

## CHAPTER NINE

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# Doing Popular Culture: Troubling Discourses about Youth

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"Young women lose their senses."

This line appeared recently in boldfaced print in the entertainment section of a local newspaper. The reporter was describing reactions to the performance of a "young Latin superstar" (Amaya, 2003). One might ask why young women were a focus of the report. One might even wonder what constitutes *young* in such an account. More probably, however, very few people asked those, or any, questions when they read those words. Most readers would be likely either not to question the sentence or to chuckle and nod their heads as they read the report, perhaps visualizing a mass of screaming *girls* swarming at the feet of a male performer.

In this chapter, we notice and trouble that line and the assumptions that go with it. We ask the question, "What does it mean to be young?" What do popular discourses—everyday talk, images, and signs—communicate to people about what an adolescent is? Further, what is it about *adolescence* that leads people to believe it is a special time period in human development, a time of searching, confusion, vulnerability, and crisis? What is it about adolescence that leads people to fear that certain influences will prey on the alleged confusion, vulnerability, and crisis of youth?

Consider, for example, the following excerpt of a response from "The American Decency Association" to the sales catalog published by the popular youth clothier, Abercrombie & Fitch (A&F) ([www.abercrombie.com](http://www.abercrombie.com)) where images of scarcely clad male and female youths are used to advertise their brand.

#### WHY A&F'S CATALOG DRAWS OUR GRAVE CONCERN

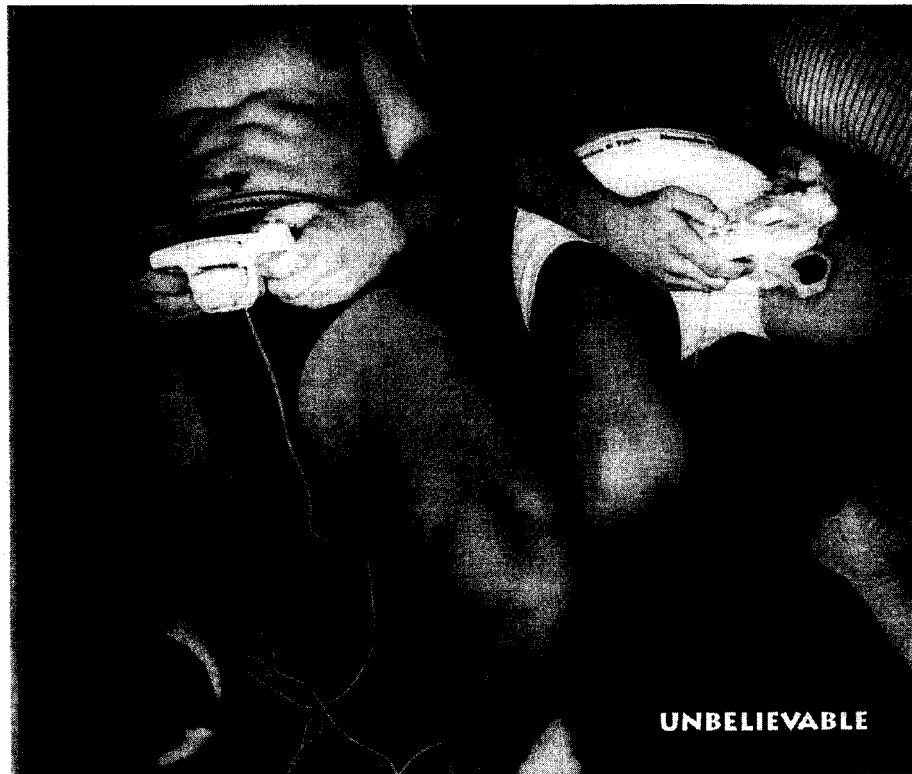
(1) Because A&F relentlessly shows no regard for the *innocence of our children*...[emphasis added]

(3) Though the vast majority of American corporations avoid using pornography to target our youth for sales and the lining of their pockets, A&F shamelessly and aggressively uses eroticism to bring youth to its doors and to their cash registers...

(6) I have four children. Through their growing up years, I have desired and prayed that each of my children would save themselves for marriage. I'm not finished with parenting and all of my children haven't finished growing up. Any corporate entity, TV program, magazine, video game, movie, catalog that attempts to undermine the sexual purity of any of my children... ([www.americandecency.org](http://www.americandecency.org))

One might argue that this text is the product of a small, radical, religious group unique in its position against A&F's marketing campaign. However, other groups also protested A&F's targeting of youth. For example, Desantis (2002), published an article entitled "Unbelievable: We control who you think you are," in XY (see Figure 1). Desantis, who was nineteen years old at the time, describes how gay youth such as himself were being controlled by A&F's self-proclaimed "*coordinated lifestyle reinforcement*" campaign [emphasis added].

We do not necessarily disagree with the argument that corporate entities use various forms of mass media and popular cultural texts to sell not only goods but also *desires and identities*, via brands, to people. What we are concerned with, however, is the assumption that young people, people between the ages of ten and twenty-five years (Arnett, 2002), are somehow more vulnerable, more open to such exploitation through branding and other media outlets than are adults (e.g., Buckingham, 2003). The assumption implicit in such discourse—that



## we control who you think you are

Figure 1. Photo and text from Desantis (2002) in XY

young people will move from “innocence” to some sort of deviance as a result of their engagement with artifacts of popular culture—reveals what adults’ believe about both young people and popular culture.

Such discourse suggests adults believe youth of a certain age to be highly vulnerable to certain influences as they search to *find themselves*, to *become* something or someone. The idea that popular cultural texts, if left unchecked and unmonitored in the hands of youth, will turn innocent children into confused, lazy, or even deviant adolescents reveals the assumption that popular cultural texts prey upon young people, and that young people are not capable, perhaps as a result of diminished rationality (Lesko, 2001), of reasoning through

the influences of those texts. That the same concern is not directed toward adults using popular cultural texts suggests that young people are assumed to be in a special category, a transitory period during which they are especially susceptible to the wiles of those who might lead them astray. Adulthood, in this view, is apparently a state of mind and body in which a person has achieved a stable identity and no longer experiences significant confusion or uncertainty.

For our part in this book on deconstructing common constructions of "the adolescent," we examine some of these assumptions about youth, with a particular focus on how some youth use popular culture. We focus on adolescents/youth because adolescence is a highly "marked" and over-determined category. A number of assumptions about people in the adolescent age group are made simply by virtue of *age*, regardless of the person's ethnicity, race, social class, sexual orientation, gender, or religious affiliation. Of course, assumptions are made about all sorts of social groups, including racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, social class, and religious groups. But adolescence is a unique grouping because it is assumed to be a transitory grouping, a stage or time period that people assume one enters and eventually leaves. It is also commonly assumed that adolescence is a time of searching, of establishing one's identity, of *becoming* (e.g., Lesko, 2001; Moje, 2002).

We give special attention to popular culture because it is so often linked in both popular and research literatures with dangerous influences on "the adolescent." Popular culture is all too often reduced to the crazy stuff that kids listen to, watch, and wear. On the flip side, young people and youth culture often get represented by images of all youth as immersed in and overwhelmed by popular cultural texts, caring about nothing and nobody else, and living their lives in a swirl of brands, logos, music, television, film, and Internet web pages. Although many youth both enjoy and produce popular cultural texts, they cannot be reduced to those texts. Young people make *youth cultures* from a complex intersection of home, school, community, peer, and popular cultures. Youth cultures can be thought of as practices and meaning systems enacted by, and unique to, particular groups of youth as they use popular cultural texts, among many other cultural

texts and models, to interact with each other and with parents, teachers, older siblings, and other elders.

Distinguishing youth cultures from the more broadly disseminated popular cultural texts that people enjoy is also important to challenging essentialized conceptions of youth cultures. When youth cultures are positioned, for example, merely as fourteen year olds watching MTV (Music Television), wearing a certain brand of clothing, or engaging in Instant Messaging, there is no sense of how particular groups of young people, of particular ages and subjectivities, in particular geographic spaces, at particular points in time, using particular aspects of particular forms of popular culture, are making sense of it.

There is also little empirical sense of how people of any age make use of popular culture texts to move in and out of different cultural arrangements. Several of the participants in the first author's research project, for example, listen to what is popularly labeled "gangster rap," but also avidly enjoy cumbia, merengue, mariachi, and salsa. They listen to, discuss, read, and write about different musical genres in different groups, but they do not necessarily confine the genres to those groups. While attending one young woman's *quinceañera* practice, or fifteenth birthday celebration, for example, Elizabeth observed the youth moving in and out of different popular musical texts, practicing for traditional dances as they listened to Mexican folk and pop songs, and weaving in hip hop moves and singing the lyrics as they danced. They interacted with the adults who were present and with each other around these texts.

Thus, the notion of something stable called youth culture should be a contested notion, as should the notion that youths are only interested in popular culture. People of all ages make cultural meanings and systems, and they all use popular culture, among other cultural models, to do so. They carry those cultural forms and models into other cultural groups of which they are members. So-called youth do not make culture by themselves; they make youth cultures while living in relation with so-called adults, and adults participate in the making of youth cultures and popular culture. Indeed, adults often control the making of popular culture, even as they critique it. Thus, how young people use popular culture should be studied in local and

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particular ways, and researchers should examine how youth are powerful and strategic in their uses of popular culture.

At the same time, studying youth culture in local and particular ways can reveal the dangers inherent in youth using popular culture, albeit different kinds of dangers than those feared by adults who believe that young people are somehow more susceptible to the vagaries of popular culture than are adults. There is a real danger of a large group of young people falling for simple consumerism offered via popular cultural texts. But there is also another group of young people engaging in a cynical rejection of the world as they become more aware of what these texts mean for their lives. A careful examination of the relationship between youth cultures, adult cultures, and popular cultures can point to ways educators might learn from youth about how and why they use various cultural texts, allowing educators to support young people as they learn new cultures, knowledges, literacies, and ways of knowing.

#### JUST WHAT IS POPULAR CULTURE?

We have used the phrases *popular culture* and *popular cultural texts* a number of times in the preceding passages, but these are phrases with few clear definitions. In their introduction to a *Harvard Educational Review* issue on popular culture, the editors refer to figures from film, music, and sports as they introduce the topic of popular culture (Gaztambide-Fernández & Gruner, 2003). Notably, they refer first to the movies made from the widely popular Harry Potter book series, implicating the novels as forms of popular culture only at the end of their essay, thereby suggesting that the "popular" in popular culture relies most heavily on electronic forms of dissemination such as television, film, radio, or Internet, although books and magazines remain important venues for popular culture.

The *spread* of popular culture, however, has a great deal to do with the technologies that carry pop culture texts. Cell phones, pagers, Palm Pilots, laptops, board-computers, e-check in, e-mail, chat, messenger, blogs, and video games are just some of the high-tech hardware and software that surround people, not to mention the mechanisms of film, television, and radio. Other technological means of communicating are also widely available, including the branding of

various items, from clothing to equipment. People of all ages, for example, sport clothing labels that carry with them, whether the wearer likes it or not, identities of "punk," "grunge," "prep," "rapper," or "retro." The identities attached to such styles are not accidental; the word *brand* has multiple meanings, from varieties of a product to labels that, metaphorically and literally, *brand* and identify wearers and users.

Since World War II, the entertainment industry, now intimately connected with every other industry, has significantly enhanced its all-encompassing presence and influence in the lives of young people and adults alike (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972). There is hardly an hour, or even a minute, that the average person is not confronted with some kind of commercial media, brand identity, or logo, whether on television, radio, Internet websites, billboards, or print magazine. These texts and brands, of course, are sold to people, who use and consume them even as they adapt them to serve their own purposes. Popular culture, then, seems to be intricately connected with many aspects of most people's identities, social lives, socio-political situation and views, economical situation, and the massive political and commercial machinery that operates around all people.

Why has popular culture in all its current manifestations become so popular? It could be said that legal, medical, and educational discourses of adolescence have all had their moments, but that popular culture discourses are dominant at this time. Furthermore, the cultural models provided through various forms of popular culture seem to frame Discourses (Gee, 1996)—ways of knowing, doing, believing, reading, and writing—which are more used, connected to, and liked by youth. Or it may be that we notice the popular cultural texts and accompanying discourses that youth use because of the unwavering gaze we direct at young people. Whatever the explanation, popular culture appears to be an explicit and significant aspect of the cultures that young people make for themselves every day (e.g., Dolby, 2003).

At least three dominant critiques of popular culture are prevalent in educational, sociological, anthropological, and psychological research literatures, and reflected in mainstream society. Often these critiques are aimed particularly at young people's uses of popular cultural texts. For example, despite and perhaps due to its dominance,

many people consider popular culture to be "low" culture, trashy, non-artistic, and representative of the baseness of contemporary society (e.g., Bennett, 1994; Hirsch, Kett, & Trefil, 1987). Popular culture aimed at or taken up by youth, in particular, is often accused of being deviant in orientation, exposing young people to drugs or "immoral" behaviors, or encouraging them to be unproductive, or "slackers." The common lament that television programming, for example, has led to shorter attention spans among children and youth is routinely taken up in research studies. Cottle (2001), for example, argues that television and other popular cultural forms have led to a culture of "distraction" in which young people cannot sustain focused attention, suggesting weakened cognitive processing abilities. Such views of popular culture imply that popular culture is worth less than *high* culture, and that it can even threaten high culture or the development of higher-level thinking.

A second critique of the popular is that it represents an explicitly manipulative tool of domination (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972) or a highly seductive, hegemonic arm of capitalism (Grossberg, 1995). Popular culture, it is argued, encourages users to consume material goods by selling not just the goods themselves, but also desires and needs. As a result, consumers require material goods designed to sate their desires or to build relationships with others who have similar desires. Consumers of popular culture, especially youth, then, are seen at best as co-opted by the popular cultural texts they consume and, at worst, as duped into thinking that the texts are expressions of their own interests and desires. The notion of consumption is particularly important in this critique, suggesting that users of popular cultural texts and brands digest texts without question, awareness, or critique of what they are taking in. In this view, popular culture is neither low nor high culture, neither traditional nor innovative. It is less about culture and more about economics because the artifacts of the popular are mired in neo-capitalist webs of production and consumption that use the consumers of popular culture to sell desires and goods.

Finally, an alternative to both of these critiques is what might be seen as an agentic or romantic critique of popular culture. From this perspective, popular cultural forms are seen as new, inventive, and

more advanced forms than the so-called classic forms of culture. People's uses of popular culture are said to represent innovative ways of thinking that far surpass the rigid, bounded modes of representation of days gone by. Two views dominate within this perspective. For some scholars, youths' uses of popular culture should be examined for the pleasure (or *plaisir*, à la Barthes, 1975) that the young people derive from the texts (Alvermann, Hagood, & Williams, 2001; Buckingham, 1991). According to this view, youth can be seen as aware of, but unconcerned with, the ways in which popular cultural texts might be subtle forms of domination and reproduction of social, economic, and political systems that serve some and disenfranchise others. Their pleasure in the texts mitigates against the problematic nature of the texts. A second perspective argues that the popular is an explicitly agentic and even resistant space in which people's innovations will reinvent culture in ways that diminish strict social reproduction and the dominance of traditional forms and ways of thinking (Dolby, 2003; McCarthy, 1998). According to this view, people—especially young people—make culture anew with the texts of the popular as their material. Indeed, their use of brands and various mass media turn the texts back on themselves, diminishing, or at least challenging, the power of the texts to shape their lives.

In each case, we would argue, the critiques are over-determined serving to frame popular culture and youth culture as either good or bad. But popular culture—no less than the youth cultures so often subsumed to it in popular discourse—cannot be reduced to categories of good *or* bad, self-expression *or* other-exploitation, deviance *or* innovation, resistance *or* domination. Popular culture is simultaneously a product of people's imaginations, curiosities, and expressions and an institution with goals of shaping desires and needs, selling products, and manipulating imaginations and expressions. Popular culture is made as people live in the everyday world, and it is made by *both* people living out their lives *and* industries trying to sell people goods. It is the complex, double—indeed, multiple—life of popular culture that makes it hard to study, to use, and to control. It is the multiple life of popular culture that often makes it difficult for educators to decide whether popular culture is something that youth use productively or that uses youth for its own gains. Our data show

that youth both use and are used by popular culture, and that working this tension, rather than simply avoiding it by avoiding popular culture, is the job of educators.

### JUST HOW DO YOUNG PEOPLE USE POPULAR CULTURE?

Ethnographic research shows that young people especially are heavy users of all forms of popular culture, or *youth lifestyle media*, a phrase which the second author has coined, through all available traditional and new media technologies (e.g., Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Buckingham, 1991; Cottle, 2001; Dolby, 2003; Holloway & Valentine, 2003; Kress, 2003; Lewis & Fabos, 1999; Mahiri, 2003; Moje et al., 2004; Nesor, 1997). Youth, as shown in much ethnographic youth research, can be sophisticated and critical in their use and re-use of popular culture material, whether electronic or print-based. Popular cultural texts can inform their desires (van Helden, 2002), shape identities (Holloway & Valentine, 2003; Moje & Ciechanowski, 2002), enhance or change the nature of literacy skills (Gee, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2002; Lee, 1993; Mahiri, 1994, 1998), improve certain kinds of test scores (Gee, 2003), and stimulate creativity (Alvermann, et al., 1999; Gee, 2003; Holloway & Valentine, 2003). Such texts can also do the opposite, or at least leave them indifferent or uncritical, just as they do to many adults (van Helden, 2002). In what follows, we present some of these possibilities via data drawn from Caspar's work with young men "reading" Abercrombie & Fitch (A&F) catalogs and websites, and from Elizabeth's work with young Latinas as they talk about, read, listen to, and watch music and film.

#### Doing Popular Culture: Abercrombie Boys

Caspar's examination of youth using popular culture is presented as narratives drawn from interviews with three different young men. The participants in Caspar's research, Jason, Tim, and David,<sup>2</sup> were all twenty to twenty-two years old at the time of his study. Jason and Tim agreed on having some of the characteristics commonly associated with adolescence or as "behaving as an adolescent," while David embraced "being one" and seemed to equal his adolescent status to a constant state of "post-modern bliss," as he put it. He added that there is "really no other way to be anymore, no matter what your age

is." In short, given their biological age, the Abercrombie & Fitch target group guideline, and their own claims to adolescence, we were satisfied that these participants would be suitable for this analysis.

Jason was twenty-two years old at the time of the interview, which took place in 2002. He was a business major at an East Coast private university in a major metropolitan area. His parents are Argentinean and American, but he has lived in the United States since the age of six, except for one year in Argentina during his late teens. He identifies himself as gay, and at the time of the research wore A&F clothing almost exclusively. He had worked at an A&F store as a "brand representative." Jason also looked like a model typically found within the A&F advertisements, with a very strong, fit physical appearance, white complexion, and energetic and playful, but serious and masculine behavior in engaging with others. That is, his body language was self-confident and his responses to the interview questions came in a strong, low voice without intonation or fluctuation, suggesting a confident and assertive manner. In other words, he seemed to know what he wanted to say and seemed confident that his comments would be accepted and understood.

David, twenty years old at the time of the interviews, was a student at a large state university in the Midwest United States. He studied comparative literature; was very much interested in different types of music, art, and drama; and often creatively engaged in producing poetry, screen plays, paintings, and photography. He has an Israeli and American background and had done all his schooling in the United States. Specifically, he described himself as "Moroccan, Egyptian, Israeli, with a dash of German and a sometimes nauseatingly overwhelming American coating." He identified himself mostly as gay, suggesting that he didn't "know if he wants to buy into the stereotype all the way." David dressed in a slightly *alternative* style mixed with some university logo-wear.

Tim lived down the hall from David in the same apartment building on campus. Tim was a twenty year old European American philosophy major at the same Midwestern state university. He was a rather short, skinny young person who wore baggy, oversized "street-wear." Tim identified as heterosexual and spent a lot of time with

David socially. He was born in the Midwest and did not have a great deal of travel or living experience outside that area.

Caspar interviewed Jason in a structural manner about his opinions of the A&F brand and his experiences working for them at an East Coast store. David and Tim engaged in a more informal conversation in David's apartment, and later at a restaurant, while they reflected on some of the things Caspar suggested, and offered topics and opinions of their own as well. During this second conversation, Caspar asked them about A&F in a more integrated manner as part of a larger conversation of popular culture and identity, while leaving the table free for anything they might want to offer. Because Caspar's goal was to examine whether and how the A&F brand was taken up as a popular cultural text by these youth, his analysis focuses primarily on the young men's interpretation of A&F. Tim, however, did not view A&F as integral to his identity, and so Caspar allowed the focus of the interview to expand to the popular cultural texts with which Tim did engage. Consequently, Tim's case allows for an interesting comparison of the ways the young men used and were used by different popular cultural texts. We present each case, or narrative, in succession, beginning with Jason.

### *Jason*

Caspar met Jason while attending a linguistics conference where Jason served as an assistant to the conference organizers. When Caspar asked Jason, after several days of observing him, why he always wore A&F, Jason explained that it was because he had worked there in the past and they gave him discounts on clothing purchases. As a student, he added, he was too poor to buy new clothes. He immediately added that he did not wear A&F because he particularly liked them, their clothes, or their image, adding that it was actually "pretty anti-gay."

Jason acknowledged the appeal of A&F's advertising campaigns insofar as the models used were "hot." He explained that he did not really know anything about A&F other than they sold "boring men's clothes which my father used to buy," and only realized their merchandise and image had changed when he went for a job interview at the suggestion of a friend. He was surprised nobody wanted to know

much about his background; the recruiters were only interested in whether or not he was "trainable" and whether he "had the look." He received a "brand representative" contract. Jason noted, A&F staff are not "sales people," an expression which seemed to leave a bad taste in his mouth. He soon moved up to be assistant manager and started hiring and firing people himself. To do so, he said, he used the "look-book," which consisted of guidelines on what job applicants were supposed to look like in order to fit A&F's brand image. It also described the colors that staff could wear during working hours: clothing colors matched skin tones. Jason said that he became appalled by the obvious anti-gay and anti-black attitudes of the district managers:

The district manager made it pretty clear to me that I needed to hire hot, A&F-look boys and girls. Black people were obviously not welcome, not even as customers, really. He eventually forced me to fire a boy for swishing too much while he walked around the store. It just really pissed me off, and eventually I quit. I know I still wear their shit, but that's just financial. I can't believe people buy into all those bimbos and yeah, the boys are hot, but are they brainless or something?

In his talk, Jason made sure to distance himself from what he claimed are A&F's racist and sexist policies, while he defended his own A&F outfits. He did acknowledge that the models are sexy and that he liked them, but also associated the models and, seemingly, the consumers with being "brainless."

A&F as a brand has a prominent place in popular, mass-produced, consumer gay youth culture, although not necessarily in local versions of gay youth cultures, because of its attractive models, who wear little in the way of clothing, and because of the homoerotic nature of much of its photography. These erotic notions are, in the advertising, connected with youth or young people. With its repeated photographs and videos of all-male interactions—A&F presents fewer all-female photographs—and its emphasis on body, beauty, and virility (van Helden, 2002), the photography of A&F, and thus, the brand itself, may present to some gay cultures a version of an "ideal gay world" in which everyone is young, beautiful, and gay. This is also why, according to Jason, some men outside the target age group wear A&F clothing:

Well, when you see guys in their forties wear A&F T-shirts in a bar then you know you've gotta stay away from them...they're after young boys. Total chicken hawks who pretend to look young and cool by putting on Abercrombie. I think it's pathetic those guys who go after boys twenty years younger and I usually stay away. Especially when they wear A&F, that's like a warning signal.

Jason accepted the A&F brand for two reasons: the models are attractive and the business model is admirable for its success. As a young gay man and a business major, for Jason, those claims seem perfectly understandable, and in line with his sexual and professional identities. Simultaneously though, he rejected corporate policies for being racist and sexist, while showing that he had little respect for the "brainless" people who so easily buy into the A&F concept. On yet another level, Jason seemed fine with college age boys wearing A&F while accusing significantly older men of trying to look younger and pursuing young gay boys. He constructed a conditional view that the brand targeted a certain age group and that trying to belong in that group when no longer within the target range was not acceptable.

Jason's story shows how young people can make complex meanings out of a particular expression of popular, commercial culture. Some premises of a brand can be accepted, while others of the same brand are rejected, and so Jason developed a system that apparently was a comfortable way for him to think about A&F. Comfortable, here, does not mean simple.

### David

Caspar has known David longer than the others, and so David was, at the time of the interviews, perhaps more aware of Caspar's interests in popular culture, youth culture, and identity. In fact, during previous conversations, David had accused Caspar of being a "pop culture slut." David generally tried to be witty, ironic, and smart and always tried to find some unusual or "twisted" connection to any interview topic. He had the following to say about the A&F brand:

Oh yum, those boys are beyond fuckable and totally porny. Just a touch slick and modern, for my taste, but that wouldn't stop me. What I don't get is the whole gender mix that's going on there, I mean, why design screen savers

with boys and tits? Either the boys don't like it or the girls don't. Anyway, I wouldn't seriously wear any of their stuff, unless one of those jocks would rip it off me [laughs].

David did have an A&F T-shirt, which he wore "ironically" and not "seriously," he said, especially when he wanted to feel "slutty." When asked about other popular culture items or websites that he uses, he mentioned an expressly gay website first. It is a portal that offers information on travel, movies, shopping, and other lifestyle topics, but is mainly used by registered participants as a chat site:

...gay.com [a website], I use the most. Where else I am going to meet guys in this town? It totally is part of and feeds my identity, because not only do I talk to them and get to express myself, which is all cool in a virtual sort of way, but eventually you can hook up and connect with actual flesh and blood. A lot of socializing I do there, and the shift from an anonymous virtual life to the moment where you have coffee with someone, or sex, is fabulous. You create every moment exactly to your current metaphysics.

It seems that David was far more interested in such a website than in a commercial site or a brand such as Abercrombie. These latter seemed too "fixed" to him, or too "modern," as he put it, which he meant as opposite to post-modern. By contrast, gay.com offered him space to perform and express different moods, values, desires, and even bodies: one can manipulate one's online profile any way one wants. With each new contact, or chat, it is possible to build a relationship from scratch, and this contact can eventually lead to a game of pinball, a cup of coffee at Starbucks, or a hook-up, a one-time sexual encounter.

David seemed to love inventing himself and every situation continuously, and somehow seemed to feel very powerful and excited about doing that. The static beauty of A&F models who could not communicate was boring to him. However, he used A&F branded clothing to send messages to others, in class or in a bar, to tell them something about who he was. In doing so, he said that he made sure not to come across as a "typical" Abercrombie jock, although he did not elaborate how he portrayed an image contrary to what he saw as the typical Abercrombie image. What is important in David's talk about A&F is the sense of agency he seemed to convey as he made use

of and took some pleasure from the erotic and sexualized image that A&F carries in the gay community. His comments indicate that he was aware of what he was doing and that he engaged in some level of critique of A&F as a brand, even as he used the brand as a way of building and maintaining relationships within his own youth culture and with others he encountered in a variety of contexts in which A&F could be read in particular ways.

### *Tim*

To the question of what his favorite popular culture artifact or website was, Tim immediately responded, "my bong." That statement came with a smirk on his face, as Tim intended his labeling of the bong as an artifact of popular culture to be ironic, a joking response. But whether or not he recognized it, Tim's behaviors in a number of settings suggest that his bong really did serve as both an artifact and symbol of his taking up of popular culture. Tim showed Caspar his room, where he was just painting a bong-stand, a wooden device he constructed himself to keep the glass bong from falling over, in a design he had previously worked out on paper. David and Tim often smoked pot together in Tim's room, which was a small dark one-bedroom studio crammed with books, laundry, a bed, a desk, and a computer.

Really, it [smoking pot] has to go together with the Simpsons. I can do them separately, but it's not the same. The Simpsons website would also be my favorite one. I use it daily. I don't quite identify with any of the characters, but it's the whole dynamic that I find nurturing. I have this really cool book too that explains how every great western philosophy is represented in episodes of the Simpsons (...) Otherwise I don't really understand pop music, or pop culture. It's such trash and just, no good, you know. I mean, Britney? Is that what you're talking about?

Tim's remarks suggest two important points about how Tim took up popular cultural texts. First, Tim considered "pop culture" to be something tasteless and for the masses, while he saw *The Simpsons* as an exception to his overall impression of what counted as pop culture. During the conversation, it became clear that he saw popular culture as unintelligent, unchallenging, sort of pre-chewed bubble-gum for

those with "small brains." His main activities during most days were, according to his own words, watching *The Simpsons*, smoking pot, and reading philosophy (in that order). He had developed a way to link these activities so that he could stay home and watch episodes on his computer screen—he did not have a TV so he downloaded them from the Net—while commenting to David and exchanging the bong. Thus, the bong served as both a tool for the making of his particular youth culture—what he did while hanging out with David and other friends—and as an artifact that connected his particular youth culture to a wider, mass media produced, popular cultural artifact. Watching *The Simpsons* with his college peer transformed the popular cultural text of *The Simpsons* into an intellectual activity particular to him and his friends.

The Internet was another source of popular cultural texts for Tim. Tim did not drink, or have a girlfriend, but he did work some nights in a local restaurant. Outside of class, however, he spent much of his time in his room. Being online "24/7," he surfed the Internet, e-mailed, and chatted often with family members and some friends, "who are a bit tired" of his "obsession" with *The Simpsons*. When offered an article on gay interpretations of *The Simpsons*, he said that would be "totally cool." On the topic of Abercrombie & Fitch, he really could not say much, as he was unfamiliar with the brand and the imagery. However, when he looked at parts of the catalog as part of the interview, he responded, "yeah, right, steroid city," and switched the topic. Tim's dismissal of the A&F brand and its merchandise serves to underscore his general distaste for what he labeled popular culture. As he took up popular cultural texts in the privacy of his own room, with his small circle of friends, Tim transformed these texts in his own mind to be intellectually and socially stimulating texts, texts that allowed him to maintain certain kinds of relationships and a certain level of social isolation.

From these few segments of in-depth interviews, it becomes clear how very differently three older youth can talk about, use, and evaluate their ideas and behaviors in relation to popular culture. There is not a simple acceptance or rejection of popular culture. In the case of A&F, Jason and David both appreciate some aspects of the brand, and both use the brand insofar as they wear Abercrombie clothes and find

the models in the advertisements desirable. At the same time, however, they reject A&F's corporate policies and what they see as empty messages of sculpted torsos and "challenged intelligence." Tim seems to reject most strongly, or demonstrate disinterest in, A&F's brand and image by dismissing the whole thing as fake—a "steroid city." He was also the only participant who identified himself as heterosexual. The other two who acknowledged the attractiveness of the models, steroids or not, identified as gay and did have athletic, muscular appearances very much like the models in the A&F catalog (while Tim did not). Tim, however, also did not comment on, or seem to be interested in, any of the females portrayed on the catalog.

Their use of the A&F brand is sophisticated, as both Jason and David wear A&F clothing in a problematized or complex way. Jason claims to do it because it is all he can afford, but also acknowledges its sex-appeal and its role in the categorization of men of different ages and their interests. He did socialize with men of different age groups and his interview comments suggest that he was aware of what the word "Abercrombie" on his chest might signal to them. David also wore the brand name, but claimed to do it "ironically," to show that his sex appeal is connected with wit, intelligence, and sauciness. In his words, "It says I'm not a dumb jock but I do like to screw." He seemed to think other features of his personality, appearance, and behavior somehow compensate for, or complicate, the "dumb jock" image that A&F carries for him.

It is worth noting that many of Jason and David's comments were connected to sexual identity and behavior. Only Tim stayed away from such remarks, and did not make any sexual comments or jokes under any circumstances during the conversations. The other two connected their discussion of A&F to other popular culture activities or media, such as bars and websites, both of which were again connected to sexual activities. It is clear that the brand had particular meaning for them in terms of sexual identification, and that they carried that meaning with them, via another medium or space such as a bar or a chat room, and communicated it to others. They were aware of the popular meaning A&F carried, and they were aware that they were "playing" with different meanings in their heads, and in their communications and behaviors.

The most important claim that we can make from these interviews is that these three young people took up popular culture very differently. They also consumed, interpreted, and re/used these phenomena in complex and creative ways. Finally, they were acutely aware that this was exactly what they were doing. These interviews hardly constitute a statistical sampling, but they do demonstrate that researchers and popular presses alike must be cautious in oversimplifying the meaning that is made by young people out of popular cultural texts. Adults need to be careful about assuming how youth are influenced by such texts and how they use these texts in their daily lives. This realization must affect how we theorize identity, adolescence, and youth culture, as young people themselves seem to be quite clear about the fact that popular culture has an impact on them. Whether this impact is good or bad remains an open question and depends very much on the youth themselves and the opportunities they have for examining these texts in explicit and critical ways.

#### **Doing Popular Culture: Latino<sup>3</sup> Lovers**

Elizabeth has been engaged in an ongoing community ethnography focused on youth culture, identity, and literacy in one urban community for five years. The community, embedded in the city of Detroit, Michigan, is inhabited predominantly by Latino/as. In the larger project, Elizabeth and a multidisciplinary, multi-ethnic team of researchers have interviewed and observed forty-one young people (both male and female) in community, home, and school settings. For this chapter, Elizabeth uses data from four young women with whom she and her team have worked closely over a four-year period. Their self-identified pseudonyms in the study are Pilar, Alexandra, Yolanda, and Jovana. The young women all live in low-income or working-class homes. Although this data is from only four young women, their complex uses of popular culture are, in many ways, representative of the complexity we observed in the larger sample of youth. The young men in the larger study differ from the young women in important ways, but we chose to focus on the young women to provide a contrast to Caspar's male participants.

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### *Background on the Young Women*

These young women identify variably as Mexican, Chicana, Tejana, Mexicana, and Mexican American, depending on when and where they were born, and when and where they are asked about their identities. Yolanda was born in Mexico and identifies herself as Mexican. Pilar, Alexandra, and Jovana were born in the United States to parents born in Mexico. Pilar and Alexandra represent themselves most frequently as Chicanas or Tejanas (residents of Texas who are of Mexican ancestry), citing their origins in Texas whenever they name themselves as Chicanas. They also labeled themselves as Mexican, Latina, or Hispanic in various written texts and on a language and identity survey. Jovana chose many of the same identifiers on the written survey, but in her talk with peers and members of the research team, she identified herself as "Mexican and American, too." Thus, the sample is representative in terms of generational status and hybrid identity enactments of a range of Latinas who identify as being of Mexican ancestry in this urban area. What unites all of the Latinas in Elizabeth's research project is (1) their strong ethnic identity enactments (all describe themselves in terms of some aspect of Mexican-ness when asked simply to describe themselves to another person); (2) their explicit attention to a wide variety of popular cultural texts; and (3) their unique usage of popular cultural texts.

Artifacts of popular culture filled their lives, and yet their lives cannot be reduced to popular culture, and certainly not to any one type or one stream of popular cultural texts. These young women were immersed in the popular, but they were also immersed in many other cultural texts, models, and practices, including school, Catholic, home, Mexican/Chicano/Latino, Detroit, Latina (i.e., gendered), and urban cultures, just to name a few. These other cultures are, of course, *popular*, in the sense that *people* make and practice these cultures, but they are not the *popular* in the sense of being broadly—no less globally—marketed and disseminated. What is critical, however, is how these cultures intersected with mainstream popular culture as the young women produced cultural practices unique to their particular physical and social space, to their groups of peers, and to their families and community. In short, these young women used a variety of cultural texts in different ways, at different times, to different ends,

thus producing something that one might generically label *youth culture*, but more specifically as *Detroit Latina/Mexicana/Chicana urban popular family youth culture*. They were not simply taking up the mainstream, but nor were they ignoring it.

### ***Doing Popular Culture: Being Latino Lovers***

Imagine a seventh grade classroom filled with young people at the end of the period. The teacher has just given the students the last five minutes of the period as "free time." Some chat with one another; some pull out homework due next period; some get up and move around the room. Others—in this case, two young women—read a magazine together. They sit side by side, flipping through the pages, glancing at images, pointing out features and dress of the people pictured, occasionally reading some text. Elizabeth approaches the two girls and asks what they are doing. "We're reading this music magazine. See, this is the Backstreet Boys, we love them, they're so fine [pronounced "foin," a pronunciation taken from an urban colloquialism and used as a marker of group membership]. This is AJ, he's Hispanic." Elizabeth's curiosity is piqued: Why the Backstreet Boys? Why AJ? Why mention that he's Hispanic? She probes the girls with each of these questions, and they respond simply: "They're fine...He's hot...We only like Hispanic boys."

This scene represents Elizabeth's first sustained interaction with two of the young women and is remarkably representative of the different interactions we had with the young women in this study. Many interactions revolved around some sort of text, usually a magazine, a CD, a song playing on the radio, or a local newspaper. A surface look at these interactions might lead one to concur with dominant discourses about adolescents, particularly young women: "young women lose their senses" and live out their lives in relation to hyper-real images of masculinity, femininity, and romantic relationships available in popular culture.

But that reading of the girls' uses of popular culture would be checked upon closer examination of their typical practices. For example, when we stopped to pick up a local newspaper while walking around the community, Pilar, Alexandra, and Yolanda turned to the entertainment section, searching for information on the performances

of bands or groups they cared about. On one outing, Alexandra and Pilar both picked up newspapers and quickly turned to the "centerfold" advertisement of an up-coming performance of the all-male group, *Intocable*, at a local dance and music club later that month. They checked out ticket prices and times, but they also talked about saving the centerfold to display in their rooms. Some of the girls present noted the prohibitive price of the concert, stating that they would not be able to attend; others said that they would find a way in, perhaps via one young women's sister who had "connections." Still others noted that the concert started too late and their parents or other family members would not let them stay out.

Even such a brief glimpse at the young women's talk around one popular cultural event can reveal some of the complexity in their take-up of pop culture. The young women, for example, were not talking about a mainstream, mass media musical group, but about following a locally popular Mexican group which sings romantic ballads and pop numbers. Second, the girls did not merely fantasize about the men in the music group; they made social and economic plans around the group's performance, discussing ways to acquire tickets or entrance (without paying), how to make use of social and familial relationships, and whether their schedules and family norms would allow them to attend the concert. The group's performance—represented in the centerfold photograph in a local newspaper—served as a site for social and economic negotiation within a larger network of social, cultural, economic, and even political relations.

Popular cultural tools can also serve as identity tools, part of a larger identity toolkit (Gee, 1996) the young women build through a variety of cultural practices and interactions. When window-shopping in a suburban shopping mall or on their neighborhood streets, for example, the young women spent a great deal of time examining music CDs of their favorite artists. The focus in these texts was, with a few exceptions, on music artists and, almost always, on male artists. However, the artists they were drawn to were different in different spaces, with the mainstream mall space offering more mainstream artists, such as rappers Tupac and Eminem, and Juvenile or boy bands, such as the Backstreet Boys or 'N Sync. In addition, some cross-over

Latino groups, such as the Kumbia Kings, received attention in mainstream stores and in local community stores.

On at least one occasion, when one young woman in the group expressed an interest in mainstream female artists, such as Britney Spears or Christina Aguilera, she was careful not to display her interest in obvious or vocal ways to the others in the group. Her interest was similar to that of another young woman who professed a love for "white" television shows, from which they could learn to "talk like a white girl," dress white, and adopt "white" hair and make-up styles. Indeed, when asked where she got information about how to "talk like a white girl," one young woman claimed, "TV. I learn everything from there" (Moje & Ciechanowski, 2002). It is worth noting that other young women watched the same shows (e.g., *Boy Meets World*), but did not talk about learning how to act like white girls from the show. Instead, they talked about the show portraying "real life" and "just being funny." Thus, their uses of the cultural texts, and the identity tools they provided, differed in significant ways. In all cases, the texts provided the girls with tools they could use to make identity and group membership claims, but the kinds of claims they wanted to make differed in important ways.

For example, although all the girls made gendered claims, Pilar and Alexandra identified more explicitly as "Latino Lovers"—even choosing that phrase as an e-mail address. These young women were stunned to find that the email address they really wanted, something to the effect of "ChicanoLoversKumbiaKings,"<sup>4</sup> was already taken, a point that underscores the power of the popular for both reflecting and shaping identities. These young women named themselves Latino Lovers because, as they announced time and time again, "I love Mexican boys," also adding that they liked "Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans." Every interview conducted with Pilar and Alexandra included a discussion of the young men in their lives, both friendships and romantic relationships. They also talked at length about what they labeled the "macho" Mexican male, who "had to be right," who had to be "in charge." Although they talked in critical ways of what they called "part of Mexican culture," they seemed accepting of such gendered relationship practices, and seemed intent on building romantic relationships with young Latinos.

Their Latino Lover identities were tied to popular Latin music texts about love, sex, and relationships. The texts—which varied from sexually explicit raps to love ballads—also were tools for imagining, learning about, or maintaining female-male relationships, reminiscent of the uses of romance novels among housewives detailed by Janice Radway (1984). They imagined, for example, fathers for their future children, referring to certain music artists with phrases such as, “he’s my sixth baby daddy,” meaning that the artist was one of six men whom they deemed good enough to be a father to their children, if they were to have them. Music texts also were useful for promoting and maintaining actual, present relationships, as well as for living out relational identities. When Elizabeth asked Pilar what song most represented her identity, Pilar responded, *De Uno y De Todos Los Modos* [*One and All the Ways...I can possibly love you*] “because my boyfriend dedicated it to me and because I have always liked it.” Although Pilar self-identified throughout the study as “Chicana” and “loud,” claiming repeatedly that “I like to be heard,” her representative song focused on love and relationships, underscoring her use of popular cultural texts as ways to maintain certain kinds of relationships.

Alexandra, by contrast, chose the word “bitch” to identify herself, and chose *Move Bitch* by Ludacris—a song performed by an African American male artist and addressed to the many women who have tried to hook up with him for his money and status. Alexandra explained: “I have a very bad temper and I most likely end up calling everybody a bitch.” In Alexandra’s case, her choice seemed to reflect her sense of self in male/female relationships, her self-positioning as someone who gets in men’s faces. Just as Butler argues about the “radical resignification” of the word “queer” (quoted in Olson & Worsham, 2000, p. 759) in queer theory, Alexandra here may be radically resignifying Ludacris’s positioning of women as bitches by taking up the title for herself to diminish the sting of the word applied to her and the rest of her gender. In such a move, Alexandra talks back to Ludacris, engaging in what those in marginalized positions have done throughout time when they take up racial or sexual slurs (e.g., nigga, queer): apply them proudly to themselves thereby dif-

fusing and transforming the power of the slur to slur, to hurt, or to marginalize.

In both cases, these young women were representative of a group of girls who talked explicitly and often about male-female relationships, and who used the songs to "hook up" with men or to define themselves as separate from men who listened to the same music. This last point is particularly important: the songs were useful not only for imagining relationships, but also for promoting, developing, and maintaining relationships. Popular cultural texts were tied to actual romantic relationships, to the structure of gendered relationships in their ethnic cultural practice, and to how they identified as young women in their everyday worlds.

Other young women, such as Yolanda and Jovana, were more interested in using popular cultural texts to learn, it seems, about different ways of being a woman. They were concerned with how to talk, dress, or present themselves in certain ways, such as learning how to "talk like a white girl," thinking through life relationships (e.g., with parents, siblings, or young men), or checking out Britney's (and other female performers') latest hair and dress styles. Both Jovana and Yolanda used the texts to learn about other ways of being outside their cultural and geographic space, thus allowing them to navigate different cultural groups, from "white girl" groups to other Latina groups, from school groups to family groups, from male groups to female groups. However, both Yolanda and Jovana enjoyed the same romantic ballads of Mexican male artists as did the previous group. What it seems Yolanda and Jovana did not share with Pilar and Alexandra was an interest in rap and hip hop music, or music that their male peers would be likely to listen to. Pilar and Alexandra, by contrast, did not share Yolanda and Jovana's interest in "white girl" texts and more mainstream *pop* music.

Thus, what linked the two groups of young women was a focus on gendered identities and romantic relationships. What distinguished them were different ways of being in relationships and different goals for the outcome of those relationships. In no case were the young women simply following along with their peers, and in no case were the young women ignorant of the implications of their engagement with the popular cultural forms. Each of them recognized how

these texts were emblematic of particular identities, and they emphasized different texts in different spaces and relationships as a way of marking their identities, for example, backgrounding an interest in Britney, foregrounding their enjoyment of certain movies, and so on, depending on the group they were with at the time.

More interesting, these differences seem to generate different sorts of *girl cultures*, with groups of young women referring to each other as "those girls who think they're all that," or as "babyish," or as "acting all naive, like a little girl." The girls who listened to, watched, or read about older male artists, particularly rappers, could position themselves as "more mature" and could use the "less innocent" texts, as they described them, to identify with the male youth to whom they were attracted to in their neighborhoods. The other girls could position themselves as "respectful" and "responsible" girls who were thoughtful and more careful of relationships. They could also position themselves as standing apart from their urban community, as signaled by the desire some girls expressed to "get out of this community," which they considered dirty and dangerous.

That a consistent pattern of talk about love, relationships, babies, and marriage appears among all the young women—including young women in the larger sample—illuminates an important source of difference in cultural constructions of the adolescent. Elizabeth, a middle-aged white academic, has noted, with some tension, the lack of talk about post-secondary educational and career goals among all of the young women she and other research team members have interviewed. Observing how the young women take up popular cultural texts which foreground male-female relationships, Elizabeth has worried that these texts, read and listened to *at such a young age* foreclose possibilities for agency and potentially cast the girls into positions of subjugation. But Elizabeth's reading of these texts, and of the young women's practices generally, are framed by her own class, race, age, and particular way of expressing gender. These young women see themselves as emotionally, physically, and socially mature enough to handle the responsibilities of romantic relationships and parenthood. They do not see themselves as children on the brink of adulthood. Indeed, their many domestic responsibilities at home, such as childcare, cleaning, cooking, and

overseeing the completion of homework by younger siblings, are similar to the responsibilities Elizabeth currently has in her own domestic life—responsibilities she did not have as a younger person. Her out-of-school time was scrupulously protected for school homework and extracurricular activities. The assumption, then, that these young women, in virtue of their age, are in need of protection, guidance, and oversight; the assumption that their time must be carefully structured for them; the assumption that their school responsibilities should be foregrounded above all else, can be understood as a white, middle-class construction of adolescence as a time of innocence, development, and becoming some particular sort of future person. When examined from the particular Latina perspective represented by these young women, adolescence seems to be a very different thing, if, indeed, a thing at all. Consequently, their choices and uses of popular cultural texts must be read from the particular social, cultural, and economic perspectives that they bring to bear on the texts.

Indeed, the desire for emotional, physical, and relational maturity as represented in the girls' choices of popular cultural texts appeared to be imbricated in the gendered, religious, ethnic, and cultural models, most visible in the traditional *quinceañera* that most of these young women celebrated. The *quinceañera* marks a specific transition from girl to woman for Latinas who practice it. It is only after they turn fifteen that young Latinas are allowed to wear cosmetics, dance, and date young men. And as often as they read teen music magazines, watched television, and listened to various music artists, these young women also read fashion magazines, searched for *quinceañera* dresses, consulted with mothers, aunts, uncles, and godparents about *quinceañera* plans, and made lists of possible *chambelans* (their male escort in the church mass and the party that follows) and *dubas*, or male attendants, for their *damas*, or female attendants. Their preparations for the *quinceañera* demonstrate the power of a variety of cultural models to draw their attention, as *quinceañeras* are rarely represented in mainstream popular cultural texts. To do the *quinceañera*, one had to *do* traditional Mexican culture.

Thus, the talk about and focus on maturity, innocence, love, and romance via mainstream and Latino/a popular cultural texts is not a

vestige of the cultural models offered by popular cultural texts alone. Rather, the young women's focus on love, relationships, and maturity bears the trace of multiple cultural models. The desire to be *mature* for these particular young women was drawn from and integrated with models of what it means to be an adolescent, Roman Catholic, Mexican young woman in this urban landscape. The cultural models of maturity, innocence, love, and romance offered to these young women are, of course, not unique to Latinas or Catholics. That is, the cultural models that position young women as innocent objects to be made mature through romantic relationships with men are offered in wide variety of religious and ethnic cultures. What is important here is the recognition that the popular cultural texts the young women identify with do not exist in a vacuum; indeed, these popular cultural texts might not have worked their magic with these young women unless the girls were not already living inside cultural models that positioned them as waiting on the edge of innocence for men to develop them into mature beings. In short, one must question the role of popular culture in "robbing children of their innocence," and examine the role that dominant social and cultural discourses about adolescence, gender, sexuality, and relationships might have in how young people decide which popular cultural texts are most interesting and useful to them.

### **Doing Popular Culture: Playing at Borders**

The group-centered analyses that we have presented are important in illustrating some differences in how young people of the same gender, ethnic background, and social class take up popular culture. However, group analyses fail to emphasize the ways in which all the young women in the study engaged with a wide variety of texts, connecting to certain texts when necessary for membership in one group or another. Group analyses also fail to demonstrate fully how these young women also merged mainstream popular cultural texts with less widely distributed Latino/a popular texts. In this section, we use a narrative constructed from data rendered by Pilar to illustrate the unique ways that these young women took up a host of cultural texts. On one occasion, Pilar, for example, read the contents of her CD case to Elizabeth, emphasizing the contrasts in her musical choices:

- P: We're gonna play our CDs, you can hear them. We'll be like, "This is Mexican. This is rap." They're like totally different. I got Juvenile: *I Got Da Fire*. Right next to that I've got Intocable. They're right next to each other.
- E: That's cool. That shows all your different identities.
- P: Um-hmm...O'Town sings a slow song, *All or Nothing*. Right next to it I've got Pegaso.

In another segment of the interview presented above, Pilar went on at length about popular cultural texts and her ethnic cultural identities, blurring the boundaries between popular culture (in the form of music that anyone could obtain on a CD, tape, or website) and ethnic culture, which Pilar claimed as an important aspect of her identity:

Penni let me borrow her Kumbia Kings CD, the first one, 'cause I've got only the second one...Have you heard the Intocable CD? I'll put this one on and if it sounds familiar then you'll know if it's *Es Para Ti*...[she is setting up the Intocable CD]...Alexandra is from Texas. I was born in Texas. We're Chicanas, we're Tejanas. In my sketch book, I've got something that says Chicana, then Pilar, then Angel...Oh, here's a song [she says the name, *Azucita*, but Elizabeth doesn't understand what the Spanish means, so Pilar explains]...You know, like sugar...azucar [she spells this for Elizabeth]. It's a really famous song, you might have heard it. "Azucita" she sings to me. "Ay, I love that song." The Kumbia Kings, they have some English songs. It has two songs, but their new CD, it has like five songs.

Pilar's movement from talk about the Kumbia Kings and Intocable to her talk about her friend, Alexandra, who has reminded her of being Tejana/Chicana, is not merely the jumbled ramblings of a hyperkinetic or confused adolescent blissfully hopping from one topic to the next. The links between these texts and Pilar's ethnic cultural identity become clear from studying both the texts, and how Pilar talks about herself and her identity across time. Her talk about Mexican music groups overlaps with her multiple self-labelings ("we're Chicanas, we're Tejanas"), just as her ethnic and gendered identity is represented in the palimpsest of labels she gives herself ("Chicana," "Pilar," "Angel"). When Pilar named herself in the midst of her talk

about Mexican music, she sandwiched her named identity between her foregrounded Chicana identity and her gendered identity. Gender was signaled explicitly with the "a" on Chicana, and more implicitly with "Angel," a polyvalent youth cultural term layered with mixed messages about innocence and sexuality for young women. Chicana, in addition to marking gender, signals a hybrid ethnicity of Mexican and American. In this move, Pilar signified her sense of self as more than one individual, as a hybrid of Chicana, woman, youth, and person. In this move, Pilar also signified for the informed reader the importance of gender in her subjectivity. The term Chicana indexes both ethnicity and gender, suggesting that there might be no further need or desire for Pilar to ground her identity in the gendered, "Angel." But the use of "Angel" underscores her identity as a particular kind of Chicana, a sexualized young woman who takes up a North American popular identity while maintaining a resistant, conflicted, borderlands identity. Pilar's choices of musical texts further this sense of self as hybrid.

The music of the Kumbia Kings, for example, is critical to her representation of her polyvalent self as both a Chicana person named Pilar and a woman named Angel, as the Kumbia Kings are themselves representative of borders, hybridity, and polyvalence.<sup>5</sup> The Kumbia Kings' latest album containing both Spanish and English songs (which Pilar specifically marked in her talk), is emblematic of both the group's and Pilar's hybrid identity. As a Chicana who lived in a predominantly African American neighborhood, and attended a predominantly African American school in Detroit, a two-way bilingual immersion school, a predominantly Latino/a high school, and finally a predominantly African American high school, Pilar's ethnic identifications had gone through a variety of transitions. As she remarked in one interview, "At my old school, I didn't talk much Spanish. I didn't talk about being Hispanic. I would never deny my culture, but I didn't talk about it much either. It's different at [middle school name]. I speak Spanish all the time." Just as she shifted her everyday practices in accordance with the dominant populations at her schools, she shifted her choices of popular cultural texts, taking up the Backstreet Boys and focusing on their "Hispanic" members early in her predominantly Latino/a middle school career, then shifting to Kumbia

Kings, Intocable, and other Mexican or Latino artists as she met Alexandra, who identified explicitly as Tejana/Chicana. At the same time, Pilar added rap and hip hop music texts to her retinue, weaving together mainstream popular texts valued in her neighborhood, as well as texts valued in her predominantly African American neighborhood, school, and in the larger Detroit environment.

Just as the young men Caspar represented used and rejected, critiqued and consumed Abercrombie & Fitch, these young women used, critiqued, *and* consumed popular music, movie, and television texts in complex ways. The young women used popular, ethnic, spatial, religious, and school culture to make something unique, a particular youth culture that drew from popular cultural texts, but also drew from interactions with parents, siblings, teachers, and community members. The culture that these youth made and lived each day was situated in particular geographic and physical spaces (Moje, *in press*), and shifted and changed with each interaction they had. Yes, they voraciously consumed popular cultural texts, but they consumed a wide variety of texts, and they took them up in ways that allowed them to represent particular facets of their identities. They were neither deeply critical nor blissfully acritical of these texts. As educators and parents, we might all continue to wonder about the effect of these texts on these young women, but we cannot look only to the texts, nor can we assume that these girls are more vulnerable than we are, simply because of their youth. They take up the texts because, whether we like to acknowledge it or not, the texts do not deeply disrupt other cultural models in their experience. In this case, the models revolve around what it means to be a young woman, and they are offered by society, religion, and schooling. Rather than focus attention on the youth or pop culture texts, we might do well to look to the interrelationship of popular culture with other more invisible and, perhaps, deeply rooted texts, discourses, and identities offered via other cultural models.

## CONCLUSION

We can no longer assume that youth live at the whim of popular culture more than any other age group. We can no longer assume that all young people take up popular cultural texts in identical ways. And

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we can no longer reduce them to the texts of popular culture. At the same time we can avoid romanticizing their uses of popular culture by highlighting the complexity and contradictions evident in their talk about and use of popular cultural texts. Although it is clear that youth are not the lazy, deviant, hormonally challenged youth they are often depicted to be in the press and some popular media, it is also clear that they are, at times, conflicted about their uses of popular culture, as clearly indicated in data from both of our groups of young people. In particular, Caspar's data indicate that even highly educated, older (on the adolescent age spectrum) youth who are accustomed to "doing critique" are not always as critical of popular culture as they might claim in their talk. For a whole host of reasons, they take up—and often use to particular ends—the texts and the artifacts of popular culture that they say they despise. Such findings lead us to consider a number of questions we believe are critical for deconstructing notions of adolescence and for enhancing the education of young people in a media-saturated world.

First, what does it really mean for young people to analyze critically the role of popular culture in their lives? Do they understand the ways that makers of mass-produced popular culture may be co-opting their interests and desires in order to sell them things and belief systems, which in turn shape their desires and interests? Must one shun a practice or text to fully critique it? What about enjoyment and pleasure? Should educators assume that enjoyment and critique are mutually exclusive? More research is needed to provide insight into how these media succeed in getting people *emotionally* involved, how these artifacts shape the system of meaning of feelings and emotions young people employ or experience, how one engages in critique of a text one enjoys or even loves, and how an active critique of popular culture would influence systems of emotion and feeling.

Second, why is the world so concerned about *youth* and popular culture, even as its major corporations co-opt popular cultural trends for the explicit purpose of selling to youth? Are youth as naive as some researchers, teachers, and parents seem to believe? It seems clear that educators and educational researchers alike assume a lack of sophistication, a developmental vulnerability in *the young person* that makes youth particularly susceptible to the negative power of

popular culture. But it is worth asking whether youth need to learn to be critical any more than do adults.

These questions aside, if popular culture is as closely connected to people's identities, belief systems, values, and behaviors as we suspect it is, and if different groups of young people are actively involved in constructing cultures from the many different cultural models available to them, then it is time to take what youth do with popular culture seriously. It is time to give it a more prominent place in research on adolescence and education. It can be argued that popular culture has become the dominant post-ideological force. Its post-modern, polyvalent appearance guarantees its stealth-like quality of being impossible to grasp, comprehend, or attack, while its inner machinery is modernly capitalist, exploitative, and linear. It can also be argued that popular cultures' polyvalent and hybrid appearance is exactly what gives it the power to serve as a tool of agency, expression, and resistance in the hands of those typically marginalized (Knobel & Lankshear, 2001; McCarthy, 1998). From both perspectives, it is important to understand that popular culture frames dominant discourses of our time and that these discourses are important tools in people's identity, learning, and self-expression kits.

If popular culture discourses open up opportunities to teach better, learn better, and understand better (Alvermann, et al., 1999; Dolby, 2003; Dyson, 2003), then educators cannot ignore them. Those who work with or study popular and youth cultures can be sure of three things at least: popular culture is everywhere, it usually has commercial interests, and it pays special attention to young people as a market (Grossman, 2003). Although youth are no more vulnerable to the *immorality* or *commercialism* of popular culture than are children or adults, they are certainly targets of organized "lifestyle reinforcements" and "the quest to be cool" (Grossman, 2003) enacted via popular cultural networks (Dolby, 2003). Systems of education serve as useful sites for such careful attention to popular culture, not because young people are especially vulnerable to the whims of popular culture, but because the school is a space where all cultural models should be closely examined, expanded, and/or challenged.

Before we jump on the popular cultural and education bandwagon, however, it seems important to ask whether we have evidence

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that some people—other than researchers—are not happy with the current assumptions about how adolescent people use popular culture and about dominant views of popular culture's place, or lack thereof, in the classroom. Although both the popular press and the research literature decry the dangers of popular culture's influence on adolescents, only certain texts are brought under the microscope. Whose interests are served by studying youths' uses of popular culture and by attempts to effect change in those uses? Whose interests are served by maintaining the *status quo*, and simply worrying about the lost innocence of imagined youth? Would those interests be served if young people learned to critique the economic and political reach of popular cultural texts?

If we deconstruct the notion of *adolescence* more fully and demonstrate that young people already engage in critique or that, in many ways, they *build* popular culture, then systems of marketing and advertising will have to be reinvented. If educators teach youth to engage critically with popular culture and to use it to their advantage, then that may change or upset the original balance or "popular commercial ecosystem" in place now. These ecosystems are an integral element of the larger economic and political system that we live in, and do not generally appreciate challenges to its wealth or power. In other words, current discourses of adolescence may be central in some way to the "neo-capitalist" organization and interests of our society. Are we prepared to encounter the consequences of critiquing one of the pillars of the system, and ready to address what happens in a post-adolescent world?

## NOTES

1. Age categorizations that distinguish adolescents from children and adults generally range from ten to twenty years. We add another layer of distinction: Adults, for the purposes of this chapter, can be considered those people who talk about *adolescents* as if they no longer belong in that category.
2. All identifying names have been replaced by pseudonyms.
3. We emphasize the use of the "o" or the "a" at the end of Latino/a, which is used to signal gender. When we are referring to males of Latin descent, we will use *Latino*; for females, *Latina*. When referring to both genders or generically, we use the term, *Latino/a*. These distinctions are important in this section, i.e., this header refers to young women who have deemed themselves those who love Latinos.

4. We are purposely vague here, although the exact phrase is noted in our field notes. Although it is unlikely that readers could track down the owners of the exact e-mail address the girls wanted and ultimately chose, we prefer to maintain as much anonymity for these youth as possible.
5. The Kumbia Kings, a musical group, was started by the brother of Selena, a Mexican female artist murdered just as her career was in ascendancy on both sides of the Mexican/US border.

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