation is neither the restoration of invaded territory nor the repairing of colonial violence and injury against the native other.[238]

Although not a perpetrator of violence, Fausta is made to stand in for "both sides of the psychic equation:" representing both Peru and traumatized Andean women. Indeed, *La teta asustada* establishes the "boundaries" of Fausta' neo-liberal subjecthood through the hopeful telos of her precarious development and through her connection to the victimized Perpetua. As such, it is significant that Fausta disposes of her mother's embalmed body before encountering the flowering potato plant, which expresses the abstraction and containment of the object of trauma as an act of reparation.

While *La teta asustada*'s treatment of trauma complements Klein's discussion of child development and colonial violence, this theoretical connection also supplies the basis for the

[238] Eng, "Colonial Object Relations," 9.

film's postfeminist diagnosis of Fausta's condition. Speaking about the film's subject matter and imagined audience, filmmaker Claudia Llosa offers a description that resembles the medicalization of failing can-do girlhood described in this dissertation's introduction, wherein can-do girls require supervision and self-regulation to overcome their psychological issues. Llosa states that "the film is about the trauma and burden that women suffer, their pain and sorrow, their muteness. The film is about accompanying these women and giving them a voice, so they can process what happened to them and rebuild their self-esteem."[239] What this admission means for theorizing the film's recuperative potential for its inscribed female viewers is two-fold: it tells us the film's intended audience, and that the film is a heuristic tool. Llosa's comments suggest the film is designed to address women traumatized during the twelve-year period of extreme violence and empower them ("giving them a voice") to accept responsibility for their own recuperation.[240] As Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad remind us, neoliberalism's conjoined creation of precarious conditions and psychological incitement for people to self-manage often targets those deemed "the poorest and most vulnerable groups in society, whose struggles become framed as 'personal crises or accomplishments decoupled from economic and social circuits of accumulation and dispossession."[241] In a similar vein, by framing trauma as a "self-esteem" issue, *La teta asustada* offers its inscribed viewers a model of reparation that denies the impacts of the armed conflict, which is "divested of historical response and responsibility toward the native other."[242] In so doing, *La teta asustada*'s simplistic and solipsistic reparative gestures short circuit the process of healing it presumes to image in Fausta's coming-of-age process and

[239] Llosa, "*The Milk of Sorrow*: An Interview with Claudia Llosa."
[240] See, for example, Deborah Shaw, "European Co-Production Funds and Latin American Cinema: Processes of Othering and Bourgeois Cinephilia in Claudia Llosa's *La teta asustada*," *Diogenes* 62, no. 1: 88-99.
[241] Gill and Orgad, "The Amazing Bounce-Backable Woman," 479.
[242] Eng, "Colonial Object Relations," 9.

to facilitate through its address to Andean women. However, this divestment of history also works to generalize the affective and psychic neoliberal registers so that Fausta's therapeutic narrative of necessary self-improvement offers an inspirational incitement for a wider range of viewers to relinquish their own negative past experiences, including those unaffected by Peru's problematic history.[243]

The model of reparation presented in *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* is articulated on multiple levels through its emphasis on the importance of storytelling as an act of presencing. While *La teta asustada* drew attention to the significance of Indigenous self-narration through Perpetua's song in the opening scene, its conclusion constrained Fausta's ability to do so after individuating from her mother and the historical trauma.[244] This is not the case in *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*, which not only calls attention to moments in which characters tell stories by pausing narrative progression, it also emphasizes its own heuristic function as an audiovisual storyteller offering its inscribed viewers opportunities to undergo their own coming-of-age process in a movement from "ignorance and innocence to wisdom and maturity."[245] *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* introduces the notion of recognition as a vital part of the reparative process by making the relinquishment of "epistemologies of ignorance"—a phrase Sandrina de Finney uses to describe how the erasure of Canada's violent colonial history and immigrants, and white Canadians' adopted stance of "not knowing" this history preserves systemic oppressions—the telos of the inscribed viewer's spectatorial experience.[246] The reference to the Indian Act in the film's introduction and a

[243] Rosalind Gill, "The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism: A Postfeminist Sensibility 10 Years On," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no. 6 (2017): 606-626; Rosalind Gill and Akane Kanai, "Mediating Neoliberal Capitalism: Affect, Subjectivity and Inequality," *Journal of Communication* 68 (2018): 318-326.
[244] Given these differences in the films' treatments of Indigenous self-narration, it would be interesting to explore further the roles that the filmmakers' identities play in their self-positioning toward the subject matter.
[245] Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland, eds., *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1983), 6.
[246] de Finney, "'We Just Don't Know Each Other,'" 471-487; and, de Finney, "Playing Indian," no. 2 (2015): 169-181.

beautifully animated sequence illustrating the impacts of the residential school system presume the viewer's unfamiliarity with Canada's (gendered) colonial policies and their impacts on sovereign Indigenous nations (Figure 1.16). These filmic elements, in addition to *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*' emphasized proximity to Aila's mental perspective—through her voiceover narration, flashbacks, and visions—lend themselves to a phenomenological theorization of the kinds of parallel development/healing the film constructs between Aila and the inscribed female viewers.

Figure 1.16. A silhouette of the hungry wolf in Ceres' (Katherine Sobey) story in *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* (Barnaby, 2013).

Throughout the film we see Aila in different contexts that depict the intergenerational transmission of Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies. One such example, a flashback involving Anna teaching a younger Aila to paint Indigenous figures, has been discussed in detail in previous sections. In what follows I will concentrate on an exchange between the film's protagonist and Ceres, an older woman who runs the grow-op supporting Aila's business. As Ceres narrates the story of the wolf and the mushroom, Aila flips through a book of her mother's

artwork and a two-minute digitally animated sequence depicting a post-apocalyptic wasteland plays onscreen:

> Once upon a time, the weather was rough. The sky was full of smoke and stunk like the smell of sulphur. And all the animals had starved and fled. The wolf was all alone. Sick and alone. He leaves and goes to the forest. As he's walking around, he sees a tree. He begins to hallucinate. Mi'gmaq children are hanging from the tree. The wolf, so hungry, blacks-out and shakes the tree really hard. Until the children begin to fall. He sees them as though their heads have become mushroom caps and their bones as stalks. He begins to eat, and eat. Until finally, he's eaten all the children. When he comes back to reality, he looks around at the world. He feels so sorry for what he has done. Not knowing what to do, he continues to eat. As he sits there, he begins to eat his tail. He gets to his stomach, and begins to eat his stomach. He finishes his stomach, then gets to his heart and eats his heart. He has finished his heart completely and then has finished eating himself.[247]

Upon finishing this story, Ceres discloses that she learned it from her mother before being taken to the residential and that through the artwork, Anna was sharing the story with Aila. Crucially, a practice of care underlies this diegetic acknowledgement of historical trauma. On one hand, it works within the film narrative to affirm the role of women in the transmission of knowledge and to help Aila understand the scope of colonial violence; on the other hand, it works holistically to contextualize Aila's drug-dealing and disrupt viewers' pathologization of this trauma coping mechanism.

We find a similar foregrounding of film's materiality in *Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman, 2003), another contemporary film exploring questions of trauma recovery, hope, and the place of memory, as it moves between digitally animated and live-footage sequences. As Davina Quinlivan explains in her study of the film, *Waltz with Bashir* "plays with the specificity of the medium, and, indeed, with the ways in which viewers are oriented towards the traumatized mind and body of its protagonist; it makes apparent its filmic properties in order to synthesize the

[247] This translation is taken from the film's subtitles.

experience of bearing witness to the de-stabilizing affects of the war."[248] Where *La teta asustada* harnesses these properties to convey the significance and experience of Perpetua's trauma, the film's act of "bearing witness" is self-serving in that it aims to do away with the record of historical trauma that is Perpetua's body, and orient viewers towards a neoliberal postfeminist conceptualization of hope. In contrast, *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* "spectacularizes" moments of storytelling in order to prime viewers for a conclusion that invites the imagining of a potential decolonized future. After agreeing to Gisigu's terms that she will cease involvement in her uncle's drug trade, Aila sits quietly with Jujijj, the boy who killed Popper to prevent her sexual assault, in her treehouse. When he utters the film's last lines, "What do we do now, boss?" the film cuts to a close-up of Aila's face, marked with makeup from her St. Dymphna's heist costume and bruises from Popper's blows, as she closes her eyes to imagine the future. In leaving this question unanswered, it seems that the film frames the imagining of Indigenous futurisms as a matter for its community of inscribed viewers, not just Aila. It is significant that *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* raises this question in a scene featuring these two young characters, whose challenges to oppressive forces are performed in community, demonstrating "a sense of collective influence over the social conditions of one's life."[249] As a result, the parallel mode of healing/development on offer to the film's inscribed viewers reflects the importance of imagining reparative hopeful futures alongside the recognition of historical trauma.

[248] Davina Quinlivan, *Filming the Body in Crisis: Trauma, Healing and Hopefulness* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 7.
[249] Young, "Punishment, Treatment, Empowerment," 48.

Conclusion

In making *La teta asustada* and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* its case studies, this chapter has sought to examine how the forms of resistant agency and empowerment many Indigenous girls use might enrich conceptualizations of post-girl power femininities, and challenge the construction of Indigenous girlhoods as inherently at-risk. Tracing the depoliticization of female empowerment discourses in the first section of this chapter explained neoliberal postfeminist girlhood's failure to account for the ways that many Indigenous girls exercise their cultural and political resistant agency. This work showed how the intertwinement of girl economic independence, self-actualization, and empowerment with ideals of national (Western settler society) progress is threatened by the inclusion of Indigenous girlhoods invested in sovereignty and decolonization movements.

The second section established the forms of trauma and trauma recovery portrayed in *La teta asustada* and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*, noting the ideological implications of the films' necro-political figuration of the mothers' bodies and different approaches to the subject of healing. An important discovery revealed the ways that trauma-informed practices empowered Indigenous girls to identify and articulate intersecting forms of discrimination as well as personal strengths, thus challenging the neoliberal postfeminist logic that constrains girls' resistant agency and their abilities to recognize structural oppression.

The third and fourth sections of the chapter used Melanie Klein's object relations theory to map the precarious girlhood development of the protagonists, noting the roles the necro-reimagined maternal bodies played in mediating these processes and trauma as well as the function of male/father figures in the final stages of the girls' journeys. Klein's theorization of how a child experiences her mother's body as the most important object in the world illuminated the ways that Perpetua and Anna's corpses, as necropolitical figurations of historical trauma,

shaped Fausta and Aila's understanding of the world, others and themselves. But, perhaps more importantly, this framework sheds insight on the ways the girls' treatment of those bodies engaged or eschewed neoliberal postfeminist conceptualizations of girl power and development. While this difference underscored the diversity of Indigenous girls' perspectives and levels of cultural engagement, it also showed how traits conventionally associated with Indigeneity, such as otherness and being connected to nature, can be deployed to frame injury-repudiating decisions as natural.

The final section of the chapter theorized how the films' different models of trauma and healing might offer inscribed viewers modes of self-discovery and transformation that parallel the protagonists' coming-of-age journeys. An inherent difficulty in performing this work is that there is a significant difference between actual and implied spectatorship; for example, despite Llosa's claims that the film was addressed to an Andean female audience, *La teta asustada* was primarily screened in urban areas with a low Indigenous population and circulated within the prestigious international film festival circuit. My analysis of the model of healing depicted in the film's conclusion benefited from continued engagement with Melanie Klein's object relations theory of child development, which compared an infant's selective aggression against a bad object to a genocidal colonizer's rationalization of violence against Indigenous peoples. Crucially, this comparison highlighted the political implications of depoliticizing Fausta's girl power implicit within the film's portrayal of Fausta's longing for external justice as an internal quest for self-esteem. Continuing this analysis of neoliberalism's increased emphasis on individual responsibility in recessionary girlhood cinema and its reconfiguration of traditional tropes of feminine development, Chapter 2 explores the reimagining of the symbolic value of the

notion of “home” and the process of domestication in three American independent films about economic and housing precarity.

CHAPTER 2

'There's No Place Like Home:'
Feminine Domestication and Nationalistic Fantasies in American Independent Cinema

Introduction

The mother/daughter relationships in *Precious: Based on the Novel "Push" by Sapphire* (Lee Daniels, 2009, USA), *Winter's Bone* (Debra Granik, 2010, USA) and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (Benh Zeitlin, 2012, USA) are just as worthy of analysis as those explored in the previous chapter: this specific group of films links the girl protagonists' experiences of housing insecurity to their troubled relationships with mothers who are emotionally or physically absent from their homes. *Precious: Based on the Novel "Push" by Sapphire* (henceforth *Precious*) is the bleak account of an illiterate, obese, and HIV-positive teenage mother impregnated twice by her father and regarded as a romantic rival by her emotionally, physically, and sexually abusive mother. *Winter's Bone* follows a teenage girl's efforts to care for her catatonic mother and young siblings, and her determination to save them from eviction after her methamphetamine-manufacturing father skips out on bail and she learns their home will be seized as collateral. *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (henceforth *Beasts*) depicts the unraveling relationship between a six-year-old girl and her abusive, dying father, and her search for her missing mother.

However, I now turn to the ways that *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* appeal to the notion of home to represent the process of domestication, which involves becoming skilled in caregiving and other household chores, as a crucial part of normative feminine development. I take into account the home's relation to nationalism and the homeland, as well as its regulation of appropriate femininity, specifically through the management of family life and household

chores, on the one hand, and female sexual agency, on the other.[250] The increased deregulation and globalization of financial markets, combined with the United States' subprime mortgage crisis (2007-2010), and the collapse of major American financial institutions, to spark a global financial crisis (2007-2008) and recession that were worse than the Great Depression (the 1930s), serving as a backdrop for these productions.[251] American girlhood in these films is precarious, seen through their narrative preoccupation with trauma and economic and housing insecurity, and alongside public perceptions of America's declining global leadership at the time of the films' release.[252]

This chapter places *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* in conversation because their depictions of heroic, precarious girlhood in the midst of shifting economic and social landscapes[253] have important implications for the post-global recession extradiegetic image of the United States.[254] I argue that the films each portray their female protagonists' hopeful, self-directed domestic alignment as acts of self-realization and resilience as the telos of their precarious coming-of-age processes. This depiction of development embodies the American Dream's myth of self-reliance and aims to restore the extradiegetic reputation of the United

[250] Anita Harris, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 101.
[251] James Crotty, "Structural Causes of the Global Financial Crisis: A Critical Assessment of the 'New Financial Architecture," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 33, no. 4 (2009): 563-580; David M. Katz, "The Financial and Economic Crisis of 2008: A Systemic Crisis of Neoliberal Capitalism," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 41, no. 3 (2009): 305-317; Eric Helleiner, "Understanding the 2007-2008 Global Financial Crisis: Lessons for Scholars of International Political Economy," *Annual Review of Political Science* 14 (2011): 67-87.
[252] Joseph S. Nye Jr., "American and Chinese Power After the Financial Crisis," *The Washington Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (2010): 143-153; Graham Bowley, "It's 'America the Swift' in Bank Reform," *New York Times*, June 26, 2010, https://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/27/weekinreview/27bowley.html.
[253] Anita Harris reminds us that institutional investments in national progress motivated their preoccupations with normative adolescent development. Harris, *Future Girl*, 2.
[254] Kendra Marston, in an article about the contemporary travel romance film genre, explores the rehabilitative function of affluent white women tourists in relation to the recuperation of America's extradiegetic global image. Marston, "The World is Her Oyster: Negotiating Contemporary White Womanhood in Hollywood's Tourist Spaces," *Cinema Journal* 55, no. 4 (2016): 3-27.

States following the Great Recession.[255] Reading the girls' decisions through a "phenomenology of the value of home" reveals the ways profilmic and thematic elements function as bootstrap narratives of feminine development. Deeply ingrained in American culture, the bootstrap narrative shifts under the neoliberal context presented in these films, causing "bootstrapping" to operate as a form of post-girl power agency. I conclude this chapter by exploring how these inspirational coming-of-age stories possess modes of address that inscribe a female viewing position of "compulsory positivity," the sustained, positive perception of adversity, as part of the neoliberal subjectivity formation. As I argued in the last chapter, at the heart of *La Teta Asustada* and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* there lies the question of how the girls can possibly move forward into the future, given their experiences of intergenerational trauma. I showed how the films connect the girls' coming-of-age processes to their trauma recovery. In this chapter I concentrate on the neoliberal conceptualization of resilience, as a form of girlish plasticity, and look at how this group of American independent films uses the theme of domestication to take up another aspect of this dissertation's exploration of girlhood as a contested space, specifically with respect to its preservation of hierarchies and national ideals in unstable sociocultural landscapes. The films highlight the ongoing, formative nature of feminine development, as well as the role of positivity in the cultivation of resilience and invoke a viewing position that must also follow the prescriptive positive outlook shown onscreen.[256] The films' emphasis on resilience and positivity as self-regulatory feminine ideals indicates their participation in popular culture focused on the ongoing self-improvement of their intended female audiences.

[255] Iris Marion Young, "A Room of One's Own: Old Age, Extended Care, and Privacy," in *On Female Experience*: "*Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 155-6.
[256] Ibid.

This chapter enters debates about the usefulness of "postfeminism" as an analytical category for critically examining the contradictions of contemporary girl-centered media culture. For girlhood scholars defining postfeminism in strictly historical terms, typically as a backlash against feminism, the emergence of new feminisms in corporate, popular, and political cultures indicates that we are currently in a post-postfeminist moment; as a result, we require new ways of thinking about feminist politics.[257] What makes performing close dialogical analyses of *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* a particularly effective method for engaging this debate is that it reveals how postfeminism operates as a shared sensibility and logic across these representations of resilient, precarious girlhood. Whereas examining *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* separately causes the narrative trajectories of the girl protagonists, in which they each overcome challenges through individual hard work, to function as tales of recessionary feminist empowerment. The chapter contains four sections. The first distinguishes *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* from other similarly themed, contemporary films about female protagonists navigating precarious circumstances to provide a rationale for the dialogical analysis of my chosen cinematic corpus. The second section establishes the films' connections with *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939, USA) by exploring how their representations of domestic self-alignment-as-feminine development relate to the construction of the American national project and cultural imaginary. The argument unfolds in two subsections: the first part examines *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* as a post-Civil War tool of national self-definition and the induction of its 1939 film adaptation into American cultural practices; the second part looks at the emergence

[257] Jessalynn Keller and Maureen E. Ryan, eds., "Introduction: Mapping Emergent Feminisms," in *Emergent Feminisms: Complicating a Postfeminist Media Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), 1-21; Hanna Retallack, et. al, "'Fuck Your Body Image:' Teen Girls' Twitter and Instagram Feminism in and Around School," in *Learning Bodies: The Body in Youth and Childhood Studies*, eds. Julia Coffey, Shelley Budgeon, and Helen Cahill (Singapore: Springer, 2016), 85-102.

of postfeminist cultural sensibilities during the Great Depression and Second World War to reinforce the thematic genealogy of *The Wizard of Oz*, *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts*. I then move in the third section to examine the ways these postfeminist cultural sensibilities shape the films' function as bootstrap narratives of feminine development that rehabilitate the nation's post-crises extradiegetic images. This part has four subsections; the first two subsections consider the films' treatments of compulsory positivity, whereas the remaining two subsections look at how racialized and classed domestic discourses in the films engage American ideals of normative femininity and citizenship. The fourth section addresses how *The Wizard of Oz*, *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* operate as inspirational, coming-of-age texts that invite their inscribed viewers to adopt a position of compulsory positivity. Throughout, I demonstrate the significance of post-crisis precarious girlhood cinema for the recuperation of America's extradiegetic image.

1 Distinguishing Cinematic Features

Precious, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* stand apart from other films about childhood poverty and about youth confronting significant barriers to successful societal integration that were released contemporaneously. Through their protagonists' hopeful, self-directed acts and the sense of optimistic futurity their conclusions convey, *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* identify the cultivation of resilience, not the social transformation of inequality, as the key to human flourishing. Earlier socially-conscious depictions of desperate and impoverished youth, such as *Lilya 4-ever* (Lukas Moodysson, 2002, Sweden), *A Way of Life* (Amma Asante, 2004, UK), and *American Honey* (Andrea Arnold, 2016, UK and USA) can be read as symbols of national moral decline or direct critiques of globalization. The inspirational coming-of-age films this chapter

analyzes, however, possess a postfeminist cultural sensibility that frames this form of social exclusion and its relation to national ideals differently. Unlike the protagonists in these other films, the girls in this incidental cinematic corpus do not attempt to escape poverty or concern themselves with the possibility of upward mobility. Rather, the films celebrate the girls' hopeful orientation within their circumstances and frame that hope as a crucial way of being for their successful coming-of-age; in doing so, hope is framed as a personal attribute rather than as a means for sociopolitical transformation.[258]

Precious, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* reveal a dialectical relationship between hope and despair. Insofar as hope requires the active confrontation of one's present conditions, it provides the foundation for its attributes of relationality and receptivity, which I argue has implications for the films' function as objects of hope and their implied viewing positions.[259] After all, as an "awaiting-enduring,"[260] hope possesses a future-oriented temporality that involves a belief in the logical and material possibility of a desired outcome, an entanglement with optimism, as well as attendant modes of activity, attention, expression, and feeling that regulate other emotions.[261] This characterization of hope-as-perseverance engages what Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad describe as "an increasingly psychological turn within neoliberalism" to reframe adversity, and one's navigation of difficult circumstances, as being personally formative and a productive

[258] Sara Dorow and Goze Dogu, "The Spatial Distribution of Hope in and Beyond Fort McMurray," in *Ecologies of Affect: Placing Nostalgia, Desire and Hope*, eds. Tonya K. Davidson, Ondine Park, and Rob Shields (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013), 274.
[259] Paul W. Pruyser, "Phenomenology and Dynamics of Hoping," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 3, no. 1 (Autumn 1963): 92-95.
[260] Anthony J. Steinbock, "The Phenomenology of Despair," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 15, no. 3 (2007): 435.
[261] Kristina Schmid Callina, Nancy Snow, and Elise D. Murray, "The History of Philosophical and Psychological Perspective on Hope: Toward Defining Hope for the Science of Positive Human Development," in *The Oxford Handbook of Hope*, eds. Matthew W. Gallagher, Shane J. Lopez (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 13.

means of unlocking or discovering one's authentic self.[262] To that end, *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* can be seen to underline, not critique, the neoliberal and postfeminist impulses of their protagonists' subjectivities.[263] The release dates and thematic intertwinement of housing insecurity and domestic self-alignment make it most productive to read their depictions of precarious girlhood development in relation to the neoliberal and postfeminist notions shaping their cultural moment.

Disinterested in mourning a glorified past or mining the political potential of their protagonists' predicaments to inspire activism in their audiences, *Precious*, *Winter's Bone,* and *Beasts* are also distinct from a corpus of films within the New European Cinema of Precarity. Exploring the place of work and the domestic in relation to ideas about gender and nationality amidst conditions of precarity, the New European Cinema of Precarity concentrates on working-class, educated youth, and young professionals navigating the negative effects of labor casualization, and white middle- and upper-class characters struggling to maintain their status within shifting economic landscapes.[264] Films such as *Rosetta* (Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne, 1999, Belgium), *Äta sova dö*/*Eat, Sleep Die* (Gabriela Pichler, 2012, Sweden), and *Deux jours, une nuit*/*Two Days, One Night* (Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne, 2014, Belgium) highlight job precarity and unemployment, while works such as *L'Emploi du temps/Time Out* (Laurent Cantet, 2001, France), *Giorni e nuvole*/*Days and Clouds* (Silvio Soldini, 2007, Italy) and *Tutta la vita davanti*/*All Your Life Ahead of You* (Paolo Virzi, 2008, Italy) concern the loss of position and

[262] Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad, "The Amazing Bounce-Backable Woman: Resilience and the Psychological Turn in Neoliberalism," *Sociological Research Online* 23, no. 2 (2018): 478, doi: 10.1177/1360780418769673.
[263] Laura Favaro and Rosalind Gill write, "Confidence, resilience and positivity as technologies of self essentially rely upon a repudiation of expressions of or claims to victimhood—at least in women." Laura Favaro and Rosalind Gill, "'Pump up the Positivity:' Neoliberalism, Affective Entrepreneurship and the Victim-Agency Debate," in *Rewriting Women as Victims: From Theory to Practice* (forthcoming).
[264] Alice Bardan, "The New European Cinema of Precarity: A Transnational Perspective," in *Work in Cinema*: *Labor and the Human Condition*, ed. Ewa Mazierska, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 69-90.

future prospects.[265] These films are important because they illustrate how cinemas of precarity use their characters' financial uncertainty to explore ideas of nationhood, citizenship, and gender.

Although social realist films and films labeled "precarious cinema" explore subject matter similar to *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts,* these categories do not fully account for my corpus's distinction as a group of films that recuperate America's post-recession extradiegetic image. Scholarly analyses of British social realist films show us that notions of foreignness and alterity play into the visual and narrative representation of marginalized youth, who often function as signifiers of societal inequities.[266] In *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts*, this form of signification is minimized by emphasizing culturally-legible markers of their protagonists' resilience and diegetically insulating them from other local and global socioeconomic contexts. This isolation short-circuits the disruptive potential of what bell hooks describes as a marginal "mode of seeing," as I will show later through textual analysis.[267] Whereas in the precarious cinemas of the Americas, the ongoing cultural effects of colonialism and the complex relational dynamics between localized and global contexts position precarity serve as a productive lens for understanding the filmmaking practices, content and distribution

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[265] I would also add *A perdre la raison/Our Children* (Joachim Lafosse, 2012, Belgium) to this group because each of these films engage ideas about gender and nationality as they concentrate on the complicated nature of their protagonists' emotional labor and convey the extreme desperation their displaced protagonists feel. See also, *Ressources humaines/Human Resources* (Laurent Cantet, 1999, France), *Mi piace lavorare* (*Mobbing*) (Francesca Comencini, 2004, Italy), and *Cover Boy: L'ultima rivoluzione/Cover Boy…Last Revolution* (Carmine Amoroso, 2006).

[266] In her study of contemporary British films about austerity, Stella Hockenhull examines the representation of youth in *Sweet Sixteen* (Ken Loach, 2002, UK), *Pure* (Gillies MacKinnon, 2002, UK), *Bullet Boy* (Saul Dibb, 2005, UK), *This is England* (Shane Meadows, 2006, UK), *London to Brighton* (Paul Andrew Williams, 2006, UK), and *The Selfish Giant* (Clio Barnard, 2013, UK). See, Stella Hockenhull, "Poor Relations: Youth and Poverty in Post-Millennial British Cinema" in *Popular Culture and the Austerity Myth: Hard Times Today*, eds. Pete Bennett and Julian McDougall (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 189. Also consider, Alicia Castillo Villanueva, "The Recession in Contemporary Spanish Cinema," in *The Dynamics of Masculinity in Contemporary Spanish Culture*, eds. Lorraine Ryan and Ana Corbalan (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 127-138.

[267] bell hooks argues that societal marginalization offers opportunities to develop new knowledges, new modes of resistance, and new ways of seeing and experiencing reality that are produced independently from, but cognizant of, dominant frameworks. bell hooks, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 36 (Jan 1, 1989): 15-23.

practices of these minor cinemas.[268] While the filmmakers of *Precious*, *Winter's Bone,* and *Beasts* have made similar claims about production challenges, the aims of this cinematic corpus differ from the politically-engaged cinemas of the Americas. Indeed, we see other guiding interests at work in the production and marketing of *Precious*, *Winter's Bone,* and *Beasts* that suggest a shared desire to position these texts as objects of high cultural value for middle- and upper-class cultural consumption. There is little to indicate filmmakers' intentions of using the films' attention to precarity as a means of disrupting political and cultural systems. The films' marketing campaigns emphasized the authenticity of the films' content and production by highlighting their inclusion of nonprofessional actors and on-location settings or faithfully-rendered film sets, while also emphasizing the universal relatability of these emotionally-forceful, subculture-specific stories, and creating parallels between the filmmakers' professional stories of triumph and the film content. In addition, *Precious*, *Winter's Bone,* and *Beasts* use early-career actors in lead roles and can be seen to aestheticize the portrayal of violence and substandard living conditions among the poor.[269] *Precious* and *Beasts* attracted praise from notable American public figures such as Oprah Winfrey and the former President Barak Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama for their inspirational messages, while critics christened *Winter's Bone* "the runaway indie success of the year."[270]

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[268] Constanza Burucúa and Carolina Sitnisky, eds., "Introduction: Forms of the Precarious in the Cinemas of the Americas," in *The Precarious in the Cinemas of the Americas* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 1-15.

[269] One could also argue that these breakout roles initiated the career "coming-of-age journeys" of Gabourey Sidibe, Jennifer Lawrence and Quvenzhané Wallis.

[270] See "Toolkit Case Study: How Indie Hit 'Winter's Bone' Came to Be," IndieWire.com, November 4, 2010, https://www.indiewire.com/2010/11/toolkit-case-study-how-indie-hit-winters-bone-came-to-be-244485/; Olivia B. Waxman, "President Obama to Oprah: Watch *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, *TIME*, August 27, 2012, http://entertainment.time.com/2012/08/27/president-obama-to-oprah-watch-beasts-of-the-southern-wild/; Super Soul Sunday, "Why Oprah Loves Beasts of the Southern Wild," aired August 26, 2012, http://www.oprah.com/own-super-soul-sunday/why-oprah-loves-beasts-of-the-southern-wild-video; Ben Child, "Oprah Winfrey Helps *Precious* Find Love in Toronto," *The Guardian*, September 21, 2009, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/sep/21/oprah-winfrey-precious-toronto; and Neda Ulaby, "Oprah, Tyler Perry and a Painful 'Precious' Life," *NPR*, September 28, 2009, https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=113213188.

However, like many contemporary films about marginalized girls and women from poverty subcultures, *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* narrativize a range of discourses such as poverty-as-moral-failure, the feminization of poverty, and the presumed key role that girls play in ending intergenerational cycles of poverty.[271] Some of these female-centric films, which portray girls and women as the most vulnerable figures of highly unstable socioeconomic contexts, include *María*, *llena eres de gracia*/*Maria Full of Grace* (Joshua Marston, 2004, USA *Wendy and Lucy* (Kelly Reichardt, 2008, USA), *Frozen River* (Courtney Hunt, 2008, USA), *Fish Tank* (Andrea Arnold, 2009, UK and Netherlands), *La sirga*/*The Towrope* (William Vega, 2012, Colombia and France), and *Leave No Trace* (Debra Granik, 2018, USA and Canada). The protagonists in the American independent films *Wendy and Lucy* and *Frozen River,* for example, experience sudden events that not only thwart their attempts to improve their welfare but place the women in even more perilous circumstances. Faced with few options, these women must occupy transgressive spaces and participate in criminal activities to survive. *Fish Tank* and *Leave No Trace* represent familial separation as their girl protagonists' only chance to end the cycle of marginalization. Carolina Rocha sees the resilient adolescent girlhood in *María*, *llena eres de gracia* and *La sirga* epitomizing the optimistic future of a politically and socioeconomically unstable Colombia, even as the film protagonists seek opportunities outside of their country's borders. But I argue that these films actually participate in a cycle of films centering young

[271] See Sylvia Chant, "Galvanizing Girls for Development? Critiquing the Shift from 'Smart' to 'Smarter Economics,'" *Progress in Development Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016): 314-328; Sylvia Chant, "Women, Girls and World Poverty: Empowerment, Equality or Essentialism?" *International Development Planning Review* 38, no. 1 (2016): 1-24; Sarah Banet-Weiser, "'Confidence You Can Carry!': Girls in Crisis and the Market for Girls' Empowerment Organizations," *Continuum* 29, no. 2 (2015): 182-193; Ofra Koffman and Rosalind Gill, "'The Revolution will be led by a 12-year-old Girl:' Girl Power and Global Biopolitics," *Feminist Review* 105, no. 1 (2013): 83-102; Steven Pressman, "Feminist Explanations for the Feminization of Poverty," *Journal of Economic Issues* 37, no. 2 (2003): 353-361.

women's experiences of economically motivated dislocation and migration.[272] Viewing the films in this way reveals the condition of displacement and the protagonists' attempts to self-locate as major, recurring themes in precarious girlhood cinema. However, in this case, criminality, emigration, or family abandonment function as the only modes of empowerment available to the aforementioned films' female protagonists, regardless of national context.

By contrast, the film worlds inhabited by the lead female figures in my principal case studies, Precious "Claireece" Jones (Gabourey Sidibe), Ree Dolly (Jennifer Lawrence), and Hushpuppy (Quvenzhané Wallis), position domestic self-alignment as a more viable alternative than criminality, emigration or family abandonment. It comes as little surprise that the films depict the girls' troubled relationships with their mothers as a key factor in their experiences of housing insecurity. Although physically present in the home, Mary (Mo'Nique), Precious's emotionally, physically and sexually abusive mother, and Connie (Valerie Richards), Ree's unexplainably catatonic mother have abdicated their homemaking responsibilities, while Hushpuppy's mother "swam away" shortly after giving birth. This failure to fulfill maternal duties makes their homes disordered and vulnerable, and the girls' performance of household tasks or caregiving in varying degrees empowers them to create a semblance of order and security on their terms. Moreover, in showing the girls appealing to their mothers or the *concept* of mother for help as well as the denial of these requests, these films underline matters of female agency and choice.[273] Common sense suggests that the absentee maternity in these films, combined with the daughters' involvement in varying forms of domestic labor, presents an

[272] This cycle includes films such as *Lilya-4 ever* (Lukas Moodysson, 2002) and *Ghosts* (Nick Broomfield, 2006). See Carolina Rocha, "From Girlhood to Adulthood: Colombian Adolescence in *María*, *llena eres de gracia* and *La sirga*," in *New Visions of Adolescence in Contemporary Latin American Cinema*, eds. Geoffrey Maguire and Rachel Randall (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave, 2018), 203-221.

[273] In a deeply emotional scene, Precious cries to her alternative school classmates and teacher about her lack of parental care and experiences of abuse.

implicit critique of American women's feminist gains in the public sphere, selfish neglect of the private sphere and exposure of girls to increasing risks.[274] In other words, these women are shown *choosing* to allow their daughters to resolve the difficult issues they face on their own.

Precious, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* provide striking, gendered counterpoints to the commercially-successful Hollywood films about the roguish mavericks of Wall Street fraud schemes or the American housing and financial crises, which were played by bankable male stars such as Michael Douglas, Christian Bale, and Leonardo DiCaprio.[275] These commercially-successful films operate according to a double address, wherein they mitigate the seriousness of the male characters' criminal involvements by using representational ideas of boyish fun to stage the characters' illegal activities and enjoyment of material pursuits.[276] Despite not directly referencing these crimes, all while showing some of their effects, these films of precarious girlhood development use a mode of address that isolates the girls' mothers as significant, and unredeemable, contributors to their daughters' predicaments. The conclusions reinforce this irredeemability by excluding or sidelining these maternal figures from their daughters' experiences of resolution, further demonstrating the idealized figuration of the girl as an elastic, resilient subject capable of withstanding the uncertainties of neoliberal capitalism.

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[274] See Elizabeth Nathanson, *Television and Postfeminist Housekeeping: No Time for Mother* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 26; Alison Fyfe, "News and the Social Construction of Risky Girls," *Girlhood Studies* 7, no. 1 (Summer 2014): 46-64, doi: 10.3167/ghs.2014.070105.

[275] The films about the financial and housing crises include *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* (Oliver Stone, 2010, USA), *Margin Call* (J.C. Chandor, 2011, USA), *99 Homes* (Ramin Bahrani, 2014, USA) and *The Big Short* (Adam McKay, 2015, USA). The temporal setting for *Precious* and *The Wolf of Wall Street* (Martin Scorsese, 2013, USA) is 1987, which is also the year that Oliver Stone's film *Wall Street* was released.

[276] They also differ from American downsizing films, such as *Up in the Air* (Jason Reitman, 2009, USA), *The Company Men* (John Wells, 2010, USA) and *Larry Crowne* (Tom Hanks, 2011, USA), that portray decreased employment options following the 2007 economic crisis as a crisis in masculinity, which some have argued creates opportunities to delegitimize women's involvement in the public square and reinstate them in the home. Suzanne Leonard, "Escaping the Recession? The New Vitality of the Woman Worker," in *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in an Age of Austerity*, eds. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 31-58.

In addition to positioning domestic self-alignment as an empowering choice, I distinguish *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* from gendered poverty film narratives in two significant, connected ways: their protagonists' characterization as optimistic, resilient figures and their hopeful narrative conclusions. These shared correspondences create a striking portrait of contemporary American girlhood-in-transition and offer the means to investigate how the films might rehabilitate the nation's post-financial crisis global image. Placing their girl protagonists alongside each other for analysis reveals they are updated variations of the plucky, wholesome American girl, a cinematic trope that was popular during a period of economic adversity in the 1930s and 1940s.[277] But even more specifically, they bear a close generic family resemblance to *The Wizard of Oz*, an iconic female coming-of-age film with whom they share an unconscious intertextuality despite their striking stylistic differences and genre conventions.

Besides sharing characterological similarities like plucky heroines with grit, other ideological and narrative correspondences foster this intertextuality. *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts*, all contain ideological investments in the notion of home and hopeful narrative conclusions, which I argue are, simultaneously, regressive and progressive elements that repackage mythopoetic ideals and create the illusion of an essential, resilient national identity. These films are dialectical narratives that explore how the Western girl figure's signification of cultural identity, continuity, and crisis cause her to operate as a site of tension where notions of empowered female agency and subjectivity come against restrictive classed, gendered, and racialized stereotypes. Dialogical analysis is therefore possible, despite the films' subcultural, geographical and temporal differences, because they exemplify what Lauren Berlant describes as

[277] Gaylyn Studlar, *Precocious Charms: Stars Performing Girlhood in Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2013); "Work," in *Girlhood in America: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Miriam Forman-Brunell. (ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2001), 692-693.

a "collective singularity," wherein disparate groups are united through their similar responses to emerging crisis ordinariness.[278] Coined by Lauren Berlant, the term "crisis ordinariness" offers a way of articulating how people adjust beliefs about meritocracy, upward mobility, and the achievability of prosperity and success during crises, so their achievement is regarded as exceptional rather than normative.[279] *The Wizard of Oz*, *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* conceptualize the girls' domestication as an appropriate and optimistic response to shifting cultural and economic landscapes. My focus here is on examining how the films function as fantasies of resilience through their representation of domestic femininity and through domestic femininity's symbolic role in American girlhood development; this is where the history of that canonical female coming-of-age film sheds light on the significance of its cultural moment.

2 Domestic Self-Alignment, Feminine Development, and the American National Project

2.1 Rewriting the Nation with Dorothy Gale

L. Frank Baum's popular children's novel, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, has undergone many forms of adaptation ranging from screen and stage productions to fan fiction, comic books, and games. The relevance of Victor Fleming's version here lies not merely in its status as one of the most iconic American female coming-of-age films, nor in its continued influence on thematic and narrative elements in subsequent films about female development, but rather in the ideological shorthand the film's conventions offer.[280] In the 1939 feature film, a runaway Dorothy (Judy Garland) is caught up in a twister and transported to the Technicolor Land of Oz where she discovers the value of her family and home, on the one hand, and of her innate power,

[278] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 201-2.
[279] Ibid., 10.
[280] *Precious*, *Winter's Bone* and *Beasts* are also literature-to-film adaptations.

on the other. This alignment of the value of the home and female agency also plays a significant role in the representation of precarious girlhood development in *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts*.

In his study of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*'s transmedia remakes and popular culture seriality, Frank Kelleter points out the novel's double-function as a cultural product and cultural force of national ideals.[281] He contends that as a gesture of self-description and self-recognition, the novel participated in a set of cultural practices reconstructing America's post-Civil War identity.[282] Kelleter makes a similar argument about Fleming's adaptation because of its Great Depression diegetic and extradiegetic contexts, but I find his claims about the film's 1950s television crossover and subsequent inclusion in America's holiday viewing rituals more useful for my dialogical analysis of the ways *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* construct a positive extradiegetic image for recession-era America.[283] As one of America's cultural rituals, watching *The Wizard of Oz* formed and represented a particular understanding of national identity, which makes spectatorial practice an integral part of identity formation, much like the coming-of-age process this film depicts. David Payne makes a crucial distinction, however, that sets apart *The Wizard of Oz*'s legacy as an important American cultural ritual and artifact from similar practices, such as watching *Miracle on 34th Street* (George Seaton, 1947, USA), *White Christmas* (Michael Curtiz, 1954, USA) and *It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946, USA) during Christmastime. According to Payne, *The Wizard of Oz*'s annual Easter holiday television

[281] Frank Kelleter, "'Toto, I think We're in Oz Again' (and Again and Again): Remakes and Popular Seriality," in *Film Remakes, Adaptations and Fan Productions*, eds. Kathleen Loock and Constantine Verevis (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 19-44.
[282] Ibid., 21.
[283] Mark Evan Swartz explains that even though the film's initial 1939 release was top-grossing and broke attendance records, its 1949 reissue and mid-1950s television broadcast reached more audiences and cemented its unique significance in American culture. Swartz, *Oz Before the Rainbow: L. Frank Baum's* The Wonderful Wizard of Oz *on Stage and Screen to 1939* (JHU Press, 2002), 254.

broadcast and its thematic concern with Dorothy's "death and renewal" caused the film to straddle a liminal cultural space between the secular and the sacred, thus generating liturgical rhythms and practices related to the iconography and formation of resilient American identity.[284] I argue this preoccupation with death and resurrection corresponds to the thematic treatment of trauma and hope that we also see in *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts*.

Continuing this idea of cinematic identity formation, Payne suggests that the film's celebration of Dorothy's heroic qualities presented audiences with a progressive model of female agency, despite its portrayal of a gendered developmental trajectory and traditional telos.[285] Conversely, Kelleter emphasizes the more feminist nature of the source material and describes the adaptation's changes to Dorothy's characterization, her journey through Oz, and its conclusion as being *less* progressive. [286] I'm of two minds about Payne and Kelleter's claims of *The Wizard of Oz*'s progressiveness. I agree that the film does something significant with Dorothy's subjectivity by creating space for both her and the audience to explore her desires, fears, and thoughts. And yet, Dorothy's affirmation that "there's no place like home," the revelation that her spectacular journey through Oz only took place in her mind, and the conclusion's incomplete resolution of Toto's fate seems to defang her power. As a result, *The Wizard of Oz* can be seen to possess a combination of progressive and regressive elements similar to what we see in *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts*. Specifically, these films preserve the internal contradictions of the plucky girl, even with their differing historical contexts, through her demonstration of the mythical ideal of bootstrapping and its intertwinement with the American Dream, as well as her signification of the ethos of economic crisis. I argue that

[284] David Payne, "*The Wizard of Oz*: Therapeutic Rhetoric in a Contemporary Media Ritual," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 75, no. 1 (1989): 26.
[285] Ibid, 36.
[286] Kelleter, "'Toto, I think We're in Oz Again,'" 30.

through Fleming's film we can, and should, see the ways that limiting young female agency to self-management and self-regulation, but representing them as freely chosen actions, makes a logic of immobility-as-mobility emblematic of precarious American girlhood.[287]

2.2 Postfeminism's Connection to The Great Depression and Second World War

While the personally perilous contexts in the later films bear little resemblance to the Kansas of Fleming's film, a closer look at Dorothy's circumstances and characterization reveals further ways that *The Wizard of Oz* and the later group of films are very much in dialogue. The sepia tones of its opening and concluding scenes visually underscore the Gale family farm's volatile ecological Dust Bowl setting and the economic conditions of the Great Depression (Figures 2.1. and 2.2.). Narratively, Auntie Em (Clara Blandick) and Uncle Henry's (Charley Grapewin) preoccupation with the farm's productivity makes them unable to pay attention to, much less entertain Dorothy, their plucky and imaginative niece; while Hunk (Ray Bolger), Zeke (Bert Lahr), and Hickory (Jack Haley) are laborers whose livelihoods depend on this continued productivity.[288] Their economic worries are further compounded when Dorothy's dog Toto (Terry) bites the wealthy Miss Almira Gulch (Margaret Hamilton), who threatens to seize the farm if Toto is not euthanized. To be sure, the musical genre, as a discourse of happiness, creates feelings of expansion in *The Wizard of Oz* that soften the unresolved nature of Dorothy's economic and housing precarity, and offset the experiential constraints conveyed by the framing scenes' formal qualities.[289] A similar structure of feeling is at work in *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*,

[287] Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (2007): 164.
[288] Susan Mackey-Kallis, *The Hero and the Perennial Journey Home in American Film* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 130.
[289] Richard Dyer, *In the Space of a Song: The Uses of Song in Film* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 101.

and *Beasts*, insofar as their melodramatic mode of storytelling organizes alternating moments of confinement and expansion, which create the impression that the girls' ongoing, hopeful responses to trauma make them special; further, these contradictory qualities also cause the film conclusions to feel inspirational, as I demonstrate later.

Figure 2.1. In *The Wizard of Oz*'s (Fleming, 1939) opening scene, Dorothy (Judy Garland) and her dog Toto enter the Gale property.

Figure 2.2. In *The Wizard of Oz*'s (Fleming, 1939) conclusion, Dorothy (Judy Garland) recovers in bed under the watchful gazes of Auntie Em (Clara Blandick) and Uncle Henry (Charley Grapewin).

Despite predating both postfeminism and contemporary neoliberalism, *The Wizard of Oz*, like *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts*, features a plucky girl protagonist whose expressions of individual choice and agency determine her experience of precariousness. Throughout the film, Dorothy's knack for getting herself into and out of trouble provides ample opportunities to showcase her self-determination and agency. From her spirited refusal to relinquish Toto and disastrous entry into Oz, to her defeat of the Wicked Witch of the West and magical return to Kansas, Dorothy is clearly a force to be reckoned with, but she also anticipates a brand of already-empowered, resilient, can-do girlhood that is positive in the face of challenges and responsible for its own happiness.[290] Unlike critical understandings of female agency and

[290] Rosalind Gill, "The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism: 10 Years On," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no. 6 (2017): 619.

individual choice that examine the ways girls and women can exercise material and physical autonomy, the model presented in *The Wizard of Oz*, *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* demonstrates how adopting a positive outlook constitutes agency's psychological expression. Thus, in these films, optimism is figured as a choice that involves taking responsibility for one's experiences of the world. [291]

The question of how this trope of empowered, resilient female agency maintained its symbolic force as a national morale booster across the films' different historical contexts is best answered by exploring linkages between the self-regulatory femininity of the Great Depression and Second World War, and that which is articulated by contemporary postfeminism. The Great Depression, New Deal policies and Second World War created new social roles for American women, increasing their employment prospects and mobility, albeit differentially, with white women often being hired at faster rates than black women, replacing black women in the workplace or striking because they refused to work alongside them.[292] As Bilge Yesil has argued in "'Who Said This is a Man's War?'" government propaganda and advertising targeting women idealized their simultaneous involvements in the domestic sphere and the wartime workplace, constructing an image of the patriotic female laborer as "the strong, competent, courageous 'unsung heroine of the home front.'"[293] Noting the racialized and classed dimensions of this model of heroic femininity, Yesil highlights how women's magazines urged their readers to

[291] Speaking of the privatization of the responsibility of harm, inequity and problem-solving challenges, Laura Favaro and Rosalind Gill write, "Agency…becomes not merely limited to individual interventions, but to psychological ones." Favaro and Gill, "'Pump up the Positivity.'"
[292] Bilge Yesil, "'Who Said This is a Man's War?': Propaganda, Advertising Discourse and the Representation of War Worker Women During the Second World War," *Media History* 10, no. 2 (2004): 103-117; Frances M. Seeber, "Eleanor Roosevelt and Women in the New Deal: A Network of Friends," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (1990): 707-717; K.T. Anderson, "Last Hired, First Fired: Black Women Workers During World War II," *The Journal of American History* 69, no. 1 (1982): 82-97; and Marc Miller, "Working Women and World War II," *New England Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (1980): 42-61.
[293] Yesil, "'Who Said This is a Man's War?'"103.

preserve their sexual attractiveness and femininity while demonstrating their strength, resilience, and competence in the workplace, and to view this patriotic labor as a service to their male relatives and romantic partners.

While it is true that these wartime messages were more focused on reinforcing women's supportive role to men and ensuring a post-war return to traditional gender roles, rather than facilitating women's empowerment and independence, they exhibit a shared sensibility with postfeminism that aligns one's personal freedoms with consumerism. Analyzing advertisements for a range of beauty products, Yesil describes the selection and application of cosmetics as practices having personal benefits with nationalistic implications. For example, a lipstick brand purports to raise one's personal morale and self-confidence by suppressing sad feelings, and presents itself as a symbol of freedom ("the precious right of women to be feminine and lovely under any circumstances") that also preserves one's feminine bodily properties ("a reflection of the free democratic way of life that you have succeeded in keeping your femininity—even though you are doing a man's work!").[294] In making cosmetics patriotic technologies of the self, these advertisements exhibited a series of attributes that also constitute contemporary postfeminist discourse, such as an emphasis on consumerism, self-surveillance and the notion that femininity is an essential, embodied quality. But, perhaps more importantly, they also show us that women were expected to regulate their negative emotions and demonstrate courage in the face of challenging circumstances.[295]

These dynamics are also apparent in popular Hollywood films showcasing the youthful star personas of Judy Garland, Deanna Durbin, and Shirley Temple, contributing to a particular construction of American girlhood that appealed to adult audiences during the 1930s and 1940s.

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[294] Ibid., 113.
[295] Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture," 149; Yesil, "'Who Said This is a Man's War?'" 111.

As Gaylyn Studlar points out in *Precocious Charms: Stars Performing Girlhood in Classical Hollywood Cinema*, this plucky figuration overcame difficulties by drawing on her internal resources, rebelled temporarily against expected gender norms before achieving appropriate adult femininity, and was skilled in tackling adult problems. Feminist scholarship examining how the actors' star personas were in dialogue with national ideals have noted links between Shirley Temple's high profitability during the Great Depression and her recurring characterization as an innocent optimistically persevering through hardship and facilitating others' emotional healing.[296] Hailed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the United States Congress for her morale-boosting charms and global appeal, Shirley Temple symbolized America's "cheerful resilience" and progress,[297] while sparking commercial tie-ins that helped stimulate the economy.[298] In addition to their utopian nationalistic signification, Studlar argues that these star personas also contained contradictions related to gendered behaviors, childhood, and adulthood, innocence, and sensuality, often situating these girls as liminal figures. I see these contradictions as reflective of extradiegetic competing conceptualizations of girlhood, insofar as patriotic fervor and public expectations shaping girls' new social roles and homefront contributions simultaneously increased and constrained their agency, thus leading to the emergence of "fragile yet brave" female subjectivities during hard times.[299] The consequence of this onscreen and off-

[296] See Ina Rae Hark, "Shirley Temple and Hollywood's Colonialist Ideology," in *Hollywood and the Great Depression: American Film, Politics and Society in the 1930s*, edited by Iwan Morgan and Philip John Davies (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 106-108; Kristen Hatch, *Shirley Temple and the Performance of Girlhood* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015); and Studlar, *Precocious Charms*, 57-58, 93.
[297] Ibid., 57-58.
[298] John F. Kasson, *The Little Girl Who Fought the Great Depression: Shirley Temple and 1930s America* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 148-149.
[299] Lisa L. Ossian, "Fragilities and Failures: Promises and Patriotism: Elements of Second World War English and American Girlhood, 1939-1945," in *Girlhood*: *A Global History*, eds. Jennifer Helgren and Colleen A. Vasconcellos (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 163.

screen dynamic is a figuration of idealized American girlhood that is aligned with domestic space but is temporarily allowed to enter public spaces to protect the home.

In *Precious*, *Winter's Bone,* and *Beasts*, these girl protagonists encounter dilemmas that are occasions to celebrate their grit and to show how hopefulness and resilience are necessary orientations, or ways of being, for their flourishing. Looking at the films together shows how resilience, like confidence, erases differences between the girls to construct an essentialist notion of American identity, and also challenges readings of these impoverished, abused girls as victims.[300] I argue that this understanding of precarious girlhood invites a postfeminist phenomenological reading because the girls are shown to be fully responsible for their life trajectories, despite traumatic experiences and setbacks.[301] Where feminist film phenomenology considers how a film articulates the constraints that structure a character's gendered experience of her body and the world, a postfeminist phenomenological approach might concentrate on the ways this character's active, freely-chosen self-regulation is the decisive factor in her understanding of and responses to these experiences.[302] We see this in *The Wizard of Oz* with Dorothy's decision to return to the Kansas farm despite the lack of narrative resolution to the problems prompting her initial departure from the home.

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[300] Gill and Orgad, "Confidence Culture," 16–34. Also, Favaro and Gill write, "Confidence, resilience and positivity as technologies of self essentially rely upon a repudiation of expressions of or claims to victimhood—at least in women." Favaro and Gill, "'Pump up the Positivity.'"

[301] Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture," 163-164.

[302] See Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004); and Lucy Bolton, "A Phenomenology of Girlhood: Being Mia in *Fish Tank* (Andrea Arnold, 2009)," in *International Cinema and the Girl*, eds. Fiona Handyside and Kate Taylor-Jones (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 75-84.

3 Postfeminist Bootstrap Narratives of Feminine Development

3.1 Fantasy's Inadequate Response to Trauma

Even still, there is a sense in which Judy Garland's prettily coiffed, well-dressed Dorothy Gale resists the designation of precarious American girlhood that so easily fits the protagonists of *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts*. *Precious* centers on its protagonist's emotional and bodily experiences of multiple forms of abuse and her discovery that education will provide the means to care for herself and her children. Katie M. Kanagawa argues that in addition to identifying Precious's experiences of rape and multiple forms of abuse as traumatic, the film also locates trauma in one's "daily systematic exclusion and alienation from dominant social ideals and norms," which is an observation that is also relevant to the other films.[303] Precious's fantasy life and voiceover indicate her awareness of how her skin tone and body fail to meet dominant beauty standards that privilege slim, light-skinned girls and women. In a particularly poignant sequence, Precious looks into a mirror while fixing her appearance; however, the film presents a young, blonde white woman as Precious's mirror image, illustrating the extent of her internalized colorism, negative self-image, and awareness of her exclusion from dominant norms (Figure 2.3.). Most significantly, the next scene further underscores this awareness of exclusion by showing Precious reflecting on Mary's request that she perform cunnilingus on her mother. *Winter's Bone* presents Ree's efforts to continue caring for her catatonic mother and young siblings and prevent their eviction from the family home. Her father's failure to appear for a trial raises the stakes by giving Ree a week to provide proof that his disappearance is death-related, or the bail bondsman will seize the property. *Beasts* depicts six-year-old Hushpuppy's changing

[303] Katie M. Kanagawa, "Dialectical Meditation: The Play of Fantasy and Reality in *Precious*," *Black Camera: An International Film Journal* (*The New Series*) 4, no. 1 (2012): 120, DOI: 10.2979/blackcamera.4.1.117 https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/blackcamera.4.1.117.

relationship with her father Wink (Dwight Henry) when a hurricane of epic proportions threatens their isolated, off-grid home. The film concentrates on Hushpuppy's journey to self-sufficiency as she longs for her absent mother and encounters devastating losses. But where these depictions of precarious American girlhood differ in the kind, degree, and social specificity of trauma experienced, they are united in the representation of the protagonists' hopeful navigation of these dire circumstances as a critical facet of their self-development: they act as if it were *possible* to return home, "break through," prevent eviction and death.[304]

Figure 2.3. Precious's (Gabourey Sidibe) imagined mirror image (Silje Vallevik) removes a sponge curler from her hair in *Precious* (Daniels, 2009).

Most obviously, this daily exclusion and alienation appears less traumatic in *The Wizard of Oz* than the other films but is identified as trauma through its connection to Dorothy's escape into fantasy. Early scenes show Dorothy being scolded for constantly getting in the way and her wanting to find a place where she can't get into trouble, an elsewhere that she imagines is "Somewhere over the Rainbow."[305] Dorothy's longing for this fantasy space ultimately expresses

[304] Precious speaks of one day "break[ing] through" the circumstances that threaten to hold her back.
[305] It's rather funny that the very first thing Dorothy does when she arrives in Oz is kill someone, albeit accidentally, given her desire to go to a place where there isn't any trouble.

a desire to change her experience of herself and her experience of the world, and instigates her journey on an adventure that threatens to disrupt her preparation, and suitability, for a future within the patriarchal order. Surprisingly, Auntie Em is absent from Oz's fantasy space, save a brief moment when she appears in the Wicked Witch's crystal ball, which further demonstrates how Dorothy's domestic self-alignment involves the idea of home and not its physical structure. Auntie Em's absence grants Dorothy freedom of comportment and motility that she does not enjoy in Kansas.

A similar coupling of trauma and fantasy occurs in *Precious* and *Beasts*. Precious's recourse to racialized and classed fantasies is introduced through her desire for normalcy, which is expressed via voiceover and first imagined as a romantic relationship with Mr. Wicher (Bill Sage), her white, middle-class math teacher.[306] Following this, Precious's fantasies are embedded within or immediately following a traumatic event, the details of which are often presented through her interiority as fragmented impressions. There are three striking facets to the film's fantastical moments that are suggestive of the role they play in Precious's way of being: firstly, their temporary disruption of narrative progression materializes the dissociative response to trauma, secondly, hyper-realistic formal qualities express the experiential relief of this disruption, creating a counterpoint to Precious's difficult circumstances and thirdly, when held together, these facets reveal a logic of race that includes but extends beyond skin color to map its systems of signification.[307] Precious imagines herself in positions of empowerment that are classed, gendered and raced; in her fantasies, she is a famous supermodel on a photoshoot and a

[306] In voiceover, Precious describes pretending Mr. Wicher is her husband and that they are (wealthy) Westchester County residents. The camera's blurry, forward-tracking motion toward Mr. Wicher accompanies this disclosure and signals entry into Precious's inscape, where he returns the girl's adoring gaze.
[307] Sedef Arat-Koç, "New Whiteness(es), Beyond the Colour Line? Assessing the Contradictions and Complexities of 'Whiteness' in the (Geo)Political Economy of Capitalist Globalism," in *States of Race: Critical Race Feminism for the 21st Century*, eds. Sherene Razack, Malinda Smith and Sunera Thobani (Toronto, ON: Between the Lines, 2010), 148.

film star on the red carpet, and an actor in an Italian Neorealist film (Figures 2.4, 2.5, and 2.6).[308] Most significantly, throughout some of these scenes, we see her imaginary light-skinned boyfriend gazing adoringly at her, affirming her value within a racialized, African-American context.[309] Kanagawa sees this turn to fantasy as an expression of Precious's challenge to the dominant social order insofar as it is used to reimagine herself, an overweight, dark-skinned teen, as an empowered agent and an object of desire. He notes how these classed, gendered and raced imaginings reflect the protagonist's understanding of her marginalization, which some critics have interpreted as racial self-hatred and internalized colorism.[310]

Figure 2.4. Precious (Gabourey Sidibe) fantasizes about being a film star in *Precious* (Daniels, 2009).

Figure 2.5. Precious (Gabourey Sidibe) imagines that she is a fashion model in *Precious* (Daniels, 2009).

Figure 2.6. In one of many fantasy sequences, Precious (Gabourey Sidibe) stars in an Italian neorealist film with her mother (Mo'Nique) in *Precious* (Daniels, 2009).

[308] She also appears as a singer in a church choir, but, unlike the other fantasy sequences, Precious is shown watching this scene from outside of the church.

[309] Her internalized colorism is explicitly revealed when she introduces herself to film viewers: "My name is Claireece 'Precious' Jones. I wish I had a light-skinned boyfriend with real nice hair. And I want to be on the cover of a magazine. But first I want to be in one of them BET videos. Momma said I can't dance. Plus, she said who wanna see my big ass dancing anyhow?" That Precious has an order for these achievements tells us a lot about how her experiences have shaped her knowledge of the world: these aren't musings from the top-of-her-head, they're well-informed conclusions about the invisible, yet omnipresent connections between a slender build, light skin and beauty in visual culture.

[310] Courtland Milloy, "*Precious*: A Film as Lost as the Girl It Glorifies," review of *Precious: Based on the Novel 'Push' By Sapphire*, by Lee Daniels, *Washington Post*, November 18, 2009, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/11/17/AR2009111703465.html; Darryl Lorenzo Wellington, "Looking for Precious," *Crisis* 117, no. 1 (2010): 26-30; Felicia R. Lee, "*Precious* Spawns Racial Debate: She's Demeaned or Angelic," *The New York Times*, November 21, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/21/movies/21precious.html; Mia Mask, "The Precarious Politics of *Precious*: A Close Reading of a Cinematic Text," *Black Camera* 4, no.1 (2012): 96-116.

And yet, a point that needs emphasizing here is that the film exposes fantasy as an inadequate response to trauma, by using Precious's decision to discover and accept her HIV status as a way of signaling her determined cultivation of resilience. Now living in a half-way house with Abdul and planning to gain custody of her daughter Mongo (Quisha Powell), Precious is visited by her mother who discloses that the girl's father died from AIDS virus complications.[311] Immediately, sounds of camera shutters clicking accompany a close-up of Precious's reaction to this news; this image is replaced by a behind-the-scenes montage showing a makeup artist/hairstylist preparing Precious-the-supermodel for a photo shoot with her light-skinned boyfriend playing fashion photographer. Mary's voice rises above the fantasy sequence's pop music, drawing Precious out of her daydream. Confronted with this news, Precious, unlike Mary, recognizes her viral exposure and encourages her mother to get tested. As Precious looks through the window at her motorcycle-riding fantasy boyfriend, her mother walks past him, desaturating the image and prompting Precious to recognize the limitations of her coping mechanism.

This interpenetration of fantasy and diegetic realities is most notably present in *The Wizard of Oz*, when the farmhands appear in Oz as the Tin Man, Cowardly Lion, and Scarecrow, and it also surfaces in *Beasts* through Hushpuppy's expressed longing for her missing mother. Through Hushpuppy's narration, we learn that her house is a repository for her mother's discarded belongings, and we hear her fabled account of her mother's abandonment of the family ("she swam away"). During the voiceover, the camera follows Hushpuppy's movements as she nimbly clambers over furniture and piles of clothing, circuitously making her way into the kitchen. The camera reframes, drawing attention to an area of wall space featuring a string of

[311] Precious's daughter Mongo has Downs Syndrome and lives with Mary's mother.

fairy lights (and Mardi Gras beads) mounted around a hand-drawn female head and basketball jersey, just as the lights turn on. It is after this that we see Hushpuppy use a blowtorch to light her stove and watch her cook a tin of cat food. While preparing the meal, she converses with "Momma," a voice that emanates from the basketball jersey. In showing Momma speaking kindly and singing of her love for Hushpuppy, this scene visualizes the little girl's heartfelt desires and furnishes a contrast to Wink's abrasive parenting style when the sound of his sudden reappearance ruptures the fantasy.

Much later, after Wink reveals the severity of his illness to Hushpuppy, and they return to The Bathtub after their forcible evacuation to a relief and relocation center, Hushpuppy and her friends head for Elysian Fields, the offshore brothel where she suspects her mother works, in the hopes the woman will take care of her and her ailing father. When the girls arrive, they pause at the entrance, peering below deck as light and the distorted strains of Fats Waller's "(It Will Have to Do) Until the Real Thing Comes Along" spill outside. Once inside, a series of shot-reverse-shots facilitate alignment with Hushpuppy's point of view as she searches the faces of the female sex workers for her mother, with the camera noticeably lingering on the faces of black women. In concert with the jazz song's expression of unrequited longing, the brothel's hazy, dreamlike and otherworldly interior suggests a state of suspension; and, as we will see, these elements cause the brothel to exemplify the fantastic space of hesitation.[312] To take a case in point, my earlier discussion of Massey's conceptualization of boundaries as linkages *between* places supplies the first instance in which the brothel presents a fantastic sense of space. An abundance of fairy lights in the brothel recalls the light installation in Hushpuppy's makeshift shrine to her

[312] The dreamy, glittery interior of Elysian Fields recalls the otherworldly setting of Rainbow, the aptly-named costume shop of *Eyes Wide Shut* (Stanley Kubrick, 1999, UK/USA) where Bill (Tom Cruise) learns, in his own way, that there is 'no place like home,' while Waller's 1936 recording recalls the eeriness of "Midnight, The Stars and You," the 1934 song playing in *The Shining*'s (Stanley Kubrick, 1980, UK/USA) Gold Room.

absent mother. Given their placement and Hushpuppy's age, it is highly unlikely that she was able to install the lights herself, which suggests the filmmaker's intentional linking of both places. The second instance takes up fantasy's other associations and involves the brothel's function as a space which fulfills clientele's sexual fantasies, and Hushpuppy's mother-fantasy might become a reality.

Adding to this fantastic sense of space is the revelation that Waller's jazz music is non-diegetic: Hushpuppy's wanderings lead us past a pair of performers whose lip and bodily movements do not correspond to the song playing. As the song becomes distorted and fades away, an attendant shift in camera orientation and height anticipate a moment of great significance: a woman, silhouetted by the brightness of the space she has just left, enters the room and for a brief moment the aural environment is muted. The film's recurrent musical theme invests an additional layer of subtext to the image of a mesmerized Hushpuppy, who gazes at the woman in wonder and something like recognition.[313] Having noticed Hushpuppy's stare, the woman speaks kindly to her in the voice of Hushpuppy's imaginary Momma. And in a striking reversal of roles that recalls Hushpuppy's scene with Momma, the mysterious woman leads Hushpuppy into the kitchen and cooks for her, while dispensing practical advice about feminine comportment.

Again, the sequence uses music to shift registers, oscillating between a sense of the imaginary and the real, thus raising the stakes about whether the mysterious woman is Hushpuppy's mother. The continuous looping of Waller's song as the girls dance slowly with their adult female partners enhances the sense that time is suspended and, importantly, conveys the embodied experience of not wanting a dance number to end (Figure 2.7). Through a series of

[313] We see a similar response in the earlier scene, when Hushpuppy listened to Momma's singing.

close-ups, the film emphasizes their skin-to-skin contact, which contrasts sharply with Hushpuppy's interactions with her father. This contrast reveals the situatedness of Hushpuppy's orientation to the world and her different modes of bodily comportment and spatiality. We see Hushpuppy, nestled deeply in the woman's embrace, suggest the woman act as caretaker for herself and her father. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the woman refuses and issues an invitation of her own: Hushpuppy can remain at the brothel. As Hushpuppy considers this proposal, Waller's song fades out, making room for Hushpuppy's voiceover narration and flashback to infancy. A plaintive melody plays under the image of an infant Hushpuppy and continues into her present, where she declines the woman's invitation. "I need to go home," she tells her as strains of Waller's song seep into the film's score and the woman holds her closer. After Hushpuppy whispers something in her ear, the woman cradles her, spins her around and sets her down. Sharing Hushpuppy's perspective, we hear Waller's music rise in volume and watch as the woman wipes her eyes and retreats. Ending the sequence with the framing that heralded the woman's appearance on-screen and picking up the film's recurrent musical theme before Hushpuppy leaves the brothel signaling Hushpuppy's reorientation and end of her appeal to fantasy space.

Figure 2.7. Hushpuppy's friends dance with their adult female partners in *Beasts* (Zeitlin, 2012).

3.2 Spatializing Compulsory Positivity

Looking at the films' representations of fantasy as an inadequate response to trauma lays the crucial groundwork for understanding their depictions of compulsory positivity and resilience as necessary attributes for successful self-directed development. As Favaro and Gill have noted, a positive mental attitude has become a structuring force in resilient personal transformation and reflects the neoliberal emphasis on "enterprising, creative and —yes— agentic individuals who embrace risk, take responsibility for themselves and 'bounce back' when things go badly."[314] While the girls' hope-filled, resourceful perseverance through adversity reflects this compulsory positivity, the diegetic insularity of the narrative spaces they occupy also represent this emphasis on this self-regulatory, psychological agency and correspond to the logic of immobility-as-mobility governing the girls' construction of their subjectivities. In other words, these insulated narrative spaces materialize the individualization of success and failure, making it impossible for these marginalized girls to develop new knowledges, new modes of agency and resistance, or new ways of seeing and experiencing reality. In so doing, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* underscore marginality as "a site of deprivation" not as a "site of radical possibility, a space of resistance."[315] This insularity defines the representational boundaries of the films' Manichaean microcosm, by obscuring structural causes of marginalization and placing blame on members of the protagonists' kinship network, who, in the later films, are shown committing assault and other crimes. This cultural and geographical isolation therefore brackets-out alternate ways of being for the girls and positions them as ideal subjects who must draw on personal resources as they accept and adjust to their precarity.

[314] Gill and Orgad, "The Amazing Bounce-Backable Woman," 484.
[315] hooks, "Choosing the Margin," 20.

To be fair, there is a sense in which these isolated narrative spaces can be seen to visualize the particular limitations and opportunities accompanying the girls' intersecting age, class, gender, and racial identities. In *The Wizard of Oz*, the trajectory of Dorothy's development is defined by the diegetic options available to her. Further, it is unclear what exists beyond Professor Marvel's campsite and the neighborhood surrounding the Gale farm. There is little-to-no representation of narrative places unmarked by poverty in the later films, which dehistoricizes and decontextualizes Precious's New York City housing projects, Ree's weather-worn house in the Missouri Ozarks, and Hushpuppy's off-grid mobile home. These spaces bear little relation to the extradiegetic realities of American communities in the late 1980s and mid-2000s that were disproportionately affected by neoconservative socioeconomic policies related to benign neglect, rural deindustrialization, and the post-Hurricane Katrina state-of-emergency, or that inherited legacies of slavery and segregation that devalued black American lives.[316]

And yet, diegetically isolating these settings does not cause them to operate as restrictive agents preventing the girls' full expressions of their subjectivities as some might suppose. In fact, the converse is true: *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* use these narrative spaces to fetishize the girls' individual agency and choice[317] and demonstrate the girls' command over meaning-making their embodied experiences of precariousness.[318] It is especially significant that this meaning-making is performed through the girls' domestic labor, which, as I will show in the next

[316] Christopher Lloyd, "Creaturely, Throwaway Life after Katrina: *Salvage the Bones* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild*," *South: A Scholarly Journal* 48, no. 2 (Spring 2016): 260. What is more, there is a sense in which their imperiled homes are liminal time-spaces. The homes' spatial displacement, their geographical and social marginalization, and their temporal telescoping of domestication's future-oriented aims require the girls to immediately put homemaking skills into practice. I am thinking here of Bakhtin's characterization of the ways that narrative expresses the interconnectedness of time and space. M.M. Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84.
[317] Favaro and Gill, "'Pump up the Positivity.'"
[318] Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt, "In the Social Factory? Immaterial Labour, Precariousness and Cultural Work," Theory, Culture & Society 25, no. 7-8 (2008): 5, 27, doi: 10.1177/0263276408097794.

section, encompasses a way of being that lends itself well to the cultivation and empowerment of the films' female protagonists and inscribed viewers.

3.3 Homemaking, Meaning Making, and Subject-Making

Racialized and classed domestic discourses have long shaped American understandings of normative femininity, which, in turn, played a key role in forging and preserving the national project, resolving ideological contradictions and shaping representations of domesticity in American contemporary, silent and woman's films.[319] One of the most intriguing discoveries that emerged during dialogical analysis is how *The Wizard of Oz*, *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* use the girls' processes of transition to continue this ideological coupling of domestic femininity and national identity. Surprisingly, these films present the girls' domestication as a process occurring through emotional rather than practical means, regardless of the degrees of the girls' involvement in housework. Feminist film scholars have traced these linkages in American cinema to their nineteenth-century roots and examined the transformation of material, domestic work onscreen into sentimental gestures that reinforce conservative ideals.[320] Irene Mata argues that Hollywood films about immigrant female domestic workers rely on and advance the idea that America is a land of equal opportunity, without engaging late capitalism's challenges and exploitative labor practices.[321] Katarzyna Marciniak, in turn, considers how depictions of immigrant female labor often entail the healing and restoration of individuals and families, and reaffirm American understandings of femininity and domesticity as mechanisms that structure

[319] See Kathleen Anne McHugh, *American Domesticity: From How-to Manual to Hollywood Melodrama* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 6-7.
[320] Ibid., 5.
[321] Irene Mata, *Domestic Disturbances: Re-Imagining Narratives of Gender, Labor and Immigration* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2014).

and strengthen national well-being.[322] These claims therefore suggest that emotional domestic labor in *The Wizard of Oz*, *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* can represent their female protagonists' relation to nationalism, reinforce conservative ideals, and operate as a rehabilitative force for the image of the United States.

Although *The Wizard of Oz* literally aligns Dorothy with her home, by making it accompany her to Oz, the imaginative nature of her journey indicates her personal valuation of the home and shows this domestic connection is more emotional than physical.[323] Along with Dorothy's lack of involvement in household tasks and farm chores, the film uses her clumsiness, when she falls into the pigpen, to signal how out of place she is on the farm. For Linda Rohrer Paige, the film's treatment of the home highlights its function as a patriarchally-prescribed and gendered place that shapes the contours of Auntie Em's expressions of agency, including her ability to control farm life and her inability to challenge Miss Gulch's sheriff-backed authority.[324] When Dorothy runs away, she is motivated to find another way of being, so it is significant that she tries to return home after meeting Professor Marvel (Frank Morgan). A closer look at what happens during her exchange with the traveling magician gives insight on why she chooses domestic self-alignment.

After urging Dorothy to close her eyes, Professor Marvel sneaks a look at a photo of Auntie Em, pretending to use his psychic powers to gain special knowledge of how the girl's running away has adversely affected her aunt's health. In doing so, he redirects her desire for elsewhere and frames immobility, rather than mobility, as an appropriate mode of feminine

[322] Katarzyna Marciniak, "Palatable Foreignness," in *Transnational Feminism in Film and Media*, eds. Katarzyna Marciniak, Anikó Imre, and Áine O'Healy (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 187-205.
[323] Linda Rohrer Paige, "Wearing the Red Shoes: Dorothy and the Power of the Female Imagination in *The Wizard of Oz*," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 23, no. 4 (1996): 148.
[324] Ibid., 148.

comportment. The twister interrupts this return, "transporting" Dorothy to Oz where she encounters The Wicked Witch of the West, Professor Marvel's negative image, who gives Dorothy a true glimpse of Auntie Em's distress and intensifies her desire to return home. As symbolic bookends, these moments crystallize the tensions of Dorothy's developmental dilemma and reveal her individual choice as a significant part of the domestication process. Dorothy's concern for Auntie Em, combined with her self-directed efforts to return home, epitomize caregiving. In this light, Iris Marion's claims that homemaking is meaning-making help us understand there are other ways to conceptualize feminine domestication as girlhood development.[325] I suggest this way of approaching domestication shows that including a figurative alignment with the home to the already established literal connection, allows *The Wizard of Oz* to meld not just the farm's future with Dorothy's, but also, by extension, America's extradiegetic future, as I will show later.

In my view, the girls' domestication, or self-directed alignment with the value of home, occurs through defining narrative moments in *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* that reveal the stakes of the girls' coming-of-age processes and disrupt developmental through lines between their material domestic labor and their self-realization. While these moments crystallize tensions between the girls' experiences of micro and macro forms of trauma, they also reinforce the girls' blamelessness in their suffering and complicate the can-do/at-risk girl binary of contemporary media culture and political discourse. Organized by the films' melodramatic narrative mode, these instances demonstrate how the girls' virtue, as self-regulating or self-disciplining subjects, becomes morally legible and the vehicle through which the films set up the symbolic Manichaean oppositions that obfuscate the ideologies and structural causes of the girls' social

[325] Young, "A Room of One's Own," 156.

exclusion.[326] The melodramatic narrative mode is rooted in a "dialectic of pathos and action," which, Linda Williams tells us, structures much of American fiction filmmaking and involves a two-part revelation of a character's innocence: first, for the film audience and second, during the film's conclusion, for other characters.[327] For example, in her *Precious* film review, critic Dana Stevens shows how the film's first hour tethers together Precious's emotional, physical and sexual violation with her declaration that "I ain't done nothin'!" to demonstrate her innocence to viewers, while later, we see Precious's innocence revealed to a social worker who thought she was just gaming the system.[328] We see similar demonstrations of Ree and Hushpuppy's innocence in their films, as I will show later.

Dysfunctional family dynamics force Precious, Ree, and Hushpuppy to adopt roles in their households that are either grossly abnormal or typically taken on later in life, while tasking them with work that is presented as a symptom of their subcultures' social pathologies. But instead of showing the girls succumbing to the contaminating effects of this "pathological" domestic training, which can be seen to foreshadow and prepare them for their ongoing social exclusion, the films negotiate the girls' development through moments that show them directly confronting threats of severe bodily harm, and even death, and retaining their hopeful orientation toward their goals. Mary's attempts to kill her newborn grandson (Alexander and Kendall Toombs) and seriously injure her daughter herald Precious's break from the family home, but I see Precious's discovery of her exposure to the AIDS virus as a turning point in her development because it not only marks her rejection of fantasy and acknowledgement of her full

[326] Linda Williams, "Melodrama Revised: Refiguring American Film Genres," in *Refiguring American Film Genres*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 66.
[327] For information about the moral legibility of melodrama, please see Williams, "Melodrama Revised," 42-88.
[328] Dana Stevens, "Sorry, I didn't like *Precious*," review of *Precious* (Lee Daniels, 2009), *Slate*, November 5, 2009, https://slate.com/culture/2009/11/sorry-i-didn-t-like-precious.html.

precariousness, it introduces the theme of resilience. In fact, the next scene shows Precious's teacher (Paula Patton) and classmates discussing a protagonist's circumstances as being "unrelenting." Rita (Stephanie Andujar) is unable to define the term describing this protagonist's experience. But in an almost too-good-to-be-true moment of narrative reflexivity, another classmate, Rhonda (Chyna Layne), turns the discussed scenario on its head, effectively offering a postfeminist phenomenological reading, and she instead describes the protagonist as "relentless." This shift in focus, from circumstances to agency, reflects the postfeminist and neoliberal disavowal of crises' negative effects on an individual's welfare. The scene ends with a close-up of Precious's face, which underlines the importance of her decision to persevere against worsening odds.

The cinematography and bleak color palette of *Winter's Bone* underscore the difficulties of life below the poverty line in the rural Missouri Ozarks and calls to mind, not only the dusty, sepia tones of Dorothy's Kansas, but also the wild American frontier. Shot on-location, using local residents and their homes, the film depicts a landscape and cultural geography that position Ree, her family, and neighbors as outlaws. Facing a yard cluttered with decaying items, the Dolly home is made of water-warped wood and houses a palimpsest of personal effects, homemade decorations, and stacks of containers and laundry baskets that put space at a premium. In these spaces, Ree's homemaking extends beyond traditional activities, such as cooking and doing laundry, to include grooming her mother, being the primary caregiver for her siblings, and hunting and skinning animals. Ree's crisis point transpires when her ongoing search for her father fails to comply with her extended family's criminal code, and she is constructed, according to A.O. Scott, as a "modern-day Antigone" whose defiance almost results in her

death.[329] After Ree is brutally assaulted, her grandfather Thump (Ronnie Hall), a local crime boss, gives her an opportunity to plead her case (Figure 2.8).[330] Her monologue sheds insight on the value she places on her home: she needs the house because it enables her to care for younger siblings ("who can't feed themselves yet") and a mother ("who's always gonna be sick"), but it also illuminates her way of being and signification with regard to nationality. Girlhood scholar Catherine Driscoll highlights Antigone's philosophical and psychoanalytic signification, noting how she has been "used to map ways in which the idea of the girl relates to womanhood, maturity, and citizenship."[331] Along similar lines, we see Ree at odds with her lawless community, and we can discern the ways in which her fierce determination to secure her home straddles the symbolic opposition between the homestead and the wild frontier, a mythic space that "established the grit and perseverance which epitomized early national identity."[332]

Figure 2.8. Ree (Jennifer Lawrence) explains the importance of her family's home in *Winter's Bone* (Granik, 2010).

[329] A.O Scott, "Where Life is Cold, and Kin Are Cruel," *The New York Times*, June 10, 2010, https://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/11/movies/11winter.html.
[330] The assault is interrupted by Ree's uncle Teardrop (John Hawkes) who vouches for her ability to preserve the community's code of silence.
[331] Catherine Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 32.
[332] Alissa Burger, *The Wizard of Oz as American Myth: A Critical Study of Six Versions of the Story, 1900-2007* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2012), 126.

All of the films under consideration in this chapter engage mythmaking through formal properties that represent their girl protagonists' interiorities and emphasize how their hopeful orientation succeeds as a response to adversity. In *Beasts*, this mode of filmmaking is more obvious given the ways its magical realist sensibilities, moving musical score and camerawork make apparent its youthful protagonist's imaginative subjectivity. As bell hooks points out in her scathing review, these enchanting filmic elements are designed to romanticize the plight of its noble savage protagonist and through their inspirational register, conceal the film's racially-charged imagery, depiction of child abuse and underlying politics of domination.[333] The film condenses what is at stake for its protagonist through her confrontation with the ferocious aurochs, the prehistoric beasts with whom she has been visually linked repeatedly, who purportedly only feed on "cave babies" like Hushpuppy.[334] Face-to-face with her nemeses, Hushpuppy declares them her friends, representing a coming to terms with death's interconnectedness with all living things.

While Hushpuppy's cosmic conceptualization of home, and its value, contributes to the inspirational charge of the film's environmental message about the universe's interwoven nature, her perseverance and hopefulness are figured as nation-building qualities. During a special White House screening of the film and workshop, former First Lady Michelle Obama exhorted a group of children, many of whom were from New Orleans, to concentrate on preparing themselves for future challenges and she described the session as an effort to "inspire kids like you all over this

[333] bell hooks, "No Love in the Wild," *New Black Man in Exile*, September 5, 2012, http://www.newblackmaninexile.net/2012/09/bell-hooks-no-love-in-wild.html.
[334] The film visually represents Hushpuppy as a "cave baby" during the scene when she draws on the "walls" of an overturned, oversized cardboard. She's dimly lit by the flickering flames of the fire she accidentally set while cooking cat food and wistfully imagines being the subject of future scientists' and children's discussions.

country to do amazing things."[335] Throughout her remarks, Obama noted Hushpuppy's and the creative team's triumphs over adversity and reiterated the importance of dreaming big, being hardworking and responsible. She went on to emphasize the need to find inspiration in stories of people overcoming challenges, which she cited as the secret of her and the President's successes. This explicit entanglement of ideal American citizenry and Hushpuppy's experiences speaks loudly to the film's function as a fantasy of resilience.

The emphasis on the girls' resilience in these portions of the films helps these characters resist the designation of victim, despite their ongoing precariousness, and reframes these near-death experiences as beneficial catalysts of their growth. As a result, these depictions of precarious girlhood can be seen to use their protagonists' emotional domestic labor, which is a gendered concept implicated in the construction of national ideals, to show that perseverance and hope are necessary for navigating adversity and cultivating resilience. But *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* are not unique in depicting hope as an ideal solution for trauma recovery or the cultivation of resilience as an optimal result of the female coming-of-age process. Their ideological investments in resilience and its restorative implications, with respect to nation and gender, are enmeshed with a notion of self-sufficiency not present in other American independent films about precarious girlhood development. For example, both *Hounddog* (Deborah Kampmeier, 2007, USA), a project referred to as the "Dakota Fanning rape movie," and the indie darling *Eve's Bayou* (Kasi Lemmons, 1997, USA), have explored this interplay of hope and trauma, but identified relational connection as the pathway to resilience and

[335] "Remarks by the First Lady at the *Beasts of the Southern Wild* Workshop," Obama White House Archives, last modified February 13, 2013, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/02/13/remarks-first-lady-beasts-southern-wild-workshop.

restoration.[336] Lewellen (Dakota Fanning), *Hounddog*'s tragic protagonist, is beset by an extraordinary number of catastrophes, such as instrumental parentification and rape, and through her enjoyment of Elvis Presley's music, as well as some fantastical interventions, she finds the strength to persevere.[337] While the middle-class Creole family portrayed in *Eve's Bayou* stretches the socioeconomic boundaries of precariousness as defined in this project, the linking of hope and trauma as a defining feature of its protagonist's girlhood development prompts a closer look. After discovering that her philandering father (Samuel L. Jackson) may have molested her older sister Cisely (Meagan Good), Eve Batiste (Jurnee Smollett) commissions a spell that she hopes will allow her to use a voodoo doll to punish her father. Instead, the spell results in her father being shot and killed by a lover's enraged husband. Both films externalize the girls' hopes for restoration and how their suffering leads to the development of resilience. The catatonic Lewellen recovers her voice through a fantastical encounter with snakes and her performance of an Elvis song, and reunites with her mother who promises to give her a new start elsewhere. *Eve's Bayou*'s opening sequence announces the film's flashback temporality and traces the source of its protagonist's resilience to the courageous slave for whom she was named, while its conclusion shows Eve discovering her sister's lie and choosing to face their uncertain future together.

The cultural contexts of their release dates aside, the positive feminist message constructed by *Hounddog* and *Eve's Bayou*'s images of healing female kinship are less potent in their ideological signification of national values and rehabilitation than *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*,

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[336] Julie Bloom, "Like Its Heroine, a Movie Encounters Savage Treatment," *The New York Times*, September 12, 2008, https://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/14/movies/14bloo.html. Roger Ebert called the top-grossing *Eve's Bayou* "one of the very best films of the year." Ebert, "Eve's Bayou," Rogerebert.com, November 7, 1997, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/eves-bayou-1997.

[337] Lewellen becomes catatonic after she is raped, and the film shows her being healed by a large number of snakes that have crawled through her open bedroom window and through her performance of Elvis's music.

and *Beasts* because they fail to engage the myths of individualism and self-directed accomplishment at the center of the American Dream. In the popular post-Civil War bootstrap narratives of male development, impoverished characters overcame their challenges and achieved the American Dream through their honesty, hard work, and determination.[338] However, where the boy protagonists' self-directed journeys of transformation resulted in their escape from poverty, the diegetic insularity of *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts*' narrative spaces illustrates a gendered, neoliberal reconstitution of the American Dream. This ideal is no longer signified by external markers, such as middle-class prosperity and homeownership, but is instantiated only within the expression of one's freedom to choose. For Laura Favaro and Rosalind Gill, this entrenchment of neoliberalism as a governing societal ethic took place within the last decade—which is, coincidentally, the same period in which *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* were released—and became entangled with concepts that I argue are also part of an ideal American citizenry, such as meritocracy and self-determination.[339] Turning attention to this imbrication of self-sufficiency, national identity and girlhood development in *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts*, the following section of the chapter will examine the films' optimistic conclusions, highlighting the relevance of the girls' class, gender and racial identities for the films' function as fantasies of resilience that are useful for the rehabilitation of America's post-recession extradiegetic global image.

[338] I am thinking here of Horatio Alger's popular novels about virtuous, but poor young male protagonists escaping poverty through their hard work and the kindness of unexpected benefactors. These works are widely regarded as major influences in the formation of America's national identity during a period of great prosperity.
[339] Favaro and Gill write, "In the last decade neoliberalism has become a central organizing ethic of society underpinned by ideas about self-determination, entrepreneurialism, competition and meritocracy that shapes the way we live, think and feel about each other and even ourselves." Favaro and Gill, "'Pump up the Positivity.'"

3.4 Happily Ever After: Innocence, Self-sufficiency, and American Citizenship

In *The Wizard of Oz* and these later films, this notion of self-sufficiency is instrumental in the shaping of their optimistic endings and, along with the girls' figuration as innocent, self-directed subjects, it plays an integral part in the films' function as positive, inspirational texts. Having replaced the symbolic function of adolescence in supporting national ideals, the late modern girl represented a progressive nation's ability to weather transition into a new socioeconomic order. The imagined flexibility of this female figure, Anita Harris suggests, typified the kind of citizenship late capitalism's unstable conditions warranted: a citizenry that is flexible, self-directed in its development, and not reliant on state intervention.[340] We also see this female figuration in *The Wizard of Oz* after the Wizard's failure to return Dorothy to Kansas in his hot air balloon, when Dorothy learns from Glinda the Good Witch (Billie Burke) that she always possessed the power to leave Oz. While in the later films, interventions from social services and federal agencies are ineffectual in bringing about the changes Precious, Ree, and Hushpuppy desperately need, prompting them to draw on inner strength to achieve their objectives. While this emphasis on the girls' character traits epitomizes neoliberalism's psychological dimensions, it also pinpoints their contradictory positioning as subjects who are both innately resilient, which removes state responsibility for their support, and not resilient enough, or they would not be poor.[341]

The fact that the Precious, Ree, and Hushpuppy suffer, and persevere, during their self-directed development is especially relevant for the films' representation of resilient American

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[340] Harris, *Future Girl*, 2.

[341] Dorothy Bottrell, "Responsibilised Resilience? Reworking Neoliberal Social Policy Texts," *M/C Journal* 16, no. 5 (2013): Journal 16(5). Available at: http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/708, quoted in Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad, "The Amazing Bounce-backable Woman: Resilience and the Psychological Turn in Neoliberalism," *Sociological Research Online* 23, no. 2 (2018): 480, https://doi.org/10.1177/1360780418769673.

identity. Linda Williams argues that the melodramatic narrative mode's preoccupation with virtuous suffering is a distinctly American pop cultural phenomenon; and, by extension, she posits that its "constant assertion of innocence" characterizes moral goodness as an integral part of American national identity.[342] To be sure, this pattern is also at work in *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* and through its moral investment in each girl and her self-sacrificial acts, rather than in structural transformations. This mode finds an additional, unexpected synergy with the films' production of postfeminist and neoliberalist femininities.[343] First, the films establish the protagonists' innocence by centering the girls' points of view and highlighting their moral difference from their kinship networks.[344] Second, they use the girls' victimization by these kinship networks, and their suffering, to underline their innocence and clarify the narratives' moral universes.[345] Finally, in the films' conclusions, following their defining moments of near-death (trauma) and self-sacrificial action (hope), the protagonists' hidden moral virtue is revealed to other characters, and they experience a triumphant, albeit incomplete, end to their suffering.[346] What makes these observations particularly significant is that they reveal the ways the films fetishize the girls' goodness and present Mary, the Dolly clan, and the aurochs (as the personification of death) as the causes of the girls' suffering, not their impoverishment; and, in doing so, the films further illuminate the girls' ideological signification of notions of Americanness.

And yet, despite the universalizing effects of their unique characterization and possession of qualities consistent with idealized American citizenship, these impoverished figures are

[342] Williams, "Melodrama Revised," 80-81.
[343] Ibid., 74.
[344] Ibid., 66.
[345] Ibid.
[346] These triumphs over internal or external threats do not, however, resolve the overall precarious nature of the girls' circumstances, much like what we see in *The Wizard of Oz*. Dorothy's return addresses Auntie Em's distress but cannot change Toto's fate.

necessarily racialized. This racialization of poverty plays an important part in the films' appeal as inspirational bootstrap narratives of feminine development. We see this in Precious's active disruption of her apprenticeship in welfare fraud and child endangerment when the film creates parallels between its protagonist's education, her burgeoning love for her children and her cultivation of self-knowledge to present them as the building blocks of her self-emancipation.[347] As an illiterate, unwed black teenage mother, pregnant with her second child through incest Precious epitomizes a generational cycle of poverty that eschews hard work for laziness and unconstrained reproduction. The film recalls the scapegoating of poor black women on Reagan-era social welfare programs through Mary, the protagonist's domineering mother who is often shown watching a stream of television shows in a dingy, darkly-lit apartment and coerces Precious's grandmother (uncredited) to help her deceive a social worker (Grace Hightower) about family living arrangements so she can continue receiving additional support. For Patricia Hill Collins, the stigmatization of the black mother on welfare shifted public attention from contributing structural figures to blame assistance recipients and justify the restriction of their reproduction.[348] This racialized social pathology is evident in Mary's disinterest with work, her obsessive concern with maintaining their government social assistance, and her sexual, verbal, and physical abuse of her daughter.[349]

We are finally offered a myopic glimpse into Mary's pre-welfare backstory during the film's concluding sequence, which only serves to emphasize her past and present failures to

[347] Seeing education as a vehicle for social mobility, Precious contemplates how developing a love for learning in her son will help him to succeed. However, this vision of social mobility is isolated to her son.
[348] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 80.
[349] We do not know until about fifteen minutes into the film that Mary hasn't always painted a picture of dependency and degeneracy that is anathema to the American national project. In a telling magical realist scene, Precious flips through a family photo album, revealing an image of her mother's more conventionally mainstream former existence and the protagonist's understanding of what constitutes maternal care.

maintain appropriate womanhood. In a meeting with Miss Weiss (Mariah Carey), Precious's new social worker, Mary reveals that she allowed her husband to molest their daughter in the hopes that it would preserve their marital relationship. With Miss Weiss now aware of the extent of Mary's maternal neglect, Precious declares that the exceptional nature of her circumstances requires more skill and understanding than Ms. Weiss and the organization she represents might possess. As LaBelle's "It Took a Long Time" plays in the background, signaling the possibility of hopeful futurity, Precious guides her children away from the social services building and walks toward the camera, smiling and caring for her toddler and newborn.

Winter's Bone and *Beasts* also ground their feel-good optimism about the girls' futures within linkages between the girls' self-sufficiency and racialized ideas about American identity and poverty. *Precious* shows its girl protagonist looking at family photos of a more economically stable time, but in *Winter's Bone,* similar photos disrupt class-based, ontological assumptions about white American identity and their standardization in popular culture. In *Precious*, the magical realist photo flashback does little to counter the pervasiveness of controlling cultural images used to stereotype and oppress African-American women.[350] *Winter's Bone's* portrayal of Ree's resilience and active navigation of obstacles engages nationalistic myths about white impoverishment-as-personal failure and removes concomitant stigmatization.[351] We see Ree visiting her former high school's army recruitment office and asking about the $40,000 enlistment bonus, one of many monetization schemes supplementing the U.S. military's recruitment efforts amongst poor Americans.[352] Given the bonus's indefinite wait time (14 weeks

[350] Ibid.
[351] John Hartigan Jr., "Name Calling: Objectifying 'Poor Whites' and 'White Trash' in Detroit," in *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, eds. Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 1996); Matt Wray, *Not Quite White: Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006).
[352] Nick Turse, *The Complex: How the Military Invades Our Everyday Lives* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008).

to 82 weeks), Ree's underage status and inability to take her younger siblings with her to basic training, these circumstances cut off any hope this financial incentive might offer. Although limited in the help they can offer, Ree's Uncle Teardrop (John Hawkes) and best friend Gail (Lauren Sweetser) provide some emotional support, but it is Ree's tenacity that finally brings closure to the mystery of Jessup Dolly's whereabouts and an end to the threat of eviction. *Winter's Bone* carefully underlines this fact when it shows us, in the film's concluding sequence, that Ree has won the respect of Sheriff Baskin (Garret Dillahunt), her uncle, and the bails bondsman,[353] despite receiving assistance from the women who assaulted her.[354] The film ends with Ree sitting on the steps of her family home with her younger siblings, armed with the unclaimed remainder of her father's bail and affirming her ongoing commitment to care for the children (Figure 2.9).

Figure 2.9. Ree (Jennifer Lawrence) assures her younger siblings Sonny (Isaiah Stone) and Ashlee (Ashlee Thompson) that she will continue to care for them in *Winter's Bone* (Granik, 2010).

[353] Ree's interaction with the sheriff indicates she has a moral upper hand, her uncle discloses a vital piece of information, and, in answer to the bail bondsman's expressions of admiration and wonder, Ree reminds him of her original statement about how being a Dolly meant she would find a way to resolve the situation.
[354] These women take Ree to her father's submerged body and, by dismembering his hands, give her legal proof of his death.

By contrast, the ways *Beasts* plays with controlling images and stages Hushpuppy's journey as a bootstrap narrative are less readily apparent. The Bathtub is presented as a primeval space that remains invisible to governmental agencies for most of the film, while its unconventional, racially diverse community members create the impression of a joyous post-racial utopia. Early on, Hushpuppy's naïve voiceover situates her as a tour guide, sharing a behind-the-scenes look at The Bathtub's raucous holiday festivities, and as a cosmic sage, through her intimate knowledge of the shantytown's inevitable demise-by-storm. As this sequence concludes, Hushpuppy proclaims that she and her father will remain in The Bathtub, despite its impending catastrophic ends, because of their connectedness to the land. Music swells triumphantly to underscore the affective tone of Hushpuppy's declaration as it plays over the remaining images of Bathtub's drunken residents celebrating. Then, the film's title, "*Beasts of the Southern Wild*," appears superimposed over the image of Hushpuppy running with sparklers, almost as if to suggest that what follows in the film is actual ethnographic documentation of a distant culture, not a fictional narrative (Figure 2.10). It is no surprise, then, that much of the criticism directed at this film involves the ways it portrays members of this post-racial community as responsible for their predicament following their refusal to heed major storm warnings.[355]

[355] Chris Tookey, "What a Washout *Beasts of the Southern Wild* is," *Daily Mail*, October 23, 2012, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/reviews/article-2219911/Beasts-Of-The-Southern-Wild-What-washout-wet-film-is.html; Ben Kenigsberg, "Beasts of the Southern Wild: A Republican Fantasy?" *Time Out Chicago*, July 6, 2012, http://www.timeoutchicago.com/arts-culture/film/15493241/beasts-of-the-southern-wild-a-republican-fantasy; Kelly Candaele, "The Problematic Political Messages of 'Beasts of the Southern Wild,'" *Los Angeles Review of Books*, accessed July 5, 2013, http://lareviewofbooks.org/article.php?id=828&fulltext=1; Kevin Allred, "Beasts of the Southern Wild: An Affective Review," *The Feminist Wire*, February 23, 2013, https://thefeministwire.com/2013/02/beasts-of-the-southern-wild-an-affective-review/.

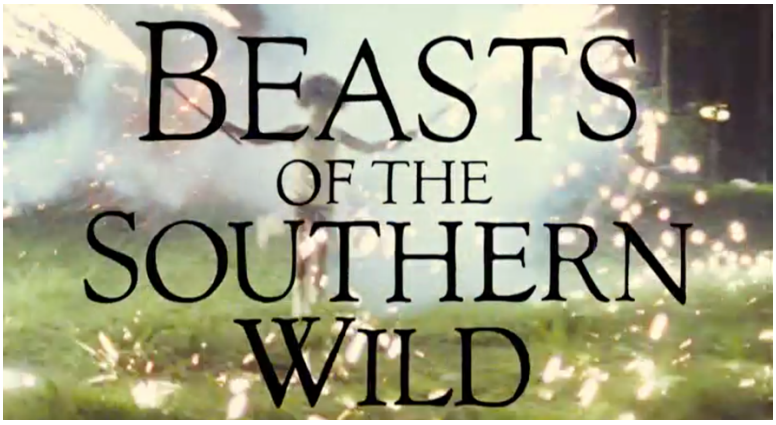

Figure 2.10. The film title appears superimposed over an image of Hushpuppy (Quvenzhané Wallis) running with sparklers in *Beasts* (Zeitlin, 2012).

Younger than the other protagonists in this group of inspirational bootstrap film narratives, Hushpuppy often appears an unwitting tag-a-long in her father's schemes; and, as such, her innocence and expressions of agency are grounded in her imaginative conceptualization of the interconnectedness of the universe. For A.O. Scott, Hushpuppy's imaginative spark and rambunctiousness insert her in a family of iconic American child characters such as "Huckleberry Finn, Scout Finch, Eloise (of the Plaza), Elliott (from "E.T.") and other brave, wild, imaginary children," but in my view her unkempt appearance does more to recall an American cultural legacy of rendering black female figures strange on-screen.[356] Although the melodramatic narrative mode's structuring effects partially resolve this tension, Hushpuppy's resilience and self-directed development demonstrate she is more familiar than foreign. As previously mentioned, Hushpuppy's decision to refuse the cook's offer and return to The Bathtub to care for her ailing father marks her rejection of fantasy as an answer to trauma.

[356] See, Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2016); Daniel Bernardi, ed., *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996); Diawara, *Black American Cinema*; hooks, "No Love in the Wild;" A. O. Scott, "She's the Man of This Swamp: Review; 'Beasts of the Southern Wild,' Directed by Benh Zeitlin," *The New York Times*, June 26, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/27/movies/beasts-of-the-southern-wild-directed-by-benh-zeitlin.html.

Following her decision, the films' repeated intercutting of Hushpuppy and the fast-moving, hungry aurochs finally culminates in a face-to-face confrontation when the girls return to shore. In full view of the Bathtub's remaining residents, the menacing creatures kneel before Hushpuppy as she declares, "You're my friend, kind of. I've got to take care of mine," a declaration that causes the aurochs to retreat, her watching neighbors to regard her with awe, and allows Hushpuppy to feed her dying father. Hushpuppy's resilience and resourcefulness serve her well during her father's final moments. And after lighting his funeral pyre, Hushpuppy leads The Bathtub's ragtag remnant towards the camera while the film's rousing score soars and the camera tracks backward, accentuating the girl's triumph over death and understanding of her place in her community, and ultimately, the universe.

4 Inscribing and Inspiring Female Viewers

4.1 Feminine Conduct: Self-Regulation, Resilience, and Optimism

It is significant that these protagonists are oriented towards the camera, and ostensibly their futures, during the films' conclusions. These final images and sounds draw the cinematic exploration of precarity's new feminine subjectivities to a close and present a last, sustained look at young female figures who were resilient against multiple adversities and driven by hope. To be sure, these images remind us of the girls' humanity, not just their ideological signification. But I argue this invitation to gaze at their faces also underscores the films' articulation of compulsory positivity and its specific address to female viewers. Just as female coming-of-age literary conventions inscribe a parallel developmental process for their female protagonists and implied female audiences, the films' diegeses, material and formal qualities, especially the use of

voiceover narration and the close-up, can be seen to create and offer an analogous viewing experience that calls on female viewers to cultivate a hopeful outlook and resilience.

To be fair, I am not suggesting that the films have only had a female viewership or a unified critical and popular response. Their critical success within international film festivals and from prestigious awarding bodies, combined with their sparking of intense public debates about their depictions of girlhood, indicate that *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* had a much wider audience and reception than the gender-specific inscribed viewership I am theorizing here. And despite the films' racialized depictions of poverty, audience and critic film reviews from Western countries have been overwhelmingly positive, with many reviewers using terms such as "hopeful" and "optimistic" to describe the conclusions, and "inspiring," "touching," and "moving" to describe the embodied nature of the films' explorations of hope, resilience and triumphs over adversity.[357] I suggest that we consider how these films, as narratives of girlhood development, can facilitate an embodied form of feminine training through the inspirational signification of their bootstrap narratives and the "touching" film experiences they are designed to offer.

[357] Reviewers also use descriptive terms such as "determined," "resolute," and "heroic" for the protagonists' confrontation with adverse circumstances. See, "*Precious* (2009)," Critic Reviews, IMDb, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0929632/criticreviews?ref_=tt_ov_rt; "*Precious* (2009)," User Reviews, IMDb, accessed January 23, 2019, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0929632/reviews?ref_=tt_ov_rt; "*Winter's Bone* (2010)," Critic Reviews, IMDb, accessed January 23, 2019, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1399683/criticreviews?ref_=tt_ov_rt; "*Winter's Bone* (2010)," User Reviews, IMDb, accessed January 23, 2019, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1399683/reviews?ref_=tt_ov_rt; "*Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012)," Critic Reviews, IMDb accessed January 23, 2019, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2125435/criticreviews?ref_=tt_ov_rt; and, "*Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012)," User Reviews, IMDb, accessed January 23, 2019, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2125435/reviews?ref_=tt_ov_rt. See also, "*Precious: Based on the Novel* Push *by Sapphire* Reviews," Rotten Tomatoes, accessed January 23, 2019, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/precious/reviews/?page=2&sort=; "*Winter's Bone* Reviews," Rotten Tomatoes, accessed January 23, 2019, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/10012136-winters_bone/reviews/; and, "*Beasts of the Southern Wild* Reviews," Rotten Tomatoes, accessed January 23, 2019, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/beasts_of_the_southern_wild/reviews/.

By "feminine training," I refer to the cultural function of eighteenth and nineteenth century Anglo-American texts addressing female audiences, such as female coming-of-age narratives, women's magazines and female conduct books, which integrated ideas about nationality and middle-class identity into their depictions of idealized femininity.[358] Contemporary feminist scholars exploring the rise of resilience discourse across a range of public policy and popular culture, following the global financial crisis, have noted distinctive variations in the ideal feminine subject these sites imagine: she retains her middle-class status but is now expected to recover quickly from trauma and regard difficulties positively, as if part of her personal development.[359] Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad reflect on the ways women's magazines acknowledge the socioeconomic impact of the financial recession and austerity measures, but urge their readers to view the development of self-confidence and resilience across a range of domains, including their appearance and bodies, their workplace and their sexual relationships, as an appropriate and necessary response to precarity.[360] Inspiring stories of resilient, middle-class women are interwoven into these gendered calls to self-regulate, linking consumerism and individual choice to personal happiness and by making positivity a prerequisite for building resilience. Using Elizabeth Gilbert's memoir *Eat*, *Pray*, *Love* and its commercial tie-ins as examples, Ruth Williams argues this intertwinement of empowerment, consumer culture,

[358] Susan Fraiman cites eighteenth-and nineteenth century women's conduct literature as a major influence on novels about female development in *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and The Novel of Development* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). Also, for discussions about how ideal Anglo-American girlhood and appropriate adult femininity were constructed in eighteen- and nineteenth-century literature and interactive texts, see Nazera Sadiq Wright, *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century* (University of Illinois Press, 2016); Jacqueline Reid-Walsh, "Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Flap Books and Paper Doll Books for Girls as Interactive "Conduct Books," in *Girls, Texts, Cultures*, eds. Clare Bradford, Mavis Reimer (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2015), 211-236; Soňa Šnircová, *Girlhood in British Coming-of-Age Novels: The Bildungsroman Heroine Revisited* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018).

[359] Favaro and Gill, "'Pump up the Positivity;'" Gill and Orgad, "The Amazing Bounce-backable Woman," 484, https://doi.org/10.1177/1360780418769673.

[360] Gill and Orgad, "The Amazing Bounce-Backable Woman," 489.

and self-directed feminine development also engenders a form of neoliberal spirituality that encourages women to pursue enlightenment through consumption-based, inspirational activities and products that allow them to prioritize their happiness.[361] Further, Williams notes that this journey of "self-discovery" involves not only disposable financial resources but the adoption of a depoliticized lens that allows women to glean inspiration from Others' struggles while ignoring their histories and systemic social inequalities. [362]

The neoliberal spiritual view of feminine self-development-through-consumption offers a productive way of theorizing how the inspirational film experience offered by my corpus instigates neoliberal subjectivity formation. Their circulation and reception as inspirational, prized objects within the international film festival circuit ensures their inclusion in middle- and upper-class cultural consumption practices even as claims about the authenticity of the films' content and production situate the films as empowering tools that offer viewers enlightenment through their authentic encounters with the impoverished Other.[363] Diegetically isolating the narrative spaces that Precious, Ree and Hushpuppy occupy determines the inspirational signification of the girls' triumphs over adversity in two ways: first, by decontextualizing and dehistoricizing the girls' precariousness and second, by framing the destabilizing effects of neoliberal capitalism in highly individualistic terms. As a result, viewing *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* becomes triply positioned as a gendered and classed form of personal enrichment and the formation of an ideal, feminine neoliberal subject. In a primary sense, neoliberal subjectivity formation is possible because of the female coming-of-age narrative's

[361] Ruth Williams, "*Eat, Pray, Love*: Producing the Female Neoliberal Spiritual Subject," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 44, no. 3(2014): 616.
[362] Ibid., 630.
[363] Kirsten Stevens, *Australian Film Festivals: Audience, Place, and Exhibition Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 163; Williams, "*Eat, Pray Love*," 616.

generic conventions, which reimagine the dialogical relationship between reader/viewer and text as constituting parallel modes of development. In another sense, this formation is facilitated through the films' presentation of female-focused content that appears to have women as its imagined audience and declares individualized coping mechanisms as best practices for worsening societal inequities. In another sense, the films' abstraction of the girls' bootstrapping efforts causes their labor to transcend subcultural specificity and present as "universal" experiences while simultaneously localizing their problems to discrete dysfunctional dynamics.

In *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts*, the girls' inspirational signification, the decontextualization and dehistoricization of their precariousness and the formation of the viewer's neoliberal subjectivity are made possible by their melodramatic narrative mode. As a structuring device for the films' emotional and moral investments, in the girls' virtuous suffering and the double recognition of their virtue, the melodramatic narrative mode obfuscates the real sources of the girls' precarity by divorcing social problems from their cultural, historical and ideological contexts, and offers solutions that only work on the individual level. This resonates with the highly individualized address of the gendered neoliberal framework. As Linda Williams reminds us, the melodramatic narrative mode "offers the hope that...virtue and truth can be achieved in private individuals and individual heroic acts rather than…in revolution and change."[364] In the case of *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts*, the emphasis is on the girls' efforts to solve the problems they face, instead of on transforming the conditions that contributed to their precarity. To reiterate my earlier points, this mode of storytelling treats Precious, Ree, and Hushpuppy's suffering as opportunities to fetishize their moral goodness and construct the figures causing the girls' suffering as symbolic representations of the social problems

[364] Williams, "Melodrama Revised," 74.

contributing to and structuring the girls' precarity. But rather than address these social problems directly or name their underlying ideologies, this narrative mode confines resolution to other characters' recognition of the girls' virtue instead of solving the larger problem. If we return to *The Wizard of Oz*, we see this situation illustrated most clearly in the ways the film's happy ending stages Dorothy's reunion with her extended family as a resolution to her woes but fails to explain where Miss Gulch is or what is to become of Toto. We see a parallel staging in Miss Weiss' discovery of Mary's villainy and Precious's innocence, Ree's winning the respect of male "law-bearers," and in Hushpuppy's showdown with the hungry aurochs in full view of The Bathtub's remaining residents.[365]

As to be expected, this storytelling mode also employs a melodramatic aesthetics that sensorially translates that which is linguistically inexpressible and invites viewers to *feel* sympathy, hope, vindication, and resilient along with the victimized protagonists.[366] This invitation is apparent in *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* as they use their filmic properties to emphasize the embodied nature of hope and resilience. The experience of bodily and psychic traumas makes their protagonists' perspectives and observations the driving force of their narratives while also broadening their representation of precarious girlhood beyond the level of story into sensorial perception. From the outset, the films immerse viewers in narrative spaces that are designed to look and feel authentic, and they use camera placement and framing to foster a sense of intimacy and the impression that viewers are not only sharing those spaces with the protagonists, they are also sharing their observations. But rather than facilitate spectatorial over-identification with these beleaguered female figures, as some have conceptualized female

[365] I use the term "law-bearer" to describe not just the sheriff and bail bondsman, but also Uncle Teardrop who implies he will mete out justice to Jessup's murderer.
[366] Ibid., 66-67.

spectatorship, these layers of embodied experience are foundational for a dialogical relationship with the films *and* the female characters that results in the viewers' enlightenment. In the next section, I will explore the dynamics of this embodied film experience by turning, again, to *The Wizard of Oz*.

4.2 Inspiration: Touching and Moving Bodies

In her insightful reading of Dorothy's journey as a metaphor for the movie-going experience, Ina Rae Hark examines how the film's "movieization" of Oz—its stylistic concealment and disclosure of the cinematic apparatus—renders the girl's home-leaving a "dream that Dorothy experiences as if it were a movie she simultaneously watches and stars in."[367] This movieization is introduced, Hark suggests, through the farmhouse window's metonymic function as a movie screen, when a loose window frame knocks Dorothy unconscious, later reappears when another window displays images of her twister-trapped neighbors, continues with a view of Oz through the doorframe and culminates with The Wizard's special effects spectacle.

Importantly, the matter of film viewing-as-feminine formation is central to this understanding of Dorothy's cinematic dream: *The Wizard of Oz* defers her Kansas return only after she has relinquished her spectatorial gaze (closing her eyes) and demonstrated her internalization of the phrase "there's no place like home," or what Hark describes as "the catechism of home-for-woman."[368] In this scenario, Hark posits, the dream of Oz "becomes an educational film" that causes Dorothy's constrained mode of female spectatorship to parallel the

[367] Ina Rae Hark, "Moviegoing, 'Home-leaving,' and the Problematic Girl Protagonist of *The Wizard of Oz*," in *Sugar, Spice and Everything Nice: Cinemas of Girlhood*, eds. Frances K. Gateward and Murray Pomerance (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2002), 27-29.
[368] Ibid., 29, 35.

domestic constraints of her feminine development.[369] This parallel reveals a pattern of looking relations that presumably also denies the film's female viewers subject and spectatorial positions. But focusing on the dynamics of Dorothy's cinematic dream also opens up other possibilities for theorizing linkages between female film spectatorship and feminine development. Hark makes a point of showing how *The Wizard of Oz*'s pre-television screening in movie theaters and Oz-focused marketing challenged its gendered fantasy of domesticity, but another point that needs emphasizing is how the inspirational charge of Dorothy's journey *aims* to impart the value of the home to the film's audience. By making Dorothy both star and spectator of her own "film," *The Wizard of Oz* draws on the notion of "mutual absorption"—wherein an individual's experience of the world involves their convergence—to offer an embodied model of inspired female spectatorship.[370] Dorothy's dream teaches or—if we look at the etymological roots of the word *inspire*—"divinely" influences her to embrace her domestic confinement. We see a similar sacralization of the film experience in Christian Metz's likening of fiction film to a person's daydreams or fantasies, wherein he draws on the notion of the sacred to convey the exceptionality and sensorial effect of the fantasy-film overlap, but this is a point I will return to later.

In *The Tactile Eye*, Jennifer Barker draws on the philosophical writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty to theorize a phenomenological understanding of how films literally and symbolically *in-spire*, that is draw in or breathe in, their viewers. Surprisingly, this emphasis on the term's etymological reference to respiration enables contemplation of film's corporeal

[369] Ibid., 29.
[370] Jennifer Barker, "Conclusion: Inspiration," in *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 146.

attributes and their mode of address to the embodied viewer.[371] Building on Merleau-Ponty's conceptualization of inspiration as a mutually-immersive exchange between bodies and Vivian Sobchack's concept of the "film's body," Barker suggests that in capturing a viewer's attention the film body opens up and overlaps the viewer's body, taking up its way of being while filling it with its own.[372] For Barker, this reversible mode of perception is best understood by thinking through one's emotional and bodily responses to sad, joyful or tense narrative content within a scene and the ways the film borrows and transmutes those intense reactions through formal qualities that mimic their human sensorial emergence, such as swelling mournful and rousing music or rapid cutting. As a result, the film and viewer share analogous embodied experiences and expressions that, through their contact with each other, "opens onto something larger than either film or viewer."[373] The question of what this something larger *is* is of paramount importance to our understanding of how *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* inspire their implied female viewers to adopt a positive outlook and build resilience.

While Barker applies this thinking to the embodied film experience more broadly, its implications for viewer engagement with inspirational *content* are worth exploring. Given the sensorial charge of terms often used to describe this subgenre, and my cinematic corpus, such as "touching," which speaks to the tactility of the film-viewer relation, and "moving," this frame suggests both an orientation and a telos. Inspirational film aesthetics are expected to affect viewers in a manner that orients them toward a particular outcome. We see this expectation in the favorable and severely critical analyses of *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts*, with critics

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[371] Here, Barker is describing the respiratory connotations of the word's etymology. Barker, "Conclusion: Inspiration," 145-146.
[372] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," trans. Carleton Dallery in *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 167; Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*: *Phenomenology and Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 207; Barker, "Conclusion: Inspiration," 147.
[373] Barker, "Conclusion: Inspiration," 149.

and audience reviewers highlighting the films' success or failure to elicit hope and a change in perspective.[374] The tenor of these film reviews points to a shared expectation that the films would create a motivating affective experience; as such, they can be seen to engage Barker's respiratory model of shallow and deep interactions between film and viewer.[375]

Other aspects of *inspire*'s etymology surface in *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts*, activated through the films' melodramatic modality, which structures an expectation that the girls' virtue will be recognized and their (moral) dilemmas resolved. This modality is designed to encourage viewers to become invested in the girls' achievement of discrete goals and their triumphs over adversity and enables the films to "influence or animate" a hopeful outlook within their inscribed viewers.[376] For Dorothy, this hopeful animation is realized through the optimistic discursivity of *The Wizard of Oz*'s musical numbers and Technicolor technology, which take up the feelings of expansion typically associated with "male going out into the world," and the Kansian absence of Miss Gulch in the film's spatially-enclosed ending.[377] In describing hope's motivational force, philosopher Margaret Walker draws attention to its engendering specific

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[374] Consider these negative reviews about *Precious* by Brigit Grant, "Film review round-up: *Edge of Darkness*, *Precious*, *Adoration*, *The Princess and The Frog*," *Express*, January 31, 2010, https://www.express.co.uk/entertainment/films/155266/Film-review-round-up-Edge-Of-Darkness-Precious-Adoration-The-Princess-And-The-Frog; Sukhdev Sandhu, "Precious, review," *The Telegraph*, January 28, 2010, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/filmreviews/7092274/Precious-review.html; David Cox, Film Blog: Precious is an insult to the poor, *The Guardian,* February 1, 2010, https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2010/feb/01/precious-insult-to-poor; and Peter Bradshaw, "Review: Precious: Based on the Novel Push By Sapphire," *The Guardian,* January 28, 2010, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/jan/28/precious-review. Also consider these negative reviews of *Beasts* and *Winter's Bone*. Ignatiy Vishnevetsky, "Review: Benh Zeitlin's 'Beasts of the Southern Wild,'" MUBI: Notebook Review, June 29, 2012, https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/notebook-reviews-benh-zeitlins-beasts-of-the-southern-wild; Vince Mancini, "The Case Against Beasts of the Southern Wild," UPROXX: FilmDrunk, December 3, 2012, https://uproxx.com/filmdrunk/the-cast-against-beasts-of-the-southern-wild/; Dorothy Woodend, "'Winter's Bone,'" *The Tyee: Arts and Culture*, June 18, 2010, https://thetyee.ca/ArtsAndCulture/2010/06/18/WintersBone/.

[375] Using the notion of the breath, Barker describes how embodied acts of inspiration are experienced through three primary registers: surface inhalation (nostrils and mouth), musculature (traveling through the throat and chest) and into organs (lungs and bloodstream). Barker, "Conclusion: Inspiration," 146.

[376] "Inspire," Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed January 23, 2019, https://www.etymonline.com/word/inspire#etymonline_v_30053.

[377] Dyer, *In the Space of a* Song, 101.

modes of activity, attention, expression, feeling and gestures which, I argue, are at work in the affective qualities of *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts*' musical score, cinematography, editing, and color palettes, and use to theorize viewers' affective responses.[378] In this respect, we can see how these films invite viewers to share their positive, future-oriented attention to their protagonists' lived experiences and aim to motivate or *move* viewers to feel hopeful for the girls, despite a full resolution to their precarity.

While the protagonists and viewers' shared experience of hoping provides the grounds for their parallel development, we can identify where the viewer builds hopefulness for her own situation by returning to the phenomenological model of intersubjectivity visualized by Dorothy's cinematic dream. I posit that Dorothy's experience of displacement, in Kansas and Oz, is the connective tissue facilitating the dream's extraordinary educational or transformative power, in a manner like Christian Metz's explanation of the ways that a narrative film's materialization of a spectator's fantasies can reassure her. For Metz, this rare overlap between fiction film and fantasy not only entails "the feeling of a little miracle," but also involves the "temporary rupture of a quite ordinary solitude." In the context of *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts*, the films depict female experiences of precariousness that materially evoke or directly address the viewers' anxieties and temporarily assuage the isolating effects of neoliberal capitalism's intensifying inequalities.[379] However, instead of offering viewers a Damascene transformation that would enable them to identify and address real-world areas requiring social change, the ideological charge fomenting this synchronicity is consonant with the ways Precious,

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[378] Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Repair: Reconstructing Moral Relations After Wrongdoing* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 47-48.

[379] To take a case in point, consider how *Precious* ends with the dedication, scrawled in the protagonist's handwriting, "For Precious Girls Everywhere," and the ways in which Precious and Hushpuppy address their films' viewers through voiceover narration. See also, Christian Metz, "The Fiction Film and Its Spectator," in *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (Indiana University Press, 1982), 135-136.

Ree and Hushpuppy's challenges, especially their near-death confrontations, are individualized and framed as opportunities for growth. As such, this reversible act of perception reinforces the experiential inevitability of life's difficulties and positions the consumption of these inspirational cultural objects as acts of empowerment.[380]

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored how reimagining domestication as self-alignment with the notion of home enabled *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* to visualize the post-global recessionary resilience of the United States. I demonstrated how considering the films' release dates within the context of the United States subprime mortgage crisis and the ensuing global recession invited contemplation of the ways that resonances between the films' heroic girl protagonists and the Great Depression-era figuration of American girlhood might recuperate the nation's extradiegetic image. I argued that *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* diegetically insulated their protagonists from the possibility of upward mobility to reinforce the American Dream's myth of self-reliance and present as bootstrap narratives of precarious girlhood development in the post-girl power era. Indeed, the protagonists' self-alignment with homes marked by familial dysfunction and economic precarity is particularly extraordinary, when considered in relation to neoliberal postfeminist discourses that emphasize the breadth of opportunities available to facilitate girls' self-actualization. According to dominant conceptualizations of girlhood, Precious, Ree, and Hushpuppy should aim to maximize their potential and apply neoliberal principles to their self-directed development, which the films affirm through their attention to the ways these depictions of post-girl power agency and choice distinguish the girls from their

[380] Williams, "*Eat, Pray, Love*," 630.

communities' pathologies. Following this, I also argued these self-regulatory postfeminist ideals in *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* emphasized the cultivation of resilience and compulsory positivity and offered a parallel mode of spectatorial development that bracketed out consideration of systemic inequalities. I showed how emphasizing the girls' hopeful responses to adversity inscribed inspirational filmic modes of address that encouraged implied female viewers to adopt the prescriptive positive outlook shown onscreen.

What this chapter does not address, however, is the post-global recessionary treatment of the notion of home as a dynamic, self-appointed concept as we see in *Leave No Trace* and *Captain Fantastic* (Matt Ross, 2016, USA), two American films that intertwine precarity and teen identity construction to unconventional representations of fatherhood and domesticity. In these films, the phenomenology of the value of home is a roving concept constructed by highly mobile families living off-grid. Where *Precious*, *Winter's Bone*, and *Beasts* align self-domestication with self-actualization, these other films explore how challenges to their protagonists' ways of life present pressures to conform and encourage the disavowal of self-reliance. In the next chapter, I explore the role of female best friendships in precarious girlhood development, examining how these friendships operate as technologies of the neoliberal postfeminist self, reflect consumerist notions of individual choice, and enable temporary performances of agentic feminine subjectivities.

CHAPTER 3

Best Friends Forever? Self-Transformation and the Mischief Makeover in *Spring Breakers* (2012), *Bande de filles* (2014), and *Guo chun tian* (2018)

Figure 3.1. Candy (Vanessa Hudgens) presents her spring break plans to best friend Brit (Ashley Benson) in *Spring Breakers* (Korine, 2012).

Introduction

There is a striking scene in *Spring Breakers* (Harmony Korine, 2012, USA) that illuminates the role that consumption plays, as a mode of teenage girlhood, in the development of precarious feminine identities in late modernity. Occurring nearly three and a half minutes into the film, we see Brit (Ashley Benson) and Candy (Vanessa Hudgens), two members of a four-girl friendship group, seated in a university lecture about the African American Civil Rights Movement (mid-1950s - late 1960s). Glazed in candy-colored hues cast by a sea of illuminated student laptop screens, Brit draws a heart in her notebook around the words "I want penis" and kisses it; soon after, Candy draws a large erect penis with the words "spring break bitch" written within the boundaries of its lines (Figure 3.1). As the lecturer describes how African American servicemen became radicalized freedom fighters after battling fascism and witnessing fellow soldiers'

deaths, Candy mimes fellating the drawn penis, forms a gun with her fingers, and "shoots" herself in the head.

What is most remarkable about this scene is how it uses this thematic disjunction between Brit and Candy's girlish mischief and the human rights lecture to crystallize discursive tensions about the proper or improper uses of female agency, choice, freedom, and empowerment. Using the notion of self-emancipation to contextualize the girls' desires for recreation and sex extends the usual definition of teen girl consumption beyond the acquisition of material goods to include pleasurable fantasies of self-expression. This link also recalls the categories of the at-risk/can-do girl framework that governs girls' behavior. Anita Harris argues that the "confident, resilient, and empowered" can-do girl is in danger of becoming someone who engages in risky behavior; and as such, she must adopt a neoliberal postfeminist approach to her future that includes using consumer culture to guide her formation and performance of an idealized feminine identity.[381] Within this context, Brit and Candy's white racial identities, combined with their pursuit of higher education and freedom of choice regarding their bodies and sexuality *should* position them as can-do benefactors of feminist gains; however, the girls' jokes about spring break hookups, along with early montages of their on-campus alcohol and drug use, portend disordered consumption patterns and at-risk behavior in need of regulation. Through its account of a female friendship group's crime-fueled spring break vacation as a disordered rite of passage, *Spring Breakers* reconfigures the portrayal of transformation-through-consumption typically associated with girlish mischief and the makeover trope in American teen girl films.

It is worth lingering just a little longer over the visual disjunction of the girls' candid pantomime and the projected image of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till in this scene, to consider

[381] Anita Harris, "The 'Can-Do' Girl versus the 'At-Risk' Girl," in *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 16.

its implications for the girls' consumption-oriented precarious development. Lynched by civilians in 1955 for alleged sexual menace toward a white woman, Till symbolized aggressive, black masculinity for many white Americans in support of racial segregation, and his brutal murder catalyzed increased strategic action within the civil rights movement. This pairing foreshadows the ways in which Brit and Candy adopt stereotypical markers through the fetishization of the black male body to gain access to extraordinarily agentic and liberated modern femininities. It also introduces the theme of white female violence against racialized black male bodies through the extratextual facts of Till's murder, wherein his accuser later admitted to fabricating the assault scenario.[382] I argue that this disjunction presents a new way of conceptualizing precarious girlhood development in the globalized, post-girl power era. Whereas the previous chapter explored linkages between domestication, resilience, and precarious development within the American national context, this chapter looks at three films about girlhood development and friendship—*Spring Breakers*, *Bande de filles/Girlhood* (Céline Sciamma, 2014, France), and *Guo chun tian*/*The Crossing* (Bai Xue, 2018, China)—and focuses on the ways their protagonists' disordered consumption patterns constitute negotiations between the local and global, and a reimagining of the transformation-through-consumption trope.[383] This chapter problematizes the dichotomy between teen girl makeovers and mischief-making as distinctly different female coming-of-age processes with conflicting outcomes. Through

[382] The men arrested for his murder were acquitted of all charges by an all-white jury. Carolyn Bryant Donham, the woman connected to this crime, admitted years later in an interview that her claims were false. Richard Pérez-Peña, "Woman Linked to 1955 Emmett Till Murder Tells Historian Her Claims Were False," *The New York Times*, January 27, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/27/us/emmett-till-lynching-carolyn-bryant-donham.html. See also, DeNeen L. Brown, "Emmett Till's mother opened his casket and sparked the civil rights movement," *The Washington Post*, July 12, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2018/07/12/emmett-tills-mother-opened-his-casket-and-sparked-the-civil-rights-movement/?utm_term=.427256d5f691.

[383] According to Clarence Tsui, "*Guo chun tian*" is a smuggler's code for clearing checkpoints. Tsui, "Opinion: How China is Making Realist Films About Hong Kong Instead of Fantasy Portrayals," *Post Magazine*, March 28, 2019, https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/arts-music/article/3003512/crossing-mainland-chinese-directors-debut-film.

dialogical film analysis, this chapter demonstrates how these acts of homosocial bonding overlap as "processes of consumption and feminization" within precarious girlhood development to construct ideal neoliberal subjects.[384] In doing so, this chapter accounts for and articulates differences between teen girls while exploring the interplay of agency, choice, and empowerment in their identity formation.

I contend that the post-recessionary female friendship film's portrayal of homosociality as a technology of the neoliberal self makes it an intriguing site for this chapter's examination of precarious girlhood development in the globalized, late modern era. The development trajectory of *Bande de filles*' teen protagonist is punctuated by close female friendships, one of which involves a girl gang, and her increasing alignment with criminality. *Guo chun tian* portrays a similar parallel progression of criminality and self-knowledge for its teen girl protagonist, who hopes to make enough money to visit a luxurious Japanese spa with her best friend. She is first shown selling iPhone cases and screen protectors to classmates, then later smuggling iPhone 6s across the border between Hong Kong and China.[385] Through its attention to the ways that self-sexualization and criminality factor into its protagonists' subject formation, *Spring Breakers* likewise complicates moralistic discourses about at-risk girlhood and the ways that homosociality operates as a site for girls to regulate themselves and each other.

In keeping with this dissertation's interest in the ways that girlish plasticity emerges as a response to neoliberal demands for self-actualization, I aim to demonstrate how these films use adaptability and malleability to articulate the roles of consumption and best female friendship in

[384] Sarah Gilligan, "Performing Postfeminist Identities: Gender, Costume, and Transformation in Teen Cinema," in *Women on Screen: Feminism and Femininity in Visual Culture*, ed. Melanie Waters (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 167.
[385] Although released in 2018, the film narrative follows the smuggling of the iPhone 6, which was released in mainland China in October 2014.

the girl protagonists' self-directed development, which I argue involves a continuous sampling of different femininities and an indeterminate telos. This chapter is therefore divided into five main sections. The first section establishes how precarious girlhood and postfeminist culture are transnational phenomena, and explores the ways the film protagonists' consumption practices give them access to new forms of belonging and subjectivity. The second section concentrates on two major tropes of homosocial girlhood development: the commercial makeover and girlish mischief-making. The third section uses the 1920s/1930s Modern Girl to examine the primary modes of disordered consumption in each film and to consider how these case studies reconfigure bedroom culture's fantasy spaces. The fourth section identifies how each film conceptualizes the end of its protagonist's coming-of-age process. The fifth section explores the pedagogical function of makeover sequences in 1980s-2010s American films and examines each case study's aesthetic treatment of a significant girlish mischief sequence.[386] It also theorizes how the protagonists' engagement with the concept of "performative shamelessness"—a term that Amy Shields Dobson uses to describe an affective mode of gender melancholia—elicits an embodied mode of inscribed female spectatorship that accounts for the mischief makeover sequence's pedagogical role.[387]

[386] I start with makeover sequences in the 1980s, as opposed to the 1990s when teen girls became most visible in popular culture, because of parallels between our contemporary context and the political landscape of 1980s American popular culture insofar as it emphasized materialism, self-transformation, and new opportunities for girls and women. See, Maryn Wilkinson, "The Makeover and the Malleable Body in 1980s American Teen Film," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 18 no. 3 (2015): 385-391.

[387] Amy Shields Dobson, "Performative Shamelessness on Young Women's Social Network Sites: Shielding the Self and Resisting Gender Melancholia," *Feminism & Psychology* 24, no. 1 (2014): 97-114.

1 Precarious Girlhood, Consumption Practices, and Postfeminism

1.1 Precarious Girlhood is a Global, Post-recession Phenomenon

In what follows, I will outline the ways that precarious girlhood and postfeminist culture manifest transnationally as evidenced in the selected case studies. The section will explore the ways that immaterial and material forms of consumption introduce the protagonists to new subjectivities and modes of belonging. Starting with *Spring Breakers* and *The Bling Ring* (Sofia Coppola, 2013, USA), two films that are often considered together in scholarly and popular criticism, we can see how they use their teen protagonists' disordered consumption, leisure, and labor patterns to engage postfeminist concerns and their formal qualities to offer varying levels of critique about late capitalist America.[388] *Spring Breakers* is about four university friends who rob a fast-food restaurant to pay for their spring break vacation in St. Petersburg, Florida, where a few of them become involved in progressively violent armed robberies, gang warfare, and murder. Coppola's film concerns a group of wealthy teens who use young, A-list celebrities' social media posts to determine the most opportune times to steal luxury goods from their homes. The class and racial identities of both sets of protagonists grant them unparalleled freedom of movement across a range of private and public narrative spaces. In addition, the protagonists'

[388] See, Maryn Wilkinson, "On the Depths of Surface: Strategies of Surface Aesthetics in *The Bling Ring*, *Spring Breakers*, and *Drive*," *Film-Philosophy* 22, no. 2 (2018): 222-239; Maryn Wilkinson, "Leisure/Crime, Immaterial Labor, and the Performance of the Teenage Girl in Harmony Korine's *Spring Breakers* (2012) and Sofia Coppola's *The Bling Ring* (2013)," *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 12, no. 3 (2017): 20-37; Erin K. Stapleton, "Objects After Adolescence: Teen Film Without Transition in *Spring Breakers* and *The Bling Ring*," in *Genre Trajectories*: *Identifying, Mapping, Projecting*, eds. Garin Dowd and Natalia Rulyova (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 183-199; and Sara Pesce, "Ripping off Hollywood Celebrities: Sofia Coppola's *The Bling Ring*, Luxury Fashion and Self-Branding in California," *Film, Fashion, & Consumption* 4, no. 1 (2015): 5-24. In popular media, an episode of *BoJack Horseman* (TV series, 2014--) shows a brief encounter between Todd (Aaron Paul) and two girls wearing bikinis and ski masks claim to rob celebrities. Their wardrobe resembles Brit and Candy's clothing during their gang warfare sequence, while the background music recalls musical pieces playing during *The Bling Ring* montages.

habits of privileged bodily comportment influence how their criminal and leisure pursuits overlap, but also contribute to the degrees of punishment they experience.

Given recurring comparisons of these similarities, it is easy to conclude that *Spring Breakers*' modes of teen girl consumption and comportment are distinctly American. However, this chapter proposes that Brit and Candy's modes of being in the world and consumption recall the political economy and sociocultural significance of the 1920s and 1930s global Modern Girl, which allows *Spring Breakers*' figuration of precarious girlhood to illuminate the effects of globalized, late capitalism on identity formation in a way that *The Bling Ring* cannot. I contend that distinct parallels between the socioeconomic climates of *Spring Breakers* and the Modern Girl provide the rationale for examining how precarious girlhood operates as a global post-recession phenomenon. Both a marketing strategy and real-life social agent, the Modern Girl was defined by her consumption of global cultural commodities, embodying traits of self-aware, girlish plasticity that were easily identifiable across different national contexts, while also reflecting regionally-specific, idealized femininities.[389] Her emergence during the interwar period coincided with a rise in political nationalisms, the increased interconnectedness of global markets, as well as a global recession, attendant austerity measures, and uncertain labor markets.[390] While all of the films under consideration in this dissertation were released during similar socioeconomic conditions, the consumption-oriented coming-of-age themes depicted in *Spring Breakers*, *Bande de filles*, and *Guo chun tian* position the Modern Girl as a useful logic for examining additional aspects of precarious girlhood development.[391]

[389] The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group, eds., "The Modern Girl as Heuristic Device," in *The Modern Girl Around the World* (Duke University Press, 2008), 1-24.
[390] Ibid., 8.
[391] Ibid., 1-24.

1.2 Imaginative, Material, and Relational Forms of Teen Girl Consumption

Spring Breakers, *Bande de filles*, and *Guo chun tian* are principal case studies for this chapter's analysis of precarious girlhood development chiefly because of their treatment of friendship as the primary locus for the protagonists' consumption-oriented, temporary performances of new feminine subjectivities. The protagonists do not approach consumption as a way of securing their place in the world, as is the case in many Hollywood female coming-of-age films. Rather, the girls in this selected corpus view their consumption practices as ways of activating the temporary fantasy spaces in which they can perform spectacular femininities, before returning to their normal lives as marginalized figures. The films' conclusions show the girls post-consumption, still unable to self-locate and fully integrate into mainstream society but embarking on another performance of femininity, which I argue is indicative of the globalized, late modern era.

As discussed in this dissertation's introduction, the unpredictable socioeconomic conditions of late modernity in the Global North have displaced social relationships previously centered in processes of identity formation, and sparked concerns about how youth develop their identities and integrate into society. The economic and social effects of competitive individualism, deindustrialization, and the increased globalization of capitalist economies emphasize personal responsibility and situate consumption, not production, as the guiding principle for a self-referential, unpredictable process of identity formation.[392] In conjunction with this shift toward increased individualization, one's selection of a new kinship network becomes an act of consumption. As a result, choosing friends becomes an important part of the self-

[392] Harris, *Future Girl*, 3-5.

directed development process in a manner that extends beyond normative individuation from one's family of origin.[393]

Within this context, the teen girl figure operates as a symbol of promise and moral panic, embodying both feminist achievements and the tensions associated with the ideal, late modern subject. As such, this figure's close friendships are technologies of the self; they reflect her ability to exercise her agency, individual choice, and freedom wisely, especially because of increased expectations that she is solely responsible for her successful societal integration. According to Terri L. Russ, as agents of social integration, female friendships operate pedagogically, informing teen girls' senses of self, their relations with others, and their environments.[394] In this respect, the friends who are chosen by a teen girl inform her development as a can-do or at-risk girl, and become one of many choices that lead to her success or failure. Positioning the teen girl's friendships as a matter of choice aligns these relational decisions with her active commodity consumption: friendships enable her to cultivate self-understanding and sample new femininities, activities that comprise her identity formation.

There are intriguing resonances between the selected case studies that foreground the connection between consumption, friendship, and identity formation. In her essay on the female adolescent coming-of-age process, Felicity Colman introduces an idea that enriches our understanding of this connection: best friendship enables a teen girl to become self-aware through the discovery of her desires and aspirations.[395] I argue that consumer capitalism plays a

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[393] While it is possible to explore how France and Hong Kong's colonial history and postcolonial states shape the conditions for this aspect of self-actualization in *Girlhood* and *Guo chun tian*, such a study exceeds the scope of this chapter.

[394] Terri L. Russ, "Body Shape(ing) Discourse: Bakhtinian Intertextuality as a Tool for Studying Discourse and Relationships," in *Gender in Applied Communication Contexts*, eds. Patrice M. Buzzanelli, Helen Sterk, and Lynn H. Turner (Thousand Oaks and London: SAGE Publications, 2004), 219-220.

[395] Felicity Colman, "Hit Me Harder: The Transversality of Becoming-Adolescent," *Woman: A Cultural Review* 16, no. 3 (2005): 357.

similar function in influencing our desires, aspirations, modes of self-definition, and being in the world. Many American teen girl films use the makeover process to represent the linkages between the coming-of-age process and their protagonists' consumption practices and best friendships. As the girl protagonists reap the metamorphic benefits of American consumer culture, their bodily transformations, and development of self-confidence prompt shifts, and even fractures, in the friendship group's dynamics, eventually leading to the protagonists' emergence as sexually desirable, self-aware individuals. It is important to note, however, that this postfeminist neoliberal figuration of the teen girl, her development, and friendships is not limited to North American consumer culture but circulates and is hailed through globalized media cultures.

Although part of a four-girl friendship group, *Spring Breakers*' Brit and Candy are most often paired onscreen, or occasionally joined by best friend Cotty (Rachel Korine), which creates the impression that the pair's experiences of self and the world are intimately bound up with their experiences of each other. Director Harmony Korine has explained that he views Brit, Candy, Cotty, and Faith (Selena Gomez) as parts of "one single entity," representing varying levels of moral responsibility that become increasingly apparent as the friendship group fractures and the girls leave St. Petersburg.[396] Uneasy with their new criminal alliance after a local drug dealer bails the friendship group out of jail, Faith returns to campus, leaving Brit, Candy, and Cotty to continue indulging in armed robberies and increasingly dangerous forms of recreation. Korine explains, "Faith's character is the first to leave and she's the morality. So once morality is stripped, you're left with something wild and dangerous, and what happens in the film becomes

[396] R. Kurt Osenlund, "Interview: Harmony Korine," in *Harmony Korine*: *Interviews*, ed. Eric Kohn (University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 205-6.

the result of that. And when Cotty goes, it gets even more wild and dangerous."[397] Korine's conceptualization of their precarious girlhood collapses Brit and Candy into a single female figure, but it also suggests the process of precarious development produces a fractured subjectivity.

Bande de filles explores a similar progression in criminality through its protagonist's best friendships. Marieme (Karidja Touré) has three significant, discrete female relationships that correspond with changes to her appearance and different stages of her coming-of-age process. This chapter focuses on her relationship with the girl gang, although her friendships with her sister Bébé (Simina Soumaré) and a sex worker yield additional insights about the nature of precarious girlhood development. Divided by ellipses into three narrative sections, Marieme's journey involves different ways of performing gender, as well as a simultaneous, progressive movement away from respectable black French girlhood and toward greater independence from male characters. When the film begins, repeated poor academic performance constitutes Marieme's delinquency, and she shares with her sister Bébé a fear of their older brother Djibril's (Cyril Mendy) abuse. Her decision to join a girl gang triggers the second narrative section, which is characterized by Marieme's new, confident way of being in the world and recreational pursuits that include gang fights, theft, and drug and alcohol use. After the girl gang leader teaches Marieme to value her own desires, *Bande de filles* reveals the tensions of agentic femininity in French immigrant communities by making Marieme's newfound confidence a catalyst for winning her brother's respect and for attracting his ire.[398] The third narrative section concerns Marieme's friendship with a sex worker and alliance with a local drug dealer who offers her

[397] Ibid., 205.
[398] Marieme's brother Djibril (Cyril Mendy) celebrates her victory over a rival gang member but chokes her after learning Marieme has had sex with her boyfriend.

protection after she leaves home; this protection is short-lived, however, when Marieme publicly refuses his sexual advances and the transactional implications of their relationship. She turns to her boyfriend for help but refuses his offer to make her a "decent girl" through marriage. The film concludes with Marieme choosing to not return home and to take her chances elsewhere.

Female best friendship in *Guo chun tian* performs a similar function for consumption-oriented precarious girlhood development, insofar as it provides the context for its protagonist's self-discovery and temporary access to different ways of being. Peipei (Huang Yao) crosses the border twice a day, between her home in mainland China and her Hong Kong high school, where she is best friends with Jo (Ka-Man Tong), a wealthy classmate with whom she is planning an exclusive Japanese spa vacation. We see the girls selling Peipei's cellphone screen protectors and custom cases to their classmates, as well as fantasizing about the snow, hot springs, specialty foods, and alcohol they will enjoy in Japan. The film emphasizes the ways that Jo's idealized lifestyle and knowledge about traveling and living abroad fuel Peipei's desire to enjoy glamorous commodities and perform cosmopolitan femininities, even at risk to her well-being. The first indication of Peipei's willingness to self-endanger occurs at a yacht birthday party for Hao (Sunny Sun), Jo's much older boyfriend. Peipei gifts cigarettes stolen from her mother and participates in a drinking game that ends with her jumping into the water despite being unable to swim. After the party, a chance encounter with one of the guests results in Peipei's impromptu smuggling of counterfeit iPhones into China and her discovery of an accelerated way of raising cash. As a uniformed schoolgirl crossing the border daily, Peipei glides through customs unnoticed by border officials, and the film uses three musically distinctive, freeze frames to create parallels between shifts in her self-understanding and her increasing involvement in the smuggling operation.

Simidele Dosekun has argued that theorizing postfeminism as a transnational phenomenon, not confined to Western cultural contexts, enriches our understanding of how this contradictory cultural sensibility is circulated in uneven flows that go beyond and across borders, without erasing them.[399] Noting postfeminism's entanglement with neoliberalism, "a transnationally migrating rationality," Dosekun rightly points out that the materialization of this cultural sensibility in different geographical locations is not one of uniformity.[400] As postfeminism continues to circulate through media and consumerist discourses, within and beyond the West, it integrates local expressions of femininity as a bodily property, sexual self-subjectification, the necessity for beautifying goods and services, and the notion that female agency must be self-aware, self-directed, and pleasurable.[401] These themes are present in *Spring Breakers*, *Bande de filles*, and *Guo chun tian* and their treatment reflects both the girls' local specificities and a globalized figuration of female modernity. Mary Jane Kehily and Anoop Nayak urge us to notice how teen girls' consumption of global cultural commodities involves a negotiation between the local and the global, wherein they must adjust, borrow from, and unsettle the new subjectivities and femininities these objects produce to suit their specific contexts.[402] For Dosekun, these transnational consumption practices also include learning and fantasizing about the pleasurable modes of being that global media and commodities offer, which are, incidentally, activities also structured by the filmic protagonists' local contexts.[403] This view extends our primary understanding of commodity consumption beyond material terms, and it highlights how the asymmetrical flow of capital, resources, and consumer goods, within and

[399] Simidele Dosekun, "For Western Girls Only?," *Feminist Media Studies* 15, no. 6 (2015): 960-975.
[400] Ibid., 972.
[401] Ibid., 960, 965.
[402] Mary Jane Kehily and Anoop Nayak, "Global Femininities: Consumption, Culture, and the Significance of Place," *Discourse*: *Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 29, no. 3 (September 2008): 325-342.
[403] Dosekun, "For Western Girls Only?" 965-966.

across borders, determines how teen girls self-direct their unpredictable processes of identity formation.

In the next section, I will explore how Hollywood teen films have established immaterial and material modes of consumption as vehicles for girls' achievement of adult femininity, looking closely at the ways girls' negotiations and consumption practices are distinctly classed, gendered, and raced within nationalistic discourses. The goal is to supply a context in which to later evaluate how commercial consumerism, best female friendship, and girlish mischief-making—as cinematic tropes of feminine development—are reconfigured into new forms in *Spring Breakers*, *Bande de filles*, and *Guo chun tian*. I will conclude by briefly discussing how these reconfigurations compare with other post-recessionary teen girl films from the case studies' national cinemas.

2 Consumption-Oriented Tropes of Homosocial Girlhood Development

Since the 1980s, scenes in Hollywood teen films depicting commercial makeovers and girlish mischief-making have used these activities to represent a teenage girl's enculturation into appropriate and disordered femininities, respectively. Like the makeover montage sequence, which makes visible the link between consumerism and self-reinvention, girlish mischief-making constitutes another self-initiated consumption-oriented performance, albeit one that must be temporary to prevent a character's permanent slippage into problematic girlhood. While these makeover and mischief films center the role of individual choice and the malleability of the teen girl body and subjectivity, the female figure's transformation process also operates as an important part of her induction into a friendship group and as an intimate form of homosocial bonding. Best friends are shown playing a key role in protagonists' attitudinal and physical

transformations by assisting, evaluating, and regulating the girls' performance of new femininities.[404]

In films such as *The Breakfast Club* (John Hughes, 1985, USA), *Jawbreaker* (Darren Stein, 1999, USA), and *Mean Girls* (Mark Waters, 2004, USA/Canada), which feature makeover sequences, teen girls' empowerment is explicitly connected to their tutelage and participation in the performance of appropriately sexy and modern femininity.[405] Because heterosexual romance often functions as the catalyst and telos of these transformation processes, attracting a desirable male character's attention validates the teen girl's permanent transition into normative adult femininity, as well as her increased social capital. However, only girls who can affirm and embody idealized white, middle-class femininity are offered opportunities for this spectacularized transformation, whereas middle-class girls of color, who are usually African American, are portrayed as appreciative or supporting players in these makeover processes.[406] When these girls of color do undergo spectacularized transformations, as in films like *The Wonderful World of Disney: Cinderella* (Robert Iscove, TV Episode 1997) and *Josie and the Pussycats* (Harry Elfont and Deborah Kaplan, 2001, Canada and USA), these engagements with diversity resemble what Ella Shohat calls a "sponge/additive approach," insofar as the

[404] Alison Winch, *Girlfriends and Postfeminist Sisterhood* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
[405] It is worth noting that some of these makeover girl teen films, such as *Ever After: A Cinderella Story* (Andy Tennant, 1998, USA) and *A Cinderella Story* (Mark Rosman, 2004, USA and Canada), are variations of the Cinderella fairy-tale. Whereas films such as *Clueless* (Amy Heckerling, 1995, USA), *The House Bunny* (Fred Wolf, 2008, USA), and *Easy A* (Will Gluck, 2010, USA) show us girls who temporarily adopt other, spectacularized, but false, femininities and later discover their true selves, which, coincidentally, are middle-class femininities. The *Freaky Friday* (1976, 2003, USA) films present a different kind of transformation that is temporary and causes the mother and daughter to develop a greater appreciation for their respective social roles and each other. There are also other films featuring makeover-transformation moments like *Not Another Teen Movie* (Joel Gallen, 2001, USA); while films such as *The Princess Diaries* (Garry Marshall, 2001, USA and UK) and *What a Girl Wants* (Dennie Gordon, 2003, USA) frame the makeover as part of a girl's royal or upper-class responsibilities to the public.
[406] Consider Gabrielle Union's roles in *She's All That* (Robert Iscove, 1999, USA) and *10 Things I Hate About You* (Gil Junger, 1999, USA), or Stacey Dash in *Clueless* (Amy Heckerling, 1995, USA).

characters' cultural and racial differences are homogenized under the rubric of American girlhood and are later validated by attractive heterosexual male characters.[407]

Representations of girlish mischief in American youth-themed cinema are much more discriminating in their attention to the characters' sociocultural specificities than they are for conventional teen girl makeover transformations. There is a direct connection between the represented seriousness of characters' girlish mischief and their class and racial identities: privileged white girls make mischief whereas poor white and racialized girls commit crimes. As Anita Harris notes, the difference "between leisure and crime is frequently determined by where the activity takes place and who is partaking."[408] Films featuring mischievous white, middle- and upper-class girls often employ ironic strategies of representation that mitigate the seriousness of the characters' criminal behavior and the characters receive little to no punishment for their crimes. *Sugar & Spice* (Francine McDougall, 2001, USA) and *The Bling Ring*, for example, each use comedic elements to portray the series of real-life robberies perpetrated by bored upper middle-class teen girl gangs, whose similarities also include being majority-white groups, with an Asian-American member (Figures 3.2 and 3.3).[409] In *Crazy/Beautiful* (John Stockwell, 2001, USA) and *Chasing Liberty* (Andy Cadiff, 2004, USA/UK) elected officials' daughters rebel by running away from home but are then recuperated into normative femininity through heterosexual romantic relationships. Regardless of the kinds of crimes these wealthy white girls commit, they are never constructed as being irredeemable.

[407] Ella Shohat, "Area Studies, Transnationalism, and the Feminist Production of Knowledge," *Signs* 26, no. 4, Globalization and Gender (Summer 2001): 1270.
[408] Harris, *Future Girl*, 28.
[409] *The Bling Ring* tells its story through Marc (Israel Broussard), a gay teen who is part of the female friendship group.

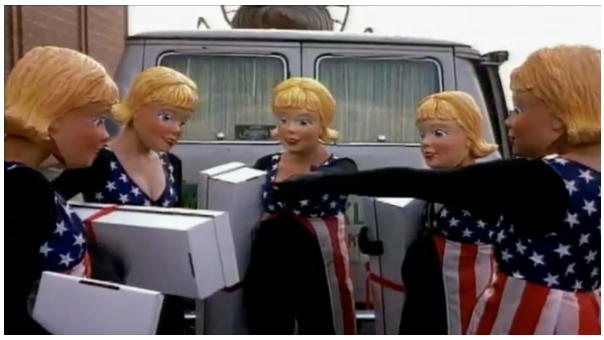

Figure 3.2. The cheerleader gang prepares for a robbery in *Sugar & Spice* (McDougall, 2001).

Figure 3.3. Outside the courthouse, Nicki (Emma Watson) reveals that her future ambitions include leading a country in *The Bling Ring* (Coppola, 2013).

By contrast, American films about lower middle- and working-class girlhoods, such as *Mi Vida Loca* (Allison Anders, 1993, USA/UK), *Foxfire* (Annette Haywood-Carter, 1996, USA), *Girls Town* (Jim McKay, 1996, USA), and *Thirteen* (Catherine Hardwicke, 2003, USA/UK) emphasize the lead characters' at-risk girlhood and the seriousness of their transgressive behavior. *Mi Vida Loca* concerns two young Hispanic women who have been best friends since childhood and are involved in a gang. *Foxfire* and *Girls Town*'s mostly college-bound characters perform feminist acts of retribution against male abusers. In *Thirteen*, maternal neglect makes the protagonist vulnerable, whereas interracial friendship introduces her to underage sex, alcohol, and drug abuse. Because the extended periods of girlish mischief in these films indicate the girls' ongoing misuse of agency, choice, and empowerment, these characters must recuperate their own disordered consumption practices or risk public punishment, as we see in *The Craft* (Andrew Fleming, 1996, USA) and *Cruel Intentions* (Roger Kumble, 1999, USA).

Spring Breakers, *Bande de filles*, and *Guo chun tian* mark a departure from these cinematic tropes of can-do and at-risk development by merging the transformative potential of global cultural commodities and girlish mischief-making within the context of close female

friendships. As I will demonstrate, this merging captures both the future-oriented process of commercial makeovers and the agentic immediacy of mischief-making to produce what I term a "mischief makeover," a mode of precarious girlhood development that constructs the protagonists' criminal involvements as both a means to an end and the end itself. This joining of distinctly different filmic female coming-of-age processes pinpoints the contradictions of neoliberal postfeminist incitements for girls to self-actualize and to participate in an ongoing process of self-reinvention. It also illustrates the interdependence of can-do and at-risk girlhood discourses within the globalized, post-girl power era.

To be sure, other girl-centered recessionary films, such as *Eighth Grade* (Bo Burnham, 2018, USA), *Divines* (Houda Benyamina, 2016, France/Qatar), and *Jia nian hua/Angels Wear White* (Vivian Qu, 2017, China), also problematize the disordered modes of empowerment their protagonists experience following their engagements with global commodities. *Eighth Grade* follows Kayla (Elsie Fisher) during her transition from middle to high school, highlighting her struggle to cultivate self-understanding through her involvement with the self-help and compulsory positivity discourses circulated in teen-oriented social media. After watching a video of a local drug dealer's glamorous Thailand trip, Dounia (Oulaya Amamra), *Divine*'s protagonist, negotiates a position in the gang, which places her life in danger and leads to her best friend's death. In *Angels Wear White*, a surreptitious cell phone recording of a sexual assault initially offers illegal immigrant Mia (Vicky Chen), the film's protagonist, an opportunity to secure her future but later leads to her increased vulnerability and placelessness. These films, much like the American at-risk girlhood films produced between 2000 and 2008, show their lead female characters reflecting on lessons learned, mourning the consequences of their bad decisions, or turning away from the self-initiated situations that placed them at risk.

By contrast, *Spring Breakers*, *Bande de filles*, and *Guo chun tian* show their protagonists' assumption of risks and disordered consumption practices as integral aspects for their navigation of precarious girlhood development. In her study of how girls employ transgressive behaviors to negotiate the contradictions of neoliberal postfeminism and perform new subjectivities, Amy Shields Dobson has pointed to the entanglement of intimate female friendships and "performative shamelessness" in constructing new modes and displays of femininity that exceed restrictive girlhood norms.[410] Dobson builds on Angela McRobbie's insightful analysis of how girls can use self-harming, binge-drinking, eating disorders, and "shameless self-exposure online" as coping mechanisms to navigate societal pressures, noting how these self-protective measures are often traced to individual pathologies rather than economic conditions under neoliberalism or the "requirements of contemporary femininity."[411] These explanations provide my dialogical analyses of the case studies a way to account for the dual role the mischief makeover plays in the empowerment and subject formation of both the films' inscribed female viewers and at-risk girl protagonists. The lead female characters in *Spring Breakers*, *Bande de filles*, and *Guo chun tian* are disenchanted with the constraining requirements of late modern femininity and its attendant neoliberal incitements of economic independence, self-reinvention, and personal success. As such, these girls are constructed as postfeminist melancholic subjects who use dangerous activities to cultivate and demonstrate their personal autonomy, confidence, and self-acceptance.[412]

The next section concentrates on how these depictions of mischief-making as consumption-oriented transformations reconfigure the conventions of girlhood bedroom cultures

[410] Dobson, "Performative Shamelessness on Young Women's Social Network Sites," 97-114.
[411] Ibid., 102-103.
[412] Ibid., 98.

and draw attention to the girls' economic precarity. This work will comprise engagement with the ways that each filmic protagonist's transgressive public display corresponds to a variant of the 1920s/1930s Modern Girl figure. The goal is to explore how the protagonists' disordered consumption practices grant them access to empowering fantasy spaces and operate as self-liberatory vehicles that free the girls from the confines of their social identities.

3 Reconfiguring Bedroom Culture's Fantasy Spaces

Any discussion of classed and raced consumption-oriented transformations in teen girl films must address how often they take place in private gendered narrative spaces, such as bedrooms, bathrooms, or beauty salons. Critical scholarship analyzing extradiegetic instances of this gendered spatialization for teen girls have noted the centrality of bedroom culture for girls' consumption of cultural objects that present opportunities to fantasize about or perform other ways of being. As expected, teen girls' participation in bedroom culture has class implications, insofar as the goods, media, and services marketed to middle and upper-class teen girl consumers necessarily entail consumption in insulated, private spaces.[413] The lower middle- and working-class protagonists of *Spring Breakers*, *Bande de filles*, and *Guo chun tian* desire consumption-oriented transformations that are financially and experientially out of reach; further, the girls' attempts to enjoy these experiences coincide with the displacement of their bedroom culture into liminal narrative spaces.

[413] See the canonical essay, Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber, "Girls and Subcultures: An Exploration," in *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, eds. Stuart Hall and T. Jefferson (London: Harper Collins Academic, 1976), 209-222. See also Sian Lincoln, "Feeling the Noise: Teenagers, Bedrooms and Music," *Leisure Studies* 24, no. 4 (2005): 399-414; and Mary Celeste Kearney, "Productive Spaces: Girls' Bedrooms as Sites of Cultural Production," *Journal of Children and Media* 1, no. 2 (2007): 126-141.

3.1 *Spring Breakers* and the Modern Girl's Racial Masquerade

Intentionally selected for their ideological signification as glamorous Walt Disney Television teen stars, the principal cast of *Spring Breakers* are bound up in the commodification of celebrities and American girl culture, which causes their onscreen presence to confer an aura of spectacularized white femininity and otherworldliness to their precarious girl figures.[414] With the scene described at the start of this chapter, *Spring Breakers* uses its protagonists' erotic playfulness to complicate the actors' wholesome star personas. This contrast doubly articulates the stars/characters' embodiment of self-commodification practices, including the postfeminist notion of sexual entrepreneurship-as-empowerment insofar as it situates Brit and Candy's autonomy, desire, and readiness for casual, consensual sex within consumer capitalism.[415] But as Ayesha Siddiqi reminds us, "If *Spring Breakers* showcases the thrill of reclaiming patriarchy's sexualization, then it's an agency extended only to white girls."[416] Indeed, it is worth pausing to note that, despite neither actor being white, Vanessa Hudgens and Selena Gomez were often positioned as white or racially ambiguous in the film, its marketing campaigns, and varying forms of critical engagement.[417] Sarah Projansky argues that this approach to spectacular raced girlhood creates a "'fourth stage' of racial representation, one of ambiguity and hybridity" that is never explicitly addressed in pop culture.[418] I argue that the girls' racialized representational

[414] Eric Kohn, ed., "Harmony Korine Talks *Spring Breakers*, Casting Selena Gomez, and How Her Mom is a Fan of His Work," in *Harmony Korine*: *Interviews* (University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 200.
[415] See Laura Harvey and Rosalind Gill, "Spicing It Up: Sexual Entrepreneurs and *The Sex Inspectors*," in *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 52-56; and also, Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture Elements of a Sensibility." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2, (2007): 151.
[416] Ayesha Siddiqi, "Bikini, Kill," *New Inquiry*, April 17, 2013, https://thenewinquiry.com/bikini-kill/.
[417] For a few of these instances, please see Wilkinson, "Leisure/Crime," 20-37; Joshua Clover and Shane Boyle, "High as Finance," *New Inquiry*, April 17, 2013, https://thenewinquiry.com/high-as-finance/; Stapleton, "Objects After Adolescence," 183-199; and Jacob W. Glazier, "Spring Break Forever, Bitches! Neoliberal Identity Politics Undergoes Schizoanalysis," *Rhizomes*: *Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* 28 (2015).
[418] See, Sarah Projansky, *Spectacular Girls: Media Fascination and Celebrity Culture* (New York and London: NYU Press, 2014), 72-73.

logic enables comparison of their adoption of stereotypical markers to the white American Modern Girl's consumption of exoticized commodities, which reinforced her national and racial identities.[419] However, *Spring Breakers*' suitability as a dialogical partner for *Bande de filles* and *Guo chun tian* lies in how its treatment of consumption-oriented fantasy draws out the unevenness of the girls' access to resources like capital, leisure, and mobility. Just as sociocultural specificities in teen girl films determine the forms of girlish mischief available to their protagonists, these characteristics also inform the spatialization and duration of the fantasy spaces the girls' disordered consumption activates.

As previously mentioned, this university classroom scene also introduces Brit and Candy's disordered consumption patterns within the context of self-emancipation and in relation to signifiers of aggressive, black masculinity. This confluence of factors provides a compelling and useful point of entry for engagement with the actual historical and figurative Modern Girl of the 1920s and 1930s—who was identifiable as a global phenomenon through her purportedly excessive consumerism and eroticism—and my analysis of reconfigured feminine development themes as they pertain to self-definition and self-emancipation.[420] Alys Eve Weinbaum, in an essay exploring the white American Modern Girl's "racial masquerade," describes a process in which young women used racialized signifiers of cultural difference to construct their modern white femininities. Throughout *Spring Breakers*, many instances of the friendship group's consumption of black masculinity underscore its impact on their habits of privileged bodily comportment and their self-understanding as empowered, self-aware, and self-pleasing individuals: Cotty watches *WorldStarHipHop* Kimbo Slice street fights, and the girls play

[419] Alys Eve Weinbaum, "Racial Masquerade: Consumption and Contestation of American Modernity," in *The Modern Girl Around the World*, eds. The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 121.
[420] "The Modern Girl as Heuristic Device," 1.

suggestively together while singing Nelly's "Hot in Herre." In sampling racialized cultural products, Weinbaum suggests, consumerism empowered the Modern Girl to self-direct her ongoing transformations and render her body malleable, but I would add that in *Spring Breakers* this commodity consumption also helped create fantasies about the new selves it would produce.[421] After robbing the fast-food restaurant, Candy feminizes Gucci Mane's gangster rap lyrics by saying the stolen money "makes my pussy wet" and Cotty adds that it "makes my tits look bigger." This feminization of lyrics celebrating the African-American rapper's phallic power reflects the girls' sexual self-subjectification and underscores the role this criminal mode of consumption plays in the articulation of their agentic, liberated femininities and the fantasy of "spring break forever."[422] With local white rapper Alien (James Franco) serving as the girls' bridge between the mediated representations of aggressive, black masculinity and St. Petersburg black gangsters, Brit, Candy, and Cotty are able to continue their consumption of racialized activities, media, music, and narrative locations, as well as their performance of new subjectivities long after the end of the spring break holiday period. Crucially, this extended fantasy space epitomizes the girls' unrestrained access to capital, leisure, and mobility.

Spring Breakers continues this agentic fantasy into its concluding sequence when Brit and Candy miraculously infiltrate an African American male drug kingpin's heavily guarded compound, murdering him and his gang. This phantasmagoric, colorful sequence is intercut with audio and images of the girls performing a range of femininities: naked, they lounge poolside with their drug-dealer boyfriend after a threesome and speak earnestly in telephone conversations with family members about their transformational spring break vacation. Typically, most

[421] Ibid., 120-146.
[422] In the film, Alien's voiceover recitation of his subversive nursery rhyme about the girls and the refrain "spring break, spring break, spring break forever" plays over images of the girls having fun.

Hollywood films focusing on the (makeover) transformations of their teen girl protagonists emphasize their adaptability and malleability, and they portray the girls' commercial consumption as their primary means of securing idealized feminine identities. In *Spring Breakers*, Brit and Candy's spring break vacation appears as a consumption-oriented transformation process; however, while it permits the putting on and discarding of different ways of being, it does not result in their achievement of appropriate adult femininity. Rather, the sequence's sonic and visual imbrication of Brit and Candy's disparate feminine performances underscores the girls' self-aware manipulation of their plasticity, their facility articulating different social positionings, and the temporary nature of transformation. The girls' close friendship provides the locus for this phenomenological experimentation and self-discovery, while also offering another site for the exploration of discursive tensions about can-do and at-risk girlhoods.[423]

3.2 *Bande de filles* and the Modern Girl's Racial Respectability

Generally speaking, the racialization of at-risk girlhood forecloses the possibility that Marieme and the other Le Clos-Français girls from French colonial, immigrant communities could be can-do girls. Like many heroines of female-focused banlieue films, *Bande de filles*' Marieme and the girl gang occupy a "problematic place in French society;" as such, it is no surprise that Marieme's self-directed, consumption-oriented transformations or the gang's girlish mischief and reconfiguration of bedroom culture involve taking up liminal public spaces.[424] I argue that

[423] In *Visible Identities*, Linda Martín Alcoff writes that we develop our sense of self, our competencies, and understanding of our place in the world through relationships. Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 116.
[424] Carrie Tarr, "'Grrrls in the Banlieue:' Philippe Faucon's *Samia* and Fabrice Génestal's *La Squale*." *L'Esprit Créateur* 42, no. 3 (2002): 30.

reading Marieme's precarious girlhood development through the diasporic black, 1920s/1930s Modern Girl figure and her "rejection of respectability politics" illuminates how consumption operated as a means of contesting French racial hegemony in *Bande de filles*.[425] Throughout the film, Marieme's attempts to self-locate are marked structurally through ellipses that divide the narrative into chapters, and by drastic, self-initiated changes to her hairstyle, comportment, and wardrobe. The first transformation accompanies her induction into the girl gang: Marieme trades her youthful, cornrowed extensions for sewn-in weave extensions, her body comportment becomes less tentative, and she wears a stylish leather jacket.

Marieme initially rebuffs the girl gang's invitation to take a day trip to Paris but changes her mind upon discovering the girls are friends with her romantic crush, which indicates Marieme's consumption-oriented approach to teen girl friendship. Whether dancing and singing on the metro, perusing racks of clothing in a store, or walking four-abreast through the underground shopping center of *Les Halles*, Lady (Assa Sylla), Fily (Mariétou Touré), and Adiatou (Lindsay Karamoh) make full use of their bodies' "spatial and lateral potentialities," actively occupying narrative spaces in a manner that challenges their societal marginalization.[426] "Racial respectability," Lynn M. Thomas writes, "refers to people's desires and efforts to claim positive recognition in contexts powerfully structured by racism."[427] Lady, Fily, and Adiatou reject this desire for positive recognition, choosing instead to negotiate a relationship with stereotypes contributing to their marginalization through different performances of feminine bodily comportment. The girls' way of being in the world reflects a "particular way of seeing

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[425] Lynn M. Thomas, "The Modern Girl and Racial Respectability in 1930s South Africa," in *The Modern Girl Around the World*, eds. The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 96-119.
[426] Iris Marion Young, "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality," in *On Female Body Experience: 'Throwing Like a Girl' and Other Essays*" (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 33.
[427] Thomas, "The Modern Girl and Racial Respectability," 98.

reality…from the outside in and from the inside out," transforming their societal marginalization into a position of empowered girl agency and resistance.[428] When a white shop girl racially-profiles Marieme for shoplifting, the gang performs an aggressive mode of femininity that intimidates the assistant. After leaving the store, the girls shed this performance and, giggling, they reenact their intimidation of the shop girl and recount her responses. Not long after, they see a rival girl gang on an opposite metro platform and present another mode of aggressive femininity through boisterous, threatening behavior. Choosing to stand beside them during this confrontation, Marieme develops her own marginal mode of seeing and begins her self-directed sampling of different modalities of feminine comportment and mobility that are resistant to the politics of respectability governing girlhood in both mainstream French culture and her immigrant subculture (Figures 3.4, 3.5, and 3.6).

Figure 3.4. Lady (Assa Sylla), Fily (Mariétou Touré) and Adiatou (Lindsay Karamoh) intimidate the shop assistant (Daisy Broom) profiling Marieme (Karidja Touré) in *Bande de filles* (Sciamma, 2014).

Figure 3.5. Adiatou (Lindsay Karamoh), Fily (Mariétou Touré), Lady (Assa Sylla), and Marieme (Karidja Touré) recount their encounter with the shop assistant in *Bande de filles* (Sciamma, 2014).

Figure 3.6. Marieme (Karidja Touré) tentatively aligns herself with the girl gang when they confront a rival gang in *Bande de filles* (Sciamma, 2014).

Speaking of the racialized respectability politics governing the diasporic black, 1920s/1930s Modern Girl figure's appearance, Thomas explains how young women appropriated

[428] hooks, "Choosing the Margin," 20.

and adapted globally-marketed versions of modern black femininity to achieve "respectability in a racist society."[429] Most importantly, this consumption of cosmetics, new clothing, and hairstyling performed a self-liberatory function through its production of a beauty subculture and its mimicry of white standards of femininity. We see a similar logic at work in the ways that makeovers punctuate Marieme's journey of personal liberation, most notably represented through changes from youthful, braided extensions to sleek, weaved extensions and, finally, to a masculinized cornrowed hairstyle. However, where the diasporic black Modern Girl's consumption enacted normative modes of self-improvement, we see Marieme's transformations accompanying performances of progressively criminalized identities.

Despite Marieme and her friends' subversive negotiation with mainstream French cultural politics, there is a sense in which their recurring occupation of liminal public spaces illustrates the ongoing problem of the girls' full societal integration, and demonstrates how their limited access to capital and leisure affects their mobility. The domineering domestic presence of Marieme's abusive older brother and the representational absence of Lady, Fily, and Adiatou's homes further underscores the placelessness of French black girlhood in late modernity. We only see Marieme enjoying increased mobility and access to leisure activities when Djibril invites her to play FIFA Soccer in his room, a place which was previously off-limits, in celebration of her victory over a rival gang member. He offers her the Brazil team, but Marieme declares her preference to play as France, effectively taking up space in her relationship with her brother and connection to the French colonial imaginary. However, this relational truce ends when Marieme extends her newly empowered feminine modality to her sexuality, which results in her

[429] Thomas, "The Modern Girl and Racial Respectability," 113.

permanent exile from the family home, the subsequent fracturing of her friendship group, and her slippage into the illegal drug trade.

In the previous subsection, it was the spectacularized white girlhood of *Spring Breakers*' protagonists that prolonged the duration of the fantasy space generated by the girls' disordered consumption practices. Playing with racialized markers enabled Brit, Candy, and Cotty to access the fantasy of extraordinarily agentic, liberated white femininity. As a result, their performance intertwines this modality with greater access to capital, leisure, and mobility. Conversely, in *Bande de filles*, Marieme, Lady, Fily, and Adiatou face a series of constraints and opportunities that limit their access to the resources that construct spectacularized femininities. We see this unevenness at work in the film's treatment of their consumption-generated fantasy space's duration and narrative location. In *Bande de filles*' most frequently cited scene, Marieme and her friends undergo temporary, spectacular feminine transformations, in a hotel room paid for with stolen money, through their approximation of a glamorous music video performance (Figure 3.7). Director Céline Sciamma has described this moment as *Bande de filles*' most important scene and as her first idea for a film about the "empowerment of friendship."[430]

[430] Céline Sciamma, "Why Pop Star Rihanna Gave Her Blessing to Film Festival Movie *Girlhood*," interview by Tom Cardy, *Stuff*, July 20, 2015, https://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/70383339/why-pop-star-rihanna-gave-her-blessing-to-film-festival-movie-girlhood.

Figure 3.7. Marieme (Karidja Touré), Lady (Assa Sylla), Fily (Mariétou Touré) and Adiatou (Lindsay Karamoh) dance to Rihanna's pop anthem "Diamonds" in *Bande de filles* (Sciamma, 2014).

Nestled in a sequence that emphasizes the girls' disordered consumption and the displacement of their bedroom culture, Marieme, Lady, Fily, and Adiatou put on shoplifted dresses and perform a lip-synced version of Rihanna's song "Diamonds." Illuminated by unmotivated blue lighting, the girls' dancing, brown-skinned bodies become striking spectacles that convey the transformative effects of music and commodity consumption, while the song's disruption of narrative progression materializes the activation of this fantasy space. Scott Henderson argues that teen films often use musical moments, temporary insertions of musical performance in non-musical films, to construct and contain the "cinematic excess" of adolescent identity formations.[431] In *Bande de filles*, the musical moment's cinematic excess is what enables the girls to disrupt controlling narratives about their problematic societal positioning. The song lyrics articulate the girls' understandings of subjectivity and grant them temporary access to agentic, liberated black femininity. However, the transformative effects of this consumption last only for the duration of the song.

[431] Scott Henderson, "Youth, Excess, and the Musical Moment," in *Film's Musical Moments*, eds. Ian Conrich and Estella Tincknell (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 146-147.

3.3 *Guo chun tian* and the Modern Girl's 'Desire for Migration'

Putting these representations of the girl gangs' disordered consumption practices and fantasy spaces in conversation with those occurring in *Guo chun tian* highlight the ways that postfeminist sensibilities previously understood as localized within Western culture—such as the notion that female agency must be self-aware, self-directed, and pleasurable—emerge in non-Western contexts through cultural globalization.[432] Thus far, I have explored how *Spring Breakers* and *Bande de filles* draw attention to their protagonists' adaptability and malleability when they use their agency to modify their performances of femininity. I have concentrated on how their friendship, and not specific physical locations, has served as the locus for the girl gangs' bedroom culture. In these films, we see these girls actively adapting and appropriating the media, music, narrative locations, and objects that enable them to perform the agentic, liberated femininities to which they aspire. In *Guo chun tian*, Peipei's desire for other ways of being is mediated by Jo, her wealthy best friend. Peipei admires Jo's alignment with a highly-mobile, cosmopolitan femininity, exhibited through the exercising of her cultural capital, her family connections in distant cities, her romance with an older guy, and her access to varied leisure and study opportunities.[433] The details of Jo's life awaken Peipei's interest in living abroad: because Jo housesits for her aunt while she is in Galway, the girls often hang out in her luxury home and discuss Jo's desire to study abroad, her romantic life, and the kinds of foreign employment that enable Jo's aunt to own this house. But these class details also reinforce a divide between the girls that extends beyond their geography: Jo's awareness of her privilege manifests through

[432] Dosekun, "For Western Girls Only?" 960.
[433] When the girls cut school to attend the yacht party, Jo pretends to be her foreign housekeeper and calls the high school to excuse her absence.

jokes about bequeathing her boyfriend to Peipei after moving abroad, and through her assertions that Peipei should take the smelly coat she's donating because it's designer. Crucially, these scenes privilege Peipei's attention to markers of cosmopolitan identities and her contemplation of Jo's answers, but what makes them important is the way Jo's aspirational mode of teen girlhood mediates Peipei's discovery of her desires and aspirations, which displaces the immediacy and proximity that we see structuring the consumption-fantasy connection in *Spring Breakers* and *Bande de filles*. It is also worth noting that Jo's mediation of cosmopolitan femininity causes Peipei to view it more favorably than when her mother begins learning Spanish in the hopes of emigrating to Spain.

The girls' model of best friendship and their fantasy of the Japanese spa invite comparison with the 1920s/1930s Modern Girls of Japan and mainland China, who placed great importance on mobility—including *social* mobility—as a marker of their modern femininity.[434] Noting how spatiality constrained Japanese teen girls' access to commercial culture is, Ruri Ito describes how local girlhood cultures idealized performances of femininity in faraway locations and fostered desires for travel.[435] *Guo chun tian* makes a point of emphasizing differences between Hong Kong and mainland China, and the ways these narrative places reflect Peipei's isolation and multi-level in-betweenness. This social positioning primes Peipei for the idealized femininity Jo presents in her tales about how much sushi and fun they will have in Japan, in her

[434] See Madeleine Y. Dong, "Who is Afraid of the Chinese Modern Girl?" in *The Modern Girl Around the World*, eds. The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 194-219; Ruri Ito, "The 'Modern Girl' Question in the Periphery of Empire: Colonial Modernity and Mobility among Okinawan Women in the 1920s and 1930s," in *The Modern Girl Around the World*, eds. The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 240-262; and, Barbara Sato, "Contesting Consumerisms in Mass Women's Magazines," in *The Modern Girl Around the World*, eds. The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 263-287.
[435] Ito, "The 'Modern Girl' Question in the Periphery of Empire," 257.

descriptions of how they will behave at the spa, and when she talks about what she will do after emigrating from Hong Kong.

And yet, purchasing and enjoying the leisure experience together creates the possibility of overcoming the girls' class differences. As a therapeutic space, the spa promises to heal Peipei's feelings of displacement, satisfy her longings for mobility, and to allow her to perform an agentic, liberated femininity. Indeed, Madeleine Y. Dong points to the Chinese Modern Girl as a symbol of social mobility who threatened to blur class lines; in advertising, this figure presented an idealized standard of Chinese beauty that was enhanced by her consumption of foreign cultural commodities.[436] Along similar lines, Peipei and Jo fantasize about their future experiences of the spa vacation's glamorizing effects, not about becoming someone else.

Guo chun tian underlines, in a manner more explicit than *Spring Breakers* and *Bande de filles*, how the process of commodifying experiences, objects, and signs also involves imagination and world-building.[437] After school, the girls take bubble tea to a rooftop, where they calculate and record the day's screen protector earnings. When they fantasize about visiting the Japanese spa over Christmas break, their imaginings begin with viewing layout images on a tablet, then progress to physically blocking the floor plan and pretending they're walking through the luxury resort (Figure 3.8). Jo excitedly pulls Peipei to-and-fro, describing the expansiveness of the spa entryway and how pleasurable it will feel to sit naked in the hot springs and drink sake as snow falls around them like cherry blossoms.[438] Through this wondrous description, Jo offers Peipei an opportunity to experience the mobile, cosmopolitan femininity she aspires to, albeit temporarily. As Jo continues fantasizing, we see Peipei lost in thought, gazing across the roof at

[436] Dong, "Who is Afraid of the Chinese Modern Girl?" 200-204.
[437] Sato, "Contesting Consumerisms in Mass Women's Magazines," 282.
[438] In response, Peipei asks Jo to delay booking their hotel room until after they've secured their flights plans: she is still trying to save funds for the trip.

the city skyline. The next sequence offers some indication of Peipei's interiority: she goes to a bustling restaurant to apply for a part-time waitressing job. Later that evening, she appears to lose the job when a restaurant patron has difficulty finding a piece of jewelry after Peipei services the table.[439]

Figure 3.8. Jo (Carmen Soup) and Peipei (Huang Yao) fantasize about their winter holiday spa vacation in *Guo chun tian* (Xue, 2018).

However, most unlike *Spring Breakers* and *Bande de filles*, *Guo chun tian* shows us that precarious girlhood development is an unpleasant experience that responsible adults can try to regulate. With few options to raise money quickly, Peipei resorts to smuggling iPhones across the border in her free time, gaining confidence from her growing reputation within the underground ring and her ability to move goods illegally without attracting attention, but losing her best friend in the process. These shifts in her self-understanding are accompanied by three freeze-frames, which also signal moments in which she has crossed another moral line. What makes this double articulation of Peipei's border crossing noteworthy is that it illustrates how late modern shifts in leisure and labor patterns present new opportunities for identity

[439] It is Peipei's birthday, which means she is now legally able to seek employment and explains why her previous source of income was selling cell phone accessories.

formation.[440] We see a similar intersection of leisure and labor in *Spring Breakers* and *Bande de filles*, insofar as the girls participate in criminal behavior to fund their escapes into fantasy, but crime is a pleasurable activity for the girl gangs. *Guo chun tian* disrupts this connection between crime and pleasure by highlighting Peipei's discomfort during smuggling and by removing the possibility of her visiting the Japanese spa. The conclusion's narrative and aesthetic punitive logic further reinforce this moral stance. Peipei is arrested during a sting operation and placed on probation, but the film also inserts an intertitle that interrupts narrative progression and notes how real-life, major technological improvements to border security have crippled smuggling operations.

4 Girlhood's End

This section concentrates on how the formal and narrative elements of *Spring Breakers*, *Bande de filles*, and *Guo chun tian* "resolve" their protagonists' precarious girlhood development and visualize the girls' new relations to themselves, their kinship networks and environments. At the ends of their films, it is unclear what the future holds for Brit and Candy, Marieme, and Peipei. But a closer look at the treatment of narrative space in the films' final images suggests the emergence of a new relationship between the girls and their environments. In *Spring Breakers*, a series of images showing Brit and Candy driving silently in the murdered drug kingpin's orange Lamborghini are intercut with scenes of spring break partygoers and the aftermath of the girls' killing spree at the compound. At the same time, Candy's processed voiceover remarks on the location's beauty and confesses to never wanting spring break to end, which prompts the question: Was this the "something more than just spring break" that the girls wanted to see?

[440] Kehily and Nayak, "Global Femininities," 325.

What happens next is noteworthy: Brit and Candy's world is turned upside down. Korine returns us to the pier where their boyfriend Alien was killed, briefly showing his body in a long shot then switching to an upside-down close-up. Entering the frame from below, the girls, wearing pink ski masks, take turns kissing Alien goodbye then run down the pier. We hear a cocking gun, which has signaled scene transitions throughout, and the movie ends abruptly. This upside-down spatiality indicates a reframing in the girls' understanding of their places in the world and provides a bookend to the university lecture scene that opened this chapter: Brit and Candy have been radicalized like the African-American servicemen who witnessed their friends' deaths in battle, and the girls are now committed to their emancipation back home. What this looks like, in a practical sense, is irrepresentable onscreen and becomes the purview of spectatorial imaginings.

Bande de filles employs a similar logic of visual irrepresentability in its conclusion. This shared trait highlights what happens when processes of development with presumably different aims overlap. According to cinema conventions, consumer-oriented teen girl makeover transformations are usually normative rites of passage resulting in the achievement of adult femininity. And when a teen girl protagonist learns the error of her ways and puts an end to her girlish mischief, her penitence facilitates her societal reintegration and status as a can-do girl, whereas unchecked misbehavior is the provenance of at-risk girlhood. Brit, Candy, and Marieme do not show remorse for their mischief; and, while neither *Spring Breakers* nor *Bande de filles* show the girls being apprehended by local law enforcement, Marieme's behavior is portrayed as still being subject to the patriarchal code of her community.

After refusing her boyfriend's marriage proposal, Marieme finds herself facing a return to the family home, and her brother's authority, as the only viable option. Unable to allow herself to

go inside after Bébé buzzes her into the family's apartment building, Marieme holds the unlocked door handle but hesitates to open it. She instead releases the handle and walks toward, then past the camera to the end of the apartment building's landing. The camera tracks forward slowly and past Marieme as she cries, offering an out-of-focus look at the city. While she cries offscreen, the cityscape remains out-of-focus, prompting contemplation of its representational significance for Marieme's positioning within a national framework and her thematic alignment with Marianne, the symbol of France. A familiar swell of electronic music plays, completing the musical phrase that has accompanied each of Marieme's changes in comportment and orientation within the world. This time, however, the piece is extended so that a tonal key change infuses the music with a new optimism as Marieme steps into the center of the frame, inviting viewers to contemplate the off-screen object of her gaze and her other options. She visibly composes herself and exits the frame, ending the film. As the conclusion's use of music foreshadows another of Marieme's self-directed transformations, its optimistic tone recalls the diasporic black Modern Girl's model of "'personal liberation' through self-improvement" and suggests that Marieme has achieved true independence.[441] However, this is not just a freedom *from* something, such as male domination, but freedom to self-define her relation to mainstream French society.

As girlhood friendship films employing themes of consumption-oriented makeover transformations to structure their representations of feminine identity formation, it is no surprise that *Spring Breakers*, *Bande de filles*, and *Guo chun tian* end with their protagonists separating from their friends. After her arrest, Peipei is shown looking at an empty desk while an instructor, who is speaking in English, describes a hypothetical scenario involving a trip to Thailand. Combined with a subsequent scene of Peipei at home looking at a postcard, these images suggest

[441] Thomas, "The Modern Girl and Racial Respectability," 110.

that Jo is now living abroad, and the dynamics of their friendship have changed. It also forecloses the possibility that Peipei can approximate Jo's cosmopolitan femininity for herself.

Through its narrative elimination of Jo and the rehabilitation of both Peipei and her wayward but affable single mother, *Guo chun tian* rejects the notion of individualization underlying precarious girlhood development, and positions both characters as girls in need of recuperation. Although both female figures imagine foreign countries as places for self-reinvention, Peipei's mother is portrayed as the least responsible of the two. Often drunk and gambling late into the night with her mahjong friends, Peipei's mother becomes more involved in housekeeping and caregiving after her daughter's arrest: for the first time, we see them cooking and eating dinner together. And later, in a post-intertitle scene, we are shown that this domestic recuperation of their girlish mischief has significant implications for their identifications with foreign locations: their desire for the agentic, liberated femininities these distant spaces offer must be contained. In the film's final images, Peipei and her impractically dressed mother hike to the top of Kowloon Peak, where the older woman declares breathlessly, "That's Hong Kong for you." Most surprisingly, a light flurry of snow falls, contradicting a character's derision of Peipei's birthday wish for snow and his claims that it was too hot for such weather. The film cuts to black after Peipei extends her hand and smiles, suggesting that the *real* desire underlying her longing for foreign spaces, the opportunity to feel snow and cold, could be sated without going abroad.[442]

While *Spring Breakers*, *Bande de filles*, and *Guo chun tian*'s conclusions do not depict their protagonists' societal integration, they do demonstrate the role of the girls' "processes of consumption and feminization" in their identity formation. Brit, Candy, Marieme, and Peipei

[442] In an earlier scene, Jo's boyfriend Hao (Sunny Sun) and Peipei tape iPhones to each other's bodies and she explains her fascination with snow.

each achieve the goals that initiated their journeys of disordered consumption.[443] I contend that this affirmation of the girls' underlying desires for self-emancipation, independence, and a different way of being legitimize their transformative functions. As a result, in the next section, I will explore how the films' aesthetic treatment of these processes fosters a parallel mode of development inscribed for their female viewers. The goal is to demonstrate how their portrayals of the girls' criminal involvements draw on conventions from teen girl makeover transformation montages, and perform an analogous pedagogical role for the inscribed female viewers.

[443] Gilligan, "Performing Postfeminist Identities," 167.

5 Theorizing Embodied Female Spectatorship and Parallel Development

5.1 The Pedagogical Function of U.S. 1980s and Millennial Makeover Film Sequences

Much like the makeover montages in many American 1980s and millennial girl teen films, scenes in *Spring Breakers*, *Bande de filles*, and *Guo chun tian* that spectacularize their protagonists' consumption-oriented transformations perform a pedagogical function for other female characters and inscribed viewers.[444] Maryn Wilkinson argues the 1980s makeover sequence, in films such as *The Breakfast Club* and *She's Out of Control* (Stan Dragoti, 1989), upheld conservative gender ideals while also framing girls' consumerism as an appropriate mode for agentic, self-transformation. For Wilkinson, the sequence's pedagogical function, and visual pleasure, lay in its behind-the-scenes revelation of the makeover process and celebration of the ways the teenage girl's malleable body enabled her to direct her achievement of desirable adult femininity through consumerism.[445] Through a series of close-ups, the transformation of specific facial or bodily features emphasizes both girl malleability and the labor required; however, the protagonist's expression of pleasure in her own image remained offscreen. While the delayed makeover-reveal created narrative tension for the viewer, it also reinforced the importance of heterosexual male approval, using music and a shot-reverse-shot structure to convey the significance of the moment and invite viewers to share the male character's pleasure in the transformation. The lesson, it seems, is for inscribed female viewers to evaluate their own performances of femininity via a real or imagined male romantic partner's possible responses.

[444] See Wilkinson, "The Makeover and the Malleable Body," 385-391; and, Samantha Colling, *The Aesthetic Pleasures of Girl Teen Film* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2017).
[445] Wilkinson, "The Makeover and the Malleable Body," 387.

Figure 3.9. Shortly after her excessive makeover, Cady (Lindsay Lohan) seduces her friend's ex-boyfriend (Jonathan Bennett) in *Mean Girls* (Waters, 2004).

Figure 3.10. A repentant Cady (Lindsay Lohan), post-makeunder, apologizes to prom attendees in *Mean Girls* (Waters, 2004).

In contrast, for many girl teen films released between 2000 and 2010, such as *Mean Girls* (Mark Waters, 2004) and *The House Bunny* (Fred Wolf, 2008), sensorial aesthetics emphasize the protagonist's pleasure in her transformation process and results, offering viewers an opportunity to enjoy the kinaesthetic and tactile pleasures these moments make available.[446] Samantha Colling has noted a significant shift in the representation of the makeover and its guaranteed outcome of appropriate, authentic femininity. Using *Mean Girls* as a case study, Colling shows how Cady's (Lindsay Lohan) first makeover, which accompanied her induction into The Plastics friendship group, resulted in her performance of inauthentic femininity (Figure 3.9). The film draws parallels between Cady's pleasure in her glamorous appearance and her participation in activities such as bullying, pitting her friends against each other, and downplaying her strengths to attract male romantic attention. However, after being ostracized by her peers, Cady undergoes a makeunder, adopting a more naturalistic appearance and making amends for her cruel behavior (Figure 3.10). According to Colling, *Mean Girls*' double address encourages viewers to enjoy its ironic treatment of girl teen film conventions, such as the makeover process and reveal, while also inviting these viewers to share the kinaesthetic and

[446] Colling, *The Aesthetic Pleasures of Girl Teen Film*, 23-46.

tactile pleasures of Cady's fashionable clothing through "embodied empathy."[447] This onscreen distinction between good and bad makeovers in *Mean Girls* prompts the implied teen viewers to contemplate the proper use of their girl agency and choice, thus engaging post-girl power discourses about girls' misusing their opportunities in the new economy. But it also marks a change in the representation of makeovers as a coming-of-age process with a permanent outcome, which is typically realized through the character's achievement of sexual attractiveness and/or a heterosexual romance.

Before theorizing the pedagogical function of the mischief makeover sequences in *Spring Breakers*, *Bande de filles*, and *Guo chun tian* for their inscribed female viewers, it is important to note that the ratings systems and the filmmakers' auteur/art-house status limited or otherwise shaped potential teen girl viewers' access to these films. If we take *Spring Breakers*, as an example, we see Selena Gomez, in interviews and on her Facebook page, cautioning the tween fans of her music and Disney television series against seeing the R-rated film.[448] *Bande de filles* reviews[449] tend to highlight the white, older identities of audience members and concentrate on the film's ability to portray black feminine adolescence authentically, whereas those for *Guo chun tian* draw parallels with the work of female auteurs such as Andrea Arnold, Sofia Coppola,

[447] Ibid., 38.
[448] Alex Godfrey, "Interview: Spring Breakers, a Riotous Take on Modern America," *The Guardian*, March 30, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/mar/30/spring-breakers-harmony-korine-interview.
[449] Régis Dubois, « Bande de filles » : Safari sur la Croisette, le sens des images : cinéma, pop-culture et sociéte, October 23, 2014, http://lesensdesimages.com/2014/10/23/bande-de-filles-safari-sur-la-croisette/; Fanta Sylla, "Carefree Black Girls, Interrupted: on *Girlhood*, a Film By Céline Sciamma," December 2014, http://www.blackgirlstalking.com/annex-home/2015/8/5/carefree-black-girls-interrupted, available on https://cargocollective.com/littleglissant; Sara Gharsalli, "*Girlhood*: Stereotypes Within Stereotypes," Artefact, May 27, 2015, http://www.artefactmagazine.com/2015/05/27/film-girlhood-stereotypes-within-stereotypes/; Clemence Bodoc, « Bande de filles », un film encensé pour de mauvaises raisons, *Madmoizelle*, May 22, 2016, https://www.madmoizelle.com/bande-de-filles-probleme-294696; Will Higbee, "'Beyond Ethnicity' or a Return to Type? *Bande de filles/Girlhood* and the Politics of Blackness in Contemporary French Cinema," in *Post-Migratory Cultures in Postcolonial France*, eds. Kathryn A. Kleppinger and Laura Reeck (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018), 166-182.

and Lynne Ramsey, which suggests a niche audience located primarily at film festivals.[450] In what follows, I consider the potential pedagogical function of the neoliberal postfeminist affective registers in *Spring Breakers*, *Bande de filles*, and *Guo chun tian*'s spectacularized crime sequences, which the films depict as moments of self-transformation and opportunities for the girl protagonists to define the terms of their empowerment. In these films, disordered consumption does not result in the production of inauthentic femininities; rather, their mischief makeovers are the means through which the girls construct empowered identities that destabilize the social order. I explore how the sequences' aesthetic features convey the girls' embodied experiences of mischief makeovers and construct the girls' continuous sampling of different femininities as pleasurable and empowering processes. I argue this phenomenological representation of what disordered consumption feels like aligns viewers with the girls' perspectives and complicates the pathologization of at-risk girl agency and choice. As Lucy Bolton has argued, spectatorial alignment with a character's point of view does not require their shared moral and psychological perspectives; rather, this alignment enables viewers to experience and understand the film world as the character does.[451] The films affectively and psychicly incite their lead female characters and implied female audience to think more broadly about the forms that self-definition and self-emancipation processes can take, and to view personal reinvention through different modes of consumption as both necessary and freely chosen, pleasurable actions.

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[450] Sarah Manvel, "Movie Review: Little Trouble in Big China—The Crossing (2019)," Critic's Notebook, March 20, 2019, https://www.criticsnotebook.com/2019/03/the-crossing-movie-review-guo-chun-tian-bai-xue.html; Cath Clarke, "The Crossing Review – Bai Xue's Slowburn Gem Delivers the Goods," *The Guardian*, March 21, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/mar/21/the-crossing-review-bai-xue.

[451] Lucy Bolton, "A Phenomenology of Girlhood: Being Mia in *Fish Tank* (Andrea Arnold, 2009)," in *International Cinema and the Girl: Local Issues, Transnational Contexts*, eds. Fiona Handyside and Kate Taylor-Jones (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 75-84.

5.2 *Spring Breakers* and Authentic Self-Expression

Spring Breakers mixes electronic music with audio and images from different scenes to evoke the immersive experience of the girls' fluid consumption practices: there is no difference between the lead characters' voracious consumption of drugs, alcohol, crime, and popular culture. When Cotty, Brit, and Candy plan the restaurant robbery, images of the girls talking, snorting lines of cocaine and provocatively blowing smoke into each other's mouths are interspersed with online street fight videos. Candy's recipe for cultivating a confident, carefree approach is that the girls should "fucking pretend it's like a video game" and "act like you're in a movie or something." While Candy's mandate blurs boundaries between diegetic "actual" and mediated modes of being, the film form reflexively performs and elicits a similar dissolution of boundaries for the inscribed film viewers. In interviews, Korine has described his aims of using film aesthetics and soundscapes to evoke a hallucinatory feeling that is "more like a drug experience than a traditional narrative."[452] This description not only recognizes the primacy of the viewer's bodily responses, but it also destabilizes the separation of the viewer and the film object she is viewing. As a result, *Spring Breakers* invites the use of an existentialist phenomenological approach to theorize how this sensual viewing experience appeals to the inscribed viewer's body and operates pedagogically to shape a female viewership.

Through its narrative representation and sensuous elicitation of what the loss of boundaries *feels* like, *Spring Breakers* creates a mode of embodied spectatorship that borders on

[452] Josh Eells, "Inside 'Spring Breakers,' the Most Debauched Movie of the Year," *Rolling Stone*, March 15, 2013, https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-news/inside-spring-breakers-the-most-debauched-movie-of-the-year-184469/.

the erotic, opening an interaction between the viewer's body and the film's body that shapes how the viewer *sees* and cultivates self-knowledge. As Laura Marks argues persuasively, in her article "Video Haptics and Erotics," film aesthetics can prompt a way of seeing that incorporates the body, facilitating a corporeal interaction that entails being in the *presence* of the film, not just analyzing its onscreen objects.[453] Crucially, Marks describes this embodied viewing activity as a dynamic "giving over to the other,"[454] noting that it is often characterized as being a distinctly "feminine" way of seeing, which has implications for my theorization of *Spring Breakers*' implied viewership.[455] While not all films prompting a haptic visuality simulate and/or elicit a transcendent drug-like experience, I posit that *Spring Breakers* opens up for its inscribed female viewers new ways of seeing and being in the world, which are, incidentally, linked to transgressive postfeminist, post-girl power strategies of self-definition.[456] Moreover, much like a good "drug trip," wherein a person's altered state of consciousness produces epistemological, therapeutic, and recreational benefits, the film invites its inscribed female viewers to develop new subjectivities that transcend the constraining requirements of contemporary femininity.

Because this section of the chapter aims to identify a specific mischief makeover sequence in each case study and theorize the lesson it offers to implied female viewers, in what follows I concentrate on how one of *Spring Breakers*' most memorable sequences reflect this transcendent subject-making. In this example, Britney Spears' pop ballad "Everytime" accompanies slow-motion images of Brit, Candy, and Cotty committing armed robberies while dressed in pink unicorn balaclavas, bathing suits, and logoed sweatpants. The sequence's self-

[453] Laura U. Marks, "Video Haptics and Erotics," *Screen* 39, no. 4 (1998): 331-348.
[454] Ibid., 347.
[455] Ibid., 337. Marks notes that haptic visuality is often perceived as being "feminine," she prefers to consider it a "feminist visual strategy."
[456] Dobson, "Performative Shamelessness," 97-114. According to Dobson, this wild and raucous mode of being is most often featured within the context of female friendship displays online and paired with declarations of self-acceptance and self-esteem which serve to deflect criticism.

conscious intertextual reference to pop music plays with its initial romantic sunset setting: it begins with the girls encouraging Alien, who is tinkering the keys of a poolside piano, to play something "sweet," "uplifting," and "fucking inspiring." As Britney Spears' vocals replace Alien's sensitive, off-key serenade, the sequence takes on a music video quality, alternating between the girls' silhouetted sunset dance choreography and their brutal crime sprees, and culminates with the gang's gun salute celebration of their exploits (Figure 3.11).

Figure 3.11. Brit (Ashley Benson), Candy (Vanessa Hudgens) and Cotty (Rachel Korine) dance to Britney Spears' pop song "Everytime" in *Spring Breakers* (Korine, 2012).

While the music video aesthetics increase the sequence's affective force, the juxtaposition of images and Spears' plaintive singing voice can be seen to celebrate the "contradictory qualities of innocence and experience" that structure (white) American girlhood in the pop-cultural imagination.[457] Through this sequence, we see Brit, Candy, and Cotty embracing these inherent contrasts and enjoying how criminality operates as a vehicle for their authentic self-expression. This postfeminist, post-girl power mode of self-acceptance serves to

[457] Colling, *The Aesthetic Pleasures of Girl Teen Film*, 5.

subvert the pathologization of feminine adolescence and presents a strategy of self-definition for its film characters and viewers. In addition, for those familiar with the song's reputation as a form of self-disclosure detailing the singer's feelings about her public breakup with pop star Justin Timberlake, her mental health crisis, her dysfunctional family dynamics, as well as her difficulties navigating music industry demands, this knowledge provides the grounds for another lesson about the transformative function of yet another "celebratory and confident" strategy of self-definition that Amy Shields Dobson has termed "shameless self-exposure."[458] Indeed, much of the song's popular and critical reception read the lyrics as Spears' empowered refusal to succumb to public scrutiny or care what others thought of her.[459] We can see how such displays of authentic self-expression and self-acceptance might affectively inspire viewers to embrace transgressive approaches to self-definition.

5.3 *Bande de filles* and Self-Liberation

In *Bande de filles*, Marieme's beautification processes and appraisal of her new appearances take place offscreen, and save one exchange following her transformation into a masculine-presenting drug-dealer, the film gives little attention to her romantic interest's responses to these makeovers.[460] Most surprisingly, her shoplifting and robberies are rarely represented onscreen

[458] Dobson, "Performative Shamelessness," 110. There are also parallels between Spears, Hudgens, Benson, and Gomez insofar as their "shameless self-exposure" facilitates their tactical shifts from wholesome child to sexy woman star personas.
[459] See, for example, "Readers' Poll: The Best Britney Spears Songs of All Time," *Rolling Stone*, December 7 2011, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/readers-poll-the-best-britney-spears-songs-of-all-time-10323/8-everytime-234350/; Ryan Bassil, "Britney Spears Made a Response Song to 'Cry Me a River' That You've Never Heard," *Vice*, November 12 2014, https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/rk4496/britney-spears-original-doll-lost-album-mona-lisa-response-to-justin-timberlake-2014; Alex Macpherson, "Britney Spears—10 of the Best," *The Guardian*, August 16 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2016/aug/24/britney-spears-10-of-the-best.
[460] When visiting Marieme in her new apartment, Ismaël (Idrissa Diabaté) expresses displeasure with her bound breasts and short cornrows.

despite the film's title and narrative thematic concern with the girl gang. This representational logic makes a scene featuring Marieme's fight with the rival gang member who humiliated Lady even more striking. Dismayed by the ensuing loss of reputation, Marieme adapts the gang's code by setting up a rematch, under false pretenses, and fighting her unnamed opponent in an abandoned lot, surrounded by a cheering crowd of teenagers. In keeping with their fight protocol, Marieme strips the other girl's shirt off to demonstrate her victory, but in a surprise move, cuts and removes her opponent's bra.

Figure 3.12. Marieme (Karidja Touré) holds her opponent's bra over her head in victory in *Bande de filles* (Sciamma, 2014).

Figure 3.13. "Liberty Leading the People" (Eugène Delacroix, 1830). WikiCommons.

Shot on-location with natural lighting and handheld camera, this scene evokes the experience of racialized girl gang life in the banlieue. But what makes this immersive representation of Marieme's delinquency significant is encapsulated in the scene's final image: Marieme holds the opponent's red bra aloft in a manner that invites comparison with « La Liberté guidant le peuple, » Eugène Delacroix's iconic painting of Marianne, the symbol of the French Republic (Figures 3.12 and 3.13). The effects of this victory reverberate through multiple areas in Marieme's life: it shifts the interpersonal dynamic of her girl gang, changes her relationship with her abusive brother, and instills in her the courage to circumvent cultural taboos and initiate sex with her secret boyfriend.

There is a sense in which *Bande de filles* expects its implied audience to recognize this symbolic visualization of Marieme's victory, which can potentially destabilize the societal marginalization of girls who look like Marieme and the construction of their modes of girl agency as straightforward acts of delinquency.[461] On another level, this celebratory framing of Marieme's defiant actions creates a position from which its viewers can not only share affectively and psychically in her triumph, but also learn from Marieme's self-pleasing boldness and assertion of her freedom to express individuality in relation to the girl gang. Herein lies the film's pedagogical address to its inscribed female viewers: *Bande de filles* portrays resistance and defiance as positively charged technologies of the self that help young women forge their own paths, while circumnavigating, but not directly confronting, socioeconomic constraints.[462]

5.4 *Guo chun tian* and The Preservation of Individuality

In contrast, the didactic nature of *Guo chun tian*'s anti-smuggling message short circuits the connection between the mode of aesthetic engagement on offer and the possible parallel development of its implied female viewers. Whereas the disjunction between the violent imagery and the pop ballad in *Spring Breakers* creates space to think through the contradictions of commercial American girlhood, and *Bande de filles* inserts French national iconography into a teen gang fight to reframe discourses about cultural belonging, *Guo chun tian*'s double-address circumscribes its depictions of agentic, young femininity. Nonetheless, in the following

[461] During their hotel party, Marieme is gifted with a nameplate necklace ("Vic for Victoire") in a manner reminiscent of a formal naming ceremony. Considering the earlier scene along with this citation doubly-links her to French national identity. Ginette Vincendeau argues that the naming scene references Vic (Sophie Marceau) from the French teen film *La Boum* (Claude Pinoteau, 1980, France). Ginette Vincendeau, "Minority Report," *Sight and Sound* (June 2015): 27.

[462] Rosalind Gill and Akane Kanai, "Mediating Neoliberal Capitalism: Affect, Subjectivity and Inequality," *Journal of Communication* 68 (2018): 324.

discussion, I examine the aesthetic features of a mischief makeover scene in *Guo chun tian* and posit the intended affective outcome and its role in the film's female apprenticeship.

To be sure, the representational strategies used to depict the entanglement of labor, pleasure, and self-transformation in the girls' criminal activities differ between *Spring Breakers*, *Bande de filles*, and *Guo chun tian*. In *Guo chun tian*, the moment of transgression, when Peipei crosses the border, is brief and barely perceptible; as such, the film disrupts narrative progression with freeze-frames, in conjunction with strummed electric guitar chords, to signal these moments and Peipei's split-second acknowledgment of her achievement. This aesthetic signification happens three times in the film. These disruptive elements mark the protagonist's progressive precarious development and create space for viewers to contemplate her perspective, but they offer little insight into the ways that smuggling allows Peipei to define the terms of her empowerment. I suggest that looking to instances that highlight her adaptability, like when Peipei takes on additional smuggling opportunities to earn more money faster, does more to reveal linkages between her disordered consumption and self-transformation. One such instance involves Peipei and Hao (Sunny Sun), a fellow smuggler and her best friend's boyfriend. After her induction into the iPhone crime syndicate, their relationship changes drastically: she develops a romantic crush on Hao, and he grows in admiration for Peipei's mastery of her double life. It is not long before he recruits her to assist in his smuggling side hustle.

Figure 3.14. Hao (Sunny Sun) secures an iPhone-belt to Peipei's (Huang Yao) torso in *Guo chun tian* (Xue, 2018).

The mischief makeover sequences in *Spring Breakers* and *Bande de filles* depict authentic self-expression and self-liberation as the outcomes of their girl protagonists' criminal behavior, whereas in *Guo chun tian* the selected scene portrays Peipei's developing self-allegiance. Her mischief makeover scene is most striking in its visual and sonic differences from the rest of the film and shows Peipei defining the terms of her autonomy. Illuminated by low red lighting, breathing heavily, and glistening with sweat, the two characters tape iPhone-belts to each other's bodies, their hands touching places typically hidden by clothing (Figure 3.14). When Peipei encourages Hao to tape even more smartphones to her body, his hands hesitate briefly under her skirt, and she helps him secure the iPhones onto her inner thighs. While their playful banter intensifies the scene's sexual charge, it also shows Peipei testing what it is to be *herself* and maintain her individuality. We see her choose how much access Hao has to her body and how much to disclose about her motivations for the planned Christmas vacation. This is the first time that we see Peipei be this transparent, and within this context, it presents as something akin to post-coital self-disclosure.[463] The scene's sonic elements preserve this sense of intimacy:

[463] This sexual sense continues in the subsequent scenes following their secret rendezvous: the two travel separately, but within eyesight of each other and they are caught in their intrigue by Sister Hua (Elena Kong), the iPhone syndicate boss, who decries their deception and warns Peipei about trusting men.

Peipei and Hao's amplified heavy breathing, the rustle of their clothing, the sound of tape pieces being unwound and wrapped around their iPhone-strapped bodies all emphasize the proximity and tactility of their interactions. The scene's aesthetics also make apparent Peipei's labor and sensual enjoyment of their smuggling preparations. Isolating this scene from the film's concluding sequence, which includes the intertitle's reference to extradiegetic technological measures curbing cross-border smuggling and the moral recuperation of its protagonist, makes it possible to consider the preservation of one's individuality as a suggested mode of parallel development for the film's implied teen girl viewers. However, because this scene is part of a larger narrative, we must consider its significance in relation to the film's other storytelling components, including the intertitle's nationalistic interjection, which reminds us that girls and young women are positioned as the main determinants of their countries' futures.[464] As such, *Guo chun tian* entangles matters of Chinese national security and the country's extradiegetic reputation with Peipei's girlhood development.

Conclusion

Reading girlhood friendship within the context of subject-making consumption practices provided more expansive ways of conceptualizing post-girl power agency and development. My goal in this chapter was to determine the role of best friendship in precarious girlhood development. Reading *Spring Breakers*, *Bande de filles*, and *Guo chun tian* together provided a compelling critique of the neoliberal postfeminist construction of girls as being always already empowered. In centering their filmic protagonists' distress about a lack of disposable income and access to opportunities, the case studies drew attention to the role that the notion of economic

[464] Angela McRobbie, "Sweet Smell of Success? New Ways of Being Young Women," in *Feminism and Youth Culture: From 'Jackie' to 'Just Seventeen'* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 201.

independence plays in the idealization of gendered consumer citizenship. Reviewing girlhood friendship films released between the 1980s and 2010s revealed two primary recurring tropes that parallel can-do and at-risk conceptualizations of girlhood: teen girl makeovers and girlish mischief-making. Makeover transformations involving commercial goods and services help can-do girls developing appropriate femininities, whereas girlish mischief-making was the provenance of at-risk girls, or a temporary diversion for can-do girls. I argued that friendship-focused films about precarious girlhood combined these classed and raced processes to construct "mischief makeover transformations." Through dialogical analysis of *Spring Breakers*, *Bande de filles*, and *Guo chun tian* I showed how this transformation process accelerated girlhood friendship's ephemerality and caused the film protagonists to develop traits consistent with the ideal neoliberal subject. I also argued the girls' ongoing displacement in the films' conclusions reflected the neoliberal imperative for their continuous self-reinvention and their problematization of the dichotomy between can-do and at-risk girlhood.

CONCLUSION AND AREAS FOR FUTURE STUDY

Through dialogical textual analyses of critically-acclaimed festival films from the United States, Canada, France, Peru, and China, this dissertation has illustrated some of the ways that neoliberal postfeminism, as a transnational discourse and cultural sensibility, calls on nonwhite, non-Western, and non-middle-class girls and young women to self-actualize, even within local contexts that have not undergone Western feminist "waves." The post-2009 recessionary films selected for study reflect an increased emphasis on personal responsibility in contemporary culture after the global financial crisis of 2007-2008, and they foreground the precarious economic and social conditions in which their protagonists live. What sets this later group of international films apart from the at-risk girlhood U.S. cinema fare released between 2000 and 2008—which tended to conclude with the recuperation of their chastened protagonists into traditional social institutions—is how the group's narrative preoccupation with precarity forecloses normative modes of girl resistant agency and girlhood development. Indeed, the young female figures in this post-2009 cinematic corpus are shown exhibiting can-do traits that purportedly guarantee success—such as "desire, determination and confidence"—and yet they still fail to epitomize societal ideals and transition well into normative adult femininity.[465] As such, this dissertation has argued that the case studies' depictions of precarious girlhood—as an inescapable social positioning—interrogate the neoliberal postfeminist promise that girls could avoid or overcome being at-risk through individual hard work, strategic decision-making and the cultivation of flexibility and resilience.

[465] "Review of *Gutsy Girls: Young Women Who Dare*," *Adolescence* 36, no. 141 (Spring 2001): 176-77, quoted in, Anita Harris, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 1.

This project has several limitations in relation to the audiovisual objects selected for study. On the institutional level, these constraints include the industrial and cinematic contexts in which the selected case studies were produced, their release dates, and the levels of critical acclaim conferred during their international festival circulation. Concentrating on these prized national films was a strategic decision that allowed me to map some of the ways that a neoliberal postfeminist sensibility emerges transnationally. On the representational level, these strictures comprised the centering of heterosexual girlhood and the girls' bodily and economic precarity as well as the discussion of specific traditional tropes of feminine development, such as the mother/daughter relationship, domestication, and best female friendship and consumption. These conditions shaped my exploration of the limitations of neoliberal self-regulatory ideals in the production of new subjectivities and in the safeguarding against difficulties. As such, there are likely other post-2009 recessionary films about precarious girlhood development not explored within this dissertation that may problematize or complement this analysis of the failures of neoliberal postfeminism and the ways that it operates across and within different sociocultural contexts to reproduce social inequalities. Nonetheless, this analysis of how the lived, situated experience of precarity is mobilized in recessionary girlhood cinema highlights—and produces in their inscribed female viewers—alternative modes of agency, resistance, and subject formation contributes to a field of study that has called for new, nuanced theorizations of emerging post-girl power femininities.

What is more, the investigative work this dissertation performs could be accomplished in relation to other moving image texts about precarious girlhood that have received international critical acclaim and that possess heuristic modes of engagement, such as video games. As Astrid Ensslin has argued, in a talk entitled "Gamifying the Bildungsroman: Visual Storytelling in

'Literary' Games," visual storytelling tools and game-design elements can be used to transpose the generic conventions of the development narrative into a form of play that adds new affective and embodied dimensions to the story and promotes player self-discovery.[466] To master skills, accomplish objectives and complete a video game, the player is introduced to in-game situations and environments that progressively develop her hand/eye coordination and puzzle-solving proficiencies, often leading to a difficult confrontation with a final boss in the game's conclusion. However, as Ensslin points out, literary games often reimagine design practices and rules in ways that prompt player-characters to perform "close readings" while juggling tactical strategies that allow the players to advance in the game. According to Ensslin, the outcome is the player-character—who is inscribed in the game narrative as a novice—matures on an "operational level" through skill mastery and the completion of difficult game levels as well as through a process of philosophical meaning-making, which is facilitated by "multisensory perception and kinetic gameplay."[467] As a result, the player-character's decisions and increasing competencies can be seen to parallel or correspond with the onscreen avatar's progression towards the game's telos.

In games that explicitly address themes of human development, Ensslin also identifies an exploration of questions that comprise the games' remediation of the *Bildungsroman*: chiefly, "'What/Who made me become who I am?', 'What is my purpose in the world?', and 'Where am I going?'"[468] We see this confluence of ludic and narrative elements at work in *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2012, US) and *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013, US). These

[466] Astrid Ensslin, "Gamifying the Bildungsroman: Visual Storytelling in 'Literary' Games" (paper presented at HuCon 2016, University of Alberta, 4 March 2016).
[467] Ensslin, "Gamifying the Bildungsroman," 4.
[468] Ensslin examines *Passage* (Jason Rohrer, 2007), *The Path* (Tale of Tales, 2009), and *Journey* (thatgamecompany, 2012). Ibid., 3.

postapocalyptic single-player video games about zombies and infected hordes, respectively, depict fraught female coming-of-age processes and the inescapable bodily and social precarity of its girl characters, alongside the more typical conventions of the zombie horror subgenre which tend to invite critical readings of consumerism and late capitalism.[469] Many critics have praised both titles for their compelling narratives about outlaw men who guide vulnerable girls to indeterminate locations—which are later revealed to pose direct threats to the girls' lives—and for the games' unique abilities to stimulate players' philosophical contemplation and elicit their deep emotional investments in the girls' futures. Much like the filmic case studies examined in this dissertation, the games' conclusions lack a clearly defined telos for their girl characters' coming-of-age journeys. In fact, what makes these games such striking objects of study in relation to neoliberal postfeminist discourses is how their conclusions portray the male characters' inability to accomplish their missions as planned. Rather, we are shown that the girls must accept their guardians' limitations and draw on personal resources that will enable them to navigate circumstances that are significantly more precarious than the situations depicted through the course of the game. Thus, in shifting responsibility for the "completion" of the girls' development from the father figures to the girls themselves—and short-circuiting the player-character's ability to achieve the stated objective—these game narratives create a dynamic that resembles key features of late modernity which include the replacement of institutional guidance with self-governance and incitements for citizens to be flexible, resilient, and self-actualizing.[470]

While there are additional defining characteristics that demonstrate how *The Walking Dead* and *The Last of Us* remediate the *Bildungsroman* and use the at-risk girl figure as a vehicle

[469] *The Walking Dead* tracks major player choices which have effects on scenes both within and in subsequent installments, allowing players to compare their decisions with those made by other gamers. *The Last of Us* also features an online multiplayer mode, wherein they play as different people groups depicted in the main campaign.
[470] Harris, *Future Girl*, 2.

for exploring neoliberal incitements to accept precarity, gameplay mechanics can be analyzed in relation to their harnessing of the player-character's individual choice and facilitation of his or her operational and philosophical self-actualization.[471] As such, it would be interesting to examine the ways that the affective registers of these female coming-of-age game narratives might hail young men—who are typically conceptualized as the primary audience of videogames—to also develop traits of the ideal neoliberal subject. Despite accounting for the ways these interactive narrative texts about girlhood development use playable male protagonists for their gendered address to male gamers, this line of inquiry would still complement the discoveries presented in this dissertation.

While performing close readings of reconfigured traditional tropes of girlhood development across national cinemas, I have pointed to the transnational circulation of neoliberal postfeminist discourses and argued that the at-risk girl figure's inability to self-actualize must be read within the context of worsening inequalities. Given her historical and ongoing figuration transnationally as a symbol of anxiety and possibility during periods of societal change, it is highly likely that we will see yet another iteration of the at-risk girl in the future.

[471] *The Walking Dead* and *The Last of Us* play with and trouble player expectations, which Ensslin argues is one of the markers of games that remediate the *Bildungsroman*. For example, *The Last of Us* unexpectedly makes its teenage girl protagonist the victor of a "boss battle," not her male guardian. Ensslin, "Gamifying the Bildungsroman," 1.

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