Narratives of Violence, Myths of Youth:  
American Youth Identity in Fictional Narratives of School Shootings

Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By  
Kathryn E. Linder, M.A.  
Graduate Program in Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

The Ohio State University  
2011

Dissertation Committee  
Linda Mizejewski, Advisor  
Valerie Kinloch, Co-Advisor  
Rebecca Wanzo
Abstract

Throughout the 1990s in the United States, a series of suburban school shootings perpetrated by young, white males disrupted contemporary perceptions of American youth, often a population configured in terms of ideal whiteness. In conjunction with sensationalized media coverage of school shootings, various fictional portrayals of suburban youth violence also emerged throughout this period as what Henry Giroux has called “public pedagogy” that served to further influence national perceptions of youth. In this body of film, television and literary narratives, school violence is often related to other national concerns surrounding American youth identity such as deviant sexuality and teen pregnancy. While a good deal of scholarly attention has focused on popular representations of education and youth generally, little has been written about these specific fictionalizations of school shootings and what they signify. This dissertation offers a feminist, discursive analysis of these fictional narratives of suburban school violence and argues that rampage violence narratives are intricately connected to national anxieties regarding youth, citizenship, threats to white masculinity, and American identity. In order to illustrate the complexities of themes present across popular culture mediums, my research delves into the purpose of the narratives and what they signify about contemporary American youth identity. Thus, my dissertation will explore representations of youth violence from a variety of angles that prioritize intertextual connections. Specifically, I offer a comparative analysis of portrayals of urban versus
suburban school violence, explore the creation of gay male shooters as protagonists, and analyze fictional female shooter characters and teen pregnancy storylines. As well, my dissertation examines the genre phenomenon of young adult novels portraying school violence in order to place these novels in dialogue with other “adult” narratives. Throughout my dissertation I explicate the ways in which school shooting narratives reflect and challenge political and academic debates that situate American youth as current and future citizens in the U.S.
Dedication

For Ben. Thank you for journeying with me day by day, sometimes being pulled along, sometimes carrying me, but mostly just walking by my side.
Acknowledgements

Writing this dissertation, I never once felt alone. The community of writers and thinkers that have contributed to this project are numerous and all have made the process a joy and a privilege to complete. First and foremost, I thank my committee members Linda Mizejewski, Valerie Kinloch, and Rebecca Wanzo for their thoughtful feedback, comments, and advice on each chapter and on the project as a whole. I also offer my gratitude to my writing group members, Alexis Martina and Na’im Tyson, who provided both intellectual and emotional support throughout this writing journey. To my colleagues at UCAT and WAC, thank you for your understanding on those days when I was distracted by my latest chapter draft. Thank you also for the time and space you gave when I was physically present in the office, but not really there because I was just using the space to work on my writing. To Mom, Sarah, Megan, Ralph, Judy, Beth, and Matt – thanks for always checking in on how things were going even when you did not really know (or care) what I was writing about. Tori, thank you for your constant support and unwavering confidence in my abilities. And Ben, who gets the whole dedication page for this project, thank you for giving up the living room for a year so that I could write and research whenever I wanted. You can have it back – for now.
Vita

June 2001…………………………….Tualatin High School

2005………………………………..B.A. English, Whitworth College

2007………………………………..M.A. Women’s Studies, The Ohio State University

2005 to 2006……………………….Graduate Research Associate, Department of
Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, The Ohio State University

2006 to 2009……………………….Graduate Teaching Associate, Department of
Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, The Ohio State University

2008 to 2010……………………….Graduate Consultant, Writing Across the
Curriculum, The Ohio State University

2009 to 2010……………………….Doctoral Intern, University Center for the
Advancement of Teaching, The Ohio State University

2011-present………………………Assistant Director, Center for Teaching Excellence,
Suffolk University

Fields of Study

Major Field: Women’s Studies
Table of Contents

Abstract...........................................................................................................................................ii-iii

Dedication........................................................................................................................................iv

Acknowledgments.........................................................................................................................v

Vita....................................................................................................................................................vi

List of Tables...................................................................................................................................viii

Introduction: Narratives of Violence, Myths of Youth.................................................................1

Chapter One: Dangerous Liminalities, Constructed Criminalities: A Comparative
Analysis of Urban and Suburban/Rural Youth Violence Narratives.................................33

Chapter Two: Heteronormativity and the Queer Rampage Killer: Youth Identity,
Masculinity, and Sexual Citizenship.........................................................................................80

Chapter Three: Violence, Pregnancy, Agency: The Birth of the Female Shooter.........113

Chapter Four: Protection and Prevention vs. Democratic Participation: Power,
Citizenship, and Voice in YA Literature about Rampage Violence.................................153

Conclusion: Narratives as Myths: Situating Fictional Rampage Violence Within a Larger
Narrative of Youth Identity.........................................................................................................191

References.....................................................................................................................................209
List of Tables

Table 1. Urban School Violence Narratives.........................................................43
Table 2. Suburban Rural School Violence Narratives..............................................44
Table 3. Taxonomy of Youth Violence Narratives..................................................52-54
Table 4. Selected Examples of Subordinated Masculinities in Rampage Violence Narratives..............................................................................................................98
Table 5. Female Involvement in Suburban/Rural School Violence Narratives.....120-121
Table 6. Female Involvement in Urban School Violence Narratives......................122
Table 7. White Female Violence, Teen Sexuality, and Pregnancy in Suburban/Rural School Violence Narratives........................................................................137
Table 8. Minority Female Violence, Teen Sexuality, and Pregnancy in Urban School Violence Narratives.........................................................................................138
Table 9. Female Youth Pregnancy in Rampage Violence Narratives....................146
Table 10. Young Adult Literature Featuring Rampage Violence Post-2000.............157
Table 11. Eight Part Definition of Abstinence-Only Sex Education.......................201
List of Figures

Figure 1. Cyclical Influence of Realities and Fictions of Youth Violence……………..114
Introduction: Narratives of Violence, Myths of Youth

An “Epidemic” of Youth Violence

Since 1990,¹ there have been over two dozen “rampage” school shootings in junior high and high schools across the United States, the majority of the shootings perpetrated by young white males (Newman 2004, 308-309). The “rampage” shootings of the late 1990s, defined “by the fact that they involve attacks on multiple parties, selected almost at random” (Newman 2004, 15), have been referred to as an “epidemic” of violence among white suburban and rural youth (Snyder 1999, A25). Media coverage of these school shootings often focuses on the impact of these events on U.S. society and American youth identity. Indeed, media scholars noted the shift from coverage of initial school shootings where the violence is “salient exclusively because of its impact on the individuals involved and the community in which it occurred” to media coverage of later shootings such as the 1999 Columbine shooting in Littleton, Colorado, when media responses “highlighted the societal significance of the cases” (Muschert and Carr 2006, 756-757). The Columbine high school shooting was considered to be the deadliest school shooting in American history up to that point and “represented the violent destruction of a

¹ While school shootings were perpetrated before 1990 in the United States, the 1990s have been identified as the beginning of a phenomenon of rampage shootings that occurred repeatedly throughout the decade. In her book, Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings, Katherine Newman cites two shootings in 1992 and 1995 respectively, one shooting in 1993 and 1996 respectively, four shootings in 1997, three shootings in 1998, and four shootings in 1999 for a total of 17 rampage school shootings in the 1990s in the United States.
cherished American idea: that schools in the suburbs and the countryside were havens of peace and safety” (Associated Press 2009, np) for American youth.

The relationship between American youth identity and school shootings has been cemented through the choices in media coverage that followed the spectacle of the Columbine high school media event. As Patricia Leavy and Kathryn Maloney argue in their comparative analysis of the media coverage of the suburban Columbine shooting in 1999 and the Red Lake School shootings of 2005, which took place on an American Indian reservation, “the press gave Columbine a face, the ‘all-American’ face, whereas the victims of the Red Lake shootings received significantly less press coverage… victims were portrayed as a group and not individualized, failing to produce an emotional connection between citizens and the event” (Leavy and Maloney 2009, 281). According to Leavy and Maloney, “journalistic practice is an integral part of establishing a national memory – a constituent component of national identity – the implicit racism, classism, and sexism evidenced in our research has implications for how majority groups are positioned with respect to the collective memory dimension of nation-building” (Leavy and Maloney 2009, 280). Ultimately, the authors find through their comparative analysis that the “national memory” that was created and maintained through media coverage of school shooting events “incorporates dominant conceptions of race, class, and gender resulting in a memory repository of representations that continue to normalize whiteness, maleness, and the middle-class” (Leavy and Maloney 2009, 288).

This disturbing conclusion has also been identified by cultural studies scholars who have pointed to the ways in which whiteness, wealth, and masculinity have become embedded aspects of the media coverage of school shootings and public commentary on
contemporary American youth identity. Since “representations of violence are largely portrayed through forms of racial coding that suggest that violence is a black problem, a problem outside of white suburban America,” suburban and rural violence result in a “white moral panic” (Giroux 1996, 66) in which white, male violence must be explained away through a variety of outside influences such as violent media, mental illness, and other forms of social deviance.² Both media and scholarship often collapse “urban violence” and black racial identity, thus creating a single enemy for populations of white suburbia to fear (Giroux 1996). The dichotomy of white/black racial relations and the sole focus on black violence allows for an easy delineation to be made between white victims and black perpetrators, ignoring the ways in which racism is also embedded in complicated ways within coverage of situations like the Red Lake school shooting cited above. Creating a white/black dichotomy serves to further segregate white suburban areas as an oasis away from the urban ghetto; this dichotomy is extended to popular culture representations of school violence that often portray racially segregated education environments and youth violence (a point I will expand in the following chapter).

As early as 1977, with the publication of Stephen King’s³ novel Rage, there have been questions regarding the relationship between violence enacted by youth and popular culture representations of violent acts. A narrative of a teenage student who perpetrates a shooting at his high school, King’s novel has been blamed for actual events of school violence such as a 1996 school shooting in Moses Lake, Washington (Webber 2000, 18).

---

² This phenomenon of moral panic will be further examined in the following chapter.
³ Rage was published under the pseudonym Richard Bauchman and is considered one of the four “Bauchman Books” that Stephen King published before his pseudonym was uncovered.
In response to criticisms, King himself has asked, “how much responsibility does the author of a book bear when that book seems to form some part of the triggering mechanism for a psychotic or criminal interlude?” (King 1996, vi). This same question has been asked of violent video games (Ferguson 2008; Olson, et al. 2007), films and television (Cantor 2000; Hopf, et al. 2008; Savage 2008), and even caused singer Marilyn Manson to cancel an event in response to public outrage after the Columbine High School shooting (Taylor 1999, 12). Indeed, following the Columbine shooting, President Bill Clinton called for a summit on youth violence and, in response to “national angst over America's ‘culture of violence’, where guns can be easily bought and television, films, and computer games glorify violence,” he invited “representatives of the entertainment, Internet, and gun industries” to attend (“Clinton Calls Summit” 1999, 16).

As cited above, scholars across disciplines have questioned whether portrayals of violence in video games, literature, film, music, and other pop culture mediums influence or cause real-life violence among youth populations. However, questions about the causal effects of patriarchal culture and violence masculinity (Consalvo 2003; Watson 2007), mental illness (Franke 2000; Cullen 2008), and racial segregation (Aitken 2001; Eitle and Eitle 2003) have also been raised in scholarly texts and media reports of school shootings and youth violence. Each of these studies points to a desire to understand youth violence and its origins. In his article on suburban school shootings and the moral panics that result, Stuart Aitken (2001) offers a justification for this concern when he

---

4 Taylor notes in her article that “Marilyn Manson, whose lyrics promote blasphemy, violence and parent-killing” cancelled his show near Littleton “in case of trouble” (Taylor 1999, 12). Manson has also been accused of promoting murder and suicide through his music (Heywood 1999, 4).
explains that “although not rare when compared to long-term national statistics, white-student shootings in suburban schools tear apart the fabric of the American myth, portending the imminent rending of society’s hallowed places and its future in its young people who live there” (Aitken 2001, 598). Understanding and eradicating white youth violence is seen as a central component of ensuring a successful future for America.

*The Significance and Signification of Suburban Youth Violence in Popular Culture*

The exposure of suburban/rural schools as part of a larger mythology of white youth innocence and educational idealism, although shocking to the majority of Americans, was not surprising to feminist scholars. Feminist scholars are both familiar with and have engaged in challenging a variety of myths concerning public education and race and gender privilege in the United States. For example, a growing number of feminist analyses of education in the United States locate inequalities in policy, curriculum, pedagogy, and education research and challenge traditional notions of education as openly accessible to all and as unbiased and objective. Rather than view education as unproblematically liberatory, feminist education scholars have instead turned to arguments that acknowledge the ways in which “the whole schooling process is an apparatus for the distribution, appropriation, and stratification of discourses” (Olssen, et al. 2004, 67). More specifically, feminist scholars have critiqued the ways in which schooling, as well as representations of education, communicates normalizing discourses that work to maintain hegemonic power structures. Education practices in the U.S. and their portrayals in media and popular culture are perceived by many feminist education
scholars as embedded with techniques of control influenced by patriarchy and other hegemonic systems of inequality.  

Portrayals of education in U.S. popular culture frequently present “realities” of contemporary education that are contradictory to the lived experiences of students and teachers in order to obscure power dynamics that occur in schools and society. Even as these portrayals are often “based on a true story,” popular fictional representations of education also produce particular narratives that are raced, classed, and gendered and which act to promote dominant ideas about the “good” U.S. student and their contribution to civil society. Illustrating the ways in which education in the United States is

---

5 In her article, “Postcolonial Technologies of Power: Standardized Testing Representing Diverse Young Children,” for example, Radhika Viruru has argued that standardized tests are one technique of control in public schools. She notes that the ways in which standardized testing is enforced does not give students “the right to question what is on the test, or to refuse to take it” (Viruru 2006, 54). Specifically, she challenges standardized testing as a “technology of social exclusion: a system designed to legitimate exclusion” (Viruru 2006, 56) and reinforce socially constructed inequality and difference. Standardized curriculum has also been critiqued as a technique of control in public schools. Scholars Jean Mendoza and Debbie Reese (2001) state that “schooling that lacks salient information about the diversity of U.S. society, and that instead presents bias and misinformation; ‘White privilege,’ which obscures the real meaning of race in American life; and racial identity development, which reflects an individual’s level of awareness about the role of race in his or her life and the wider world, all affect cultural awareness and understanding” (Mendoza and Reese 2001, 17). These scholars, among others (see also Kincheloe and Steinberg 2006), claim that immigrant students and students of color are marginalized through homogenized curricular materials that continually alienate “othered” identities and represent diverse populations as lesser than or beneath the American ideal.

6 See, for example, the feature films Dangerous Minds (1995) and Freedom Writers (2007), the teaching memoirs My Posse Don’t Do Homework by Louanne Johnson and In the Deep Heart’s Core by Michael Johnson, and made-for-television-movies such as All-American Girl: The Mary Kay LeTourneau Story (2000) presented on the Lifetime Network.

7 Ideas about the “good” student are always already formed by portrayals of the “bad” student who often must be reformed by white influences (see, for example, film and
perceived in contradictory and complex ways, my research assumes that representations of suburban and rural youth violence are a form of what Henry Giroux has called “public pedagogy” and serve to shape popular understandings of the relationship between education and American identity, the liminal space between childhood and adulthood, and the centrality of white heterosexual masculinity to definitions of social, political, and economic success in the United States.

Over the past two decades, representations of the education of youth in the United States across various mediums of popular culture such as film, literature, memoir, and television have become increasingly abundant. In particular, portrayals of school violence, with a specific focus on representations of urban violence and suburban and rural school shootings, have been especially present throughout pop culture mediums. In contrast to the academic scholarship that analyzes representations of schooling, curriculum, and the extracurricular activities of students such as school sports (see, for example, Dalton 1999; Farber et al. 1994; Giroux and Simon 1989; Maeroff 1998; Mahiri 1994; McCarthy et al. 2005; Weber and Mitchell 1995), little attention has gone to fictional representations of school violence and, more specifically, the growing

---

8 The term “youth” has been defined in a variety of contradictory ways. Indeed, Cohen and Ainley have argued that “images of youth and adulthood have become blurred and confused because, for example, whilst students become older, many adults engage in activities previously associated with younger people” (Cohen and Ainley 2000, 81). Within this dissertation, I assume that “youth” is a social construction that is malleable and that changes over time. However, in order to draw boundaries for the texts within my study and to further articulate the relationship between constructions of youth and citizenship practices, I define “youth” as people who are under the age of 18 and thus are unable to vote or represent themselves as individual citizens in the United States. Primarily the discussion of youth in this study will center on adolescent and high-school-age students as they are represented in narratives of school violence.
representations of suburban and rural junior high and high school shootings that have accumulated in response to media events such as the Columbine High School Massacre of 1999.

Throughout the 1990s in the United States, a series of suburban school shootings perpetrated by young, white males disrupted contemporary perceptions of American youth, often a population configured in terms of ideal whiteness. While scholars from a variety of disciplines have expressed an interest in the ways in which the media portrays real life school violence and offered critiques of portrayals of race and gender as homogenously white and male (see, for example, Egendorf 2002; Kellner 2008; Larson 1999; Lebrun 2009; Newman 2004), there is scant analysis of fictional accounts of school shootings and school violence despite the increasing availability of these narratives across broad audiences. Following the numerous school shootings throughout the 1990s, several films, adult and young adult novels, television episodes, memoirs, and a variety of non-fiction texts emerged as forms of social commentary on school violence. Each of these representations focus on adolescent protagonists who experience or perpetrate school violence in suburban or rural settings (i.e. primarily white locations) and several of the fictional narratives take on societal issues such as school bullying and mental illness in their attempts to come to terms with the reasons behind youth violence. However, even as these narratives incorporate “real” youth problems, they also represent school violence in ways that deviate from the historical experiences of suburban school violence in the U.S. by utilizing narrative devices such as female shooters and teen

---

9 Katherine Newman, in her text Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings (2004), offers a comprehensive list of rampage violence in schools from 1974 to 2001, noting 27 different incidents, 22 of them perpetrated by white, male students (308-309).
pregnancy storylines and by hinting at relationships between psychotic youth and adolescent gay identity. The very presence of these fictional representations suggests the question of their cultural work and what the portrayals signify as a grouping of narratives.

Understanding the relationship between the realities of U.S. public education and popular culture has become especially salient in discussions of American youth as the future of the nation. In particular, national anxieties about youth encountering drug use, violence, and rampant sexuality in school settings exist alongside arguments about the need for public schooling to educate students about how to be “good” citizens. Thus, the American education system has been simultaneously positioned as both a site of danger and salvation, embodying both the problems of society and the solutions to those problems in future generations of U.S. citizens. As cultural studies scholar Henry Giroux states, “more than any other institution, public schools serve as a reminder of both the promise and the shortcomings of the social, political, and economic forces that shape society. Public schools provide a critical referent for measuring the degree to which American society fulfills its obligation to provide all students with the knowledge and skills necessary for critical citizenship and the possibilities of democratic public life” (Giroux 1999, 63). Indeed, education scholar John Dewey argues that schools become “a miniature community” that is “in close interaction with other modes of associated experience beyond school walls” (Dewey 2004, 290). Rather than isolating children from local communities and protecting youth from societal harms, Dewey argues that schools instead become sites for children and young adults to practice the roles they will play in

---

10 See Mike Males’s *The Scapegoat Generation* (1996) for further explication of these national fears.
larger society as schools work to prepare students to be citizens and workers. Dewey states, “through the curriculum, interaction patterns, and structural arrangements, schools actively encourage certain relations and identities” (Weis 1997, 84) that situate students in roles of domination or subordination. Thus, schools become a site in which American hegemonies are both articulated and practiced by youth in preparation for their eventual adult citizenship.

Feminist and education scholars have broadly critiqued representations of education for their inability to offer critical portrayals of schooling or to challenge dominant hierarchies (see, for example, Dalton 1999 and Giroux 2002). More specifically, education and cultural studies scholars such as Henry Giroux and Larry Grossberg have illustrated through their critical analyses of education and youth that portrayals of education in popular culture offer a significant site of inquiry for feminist scholars. Indeed, feminist cultural studies scholar Lauren Berlant confirms the need to unveil the embedded discourses at work in popular culture representations of education when she argues that “the hegemonic form of national culture is fragile and always in the process of being defined” to the degree that “national culture demands a continuous pedagogical project” to help assuage “the anxieties surrounding the process of making people into national subjects” (Berlant 1997, 56). By focusing on how the realities and representations of public and civic education shape and are shaped by social hierarchies, political agendas, and corporate power structures, my analysis locates broader trends of significant national anxieties about American youth as future citizens within narratives of suburban/rural youth violence.
Youth studies literature has been divided into several categories that engage the ways in which youth are represented in U.S. contexts. In order to accomplish the analyses discussed above, my dissertation draws from the body of literature that relates cultural studies of education with American identity. While acknowledging that texts within this body of literature have separate goals and theoretical foundations, I also recognize the ways these texts can be placed in conversation with one another in an attempt to locate and respond to particular gaps in youth studies scholarship. Through this conversation, I identify how research from a feminist perspective can add to the ongoing dialogue within cultural studies of education.

Several scholars have critiqued the use of representations of public education to create a national youth identity for the ways in which these representations are oppressive to female students, minority groups, and other marginalized populations (see, for example, Kharem and Soto 2006; Miller 2006; Roithmayr 1999; San Miguel 1999). Moreover, feminist scholar Traise Yamamoto argues, “women, people of color, the poor, the queer are subject to an enforced embodiment wherein the particularity of their hyper-visible bodies defines their status as the obverse of American ideality, or more accurately as the obverse upon which the idea of American national identity depends” (Yamamoto 2000, 45). In popular culture, defining an American identity against an “other” is a strategy often used in representations of education that tackle issues of globalization, Apartheid, and inner-city violence, among other contentious themes, in order to create an idealized image of white, male American students as privileged, resilient, and naturally gifted.
Education scholars have identified how popular culture often portrays youth in school in positions of vulnerability both politically and socially. As Henry Giroux argues in his book *Stealing Innocence: Youth, Corporate Power, and the Politics of Culture*, “lacking opportunities to vote, mobilize, or register their opinions, young children become an easy target and referent in discussions of moral uplift and social legitimatization. They also become pawns and victims” (Giroux 2000b, 41). According to youth studies scholars, just as women, people of color, and queer identities are “othered” for the purpose of creating an American identity, the United States is similarly engaged in a “war against its youth” through an “escalating suspension of legal and personal rights” (Males 1996, 1; 31) in order to secure a proper definition of the “good” citizen. Indeed, Larry Grossberg claims that children are merely “caught in the crossfire” between adult political, economic, and social agendas (Grossberg 2005).

Theories of the troubling relationship among youth, popular culture, citizenship, and education have been posited most adamantly by Giroux, who has written several books outlining the ways in which popular culture acts as a form of pedagogy for both children and adults (see, for example Giroux 2002; Giroux 2001; Giroux 1981). Giroux’s critique of the Disney corporation (Giroux 1999), his analysis of education films such as *Dangerous Minds* (Giroux 1997b) and *Dead Poet’s Society* (Giroux 2002), and his indictment of popular films such as *Pretty Woman* and *Fight Club* (Giroux 2002) as upholding harmful gender dichotomies of sexuality and violence are all examples of how he attempts to solidify relationships between cultural studies, the field of education, and American identity. Throughout his analyses, Giroux points to society’s engagement with “the scapegoating of young people, especially those who are poor and racial minorities”
and argues that this “points to… a crisis in public discourse, and to a growing inability on the part of society to affirm and act on the principles of social justice, equity, and democratic community” (Giroux 1999, 22).

Both inside and outside of the field of education, Giroux and other cultural studies scholars have identified how “different sites—e.g. popular culture, educational policy, classroom practices—mutually inform each other in ways that help reproduce contingent state imperatives” (McCarthy and Dimitriadis 2005, 323) that often work against youth, and specifically poor youth of color. These arguments are also in line with those of critical race education scholars who point to the paradoxes inherent to American public education. Antonia Darder, et al., for example, argue that “public schooling is widely upheld as the promise of upward social mobility, individual privileges, economic opportunities, intellectual development, and personal satisfaction” (Darder, et al. 1997, xii). Claims of education leading to social mobility, however, are contradicted by the actual experiences of many minority children in the United States and “often [serve] to obscure the problems faced by [minority] students and the best solutions for addressing these problems” (Darder, et al. 1997, xii). This contradictory relationship between lived reality and educational representation then influences social and political agendas that directly impact the lives of American youth.

Peter Kelly, in his article “Youth as an Artifact of Expertise: Problematizing the Practice of Youth Studies in an Age of Uncertainty,” outlines the diversity of the field of youth studies. Specifically, he notes that “locations within different intellectual disciplines (sociology, psychology, education, criminology, cultural studies); different objects of intellectual abstraction (youth as ‘unemployed’, ‘students’, ‘homeless’,
‘juvenile offenders’, ‘adolescents’, ‘young men and women’); different methods, forms and levels of analysis; and different interpretive frameworks, work to constitute the discursive terrain of youth studies” (Kelly 2000, 307). Despite this disciplinary and methodological diversity, the scholarship of youth studies is often articulated through one of two trajectories: how and why youth act in a variety of contexts (subcultural or underclass studies) or how and why youth are acted upon by diverse political and social agents (youth rights and “at risk” youth scholarship). The field of youth studies has been further divided by different understandings of cultural studies scholarship in the United States, Britain, and other European countries.11

Subcultural studies scholars (see, for example, Blackman 2005; Bottrell 2007; Bullen and Kenway 2004) understand youth identity as a text and “read youth cultural style… to interpret each subculture through its creation of meaning as a collective force” (Blackman, 6). In subcultural studies, youth are read primarily through their social economic class identities and their responses to culture; their actions are “interpreted as a form of symbolic politics” through their relationships to specific contexts (Blackman, 6). Examples of subcultural studies include ethnographic research on punk culture, Goth culture, skinheads, hippies, and other “alternative” groups (During 2003, 441-442). Youth subcultures are often read as “attempting to negotiate a meaningful intermediate space somewhere between the parent culture and the dominant ideology: a space where an alternative identity could be discovered and expressed” (Hebdige 2003, 450).

Rather than focus on the practices and performances of youth subcultures, this

11 For more on cultural studies divisions by country, see Cohen and Ainley (2000) and Hall (2003).
dissertation is instead rooted in the work of youth rights scholars who have noted the emergence of “powerful narratives of risk, fear and uncertainty [that] structure a variety of emergent processes and practices aimed at regulating the actions and thoughts of young people” (Kelly 2000, 302). Like Peter Kelly (2000), my engagements with youth studies “are not so much with young people in the unruly, embodied, flesh and blood sense but, rather, with the ways in which unruly young minds and bodies provoke anxieties in the policy and academic spaces of adults in such a way as to energize diverse surveillance and management practices and projects” (Kelly 2000, 303; Kelly’s emphasis). However, as Kelly points out, youth studies has also been critiqued for the ways in which it engages in these same surveillance and management practices through academe. In response, Kelly calls for a “problematizing intellectual practice” that he locates in “feminist and post-structuralist work” in order to challenge “knowledge which secures legitimacy through its objective, reasoned, sophisticated characteristics” (Kelly 2000, 312).

The need for an analysis of youth, schooling, and popular culture from the combined perspectives of feminist and education scholars is clear. Scholarship concerning the relationship between schooling and popular culture rooted within the discipline of education is ripe for feminist contribution. While education scholars have addressed several important questions concerning the racial, gendered, and classed identities of youth in their analyses of mainstream popular culture12, these studies are

12 I differentiate here between “mainstream” popular culture such as Hollywood film and primetime television, often centered on and marketed toward white audiences, and forms of popular culture that are associated with particular communities and cultures of color such as “hip hop culture” (Parmar and Bain 2007), “street fiction” (Hill, Pérez, and Irby
neither recent nor are they exhaustive. For example, scholars who study the relationship between cultural studies and education often focus on only one medium of popular representation to ground their arguments. Whether they choose film, magazines, television, music, or forms of “new media”\textsuperscript{13} these scholars oftentimes do not engage with more than one form of popular culture in their examinations and thus can often lack an intertextual analysis. This is evident in canonical collections such as Paul Farber, et al.’s \textit{Schooling in the Light of Popular Culture} (1994) and Gene Maeroff’s \textit{Imaging Education: The Media and Schools in America} (1998), as well as studies such as Mary Dalton’s analysis of education films in \textit{The Hollywood Curriculum: Teachers and Teaching in the Movies} (1999). By limiting their focus to one mode of popular culture, these often cited works identify themes within particular cultural genres, but fail to analyze how these themes can be identified across genres in particular time periods in more complex ways.\textsuperscript{14}

As well, studies of schooling and mainstream popular culture from the field of education often focus on teaching students, parents, and educators how to view popular culture such as rap music, “hip hop culture,” and spoken word poetry (Fisher 2007). I make this distinction because although I will be analyzing “mainstream” popular culture, I hope to use the methods that are employed by more recent scholars of color who study popular culture as multi-modal and culturally-embedded (see, especially, Parmar and Bain 2007; Fisher 2007).

\textsuperscript{13} For recent scholarly work on “new media” and youth studies, see Sandoval and Latorre (2007) or Hill and Vasudevan (2008).

\textsuperscript{14} As previously stated (fn 12), studies of mainstream popular culture are often limited to one mode, but more recent studies (see, for example, Fisher 2007; Parmar and Bain 2007) illustrate the ways in which cultural studies of education have been expanded to include historical and developing forms of popular culture. Indeed, Priya Parmar and Bryonn Bain begin to mix genres in their discussion of rap music, “hip hop culture,” and spoken word poetry in order to argue that “excluding the various forms of hip hop texts from the curriculum excludes voices from being heard, denying the valid existence of life experiences, languages, and cultural expressions of many students” (Parmar and Bain 2007, 156).
culture through the development of a “critical literacy” (Freire and Giroux 1989, xi; see also Giroux 1999) and thus have a limited audience and purpose. Arguing from a critical pedagogy perspective, Henry Giroux claims that the analysis of popular culture “must incorporate aspects of popular culture as a serious educational discourse into the school curriculum” (Freire and Giroux 1989, ix). From his early work and into his most recent analyses of film and popular culture, Giroux primarily discusses the ways in which cultural representations have the potential of being used as pedagogical tools when teachers and students have been given the skills to unpack these representations in a critical way. Rather than discussing how these portrayals might be deconstructed or combated from an activist standpoint that could bring about a change in representations of education, Giroux is most interested in teaching educators how to use culture as a form of pedagogy that can further the aims of a “radical democracy” (Giroux 1989, ix).

15 Implying the deconstruction of mainstream popular culture texts in the public school classroom, recent scholarship (Fisher 2007; Hill, Pérez, and Irby 2008; Parmar and Bain 2007) has argued for the inclusion of new forms of representation that can combat dominant perceptions of youth identity. For example, Parmar and Bain (2007) argue that “hip hop texts and spoken word poetry... are one kind of cultural literacy whose addition to the classroom curriculum renders positive benefits that include the legitimation of student knowledge, student voices, and student agency” (Parmar and Bain 2007, 156).

16 While Giroux is the most often cited cultural studies of education scholar, there is a diverse range of scholars that also call for a “critical literacy” response to popular culture. In addition to including canonical scholars like Giroux in discussions of critical pedagogy and popular culture, scholars Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell (2008) make a point to examine “critical pedagogues who are not on the radar” in order to honor “freedom fighters” and “people who have engaged in... revolutionary acts beyond the classroom” (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell 2008, 37). Thus, Giroux’s arguments regarding critical literacy often speak for a multitude of scholars who believe in the power of critical pedagogy for furthering democracy.
Narratives of Violence, Myths of Youth: The Importance of Intertextual Analysis

In response to these two gaps in the cultural studies of education scholarship, my dissertation argues for the necessity of an intertextual analysis to look for themes located in school shooting narratives across various mediums. This method of analysis allows for an identification of how national anxieties about youth and education are being communicated in a variety of ways to diverse audiences. As well, rather than attempting to educate teachers, students, and parents about how to critically assess these narratives, my research instead delves more foundationally into the purpose of the narratives and what they signify. As post-structural scholar Lindsay Prior argues, “a representation should be understood… as something to be explained and accounted for through the discursive rules and themes that predominate in a particular socio-historical context” (Prior 2004, 324). In order to identify dominant discourses, I look at various genres of popular culture to locate what messages are being communicated across mediums.

Understanding popular representations of U.S. education as mediated by actors with an investment in the creation of certain narratives and the maintenance of particular social hierarchies raises the following research questions that are foundational to this dissertation: What are the dominant narratives that are communicated through contemporary popular representations of school shootings? Which institutions and/or individual actors are shaping these popular representations and for what purpose? And, how have these representations reflected or been influenced by recent political and historical events (such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, national anxieties concerning immigration, sex education debates, particular incidents of school violence, etc.)?
Because “media and popular culture are contested terrains, always subject to disruptive translations and negotiations” (Giroux 1999, 7), I address these questions by analyzing a variety of different popular culture mediums that offer contemporary portrayals of school shootings in the United States: feature films, television, novels, young adult novels, documentaries, non-fiction and media accounts, and memoir. Each of these mediums are similar in that they offer portrayals or analysis of school shootings, but each medium also provides distinctive insights to my research through their diverse forms and use of genre. Through my analysis of these diverse narratives, I draw out intertextual themes that “mak[e] visible the non-official viewpoint, the marginalized, the silenced and the oppressed from other, more dominant viewpoints” (Baxter 2003, 69). However, even as my dissertation seeks out common themes across diverse texts, I also note the ways in which these texts offer “a plurality of voices which do not fuse into a single consciousness, but rather exist on different registers, generating a ‘dialogical’ or intertextual dynamism among themselves” (Baxter 2003, 67). This is especially true of my analysis of young adult novels that takes place in Chapter Four.

My dissertation analysis primarily relies on methodologies within Feminist Post-Structuralist Discourse Analysis (FPDA) as defined by Judith Baxter (2003). Utilized by scholars studying both gender and education, this method is connected to both Conversation Analysis (primarily used in the field of linguistics) and Critical Discourse Analysis and is particularly helpful in my research as it combines methods from the fields of Education, Cultural Studies, and Women’s Studies. Offering a specific focus on gender that attempts to locate both subordinated knowledges and identities, this method is influenced by scholars such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler.
Baxter broadly defines FPDA “as a feminist approach to analyzing the ways in which speakers negotiate their identities, relationships and positions in their world according to the ways in which they are located by competing yet interwoven discourses” (Baxter 2003, 1). The use of FPDA for this dissertation project is highly appropriate to my research goals because of the method’s focus on intertextuality, the recognition of silent and silenced voices, and the method’s emphasis on the importance of heteroglossia, or “the struggle for control of signifiers… and the process by which discourses compete to fix meaning permanently and irrevocably on behalf of hegemonic interests” (Baxter 2003, 70). The ways in which FPDA methodologies seek out silenced voices, between spaces, and subjugated knowledges are central to my research because the youth subjects that are being represented are located within the liminal space between childhood and adulthood, non-citizen and citizen.17

Michel Foucault’s theories of discourse are especially pertinent to my study because of the relationship he draws between discourse, power, and the management of populations through various governmentalities. By articulating the ways in which societal discourses result in the creation of “docile” bodies and hegemonic power structures, Foucault has defined and theorized power in contrast to the conventional view. Often theorized as top-down, located within individuals, and repressive, Foucault has instead articulated the ways in which power is diffuse, that it works as a network, and that power is productive (Foucault 2000). For Foucault, power is the governance of societal

17 While several feminist scholars (see, for example, Deveaux 1999; Hartsock 1997; Moi 1985) have critiqued post-structuralism for the ways in which it challenges the category of “woman” to the degree that women’s political agency is undermined, other feminist scholars (such as Butler 2003, de Lauretis 2003, and Lather 1991) have articulated the ways in which post-structuralism can be taken up and utilized for feminist purposes.
standards and norms and can be theorized in multiple forms. Challenging subjugation as a primary form of power that dominates (what Foucault refers to as “sovereign” power), Foucault instead offers a theory of subjection in which power is located within the social nexus and within socially defined norms. By identifying the ways in which power is located within the narratives about youth violence, this dissertation evidences how that power both (re)produces and maintains particular narratives of youth identity.

To help accomplish this task, I turn to Roland Barthes’s theorization of myth. In particular, Barthes is helpful because he explains the relationship between representation through text, societal norms, and power in his discussion of myths. Barthes argues that myth as form is “a system of communication” that “has in fact a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes on us” (Barthes 1982, 93; 102). According to Barthes, myth works “to distort, not to make disappear” (Barthes 1972, 121), and thus myth must be deciphered through a form of “interrup[tion]” that causes one to “pass from the state of reader to that of mythologist” (Barthes 1972, 124). Barthes points to the challenges of understanding mythical signifiers because their meaning is “absent but full” (Barthes 1972, 124). This is certainly true of the texts in this study, which draw on discourses about a liminal population whose identities as American (non) citizens are constantly in flux.18 Within fictional school shooting narratives, youth identities are constructed around authors’ agendas and speak to larger societal discourses, even as they purport to be narratives of

---

18 For example, school shooters can be tried as adults for their crimes (Kip Kinkel, for example, was tried as an adult for a school shooting he perpetrated in 1998 at age 15), but the crimes are considered particularly heinous because they are perpetrated against “innocent and helpless” children (Webber 2003, 15).
caution or explanation.

Because myth is “read as a factual system” (Barthes 1972, 131), the origins of the texts through which the myth is communicated are particularly significant. Indeed, Barthes argues that even as myth is interpreted as fact, its actual intent is “to empty reality: it is, literally, a ceaseless flowing out, a hemorrhage, or perhaps an evaporation, in short a perceptible absence” (Barthes 1972, 143). It is precisely because myth is meant to reassure through its naturalization of power structures that it “organizes a world that is without contradictions” (Barthes 1972, 143), complexity, or the in-between spaces of liminality. Instead, myth brings about a “blissful clarity” (Barthes 1972, 143) that undermines critical thought and “depoliticizes” speech acts (Barthes 1972, 142).

Melissa Wright (2006) offers a feminist contribution to this discussion of myth through her articulation of the ways in which discursive identity constructions based in myth can have material consequences (see also Naples 1997; Roberts 1997). Focusing on the creation of gendered myths of disposability, Wright argues that inherent power structures create mythical narratives in order to “influence social behavior” and construct power as “naturalized, apolitical, and beyond human intervention” (Wright 2006, 4). Specifically, Wright utilizes a Foucauldian framework when she notes that a myth “serves as a disciplinary device for patrolling the bounds of… normativity” by constructing identities that “[reaffirm] explicit relations of power and hierarchy” (Wright 2006, 5) within larger society. According to Wright, mythical characters function in society as those who “embody intrinsic and indelible flaws that explain not only their own demise but also the demise of real people who, in everyday life and in different situations, share their signifying traits” (Wright 2006, 5).
The mythologies that are created around youth violence and, in particular, around the perpetrators of this violence, are foundational to this project. That these myths are created through media spectacle and then maintained and built upon in fictional narratives of suburban and rural school violence points to national anxieties regarding youth identity and citizenship. Feminists have illustrated the importance of identifying those who benefit from the mythologies that maintain dominant power structures in order to identify where power is located. Wright argues that even as societal myths are upheld by large institutions of power such as media, government, and structures of capitalist gain, these myths can also be combated through “building coalitions that do not assume shared identities or universal perceptions of… experience (and relationships), but that… explore how an embrace (rather than denial) of social difference can strengthen political coalitions” (Wright 2006, 15). Wright further claims, “to sabotage the myth is to strike a blow at the numerous hierarchies that rely upon its constant repetition” (Wright 2006, 15). In other words, by identifying the harmful myths within popular discourses and narratives of youth violence, as well as the societal anxieties through which they take root, political action can occur through what Barthes has theorized as an “interruption.”

Ascending Analyses Through Multi-Methodologies

The discursive analysis outlined above creates a foundation for a “multimethod qualitative design” (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2004, 307) that allows me to look at the texts in my study from a variety of angles in order to excavate foundational and intertextual myths, narratives, and themes. Specifically, I employ both close textual analysis and feminist film theories to engage with the primary texts in my research. Feminist scholars such as Lauren Berlant in her text The Queen of America Goes to Washington City (1997)
have pointed to the ways in which close readings of popular culture or “waste materials” can identify how these texts are “pivotal documents in the construction, experience, and rhetoric of quotidian citizenship in the United States” (Berlant 1997, 12). Indeed, as Berlant notes, popular culture cannot be dismissed as “white noise,” but instead must be read as “powerful language, not as ‘mere’ fiction or fantasy but as violence and desire that have material effects” (Berlant 1997, 13). Similarly to Berlant’s purpose in examining “normal national culture” (Berlant 1997, 13), this dissertation assumes that the “ordinariness” of popular texts “requires an intensified critical engagement” (Berlant 1997, 12).

Indeed, Foucault argues for just this form of “ascending analysis” of social practices and problems to best illustrate and understand how techniques of power and governance are materialized on the ground to manipulate large populations. By starting at the bottom and analyzing the everyday practices, myths, and “public pedagogies” imposed on society, Foucault believes that mentalities can be better understood with regard to power relations (Foucault 1980). Specifically, Foucault claims, “the point of view of the underside and limit of power is… indispensable for analysis of its apparatuses” (Foucault 1980, 138). Moreover, according to Foucault, an ascending analysis must be “the starting point for understanding [power’s] functioning and its developments” (Foucault 1980, 138). It is precisely because diffuse power does not operate through institutions, but finds its origins through everyday practices that it is crucial to study the mundane, or “waste materials,” in order to see the conditions that make certain practices and identities acceptable (Foucault 2000, 225).
For Foucault, a main reason for choosing an ascending analysis is because an exploration of everyday mundane practices that construct identities can lead to an understanding of why and how something is happening, thus offering ideas about how to develop techniques of resistance. Rather than focus solely on the “critical reading” practices advocated by Giroux and others, then, this dissertation instead challenges scholars to focus on the origins of narratives and myths of youth for the purpose of identifying the “why and how.” Going beyond merely reacting defensively to these narratives, I articulate and question the foundations of what violence narratives and youth myths signify about contemporary youth identity and citizenship in the United States. Because an ascending analysis locates power as diffuse rather than within institutions, it thus also prioritizes the perspectives and subjectivities of silent and silenced individuals for the purpose of understanding how mentalities are materialized rather than for the sole purpose of reacting to these mentalities.

In response to the “multiple and competing rhetorics… struggling to define and control the place of kids in our society and the structure of kids’ lives” (Grossberg 2005, 75), my textual analysis in this dissertation draws from foundations of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in order to identify the ways in which language is used to communicate and maintain power structures through mythical significations. More specifically, utilizing textual analysis from a feminist perspective offers “a critical perspective on unequal social arrangements sustained through language use” (Lazar 2005, 1). To understand more clearly how youth are framed in fictionalized literary narratives and films, a close analysis of language and context allows insight into the power structures and norms embedded within American society. Indeed, because “language is a central
vehicle in the process whereby people are constituted as individuals and as social
subjects, and because language and ideology are closely imbricated, the close systemic
analysis of the language of texts can expose… the way that people are oppressed within
current social structures” (Mills 1997, 133-134).

The textual analysis that is utilized in this dissertation focuses less on what
fictional narratives “might mean to a thinking subject” and more on “analyzing the
origins, nature and structure of the discursive themes by means of which the text has been
reproduced” (Prior 2004, 320). Thus, my analysis consists primarily of “unobtrusive
qualitative methods” that acknowledge the ways in which “cultural texts not only reflect
the social world, but are also part of the process of constituting social reality” (Hesse-
Biber and Leavy 2004, 303; 305). Scholars who utilize methods of discursive analysis
agree with Barthes that an “interruption of discourse can provide access to the ‘reality’
referenced by ‘appearances’” (Grimshaw 2001, 756) and thus imply the importance of
dissecting not only text as language, but also text as image. Because of the flexibility of
unobtrusive discursive methodologies, they have been noted both for their ability to
“acknowledge a multimodal dimension” including “visual images, layouts, gestures, and
sounds” (Lazar 2005, 5) as well as how they can respond to interdisciplinary research
questions such as those addressed in this dissertation (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2004, 314).

This dissertation also draws from methodologies of feminist film scholars in order
to draw out how visual representations of suburban youth violence rely on particular
bodies and visual motifs to communicate a variety of messages regarding the national
anxieties that surround youth identities. The theoretical frameworks offered in texts such
as feminist film scholar Judith Mayne’s *Cinema and Spectatorship* are helpful in situating
these anxieties as originating from the “most fundamental needs, desires, and beliefs” (Mayne 1993, 20-21) of a particular culture. In her explanation of foundational film theories such as spectacle, apparatus, and spectatorship, Mayne argues that cinema simultaneously “embodies the fantasies and fears of a society” (Mayne 1993, 35) while also working “to acculturate individuals to structures of fantasy, desire, dream, and pleasure that are fully of a piece with dominant ideology” (Mayne 1993, 18) in order to rectify or satiate both fear and fantasy.

Mayne and Giroux both speak to the importance of understanding the juxtaposition between the reality of social and political life in the United States and what is read about, viewed, or otherwise experienced through popular culture mediums. Giroux has applied his theory of popular culture as “public pedagogy” (Giroux 2008, 7) specifically to films that portray education in order to understand the ways in which these films communicate problematic hegemonic ideologies through a combination of “entertainment and politics” that “lays claim to public memory” (Giroux 2008, 10). Far from perceiving cinema as mere entertainment, Giroux agrees with Mayne and argues that films that portray American education are representative of “social and political allegories articulating deeply rooted fears, desires, and visions of the future” (Giroux 2008, 8); he recommends that education films be “understood within a broader network of cultural spheres, social formations, and institutions rather than read as isolated texts. That is, they have to be critically engaged within the social anxieties and assumptions that prompted their production and their circulation as public texts in the first place” (Giroux 2008, 8).

Feminist film scholars have also noted how reception studies, a combination of
the methodologies associated with film analysis and CDA, can assist scholars in identifying the political, social and historical discourses that situate filmic narratives within particular discursive frameworks. For example, Janet Staiger’s reception study, “Taboos and Totems: Cultural Meanings of The Silence of the Lambs” identifies particular “spectorial effects of films by moving beyond text-centered analysis” (Staiger 1999, 211). Thus, reception studies can include an exploration of political events, film reviews, movie star culture, audience reception, and other cultural texts apart, but interrelated, to the film text. According to Staiger, the method of the reception study is merely one more way, like FPDA, of “understanding how individuals interpret the world and how they use discourse to shape, or reshape, that world” (Staiger 1999, 221).

Staiger further argues in her book Interpreting Films that “frames,” “codes,” “conventions,” and “inferences influence, and perhaps determine, perception and comprehension” (Staiger 1992, 20), thus pointing to the importance of relating texts with their discursive contexts. Indeed, Staiger’s understandings that there are “interconnections among reading activities” (Staiger 1992, 20) of written and visual texts supports an exploration of the sites in between texts as well as an intertextual analysis within this research. Importantly, Staiger argues for the application of literary reading methods for film and television when she explains the belief in literary analysis that “the text and the reader are equally significant in creating meaning, that historical context is very significant for the interaction, and the meaning or significance is ‘in’ that contextual intersection” (Staiger 1992, 36). While my research may not utilize these specific methods, it is significantly influenced by Staiger’s theories because of the ways in which intertextual analysis looks for “contextual intersections” on a variety of discursive levels.
The texts I analyze in the following chapters produce sites that exist between fiction and fact, narrative and reality. The discourses that are produced between media representations of actual events of violence and fictional narratives of youth violence can be challenging to unearth. Competing discourses emerge and complicate a clear understanding of why narratives of youth violence are produced and for what purpose. Feminist Post-structuralist Discourse Analysis acknowledges these difficulties and embraces conflicting narratives and complicated discourse relationships, recognizing that there are no clear answers within discourse production, the dissemination of myths, and the maintenance of power. While this project situates its argument within particular claims, I also recognize that there are other—and equally valid—claims to be made about youth violence narratives. This dissertation is both the beginning of a conversation and the continuation of a dialogue regarding the ways in which American youth are represented and utilized for various political and social agendas.

Chapter Organization

Chapter One proposes a comparative taxonomy for understanding school violence narratives that are set in urban versus suburban/rural school settings. Of particular interest in this taxonomy are the ways in which raced identities are particularly salient in these narratives of masculinity and violence and in the blame that is placed for violent acts perpetrated by individual youths. As an application of this taxonomy, I analyze two representative film narratives, *187* (1997) and *Elephant* (2003). Through reception studies of the films and analysis of the films themselves, I apply my comparative taxonomy to argue that youth of color are often represented as engaging in a “culture of violence” that is directly tied to their race and community, whereas white youth shooters
are labeled as “evil” or as psychologically disturbed and are thus disconnected from their race and set apart from their communities. Through this comparative analysis of the divergent ways that male perpetrators of violence are characterized in connection to their racial identities, I argue that fictional school violence narratives communicate particular messages regarding who is a threat to democracy and who can be educated to be a harmless and productive citizen.

Chapter Two explores the ways in which fictional narratives of suburban violence portray deviant teen sexuality. While school shooters in the U.S. have been rumored to be gay (as a partial explanation for the bullying that some school shooters experienced) or to be homophobic (based on reported slurs heard by student victims during school shootings) these rumors have not been substantiated as reasons for the shooter’s actions in any school shooting. Gay identities of fictional shooters, however, is a motif that arises across school shooting narratives in both film and literature (see, for example, *Elephant* 2003, Picoult 2008, among others). This chapter explores the relationship between media coverage of gay suburban school shooter rumors and the representation of gay school shooters in fictional literature and film narratives in order to examine the complex ways in which the constructed deviant sexualities of school shooters are used as a mechanism to protect white masculinity and white male citizenship.

Chapter Three offers an analysis of female shooters in fictional literature and film narratives of suburban/rural school violence and places these narratives in a context of national anxieties surrounding teen sexuality and white masculinity. Often combined with storylines of teen pregnancy, narratives of female shooters (see, for example, Lippman 2005 and Picoult 2008) are especially interesting in light of the fact that there
has never been a real female rampage shooter in the United States. In this chapter, I argue that fictional narratives of suburban school violence mark violent adolescent girls with a deviant sexuality that is evidenced through their pregnancies or sexual activities. I site a variety of fictional youth violence narratives to point to the ways in which national anxieties surrounding youth violence and sexuality signal a concern about the liminality between childhood and adulthood that is intricately tied to the ability of schools to produce “good” and obedient citizens that perform specific gender roles.

Chapter Four offers an analysis that focuses on young adult novels as a genre of school shooting narratives that are written by adults but meant for an American youth audience. Because the narratives of these texts are written specifically to youth, I note the presence of adult agendas regarding the protection of youth from school violence, the framing of youth rights, and the ways in which adolescent characters are allowed to participate in their school communities. This chapter also explores the relationship between schooling and the participation of young people in political and social democracies, noting instances within young adult novels where adolescent characters are deprived of voice. Diverse representations of the power relationships between adults and youth are offered as evidence within this chapter of the ways in which young people are portrayed as non-citizens.

In my final conclusion chapter, I analyze a documentary, *The Education of Shelby Knox*, in order to expand my analysis of fictionalized school violence and its relationship to contemporary education practices in the United States. In particular, I make connections between the fictions and myths of youth maintained within fictional portrayals of school violence and the materials affects these myths have on the lived
experience of American young people. As well, the Conclusion offers ideas for further feminist research in the field of youth studies.
Adolescence has become a comic figure, serious yet trivialized, institutionally ordained and reduced to stereotypes, commodified and malleable as a sign of futures, pasts, fears, and hopes. So viewed, the adolescent is endearing, frightening, unavoidable, and exploitable. (Nancy Lesko, *Act Your Age!: A Cultural Construction of Adolescence*, 134)

**Introduction: Youth, Race, and “Moral Panics”**

Nancy Lesko’s *Act Your Age!: A Cultural Construction of Adolescence* (2001) examines the framing of adolescent identity in the United States during the early 1900s in order to identify the ways in which “through the adolescent body, the fears and hopes of race, sexuality, gender, and empire could be visualized, openly desired, politically strategized, and measured” (Lesko 2001, 45). In her analysis, Lesko defines adolescence as both “a technology to produce certain kinds of persons within particular social arrangements” and a “border [zone] between the imagined end points of adult and child, male and female, sexual and asexual, rational and emotional, civil and savage, and productive and unproductive” (Lesko 2001, 50). In other words, Lesko identifies adolescence in the early 1900s as both a hegemonic tool wielded to construct particular kinds of citizens as well as a location embodied by youth that is framed through the political and social aims and agendas of adults. Importantly, she notes there is a “continuing significance of turn-of-the-century ideas” (Lesko 2001, 193) in aspects of contemporary youth experience such as violence in schools (Lesko 2001, 179). Indeed, Lesko notes that in the contemporary United States, “when teenagers take on forbidden
adult behaviors, from having sex to breaking laws, they become monstrous” (Lesko 2001, 190).

According to both Lesko and Charles Acland, author of *Youth, Murder, Spectacle: The Cultural Politics of “Youth in Crisis,”* youth are on the cusp of adulthood and inhabit an in-between space where they have not yet been realized as adults or as citizens. Lesko’s argument that youth are constructed as “becoming” during an “expectant time—a moratorium of responsibility and power” (Lesko 2001, 130), is a helpful framework for understanding representations of youth school violence across various popular culture mediums. Repeated fictional narrativizing of youthful liminality in relation to youth violence narratives implies the struggle of adults to understand where youth belong in larger society. As Acland further explains, the identity of youth acts “not just a social category with particular forms of cultural expression and investment; it is also a conjunction point for various discourses with powerful implications for the forms and specificities of the popular at a given moment” (Acland 1995, 10). Acland continues in his description of the liminality of youth by describing young people as “‘before maturity,’ ‘before responsibility,’ ‘before concern,’ ‘before the

---

19 I use the term “narrative” throughout this chapter to refer to the body of texts (including film and literature) that offer fictional representations of youth violence. Scholar Belinda Morrisey argues, “a distinction between experience and narration allows for the existence of the unnarrativizable. Not all experience, even of a since event, can be encompassed within any one discourse, and nor can all potential subjectivities” (Morrisey 2003, 10). I use the term narrative because it implies that choices must be made about how to narrate in order to achieve specific purposes, embed particular discourses, or highlight specific subjectivities. As well, the term “narrative” is broad enough to include the variety of structures that occur in the texts I will be analyzing. Because part of my larger argument is that “narrative structure changes how we perceive experience and can even affect what is perceivable” (Morrisey 2003, 10), I choose to draw attention to particular components of these texts, such as their structure and design, by referring to them as narratives.
real (adult and economically productive) world,’ where ‘before’ connotes the incomplete, the existence of potential, and the possibility of failure” (Acland 1995, 25). As both Acland and Lesko argue, youthful liminality allows for flexibility in the construction of youth depending on adult interests and agendas.

Moreover, Lesko claims that socially constructed narratives of adolescence engage adult audiences specifically through their messages about the future of society. As Lesko argues, “we consumers of adolescent narratives are bound emotionally to the story. We are happy, satisfied, and comforted by narratives of fulfillment (conventional adolescent development); we are disturbed and alarmed by precocity and risk” (Lesko 2001, 132). These narratives of adolescence, whether structured in mass media or in fictionalized portrayals such as novels, film, television, or other mediums, are forms of storytelling that “[make] ‘arguments’ about the nature of reality” and which “[function] as a powerful method of meaning making and a primary way of defining the world” (Barbatsis 2005, 332). As narrative theory scholar Gretchen Barbatsis argues, “because we make our way in the world by structuring our experiences into stories, narrative structures are deeply revealing of how we think, what we value, and why we act” (Barbatsis 2005, 345). For example, by following hegemonic narrative conventions of racism, patriarchy, and class hierarchy, portrayals of youth are able “to disassociate everyday Americans from the structural context of oppression and the historical context of struggle… by laying claim to the bodies and cultures of the ‘Other’” (Kim and Chung 2005, 73). In this way the actual identities and experiences of youth are redefined and represented through dominant ideologies.
Youth of color in the United States, specifically, are often constructed as particular kinds of (non) citizens through narratives of minority youth violence. Henry Giroux argues that portrayals of minority youth often “point to serious problems in the urban centers, but do so in ways that erase the accountability of the dominant culture and racist institutions, on the one hand, and any sense of viable hope, possibility, resistance, and struggle on the other” (Giroux 1996, 44-45). Urban education narratives that focus on youth violence, in particular, when compared with their suburban/rural youth violence narrative counterparts, communicate particular messages regarding who is a threat to democracy and who can be educated to be a harmless and productive citizen. Thus, Giroux argues that “the racial coding of representations of [minority] youth tells us less about such youth than it does about how white society configures public memory, stability and disorder, and the experiences of marginal groups in America” (Giroux 1996, 69).

In youth narratives of violence, male perpetrators are frequently characterized in connection to their racial identities, resulting in racially disparate school violence narratives that frame youth of color as engaging in a “culture of violence” that is both inevitable and directly tied to their race and community, whereas white youth perpetrators are labeled as “evil” or as psychologically disturbed and are thus disconnected from their race and set apart from their communities. These representations have direct implications for the ways in which youth are both characterized as American citizens and denied citizenship based on their actions and the actions of those around them, as well as based on their racial identifications and community contexts. For example, the message communicated through a narrative in which a youth of color is
incarcerated after a violent crime (see, for example, the film *Light It Up*) differs in significant ways from the message communicated through a narrative of a white youth who commits suicide after committing an act of violence (see, for example, the film *Heart of America*). Whereas the youth of color becomes a dependent of the state, the white youth, in a strange way, displays agency by removing himself from the community without police intervention. These fictional portrayals of youth provide evidence for scholar Julie Webber’s argument that it is “citizenship [that] becomes the dominant tactic for fighting a culture war against youth, ostensibly on their behalf” (Webber 2003a, 37).

The community and national response to youth violence also differs depending on the race of the perpetrator and the location of the violent act. Because “the link between Blackness and criminality is routinized” whereas, “as a group, Whites have managed to escape being associated with crime” (Russel 1998, xiii; xiv), white crime and violence are perceived as extraordinary and surprising. When crime occurs among white youth through violence, the innocence of youth and whiteness are both called into question, bringing about what Stanley Cohen has described as a “moral panic” (Cohen 2002).

Cohen, in his text *Folk Devils and Moral Panic: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (2002; originally published in 1972), explains that moral panics are situations in which “a condition, episode, person, or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests,” and argues that these incidents are “presented in a stylized and stereotypical manner” (Cohen 2002, 1). Within moral panics, Cohen explains that there is a “gallery of folk types – heroes and saints, as well as fools, villains and devils [which is] publicized not just in oral-tradition and face-to-face contact but to much larger audiences and with much greater dramatic resources” (Cohen 2002, 8). The “folk devils”
that are the title characters of Cohen’s analysis are elaborated by Stuart Hall, et al. as “the bearer of all our social anxieties” where we direct “the full wrath of our indignation” (Hall, et al. 1978, 161).

In his exploration of youth subcultures in Britain in the 1960s, Cohen postulates that mass media play a central role in the shaping of moral panics. Indeed, Cohen notes the ways in which the mass media works to “create an awareness of what signs [will] signify [a] particular threat and what actions [are] called for” after an event has taken place (Cohen 2002, 62). Images, in particular, are especially significant in the development of a moral panic as they “are made much sharper than reality” through “symbolization, plus other types of exaggeration and distortion” (Cohen 2002, 30). As well, words that were once “neutral” – such as Columbine – “can be made to symbolize complex ideas and emotions” (Cohen 2002, 27). However, if the media have a specific role and purpose in sensationalizing crime and violence (see also, Gray 2004, Males 1999, Russell 1998, Wilson 2005), what then is the specific role and purpose of the fictional narratives that also emerge in response to the moral panics concerning white youth violence? This is a central question to which I will turn later in this chapter.

Stuart Hall, et al. build on Cohen’s analysis in their study Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order, originally published in 1978. Using the media and public responses to mugging events in the United Kingdom and the United States in the 1970s, Hall, et al. argue that mugging “not only dominated the whole public discussion of crime and public disorder – it had become a central symbol for the many

---

tensions and problems besetting American social and political life in general” (Hall et al. 1978, 19: Hall, et al.’s emphasis). The authors state that the event of “mugging” evolved into a moral panic precisely because of “its ability to connote a whole complex of social themes in which the ‘crisis of American society’ was reflected” (Hall, et al. 1978, 19). Indeed, Hall, et al. argue that mugging “connotes a whole historical construction about the nature and dilemmas of American society” (Hall, et al. 1978, 27). The public response to rampage shootings in suburban and rural schools has been treated in much the same way.

A paranoia grows out of rampage shootings, in part, because the potential victimhood that whites fear within urban areas has transitioned to white schools and suburban settings. These representations of white and minority youth have material consequences when, as bell hooks claims, “there is a direct and abiding connection between the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy in this society and the institutionalization via mass media of specific images [and] representations of race” (hooks 1992a, 2). To offer reassurance to white audiences, narratives of youth violence that reference real-life violent acts must provide justifications and explanations for white violence that is framed as unexpected and shocking. Indeed, Hall et al. explain, “to give shocking and random events ‘meaning’ is to draw them once again into the framework of the rational order of ‘things understood’ – things that we can work on, do something about, handle, manage” (Hall, et al.1978, 166). Thus, those who can reframe and explain rampage violence perpetrated by white youth hold the power of reclaiming the innocence of youth, whiteness, and, most importantly, white youth.
Similar to Hall, et al.’s study, I assume that school rampage shootings in the U.S. can also be categorized as “moral panics” because of the ways in which these shootings signify the anxieties of white suburbia and white supremacy in relation to citizenship rights. Specifically, threats to white masculinity and white male citizenship through urban “seepage,” questioning of the nuclear family and suburban parenting, and general concerns regarding American youth identity and youth sexuality are all aspects that came to light following events of suburban school mass violence (these aspects will be explored in later chapters). The media response to these shocking and unexpected cultural events both creates and maintains moral panics because of the challenges to the status quo that emerge when youth become “monstrous”.

In her article, “Why is Everybody Always Pickin’ on Youth? Moral Panics about Youth, Media, and Culture,” Sharon Mazzarella identifies moral panics that center on youth culture as exhibiting characteristics such as “adults’ fear of losing control over ‘vulnerable’ youth” and “the need to find a simple solution to a complex problem involving youth (whether real or perceived)” (Mazzarella 2007, 49). These characteristics of moral panic can be applied to the cultural reaction to both urban and suburban/rural youth violence. However, while urban violence is assumed to be endemic and thus can only be eradicated through incarceration, the importance of explaining away white youth violence is central to the moral panic that occurs in response to rampage school violence. While representations of urban youth in schools frequently focus on spectacles of violence, teen pregnancy, and other stereotypical teenage concerns in order to highlight an amazing transformation that is brought about by white teachers, these
spectacles have a vastly different purpose when included in narratives that center on the experiences of white students.

To begin to locate similarities and differences between these racially segregated sub-genres of education narratives that focus on youth violence, in the remainder of this chapter I offer a short literature review of the scholarship surrounding popular culture representations of minority youth in urban settings in order to contextualize white youth school violence narratives within already present narratives of youth violence. Following this discussion, I propose a taxonomy of urban and suburban/rural education representations to illustrate how and why youth violence narratives repeatedly communicate hegemonic ideologies of race, gender, and violence. I conclude the chapter with an application of this taxonomy that places two representative film narratives, the urban school violence film, 187 (1997), and the suburban/rural school violence film Elephant (2003), in conversation with one another through an analysis of the films themselves in addition to an exploration of the film’s reviews and reception.

Urban Education Narratives and the “Realities” of Youth Violence

In his detailed text, Framing Youth: 10 Myths about the Next Generation, Mike Males discusses the misrepresentation of youth violence in the media. According to Males, who uses statistics from California as a case study, during the 30-year period between 1976 and 1996, felony arrest rates consistently increased for white adults (over age 30) and simultaneously decreased for minority youth. In California, between 1990 and 1997, minority youth felony arrest rates fell 28 percent, while white adult felony arrests increased 21 percent (Males 1999, 6). Males argues that this is one example of the ways in which American youth are described by the media in ways that distract from the
reality of their situation. Framed as “harbingers of the multi-racial failure” (Males 1999, 8), a representation that results from adult American’s “racial and ethnic discomfort” with an increasingly minority citizen population (Males 1999, 9), minority youth are portrayed as criminals, even as crime and arrest rates rise for white adults. As Males points out, “it is no accident that political authorities, scholars, and the media now ascribe to adolescents the same prejudices once hurled at nonwhites – violence, hypersexed, irrational, volatile, dangerous” (Males 1999, 9). The status of white adults as rational and innocent must be defended; even when the statistics cannot provide the evidence needed to blame minority youths for rising crime rates, claims can still be made and believed based on racial stereotypes and social hegemonies that construct whites as ideal citizens.

Since 1993, national homicide rates among youth have been steadily decreasing (CDC 2009, np). Juvenile arrest rates for homicide fell from 3,284 in 1993 to 1,011 in 2007, a significant difference. This decrease in youth violence is also mirrored in the decline of the rate of homicides that occur on school grounds in the United States. Whereas in the 1992-1993 school year there were 42 deaths, in 2007 there were 11. Only one death on school grounds was reported in 2008 (University of Virginia 2009, np). Despite these decreasing numbers of national homicides perpetrated by youth and committed against youth on school grounds, popular culture portrayals of youth violence in schools have increased exponentially. Interestingly, previous to the year 2000, the majority of school violence novels, films, and television representations featured youth of color in narratives that focused on gang violence and encouraged the pursuit of education to escape dangerous neighborhoods (see Table 1).
Post-2000, however, there has been a rise in rampage shooting representations with numerous novels, television episodes, films, and young adult novels portraying white males shooting classmates and teachers in suburban and rural areas. These post-2000 representations continue through the present with the most recent 2009 film *April Showers*, written and directed by Andrew Robinson, a survivor of the Columbine High School massacre.

---

21 Kimmel and Mahler (2003) have made a similar chronological distinction between actual urban and suburban/rural acts of violence. The authors locate “two different waves of school violence since 1980. In the first, from 1982-1991, the majority of all school shootings were nonrandom… most were in urban, inner-city schools and involved students of color” and in the second, since 1992, 22 out of 23 school shootings “have been committed by White students in suburban schools” (Kimmel and Mahler 2003, 1442-1443). The timeline of these actual incidents of school violence and the shift that occurs in the early 1990s is parallel to a shift that is present in representations of school violence about ten years later.
School Massacre (see Table 2). A comparison of these two tables illustrates the chronological shift from urban narratives of youth violence to suburban/rural narratives that occurs around the year 2000. Of the 19 urban youth violence narratives, 14 (or 74%) take place prior to the year 2000. Comparatively, of the 21 suburban/rural youth violence narratives, 18 (or 86%) take place post-2000.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Medium</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A  Rage</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Novel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B  Duck! The Carbine High Massacre</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Film</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C  “Earshot” Buffy the Vampire Slayer</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Television Episode</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D  The Third Victim</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Novel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E  “Chapter Nine” Boston Public</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Television Episode</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F  “School Daze” Law &amp; Order</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Television Episode</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G  The Healer</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Novel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H  Heart of America</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Film</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I  Home Room</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Film</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J  “Minute By Minute” Touched by an Angel</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Television Episode</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K  Bang Bang, You’re Dead</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Film (based on a play)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L  Zero Day</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Film</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M  Elephant</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Film</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N  We Need to Talk About Kevin</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Novel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O  To the Power of Three</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Novel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P  “Dark Matter” Numb3rs</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Television Episode</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q  “With Tired Eyes, Tired Minds, Tired Souls, We Slept” One Tree Hill</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Television Episode</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R  The Hour I First Believed</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Novel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S  Nineteen Minutes</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Novel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T  The Life Before Her Eyes</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Film</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U  April Showers</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Film</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Suburban Rural School Violence Narratives

Because I will be focusing specifically on young adult novels in Chapter Four, I have not included them in Table 2 along with the other narratives that are being categorized within this chapter. The young adult novels that are relevant to this study can be found in a table on page 159.
Scholars who engage in cultural studies of youth and feminist studies (see, for example, hooks 1992b, Hall 1997) attest to the powerful role of stereotypes in the representation of difference in popular culture. bell hooks argues that “stereotypes abound when there is distance” (hooks 1992b, 341) and Stuart Hall claims that “stereotyping tends to occur when there are gross inequalities of power” (Hall 1997, 258). That is, stereotypes are born out of hegemonic social relations and become tools to maintain these relations when they are utilized against groups of people who have been identified as “other”. Stereotypical representations of minority youth, in particular, encourage further segregation and inequality within society through playing on cultural fears and anxieties of urban criminality and violence. When minority youth are perceived to be a threat to white safety and suburban security, stereotypes are deployed in order to provide justification for oppressive practices. As Hall argues, a strong stereotype, communicated across popular culture mediums, shapes social relationships as it “engages feelings, attitudes and emotions and it mobilizes fears and anxieties” (Hall 1997, 226).

Portrayals of urban youth are often rife with stereotypes that draw on myths of urban life, crime, and poverty. Black and Latino/a youth are shown as having hopeless futures without white intervention.23 Addicted to drugs, engaging in sexual activity that results in “children raising children,” and unable to excel in school, these youths are always represented as deviant when compared with their white counterparts. Unlike instances of white youth deviance, which can be explained away through discourses of masculinity (“boys will be boys”), individualized mistakes that can be corrected (“she

23 See, for example, white savior figures in Dangerous Minds (1995), Light It Up (2000), Freedom Writers (2005), and other narratives of urban youth violence.
learned her lesson; it won’t happen again”), or outside influences (rap music, violent films, video games, etc.), minority youth deviance is situated within “pathologizing discourses” in which deviant youth are not seen as individuals, but rather “stand in for or symbolize a whole host of social ills or problems” (Dimitriadis 2008, 32) as a group.

The stories that are told about minority youth in urban settings rely on a “code of the real” that “works to create notions of ‘the inner city’ as distinct from suburban ones – locating in the former a whole host of problems seen as endemic to these centers and their inhabitants” (Dimitriadis 2008, 11). Thus, when deviance occurs in white, suburban/rural settings, it becomes the unreal and shocks the community that is at the center of the event. bell hooks explains this inconsistency when she argues that “one fantasy of whiteness is that the threatening Other is always a terrorist. This projection enables many white people to imagine there is no representation of whiteness as terror, as terrorizing” (hooks 1992b, 344). Whereas representations of minority youth violence in popular culture and media portrayals work to maintain stereotypes and misrepresentations of racial identities, fictional white youth violence narratives must do the opposite by disconnecting rampage violence from white racial identity.

Urban education narratives24 are often presented as if in a vacuum, yet are embedded with “the inflated presence of the suburban priorities and anxieties in the

---

24 I use the term “urban education narrative” to encompass a broad genre of films and literature that take place in urban and inner-city settings. These narratives, according to scholars such as Beyerbach (2005) and Giroux (2008), often include underdog minority students, inspirational teachers, and tensions surrounding issues of race, class and community identity. It is not uncommon for these films to fit into the subgenre that has been described by Amy Wells and Todd Serman (1998) as the “great white hope phenomenon” in which “the heroic teachers are white and most of the students are African American or Latino” (Wells and Serman 1998, 186).
popular imagination and in political life” (McCarthy, et al. 1998, 219). Portrayals of urban education focus on spectacles of urban violence in such a way that “the discourse of race and violence provides a sense of social distance and moral privilege that places dominant white society outside of the web of violence and social responsibility” (Giroux 1996, 56). For example, the urban education film Freedom Writers (2005) begins with a series of scenes of urban violence. Starting with news footage of the “war zone” of Los Angeles in 1992, images of looting and police in riot gear introduce the film about minority youth. Following these historic scenes of the aftermath of the Rodney King trial, the film then portrays the contemporary neighborhood in which the film is set. A culture of violence is introduced through scenes in which children are taught to box, a drive-by shooting occurs, youth are initiated into gangs through group beatings, gang shootings establish turf understandings between racial groups, and “you could get blasted any time you walk out your door.” Violence is both plentiful and completely normal to the youth in the film’s white, female protagonist, Ms. Grewell’s, freshman English class, who use journaling as a strategy of processing the violence around them. Importantly, this violence is explicitly tied to the youth’s criminality, indicated by their required ankle bracelets and probation officers. During the first week of Ms. Grewell’s teaching experience, a riot breaks out on school property and students, both male and female, are shown engaging in hand-to-hand combat with one another. This fighting also enters the classroom, where Ms. Grewell must call on security officers to break up fights among her students.

The representation of this culture of violence is reinforced through students’ journal entries, which focus on domestic violence, stories of children with guns resulting
in accidental death, gang violence and drive-by shootings, “war” on the streets, and dating violence. Indeed, almost all of the students’ journal entries that are highlighted in the film focus on their experiences with violence at home, at school, or on the street. Even the students’ ability to engage with their schoolwork is mediated through their experience with everyday violence. Ms Grewell’s class becomes interested in their curriculum for the first time upon reading *The Diary of Anne Frank* because they identify with the memoirist’s struggle against systemic violence. Through these repeated illustrations of a culture of violence, *Freedom Writers* is a clear example of “the popular perception that everyday black urban life and violence crime mutually define each other” (Giroux 1996, 56).

The representations of urban violence found in films such as *Freedom Writers* play on audience perceptions of minority youth that have already been shaped by media images of raced criminality. As Acland argues, although youth are “increasingly symbolically central as that internal Other defined as a threat to the stability of the social order,” the identity of a threat is “doubly true for African American and Hispanic American youth” (Acland 1995, 41). The violence portrayed in urban youth narratives such as *Freedom Writers* mirrors the minority violence represented in the news media which “generally becomes sensational in terms of scale… individual acts of violence are deemphasized in favor of the scope and prevalence of [minority] crime” as a whole.

---

25 As I mentioned in the introductory chapter (pgs. 2-3), black racial identity often acts as the broad categorization for “urban youth” that also includes other racial identities such as Latino, Puerto Rican, and Mexican youths, among others. I would argue that Giroux’s argument about “urban life and violent crime” can be expanded beyond representations of blackness to include other portrayals of minority youths in films about urban education such as *Freedom Writers*, which include black students as well as other racial minorities being stereotyped as violent criminals.
(Acland 1995, 48). With a backdrop of stylized minority violence, racialized messages of success in urban school violence films are presented in which whiteness alone becomes “the archetype of rationality, authority, and cultural standards” (Giroux 1997b, 46). This archetype of whiteness is especially evident in Freedom Writers when shots of Ms. Grewell’s English class of primarily minority students are compared with shots of the Honors English class where a white male teaches primarily white students.

**Taxonomy of Suburban/Rural and Urban School Violence Film and Literature Narratives**

*Freedom Writers* offers a strong example of the kinds of themes, dominant ideologies, and narrative elements that are embedded within cinematic representations of urban youth school violence. It is important to note, however, that these aspects of urban youth violence narratives can be identified across cultural mediums such as novels, television, and memoir, in addition to the popular “urban education film” genre of the 1990s. Scholars have noted the ways in which these representations of urban youth have created a wide-spread discourse of “primitiveness” that portrays urban youth in popular culture as “[different] from the life of a normal society” (Wilson 2005, 56; 125). Indeed, scholar Cameron McCarthy argues that “inner-city black school youth are surrounded by this powerful discourse of crime and violence in which they are the constructed other – social objects who grapple with the reality code projected from the popular media culture” (McCarthy 1998, 101). Thus, the moral panic that results from rampage violence in white, suburban and rural areas can find its foundation in the cultural and
political anxiety surrounding perceptions of urban juvenile crime in the 1980s and 1990s (Gray 2004; Russell 1998; Wilson 2005).26

The specific representations of suburban/rural youth violence that are foundational to the following chapters are significant for two main reasons. First, the fictionalizing of historical events creates a space for interpretation by both authors and audiences. As Janet Staiger states, “anything other than a virtual copy of the real event must emphasize certain aspects of the events and neglect others, and thus produce both drama and a point of view” (Staiger 1996, 41). The creation of national and social dramas through popular representations can influence power relations. As Victor Turner argues, these representations are not concerned with “present[ing] a seemingly objective reality of certain events,” but are focused instead on “giv[ing] subtle expression to divergent interests or switches in the balance of power” (Turner 1985, 121). By representing spectacularized youth violence based on the “real” through fictional narratives, authors can influence national understandings of youth identity and citizenship in significant ways.

Second, representations based on real events blur the lines between fact and fiction to the point where audience interpretation of reality can be influenced by representation. In her article, “Cinematic Shots: Narratives of Violence,” Staiger argues that “the distance between the representation and the real has become such a widely available and misunderstood notion that it is possible for people to doubt accounts of events” (Staiger 1996, 52). This point is especially relevant to school shooting narratives

---

26 It should be noted that black youth responded to these perceptions with their own self-representations, particularly through music (Gray 2004, 36).
that emphasize psychiatric, conspiracy, and other explanatory discourses to rationalize white, male youth violence. As cultural studies scholars argue, “because reality has been redefined by and through media cultures, it is increasingly difficult to separate what happens in the realm of the popular from what happens in schools” (McCarthy and Dimitraidis 2005, 325). In response to this concern, I question the ways in which fictional narratives offer an easy way out for spectators through these portrayals as they simultaneously disrupt the potential for critical analysis.

Based on a review of 21 suburban/rural school violence fictional narratives from 1985 to 2009 (Table 2) and 18 urban violence fictional narratives from 1955 to 2006 (Table 1) including films, novels, memoirs, and television episodes, I developed the following taxonomy as a tool to categorize youth violence narratives and attempt to understand these narrative sub-genres as historically, politically, and socially embedded (Table 3). The taxonomy is divided into four categories: perpetrator/shooter identity (including the shooter’s race and gender, assumptions about the shooter’s sexuality, and the shooter’s relationship with their peer group or broader community), the form of

---

27 These narratives were chosen for analysis through both film and book reviews and online searches using tools such as the Internet Movie Database (IMDB). It is significant to note that identifying suburban/rural violence narratives is distinctly different than the identification of urban violence narratives. Because urban violence narratives often focus on a “culture of violence,” the youth violence in these narratives is frequently embedded and interwoven as an assumption, rather than as a central focus or individual incident. Suburban/rural youth violence is disruptive, not assumed, and therefore these narratives are defined through youth violence instead of using it as a backdrop. Whereas urban youth violence narratives may not be described as such in reviews and summaries, suburban/rural youth violence narratives are always discussed with the violence being identified as a central component. Thus, at times, specific narratives of rampage violence were easier to identify and locate than their urban violence counterparts. The rampage violence narratives in this study all have white youth violence as a central component, thus narratives such as *Empire Falls* (Russo 2002), a novel that includes an incident of rampage violence toward the end of the book, is not included.
violence used (including whether the violence was enacted against one or many, the weapon used, and the cause of or rationale for the violence), the aftermath of the violence (including community and national response, where blame for the violence is placed, the results of the violence, and the consequences for the perpetrator), and narrative elements (including the genre of the narrative, who is represented as the hero or savior, and the source of hope for the community that is experiencing the youth violence). These categories were identified through a review of common themes within the narratives and also include common narrative and plot elements. Included in the taxonomy are examples that represent each category (referenced from Table 1 and Table 2 above).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perpetrator/Shooter Identity</th>
<th>Suburban/Rural</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Primarily White Males</td>
<td>A, B, C, D, H, I, L, M, Q, R, S, T, U</td>
<td>Primarily Black/Latino or Other Minority Males</td>
<td>3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 12, 14, 15, 18, 19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Taxonomy of Youth Violence Narratives

28 Although this taxonomy offers a strong categorization for suburban/rural and urban violence narratives, there are exceptions to some of the categories that can help further our understanding of why contemporary representations of youth violence are constructed in particular ways. One of these exceptions is Laura Lippman’s mystery novel, To the Power of Three (2005), in which a female shooter commits one-to-one violence against another girl in a school bathroom. This novel, and other narratives that do not quite fit the taxonomy, point to additional questions regarding how the real-life narratives of suburban/rural violence are used to communicate particular understandings of American youth. The use of rampage violence frameworks – seen in Lippman’s narrative through the story of a gun brought to school, fearful students locked in a bathroom, and the mystery of why the violence occurred – play on audience’s already present experience of suburban school violence. The narratives that refuse to be categorized within certain aspects of this taxonomy offer helpful insights when placed in dialogue with the other narratives in this study because they point to the flexibility and malleability of youth violence narratives, as well as how these narratives have shifted over time to include components that differ from the real-life events (such as the female shooter seen in Lippman’s text).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perpetrator/ Shooter Sexuality</th>
<th>Implied gay or alternative sexuality</th>
<th>M, N, S</th>
<th>Hyper-masculinity</th>
<th>1, 5, 7, 8, 12, 13, 14, 18, 19</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shooter Community Identity</td>
<td>Goth subculture or other alternative affiliation, alienated from popular groups</td>
<td>H, I, N, Q, R, S</td>
<td>Gang affiliation, often popular with other youths</td>
<td>1, 5, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13, 14, 18, 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weapon</td>
<td>Guns and Bombs</td>
<td>B, C, D, G, H, I, J, K, M, N, O, P, Q, R, S, T, U</td>
<td>Guns or Knives</td>
<td>1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form of Violence</td>
<td>Rampage shooting</td>
<td>B, D, H, I, K, L, M, N, P, R, S, T, U</td>
<td>One-to-one violence, group violence (riots)</td>
<td>1, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 15, 18, 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cause</td>
<td>Mental Illness, Bullying, Conspiracy</td>
<td>C, H, M, R, S</td>
<td>Culture of Violence, Criminality, Frustration with Authority</td>
<td>1, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Result of/Response to Violence</td>
<td>National attention</td>
<td>N, R, U</td>
<td>Local attention, if any attention</td>
<td>1, 13, 14, 15, 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blame for Violence</td>
<td>Parents, popular culture, availability of guns</td>
<td>I, K, M, P, R, S</td>
<td>Community, culture of violence, poverty</td>
<td>1, 5, 7, 8, 13, 14, 18, 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consequence for Perpetrator</td>
<td>Imprisonment, death by suicide</td>
<td>H, M, N, Q, R, S, T, U, [13]</td>
<td>Imprisonment, none</td>
<td>1, 6, 8, 11, 15, 18, 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative Genre</td>
<td>Mystery, black comedy, family drama, memoir, based on a true story</td>
<td>B, D, J, N, O, Q, R, S</td>
<td>Urban education narrative, drama, memoir, based on a true story</td>
<td>All of Table 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hero/Savior</td>
<td>White male or female youth, law enforcement</td>
<td>C, D, I, Q, S, U</td>
<td>White male or female adult</td>
<td>1, 7, 8, 12, 14, 15, 18, 19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Continued
This taxonomy of youth violence narratives was developed as a tool for
categorizing themes that appear in narratives across genres and modes of popular culture.
In order to illustrate the prominence of these themes, this taxonomy offers categories that
appear in both urban and suburban/rural youth violence narratives, but also points to
shifts that occur in each category. Some of these themes, such as gender identity and
sexuality, are further explored in later chapters. Other themes, such as the identity of
“hero/savior” characters and tropes that offer a “source of hope” will be interwoven into
later analyses of how suburban/rural youth violence narratives represent embedded
anxieties concerning youth identity, citizenship, and the future of America. Below, I
offer a more detailed examination of the four main categories described above that
encompass the 12 themes that make up the taxonomy, offering examples of each in order
to illustrate the taxonomy’s capacity for intertextual application across genres and diverse
narrative modes. Following this examination, I apply the taxonomy to two representative
films in a comparative analysis.

| **Source of Hope** | Pregnancy or loss of pregnancy, youth romance, generosity/sacrifice of humanity, youth friendship, youth innocence, Christianity = universal or community themes | G, H, I, J, Q, R, S, T, U | Escape from community or school, higher education, getting out, survival or neighborhood = local or individual themes | 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 19 |
Shooter Identity

Like the actual rampage school shootings that have occurred across the United States, suburban/rural school violence narratives feature primarily white, male shooters. In many ways, this racial segregation serves to produce broader messages regarding the relationship between children/adolescents and their communities. Because rampage violence is often represented as abnormal and urban violence is normalized in minority communities through media stereotypes and popular culture portrayals of minority youths frequently engaged in crime and violence, the divergent forms of violence threaten their communities in drastically different ways. As Henry Giroux states, “violence is not absent from representations of white youth and adults, but it is rarely depicted so as to suggest that aggression and violence represent an inherent quality of what it means to be white” (Giroux 1996, 68). Rampage violence is often shocking and unexpected, pulling apart a community in an instant, whereas urban one-to-one violence is represented as having a smaller, more localized impact that is removed from larger society. Rather than illustrating a culture of violence, white youth violence “is framed almost exclusively through the language of individual pathology, political extremism, or class specific nihilism” (Giroux 1996, 68).

April Showers (2009), the most recent suburban school violence film to be released, uses the situation of a rampage shooting for broad political purposes, illustrating the ways in which suburban/rural violence attracts media attention at a national scale and has far-reaching ripple-effects. Rather than focus on white male shooters, the film instead examines the exploitation of youth victims by the media that occurs during the aftermath of rampage violence. Thus, the white youth in April Showers are primarily
categorized as victims rather than perpetrators of violence. As the film follows a white male drama student as he comes to terms with the death of a white female student at the hands of a white male rampage shooter for whom he had romantic feelings, *April Showers* becomes a study of individualized grief rather than an exploration of white youth violence. The race of the shooters and the victims is both unmarked and unexamined.

This portrayal is distinctly different from the culture of minority violence represented in the fifth season episode of *The Shield*, “Extraction,” in which the police respond to a high school race riot caused by gang violence where a student has been killed by gunfire. During this event, the police choose to turn a fire hose on fighting students in order to break them up, emphasizing the racial component of the violence by re-presenting a civil rights image of brutality. When a black mother in the community questions this choice of police response, a Latino police administrator defends the use of the fire hose and claims that the brutal act is warranted because of the students’ extreme violence. These representations of urban youth through portrayals of rioting, murder and gang violence have a lasting effect on audiences. As Charles Acland argues, “even as the initial crime is being left far behind, a general crisis of youth is being established” (Acland 1995, 14) and inner-city schools are represented as beyond hope. Minority youth violence is perceived as a “cancer” (Lebrun 2009, 2) that ravages the inner city leaving “a holy shrine to dead black and brown bodies” (McCarthy, et al. 2005, 214).

In addition to positing a “crisis of youth,” youth violence portrayals often include a “crisis of masculinity” that must be rectified through violence. As Julie Webber argues, “when men stockpile weapons, it is to increase their sense of power when they lack it in
comparison to other men” (Webber 2003a, 36). Indeed, a relationship between weapons and masculinity is frequently illustrated in both urban and suburban/rural violence narratives, which often focus on male protagonists, but in distinctly different ways. 

(1997), starring Samuel L. Jackson, is one example of an urban violence narrative that begins when an angry student of color stabs his teacher (Jackson) repeatedly on school property. This act, although situated within a community where violence is considered a norm, is also framed as an isolated incident that is one student’s reaction to a failing grade. The catalyst for violence in urban education narratives is often a personal affront that brings about the need for one-to-one vengeance or reckoning; these violent responses frequently include acts of hyper-masculinity, performances of machismo, as well as justifications based on the need to protect women within the community. Suburban/rural violence narratives, on the other hand, find white, male youths responding against a school community as a whole in order to defend their masculinity when it is questioned or to illustrate their normative sexuality. The relationship between rampage violence and masculinity is taken up in more detail in the following chapter.

Form of Violence

One of the most obvious divergences of suburban/rural violence narratives from those set in urban areas are the forms of violence themselves. Rather than focus on a central narrative of one-on-one violence or rioting, often tied to gang affiliation or other forms of criminality, suburban/rural narratives are created around rampage shooting scenarios in which one or more youths target those in their school or community indiscriminately. Using guns or bombs, these perpetrators differ from their urban narrative counterparts who usually aim to kill one instead of many when they target large
groups of students and teachers and are portrayed as shooting into crowds of students in locations such as libraries or school cafeterias. Even as both suburban/rural and urban youth violence narratives focus on violent protagonists that have been “wronged” by someone or something around them, the rationale for their violence is another strong divergence between the narratives.

In urban school violence narratives, it is not uncommon to see youth acting out against one another through hand-to-hand violence or by using weapons that happen to be in the area. The gang fighting in Dangerous Minds and Freedom Writers, for instance, is often enacted through fistfights that occur on the street. These frequent fights portray the ways in which minority youth violence is so out of control that it can erupt anytime in any location. Portrayals of rioting, such as the incident in The Shield or the opening scene of Freedom Writers, further illustrate the ways in which minority communities must be managed by white authorities when they cannot control their violent actions. That real-life riots are frequently explained by the media through racial stereotypes of violence and crime makes them all the more familiar to narrative audiences.

Because minority youth violence is often represented as out of control and spur-of-the-moment, the careful planning and scheming that is described in suburban/rural violence narratives sets white youth violence apart in significant ways. White youth protagonists are represented as having agency, intelligence, and control when they incorporate long-term planning into their violent acts. In the novel We Need to Talk about Kevin, for example, the male protagonist engages in a plan that lasts several days in order to bring a select group of students into a locked room so that he can kill them. This kind of planning is also evident in several other rampage shooting narratives that involve
more than one killer. The protagonists in these narratives are also reacting against long-term brutalities such as bullying or are acting on urges brought about by a developing mental illness. Narratives of suburban/rural violence that include scenes of a killer planning his violence emphasize the agency, intelligence, and pre-meditation of the white youths who must take reasoned actions to perpetrate their crimes.

The messages in these racially segregated portrayals of violence are varied. By focusing on particular causes of violence (gangs, bullies, mental illness, etc.) the authors of these narratives present particular rationales for their characters’ actions and thus justify the kinds of responses that occur after violent acts are committed. The one-to-one and riot violence portrayed in urban settings is represented as much more prevalent than rampage shootings, despite the concern of an “epidemic” of white, male violence. Thus, the impact of rampage shootings on individual victims and communities is all the more brutal because of the isolated nature of the events. Quick and severe responses are warranted for violence that has the potential of being prevented. Urban violence, however, when understood as a “norm” of minority communities, is not as preventable when it is a common and familiar occurrence.

Aftermath

The narratives in this study represent varying forms of local and national response depending on the kind of violence portrayed and the racial dynamics of the communities within each narrative. Whereas suburban/rural youth violence causes a national reaction and is often followed by a media spectacle, urban youth violence narratives frequently receive only local, if any, response. While some urban violence narratives portray a broader media spectacle in response to youth violence, these media events result in no
significant change in education policy or community experiences of youth violence. The 1999 film, *Light It Up*, for example, illustrates the media response that occurs when minority students take a police officer hostage in their high school. Demanding that the community fix various problems in the school (broken windows, missing textbooks, college-ready programs for students, etc.), the minority youth capture the attention of local media who surround the school with television cameras and microphones. However, when the hostage situation results in the death of a student, the overall message of the film is the hopelessness of minority youth agency. The end of the film shows no lasting changes to the school when several of the youth are incarcerated.

Suburban/rural school violence narratives, on the other hand, make political claims about the ways in which students involved in actual events of rampage shootings are often targeted and exploited by the media with lasting effects. This theme is present in *April Showers* (2009) when one character who is pursued by media outlets for his role in saving a fellow classmate commits suicide. Other representations illustrate the changes made to school property through removing areas of the school where violence occurred, adding metal detectors to increase student safety and installing permanent memorials for remembering victims of violence. Narratives such as the film *The Life Before Her Eyes* and Wally Lamb’s novel *The Hour I First Believed* focus on the long-term aftermath of suburban/rural school violence years after the event has taken place.

---

29 This act of “removing” parts of the school is similar to actual responses to rampage violence when communities redesign school environments after violence has occurred. For example, the library of Columbine High School was “removed” when the school was renovated after the shooting took place.
through portraying class reunion or memorial events and the extended trauma experienced by the victims.

The reaction of the community toward the perpetrator of the violence is also distinctly different in urban versus suburban/rural narratives. Whereas white youths are alienated from their communities and peers, experiencing vandalism to their homes or death threats, urban youths can be further accepted by some members of their communities and various social groups for incidents of violence. This is the case, for example, in both *Freedom Writers* and *The Shield* when youths become gang members after participating in acts of violence. The clear message in suburban/rural youth violence narratives is that deviant youths do not represent the white communities in which they commit their violence acts. In many ways, however, the opposite is true in urban violence narratives that focus on stereotypes of minority violence and crime as signifying the larger community identity.

Blame for the violent acts in suburban/rural and urban narratives often depends on elements of the shooter’s identity as well as their relationship to the larger community. For example, in narratives where suburban/rural youth are considered “deviant” based on their clothing choices, music, or extracurricular activities, parents are often blamed for their child’s actions and are brought up on charges themselves (such as in Lionel Shriver’s *We Need to Talk About Kevin* in which a parent faces civil charges for her son’s crimes). This deviance is not present in urban violence narratives because youth often commit violence acts with the support of those around them when they are part of a gang family or a riot situation. It is important to note that the violence enacted in suburban/rural narratives is considered to be an element that is outside of the community
forcing its way in, whereas violence in urban settings is considered to have its origins within families and groups of youth within the community.

This understanding of the origin of violence as internal or external impacts how the narratives frame the results of the violence and the consequences for the perpetrator(s). In the case of urban narratives, the violence is just expected to continue, as is the case in *187* where a white female teacher throws away her teaching certificate and gives up on the minority youth in her school. In suburban/rural narratives, however, once the white youth perpetrator is removed from the community (either through an act of suicide or incarceration), it is thought that another act of violence will not occur—lightning will not strike the same place twice. This attitude is also implied by the need to memorialize the victims of suburban/rural school shootings so that they will not be forgotten. With suburban/rural violence narratives, there is an element of “we will learn from our mistakes” that is not present in urban violence narratives where minority communities are unable or unwilling to alter their embedded “culture of violence.”

The perception of the unwillingness of urban communities to fight violence head on is strengthened through portrayals of perpetrators who are not brought to justice. The youth who kills Emilio in *Dangerous Minds*, for example, is neither caught nor tried for his crime. Whereas there are no outlaws in suburban/rural narratives of youth violence where justice reigns and the police heroically prevail, urban settings are overrun with youth criminals and murderers who are never caught. That these narratives represent a perception rather than a reality is illustrated through statistics of prison populations, which are primarily made up of minority criminals rather than white youths or adults (Grossberg 2005, Males 1996, Males 1999). Indeed, young white school shooters such as
Kip Kinkel represent a version of youth celebrity that will never be attained by an individual minority gang member unless he signs a record deal or excels in sports. The spectacle of white youth violence is more of interest to the American public than the extinction of minority youths in urban ghettos; the former needs to be stopped in order to protect future citizens while the latter can continue as long as it does not negatively influence the larger white society.

**Narrative Elements**

While memoirs are often the medium through which urban violence narratives are portrayed (several films, for example, are based on memoirs of teachers in urban settings and *187* was written by a teacher), it may not be surprising that the mystery genre is a frequent choice for suburban/rural narratives of youth violence because of the need to understand the incomprehensible rationales that lead to the deaths of innocent white youths and community members. Whereas some suburban/rural youth violence narratives are upfront about who the killer will be from the beginning (see, for example, Shriver 2003) several others choose to hide the killer’s identity until an unveiling at the end of the narrative (see, for example, Lippman 2005). The mystery genre is a significant choice for these narratives because it allows for the possibility of innocence for the violent protagonists. In Lisa Gardner’s novel *The Third Victim*, this is precisely what occurs when the real killer of a school shooting incident is unveiled as “John Doe,” the accomplice to the Oklahoma City bombing who was never caught, rather than the white youth who has been originally accused. The mystery genre allows for the possibility of suburban/rural violence to be classified as a mistake or misunderstanding.
The narrative elements at work in both urban and suburban/rural youth violence portrayals are among the most helpful components of this taxonomy because they point to a variety of racialized discourses at work within the narratives. For example, locating the hero/savior for each narrative clearly illustrates how whiteness is frequently privileged as a rational source of protection and healing. In the film *Dangerous Minds* (1995), for instance, white teacher Louanne Johnson is presented as more of a savior to minority youth than the black male administrator whose actions lead to the death of Emilio, a Puerto Rican student. Louanne’s efforts to save Emilio, including letting him stay overnight at her home, represent her selfless sacrifice. This kind of sacrifice is also present in *Light it Up* (1999) when a white male teacher works to negotiate a safe surrender for a group of minority students to police officers that have them surrounded. Despite the death of student that occurs at the end of the film, this white teacher is still upheld by the students as a hero in the school and community.

White saviors are frequently presented in rampage shooting narratives as well because these narratives take place in primarily white suburban and rural settings. Often these saviors are local law enforcement who also stand-in as sources of long-term hope for the community’s restoration to a sense of normalcy that was present before the act of violence took place. For example, Jodi Picoult’s *19 Minutes* ends with a white female judge becoming pregnant with the child of a white police officer. This literal regeneration of the community presents a clear message about what the idealized white citizen might look like – a combination of law and authority that prevails over senseless violence. Wally Lamb’s *The Hour I First Believed* (2008) also ends in a white pregnancy, illustrating the triumph of hope over adversity and a fresh start for the victims.
of rampage violence. The pregnant character, a victim of Columbine, states, “maybe I had to stay alive so I could have this baby” (Lamb 2008, 720), implying that pregnancy brings about a form of redemption and healing.

Lamb’s text also puts forth “the milk of human kindness” (Lamb 2008, 256) as a source of hope for the white community affected by Columbine. When he explains his use of this real event in his fictional narrative, Lamb states that he “felt it was [his] responsibility to name the Columbine victims—the dead and the living—rather than blur their identities. To name the injured is to acknowledge both their suffering and their brave steps past that terrible day into meaningful lives. To name the dead is to confront the meaning of their lives and their deaths, and to acknowledge, as well, the strength and suffering of the loved ones they had to leave behind” (Lamb 2008, 726-727). Lamb’s text becomes a memorial to the victims of Columbine and their families and friends – a testament to the survival of the white community that was ravaged by unexpected violence. Focusing on the good that comes out of suburban/rural violence is one way that fictional narratives repeatedly attempt to erase the relationship between whiteness and violence and the widespread trauma that it produces.

**Applying the Taxonomy: Dangerous Liminalities, Constructed Criminalities**

The above taxonomy categories are helpful in illustrating the broad themes that occur across genres in urban youth violence narratives and the more recent suburban/rural youth violence narratives that have emerged post-2000. However, the taxonomy is most useful when placing the disparate narratives in comparison with one another in order to locate the ways in which themes are shifted for the purpose of negotiating the relationship between racial identity, violence, youth identity, and definitions of American citizenship.
I chose the following films as examples of how the taxonomy can be utilized to analyze popular narratives of youth violence for the purpose of locating the embedded anxieties concerning contemporary youths as future American citizens.

_187 (1997)_ directed by Kevin Reynolds, tells the story of Trevor Garfield (Samuel L. Jackson), a science teacher who is attacked by a student and who eventually responds to his students’ apathy and violence with his own form of justice. The film begins with Garfield riding his bike to the school where he teaches in New York. The opening scenes illustrate Garfield entering into an inner-city school – indeed, he rides from an open bridge with a shot of the Statue of Liberty in the background, to a city street with shots of garbage in the foreground. After being betrayed by a white administrator who discloses to a student that Garfield has given him a failing grade, thus sending him back to a prison program, Garfield’s school becomes a place of danger and threat. Rather than the learning environment of the film’s opening scene in which students and teacher laugh and smile together over a demonstration on centrifugal force, Garfield now looks at each of the (mostly minority) students in fear. His fear is justified when he is stabbed in the back multiple times by his failing student.

Cut to “fifteen months later” and Garfield has moved to California. The American symbolism of the Statue of Liberty is replaced by a shot of the Hollywood sign. Garfield is now a substitute teacher at an inner-city school where students are “wanded” as they enter school property to check for weapons. This attempt at school safety is futile for Garfield who has already experienced a student in Brooklyn get past metal detectors with a 9-inch nail in order to enact his revenge for a failing grade. Constructed as war zones, the schools on both coasts are framed and described with war-
like imagery. Students are described as going “AWOL,” Garfield has a “purple heart” because of his experience in Brooklyn, and during Garfield’s first day as a substitute, he is asked “how goes the battle?” Despite the fact that Garfield tells his students that “anyone here can be a scientist,” the rampant drug culture and gang violence make the school “a world where chaos rules” rather than the “sanctuary” that Garfield imagines it can be.

It is implied throughout the film that Garfield suffers from a form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) based on his experience in Brooklyn. In his first experiences teaching in California, he has difficulty concentrating, visibly trembles, and has blurred vision. He also frequently uses an inhaler when he appears to be agitated. Surrounded by apathetic students who repeatedly threaten him and the other teachers, Garfield turns to violence, explaining to another teacher that “we can’t expect the system to protect us.” Killing one student, Benny, who is a gang member and murderer and drugging another student, Caesar, to remove his “trigger finger,” Garfield crosses over from victim to perpetrator. His actions are to protect himself, but also to protect the one white female teacher, Ellen Henry, with whom he has started a romantic relationship. Benny threatened to hurt her and Caesar killed her dog. Garfield also justifies his mutilation of Caesar by explaining to Ellen that the student abuses his mother.

One ray of hope throughout the film is Rita, a Chicana student who Garfield tutors in writing. Formerly abused by another teacher who had sex with her, Rita assumes that Garfield wants the same; at his house for a tutoring session, she removes her clothing automatically when he leaves the room to get her something to drink. Despite his violent acts against students, in scenes with female characters in the film, Garfield is
represented as a gentleman who is just trying to protect a world where “everybody live[s] by the same standard [Garfield does],” where order wins over chaos, and where righteousness is rewarded. As he helps Rita with an essay to be read at graduation, “My Way Out,” Garfield is upset to learn that she has stopped coming to school. When he visits her house, she explains, “this school shit’s for other kids, not me.” When Garfield is questioned by the principal based on the community’s accusations of his conduct (both rumors of his violent acts and his choice to tutor Rita in his home), he is fired from his position. Another teacher’s comment, that “the system failed him,” is broadly applicable to Garfield, Rita who was sexually abused by her teacher, and Garfield’s students who struggle to read, who attend class wearing ankle bracelets, and who are high on drugs.

After facing rejection from both the school’s administration and from Ellen, who is horrified to discover Garfield’s involvement in Benny’s death and Caesar’s amputated finger, Garfield goes home to wait for Caesar to come and kill him. Drunk and high on drugs, Caesar chooses to play Russian Roulette with Garfield, based on a scene he watches in The Deer Hunter. Another reference to the effects of the “war zone” that Garfield and his students encounter everyday, this game becomes a test of masculinity with Garfield asking, after taking the first shot, “that man enough for you, Caesar? That make me a man?” and challenging Caesar when he is “not man enough to play [his] own game.” When Garfield yells that “macho is bullshit!” and Caesar replies, “it’s all I got,” Garfield mocks him when he says, “so now you’re the victim? Let me take your turn for you,” killing himself with a shot to the head. Unable to take this sacrifice as a gift, Caesar takes one more turn, killing himself as well and leaving his friend to ask, “what’s the fucking point?” Through this powerful scene, youthful nihilism is portrayed as a
central theme of the film that spreads to Garfield when the system that he once trusted fails him and his students.

In one of the final scenes of the film, Rita reads about her “way out” at graduation, implying a form of agency for her character. This agency is echoed in the scene where Ellen removes her framed teaching credential from the wall and throws it away, walking out of her classroom. These actions, however, are disrupted by a shot of Garfield and Caesar, dead and naked in the morgue. Thus, the violence of the film is ultimately pointless and there is no lasting institutional or community response.

Regarding *187*, and other urban education youth violence films, Henry Giroux argues that “films like *187* carry the logic of racial stereotyping to a new level and represent one of the most egregious examples of how popular cultural texts can be used to demonize black and Latino youth while reproducing a consensus of common sense that legitimates racist policies of either containment or abandonment in the inner cities” (Giroux 2000a, 77). Indeed, with both Ellen and Rita, the only true innocents of the film, escaping the school, the legitimization of abandonment is complete.

*187* is just one example of an urban education narrative that features youth violence and that meets the criteria outlined in the taxonomy above. The minority students—especially the male students—are constructed as criminals with no possibility of rehabilitation. This stereotype is portrayed through characters like Benny who arrives in class under a house arrest order, antagonizes Garfield, and requests to just be written up and sent to the office. Caesar, who is unable to read a passage from the school’s science book, expresses similar apathy, frustration, and violent anger when Garfield attempts to include him in classroom activities. The token smart student, Rita, is teased
with the name “school girl” and repeatedly denies her intelligence and her interest in academics when she is around other students. These images of minority students “suggest that urban kids who are black, brown, and poor are not simply dangerous and pathological but disposable” (Giroux 2000a, 74).

As the film defines the minority students’ scholastic success and social progress in direct relationship to their racial identity, it refuses to “acknowledge the degree to which particular representations of whiteness [guide] the assumptions of successful and productive citizenship” (Shore 2007, 62). Successful students who identify in non-dominant racial, gender, or class groups are “rarely acknowledged as anything other than an accumulation of learned rather than owned behaviors” and are thus “always suspect, always open to challenge” (Shore 2007, 72). These racial differentiations among students further harmful binaries about who can be productive citizens, thus providing hope and optimism, and who will represent a threat to national economic and political success. Undeniably, “inciting fears about the ‘racial other’ plays a significant role” (Apple 2007, 222) in constructions of the purpose of public education and the kinds of citizens that public education can produce.

In contrast to the disposability of minority students in narratives such as 187, in suburban/rural education films that center on youth violence the mostly white students, represented as both innocent and on the cusp of adulthood (and, therefore, great things), must be protected at all costs. Whereas minority students are constructed as criminals who will be dependent on the system (most likely in prison), white students are constructed as the hope for the future as they are turning into productive American citizens. This theme is evident in Gus Van Sant’s Elephant (2003), which portrays white
students as responsible youths with lives of purpose and agency. Significantly, *Elephant*, which premiered at the Cannes film festival in 2003, received both the Best Director and the Golden Palm awards, top honors for the festival.

*Elephant* (2003) opens with a powerful scene of the liminality of youth, emphasizing the assumption that white youth will emerge as responsible adults. A camera, shooting from above, follows an old, used car weaving down a suburban street, grass on one side, parked cars on the other. The pre-dawn setting implies an intoxicated teenager trying to make it home after a night of revelry. But this is not an urban education narrative such as *187*, where it is typical for wasted students to come to class ready to antagonize their teacher. After crashing into one of the parked cars, the camera shifts to the driver, an older white man, and his bleached blond teenage son, John, who is attempting to have his father stop the car. One of the first lines of dialogue in the film is “What are you doing?” The “adult” in this situation is called into question due to his irresponsibility while his son takes on a parenting role when he forces his father out of the car and takes the wheel himself. As one reviewer of this film notes, “this child is definitely father to the man” (Groen 2003, R1). Rather than respond to his son’s questions and his repeated requests to exit the car, the father instead tells his son “let’s go hunting,” an ominous foreshadowing to the later rampage shooting in the film.

This scene illustrates the between-space that John inhabits as a youth that is somewhere in the midst of childhood innocence and adult responsibility, both socially constructed roles. In a film that centers on the possibility of the violence and unruliness of white youth, this opening scene is evidence that even youth with troubled homes can become responsible citizens. Alcoholic parents, for example, are not justification for
rejecting “the reproduction of a particular social order” (Acland 2000, 48). Indeed, for the rest of the film, white youths are shown walking around their high school campus independently and without adult supervision. Students participate in extracurricular activities such as sports and photography without adults to guide them and often wander the halls by themselves, interacting with their peers as they happen across one another. White students are shown making their own choices, for good and for bad, as they choose to leave campus, engage in bulimia, and order weapons off of the Internet. These actions, however, are not represented as irresponsible, but are instead the opposite, giving the white youths a sense of agency as they live their almost-adult lives.

Ironically, it is this independence that gives Alex, one of the school shooting perpetrators, the opportunity to “case” the school, taking notes about the cafeteria as he goes to eat lunch with other students. Scenes with adult surveillance, such as a classroom scene where Alex is pelted with spitballs by his peers while the teacher remains oblivious, represent adults as clueless to youth culture and youth experience. This understanding of adults is furthered by a conversation between three white girls who complain about their parents going through their rooms as they sleep. These actions are considered annoying by the girls and are illustrated to be purposeless when the camera then follows the girls into the restroom where they vomit their lunches into the toilet. The girls’ parents and the school administration are represented as completely unaware of their bulimia. Later scenes in the film with Alex’s parents are shot with angles that leave the adults faceless and anonymous; the viewer is not meant to care about these characters or focus on them for long. The white youths in the film are the center of their own universes and refuse adult intervention in their lives.
The one scene of the film with adult-youth interaction that is represented as respectful is framed through a gay/straight alliance meeting where white youths talk with a black male adult about how to tell if someone is gay. This conversation, which ranges from discussions of how people dress to their mannerisms, seems to imply a similar question of how one can tell if a youth is a killer or not. This scene, where students sit in a circle and engage with their teacher as a peer, is atypical for a high school classroom setting in which teachers represent authority figures. The students in this scene facilitate the conversation with only small additions from the adult in the room. As well, when the shooting in the school begins, it is not the adult teacher who takes control of this classroom, but a white male student who goes to the door to check on the noises, only to be shot in the chest. Like other scenes in the film that center on white male students roaming the halls (this happens at least three different times, not including the film’s focus on the killers when they enter the school), this classroom scene places white male youths in positions of authority and power.

Gus Van Sant’s choice to not justify or explain the killers’ actions throughout the film—only brief scenes of bullying are shown, for example, and they also include students that are victims of the rampage violence in addition to the killers themselves—points to a desire to allow white youth violence to remain a mystery. While some reviewers praise Van Sant for his decision to make the film’s central message: “Nazi, queer, gameboy: It doesn't matter what a killer is, only that he has killed” (Morris 2003, C1), this choice causes frustration for many reviewers who call the film “infuriating” and “empty” (Bernard 2003, 54). One reviewer states, for example, that “Elephant does not forward our understanding of the forces of human nature that lead to a Columbine.
Instead, it thrusts us into the same state of disbelief and horror we felt watching the TV coverage of the real event. That is something -- but it is not enough at this point” (Kirkland 2003, E4). The “reality” of suburban/rural violence presented by Van Sant, one of ambiguity and senselessness, is not fully appreciated or accepted by reviewers.

Significantly, this need for explanation and a sense of closure is not present in reviews of 187, which instead focus on how the film offers a reality of urban education that audiences need to see. Indeed, one reviewer claims, “the movie deserves credit for the unsparing realism with which it shows what passes for education in so many inner-city classrooms” (Ryan 1997, D4). Another reviewer calls 187 “another valiant attempt to deal with a collapsing educational system and send a warning shot across the bows of public opinion. It's a world we have seen before, but it has never been portrayed in such a realistically harrowing fashion as in 187” (Stone 1997, C4). Interestingly, these claims to realism are made despite the film’s surreal scenes of a teacher shooting a student with an arrow and then removing his finger and a teacher shooting up a rodent with morphine as a science lesson. Surely these are not the “realities” of urban education, but they are represented as such through the reviewers’ understanding of urban life as foreign and as a completely different world than suburban/rural public education where these actions would never be defined as reality.

This foreign world is represented in Elephant by the African-American character of “Benny” the only new character that we are introduced to after the rampage violence has begun. Other white youth characters in the film have background stories, relationships to other youths, and families with whom they are connected. Benny, however, is isolated when he is shown walking down the hallway toward the sound of gunshots, moving in
the opposite direction of students who are running toward safety. Benny is portrayed as
drawn toward the violence, rather than away from it, and even when given a chance to
escape through a window, chooses to stay within the school. Reviewers refer to Benny,
when he is mentioned at all, as “John Wayne” (Rickey 2003, W8) and “the sacrificial
black man” (Mitchell 2003, 1) because of his choice to walk up to the killer—maybe in
an attempt to disarm him, maybe out of curiosity, the audience cannot be sure—and be
killed rather than to escape to safety when he has the chance. Benny’s character, one of
two African-Americans in the film, and the only representation of a minority youth,
fulfills the stereotypes of urban violence despite his location in a suburban/rural youth
violence film when he is drawn to the violence from which his white peers flee. The
message is clear: Benny does not belong here and is merely a foil for white youth
innocence, rationality, and responsibility through his irrational actions.

The irrationality of the killers’ actions in the film is given some surface-level
justification, but just enough to confuse audiences. For example, the killers are shown
playing first-person shooter videogames, watching a Nazi documentary on the television,
being bullied by classmates, and kissing one another in the shower. Hints are also
offered that at least one of the killers may struggle with mental illness. Several of the
stereotypes of white youth violence compete against each other throughout *Elephant*,
offering no answer to the question of “why?” Indeed, one of the killers, Alex, is shown
playing classical music on the piano while his friend, Eric, the other killer, shoots people
on a computer game. This contrast of beauty versus death begs the question of what has
made the youths choose one over the other when they are capable of both? One review
of the film notes that because of Van Sant’s method of following a variety of teenagers
throughout the film “one gets the feeling that any of those teenagers could pull a trigger, for reasons so personal to them that nobody would understand” (Persall 2003, E1). This message is echoed at the end of the film when Eric states, while in the process of killing the school principal, “you know there’s others like us out there too.”

Even with this hint of other murderous youths in the shadows, and however much ambivalence Van Sant offers through his film, one message remains clear: white youth who kill are not the norm. We may not have been given a justification in this particular film, but the many explanations for youth violence have been presented throughout the narrative and all of them are represented as being preventable. Bullying, violent videogames and television, the availability of guns online, and mental illness among youth are all manageable problems that are not tied to whiteness or white youth specifically, but are outside influences that have created white youth violence. This message is emphasized by the innocent white youth in the film who deal with alcoholic parents, bullying, eating disorders, and other youth concerns without acting out against their peers. Whereas urban youth violence is an inherent character trait, waiting to be released, the white youth violence of Elephant and other suburban/rural youth violence narratives is a unique combination of factors that influence white youth to do what they otherwise would never attempt.

*Suburban/Rural Narratives and American Youth Citizenship Identity*

This chapter began with a discussion of how constructed narratives of adolescence contribute to and influence adult perceptions of the “realities” of American youth experience and the future of American youth as productive citizens. I argued that connections made between racial identity and violence in media depictions and popular
culture representations of deviant youths resulted in a “moral panic” concerning the citizenship identities of white youths and, in particular, white male youths. Moreover, I pointed to the ways in which “realities” of urban youth experience are constructed to justify the disposability of youth of color. In order to further examine the embedded anxieties within narratives of youth violence, I presented a comparative taxonomy to both categorize and analyze common themes across narrative genres and popular culture modes located within particular time periods. Using this taxonomy I argued that the various issues that are presented across fictional narratives of school violence invoke adult concerns regarding the relationship between citizenship, youth identity, and intersections of race and gender. Through an analysis of the films 187 and Elephant I utilized the taxonomy to illustrate how urban school violence is frequently normalized, while suburban/rural school violence is explained away through various mechanisms and discourses that maintain hegemonies of white supremacy and patriarchy.

Film theorist Peter Wollen claims, “the cinema cannot show truth, or reveal it, because the truth is not out there in the real world, waiting to be photographed. What the cinema can do is produce meanings, and meanings can only be plotted, not in relation to some abstract yardstick or criterion of truth, but in relation to other meanings” (Wollen 2004, 532). The relationship between urban youth violence narratives and suburban/rural youth violence narratives illustrates that the latter narratives do not choose to offer separate or competing messages, but instead continue to maintain and strengthen the messages of selective and segregated citizenship that urban youth violence narratives first introduced. In the suburban/rural youth violence narratives of this chapter and throughout the rest of this dissertation, “othered” identities are often central to the
definitions of white male youth citizenship that are presented. Indeed, explorations of how various identities and lived experiences are undermined through fictionalizations of the “realities” of youth violence illustrate Toni Morrison’s argument that “as in virtually all of this nation’s great debates, nonwhites and women figure powerfully, although their presence may be disguised, denied, or obliterated” (Morrison 1992, xix).

Feminist scholars such as Julia Preece have noted the consequences of citizenship defined through discriminatory practices. In her article “Feminist Perspectives on the Learning of Citizenship and Governance,” Preece argues that “the way men and women learn what is valued in terms of active citizenship and participation in decision making determines their identity as citizens, their perceived entitlements as members of a given society and their perceived role within society” (Preece 2002, 21). She further argues that women’s limited education regarding citizenship can influence women’s political participation “in terms of representation, voice and methodology, and what kinds of space women are given in which to act as individual or collective citizens” (Preece 2002, 24). These concerns also apply to the exclusionary practices used against people of color and other marginalized citizens in the U.S. It is precisely because representations of youth citizenship in suburban/rural youth violence narratives act as a form of “public pedagogy” that excavating the narratives’ messages regarding youth citizenship is crucial to a feminist understanding of how future American citizens (i.e. white males) are being framed in particular ways that are exclusionary to other(ed) populations of youth. By re-contextualizing representation of youth citizenship as politically, socially, historically, and economically situated, this dissertation will further examine the embedded anxieties surrounding American youth and the ways in which popular culture narratives attempt to
respond to these concerns while also refusing to identify or acknowledge problematic citizenship definitions and constructions.

Using this chapter as a foundation, the remainder of this dissertation will focus primarily on suburban/rural youth violence narratives and their construction of particular messages regarding white, male citizenship. The next chapter will focus on how white male shooters are portrayed in terms of their sexuality. Anxieties regarding the heterosexualization of white youth are embedded within narratives of white youth violence in which perpetrators are often represented as sexually queer and set apart from their victimized peers by their deviance and their implied gay identity. In the following chapter, I explore what these perceived gay identities imply about the relationship between adult anxieties regarding youth gender identity and sexuality and youth citizenship development.
Chapter Two: Heteronormativity and the Queer Rampage Killer: Youth Identity, Hegemonic Masculinity, and Sexual Citizenship

While there are citizens – and while the chances of being counted as a citizen might expand in certain directions – there will always be non-citizens and there will also always be those who live precariously on the margins of inclusion and exclusion. (David Bell and John Binnie, The Sexual Citizen: Queer Politics and Beyond, 39)

National identity, like nationalism itself, is a social construction that is built upon a series of inclusions and exclusions regarding history, citizenship, and national belonging. (Henry Giroux, Fugitive Cultures: Race, Violence, and Youth, 190)

People panic when [children’s] sexuality takes on a life outside the sanctioned scripts of child’s play. And nowhere is this panic more explosive than in the field of the queer child, the child whose play confirms neither the comfortable stories of child (a)sexuality nor the supposedly blissful promises of adult heteronormativity. (Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley, Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children, ix)

Introduction: Queering the Rampage Killer

As evidenced in the previous chapter, popular representations of rampage violence perpetrated by white male youths provide excellent evidence toward the argument that “social problems aren’t social problems until they begin to visibly erode white communities” (Gaines 1998, 241). Youth violence did not become part of a social agenda until it began to happen in white, suburban communities and affect white families. Even then, representations of white youth violence provide justifications through explanatory discourses that deny a correlation between violence and whiteness while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of whiteness and patriarchal structures in the creation of successful American citizens. In this chapter and the next, I continue to
analyze representations of white youth violence, focusing more intensely on the relationship between youth, violence, sexuality, and American citizenship.

Central to the analysis of this chapter is the way in which popular understandings of masculinity reinforce the relationship between race, sexuality, gender and citizenship so that these identities can be understood as not only related to each other, but also as dependent on one another for claims to power. Richard Dyer, in his foundational book *White* (1997), argues, “all concepts of race are always concepts of the body and also of heterosexuality. Race… seeks to systematize differences and relate them to differences of character and worth. Heterosexuality is the means of ensuring, but also the site of endangering, the reproductions of these differences” (Dyer 1997, 20). Thus, whiteness, and its power in society, is intricately tied to heterosexuality and the capacity to reproduce power through the maintenance of racial difference. Dyer further states, “race and gender are ineluctably intertwined, through the primacy of heterosexuality in reproducing the former and defining the latter” (Dyer 1997, 30). The triumvirate of race, sexuality, and gender coalesce in definitions of citizenship in which white, heterosexual masculinity is idealized and romanticized.

This chapter explores the potential rationales for the “queering” of white youth through portrayals of rampage violence in which childhood innocence, gender identity, and youth sexuality are intentionally “made strange” (Dyer 1997). I introduce the argument that despite (or, perhaps, because of) the threat that they represent to American society, sexually deviant adolescent characters are consistently utilized to strengthen both patriarchal and heteronormative foundations of American citizenship and to illustrate the ideal structures of citizenship identities for American youth (a claim that will be
continued in the following chapter). Within this extended argument I use the term
“queer” very intentionally. Rather than as “a catchall term… to dispute dominant
conceptualizations of sexuality, including gay, lesbian, and heterosexual, as stable,
coherent, and essential identities,” I instead employ the concept of “queering” to “make
the familiar strange—for the purposes of critique, contestation, and change” (McDonald
2002, 380; 381). To queer a rampage killer, as I will elaborate further in this chapter, is
not just to mark a character as deviant through implying an alternative sexual orientation,
but also to question his or her ability to represent childhood innocence, to embody the
ideals of whiteness, or to develop an appropriate citizenship identity.

In his book *Difference Troubles: Queering Social Theory and Sexual Politics*,
Steven Seidman argues that scholars should “make strange or ‘queer’ what is considered
known, familiar, and commonplace, what is assumed to be the order of things, the natural
way, the normal, the healthy, and so on” (Seidman 1997, xi). In this chapter, I begin to
question how and why deviant sexuality and white youth violence have been brought
together in a way that has become normal and natural. I argue that the ways in which
youth are “made strange” is part of a larger agenda to frame an idealized youth identity as
heteronormative. Thus, in this chapter, I contribute to “a discursive culture that assumes
unstable foundations, that aims to speak across communities, that deploys a pragmatic
type of social reason, and fashions narratives that avoid unidimensional stories of
progress or regress” (Seidman 1997, xi). In other words, I *queer the act of queering* in
order to expose the problematic ways in which youth culture is being “made strange” for
the purpose of strengthening and maintaining social hegemonies and systems of
patriarchal and racial power.
I begin my analysis by first identifying shifts in white masculinity as a historical construct in order to further contextualize contemporary characteristics of hegemonic white masculinity. I then focus on the contemporary phenomenon of same-sex bullying and sexual harassment in American schools and point to these aggressive acts as a defensive technique that is being employed by white male youths to maintain and strengthen dominant notions of hegemonic masculinity. Next, I examine how idealizations of heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity exist within narratives of white youth violence through hierarchies of hegemonic and subordinated masculinities. This exploration is facilitated by an analysis of how fictional male shooters are compared against masculine ideals when they are intentionally labeled with subordinated masculinities in three distinct ways: through their rationales for violence, their queer mannerisms, and their inability (or unwillingness) to engage in acts of hegemonic masculinity.

---

30 I make strategic use of the term “hegemonic masculinity” in order to point to the ways in which dominant constructions of masculinity can shift and change over time. R.W. Connell, in *Masculinities* (1995), defines hegemonic masculinity as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy” (Connell 1995, 77; see also Messerschmidt 1993). This form of dominant or “normalized” masculinity (Gutterman 1994) should also be placed in relation to “subordinated masculinities,” those gender identities that “are identified as less masculine, in part because they approach femininity, resist hegemonic masculinity, or are subordinate as the result of race/ethnicity or class” (Danner and Carmody 2001, 90). Connell argues that the relationships between various masculinities “are constructed through practices that exclude and include, that intimidate, exploit, and so on” such that “there is a gender politics within masculinity” (Connell 1995, 37). It is this relationship between masculinities that is elaborated within representations of white male youth violence that embed notions of deviant sexuality within articulations of the deviant white male “other” in order to create a comparison to the ideal white male youth as future American citizen.
In the latter half of this chapter, I offer an analysis of the film *Heart of America* (2002) in order to further illustrate the relationship between representations of hegemonic masculinity, school violence, and citizenship identity. I then conclude the chapter with a discussion of what it might mean to “consider all citizenship to be sexual citizenship, as citizenship is inseparable from identity, and sexuality is central to identity” (Bell and Binnie 2000, 67). In this final section, I elaborate how narratives of youth violence serve to influence popular understandings of the relationship between youth identity and sexual citizenship. Specifically, I ask what the identity of the “sexual citizen” means for American youths who inhabit a liminal, albeit highly sexualized, space.

*Hegemonic Masculinity as a Historical Construct*

The phenomenon of gay male shooters, or shooters who are rumored to be gay, is a frequent trope of rampage shooting narratives that is specifically tied to narratives of violence by white youths (there are no queer-identified urban youth killers in the narratives analyzed in chapter one, for example). Fictional accounts of white male youths who commit rampage violence frequently “other” white male protagonists by placing them in direct comparison with alternative male characters who embody hegemonic masculinity. Even further illustrating the shooters’ deviance from his or her

---

31 In an effort to unearth perceptions of masculinity that are engrained in day-to-day economic, social, and political practices, Michael Kimmel (1996) posits that “putting manhood in historical context presents it differently as a constantly changing collection of meanings that we construct through our relationship with ourselves, with each other, and with our world” (Kimmel 1996, 5). Thus, this section does not attempt to identify a particular masculinity present across texts of rampage violence, but instead attempts to map patterns through which the multiple male gender identities present in fictional rampage violence texts situate themselves within a hierarchy of masculinities that has developed over time.
peers, the relationship that is drawn between violence and sexuality also plays on historical framings of serial killers as sexually disturbed. One of the most obvious representations of this phenomenon is the character “Buffalo Bill” in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) who is portrayed as a cross-dressing killer who hopes to make himself a woman suit out of the skins of his victims. This over-the-top portrayal draws a direct connection between the killer’s actions and his sexual identity and maintains the 1960s definition of homosexual as psychopath (Canaday 2009, 230, 241).

In the 1950s and into the 1960s, anxieties surrounding gay identity became more pronounced as essentialist notions of masculinity were explicitly tied to national identity, sexuality, and political identity. This anxiety is reflected in federal policies that “explicitly used homosexuality to define who could enter the country and be naturalized, who could serve in the military, and who could collect state benefits” (Canaday 2009, 3; Canaday’s emphasis). In other words, sexual identity during this time period became a central characteristic for identifying who could become an American citizen. During the 1950s, “American men discovered what happened to men who failed, especially the sons of men who failed as breadwinners and fathers. They became homosexual, they became juvenile delinquents, they became communists – soft, spineless dupes of a foreign power, who were incapable of standing up for themselves” (Kimmel 1996, 237). A strict dichotomy is drawn in this decade between masculinity on the one hand, and femininity, criminality, and non-citizenship on the other.

During the 1970s, men begin to acknowledge problematic components of their socially prescribed gender identity through the Men’s Liberation Movement. In this period of re-evaluation of masculinity, “men themselves were refusing to live up to the
prescribed package of behaviors and traits that defined American manhood” (Kimmel 1996, 281). Importantly, however, there are limits to the redefinitions of masculinity that take place in the 1970s. It is during this period that “homosexual persons were [defined as] psychopaths – incapable of being good citizens” (Canaday 2009, 241). Thus, even if American men were looking to acknowledge particular faults of the male sex role, heterosexuality was certainly not one of them.

The need to redefine masculinity in the 1970s leads to what was referred to in the 1980s as the “new man,” an identity characterized by the ability to be “warm, sensitive, cuddly, compassionate” (Kimmel 1996, 292). Ushered into the 1980s through popular films such as Kramer vs. Kramer (1979), this “new man” is understood to be “the hero of the 1980s” (Kimmel 1996, 292). However, in response to this more sensitive masculinity, a “fear of the wimp” (Kimmel 1996, 295) developed in the 1980s, resulting in a genre of “hard body” narratives that “came to stand not only for a type of national character – heroic, aggressive, and determined, but for the nation itself” (Jeffords 1994, 25). Films such as Terminator (1984), Lethal Weapon (1987), and Die Hard (1988) “offered narratives against which American men and women could test, revise, affirm, or negate images of their own conceptions of masculinity, which, because of a changing economy, altering gender relations, increasingly tense race relations… were themselves in flux throughout [the 1980s]” (Jeffords 1994, 12). The decade of the 1980s offers a prime example of the ways in which definitions of masculinity compete with one another for dominance depending on the need to establish and maintain patriarchy during particular time periods.
The “hard body” backlash against the “new man” continued into the 1990s with the development of the Men’s Rights Movement. Formed “to prop up traditional definitions of masculinity” (Kimmel 1996, 309), this movement became “a relentless effort to repudiate femininity, a frantic effort to dissociate from women” (Kimmel 1996, 318). Reifying a gender dichotomy that pitted femininity against masculinity as an either/or spectrum, “masculinists” argued against men taking on any kind of characteristic that could be perceived as feminine (i.e. powerless). As Kimmel argues in the introduction to his book, *Manhood in America*, “manhood is less about the drive for domination and more about the fear of others dominating us, having power or control over us” (Kimmel 1996, 6). Thus, the 1990s was a decade in which men attempted to re-articulate their powerful position through re-claiming traditional masculinity.

Brenton Malin, in his book *American Masculinity Under Clinton: Popular Media and the Nineties ‘Crisis of Masculinity’* (2005), argues that a “crisis of masculinity” occurred in the 1990s that brought about a “newly negotiated traditional maleness, one that reiterates traditional anxieties about manhood” (Malin 2005, 10). These anxieties are intricately tied to notions of “masculinity as the ultimate measure of nationhood, citizenship, and ethics more generally” (Malin 2005, 148). Men must reclaim their traditional masculinity in order to be effective workers, fathers, citizens, and leaders. If it is true that rampage shootings are meant to be expressions of masculinity (Lesko 2001), then the fact that the majority of school rampage shootings took place during this decade also implies a distinct connection between acts of violence and the defense of masculinity as a signification of citizenship.
Kimmel states that manhood is often perceived as “eternal, a timeless essence that resides deep in the heart of every man” (Kimmel 1996, 4). Just as whiteness as a racial identity often goes unmarked, “when we do acknowledge gender, we often endow manhood with a transcendental, almost mythic set of properties that still keep it invisible” (Kimmel 1996, 4). So what does this mean for the state of hegemonic masculinity in the United States during the 2000s when the majority of representations of white youth violence in schools were being produced? According to Kimmel, during this time period “for straight, white, middle-class men a virtual siege mentality has set in” (Kimmel 1996, 330). White men face a changing social order in which their masculinity and their heterosexuality must be defended at all costs. Enactments of hegemonic masculinity become a primary vehicle for solidifying homosocial relationships between men and boys as explored in television shows like Rescue Me (2004-present) and The Shield (2002-present), and films such as the American Pie series (1999, 2001, 2003). Through depictions of male groups engaging in violence against women, achieving heterosexual success, and bullying their male peers who represent subordinated masculinities, these texts are all representative of the “siege mentality” that Kimmel identifies post-2000.

Importantly, this siege mentality is not only identified among adult men, but also among populations of adolescent youths. In particular, the school environment provides a setting for male youths to engage in acts of aggression against women and one another in order to prove their masculinity and establish their position at the top of a gender hierarchy that will continue into adulthood. In her article, “Are We Missing the Forest for the Trees? Considering the Social Context of School Violence,” Jean Baker argues that “schools, as social institutions, have overt and tacit norms and values defining
behaviors and social interaction patterns. This culture of the school shapes and constrains
the expression of individual differences among its members” (Baker 1998, 34). Thus,
when the culture of the school is influenced by the social and political discourses that
surround it, it is not surprising that certain hierarchies of gender and sexual identity
would be maintained among youth just as they are with the adults around them.
Moreover, scholars Jane Kenway and Lindsay Fitzclarence claim that “if schools
implicitly subscribe to and endorse hegemonic versions of masculinity… then they are
complicit in the production of violence” (Kenway and Fitzclarence 1997, 127). Indeed,
literature on youth violence points to the institution of the school as not only a potential
site of youth violence, but also a climate through which certain forms of youth aggression
are both condoned and supported.

*Hegemonic Masculinities vs. Subordinated Masculinities*

In her article “The Monsters Next Door: Media Constructions of Boys and
Masculinity,” Mia Consalvo argues that high school culture “tends to celebrate and
reward some masculinities and punishes or discourages others” (Consalvo 2003, 35). She
offers the real life example of Columbine High, which “glorified sports and athletes. In
the hierarchy of school relations, jocks were at the top, while geeks and nerds were at the
bottom. Jocks could revel in their position and gain status within the school for their
activities, while the geeks received only scorn” (Consalvo 2003, 35).32 This typical

32 Moreover, enactments of high-status and low-status masculinity at Columbine were
also implicitly tied to American identity. As one scholar argues, “part of parcel of the
demonizing and making queer of Harris and Klebold was their characterization as un-
American. That they ‘admired Nazis’ was the most common motif establishing their
disavowal of American normalcy” (Ramlow 2003, 120). Similar characterizations occur
The clear relationship being drawn between American youth identity and hegemonic masculinity through participation in sports stands in direct contrast with the anti-American outcast who is the rampage violence perpetrator, a figure who is never allowed to achieve idealized masculinity. Stanley Cohen argues in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (2002) that “society labels rule-breakers as belonging to certain deviant groups… once the person is thus type cast, his acts are interpreted in terms of the status to which he has been assigned” (Cohen 2002, 3). This is certainly true for shooter characters in fictional accounts of rampage violence who are meant to represent subordinated masculinities as a central justification for their violent actions. In order to maintain the relationship between white youth violence and deviance, implied evidence of queer identity among male shooters is illustrated in fictional narratives of rampage violence such as Gus Van Sant’s rampage violence film *Elephant*, which also shows white male youth shooters admiring Nazis.

Indeed this dichotomy of masculinity is present throughout popular representations of the white high school experience post-2000 (see, for example, the various high school sports films that were produced post-2000). I would argue that it is not entirely serendipitous that representations of deviant white males appear along the same timeline as representations of the ideal white American youth athlete, often a hero within his school and larger community. Just as heroic white males must offset the deviance of their rampage shooter peers within rampage violence narratives, this identity may also appear across pop culture representations as a source of white hope in response to actual events of white youth violence.
violence through three main themes: the shooters’ rationale for violence, their queer mannerisms, and their inability to embody hegemonic masculinity.

**Rationale for Violence**

In Jodi Picoult’s *Nineteen Minutes*, school shooter Peter Houghton is frequently bullied by his peers through challenges to his masculinity. Peter’s male peers, many of them popular athletes, call him a “fag” and “homo” and at one point pull down his pants in the cafeteria in front of a girl that he likes (Picoult 2007, 217; 321). The repeated “gay-baiting” in *Nineteen Minutes* “suggests that [Peter] is a failure at the one thing he knows he wants to be and is expected to be—a man” (Kimmel and Mahler 2003, 1453). When Peter goes to a gay club to try and better understand his outsider status, he is further queered for the reader, despite a gay character’s claim that Peter is straight. His gay identity is also implied when he kills a gay teacher, leading one character to posit “maybe Peter Houghton was homophobic” (Picoult 2007, 172) in an attempt to hide his own gay identity.

Scholars Mona Danner and Dianne Carmody describe subordinated masculinity as a category that “includes boys and men who are identified as ‘faggots,’ ‘geeks,’ ‘nerds’ ‘brains,’ ‘wimps,’ ‘mama’s boys,’ ‘sissies,’ ‘pushovers,’ ‘fatties,’ or ‘freaks’” (Danner and Carmody 2001, 90). Peter’s questionable sexuality and his refusal to fight back against his peers’ physical attacks categorize him as a boy who cannot meet the requirements of hegemonic masculinity. Characterizations of Peter as embodying a subordinated masculine identity go beyond his school to his home life as well. Indeed,

---

34 The “pantsing” scene with Peter Houghton is reminiscent of a similar incidence that happened to Michael Carneal, an actual school shooter who was pantsed in front of his classmates (Klein and Chancer 2000).
Peter’s mother “had always considered herself lucky to have somehow received a child who was not the cookie-cutter American boy, one who was sensitive and emotional and so in tune with what others felt and thought” (Picoult 2007, 197). Although his personality is praised by his mother, it is ridiculed by his peers.

When Peter goes to trial for his act of rampage violence, his lawyer mounts a legal defense through an interpretation of Battered Woman’s Syndrome that justifies Peter’s actions on account of the bullying he experiences. As his lawyer explains, “battered woman syndrome. It’s a valid legal defense. Battered women get stuck in a world that slams them down; eventually they feel so constantly threatened that they take action, and truly believe they’re protecting themselves—even if their husbands are fast asleep. That fits Peter Houghton, to a T” (Picoult 2007, 187). Through his legal defense strategy, Peter becomes “the first example of bullied victim syndrome” (Picoult 2007, 287); his lawyer argues that he should be first treated as a victim rather than being seen primarily as a perpetrator. This queering of Peter’s actions through attempting to let him claim the status of victim, an identity often only available to female perpetrators of murder, merely adds to the effeminacy that already characterizes his identity in school and at home.

The characterization of Peter in a stereotypically female role of battered wife, means that he is refused a hegemonically masculine rationale for his crime despite the violence that he enacts. His lawyer explains at his trial that “when Peter walked into Sterling High School that morning, he had no intention of becoming a mass murderer. He walked in intending to defend himself from the abuse he’d suffered for twelve straight

---

35 This is a topic I take up in more detail in the next chapter.
years” (Picoult 2007, 363). When he is initially arrested, all Peter can tell the police is that “they started it” (Picoult 2007, 55), again implying that he was only acting in self-defense, instead of out of offensive aggression. Rather than his violence transforming his gender identity through a masculine rationale centered around his use of violence, Peter’s claims to victimhood merely feminize him all the more.

**Queer Mannerisms**

Rampage violence narratives such as Lionel Shriver’s novel *We Need To Talk About Kevin* also frame violent male youth protagonists through their sexuality and outsider status as represented through their queer mannerisms. The main protagonist of the novel, Eva, describes her son, Kevin, who is currently incarcerated for killing his classmates, as wearing clothes that are too small and which emphasize his “aggressive sexuality” (Shriver 2003, 170-171). Kevin is also described as having “traces of effeminacy” that encourage a gender “ambiguity” that he enjoys (Shriver 2003, 171). He often intentionally makes Eva uncomfortable through his choices of dress as well as his actions. For example, as he enters adolescence, Kevin frequently masturbates in the bathroom, deliberately leaving the door open so that Eva cannot avoid his displays of sexuality (Shriver 2003, 297).

In addition to his ambivalent sexuality, Kevin is also queered through his personality and his actions. Throughout the novel, Kevin rarely acts like a “normal” child. For example, “he d[oes] not play” (Shriver 2003, 112), he is not potty trained until the age of six by his own choice, he terrorizes his classmates at a young age, and he causes the deformity of his younger sister, all without remorse. Kevin is a kind of child sociopath, showing his true feelings only around his mother, but wearing a “mask” of
normalcy in his father’s presence and while at school (Shriver 2003, 105; 149; 321). Eva explains, “to me he was never ‘the baby.’ He was a singular, unusually cunning individual who had arrived to stay with us and just happened to be very small” (Shriver 2003, 87). Kevin scares all of his caretakers other than his father because of his strange and disengaged affect.

Kevin’s violence also queers those around him. Eva must make “a concentrated effort to act normal,” a project that is “inherently doomed” (Shriver 2003, 293); Celia, Kevin’s sister, is made strange when she is “half-blinded” by an “accident” that occurs when her brother is baby-sitting; and Kevin’s father, Franklin, has begun to think his wife to be crazy (Shriver 2003, 300). Eva feels “under siege” (Shriver 2003, 300) and claims that Kevin’s violence has “turned [her] into a foreigner” where she only has a “shared cultural past” with her son (Shriver 2003, 45). Throughout the novel, Eva chronicles the ways in which her community expels her, blaming her for her son’s violence despite her efforts to “fix” him and tell others about her concerns that he is an abnormal child.

The final moments of the novel are the strongest signs of Kevin’s queer influences. Before he goes to his school to shoot several of his peers with a crossbow, he kills his father and sister, the two members of his family that never suspected his queerness and that always supported him against the accusations of his mother. He destroys his nuclear family, literally, and shows no remorse. Moreover, Kevin chooses to keep his mother alive to deal with his carnage because since his birth they “have fought one another with an unrelenting ferocity” (Shriver 2003, 400). Shriver’s novel ends with Eva “too exhausted and too confused and too lonely to keep fighting,” admitting, “if only out of desperation or even laziness [that] I love my son” (Shriver 2003, 400). The
monstrosity of Kevin’s actions at the end of *We Need to Talk About Kevin* are placed in comparison both with the Eva’s queer identity as a mother who hates her child as well as her queer decision to love him despite his violent actions that kill the rest of her family.

Kevin’s actions cannot be rationalized only through his queer sexuality, but must also be understood through the ways that he queers both childhood innocence and the traditional family structure. His identity, as explained through his mother, is so strong that even his naïve father and sister cannot combat the violence and strangeness that Kevin embodies. Most concerning, however, is Shriver’s insistence within the novel that Kevin is queer from birth and cannot be fixed, no matter what his mother attempts. He has an incurable disease that impacts the members of his family and those in his community, ultimately resulting in the need for his incarceration and containment by the state. Importantly, in *We Need to Talk About Kevin* the state must step in and take control over Kevin where the institutions of the family and the school cannot.

**Denial of Hegemonic Masculinity**

The portrayal of queer or subordinated masculinity is also present in white, male rampage violence perpetrators who either refuse to engage in acts of hegemonic masculinity or who are refused the identity of hegemonic masculinity (oftentimes even after their final acts of violence). While some of the rampage shooter characters explore or present a queer identity intentionally (such as Kevin, above), there are other narratives where characters are assigned a queer identity by those around them as punishment. As well, a shooter’s lack of hegemonically masculine characteristics can result in a queer identity by default. As R.W. Connell argues in *Masculinities* (1995), “gayness, in patriarchal ideology, is the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from
hegemonic masculinity” (Connell 1995, 78). Not surprisingly, rarely is any form of subordinated masculinity portrayed in a positive way in any of the rampage violence narratives.

Often, the rampage shooters do not engage in dating or in heterosexual relationships. In Gus Van Sant’s Elephant, the male shooters discuss the fact that they have never been kissed before they engage in rampage violence. In this scene, they turn to each other for intimacy, kissing one another while naked in the shower. The shooter in Heart of America also does not join in the traditional dating scene of his peers. While other male characters are shown having sex regularly, getting their girlfriends pregnant, and engaging in acts of rape, Daniel chooses to spend his time alone or with a male friend. His sexuality is purposely left ambiguous throughout the film as he is teased by his father and his peers for his perceived effeminacy.

The shooters’ lack of engagement with norms of heterosexuality set them apart from their peers early in each narrative. In portrayals of rampage violence that include multiple male shooters, often homosocial environments are represented, but these environments are frequently private. Rather than being portrayed together as a sports team (Nineteen Minutes) or engaging in group sex acts with women (Heart of America), scenes in which their hegemonically masculine peers are engaged, male shooters are instead shown hanging out together alone in a bedroom (Elephant) or traveling to isolated locations to test guns or bombs (Bang, Bang, You’re Dead). Unlike their male peers, who embrace “heterosexuality, homosociality, (i.e. a preference for male groups), aggression, hierarchy, and competition” (Hatty 2000, 181), rampage shooters avoid these characteristics until they engage in a rampage shooting.
Other characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, such as aggression, are also not embraced by rampage violence perpetrators until their acts of violence. Although the male shooters are frequently bullied as well as physically assaulted by their peers, they choose not to respond violently until they have weapons. This is true, for example, of the male perpetrators in *Bang, Bang, You’re Dead* who respond to being assaulted in the bathroom with a fake bomb threat to the school or graffiti on the walls. The shooters in *Elephant* are similar, with one sitting stoically while his peers shoot spitballs at him in class. Rarely do narratives of rampage violence show perpetrators reporting the bullying they have experienced before they choose to shoot their peers. When bullying is reported, as is the case in *Nineteen Minutes*, Peter is told by his mother to respond with stereotypical hegemonic masculine aggression and to fight back, a suggestion he cannot successfully implement. Rarely confronted by authority figures, bullies are only shown experiencing consequences for their actions when they are shot and killed in rampage shooting incidents.

Scholars have argued that in actual school shootings, the perpetrators “turn to extreme manifestations of normalized masculinity to try to accrue cultural capital” (Klein 2006a, 54). While this may also be the case in fictional accounts, it is rare that the shooters are ever awarded the cultural capital of hegemonic masculinity. Frequently, the queering of a perpetrator’s gender identity, sexuality, or childhood innocence will not allow for him to be characterized as having a normalized masculinity. Instead, his actions imply the danger of deviant identity to the future of American society while simultaneously reifying the importance of hegemonic identity and accompanying enactments of heteronormativity.
Policing Sexual Boundaries in Schools: Same-Sex Bullying and Sexual Harassment

It is significant to note that while bullying and implications of deviant sexuality are frequently paired with one another in rampage violence plot lines, this relationship is often articulated without any critical inquiry as to why these components repeatedly co-exist. Throughout these fictional portrayals, subordinated masculinities (see Table 4) become normalized rationales for white youth violence, drawing attention away from the harmful effects of contemporary enactments of hegemonic masculinity. As well, fictional narratives of rampage violence serve to reemphasize the importance of proper

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Subordinated Masculinities in Rampage Violence Narratives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Heart of America</em></td>
<td>Rampage violence perpetrator Daniel is referred to by father as “Danielle;” bullies ask “do they have balls?” Daniel exhibits no overt heterosexual tendencies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Bang, Bang, You’re Dead</em></td>
<td>A hierarchy of masculinities exists at the high school where male athletes can force their male peers to sing “Jingle Bells” when they walk by. Boys are also assaulted in the bathroom by male athletes and shoved into lockers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Elephant</em></td>
<td>Shooters are portrayed as gay when they take a shower together and kiss one another before engaging in rampage violence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>We Need to Talk About Kevin</em></td>
<td>Rampage violence perpetrator Kevin is referred to as having “traces of effeminacy” that encourage an “ambiguous” gender identity. Kevin exhibits no overt heterosexual tendencies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Nineteen Minutes</em></td>
<td>Peter is teased about being gay by his peers and brother to the point where he questions his own sexual identity and goes to a gay nightclub. He is called “fag” and “homo” and is referred to as Peter Homo rather than his full name of Peter Houghton. Peter also attends a Gay/Straight Alliance meeting at the school. Although Peter has feelings for his childhood friend Josie, he does not successfully pursue a relationship with her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Vernon God Little</em></td>
<td>Rampage shooter Jesus Navarro is found dead wearing women’s underwear; he is described as living an “alternative lifestyle.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Selected Examples of Subordinated Masculinities in Rampage Violence Narratives
gender and sexuality education and socialization in schools. If the perpetrators of
rampage violence are proven to be queer, then protecting youth from queer influences
will guard against youth violence. Through this rationalization, acts of sexual aggression
against “queer” shooters becomes normalized in fictional accounts of rampage violence.

Unfortunately, these fictional representations of same-sex bullying and
harassment found in rampage violence narratives are similar to the experiences that many
adolescents face in American schools. Increasing research on same-sex bullying and
harassment (see, for example, Duncan 1999, Kimmel 2003, Meyer 2009, and Southgate
2003), often includes narratives of “gay-baiting,” sexual violence, and acts of public
humiliation similar to scenes portrayed in the fictional accounts of rampage violence
discussed above. Scholars that study school bullying have also coined the term
“gendered harassment” to describe forms of aggression in schools that include “any
behavior that acts to shape and police the boundaries of traditional gender norms:
heterosexual masculinity and femininity” (Meyer 2009, 1-2). Problematically, however,
analyses of bullying and harassment in schools often fail to take into account the
influence that societal hierarchies of gender and sexuality may have on peer interactions.
Elizabeth Meyer, author of *Gender, Bullying, and Harassment: Strategies to End Sexism
and Homophobia in Schools*, argues that “the main weakness in the current trend of
bullying studies is that they fail to explore and acknowledge the influences of larger
social forces such as sexism, homophobia, and transphobia in understanding relationships
of dominance and power in peer groups” (Meyer 2009, 17). Literature on school bullying
also shows that same-sex sexual harassment and bullying is often ignored by teachers and
school administrators (Fineran 2002). As real incidents of gendered harassment in
schools go unacknowledged and unexplored, fictional accounts of rampage violence that include aggressive acts of same-sex bullying contribute to the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity through homophobic acts that are represented as a normal or natural part of peer interaction in schools.

The naturalization of gender hierarchies in school settings is a common trope of fictional narratives of rampage violence. Not only are girls subordinated under their male peers, but a clear hierarchy among male peers also develops. The existence of hegemonic masculinity strengthens these hierarchies. Indeed, when “the hegemonic definition of manhood is a man in power, a man with power, and a man of power” it is not surprising that “the very definitions of manhood we have developed in our culture maintain the power that some men have over other men and that men have over women” (Kimmel 1999, 111). A relationship between subordinated women and subordinated men has also been established by scholars of masculinity who claim that “misogyny and homophobia are not merely linked but are so closely intertwined as to be inseparable: misogyny is homophobic and homophobia is misogynist” (Epstein 2001, 106; see also Nayak and Kehily 1996). Same-sex acts of sexual aggression can thus be placed on a spectrum that also includes acts of sexual violence against adolescent girls by their male peers (a topic that I return to later in this chapter in my analysis of Heart of America).

Several scholars have also made claims that “the impact of normalized masculinity pressures on young men and the widespread effect of homophobia, heterosexism, and gay harassment” have a causal relationship to acts of rampage violence (Klein 2006b, 40; see also, Klein and Chancer 2000, Kimmel and Mahler 2003). If hegemonic masculinity “embraces heterosexuality, homosociality (i.e. a preference for
male groups), aggression, hierarchy, and competition” (Hatty 2000, 181), then school shooters cannot be, and should not be, defined as deviant. Rather, as Kimmel and Mahler (2003) note, they are “overconformists to a particular normative construction of masculinity, a construction that defines violence as a legitimate response to a perceived humiliation” (Kimmel and Mahler 2003, 1440). Rampage violence, when explained through discourses of deviant sexuality or queer identity, is thus merely a mechanism to distract from the harmful effects that hierarchies of masculinity can have on youth populations who experience pressure to enact normalized gender and sexual identities.

Actual events of rampage violence committed by white male youths in schools have been explained as a method to “violently defend themselves against charges that they are exhibiting ‘feminine’ or ‘homosexual’ qualities” (Klein 2006, 166). Ironically, however, white male perpetrators of these events frequently have motives situated within heteronormative concerns. Motives such as “rejection, jealousy/protection, and frustration” (Klein 2006, 156), for example, caused female victims to be “specifically targeted in 11 of 13 high-profile school shootings that took place in the United States between 1996 and 2002” (Klein 2006, 149). In several cases, it seems, it was not queer-identified motivations that brought about rampage violence, but distinctly hegemonically masculine and heterosexual ones.

The consistent pattern of labeling white male youth rampage shooters as gay or sexually queer in both media accounts and fictional narratives when actual events of rampage violence have heterosexual motivations raises important questions about national anxieties regarding threats to dominant understandings of masculinity and the heterosexualization of white youth. Scholars have argued that actual events of rampage
violence are acts of “remasculinizing, or a hypermasculinization” (Lesko 2001, 179) in which perpetrators defend or claim their masculinity through school violence after their gender identity or sexuality has come under threat (see also, Danner and Carmody 2001; Kimmel and Mahler 2003). Similarly, in fictional narratives of rampage violence, subordinated masculinities are identified as rationales for school violence when male perpetrators feel they must act out against their peers in order to defend their masculinity.

Of even more concern, perhaps, is how the sexual harassment of non-gender-conforming heterosexuals can distract from the abuses that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans-identified youth experience. When gay-baiting is “misdirected” (Kimmel 2003, 73) toward heterosexual youth, a phenomenon that frequently occurs in fictional and actual accounts of rampage violence, the experiences of youth who identify with a lifestyle apart from heterosexuality are erased. It is important to note that the male characters in fictional accounts of rampage violence that experience sexual bullying and harassment from their male peers do not overtly identify as gay. Moreover, there are no “out” gay or lesbian characters in the fictional accounts of rampage violence. Even in narratives that include gay-straight alliance meetings (see, for example, Nineteen Minutes and Elephant) student participants are more likely to be represented as “allies” than youth who identify as gay, lesbian, or transgender. Problematically, in fictional accounts of rampage violence, the anxiety surrounding how “queer” white boys become violent when their masculinity is threatened by their male peers displaces any conversation about the increasing bullying of gay, lesbian, and transgender youth in American schools.

Hatred in the Hallways: Violence and Discrimination Against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Students in U.S. Schools, a 2001 report published by the
Human Rights Watch, estimates that five to six percent, or approximately two million American youth, identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Human Rights Watch 2001, 18; 24). The report acknowledges the phenomenon of targeting straight students for bullying or harassment, but is critical of school officials who only respond to bullying when straight students are targets, stating, “when school officials respond only after a straight student is ‘mistakenly’ targeted, they reinforce the notion that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students are not worthy of protection” (Human Rights Watch 2001, 31).

Similarly, I argue, a preoccupation with the gay-baiting of straight characters as a rationale for rampage violence in fictional narratives distracts attention away from the bullying of youths who do not identify as heterosexual.

The fear of and disgust with being labeled gay in fictional accounts of rampage violence has a causal link to the male shooters’ decisions to act out against their peers in order to prove their masculinity. However, the derogatory ways in which labels of “faggot” and “homo” are used throughout these narratives is frequently unquestioned and unexamined. It is assumed that viewers and audiences of these fictional narratives will understand that being mistakenly labeled as gay is one of the worst experiences an adolescent male can face. Unfortunately, why this is the case is never challenged or explored. Perhaps even more important is the obvious lack of positive portrayals of gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender youth in these narratives. Gay youth, potential gay youth, or mistakenly gay youth are always abnormal, violent, and held apart from their heterosexual peers.

Neil Duncan, a scholar who studies sexual bullying, notes that “individually, sexual bullying practices are manifestations of sexual power struggles. Collectively, they
signify the production and maintenance of a value system based on gendered identity, continually rank-ordering individuals according to values measured by sexual reputation” (Duncan 1999, 131). Duncan’s argument about the meanings of individual versus collective acts of sexual bullying points to the insidious consequences of same-sex bullying when it is not critically examined as a societal practice of policing boundaries of normative gender identities and (hetero)sexuality. Schools (both real and fictional) become microcosms of gender policing as “boys discover that they are measured, sorted and played against each other” (Reichart 2001, 43) in a variety of competitive situations where they must prove their masculinity to their peers.

Importantly, however, it is not only the straight male students who are “misidentified” as gay in fictional rampage violence texts that need to be attended to. Scholars have argued that “students can create a heterosexist atmosphere that denigrates lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender peers regardless of the sexual orientation of the students they are harassing” (Fineran 2002, 66). Even when LGBT students are not being targeted, they are still affected by homophobic remarks, bullying, and harassment that others experience in the school environment. Unfortunately, fictional portrayals of rampage violence “queer” male youths with subordinated masculine identities without questioning the underlying power structures at work. Non-existent lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender characters are thus replaced by “queer” straight while male youths who represent merely one small part of a much larger societal gender hierarchy.

In the next section, I explore the ways in which social hierarchies of masculinity are portrayed within the rampage violence film *Heart of America* (2002). In my analysis of the film, I note the ways in which narratives of sexual violence against women are
used to frame idealized notions of masculinity and heterosexuality as cornerstones of American citizenship identity. As well, I explore the queered identity of Daniel, one of the film’s rampage shooters, in relation to other male characters in the film who are held up as heroes despite their violent tendencies. Finally, I examine the overall messages that the film portrays about youth as a simultaneous threat to and hope for the future of America.

*Hegemonic Masculinity and Idealized Sexual Citizenship in “Heart of America”*

On March 1, 1989, a 17-year-old female high school student with mental disabilities was raped by several white, male high school students in Glen Ridge, New Jersey. In *Our Guys: The Glen Ridge Rape and the Secret Life of the Perfect Suburb* (1997), Bernard Lefkowitz describes this incident and the aftermath that followed in Glen Ridge as “a story of power and powerlessness: the power of the young males and the community that venerated them, and the powerlessness of one marginalized young woman” (Lefkowitx 1997, 3). Within the Glen Ridge community, the white males who perpetrated the rape in a suburban basement using a broomstick and a baseball bat were supported and their crime was justified when the mentally disabled girl was portrayed as sexually deviant. Lefkowitz describes the boys who were eventually put on trial and convicted as “pure gold, every mother’s dream, every father’s pride. They were not only Glen Ridge’s finest, but in their perfection they belonged to all of us. They were Our Guys” (Lefkowitz 1997, 5). The rape that these white, male youths perpetrated was especially unthinkable for the community because of their status as elite athletes within the town of Glen Ridge and because they came from wealthy families.
This non-fiction story is reenacted, 13 years after it took place, in the 2002 film *Heart of America*. Narrated by a white male high school graduate to his friends and younger brother, the film portrays three white, male youths raping a mentally disabled girl nicknamed “Slow White” in a basement, with the implication that a stick-ball bat was used in the attack. In addition to these obvious parallels to Glen Ridge—the location of the incident, the identity of the girl as disabled, and the weapon used—the boy who tells the story speaks with pride and satisfaction, certain that he has given the young woman what she was asking for. He claims that she told her parents because “she was proud of it” rather than acknowledging that she was reporting a crime. Now out of high school, he remembers the event as one of his best moments, something that will be difficult for future generations of his high school peers to top.

This story, upheld as something for the white males involved to have pride in, is one example of how *Heart of America* uses a narrative of violence against women in order to frame the film’s definitions of hegemonic and subordinated masculinities. Through the sexual assault of “Slow White,” the white male youths in the film, similarly to the youths of Glen Ridge, “behaved as if they were gaining more legitimacy and authority as a group each time they victimized a woman” (Lefkowitz 1997, 138). A similar legitimizing occurs when Ricky, the younger brother of “Slow White’s” rapist, and his friends bully characters Daniel and Barry through making the boys eat dog feces on the football field, pulling down their pants to prove they have testicles and then making them masturbate, as well as kicking and punching them for trespassing on school grounds that Ricky claims ownership over. Through an inherent questioning of the
Daniel and Barry’s sexuality, this bullying always situates Ricky and his friends as having gendered power over the two boys.

The combination within *Heart of America* of violence against women and same-sex gendered harassment illustrates that “schools are important institutions for doing gender, especially for constructing and reproducing hegemonic masculinity in at least two forms: male dominance over females and domination by high-status males over low-status males” (Danner and Carmody 2001, 107). Perhaps not surprisingly, the film is a chronicle of, as Daniel’s character states, “guys who decide to stop taking abuse, guys that decide to take control of their own lives” through rampage violence. *Heart of America* ends with Daniel coming to school and killing his peers, including Ricky, because “[he] want[s] those motherfuckers to know what they’ve done to [him]. [He] want[s] them to feel it. And [he] wants them to know that it’s not ok.” During the shooting, Daniel tells one victim “this is your fault” before continuing on to commit more violence.

I have argued throughout this chapter that the rationale of bullying is a repeated trope in suburban/rural school violence narratives where bullied white males react to the violence they encounter at school by bringing weapons to retaliate. Indeed, white adolescent males are often described as being harassed by male peers who are violent toward them and who question their sexuality, a phenomenon that occurs for both Daniel and Barry in *Heart of America*, as well as several other shooters in fictional rampage violence narratives. Julie Webber, in her book *Failure to Hold: Politics of School Violence*, notes that the label “faggot,” in particular, becomes a “‘trigger’ word” for rampage violence, thus demonstrating “very clearly the problems not yet dealt with
concerning masculinity and homophobia, homoeroticism, and sexism faced by girls and boys in school” (Webber 2003a, 80). The references to Daniel’s effeminacy, in particular, both through the bullying he encounters and his father’s references to him by the female name “Danielle,” are evidence toward Daniel’s non-dominant masculine identity that must be defended through his violent act.  

Daniel, intent on proving his own masculinity, ends up killing males who are representative of non-dominant masculine tendencies of sensitivity, care-taking, and respect toward female characters. For example, Kevin, a character who appears throughout the film trying to convince his pregnant girlfriend to marry him, is shot and dies in the arms of his girlfriend. Ricky, who initially represents hegemonic masculinity passed from one generation to another, is killed by Daniel right after he is shown telling his friend to leave Daniel alone. It is implied that after Ricky hears the story of “Slow White” from his brother, he realizes the negative effects of his masculine posturing and wants to change his ways. As well, one of the victims shot and killed by Dara, Daniel’s partner in the act of rampage violence, is also representative of the anti-masculine. Dara participates in Daniel’s plan of rampage violence in order to kill a high-school English teacher who has insulted her writing and embarrassed her in front of her peers. Right before he is shot, however, the teacher is shown apologizing to his students for grading

36 An alternative, but mostly silent, narrative within Heart of America is Barry’s choice to condemn Daniel’s choice to act violently, instead stating, “maybe there are other ways to take a stand.” Barry walks away from Daniel’s act of rampage violence, but the audience is not given any closure to his choice other than a shot of him leaving the school grounds. That Barry chooses not to warn the school of Daniel’s intentions also implies a kind of agreement with his motives despite Barry’s choice not to actively participate.

37 Dara’s actions will receive further analysis in the following chapter, which focuses on the phenomenon of female shooters in narratives of rampage violence.
them too harshly and promising to be more “nurturing” toward them. The English teacher, like Daniel’s victims, is represented as a low-status male because of his empathy for his students and his desire to nurture their creative talents.

Those that survive the massacre—characters such as Tommy, a popular athlete who is using Dara for sex—embody insensitivity, display an inability to care-take, and have disrespectful attitudes toward women. The film’s conclusion, in which one of Daniel and Barry’s bullies becomes a hero for tackling Dara and keeping her from shooting more than her two victims, makes the clear statement about what kind of masculinity is considered appropriate. Despite his earlier enactments of bullying, this white male youth is cited by a newscaster as evidence that “there is hope for American youth.” The newscaster’s message implies that as long as there are white males who are practicing masculinity in the appropriate ways (i.e. through aggressive sexuality and power over low-status males), acts of rampage violence (i.e. enactments of violence that find their origins in subordinated masculinities) can be overcome.

The complicated portrayals of violence and sexuality in Heart of America, in which some characters’ actions are condemned and others are celebrated, offer specific messages about who is allowed to embody hegemonic masculinity. The film’s title, Heart of America, in addition to the themes of violence and masculinity throughout the film, imply a direct relationship between youth actions, whiteness as American identity, hegemonic masculinity, and certain forms of violence. Heart of America’s final message, a series of statistics about white, male youth violence with references to various U.S. cities that have experienced rampage violence incidents, further alienates the actions of rampage shooters by including, as its last narrative, that of a boy in Tampa, Florida, who
crashed a Cessna plane and praised terrorists in a suicide note. That this is the final shot of the film, implying its importance to the film’s themes and overall message, is interesting because of the connection drawn between acts of rampage violence in schools and an act of terrorism. This closing reference offers a final queering of male shooters by aligning them with terrorism, a form of violence frequently signified through racial others. By categorizing rampage violence as terrorism, *Heart of American* re-emphasizes that only certain forms of white male youth violence, such as violent acts against women and low-status males, can be counted as part of the identity of idealized white masculinity.

**Conclusion**

Henry Giroux argues that “violence is not merely a function of power; it is also deeply related to how forms of self and social agency are produced within a variety of public spheres” (Giroux 1996, 84). This is especially evident in gendered narratives of violence, such as those examined in this and the following chapter. Based on the understanding that “anxieties about youth are, in part, a way of expressing anxieties about the reproduction of a particular social order” (Acland 2000, 48), I posited in this chapter that fictional representations of rampage violence must be examined as a complex web of social concerns regarding the future of America as a nation. I argued that representations of white youth violence are “central to revealing the structures of power at work in schools, in society, and in the larger global order” (Giroux 1996, 53) because they are frequently embedded with national narratives of idealized masculinity and heterosexuality as foundational to American citizenship standards.
The privilege attributed to whiteness and hegemonic masculinity in narratives such as Gus Van Sant’s *Elephant* (see previous chapter) is also evident in the majority of rampage violence narratives within this study as “notions of race are closely linked to ideas about legitimate ‘ownership’ of the nation, with ‘whiteness’ and ‘Americanness’ linked tightly together” (Frankenberg 1997, 6). The liminal status of adolescent characters, not quite children and not fully adult, further emphasizes the ways in which their actions are meant to signify whether they will be capable of engaging as successful adult citizens. Therefore, when white male youths are portrayed making extremely violent choices, their peers must counter these representations. When the majority of white youths are shown enacting appropriate gender and sexual identities, they serve to alienate the queer rampage violent perpetrators while also illustrating the continuing development of white youths into successful adulthood.

Indeed, it is the childhood innocence of white youth, in particular, that can erase the relationship between the queer actions of rampage violence perpetrators and white racial identity. As this chapter has argued, racial identity is clearly not the only cause of the “moral panic” surrounding white youth violence. Rampage violence narratives claim that the future of America lies in the ability of white youths to become successful workers and to display the traits of heterosexual citizenship, one of which is to reproduce whiteness through pregnancy. The need to produce heterosexual citizens, however, further emphasizes the tension between the desire to heterosexualize youth while also keeping them innocent children for as long as possible.

The next chapter will focus on the ways in which female youth shooters that are presented in suburban/rural narratives are constructed in particular ways regarding their
gender roles as future female citizens, their (deviant) sexualities, and their relationships to white males. In a continued argument regarding the relationship between social anxieties surrounding the sexual choices of white youths and their developing adult sexual identities, Chapter Three will explore how pregnancy narratives are often intertwined with storylines of female shooters in suburban/rural youth violence narratives in ways that serve to strengthen hegemonic understandings of white youths as future American citizens. In the following chapter, I argue that when narratives of white female shooters displaying agency in the public sphere of the school are combined with portrayals of pregnant teens (serving as a reference to the private sphere of female citizenship) these narratives illustrate both confusion and anxiety about the development of adolescent female youths into future citizens.
A person’s understanding of who they are, and their standing in relation to the other, which allows them to commit the homicide, is constituted within assumptions embedded in sets of cultural practices and understandings, and the structural arrangements in which they are constructed. These understandings are almost always inevitably gendered. (Christine Adler and Ken Polk, *Child Victims of Homicide*, 170)

**Introduction: “Youth” Violence?**

The rise of youth violence in suburban/rural public schools in the United States during the 1990s, and the popular culture representations of these violent acts that followed, caused a reevaluation of American youth and their future as American citizens. Young men, in particular, who engaged in violence on the street and in schools brought about “the growing public perception that aggression, abuse, contempt for the most basic social values, and a rabid individualism now characterize young people” (Giroux 2009, 16). As media and popular culture discourses continue to describe the American youth population as violent and deviant, scholars note that “young people in the United States are increasingly being constructed in relation to a future devoid of any hope” rather than as a hopeful “symbol of the future” (Giroux 2009, 93; 22). However, these representations of youth, as explicated in previous chapters, are not homogenous, and often occur through segregations of race and other socially constructed identities. This chapter will focus on the ways in which dichotomous gender identities, when placed in combination with whiteness and sexuality, are used to signify national anxieties.
concerning female American youth, especially concerns regarding whether and how they can be controlled and their utility as future citizens.

In order to better understand the material effects that fictional narratives of rampage violence have on American youth, this chapter continues to explore the relationship between fictions and realities of youth identity. More specifically, this chapter lays the groundwork for the remaining chapters’ argument that fictional accounts and the “realities” of American youth influence one another in a cyclical pattern (see Figure 1). Throughout this chapter, I analyze fictional accounts of rampage violence, but I also reference actual events of school violence for purposes of comparison and explication. This chapter will further explicate a relational pattern between fictions of

![Figure 1: Cyclical Influence of Realities and Fictions of Youth Violence](image-url)
school violence and youth identity in which portrayals of rampage violence help construct moral panics regarding youth identity (see Chapter One); these moral panics then strengthen harmful ideals of citizenship, education, and childhood; these harmful ideals then influence policy decisions and public attitudes; and, finally, these material affects both reflect and continue to influence fictional portrayals of youth violence.

Throughout this chapter and the remaining chapters, I continue to illustrate the mechanisms through which facts of school violence are fictionalized and fictions of youth identity are made factual.

Building on the previous two chapters’ analyses of racialized and sexualized masculinities in youth violence narratives, this chapter continues to examine gendered ideologies of citizenship within fictional narratives of rampage violence with a specific focus on portrayals of violent white female characters. As a foundation for analysis, this chapter is guided by two central research questions: 1) In what ways do fictional accounts of white female youth violence influence dominant understandings of American youth citizenship identity? and 2) How do “real” national narratives of youth communicated through media representations and policy initiatives impact these fictional portrayals of youth violence? To begin to answer these questions, it is important to acknowledge that investigations of gender that focus “attention on boys… as gendered beings – that is, as males who move through the world exploring, asserting, and defending their masculinity” (Danner and Carmody 2001, 90) are not sufficient by themselves. An examination of fictional accounts that focuses on the narratives’ complicated representations of femininity, sexuality, and female gender roles requires a
feminist analysis that privileges female experience and identity while also acknowledging the existence of gendered oppression.

I begin this chapter by positing that an intentional feminist lens, which relates constructions of femininity to acts of female violence, is needed to analyze fictional accounts of violent female youths. In order to shift the focus from theorizations of violence and societal constructions of masculinity, which have remained central methodologies for understanding male youth violence, I look to the ways in which female shooters are described and categorized in fictional narratives in three ways: victim as killer, victim as suspect, and killer as sexual deviant. I argue that these three categories of violent females are politicized and historicized constructions that are directly tied to their gender identities as young women. As I explore these categorizations through narrative analyses of fictional rampage violence texts, I further develop my argument that the realities of youth experience are fictionalized for the purpose of creating restrictive definitions of American youth as future citizens.

In the second half of this chapter, I use the presence of pregnancy narratives within portrayals of white female youth rampage violence as a case study to illustrate the need for a different understanding of fictional narratives of youth violence that is not centered on understandings of violent masculinity. Specifically, I examine the novel Nineteen Minutes, which combines a rampage violence incident, a female perpetrator, and various pregnancy narratives, in order to analyze the citizenship roles that are being explicated for violent white female youths and their victimized female peers. Through this narrative example, I argue that the relationship that is constructed between female characters’ sexual identity and their involvement in rampage shooting incidents illustrates
a broader perception of white female youths as non-agents who will always be primarily, and detrimentally, defined through their gender identity and sexuality.

The presence of several fictional rampage violence portrayals that combine violent females and pregnancy narratives is both fascinating and troubling. In the final section of this chapter, I point to the ways in which fictional portrayals of female shooters signify a larger “moral panic” within American society that is occurring in response to the shifting sexual and political identities of contemporary American youth. I examine the complex national anxieties within these narratives that point to adult concerns regarding the intersections of youth violence, sexuality, and the gendered identities of youths as future American citizens.

The Birth of the Female Shooter

In her book, *The Queer Child: Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, Kathryn Boyd Stockton argues that even while “the normative child… is safe to us” (Stockton 2009, 30), the concept of childhood innocence, so often the foundation of this normativity, is “strange. [Children] are seen as normative but are also not like [adults], at the same time” (Stockton 2009, 31). This chapter assumes that the normativity of childhood, and the ways in which it is strange, is also heavily gendered. Female youths, in particular, embody both childhood innocence and notions of sexual purity, thus causing a double signification through which the safety and strangeness of childhood is present. Adult concerns about protecting the sexual purity of youths through programs to curb teen pregnancy and sex education in schools are overwhelmingly focused on female youths (Freeman 2008). Indeed, “the discussion surrounding teen pregnancy almost entirely focuses on young women as potential mothers, and casts a negative moral
judgment on teen motherhood” (Hendrixson 2002, 249). Ironically, this gendered focus is not present in discussions of rampage violence, which is often represented as a “youth problem” in national media accounts and policy discussions, thus allowing white female youths to share the burden of white male youths’ actions.

Explorations of actual incidents of rampage youth violence that focus on gender identity frequently depend on classifications of male perpetrators and female victims, with scholars preoccupied by the role of white masculinity in incidents of rampage violence (see, for example, Gibson 1994; Schiele and Stewart 2001). Critical readings of rampage violence incidents as misogynist acts of white male youths against their female peers emerged from the academy as scholars tried to explain why acts of rampage violence were occurring. Indeed, while media reports continued to use vague terminology such as “youth violence,” scholars concluded that “masculinity is the single greatest risk factor in school violence” (Kimmel and Mahler 2003, 1442). While societal constructions of white masculinity are certainly important in an exploration of actual incidents of rampage violence, it is also crucial to acknowledge that fictional narratives of these incidents include significant deviations from “the popular typification of male aggression and female victimization” (Danner and Carmody 2001, 100) when they include female characters engaging in violent acts.

This is true, for example, in Jodi Picoult’s novel about rampage violence, Nineteen Minutes. Although the reader is first led to believe that the school shooting that

---

38 In Beyond Bad Girls: Gender Violence and Hype (New York: Routledge, 2008), scholars Meda Chesney-Lind and Katherine Irwin note that “while virtually all school shooters were boys, the media repeatedly neglected that theme” (18). For further analysis of this phenomenon, see also Courtenay 1999; Kimmel and Mahler 2003; Klein 2006; Leavy and Maloney 2009.
is at the center of the novel’s plot has been perpetrated by Peter, a bullied white male, the end of the novel reveals that a young white female friend, Josie, also participated in the shooting. Picoult’s use of the courtroom drama genre, in particular, to unveil Josie as a female youth shooter certainly creates a certain level of melodrama. However, it is the way in which she queers male aggression and female victimization that is most intriguing. While Peter is made heroic for trying to shield his female friend from prosecution, Josie, quiet and innocently portrayed throughout the majority of the novel, becomes a violent perpetrator.

Perhaps surprisingly, Picoult’s novel is one of many fictional narratives of rampage violence that includes a female shooter and a focus on teen sexuality as central plot elements. Despite the fact that only male youths have committed rampage-style school shootings in the United States, fictional narratives of rampage violence introduce the phenomenon of a female shooter who has completely different rationales for her acts than the sexual bullying, mental illness, and violent media explanations often applied to actual male shooters. The embedded relationship between white female adolescent violence and the sexual agency of girls within these fictional narratives of rampage violence points to larger national anxieties regarding the development of adolescent girls as certain kinds of gendered, sexual American citizens.

Out of the 21 rampage violence narratives from Chapter One, four (or 19%) of the narratives involve a female shooter who participates in school violence (see Table 4). Of these four, all but one (To The Power of Three) include a female character committing violence with male shooters. In addition to these four narratives, there are also fictional portrayals that include female characters who help shoulder the blame for the violent acts
of male students. In the film *Homeroom* (2002), for example, a female character is suspected of involvement in rampage violence because her male friend commits the crime. *The Life Before Her Eyes*, a 2008 film, repeatedly shows a scene in which a female character is asked by a male shooter to choose between herself and a friend during a rampage shooting. As well, fictional narratives of rampage violence include female characters who become violent after being victimized by rampage violence. For example, Wally Lamb’s *The Hour I First Believed* includes an adult female character who, traumatized by the experience of Columbine, kills a white male youth in a car accident while under the influence of drugs. Significantly, almost one third of the narratives of rampage violence in this study include a violent female character who is involved in a rampage violence incident in some way; equally significant is that all of these characters are white and the majority of them are young women.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Role of Female Character in Violence/Involvement of Female Character in Rampage Shooting</th>
<th>Motive, or potential motive, of Violent Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Earshot” Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1999)</td>
<td>This storyline centers on a male shooter, but ends with an adult female character trying to kill students through poisoning their cafeteria food</td>
<td>Students are “vermin,” mental illness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Heart of America</em> (2002)</td>
<td>Female shooter pairs with male shooter during rampage, not part of planning; shoots one particular individual</td>
<td>Revenge on female because of male’s rejection, alliance with male shooter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Home Room</em> (2002)</td>
<td>Female character aligned with shooter and is suspected of involvement in rampage shooting or of having prior knowledge</td>
<td>Deviant lifestyle (goth clothing and makeup)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Female Involvement in Suburban Rural School Violence Narratives
Table 5 Continued

| **To the Power of Three**  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(2005)</td>
<td>Female shooter commits one-to-one violence in a school bathroom</td>
<td>Accidental shooting results from one girl trying to make another girl confess her actions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **“Dark Matter” Numb3rs**  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(2006)</td>
<td>Female shooter pairs with two male shooters in rampage violence attack</td>
<td>Revenge for rape that occurred at a party</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **The Hour I First Believed**  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(2008)</td>
<td>Columbine event “creates” violent adult female who kills male youth in car accident while under the influence of drugs</td>
<td>Post-traumatic stress caused by rampage shooting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Nineteen Minutes**  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(2008)</td>
<td>Female shooter pairs with male shooter during rampage, not part of planning; shoots one particular individual</td>
<td>Response to abuse, alliance with male shooter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **The Life Before Her Eyes**  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(2008)</td>
<td>Female character asked by shooter to choose between herself and her best friend</td>
<td>Self-preservation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Compared with the urban school violence narratives of the previous chapter, these representations of white female violence are somewhat surprising. Indeed, out of the 18 narratives of urban violence, only three include incidents of female violence (see Table 5). Two of these examples have young women of color engaging in gang violence, often against or with other female characters. While young girls are certainly a part of urban school violence narratives, as explained in the previous chapter, they are present to illustrate male characters’ masculinity as women in need of saving (see, for example, my analysis in the previous chapter of the film *187*) or women in sexual relationships with male characters (see, for example, *Zebrahead*). The two representations of female youths of color engaging in gang violence are far outweighed by narratives of gang violence that
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Role of Female Character in Violence</th>
<th>Motive, or potential motive, of Violent Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“The Gun”</td>
<td>When female gang members rob another female student by gunpoint, she considered buying a gun for her own protection</td>
<td>Gang violence, robbery, protection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Matters (1995)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls Town (1996)</td>
<td>Female youths deface a car and attack white male</td>
<td>Revenge for rape of a friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom Writers (2005)</td>
<td>Girls participate in gang violence and one-to-one violence</td>
<td>Gang disputes and initiations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Female Involvement in Urban School Violence Narratives

are dominated by male characters. As well, female characters are often portrayed in urban school violence narratives trying to stop violence from occurring. For example, in Light It Up (2000), two female characters attempt to keep their male peers from harming a police officer they are holding hostage in a school.

While forms of female resistance to violence are present (albeit rarely) in both urban school violence narratives and suburban/rural portrayals of youth violence, the sub-genres differ in their representations of female agency. The third narrative of female involvement in urban school violence, for instance, departs from the urban stereotypes utilized in the portrayals of gang violence cited above and instead offers a more complicated representation of female youths of color resisting patriarchal oppression.

Girls Town (1996) features white female characters and female characters of color working together in a narrative of revenge. In the film, high school friends react against male abusers and rapists who have harmed them either individually or who have assaulted a friend by damaging a high school boy’s car, creating a list of dangerous boys
on a school bathroom wall, robbing an ex-boyfriend and pawning his possessions, and attacking an older white man on the street. The female characters justify each attack on a male character because the men have harmed women.

Importantly, *Girls Town* is further set apart from other portrayals of female violence because it offers a representation of female youths as empowered through violence. Whereas other portrayals of urban violence utilize female characters to “articulate the possibilities of a non-violent racial order… based on intuition, compassion, and deep feeling” (Denzin 2002, 65) (see, for example, the films *Dangerous Minds* or *Freedom Writers*), *Girls Town* presents the opposite. The female characters who engage in violent acts against men build strong relationships with one another through their group efforts to end gendered oppression through force. Importantly, they are neither caught nor punished for their actions and they see results from their efforts (such as when other girls begin to add to their list of dangerous boys that they start on the bathroom wall).

*Girls Town* offers an interesting point of comparison for the narratives of white female violence that are present among fictional accounts of rampage violence incidents. The narrative in *Girls Town*, however, is a rare exception to the general rule of representations of female youth violence as disempowering or as a response to victimization, both of which serve to largely undermine female youth agency. Although scholars recognize anger as “a natural response to oppression, a necessary component of resistance, and an articulation of a compelling need for social change” (Helford 2002, 18), in narratives of female youth violence, girls’ anger is often undermined by articulations of female protagonists as victims and deviants. The frequency of portrayals
that work to undermine female youth agency are partly explained by scholars who claim that “rage has traditionally been denied in representations of women in Western societies” (Morrissey 2003, 98). If women are unable to express their strong emotions of anger and protest, young girls’ emotions are even further erased through fictional depictions of their passivity.

Scholarship examining actual incidents of violence perpetrated by female youth is limited. In their text Girls’ Violence: Myths and Realities, Christine Adler and Anne Worrall argue, “although there are many texts on ‘youth and crime,’ girls are rarely mentioned in these. Similarly, there are many texts concerned with ‘women and crime’ which pay little attention to girls” (Adler and Worrall 2004, 2). Texts that do study violence among female youth populations often focus on female youths of color who participate in gang violence (see, for example, Jones 2010; Miller 2008). Indeed, scholars of feminist criminology have noted that “the violence of white women is unnamable in both hegemonic and feminist discourses because constructions of white femininity position women as having no agency or as only demonstrating agency as resistance” (Batacharya 2004, 63). Ironically, when white girls commit violence, it is not uncommon for the violence to be blamed on feminism (see Kimmel and Mahler 2003, Vronsky 2007). 39

39 White female youth violence is also often placed in the context of “mean girls” media representations (Chesney-Lind and Irwin 2008), made popular by the 2004 film of the same name, in which white female youths engage in attacks on one another through emotional bullying rather than physical violence. Scholarly responses to this gendered phenomenon have included such texts as Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence (Wiseman 2003) and Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls (Simmons 2003).
Female murderers are often described as the abject (Morrissey 2003, 2). Like white male youths who perpetrate rampage violence, female killers are often sensationalized for their actions and mythologized as monsters. This dehumanization and “vilification serves to displace the offender from her society, to insist on her otherness, thereby avoiding the knowledge that she is produced by that society” (Morrissey 2003, 24). Indeed, like white male youths who are set apart from their race through explanatory discourses of mental illness and social deviance, white female killers experience the same alienation from their gender when they are vilified through particular legal and media discourses. All female killers, however, are not dehumanized. In her book, When Women Kill: Questions of Agency and Subjectivity, scholar Belinda Morrissey argues that female killers can be humanized, but “under only one circumstance – when they can be represented as politically neutered victims” (Morrissey 2003, 17). Once again, the victimhood of women is called upon to emphasize passivity and non-agency.

This range of representation for female killers, from monster to victim, is present throughout narratives of white female youths who participate in rampage violence. These narratives can be categorized in three ways: killer as victim, victim as suspect, and killer as sexual deviant. I offer further explanation of each category because, as Morrissey points out in her text, “representations of all female killers have an impact on understandings of what being a woman means” (Morrissey 2003, 27). Even when murder is explained away through discourses of victimization or dehumanization, the portrayal of the female killer and, in particular, the white female youth killer, continue to influence perceptions of gender, racial, and youth identities. An elaboration of the three
above categories of *fictionalized* white female youth violence illustrates how these representations serve to reinforce *actual* passive gender roles for young girls in order to deemphasize the agency and power that their violent actions might suggest.

**Killer as Victim**

The white female youth killer, who is herself a victim of violence, is a common trope for the involvement of young girls in rampage violence narratives. From *Nineteen Minutes*, which explains female violence through a youth version of battered woman syndrome to the “Dark Matter” episode of the television show *Numbers*, in which a white female youth engages in rampage violence as a method of revenge after experiencing rape, fictional female victims use rampage violence incidents as a way to respond to the patriarchal oppression they have individually experienced. Scholars who study actual events of rampage violence have noted the ways in which these incidents illustrate “the larger societal problems of hegemonic masculinity, violence against women, homophobia, and rejection of difference” (Danner and Carmody 2001, 111). In other words, young boys who kill are acting out, in part, against social hierarchies of gender and sexuality. It is important to note, however, that white male youths who respond to bullying rooted in performances of masculinity and heteronormativity are not justified through their victimization. As Morrissey argues, “this link between victimization and criminalization, which leads to women bearing little or no responsibility for their actions, is not available to men” (Morrissey 2003, 22). Similar to their real-life counterparts, the bullied male youths represented throughout rampage violence narratives are denied the ability to become victims and to claim self-defense. They can only inhabit an active perpetrator identity that must not be complicated by any state of passive victimhood.
By representing white female youth killers as victims, portrayals such as the ones cited above “repeat traditional and ‘safe’ positionings of male power and female passivity rather than explore the radical and threatening potential for new models of female agency suggested by the woman’s fatal response” (Morrissey 2003, 25). Rather than denying the white female youth’s humanity by representing her as a monster, these texts instead portray the young girls as “more to be pitied than blamed for their acts” (Morrissey 2003, 22). By aligning white female youth killers with a victim identity, these texts imply the characters’ lack of power as oppressed women, rather than highlighting the agency of their choices. Moreover, this victim identity is rooted in the characters’ gender and racial identities. Scholars have noted that “there are certain ideas about who can be a victim based on personal characteristics, cultural context, and the existence of stereotypes of myths (Garcia and Clifford 2010, xxiv). Based on the discourses of victimization in actual events of rampage violence in schools (Klein 2006), categorizing white female youth characters with victim identities, even as killers, is not a difficult task.

Other discourses of female violence also contribute to categorizing white female youths as victim-killers. Embedded notions of the female killer in American society rely on assumptions that “when women commit violence… it is involuntary, defensive, or the result of mental illness or hormonal imbalance inherent with female physiology” (Vronksy 2007, 6). In other words, women do not act as killers by choice, but only when a situation is completely out of their control. Thus, “contemporary understandings of homicide by women… represent the homicide as an emotional outburst, a loss of control, in response to a situation of stress” (Alder and Polk 2001, 154). Consequently, representations of female youths losing control of themselves and acting out violently
serve to undermine the agency of all female youths who are part of a male dominated society. As victims of oppression without the power to respond in intentional—rather than out of control—ways, white female youths will always be in need of protection from the society in which they live.

Feminists have argued that “unless women can be considered to possess full human (as opposed to mythic) agency, responsibility and culpability for their crimes, accompanied by explanations and reasons for their acts, then they continue to lack complete citizenship in their communities” (Morrissey 2003, 21). Although victim-killers may be able to articulate reasons for their actions, their agency and responsibility for their actions is undermined by discourses of victimhood that represent them as lacking intention and as without fault. Ironically, it is patriarchal legal discourses that both protect the white youth female killers from extreme punishment (in *Nineteen Minutes*, for example, the white female youth shooter receives a lesser sentence than the white male youth who also kills), while simultaneously offering them second-class citizenship.

**Victim as Suspect**

On the spectrum between victim and monster, female youth protagonists begin to lose their victim status when they are suspected of involvement with a white male rampage killer’s actions or when they will not cooperate with an investigation of the shooting in appropriate ways. Films such as *Homeroom* and *The Life Before Her Eyes* ask the audience to question the victimhood of white female youths because their actions are shrouded in mystery. In the case of *Homeroom*, it is unclear whether Alicia (Busy Phillips), a friend of the shooter, knew about his plan and chose not to report it. Although
she claims to have no previous knowledge of the shooting, she is considered suspicious because of her affect and dress. Like white male shooters in actual rampage violent events, the character of Alicia is dehumanized because of her choice to wear black clothing, die her hair black, and wear heavy black makeup. Other students in the film refer to her as “a damn freak” and she self-identifies as a “leper.” In particular, Alicia does not fulfill the characteristics of femininity and victimhood that Deanna (Erika Christensen), another victim of the shooting, embodies. Deanna acts as a foil character for Alicia because of her innocence, her virginity, and her inability to psychologically deal with the shooting incident. Hospitalized for a head injury and post-traumatic stress symptoms, Deanna believes that adults are “supposed to have all the answers” as to why the shooting occurred, an opposite view to Alicia’s defiance of adult authority (evidenced through her reactions to her father, police officers, and hospital officials).

Similarly, The Life Before Her Eyes (2008) also shrouds a female youth protagonist in mystery, causing her to be suspected of playing a role in the death of her best friend during a rampage shooting. A repeated scene in the film shows Diana being asked by a rampage shooter to choose who he should kill, Diana or her best friend Maureen. The film portrays the adolescent protagonist Diana’s life both before the shooting and what her life is like in adulthood with her husband and daughter, Emma. The structure of the film, however, does not disclose the adult Diana’s life as a fiction of the teen Diana’s imagination until the end of the film when Diana gives her life to save Maureen. Until this unveiling, it is implied that Diana has aligned herself with the rampage shooter by choosing her own life over that of her best friend. Throughout the film, Diana is suspect in her decision about who should die, but also because of her
promiscuity. Although her best friend resolves to stay a virgin until marriage, Diana has sex with her older boyfriend, becomes pregnant, and chooses to have an abortion. Diana’s sexual deviance is part of what will not allow her to inhabit the role of victim, thus making her a suspect instead.

Diana’s character is an especially good example of the negative role that teen pregnancy plays in rampage violence films. Diana is stuck between her identity as a child and her development into an adult woman. Her liminal position is evidenced through a question Diana poses to her best friend Maureen at the beginning of the film: “When is it going to start?... Our lives?” Despite Diana’s sexual relationship that results in a pregnancy and her acknowledgment that she and Maureen are “old enough to get married,” Maureen reminds her that she can only enter into adulthood through marriage “with [her] parents’ permission.” Diana is still considered a “kid” by the teachers in her school and places herself on the cusp of adulthood rather than fully embracing that identity.

The flash forwards to her adult life with her husband and child show the ideal role for her as a capable adult woman raising “Emma,” the child that the adolescent Diana decides to abort. Indeed, Diana’s decision to abort her child is very much tied to her inability to claim an adult identity. The ideal woman would keep her child to fulfill her motherhood role rather than sacrifice the child in order to live out her youthful desires. The adult Diana admits to her husband, “I thought that if I lived a certain way, cared for my daughter, my students, loved you, than I could make everything right.” Adult Diana believes that she can be redeemed through her role as a mother, wife, and caretaker for the deviant actions of her youth. Although adolescent Diana is redeemed in the end of
the film by saving her friend, she is also vilified throughout because of her deviant sexuality, and ultimately dies. Indeed, it is implied by the film that Diana’s recognition of her abortion as a mistake and her guilt over her choice is part of the reason that she tells the rampage shooter to end her life and save her friend, the virginal Maureen.

These portrayals of victim as suspect are rooted in stereotypes of female victims who “ask for it” through their dress or actions. Most commonly seen in rape cases, victims are blamed for the crime because of their actions leading up to the incident. Dressing provocatively, becoming intoxicated, or being in a dangerous part of town are all considered justifications for male violence perpetrated against women. Similarly, in the portrayals cited above, the white female characters dress in particular ways that challenge their claims to innocence. As well, the female characters’ choices to align themselves with deviant white males also impacts whether they can be defined as victims.

The focus on Alicia and Diana’s role in each film’s depiction of a rampage shooting is also significant because the female characters’ actions ultimately draw attention away from the violent acts of the white male shooters. Both of these female characters become the focus of the films’ investigations of youth violence because the white male youth shooters are no longer alive. (Ironically, neither is Diana, who is literally resurrected to become a suspect and tell the story of her own deviance.) Through these characterizations of the victims as potential suspects, each film uses the female characters’ sexuality (both characters are pregnant in each film) to distract from the deviance of white male rampage violence. The spectacle of white female sexual deviance through portrayals of teen pregnancy not only furthers the suspicion toward these characters, but also works to overshadow the violence of their white male peers.
Killer as Sexual Deviant

The killer as abject, an identity introduced earlier in this chapter, is rooted in “the fear of women, of their power to generate life and to take it away” and “relates largely to the very permeability of female bodies; through reproduction and sexual processes, female anatomy blurs the line between self and other, clean and unclean” (Morrissey 2003, 2). Thus, it is not uncommon for female killers’ actions to be blamed on “postpartum depression, premenstrual syndrome, and menopause” (Vronsky 2007, 6), all functions of the gendered female body. However, the monstrosity of the female killer and the dehumanization of the white female youth perpetrator often occur through a focus on female sexuality, particularly when it is portrayed as out of control. Emily White, author of *Fast Girls: Teenage Tribes and the Myth of the ‘Slut’*, writes of her ethnographic experience in a suburban high school following the Columbine attacks in which conversations about Columbine were eventually replaced by more normative high school discussions. She describes how “the talk was no longer about killers and bombs; it was about other forms of monstrousness and more subtle forms of erasure: who is a ‘fag,’ who is a ‘lesbo,’ who is a ‘psycho,’ who is a ‘slut’” (White 2002, 38). Overhearing these conversations causes White to ask, “what is so monstrous about a sex-crazed girl?” (White 2002, 59).

The monstrous sex-crazed girl is most evident in the film *Heart of America* in which a high school “slut,” Dara (Elizabeth Rosen), who secretly sleeps with a popular boy when his girlfriend refuses his sexual advances, participates in a rampage shooting with a white male friend. Shooting only the virginal ex-girlfriend of her popular lover, it is implied that Dara is attempting to remove her competition so that she can have the
status of girlfriend rather than being in a covert relationship in which sex occurs only in a parked car in front of the local convenience store. Unlike the victim-killers portrayed in other rampage violence fiction, Dara chooses to kill another female rather than the male who is using her for sex. She cannot be a victim because her actions are not in self-defense, but rather are caused by her selfishness and jealousy.

Like some of the examples above, Dara chooses to participate in an incident of rampage violence alongside a white male shooter. Her choice of victim however, is carefully planned and executed. Often, as the narratives above illustrate, female shooters do not participate in violence indiscriminately like their male partners, but instead use the rampage violence incident to cover up their own motivations. In these narratives, situations of rape, sexual abuse, and dating violence all precede white female acts of violence. Frequently, the white female shooters have a particular victim in mind due to revenge or jealousy and use their motivation to commit specific, rather than random, acts of violence. Importantly, however, the agency of these female youth killers is undermined when it is associated with rampage violence. When fictional female shooters are represented as out-of-control, the fact that their actions are very much planned, rational, and based on their gendered experiences of oppression is undermined.

Another narrative category of female as sexual deviant is that of the adult female predator, which serves to shift the focus away from violent white male youths. In Robert B. Parker’s 2005 novel School Days, for example, Beth Ann, a female school therapist, has a sexual relationship with an underage student, Jared, who is involved in a school shooting incident. Jared, who is eventually determined to be “functionally retarded” (Parker 2005, 280), is convinced by Beth Ann to attempt to shoot his school president, a
man who has threatened to unveil Beth Ann’s relationship with Jared. When Jared, out of love for Beth Ann, attempts to shoot the president during a rampage violence incident, he is accused of being a co-conspirator in the rampage shooting that was planned by another boy. His mental deficiencies, however, and the fact that “his parents have put him aside” and “the love of his life is a child molester” (Parker 2005, 295), mean that Jared is no longer a threat, but is instead the victim of a sexually deviant adult woman.40

In both Heart of America and School Days females victimize white male youths (by killing someone close to them and encouraging them to commit violence) in such a way that they distract from white youth rampage violence. In the same way that the sexual spectacle created by female characters in Homeroom and The Life Before Her Eyes serves to center each film on the actions of female characters, both Dara and Beth Ann also create a distracting spectacle through their respective forms of sexual deviance and criminality. Importantly, three out of four of these examples serve to illustrate the safety of and preference for white female adolescents who are virgins through embedded virgin/whore and victim/killer dichotomies (represented by Deanna/Alicia, Maureen/Diana, and Karen/Dara).

The combination of white, virginal female characters and the spectacle of adolescent sexuality and teen pregnancy created through their counterpart deviant foil characters emphasizes a larger societal preoccupation with the sexual lives of female youths. In particular, the need for representations of innocence and purity to counteract

40 Jared’s role as a passive victim is further emphasized through his identity as “functionally retarded.” It is implied throughout the novel that he cannot engage in an active citizenship role due to his mental immaturity; thus he must be protected by his lawyer and family accordingly.
portrayals of school violence evidence provides evidence that anxieties of youth violence and youth sexuality have become intertwined in fictional rampage violence narratives. In situations of school violence, youth (hetero)sexuality (or a lack of sexuality) becomes a source of hope for the community, which must segregate itself from the actions of violent white youths. Thus, representations of innocence and purity are crucial to the rebuilding of a conception of the docile female youth who can be understood as controllable, childlike, and harmless.

*Pregnancy, Female Youth Violence, and Gendered Citizenship*

Each of the three categories explicated above situate violent female youths in second-class citizenship roles because of the ways in which gendered stereotyping and gendered categorizations undermine female agency. These fictional portrayals are similar to understandings of gendered youth articulated in literature on youth deviance and youth violence. For example, rather than focus on girls’ violence specifically, literature on youth deviance often makes gendered distinctions between violent male youth “superpredators” and uncontrollable female youth “superbreeders,” thus separating male and female offenders into “classic gender roles – young men as warriors, young women as mothers” (Hendrixson 2002, 232). Gender-specific stereotypes such as these, which also frame youth as “threaten[ing] the moral underpinnings of the nation,” serve to “mask the complexity of young people and deny their ability to exercise rational thought” (Hendrixson 2002, 253). It is true that young people are broadly “associated with violence, crime, terrorism, irresponsible sexuality, and moral decay” (Hendrixson 2002, 253), but they also are aligned with these descriptors in particularly gendered ways that
serve to indicate how American society prefers to view gendered youths who will become future citizens.

A gendered segregation of deviance is particularly evident in the rampage violence narratives cited in Table 4 (above). In addition to utilizing plot devices that include female perpetrators, the narratives also incorporate pregnancy narratives and narratives of teen sexuality in ways that suggest a particular relationship between white female violence and sexual deviance. I emphasize here the relationship between gender, race, and pregnancy because, as Dorothy Roberts has argued, “reproductive politics in America inevitably involves racial politics” (Roberts 1997, 9; Roberts’s emphasis). The ideal female citizen is often framed as “the ideal white mother” (Roberts 1997, 10), an identity that white female youth are expected to embrace. Thus, it is striking that one-third of the 21 narratives of rampage violence involve a specific focus on either teen sexual activity or include a pregnancy narrative. That this one-third often overlaps with the narratives of female violence is especially significant (see Table 6, below), especially when placed in comparison to urban school violence narratives that include female perpetrators where this overlap is not present (see Table 7, below).

While urban school violence narratives include storylines of pregnancy (see, for example, Light It Up and Dangerous Minds), these instances of pregnancy and minority youth sexuality are placed in a context of racial stereotypes and community normalcy. Despite stereotypes and popular representations of teen pregnancy as primarily a problem for urban female youths, pregnancy narratives in relationship to female youth violence are more common on narratives of white females than in narratives that portray urban
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Role of Female Character in Violence</th>
<th>Motive, or potential motive</th>
<th>Focus on Teen Sexual Activity or Teen Sexual Identity</th>
<th>Pregnancy Narrative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Heart of America</em> (2002)</td>
<td>Female shooter</td>
<td>Revenge</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Home Room</em> (2002)</td>
<td>Female character suspected of involvement in rampage shooting or of having prior knowledge</td>
<td>Deviant lifestyle</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes (white female youth)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>To the Power of Three</em> (2005)</td>
<td>Female shooter commits one-to-one violence in a school bathroom</td>
<td>To hold a friend accountable</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Dark Matter” <em>Numb3rs</em> (2006)</td>
<td>Female shooter pairs with two male shooters in rampage violence attack</td>
<td>Revenge</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Hour I First Believed</em> (2008)</td>
<td>Columbine event “creates” violent adult female who kills male youth in car accident while under the influence of drugs</td>
<td>Post-traumatic stress</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes (white female youth)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Nineteen Minutes</em> (2008)</td>
<td>Female shooter pairs with male shooter during rampage, not part of planning; shoots one particular individual</td>
<td>Abuse</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes (white female youth, white adult female)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Life Before Her Eyes</em> (2008)</td>
<td>Female character asked by shooter to choose between herself and her best friend</td>
<td>Self-preservation</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes (white female youth)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Earshot” <em>Buffy the Vampire Slayer</em> (1999)</td>
<td>This storyline centers on a male shooter, but ends with an adult female character trying to kill students through poisoning their food</td>
<td>Students are “vermin,” mental illness</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>We Need to Talk About Kevin</em> (2003)</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes (Armenian adult female)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Elephant</em> (2003)</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: White Female Violence, Teen Sexuality, and Pregnancy in Suburban/Rural School Violence Narratives
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Role of Female Character in Violence</th>
<th>Motive, or potential motive</th>
<th>Focus on Teen Sexual Activity or Teen Sexual Identity</th>
<th>Pregnancy Narrative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Girls Town</em> (1996)</td>
<td>Female youths deface a car and attack white male</td>
<td>Revenge for rape of a friend</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Blackboard Jungle</em> (1955)</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes (white adult female)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Lean On Me</em> (1989)</td>
<td>None (female youths attack a girl in the bathroom, but this is minor scene compared with repeated portrays of male violence)</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes (black female youth)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Boyz in the Hood</em> (1991)</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes (black female youth)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Zebrahead</em> (1992)</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Dangerous Minds</em> (1995)</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes (black female youth)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>“The Gun” Family Matters</em> (1995)</td>
<td>Female student considers buying a gun for her own protection after being robbed by female gang members</td>
<td>Gang violence, robbery, protection</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>187</em> (1997)</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Light It Up</em> (2000)</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes (white female youth)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Freedom Writers</em> (2005)</td>
<td>Girls participate in gang violence and one-to-one violence</td>
<td>Gang disputes and initiations</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>“Extraction” The Shield</em> (2006)</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes (white adult female)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8: Minority Female Violence, Teen Sexuality, and Pregnancy in Urban School Violence Narratives
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A school violence narrative with a female shooter/violent female that includes an intentional focus on teen sexual activity, teen sexual identity, or a pregnancy storyline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A school violence narrative that includes a violent female in school, but no reference to teen sexual activity, sexual identity, or pregnancy; a narrative with a male perpetrator that does include intentional references to teen sexual activity, teen sexual identity, or has a pregnancy storyline</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7 & 8 Key
school violence. Of the three narratives that include female youth violence, only one has specific references to teen sexual activity or teen sexual identity.

When placed in comparison with the one urban school violence narrative that includes themes of female violence and pregnancy, the seven suburban/rural school violence narratives that draw connections between teen sexuality or pregnancy and female violence provide evidence that an intentional relationship between these themes is present in narratives of violent white female youths. The presence of this relationship is an interesting development in fictional narratives of rampage violence because it challenges the ways in which white female youths have previously only been seen as victims in relationship to rampage violence. While this relationship between narratives of female shooters and pregnancy is not necessarily surprising considering that “the impact of young adults is seen as a particular concern in two areas: security and reproduction” (Hendrixson 2002, 232), it is significant to note that while teen pregnancy is an actual concern in the sense that pregnancies occur in populations of white female youth, there has never been a female adolescent or teenage perpetrator of a rampage school shooting in the United States. Moral panics surrounding white teen pregnancy, such as the national reaction to the 2008 “pregnancy pact” made by Massachusetts high school students (see Allen-Mills 2008, 26; Gibbons 2008), are created based on actual events, whereas representations of female youth perpetrators found in fictional youth violence narratives are not.

Indeed, contemporary American society has been fascinated with pregnant white teens for quite some time. From pre-1970 when pregnant girls were banned from attending school (Luker 1997, 2) to 1990 when more than 200 articles were published on
the phenomenon of “teen pregnancy” (Luker 1997, 81), to the present when films like 
*Juno* (2007) and television shows like MTV’s *16 and Pregnant* (2009) and the popular 
bring pregnant teens into the American living room, a preoccupation with white teenage 
mothers has persisted. Lauren Berlant discusses the importance of pregnancy in the 
United States in her book *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* and claims 
there has been a shift in the meaning of pregnancy. Whereas historically, “the promise of 
maternal value has defined a source of power and social worth available to any woman” 
(Berlant 1997, 84), Berlant argues that in contemporary America, “the pregnant woman 
and the fetus… register changes in the social meanings of gender and maternity; as they 
meet up in national culture they also raise questions about intimacies, identities, politics, 
pictures, and public spheres” (Berlant 1997, 88). Kristin Luker echoes this argument 
with her claim that teenage pregnancies, in particular, “have come to represent a host of 
other worrisome changes that are deeply rooted in American society – changes involving 
race, age, gender, and poverty” (Luker 1997, 12-13). Consequently, American politics 
are discussed and debated through the bodies of teenage girls who have the power of 
birthing the next generation of American citizens before they have been classified as 
citizens themselves.

As Luker argues in her book *Dubious Conceptions: The Politics of Teenage 
Pregnancy*, similar to the ways in which white male violence has been perceived as 
“urban seepage” (see Chapter One), national conversations about white teen pregnancy 
have “reflected the fact that the sexual behavior and reproductive patterns of white 
teens were beginning to resemble those of African-Americans and poor women – that
is, more and more whites were postponing marriage and having babies out of wedlock” (Luker 1997, 86). Thus, teen pregnancy becomes a site through which “competing views of family and marketplace, of men and women, of rationality and morality, of rights and obligations” (Luker 1997, 97) become national conversation topics. Indeed, “the question of what kinds of people should have children and what determines when they are ‘ready’ to do so” (Luker 1997, 16) is a central debate of both teen pregnancy as well as citizenship rights debates.

Rampage violence narratives, with their inclusion of pregnancy storylines, illustrate the liminality of white female youths as pre-adult citizens who are attempting to claim agency and citizenship rights—specifically rights to their own bodies—by force. Josie, the female youth protagonist of 19 Minutes, mentioned earlier in this chapter as a dramatic example of queered victimhood, shoots her boyfriend, Matt, during a rampage shooting after he consistently abuses her, at one point causing her to fall and break her ankle. The majority of Picoult’s novel focuses on the “why” of rampage violence, narrating the childhood moments that lead up to Peter Houghton’s choice to kill ten of his classmates. Exploring themes of bullying, gay identity, and unrequited love, the novel echoes several explanatory discourses that are presented during media and scholarly analyses of actual incidents of rampage violence. Indeed, as one character comments after the shooting occurs, “it’s like Columbine… in our backyard” (Picoult 2007, 60). The unveiling of Josie as a rampage shooter at the end of the novel, however, shifts the meaning of the earlier childhood narratives that include examples of Josie and Peter’s early friendship—such as an incident in which they are both caught playing with a gun as children—as well as their interaction as teenagers when Josie initially attempts to protect
Peter from bullying, but ultimately joins the popular crowd in their ridicule of the school’s outcasts.

Part of Josie’s eventual choice to form an alliance with Peter during the shooting and react violently against her boyfriend, one of the most popular boys in school, is rooted in her insecurity concerning her own popularity and her role as Matt’s girlfriend. Although Josie is “a pretty, popular, straight-A student” (Picoult 2007, 6), she also knows that her situation as a member of the popular crowd is precarious. She feels like a “fake” and creates a suicide plan for “when the truth came out, and no one wanted to be around her anymore” (Picoult 2007, 10). When Matt comments about the school’s social hierarchy, stating “if there isn’t a them, there can’t be an us” (Picoult 2007, 219), Josie takes his words personally and is threatened by the idea that her identity could shift at any time. As Picoult elaborates, “In only existed because someone had drawn a line in the sand, so that everyone else was Out; and that line change constantly. You might find yourself, through no fault of your own, suddenly standing on the wrong side” (Picoult 2007, 211).

Josie’s preoccupation with staying on the “right” side becomes a source of tension in her relationship with her childhood friend, Peter, a definite member of the “them” group who is constantly bullied and picked on by his peers. Indeed, Peter’s choice to kill his peers is justified by him because “they started it” (Picoult 2007, 55). He represents American anxieties about the agency of youth precisely because “he wasn’t willing to sit down and let the world shit on him anymore, and that’s not supposed to happen” (Picoult 2007, 187). Josie’s alliance with Peter through her choice to join him in violence is not only a choice to defy her boyfriend (a representation of patriarchal power), but also a
decision to defy larger social hierarchies and institutions that are meant to keep certain groups in a position of power over others.

The community within the novel hopes that “kids like Peter Houghton were recognizable, as if the potential to turn into a murderer overnight were a visible birthmark” (Picoult 2007, 99), but Josie’s participation in the shooting raises the question of whether all teenagers “have the capacity to fall on one side or the other of that tightrope, and could you identity a single moment that tipped the balance?” (Picoult 2007, 136). Reassurances about identifying potential shooters through locating deviant youths with particular characteristics (i.e. their dress, music and movie tastes, alternative lifestyle choices, etc.) are disrupted by Picoult’s choice to include a female shooter from the “us” crowd, but this choice is also rooted in the anxiety that suburban/rural school violence cannot be controlled or prevented. Notably, this same anxiety is also present in national concerns regarding teen pregnancy.

Rampage violence and pregnancy narratives are intricately connected in Nineteen Minutes from the beginning of the novel when Peter’s mother, Lacy, a midwife, meets Josie’s mother, Alex, when she is pregnant. Although Alex is initially undecided about whether to keep her unborn child, when Alex decides to raise her daughter the two women bond over Alex’s pregnancy and their children become close friends. Because of Lacy’s profession, stories of pregnancy are frequently included throughout the novel and are interwoven with narrative descriptions explaining Peter’s violence and his childhood friendship with Josie. The role of parenting in rampage violence is an embedded theme in the novel with both of Peter’s parents asking themselves how they might have interceded to stop their son’s violent act. The novel includes several of Lacy’s reflections
on her own pregnancy and Peter’s early childhood in an attempt to understand why Peter eventually commits rampage violence against his classmates.\footnote{We Need to Talk About Kevin is another example of a novel in which a mother deeply reflects on her role in the violent act of her son and her inability to curb his violent tendencies.}

When Josie becomes pregnant with Matt’s child the month before the shooting takes place, she considers the child “a cross to bear” (Picoult 2007, 324) and almost immediately decides to try an at-home abortion through taking large amounts of vitamin C, an abortifacient that Josie learns about online. Part of her decision to abort is implied to be the significance of the pregnancy in her relationship to Matt. When she tells him about the pregnancy, he offers his support and states that now she “could never get rid of [him]” (Picoult 2007, 327), something that she has already tried to do once after a party where Matt acts abusive towards her. Returning to Matt only when he threatens suicide, Josie’s eventual miscarriage at three weeks is an event that brings her much relief because she is not tied to him through a child.

The pregnancy narratives throughout the novel culminate in Alex becoming pregnant again with the child of her police officer boyfriend after Josie has been tried and convicted of murdering Matt. Picoult writes that “Alex tried not to think about it as a replacement for the daughter who would still be in jail for the next four years she imagined instead that maybe this could be the one who rescued them all” (Picoult 2007, 454). Alex’s dream of a baby as a source of rescue is echoed by Peter’s lawyer, who asks his wife to make a baby with him, justifying his two children and the potential new child as “the ones who’ll change the world” (Picoult 2007, 293). Peter and Josie as violent
youths are directly contrasted with the innocent infants who have the potential of offering restoration and hope for a community that has been traumatized by their violent acts.

The birth of a white child or the pregnancy of a white woman are events in narratives of rampage violence that frequently imply hope or regeneration for the damaged community (see, in addition to *Nineteen Minutes*, Wally Lamb’s *The Hour I First Believed* (2008)). However, narratives of rampage violence also include instances in which a child of a white female adolescent is aborted, miscarried, or dies after birth, offering an entirely different message regarding the role of pregnancy and birth within the development of adolescent female characters (see Table 8). Indeed, the inability of teenage girls to bring their pregnancies to completion and produce a healthy child acts as a reminder that they are not yet adults and will thus fail in their prescribed citizenship role. In fictional portrayals of rampage violence, adolescent female youth characters are not yet allowed to take on one of the only roles that they are meant to engage in as adult citizens: motherhood.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Identity of Pregnant Character</th>
<th>Role/Context of Birth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Home Room</em> (2002)</td>
<td>White, adolescent girl</td>
<td>Alicia becomes pregnant; her daughter is born and dies the same day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Nineteen Minutes</em> (2007)</td>
<td>White, adolescent girl</td>
<td>Josie becomes pregnant with Matt’s child and miscarries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Life Before Her Eyes</em> (2008)</td>
<td>White, adolescent girl</td>
<td>Diana becomes pregnant and chooses to have an abortion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9: Female Youth Pregnancy in Rampage Violence Narratives
When Josie kills her boyfriend during the rampage shooting, “she threatens the social fabric of her culture; such an act disturbs, challenges, and questions the modern Western incarnation of the ideologies of family, marriage, and heterosexuality” (Morrissey 2003, 97). Indeed, narratives of female violence must engage in an erasure of female agency in order to undermine the “threat that women killers pose to the dominant, male-dominated institutions of heteropatriarchy” (Morrissey 2003, 170). If teen pregnancy can be read as an act of agency, “a pledge of hope, an acted out wish that the lives of the next generation will be better than those of the current generation” (Luker 1997, 5), then teen pregnancy also serves as a form of judgment against the previous generation and dominant patriarchal ideologies, as well as a signification of their failure.

White adolescent female characters who are perpetrators of violent acts, when analyzed in conjunction with narratives of teen pregnancy, imply an attempt to birth a significant change for the white female youth population, by force if necessary. Their violent reactions to abuse, sexual assault and other forms of patriarchal oppression are forms of agency and power that are then undermined and denied through various mechanisms that instead illustrate white male power. When female youths’ violent actions are not justified by discourses of self-defense, for example, patriarchal oppressions enacted through dating abuse and sexual assault go unchallenged. It is not surprising, then, that adolescent female characters can never be allowed to fully achieve the results of their pregnancies precisely because of the change that these female characters literally embody.
Violence, Pregnancy, Agency: Women’s Claims to American Citizenship

Just as the adolescent girl “is understood more clearly as a victim of culture and sexuality than as a sexual and cultural creator” (Wolf 1992, xvi), she is also only imagined as a victim of crime, rather than as an active participant in protecting herself and other women around her. In narratives of female violence, this combination of passive victimhood and passive sexuality are crucial components to dominant understandings of what successful citizenship looks like for young girls who are developing into women. Throughout the narratives of female youth violence explored in this chapter, it is clear that “girls are turned into women through what happens to them” (Wolf 1997, xv), rather than through their own agency and actions.

White, adolescent girls are given the burden of representing innocence in narratives of rampage violence on a number of levels. Their racial identity, gender identity, sexuality and age are combined in a national ideal of innocence and purity that must be protected from all deviant aspects of society. However, Gary Cross, author of The Cute and the Cool: Wondrous Innocence and Modern American Children’s Culture (2004), has argued that “sheltering innocence may be more about the deep moral conflicts among adults than the needs of children” (Cross 2004, 205). This may be one reason why adults “resent and fear the young when they threaten… illusions about the purity of childhood” (Cross 2004, 10). Thus, adolescent girls’ violence and their “lapses from ‘good’ behavior are seen as enormously threatening” (Luker 1997, 6), particularly because of their gender identities and what that identity is meant to represent to an American culture that prizes the innocence and purity of its children.
Narratives of white adolescent female violence, such as those cited throughout this chapter, are often “based on the belief that a tear in the moral fabric of society has occurred because of the erosion of normative gender roles” (Batacharya 2004, 68). These narratives frequently support a harmful and stereotypical gender dichotomy in which adolescent girls can only be passive victims while their male peers are represented as active perpetrators or protectors. Scholars such as Henry Giroux have argued that all youth are “rendered unworthy of social and political rights and views as redundant and expendable” (Giroux 2009, 31). I argued in this chapter, however, that certain youth identities are protected more than others. As this chapter demonstrates, fictional narratives of rampage violence in schools, through a reliance on actual stereotypes and anxieties regarding youth that are perpetrated through both media and political agendas, consistently protect white masculinity and heterosexuality as foundational to the ideals of American citizenship identity.

Scholar Susan Franzosa (1988) notes that historically the roles that men and women play in democratic society are based on distinctly different criteria; while citizenship norms for men are based on their “political entitlement,” these same norms for women have been reliant on “their role in the family and location within the economy” (Franzosa 1988, 280). Thus, white women’s citizenship has historically been conditional whereas white men’s citizenship status has often been assumed. Scholars Madeleine Arnot and Jo-Anne Dillabough argue that it is specifically the historical duality of the public/private sphere that has allowed for “social concepts of order, disorder, civic society, and the citizen” to be “constructed historically as gender dualisms” (Arnot and Dillabough 1999, 161) to the extent that women have been relegated to the private sphere.
and excluded from participating in deliberative democratic politics. Based on essentialized notions of womanhood such as the supposedly innate abilities of women as caretakers, female citizens have historically participated in democracy not as citizens themselves, but as women who must learn “about citizenship” in order to then engage in “the mothering of citizens” (Franzosa 1988, 277), rather than being able to claim a citizenship identity for themselves.

That motherhood is frequently and consistently denied to female adolescent characters in the above rampage violence narratives is a telling example of how youth citizenship identity is framed in particular ways through adult agendas and perceptions of the utility of youth. Concerns about youth agency and power are certainly reflected through representations of female adolescents who fail as mothers. As Rickie Solinger argues in her book *Pregnancy and Power: A Short History of Reproductive Politics in America*, “when sexually active and pregnant teen girls began to use their new rights—birth control, abortion, school attendance—and when white teens followed Black teens, claiming their right to be mothers, these developments caused crises of authority” (Solinger 2005, 238). According to Solinger, control of a woman’s reproductive choices is directly tied to her citizenship status. She elaborates, “women cannot be full citizens in the United States (or in any other country) if they cannot control their own sexual and reproductive bodies” (Solinger 2005, 250). Adolescent girls attempting to claim agency of any kind, either through violent acts, pregnancy, or any other means, become “threatening emblems of sexual and reproductive insubordination” (Solinger 2005, 104) and must be controlled through whatever means possible. In the narratives analyzed above, this control takes the form of imprisonment, death, and community exile.
Contemporary fictional portrayals of white female youth violence join a long history of attempted control over women’s bodies, reproductive rights, and claims to citizenship. Since the early 1800s, “unmarried young women’s sexuality and its control have been significant concerns in American culture… sustaining an unbroken record of institutional response” (Nathanson 1991, 14). Institutions such as “parents, the church, the school, and the state” (Solinger 2005, 242) have attempted to continually hold control over the bodies and choices of female youths. Constance Nathanson, author of Dangerous Passage: The Social Control of Sexuality in Women’s Adolescence, argues that “contests over… the assignment of responsibility for the management of sexual unorthodoxy reflect a series of underlying concerns: about the challenge of single young women’s sexuality to patriarchal and gender-based definitions of the female role” and “about the status of individuals who espouse traditional conceptions of marriage and the family” (Nathanson 1991, 218). Thus, the actions of adolescent female character hold incredible amounts of power to challenge traditional notions of the family, heteronormativity, patriarchal power structures within the church, and gendered hegemonies within school structures.

In the next chapter, I continue to explore representations of youth within young adult narratives of rampage violence. Because the narratives of these texts are written specifically to youth audiences, I focus on the messages embedded within the novels concerning the roles that adolescents can play as young people and the roles they will be expected to play as adults. In particular, through an examination of 12 young adult novels, I analyze themes concerning the protection of youth, the prevention of youth violence, the power relationships between adults and adolescents, and the capacity for
youth to participate as democratic actors. In Chapter Four, I also continue to explore the relationship between fictions and facts of youth identity in an attempt to further understand why certain harmful and negative characterizations of schooling and youth identity are consistently used in both adult and young adult portrayals of rampage violence.
Chapter Four: Protection and Prevention vs. Democratic Participation: Power, Citizenship, and Voice in YA Literature about Rampage Violence

Being a child continues to express more about power relationships than chronology. Children’s powerlessness reflects their limited access to economic resources, their exclusion from political participation and the corresponding cultural image of childhood as a state of weakness, dependency, and incompetence. (Bob Franklin, *The New Handbook of Children’s Rights*, 19)

By what process do children read the text of their culture, which presents such confusing messages, to gather some clues as to what is expected of them so that they can ‘pass’ as proto-adults in the adult world? (Mary John, *Children’s Rights and Power*, 43)


*Introduction*

Young Adult (YA) literature as a genre offers a set of narratives that adults tell about adolescents to adolescents. Often told from the perspective of a young narrator, YA literature has been thought to reassure youth that they are not alone in their experiences (Bilz 2004), to interrogate social constructions and institutions (Trites 2000), and to educate youth about how to negotiate the various power structures such as school and family that shape their lives and identities (Trites 2000). A popular form of YA literature has been the “problem-realism novel,” in which “an anxiety-ridden and alienated adolescent [is] facing some sort of problem-situation” (Fuoss 1994, 161). The 1951 publication of J.D. Salinger’s *A Catcher in the Rye* offers an early example of this kind of text in which “an unreliable, alienated, and confused adolescent narrator reveals a
severe trauma he has faced. Then, having confessed his deepest secrets and now able to cope with the world, he moves painfully to a better future” (Silvey 2006, 45). Because of its popularity with youth audiences, *A Catcher in the Rye* became a model for adolescent literature that would follow. “Problem novels” about teen suicide (Crutcher 1989), terminal illness (McDaniel 1997), gay identity (Block 1989), gang violence (Hinton 1967), incest (Sapphire 1996) and other adolescent life experiences continue to be written and published in abundance.

Additionally, contemporary YA literature has expanded beyond the “problem novel” to include poems, graphic novels, novels written in dialogue, and other “genre blends” (Latrobe and Drury 2009, 71). Despite an incorporation of distinct narrative styles, however, contemporary works of YA literature continue “to be ignored by many serious literary critiques” (Daniels 2006, 78). Unfortunately, YA literature often goes unacknowledged unless it fits one of two criteria: (1) it is being challenged in school curriculum censorship battles (see, for example, Glanzer 2004) or (2) it is a blockbuster text such as the *Harry Potter* or *Twilight* series that attracts an adult audience. Despite its acknowledgement as a distinct genre in the late 1960s, YA literature often receives little attention, acclaim, or critique from the academy or from literary critics (Daniels 2006). Thus, it is ironic that a national phenomenon such as rampage violence, which shocked and traumatized Americans throughout the 1990s, would be a repeated plot device in post-2000 young adult literature, a genre that often flies under the radar of the American public.

Roberta Seelinger Trites, in her book *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*, argues that “although the primary purpose of the
adolescent novel may appear to be a depiction of growth, growth in this genre is inevitably represented as being linked to what the adolescent has learned about power” (Trites 2000, x). Trites elaborates on this argument with her claim that much of the YA literature genre is “dedicated to depicting how potentially out-of-control adolescents can learn to exist within institutional structures” (Trites 2000, 7). Unfortunately, in several of the YA novels portraying rampage violence, all youth are considered to be “potentially out-of-control.” In Diane Tullson’s *Lockdown*, for example, the protagonist comments that the school shooter “could have been a hundred other guys” (Tullson 2008, 72). C.G. Watson’s *Quad* also explores the possibility that the novel’s unknown rampage shooter could be multiple different people representing a variety of the school’s social groups from the jocks to the nerds. With all youth characters represented as being at risk of perpetrating violence, YA novels can be included in a larger set of dominant discourses that have set up youth identity as scapegoat for the bleak future that adults have forecast for American society.

I have argued in previous chapters that fictional depictions of violent youth are representative of a larger social narrative regarding the future of the United States and the role that young people will play politically, socially, and economically. This chapter contributes to this argument by illustrating how this social narrative is communicated to young people. While the authors of YA novels may not be consciously depriving adolescent characters of their capacity for democratic participation, it is important to recognize that “the power to shape characters – one of the fundamental manifestations of power in a fictional text – does not issue from a single source, but from a variety of sources” (Fuoss 1994, 171). Discourses of power, citizenship, and voice that are
influencing the day-to-day experiences of American youth (for example, through school policies such as zero tolerance) are also embedded within fictional accounts of schooling and youth violence that adolescents are engaging with in their daily lives. As Peter Hollindale notes, “a large part of any book is written not by its author, but by the world its author lives in” (Hollindale 1992, 32). This is a primary reason why the relationship between the actual experiences of youth and fictional accounts of their actions is so important to explore.

In this chapter, I examine how school violence is represented in literature written by adults, but intended for adolescent youth readers. In particular, I look at 12 young adult novels that portray rampage violence incidents from a variety of perspectives and that were published post-2000 (see Table 1). My analysis is framed by youth rights scholarship, which frequently speaks of the tension between the protection of adolescents (from themselves and one another) and the prevention of youth violence, on the one hand, and the potential for youth autonomy and recognition as citizens on the other (see, for example, John 2003, Qvortrup 1999, and Wyness 2000). I begin this chapter with an exploration of the relationship between youth rights and American education. I focus specifically on how discourses surrounding these topics are often framed within discussions of democratic education practices. Through this analysis, I begin to outline the various ways in which young adult literature about youth violence is embedded within larger discourses of youth rights and youth citizenship identity. Next, I offer an analysis of 11 young adult novels that depict incidents of rampage violence in suburban

42 These YA novels were chosen based on the following criteria: (1) they were set in the United States, (2) they included an act of rampage violence as a central plot device, and (3) they were written for or marketed toward youth under the age of 18.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 The Brimstone Journals</td>
<td>2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Give a Boy a Gun</td>
<td>2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Monday Redux</td>
<td>2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 After</td>
<td>2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Shooter</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Project X</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 The Last Domino</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Endgame</td>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Quad: A Novel</td>
<td>2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Lockdown</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Hate List</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Just Another Hero</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10: Young Adult Literature Featuring Rampage Violence Post-2000

settings, paying particular attention to themes of protection, the prevention of crime, and adolescent acts of democratic participation.

I expand on this analysis through an exploration of the role of youth within a political and social democracy. As in previous chapters, I intentionally “make strange” certain dominant portrayals of adolescent characters that appear in YA literature such as the frequent representations of youth as powerless and without voice. By challenging the assumption that adults do, and should, always have power over youth, this chapter contributes to a comparison of the fictional narratives of youth identity and actual youth experience. Additionally, through this analysis I am able to point to contradictions within YA literature that allow for adolescent power and voice, but only in certain circumstances and with particular (mostly negative) outcomes. I end the chapter with an analysis of an additional rampage violence narrative, Just Another Hero (2009), set in a primarily African American community. Within my discussion of this narrative, I return to themes examined in Chapter One regarding the representations of urban versus suburban youth.
identity, stereotypes of minority youth, and possibilities for citizenship in order to
demonstrate how *Just Another Hero* offers a model for imagining youth participation in
schools.

*The Right to Education: Youth Autonomy and American Schools*

An understanding of adolescents as lesser-than adults, as “proto-adults” (John
2003, 43), or as subordinate to adults in relation to their citizenship status and rights is
often a contributing factor to arguments that young people are not capable of making
decisions, comprehending their rights, or having autonomous identities from their parents
and families. The autonomy of adolescents is challenged both in the home and at school
where “it is the adult’s view of the world which is most often the framework for
understanding, which forms the basis of formal and informal induction into the world”
(John 2003, 47). Adolescents are dependent on adults in a world that must be “made
intelligible by adults” (Postman 1982, 86) before they can become independent and self-
reliant citizens.

In the United States, schools are meant to be a kind of training ground for
adulthood. The school as an institution, however, can deny adolescents their rights and
autonomy even as it works to prepare students to be adult citizens. Michael Wyness
argues, for example, that “the school reflects, if not amplifies, the child’s lack of social
status. Children pass through school as they pass through various developmental stages
*en route* to something grander and more established” (Wyness 2000, 89). According to
Wyness, because adolescents are not yet adults, they are “not part of the social world that
counts” (Wyness 2000, 24). Not only are children not counted statistically in the same
ways as adults (Qvortrup 1990), but they are also “worthless” to the American economy
because of their inability to work (Zelizer 1994). The denial of adolescent rights and citizenship is compounded by the ways in which adolescents are framed within the family structure as subordinate to their parents as well as how their “school lives are always ultimately regulated by adult interests” (Wyness 2000, 129). Defined socially and politically as “unpeople” who are “anonymous” (John 2003, 53), adolescents are without a power base through which they can lobby for their own rights and interests. Wyness refers to this location of adolescents both socially and politically as “ontologically absent” (Wyness 2000, 104). This view of young people reflects the liminal role that adolescents play in society as not quite children, but also not yet perceived to be adults.

Recognizing this ontological gap, “children’s rights experts and advocates have increasingly recognized the significance of relationships between human rights and education” (Hart 2001, 9). This relationship is clear in the United Nation’s Convention on the Rights of the Child,\footnote{The Convention defines a child as “every human being below the age of 18 years, unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier” (Amnesty 1994, 3).} which came into force in 1990 and which remains unratified by the United States. The Convention specifically addresses children’s rights in relation to their education, stating in Article 29 that “the education of the child shall be directed to… the development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms… [and] the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples” (Amnesty 1994, 12). The Convention clearly outlines children’s education as a foundational tool for introducing young people to the meaning of rights, citizenship, and autonomy rather than framing school as a site for repressing children’s independence.
Importantly, the rights for children that are included in the *Convention* frequently overlap with ideas also foundational to democratic societies. For example, the *Convention* outlines the rights of children “to freedom of expression,” including “freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds” (Amnesty 1994, 5); “to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion” (Amnesty 1994, 6); and “to freedom of association and to freedom of peaceful assembly” (Amnesty 1994, 6). Each of these rights outlined for youth are central components for what Amy Gutmann calls a “deliberative” democratic society, in which citizens are held accountable to each other for the laws that are chosen to be applied to all (Gutmann 1999, xii). Thus, citizens within a democracy are expected to be educated for the purpose of participating in deliberative political structures and to “find mutually acceptable terms of social cooperation, not merely terms that are acceptable only to the most powerful” (Gutmann 1999, xiii). A deliberative democracy is focused on dialogue, communication, and equal standing for all of those participating in the community.

Education in the United States has frequently been identified as a foundational element of democratic political theory and practice. Mark Olssen, et al. in their book *Education Policy: Globalization, Citizenship and Democracy* argue that “a deep and robust democracy at a national level requires a strong civil society based on norms of trust and active responsible citizenship and that education is central to that goal” (Olssen, et al. 2004, 1-2). Gutmann, author of *Democratic Education*, argues a similar point when she states that in the United States specifically, “education, in a great measure, forms the moral character of citizens, and moral character along with laws and institutions forms the basis of democratic government” (Gutmann 1999, 49). Both Olssen, et al. and
Gutmann point to education as central to the shaping of citizens who then form or further contribute to a deliberative democratic society. They also claim that public education has the potential to develop citizens into agents with collective political power.

Through the Convention, this political power is extended to children who have not yet been formally defined as citizens. In her book Young Children’s Rights, Priscilla Alderson further explains, “the Convention transforms what were formally defined as welfare, needs and interests, dependent on adults’ definitions and good will, on whim or privilege, into equal entitlements for all children” (Alderson 2000, 130). The Convention exists to both extend particular rights of citizenship to young people and to further define definitions of children’s autonomy before they reach majority. Rather than focusing on the protection of children as subordinates, the Convention speaks of protecting the rights of children as humans (Verhellen 2001, 183; Verhellen’s emphasis). Indeed, this document is “the first legally binding international instrument to deal specifically and uniquely with the rights of the child” and “covers a wide spectrum of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights” (Amnesty 1994, 1). Thus, not only does the Convention outline educational rights for children, but it also “underline[s] the evolution of the child as a legal object to the child as a legal subject” (Verhellen 2001, 183; Verhellen’s emphasis). It may not be surprising, then, that the Convention has not been ratified in the United States, a country that uses institutions such as education to inhibit, rather than encourage, children’s autonomy and civic development (I return to this argument below).

The lack of power afforded to adolescent youths in the United States is communicated in several ways within young adult literature portraying rampage violence
incidents in American schools. In the following section, I explore how YA literature communicates themes of violence prevention, and power relationships between youth and adults, the protection of youth in school. I also examine the ways in which adolescent characters attempt to participate as autonomous citizens in response to incidents of rampage violence. Throughout my analysis, I provide examples from YA literature while also citing actual student experiences of schooling in the United States. This comparative analysis of fiction and reality is meant to lay the foundation for a larger discussion in this chapter regarding the crossover effects of fictional representations of youth to the realities that American adolescents experience day-to-day as second-class citizens.

*Rampage Violence in Youth Adult Literature*

Adolescent literature has historically been identified as a site that “consistently breaks previously taboo subjects” (Latrobe and Drury 2009, 71). For instance, since the first publication of a YA novel with a gay character (John Donovan’s 1969 novel *I’ll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*), over 200 texts that depict LGBTQ youth have been published despite school censorship battles that attempt to keep LGBTQ-themed texts out of the hands of youth (Cart and Jenkins 2006, xv). However, scholars of YA literature have pointed out that while “books for adolescents are subversive,” their apparent rebellion against dominant understandings of youth is “sometimes only superficially so” (Trites 2000, ix). This may be because of the primary authorship of YA literature – adults.

Despite attempts at challenging dominant (mis)understandings of youth, YA literature frequently relies on stereotypes of youth deviance. Indeed, Patrick Jones, in his article, “Stargirls, Stray Dogs, Freaks, and Nails: Person vs. Society Conflicts and
Nonconformist Protagonists in Young Adult Fiction,” claims that the YA genre “is a literature full of misfits, iconoclasts, freaks, geeks, and more than a few non-conformists” (Jones 2006, 13). Although YA literature has never been without these misfit characters, Jones notes that “there was a spike of interest in the wake of the awful trends of school shootings in the 1990s, in particular the tragedy of Columbine High School” (Jones 2006, 13). While the fictional accounts of school shootings are an attempt by adults to understand the actions of youth who commit rampage violence, the authors rarely look outside the school environment. Problematically, portrayals of deviant youth rarely go beyond a description of bullying and violent revenge to explore the social influences that help create violence in schools such as discourses of violence and aggression in U.S. society.

Youth rights scholars argue that “the labels adults affix to students, including those denoting deviance, do more to justify maltreatment of young people than they do to treat students with the care and respect that they deserve” (Casella 2001, 94). In the case of deviant youth characters who are created “in conflict with society’s expectations,” adult authors of YA literature may be responding as part of the group of “adults and authorities [made] very, very nervous” by actual youth actions and rationales that lead to school violence (Jones 2006, 13). When YA literature authors attempt to understand youth actions, the narratives of youth violence are certainly influenced by adult agendas. As I illustrate through my analysis below, YA literature depicting rampage violence frequently reifies a dominant identity of youth as dependent and subordinate to teachers, school administrators, parents, and other adults. That this identity is being communicated to a primarily adolescent-based audience is both ironic and unsurprising.
Youth Rights and the Prevention of Crime

Throughout YA novels about rampage violence, adolescents are not given equal status to the adults around them. It is not uncommon for adolescent characters to describe adults who treat them as if they are less than human and not deserving of equal rights. For example, in Nancy Garden’s *Endgame* (2006), the novel’s protagonist, Gray, moves with his family to a new town after he is caught with a knife at his previous school. After this incident, Gray has a tense relationship with his father who frequently yells at him out of frustration as if Gray is not “even human – like I was this thing that he had to dispose of so it wouldn’t bother him or embarrass him or whatever anymore” (Garden 2006, 42). Based on Gray’s previous actions of carrying a knife to school, Gray’s father also chooses to randomly search his bag before letting him attend school each day (Garden 2006, 95). Although Gray chose to carry a knife in self-defense to protect himself from school bullies, his actions cause him to lose both his privacy and his ability to protect himself from new physical threats. Following his act of rampage violence, Gray also comments that media accounts refer to him like he is “not a person! Subhuman or something” (Garden 2006, 128). Although Garden implies that Gray is treated unfairly by his father, this treatment is also represented as a part of adolescent development. The tension between Gray and the adults around him, especially when it goes unquestioned, offers a bleak identity for youth characters with both parents and the media treating them as undeserving of personhood.

This is also the case in Robert Favole’s *Monday Redux* in which the novel’s protagonist, Rego, describes feeling “like a cartoon. Or a puppet… a puppet who looks just like a real boy” (Favole 2003, 48) after speaking to the media about a shooting at his
school. He notes that “by retaping questions, by splicing, and cutting” the reporter “had gotten what she wanted” (Favole 2003, 48), making Rego’s answers fit her own agenda and description of youth violence. Rego’s frustration echoes some of the sentiments that another young character, Val, expresses in *Hate List* when she believes the media to be “spinning lies” (Brown 2009, 378) about her school, the administration’s efforts at healing, and her peers. Her hopelessness at being able to respond to these lies is rooted in the unequal power relationship between her and the school administration. It is not until Val partners with a friend to voice the truth at her school’s graduation that she believes anyone will listen to her because of her age and identity as a student (I elaborate on Val’s act of resistance below).

The need to prevent children from harming themselves or others is frequently used within YA novels as a justification for refusing youth their rights in schools and in the community. It is not surprising, then, that when youth rights are upheld, they may become a scapegoat for youth actions that are interpreted as deviant. This is the case in Walter Dean Myers’s *Shooter* (2004) after Lenny, an adolescent student, writes “Stop the Violence” with his own blood on a wall in his school before shooting another student and then himself. The resulting investigation of his actions are the subject of *Shooter*, which includes reports from therapists, FBI agents, local police, and interviews with two of Lenny’s closest friends. The final report on the incident concludes that the school shooting could not have been prevented, in part, because “the students on school property were protected under the Fourth Amendment against unreasonable searches” (Myers 2004, 145). The school administration is cleared of culpability for the incident because “the unfortunate death of one student and the several injuries were the work of one
individual and… the responsibility for that death and those injuries were his and his alone and were not aided in any way by negligence, errant school policies, deficient procedures, or lack of adequate safety conditions” (Myers 2004, 146). A dissenting opinion of an FBI agent is also included in which Agent Victoria Lash argues that “any chances of prevention were lost in the morass of shifting responsibilities and legal considerations” (Myers 2004, 147). In the “official report” of the youth rampage incident in Shooter, student rights are placed in direct opposition with the ability of schools to prevent the violence of youth against themselves and one another.

A similar narrative occurs in Monday Redux. After potential school shooter, Lance, is caught with guns in his car after threatening to shoot students at his school, the media critique the police’s actions. Lance’s website “full of hate speech” is deemed “irrelevant [because] hate speech alone cannot be criminalized without gutting the first amendment” (Favole 2003, 178). The search of his car occurs with “insufficient cause” because all the police have is “the uncorroborated suspicion of another student” (Favole 2003, 179). Additionally, the media caution against letting “the irrational fear of another Columbine cause us to condone Gestapo tactics” (Favole 2003, 179). Although these fictional media critiques are in defense of youth rights, readers of Monday Redux know that it is the search of Lance’s vehicle that saves several of his peers, a custodian, and a police officer from dying. The book’s overall plot, in which Lance’s peer, Rego, is allowed a “do-over” by going back in time after he fails to stop Lance from attacking other students at his school with guns, privileges students’ lives over the individual rights of Lance. Thus, as in Shooter, the civil rights of adolescents are placed in direct contrast to the protection of youth from one another.

166
The Protection of Youth in School

In YA novels that depict rampage violence, adults are represented as both authority figures and as powerless to stop youth violence. Their powerlessness is amplified when rights are afforded to children (such as protection from unreasonable searches). In these cases, the autonomy of youth and their status as individuals worthy of legal protection prevent adults from being able to protect youths in their communities from the violence of their peers. Following this line of thinking, the YA novel *After* (2003), by Francine Prose, is a dystopian account of a school that protects its students through the removal of their individual and collective rights. After a school shooting in a neighboring town, the students at Central High School experience the installation of metal detectors with accompanying school security guards (27), a new dress code (35), random drug testing to participate in extracurricular activities (48), the removal of locks from bathroom stall doors (55), random locker searches (82), book censorship (95), video surveillance on school buses (268), and a curfew with police enforcement (283). Students who refuse to follow these new “zero-tolerance” guidelines are sent to juvenile camps for rehabilitation. Teachers who resist the new administration’s decisions disappear from the school without warning. After a child dies in an “accident” at Operation Turnaround, a juvenile camp for unruly youth, Tom, the young adult narrator comments that “everything [has] gotten so confused, it [is] impossible to tell who [is] protecting whom—and from what” (Prose 2003, 212). The initial rationale of protecting children from themselves and each other fails to explain the power that the school’s administration is wielding against its students.
*After* offers an example of the ways in which “protection may be suggested even when it is not strictly necessary for the sake of children, but rather works to protect adults or the adult social orders against disturbances from the presence of children” (Qvortrup 1990, 80). While each of the changes to school policy listed in *After* occurs “to keep [the] community safe,” students begin to feel that the new school rules are oppressive and unnecessary (Prose 2003, 16). Students refer to their school experience as a “concentration camp,” a “fascist system” and a “police state” (Prose 2003, 72; 100; 113) and comment that their school feels more like a prison than a place of education. The replacement of the principal by Dr. Willner, a grief counselor, is referred to as a “coup, some kind of government takeover” (Prose 2003, 62), further emphasizing the militaristic nature of the students’ experience. In daily assemblies, the students are told that they have “no ambition, no integrity, no courage, no intelligence, no common sense, no honesty” (Prose 2003, 293). The students at Central High School are slowly being broken down physically, mentally, and emotionally—supposedly for the purpose of their own protection.

The brainwashing influence of the school’s emails to parents in *After* leaves the adolescent students with little hope of adult rescue. Fortunately, Tom’s father has stopped reading the emails and agrees to run away with Tom, taking some of his friends along after their parents have been brainwashed. The school’s new system of rules is now a life or death situation with Tom noting that “it was only kids they were after, kids they wanted to control, or—failing that—kids they wanted to get rid of” (Prose 2003, 330). The reader ultimately learns that the new program at Central High School is part of a “nationwide conspiracy against kids” (Prose 2003, 173) that will only continue to get
worse. The escape from Central High School assures Tom and his friends that they are removed from immediate danger, but the reader is given no closure about where Tom and his family will go from here or where they can go to be safe from adult authorities such as Dr. Willner.

*After* is not the only YA novel to refer to schools as “prisons” with students as “inmates” (see, for example, Brown 2009, 240; Garden 2006, 30; Meyer 2005, 22; Prose 2003, 71), but it is one of the only YA novels to be overtly critical of this characterization. In other YA novels that depict rampage violence, schools are often no longer places of learning, but have become sites to house unruly youth. In particular, references to “zero tolerance” measures appear in several of the YA novels (see, for example, Garden 2006; Prose 2003). Zero tolerance, “a philosophy shared by schools and prisons in equal measure” (Casella 2001, 6) is meant to curb youth violence by severely punishing students for school violence, drug offenses, and other forms of misbehavior.\footnote{Indeed, zero tolerance is frequently the rationale used “for the deployment of school police officers, the suspension and expulsion of students for misbehaving in class, and the buildup of security devices in schools” (Casella 2001, 7). Importantly, the portrayal of zero tolerance in YA literature is frequently closer to non-fiction than fiction.

Indeed, the zero tolerance measures taken within *After* are not uncommon in American schools which have taken to using metal detectors, searching students lockers,}

\footnote{Although not a specific focus of this chapter, the racial inequalities inherent within zero tolerance policies cannot be ignored. Several scholars have addressed this issue from a variety of angles. For further reading, see Akom 2001; Casella 2001; Gordon, Piana, and Keleher 2001; Skiba 2001; and Robbins 2008.}
and banning books to protect students from particular ideas, language, and lifestyles. In his book *Expelling Hope: The Assault on Youth and the Militarization of Schooling*, Christopher Robbins argues that zero tolerance measures in American schools are one symptom of a larger national “culture of fear” (Robbins 2008, 2). He further claims that zero tolerance in public schools “promotes a low intensity warfare of sorts not only on the principles of democracy and democratization but also on individual and groups who bear the brunt of stigmatization, punishment, social exclusion, and the related limitations of civil rights, liberties, and life chances” (Robbins 2008, 3). According to Robbins’s arguments, the militarized language used to describe the experiences of the adolescent characters in *After*, although dramatized in a dystopian setting, may not be that disconnected from the actual lives of youth in American schools.

As in *After*, zero tolerance measures in American schools serve as a mechanism for further differentiating adolescents from adults. For example, in both the fictional *After* and in actual American schools, students are punished based on “behaviors for which adults are spared punishment of any kind” (Robbins 2008, 10). In *After*, students cannot bring gum to school (Prose 2003, 80); in some American schools, students are expelled for bringing Advil in their backpacks (Robbins 2008, 10). In *After*, students cannot listen to “rap and hip-hop music…a whole category of adolescent culture that [Central High School administration has] decided to discourage” (Prose 2003, 99) when at school; in one American school, a student was expelled based on the lyrics of a homemade cd of rap music (Robbins 2008, 10). The experiences of students in *After*, although represented as somewhat fantastical, are becoming more and more real for actual students in American schools.
While *After* offers an overt critique of the loss of students’ rights based on rationales of protection, at least one reviewer of the book challenges both the adolescent and adult characters’ lack of action against the oppression that students are experiencing. David Lau critiques Prose because “the students in this novel neither think globally, nor act locally” and the adults, like their children, have become “complicit with questionably effective ‘utilitarian’ policies” (Lau 2003, np). Lau’s critique may be too heavy handed, however, as students in the American school system “have been taught about democracy, but they have not been permitted to practice democracy” (Mosher, Kenny and Garrod 1994, 1-2). Prose’s depiction of students and parents who are paralyzed when faced with Dr. Willner’s administrative decisions may not be as unrealistic as Lau claims. Examples of democratic school systems for adolescents that include “structures in which faculty, students, and administrators share power, decisions, and responsibility” (Mosher, Kenny and Garrod 1994, 6; see also John 2003) are rare in the United States where school systems are more likely to follow “top-down, corporate authority” models (Robbins 2008, 41). It is precisely because of the characters’ inaction in *After* that the YA novel offers a troubling, and perhaps too-close-to-home, view of what can happen if adolescents are deprived of their autonomy and citizenship.

**Adolescent Acts of Democratic Participation: Violence as Resistance?**

Fortunately, the general inaction of the youth characters in *After* is not the only model of youth participation that adolescents are offered in portrayals of rampage violence. Although rare, the democratic participation of youth is present in some representations of rampage violence and its aftermath, illustrating a key tension within YA literature between overt portrayals of adult power and the subversive actions of youth
to speak out against violence and share their experiences as victims of rampage shootings. In Jennifer Brown’s 2009 novel, *Hate List*, for example, students react against the dominant narrative that school administrators are attempting to create about the rampage shooting incident that left several of their student peers dead and wounded. By portraying students as friendly to one another, caring toward outcasts, and more emotionally mature following the shooting, one character claims that school administrators and the media are “spinning lies” for their own agendas (Brown 2009, 378). The novel’s protagonist, Val, the girlfriend of the shooter and a survivor, fears that “the truth about Garvin [will] never be heard” (Brown 2009, 379). As an adolescent and student, Val initially feels powerless against the adults around her.

Several scholars have pointed to the importance of voice within a system of democracy and have critiqued the supposed inclusion of youth voices because “young people are mostly heard about and rarely from” (Leistyna 2003, 106). This is certainly a danger in YA literature that is primarily authored by adults with adolescents as central characters. Pepi Leistyna, in his article, “Facing Oppression: Youth Voices from the Front” (2003), claims that “within a truly participatory democracy, a committed sign of respect and inclusion is that all voices be recognized, heard, and critically engaged for their theoretical insights and weaknesses” (Leistyna 2003, 122). He points out, however, that “youth, especially the poor and racially subordinated, are far too often left out of drafting history, describing social realities, and debating educational policies and practices” (Leistyna 2003, 106). This is initially the case in *Hate List*, where reality is created through media accounts that privilege the narratives of adult school administrators over youth experience.
The voices of youth are finally heard, however, when Val partners with another student to communicate a different truth about the school and her peers. Working subversively against the school administration and without their knowledge, Val and her friend Jessica collect narratives from survivors and family members of victims of the rampage shooting at their school in order to contribute an alternative narrative for a school time capsule memorial. By sharing these alternative narratives—including stories of pain, anger, and hopelessness—at graduation, Val and Jessica illustrate that “in order to change reality you have to be willing to listen and to learn. To actually hear” (Brown 2009, 400). Thus, *Hate List* ultimately represents young people as worthy of being heard and trusted, even more so than some of their adult counterparts. Moreover, Val and Jessica are held up as exemplars of how youth have the capacity to “change reality” (Brown 2009, 399). Like the adults around them, the adolescents of *Hate List* are attempting to understand the events leading to youth violence. A critical reading demonstrates, however, that it is the adolescent characters who have the ability to situate the dangers of youth autonomy within a larger context of hierarchical power structures, while their parents and school administrators choose to ignore or deny these power relations.

Val and Jessica’s choice to present alternative narratives at graduation can certainly be perceived as an act of resistance against the adults around them who prefer a story of healing and redemption rather than acknowledging the actual experiences of the young people within their community. Other forms of resistance, however, are not so easily identified. Indeed, Leistyna argues the importance of “differentiat[ing] pathology from acts of resistance, which are responses (though not always conscious) to
domination” (Leistyna 2003, 122). The examples he offers, such as “throwing chairs, evading the police, and developing reputations in order to survive by fear” (122) are each present in fictional portrayals of rampage violence. In The Last Domino (2005), Travis imagines throwing a chair when he becomes frustrated in class, the students of After evade the police when they are caught vandalizing their school as an act of resistance, and both Lance of Monday Redux and Gray in Endgame attempt to develop reputations through their use of weapons and violence. Importantly, the depictions of youth violence in fictional accounts of rampage violence shift in meaning when they are considered to be acts of resistance to domination rather than pathologies of youth deviance.

Like the courageous act of Val and Jessica in Hate List, other acts of resistance are present within narratives of youth violence that privilege youth voices, but they are frequently portrayed as pathological deviance rather than attempts at democratic participation. For example, in Shooter, Lenny’s choice to write “Stop the Violence” during his act of rampage violence can be understood as a form of speaking back to the violence he has experienced through bullying at school. Lenny engages in a dramatic act of violence in order to call attention to the fact that “there exists not violence in schools, but violences, a range of behaviors from the most mundane to the fatal” (Casella 2001, 35; Casella’s emphasis). When the pathology of rampage violence perpetrators is placed front and center, however, the dominant narrative of mental illness undermines the ways in which perpetrators’ actions demonstrate attempts at youth voice. Additionally, adolescent characters’ attempts at voice, when combined with violent actions, serve to reify the aggression around them, rather than escape or combat school violence.
Similar to *Shooter*, pathology is also the privileged rationale in C.G. Watson’s *Quad* (2007), in which an adolescent girl, Paisley, shoots her classmates after repeated bullying and an attempted rape. Paisley’s descent into madness, evidenced through her repeated question of “Why? Why do people have to be so mean?” (Watson 2007, 296), overshadows the question itself. While there is a clear focus in *Quad* on harmful student cliques and the hierarchical social divisions of high school, it is the fact that Paisley is mentally unstable that provides a rationale for her actions. She is not speaking out against the violence she has experienced, but rather has “snap[ped]” because “it was just too much” (Watson 2007, 292). Paisley is no longer considered in control of her actions or the message that her actions are sending. The consistent relationship that is drawn between violence, mental illness, and acts of adolescent participation illustrates the competing, confusing, and complex messages within YA literature that portrays school violence.

Anne Smith (2007) claims that rather than be recognized as valuable social actors and educated as such, young people are frequently generalized into one group in order to be “fixed” to meet particular social standards. The choice to pathologize rampage violence rather than view it as a form of resistance to social domination denies that youth are capable of expressing their dissatisfaction and anger with the violence that surrounds them (through school bullying, sexual assault, abuse from parents, etc.). The pathology of youth deviance in fictional accounts of rampage violence works as a method of homogenizing youth in order to make claims about how to protect them and prevent them from acting out. Problematically, however, this pathology denies any form of youth democratic participation because adolescent voices are pathologized as well.
As Ronnie Casella notes regarding actual events of youth violence, “kids who bring guns to school are those whose lives are embroiled in violence, often as victims” (Casella 2001, 34). This is also the case in fictional portrayals of rampage violence in which adolescent protagonists experience school bullying, sexual assault and harassment, and physical abuse from their parents. Yet, in several of these narratives, acts of rampage violence in schools are frequently represented as deviant responses. Repeatedly, there is only one youth shooter, often implied to be mentally ill, who shoots his or her peers. Over and over, a stereotype of deviance (white, male shooter; strange clothing; interested in guns and weapons; implications of mental illness; victim of bullying or sexual harassment) is employed to homogenize youth experience and deny the capacity for youth resistance and voice.

*The Role of Youth in a Democracy*

My analysis of youth identity and participation in this chapter and in the “adult” representations of youth in previous chapters point to a central question: what do fictional portrayals of rampage violence say about the role of youth in a democracy? In many narratives of rampage violence, the concept of *youth* acts as a placeholder for adult concerns regarding the future of the nation. In both adult and YA portrayals of white youth violence in schools, the concept of youth has become a sliding signifier that can shift from representing threat to hope, danger to safety, and deviance to innocence in a matter of pages. These representations confirm the idea that “adults construct the children they need” (Franklin 2002, 29) in fictions of youth experience, oftentimes without considering the needs or experiences of actual children as a social group or as a class of citizens.
In the remainder of this chapter, I continue to explore the role of youth in a democracy, focusing first on the competing expectations for contemporary youth set forth by the tenets of neoliberalism, on the one hand, and democratic community, on the other. Throughout this exploration, I note how these competing expectations emphasize the liminal position of youth identity as both child and adult, creating a set of tensions that young people must navigate through the institution of the school. In my analysis, I also situate the liminality of American youth within dominant political, social, and economic discourses in order to further describe the contemporary American society in which young people are expected to develop their citizenship identities.

**Neoliberal Youth: Dependents and Autonomous Consumer-Citizens?**

Linda Farr Darling, in her article “The Essential Moral Dimensions of Citizenship Education: What Should We Teach?” claims that “citizenship education is (or should be) about preparing citizens to constructively engage in an ongoing moral argument about how to live together, in other words, how to participate in various public spheres characterized by diverse perspectives and understandings” (Darling 2002, 230). Feminist scholars, however, have pointed out the ways in which public education in the U.S. undermines diverse perspectives and instead prepares students for hierarchy and domination (Ferguson 1984, 46). Similar to the depictions of rampage violence described in this and previous chapters, education scholars have identified hierarchies of race, sexual identity, and gender identity in American schools that inhibit all students from fully participating in their schools and larger communities as equals.

Kathy Ferguson further argues that the U.S. school system is part of a larger bureaucracy tied to “corporate and state conglomerates” (Ferguson 1984, 43). She claims
that rather than encourage students to critically think about their roles as U.S. citizens, “the typical socialization process in our schools prepares individuals simultaneously to participate in bureaucratically ordered activities and to refrain from comprehending the real place of such activities in the technical society” (Ferguson 1984, 45). In particular, with increasingly neoliberal educational goals, Ferguson notes that for students, “the self that is created is simply a rationalized commodity readied for exchange in the bureaucratic market” (Ferguson 1984, 20) rather than an educated citizen prepared to critically engage and deliberate within a democratic political and social arena.

According to several critical education scholars, American schools are increasingly focusing on creating workers rather than fostering independent thinking (see, for example, McLaren and Farahmandpur 2001; Giroux 2005; McLaren 2005; Giroux 2006). Scholars such as Henry Giroux repeatedly point to the ways in which “under the logic of modernization, neoliberalism, and militarization, the category ‘waste’ includes no longer simply material goods, but also human beings” (Giroux 2006: 187). Indeed, “those who are no longer capable of making a living, who are unable to consume goods, and who depend on others for the most basic needs” (Giroux 2006: 187) are considered unworthy of moral and citizenship rights by governments situated within capitalist economies. Young adults, who are frequently framed as economically worthless because of their dependency on their parents and the state (Zelizer 1994), are thus incapable of making claims to citizenship rights.

Despite their economic dependency, however, a clear paradox exists in competing constructions of young people as adult-like consumers versus constructions of them as childish dependents who have no rights as citizens. As Jane Kenway and Elizabeth
Bullen argue in their essay, “Globalizing the Young in the Age of Desire: Some Education Policy Issues,” this construction occurs because “young people are offered identities as pleasure-seeking, self-indulgent, autonomous, rational decision makers—in effect, as adult-like children” (Kenway and Bullen 2005, 36). Kenway and Bullen explain that children are treated by the market as consumers who are “engage[d] and satisfie[d]… over and over again” (Kenway and Bullen 2005, 37), thus differentiating children’s social lives from their school lives which may seem, by comparison, as a place where they are “dissatisfied, disengaged, disaffected, disrespectful, and disruptive” (Kenway and Bullen 2005, 31). This construction is vastly different from the dominant portrayals of children in the West that “promote a construction of children as passive recipients of adults’ actions rather than as agents” (Smith 2007, 3). Although some have argued that “participation rights, involving the individual exercise of autonomy and initiative, cannot be separated from opportunities to be responsible citizens in the context of social interactions and relationships” (Smith 2007, 4), this is the case in globalized representations of children as adult-like consumers.

Importantly, a child’s relationship to the economic market is dependent on her or his lack of knowledge because “the global corporate curriculum does not teach kids anything at all about how it is both produced and consumed” (Kenway and Bullen 2005, 40). Indeed, as Kenway and Bullen argue, in order to combat the ways in which the market uses children’s naïveté against them in the construction of citizen-worker-consumers, “schools have a responsibility to teach kids about what it means to be scripted within the global corporate curriculum and how they might rescript themselves differently as youthful global citizens” (Kenway and Bullen 2005, 42). Agreeing with
scholars such as Peter McLaren (2005) and Henry Giroux (2005) who critique contemporary education models as tied to corporations and preoccupied with preparing workers for capitalist global markets, Kenway and Bullen express the need for “research on everyday education that takes cultural globalization seriously” (Kenway and Bullen 2005, 33) in order to educate and prepare students for their future in a global society as contributing citizens.

Kenway and Bullen’s call for school responsibility is connected to a second paradox within constructed childhood identities: the need to recognize and train children as future workers versus the need for children to be valued as individual citizens. Neoliberal views of public education are founded on a “vision of students as human capital” (Apple 2007, 214). Rather than focusing on individual students’ needs and learning capabilities, “the globalization of childhood has the danger of making general statements about children, and ignoring their particular contexts” (Smith 2007, 4). Thus, the homogenization of young people that occurs in the YA literature cited above can be identified as part of a larger neoliberal tendency to generalize the identities of young people for adult agendas. Moreover, the homogenization further illustrates the anxiety some adults feel about acknowledging adolescents and children as individuals who are worthy of rights, respect, and inclusion in debates surrounding schooling and education.

Youth Identity in a Democracy

John Dewey speaks out against the problematic homogenization of children in his book *Democracy and Education* stating, “a progressive society counts individual variations as precious since it finds in them means of its own growth. Hence, a democratic society must, in consistency with its ideal, allow for intellectual freedom and
the play of diverse gifts and interests” (Dewey 2004, 247). Unlike the repressive schooling practices identified earlier in this chapter, which attempt to ignore the autonomy and human rights of young people, a “democracy welcomes diverse ways of identifying with others as civic equals” (Gutmann 1999, 314). Rather than experiencing repression in schools, adolescents within a democracy can instead practice tenets of democracy by engaging in collaborative decision-making, speaking their opinions, defending their rights as citizens, and deliberating important issues with their peers and the adults around them.

In their article, “Democratic Education and Children’s Rights,” F. Clark Power, et al. describe democratic education as “encourag[ing] individuals to think for themselves but not solely of themselves or by themselves” (Power, et al. 2001, 102). This definition of democratic education directly contrasts neoliberal educational goals within American schools that often promote individualism and competition. Indeed, Julie Webber describes the typical American public school as “less a citizen-building institution than a site for corporate exploitation, training individuals to think of themselves as consumers in a marketplace who need to compete against one another and fear the unknown” (Webber 2003b, 195). By building a strong sense of democratic participation from an early age, schools can instill a sense of community responsibility for young people in which adolescents and adults work together to co-create and manage the educational structures that youth encounter on a daily basis.

Unfortunately, according to several scholars and activists (see, for example, John 2003; Mercogliano 1998; Mosher, Kenny, and Garrod 1994), the scarcity of democratic school experiences portrayed in YA novels that depict rampage violence may mirror the
actual experiences of young people in the U.S. And although YA fiction could be one possible site of imagining the role of young people in democracy as responsible and autonomous social actors, this is rarely the case. Throughout my analysis of 12 YA texts, I discovered only one novel that places students in situations in which they are consistently allowed to make important decisions and influence their school environment in positive ways. Contrasting the previous representations of rampage violence in YA novels that are analyzed earlier in this chapter, Sharon Draper’s 2009 YA novel *Just Another Hero* offers a different view of the role of youth in school. Draper’s novel, which describes the events leading up to a rampage violence incident in a primarily African American school, is the sole text in this study that offers a consistently positive example of the democratic participation of youth. My analysis of *Just Another Hero* references the claims regarding the role of youth in a democracy from this chapter, but also re-visits themes first introduced in Chapter One concerning the representations of minority youth as disposable and incapable of achieving successful citizenship identity.

The third book in a trilogy that explores the experiences of African American youth (the first two novels focus on peer pressure, hazing, teen pregnancy, and family dynamics), *Just Another Hero* is narrated by Kofi and Arielle, two high school seniors. Kofi is a high achieving student struggling with an addiction to prescription drugs. Throughout the book, he stops taking painkillers with the help of his girlfriend, is accepted to MIT, and wins a prestigious full-ride scholarship to the school. Arielle, although initially estranged from her friends following events in the second book of the trilogy, is accepted again by her peers who help her cope with an abusive stepfather. At the end of *Just Another Hero*, Arielle has a strong support system when she and her
mother move into a homeless shelter together after they are abandoned by Arielle’s stepfather.

While *Just Another Hero* is told from the viewpoints of Kofi and Arielle, readers are introduced to a variety of characters: Dana, Kofi’s girlfriend; Jericho, Kofi’s best friend; Olivia, Jericho’s girlfriend; Eddie, who has recently been released from juvenile detention; November, a single mother who has just returned to school after the premature birth of her daughter; Osrick, a technologically savvy student who is often bullied; and “Crazy Jack,” a student who dresses oddly and frequently interrupts classes by pulling the fire alarm. Importantly, Draper uses each of these characters to contradict common stereotypes of urban youth. For example, Kofi is addicted to prescription rather than illegal drugs and is able to successfully kick his habit. Almost all of the students are planning to go to college, with conversations focusing on choices between MIT, Cornell, Julliard, and other prestigious schools. Arielle’s stepfather is emotionally and financially, rather than physically, abusive. Healthy and long-term teenage relationships are demonstrated through Kofi and Dana as well as Jericho and Olivia, who plan to remain together through college.

The most important challenge to a common stereotype occurs, however, during the school shooting. Two separate teachers first assume that the shooter is “someone off the street” (Draper 2009, 245; 250) rather than one of their students. Then, when

---

45 Perhaps surprisingly, college discussions rarely occur in portrayals of rampage violence in primarily white environments. In both “adult” texts and films and YA novels, white students are rarely shown preparing for an academic future beyond high school. While the lack of college conversations may be subtle, the silence regarding the adolescents’ futures contributes to a larger narrative of the aimlessness of youth and a hopelessness regarding the future of America.
someone comments that the shooter is probably “one of those strange kids who wear black coats and make death threats on their MySpace page,” a quick reply tells them to “stop stereotyping!” (Draper 2009, 258). Perhaps most interesting is the rationale behind the shooter’s actions. “Crazy Jack” brings a gun to school because he has stopped taking his medication. It is implied that he hears voices and hallucinates. Rather than the common stereotype of black youth as inherently violent due to gang activity or a culture of violence and poverty, “Crazy Jack” is given an individual rationale that is tied to his mental health, rather than his racial identity.

The heroes of the story, students who get Jack to put down his AK-47 and who eventually tackle him to the ground before anyone is shot or killed, understand that Jack is “sick” (Draper 2009, 247). Importantly, he is not arrested and incarcerated for his actions, but is taken instead to a “medical facility for evaluation and treatment” (Draper 2009, 276). Like other struggles that occur for characters throughout the novel (addiction to pain killers, gambling addiction, and kleptomania), Jack is seen as afflicted by an outside illness rather than being inherently violent. When the school catches a teacher who has been stealing from students, she is identified as having the equivalent of a “sickness… like alcoholism or drug addiction” (Draper 2009, 230). Unlike other depictions of minority youth violence (see Chapter One), the characters in Just Another Hero experience illnesses that can be treated rather than pathologies that rationalize their disposability.

Whereas other representations of urban violence emphasize the disposability of urban youth, the teachers and administrators in Just Another Hero recognize each student as “the children of the future” (Draper 2009, 181). Indeed, the students who survive
Jack’s shooting attempt are able to save themselves and each other through their patience, level-headedness, and teamwork. The youth in Draper’s narrative are portrayed as hopeful and worthy of success instead of as a threat to the future of society. Moreover, they are in control of their actions and decisions. Instead of being portrayed as uncontrollable by teachers, police, and parents, adolescent characters in *Just Another Hero* help their parents pay the bills, responsibly raise children, and take care of one another’s basic needs by lending clothes, food, and money when necessary.

In addition to collaborative relationships among young characters, the adolescents of *Just Another Hero* also form a democratic community within their school with the adults around them. Students and teachers identify with one another in their vulnerability to the school thief (Draper 2009, 212) and teachers depend on students for help with technology as much as students depend on teachers for learning (Draper 2009, 13). Additionally, students and teachers are represented as equally invested in the futures of college-bound students as college choices are discussed in the classroom and debated between students and teachers (Draper 2009, 46-48). Scenes such as these provide evidence that students’ voices are heard and their choices valued in *Just Another Hero*, both by each other and by the teachers and administrators that they engage with each day.

Although “zero tolerance” measures such as metal detectors, security guards, fencing, and locker searchers frequently appear in narratives of urban schooling and violence, this is not the case in *Just Another Hero*. Ironically, the “zero tolerance” measures of the suburban YA novels discussed earlier in this chapter are unnecessary in Draper’s novel because students, teachers, and administrators work together to stop the bullying and crime that occur on school property. For example, Osrick reports his
experiences of bullying to the school principal rather than attempting to deal with his bullies through physical violence. Additionally, Arielle and Osrick help the school administration and the school’s one police officer catch a thief who has been stealing from students. When the students come up with an idea about how to apprehend the thief, the school principal and police officer gladly listen and co-facilitate their successful plan.

While the YA novels discussed earlier in this chapter often include descriptions of how adolescents are treated unfairly by school officials and officers of the law following rampage violence incidents, in Just Another Hero students are respected by both school administration and the school police officer. For example, when he is investigating the series of thefts, Officer Hammler “talk[s] to kids about leads” (Draper 2009, 213). Also, after he helps catch the school thief, Osrick is congratulated for his “wonderful detective work” (Draper 2009, 228). When students play a central role in keeping their school community safe and crime-free, they are thanked as equals. This leads to relationships of trust between adult and adolescent characters. Osrick, for example, is more comfortable reporting the bullying he has experienced after he works with the school police officer and principal to catch the thief.

In contrast, the interactions portrayed in the YA novels discussed earlier in the chapter often hinge on adult characters’ claims to power over adolescent characters or general assumptions of this power. In Shooter, for example, an FBI agent trying to learn about a rampage shooting incident tells the boy she is interviewing that she does not need to provide a rationale for her questions because “you’re not my equal here Cameron” (Myers 2004, 84). In Shooter, students are held accountable to their communities by
force. For instance, Cameron is told, “I’m asking you questions, Cameron, and I want answers to them. You owe this community answers to these questions, and the best answers that you can come up with, young man” (Myers 2004, 86). Rather than forming a collaborative relationship, the official who questions Cameron about the shooting at his school antagonizes him. The white, female FBI agent also implies that her distrust comes, in part, from Cameron’s position as a wealthy African American youth.

Although the majority of the young characters in the YA portrayals of rampage violence are white, important racial distinctions are also made within the narratives. For example, in *After*, Tom’s black friend Avery compares their school situation to a horror movie and expresses his disbelief that he has not been the first youth to disappear. He notes, “it’s always the black guy who’s the first to get chomped by the man-eating shark or zapped by the space alien or killed by the supergerm or whatever” (Prose 2003, 191). This comment is met with his friends’ embarrassment because they “often forgot Avery was black until he brought it up” (Prose 2003, 191). Avery’s later comment critiquing his parents for “letting some white man convince them that their kid needed to be sent away” is ignored by his friends who pretend not to hear his “white man” comment (Prose 2003, 272). *After* offers just one example of how, in YA novels with primarily white characters, race is an uncomfortable subject that is used for humor or ignored.

These problematic representations of race are a primary reason that one cannot compare *Just Another Hero* with the other YA novels in this study without noting the racial differences of the protagonists and shooters. Whereas the earlier texts that focused on prevention and protection at the expense of adolescents’ civil rights featured white students, *Just Another Hero* avoids these themes to instead focus on the hope that is
present in the futures of intelligent and motivated black youth. Whereas white youth are frequently denied the possibility for democratic participation in YA fiction, Draper’s novel is intentionally built around the responsible actions of black youth within their school and their community. Just Another Hero offers an important, albeit rare, model of how youth can be imagined in YA fiction as both active agents and contributors within their schools and communities. While YA fiction can act as a form of socialization for youth who repeatedly read about adolescent characters who are subordinate to the adults around them, this is not always the case. Anne Reeves, in her book Adolescents Talk About Reading: Exploring Resistance to and Engagement with Text, notes that literature can also work against “the orderly dispensation of knowledge, which is the business of schools. As art, it questions assumptions, challenges authority, and shines light into dark corners” (Reeves 2004, 255). By presenting youth as trustworthy, motivated to engage in the development of their school and community, and committed to their academic futures, Draper offers a narrative that challenges the dominant discourses surrounding youth identity in other YA texts that depict rampage violence.

Conclusion

The lack of opportunities for young characters to practice or demonstrate their ability to participate in a democratic community in YA portrayals of rampage violence supports the argument that “YA novels teach adolescent readers to accept a certain amount of repression as cultural imperative” (Trites 2000, 55). Rather than represent young people as social actors, YA novels that depict rampage violence instead frequently show adolescents as merely being acted upon by the adults around them. Problematically, the only obvious agents in these stories are violent youth who are condemned for their
actions and their attempts to voice objections to the violence they experience at home and at school. The majority of youth who act are represented as both troubled and troubling.

I began this chapter with an exploration of youth rights scholarship, focusing primarily on the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. My analysis of this document in light of contemporary U.S. education practices has been a foundational component of this chapter’s argument that human and civil rights are intimately connected to the education of young people. I then examined several young adult depictions of rampage violence in order to locate embedded themes regarding the protection of youth, the prevention of youth violence, and the ability of young people to participate in democratic communities. Based on the examples provided in the first half of this chapter, it is clear that youth participation and voice are more frequently portrayed as threatening to adult authority and power than as beneficial to community wellbeing in YA novels that depict rampage violence.

In order to challenge these representations, I shifted in the second-half of this chapter to discussing the role of youth in democracy in the contemporary political and economic climate. Through a comparison of neoliberal and democratic educational goals and practices, I argued that the capacity for youth to practice a citizenship role in a democratic educational setting is rare, but possible. I then pointed to Sharon Draper’s 2009 YA novel *Just Another Hero* as a fictional model of the role of youth in an educational democracy. In particular, I noted how *Just Another Hero* challenges popular stereotypes of minority youth as inherently violence, uncontrollable, and disposable. In my comparative analysis of Draper’s novel with primarily white YA novels of rampage violence, I pointed to the lack of references to militarism in *Just Another Hero* as well as
the collaborative adult-adolescent relationships that are portrayed throughout Draper’s novel. Most importantly, I described how Draper’s YA novel represents a clear departure from the dominant themes of portrayals of rampage violence in YA fiction.

In the following chapter, I conclude my analysis of fictional texts of rampage violence through an extended examination of the relationship between fictions of youth identity and the actual experiences of American youth in school and society as they attempt to participate in democracy. In particular, I look at the documentary narrative of Shelby Knox, a Texas youth who attempted to change her school district’s sex education curriculum. Through my analysis of Knox’s experience, I point to additional parallels between fictional accounts of youth violence and non-fiction depictions of the potential role of youth in democracy. Moreover, I illustrate how narratives involving youth overwhelmingly utilize parallel constructions of subordination, hopelessness, and deviance to undermine the social power of young people as a class of citizens.
Conclusion: Narratives as Myths: Situating Fictional Rampage Violence Within a Larger Narrative of Youth Identity

The economic and political forces that shape public education—institutions that reflect the larger social order—do not make an effort to create culturally responsive, humanizing, and thus inviting public spaces where youth can achieve academically and come to voice about the historical, social, and economic forces that shape their lives. (Pepi Leistyna, “Facing Oppression: Youth Voices from the Front, 106)

If children are to be meaningful citizens in a social world, what then is their own power base—from which they can exercise their rights—and what are the social and cultural factors which constrain and shape such a springboard? (Mary John, *Children’s Rights and Power: Charging Up for a New Century*, 133)

**Narratives as Myths: Fictional Rampage Violence and Youth Identity**

In the Introduction to this dissertation, I employed Roland Barthes’s understanding of myth as something that works to “distort” (Barthes 1972, 121) to help explain how and why narratives of youth identity are embedded with political and social adult agendas. The “myths of youth” that are embedded within fictional texts of rampage violence often situate adolescent characters as powerless, as something to be feared, and as a population that needs adult intervention and guidance to become successful American citizens. I argued that youth can rarely be citizens, but are instead always situated in a stage of development and liminality. Throughout the previous chapters, I have offered critical readings of fictional accounts of school shootings to argue that myths about youth are created and maintained in order to refuse American youth individual citizenship identities. In each chapter, I have attempted a series of what
Barthes calls “interruptions” (what I have referred to as “making strange” or “queering”) in order to disrupt notions of youth identity that are considered natural and normal. Each of these interruptions has also pointed to the ways in which adult agendas are present within and across popular culture mediums.

The essential function of a myth, according to Barthes, is to naturalize so that a “myth is read as a factual system” (Barthes 1972, 131). A myth will remain unquestioned because it is composed of what are perceived to be natural relationships. Throughout this dissertation, I have illustrated how myths are related to and built on one another. In chapter two, for example, I provided evidence of how a male rampage shooter can be mythologized as sexually queer because of a historical relationship among discourses of violence, gay identity, and pathology. Through a focus on fictional narratives of rampage violence, this dissertation has offered evidence of how the believability of the myths of youth identity is impacted by their relation to myths of white supremacy, gender hierarchies, and heteronormativity.

If, as Barthes argues, “nothing can be safe from myth” (Barthes 1972, 131), then the role of the critical scholar must include unearthing and exploring the origins of how naturalized myths come to be. The myths within fictional accounts of youth violence are frequently tied to hegemonic understandings of identity, thus requiring an examination of the social and political discourses surrounding the creation of texts that include violent adolescent characters. This kind of analysis was the primary task in Chapter One, where I explored the discourses surrounding narratives of urban youth violence in order to better understand the origins of post-2000 portrayals of youth violence in suburban settings. Rather than separate the intentions of these two sets of narratives, I instead identified a
pattern of disposability and salvageability that was tied to the racial identities of the characters. While victims of urban violence were considered unworthy of salvation, white communities and white characters affected by youth violence became symbols of America’s future through their salvation and healing.

Similarly, in Chapter Four, I looked to discourses of youth rights in order to situate YA literature about rampage violence within an understanding of the role of schooling and youth in democratic communities. Through demonstrating that adolescent characters were rarely shown participating in their schools or communities, were frequently denied voice and autonomy, and were often deprived of their rights as citizens at school, in their homes, and in their communities, I was able to point to a myth of youth identity that naturalizes adults’ power over youth. In both Chapters One and Four, my analysis assumed that the myths of youth identity were embedded with value systems tied to various constructions of identity. Critically examining hierarchies of race, gender, sexuality, and age became central to my analysis of the myths used to portray youth violence.

This was especially true in Chapter Three, which offered an intersectional exploration of gender, age, race, and sexuality in an attempt to understand how and why deviant sexuality is applied to female characters who commit acts of school violence in fictional texts. In this chapter, I noted that female shooters are denied any form of agency for their actions and are framed as second-class citizens because of their intersecting identities as white, adolescent girls who are not playing their prescribed sexual role within their school or community. Indeed, it was not uncommon for myths about what it means to be a “bad” girl to be combined with narratives of school violence in the creation
of the female rampage shooter, a myth of adult imagination that serves to warn against adolescent female agency and power.

In each of this dissertation’s chapters, I have focused on the nuances of a particular body of fictional narratives in order to demonstrate a model for how feminist scholars can respond to the myths constructed around youth identity and culture. Importantly, however, narratives of youth violence need to be acknowledged as only one part of a larger set of texts that have been created in response to the moral panic regarding American youth identity. Fictional accounts of rampage violence are merely one example of how harmful myths and narratives of American youth are perpetuated and strengthened through popular culture mediums. As the previous chapters have implied, the myths present in fictional portrayals can be connected to parallel fictions and myths of youth identity that exist elsewhere in American society and culture.

In the following sections, I examine *The Education of Shelby Knox* (2005), a documentary that focuses on sex education debates in American schools. Through my analysis, I illustrate how the myths present in fictional portrayals of rampage violence are embedded within other “non-fiction” narratives of youth identity. I also discuss the importance of critically examining queer representations of youth and the national anxieties that they embody. Lastly, I argue that constructions of white youth violence and deviant sexual activity influence one another and impact the ways in which youth are nationally defined as victims in need of protection and proper socialization.

*Sex Education and American Youth*

Scholar Lauren Berlant has argued that America is currently experiencing “a state of sexual emergency” because “heterosexual life no longer seems the only mentionable
one in the United States” (Berlant 1997, 17). Fictional accounts of rampage violence provide evidence of this sexual emergency because of the ways in which they vilify characters with suspected gay identities in order to reify heteronormativity. Because heterosexuality and masculinity are perceived to be cornerstones of American identity, with the institution of the family providing “a logic of the national future” (Berlant 1997, 18), the threat of alternative sexual identities becomes a threat not only to the institution of heterosexuality, but also to the structure of the family, the reproduction of white racial identity, and patriarchal power.

Representations of white youth identity have been taken up as a central weapon in the contemporary battle to defend tenets of an idealized, anti-queer American citizenship identity.46 If hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity are under siege, then white youth, as the hope of the nation, are paramount to maintaining the dominant power structures that are currently under threat. The importance of white youth is clearly seen, for example, in recent sex education debates, which frequently place white youth at the center of both moral and political agendas. Controversies surrounding sexuality education arise, in part, because “the battle over sexuality education is not simply a dispute over the most effective means to promote the sexual and reproductive health of

46 National anxieties regarding the heterosexualization of youth are certainly not new. Indeed, debates concerning the sexual identity of children and their sexual education have been present since the early 1900s when adults began to debate the need to education young people about such topics as venereal disease. Bonnie Nelson Trudell, author of Doing Sex Education: Gender Politics and Schooling, explains that “the first organized, though largely unsuccessful, campaign for the inclusion of sex education in the public school curriculum emerged in the context of the scientific social hygiene, eugenics, and purity movements of the early 1900s” (Trudell 1993, 10). Importantly, Trudell points to the ways in which sexuality education, from its inception, was preoccupied with the relationship between sexuality and race.
youth, but rather is, first and foremost, a clash over the shape and direction of society itself” (McKay 1999, 13). Similar to fictional narratives of rampage violence, contemporary debates surrounding sexuality education embody concerns about the (re)production of American ideals of identity such as whiteness, heterosexuality, and gender norms. These debates, when analyzed alongside narratives of rampage violence, further illustrate the ways in which the realities of youth experience are fictionalized for the purpose of creating restrictive definitions of American youth as future citizens.

The importance of sex education in the United States is rooted in its “long history as, in part, a project to prepare young people for citizenship in a democratic society” (Irvine 2002, 167). Training youth through public schooling to uphold powerful American institutions such as the heterosexual family has become a central component to ensuring “a hierarchical system of sexual value” (Messerschmidt 1993, 74). If American sexual citizenship depends on heteronormative and gender-normative identities, then public schooling must include methods of socializing youth into these roles. Problematically, however, sex education has often reflected the interests of the state rather than the interests of the child. Preoccupations with the “social welfare costs of teen pregnancy” (Carroll 2009, 77), for example, can serve to distract from a focus on the health education needs of individual children.

Susan Freeman argues in her book *Sex Goes to School* (2008) that the history of sex education can be “viewed as an exercise of social control whereby educators upheld power relations based on race, class, sex, and age” (Freeman 2008, xi). Evidence of this social control is illustrated through the main proponents of sex education in schools—“primarily white, middle-class professionals in health and education” (Trudell 1993,
who frequently advocate abstinence-only curriculum and the traditional nuclear family model. Documentaries such as *The Education of Shelby Knox* (2005) point out that health and education professionals, in addition to conservative political and religious groups, are at the center of debates surrounding sex education. Released in 2005, this documentary was produced in the same time period as many of the rampage violence texts that I examined in previous chapters.

*The Education of Shelby Knox* tells the story of a high school student who unsuccessfully attempts to change the policies regarding public school sex education in the town of Lubbock, Texas over the course of three years. Through her work with the Lubbock Youth Commission, an organization started in 1999, Shelby Knox champions comprehensive sex education as an alternative to her school district’s choice of Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage (AOUM) sex education curricula. In addition to her work lobbying for changes with sex education, Knox also joins a campaign to allow promotion of a gay-straight alliance in her school. This campaign is also ultimately unsuccessful when a federal judge rules that the club would not align with the district’s AOUM sex education policy.

Throughout the documentary, Knox examines her personal religious beliefs as she shifts from a self-identified conservative Christian to a Christian who supports more liberal politics. At the beginning of the film, for example, Knox is shown making an abstinence pledge with her parents at a church event at the age of fifteen. This pledge, “the thing you do if you're a good Southern Baptist girl,” according to Knox, emphasizes heteronormative gender roles by the commitment made to “a future husband or wife” to live a sexually pure life until marriage. By the end of the documentary, however, Knox
marches at a rally for gay rights in direct opposition to her pastor and against the advice of her parents who express concerns about her liberal political beliefs.

Planning to eventually run for president of the United States, Knox is representative of a politically active youth population that is willing to fight local community battles to further both local and national youth rights. As scholar Katherine Carroll argues, “Ms. Knox’s story perfectly illustrates how a positive result of the abstinence-only education policies is that they have empowered a generation to fight for what they want and demand what they need – comprehensive sex education” (Carroll 2009, 66). Knox’s concern that abstinence-only education is not improving the lives of youth in her community, a city with “one of the highest teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease rates in the nation,” becomes a catalyst for her developing political identity and citizenship role. Powerful members of her community and the eventual alignment of the Lubbock Youth Commission with the Mayor’s office, however, cause Knox to abandon her official alliances and fight her causes through more grassroots campaigns.

It is no accident that this documentary on sex education takes place in Texas, a state “famous for its conservative politics and religion” (Wiley and Wilson 2009, 3). Despite the “growing body of evidence [that] indicates that abstinence-only education programs are ineffective in changing teen sexual behavior,” a 2009 report found that

---

47 It is also important to note that “the size of its population relative to other states gives Texas tremendous influence in the education market…the state’s huge population make Texas a primary market for textbook publishers. As a result, publishers commonly craft their textbooks for the Texas market and then sell those books to schools in smaller states around the country. Consequently, in health education as in other disciplines, as Texas goes, so goes much of the nation” (Wiley and Wilson 2009, 59).
“abstinence-only programs have a stranglehold on sexuality education in Texas public schools” (Wiley and Wilson 2009, 2). The same report found that the majority of public schools in Texas—over 94 percent—will provide only abstinence-only sex education and labeled Texas as “the flagship state for the abstinence-only movement” (Wiley and Wilson 2009, 2; 5). This description of Texas certainly justifies Knox’s comprehensive sex education campaign.

Knox’s unsuccessful attempts at change, however, point to the strength of abstinence-only education advocates who represent a variety of interest groups such as the Family Values Coalition, Focus on the Family, and other organizations that identify with the conservative political agendas of the Christian Right. Indeed, there has been an increasingly conservative attitude toward sex education since the 1960s with curriculum censorship increasing and religious organizations expressing more interest in sexuality education in schools (Whitson 1992). Jeffrey Moran, author of Teaching Sex: The Shaping of Adolescence in the 20th Century, states that “sex education in the decades after the 1960s became a potent symbol of contention in the ‘culture wars’ over the moral direction of the United States, for it involves both sexuality and family authority, and the

[48] I intentionally focus on contemporary debates regarding abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) education, a curricula of sexuality education that has been federally funded since the early 1980s (Carroll 2009, Oster 2008). Alexander McKay, in his book Sexual Ideology and Schooling: Toward Democratic Sexuality Education, claims that “we cannot accurately understand the sexuality education debates until we see them in terms of the wider ideological disputes related to sexuality that exist in Western culture” (McKay 1999, 7). I would argue that these wider disputes include, among other things, anxieties regarding the re-creation of whiteness and heteronormativity, two powerful hegemonies in the U.S. Although there is a long and interesting history of sexuality education in the United States (see, for example, Moran 2000), I primarily discuss the most recent abstinence-only sex education debates because of the ways in which they parallel—chronologically, socially, and politically—national concerns and anxieties regarding youth violence and youth citizenship identity.
debates necessarily become debates over control of the coming generation” (Moran 2000, 217). During the 1960s, debates arose concerning the comprehensive sex education versus abstinence-only sex education. The “epidemic” of teen pregnancy in the 1970s, however, foreshadowed the widespread contemporary abstinence-only sex education curriculum, which has been traced to a “resurgence of conservative political and social values manifested in the election of Ronald Reagan as President of the United States” (McKay 1999, 68; see also Halstead and Reiss 2003). Indeed, federal policies to fund AOUM sex education programs developed during the presidencies of Reagan, Clinton, and Bush II (Carroll 2009).

Connell and Elliot (2009) claim that “sexuality education, as it is currently organized, does more than present children with objective facts about sexuality; it also socializes children into systems of inequality” (Connell and Elliott 2009, 84). A good example of this is found within federal definitions of abstinence education that clearly privilege heterosexual lifestyles, marriage, and family structures (see Table 2). The eight-part definition of abstinence-only education required for Title V funding under the Social Security Act of 1996 includes the claim that “sexual activity outside the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects” (U.S. Social Security Act, §510(b)(2)). This claim includes an inherent criticism of gay and lesbian relationships where marriage is not currently legally available.

Although AOUM sexual education curricula claim to express concern about reducing the sexual behavior of youths, the legitimacy of a LGBTQ lifestyle is clearly called into question through embedded critiques of non-marital sexual relationships and

49 For more on these debates, see Carroll 2009 or Oster 2008.
parenting without a marriage contract. Moreover, as Michelle Fine and Sara McClelland (2006) argue, “the eight central tenets of [abstinence-only-until-marriage] suggest a direct

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eight Points of Federal Definition of Abstinence-Only Education</th>
<th>Applicability Outside of Heteronormative Culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The program “has as its exclusive purpose, teaching the social, psychological, and health gains to be realized by abstaining from sexual activity;”</td>
<td>None when discussion of gay lifestyle and relationships are not part of the curriculum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. “teaches abstinence from sexual activity outside marriage as the expected standard for all school-age children;”</td>
<td>None when gay marriage is not legally available.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. “teaches that abstinence from sexual activity is the only certain way to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and other associated health problems;”</td>
<td>Some relevance to all children, but gay and lesbian sex has no chance of resulting in pregnancy, out-of-wedlock, or otherwise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. “teaches that a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity;”</td>
<td>None when gay marriage is not legally available.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. “teaches that sexual activity outside the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects;”</td>
<td>None when gay marriage is not legally available.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. “teaches that bearing children out-of-wedlock is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the child's parents, and society;”</td>
<td>None when gay marriage is not legally available.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. “teaches young people how to reject sexual advances and how alcohol and drug use increase vulnerability to sexual advances; and”</td>
<td>Relevant to all children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. “teaches the importance of attaining self-sufficiency before engaging in sexual activity;”</td>
<td>Relevant to all children.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 11: Eight Part Definition of Abstinence-Only Sex Education (Source: U.S. Social Security Act, §510(b)(2))

and (im)moral route from nonmarital sex to disease and social problems” (Fine and McClelland 2006, 306). Rather than focus on the health of individual youths, abstinence-only sex education is often preoccupied with larger social concerns. Indeed, Katherine
Carroll argues for comprehensive sex education that would “stress the importance and value in abstinence while acknowledging the reality that not all teens will remain abstinent until marriage” because this kind of comprehensive education “shifts the focus away from the social welfare costs of teen pregnancy to where it should be: on the health and safety of our children” (Carroll 2009, 44; 77).

AOUM sex education programs such as *Sex Respect* (Mast 2001) tend to emphasize “the negative consequences of teenagers for having intercourse” (Whatley 1992, 79), relying on fear-tactics to convince teenagers to abstain from sexual activity. Fine (2002) notes three repressive discourses within sex education: sexuality as violence, sexuality as victimization, and sexuality as individual morality. Through these discourses, she argues, “students today do learn about sexuality – if typically through the representations of female sexuality as inadequacy or victimization, male homosexuality as a story of predator and prey, and male heterosexuality as desire” (Fine 2002, 389). These misrepresentations of sexuality become ways to narrowly frame sex education in ways that “organize ambivalence, confusion, and anxieties into tidy sound bites designed for mass mobilization” (Irvine 2002, 8). Rather than allow youth populations to discuss and debate sexuality, national anxieties about (re)producing heteronormative youth create limiting discourses—or myths of youth sexuality—that are antithetical to democratic educational practices.

Indeed, Alexander McKay, in his book *Sexuality and Schooling: Towards Democratic Sexuality Education*, argues that AOUM curriculum functions “as a form of ideological indoctrination rather than as a space for students to explore and critically deliberate between different ways of thinking about sexuality” (McKay 1999, 65).
McKay has gone so far as to argue that by denying young people access to information on sexuality, schools are not only socializing students to engage in particular societal ideals (such as heterosexuality, monogamy, and normalized gender roles), but they are also violating their human rights (McKay 1999, 28; see also Kennedy and Covell 2009). His arguments align with claims sited above that contemporary sex education curricula is clearly not geared toward the best interests of the child, but rather the agendas of the state and various state-supporting institutions.

Parallel Narratives: Fictions of Rampage Violence and Sex Education

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that representations of youth as sexually deviant are used to strengthen both patriarchal and heteronormative foundations of American citizenship. Through the analyses within this chapter, it is evident that these representations are especially powerful because of the threat that queer youth and queer children signify to the future of the nation and to the American status quo of heterosexual citizenship. It is no coincidence that “school violence victimizing girls and low-status boys reflects the larger societal problems of hegemonic masculinity, violence against women, homophobia, and rejection of difference” (Danner and Carmody 2001, 111), all topics that could be addressed through sex education in public schools. Fictional rampage violence narratives and AOUM sex education both respond to contemporary national anxieties regarding youth sexuality, gender identity, and the creation of appropriate American citizens. That these two sets of national narratives both frame queer youth as anti-citizens in order to protect an idealized notion of American citizenship as white, heterosexual, and normatively gendered implies a larger
understanding of the role that youth identity can play in national social and political agendas.

Peter McLaren (1992) points to an American preoccupation with constructing borders around areas of concern to ensure containment and control. If the gender and sexual identities of youth create a certain amount of national anxiety, it is not surprising that both fictional portrayals of white youth violence and the shaping of white youth identities through sexuality education would need to be carefully controlled and monitored. Attempts at control are understandable within narratives that reflect the national anxieties of a heteronormative state “with an institutionalized bias toward protecting the gendered status quo” (Messerschmidt 1993, 155). These anxieties provide evidence toward why rampage killers are often queered with no explanation. For example, the audience is unprepared for the killers to kiss in Elephant. Readers receive little explanation for why Jesus Navarro of Vernon God Little (2003) is found wearing women’s underwear after his act of rampage violence. Similarly, Daniel’s sexuality in Heart of America also remains unresolved.

The idea of a queer child creates a moral panic because queer identity challenges the status quo and questions power structures that have historically and politically shaped an ideal American citizenship identity. Because of the strong relationship between masculinity and heterosexuality as well as the connection between masculinity and American citizenship identity, youth citizenship discourses must be recognized as heterosexualized (Bell and Binnie 2000). If all developing citizens are recognized as “sexual citizens,” then it can be acknowledged that “different forms of sexual identity mark claims to citizenship status differently” (Bell and Binnie 2000, 33). While some
scholars claim this means that queer-identified Americans are merely viewed as non-citizens, Margot Canaday, author of *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth Century America*, argues more strongly that gay identity becomes “the anticitizen” (Canaday 2009, 9).

Shelby Knox, with her competing beliefs regarding her personal abstinence choice and her public campaigns for comprehensive sex education and gay rights for youth, embodies a national fear about the liminality of youth. If Knox, a white child in the state of Texas who was raised by conservative Christian and Republican parents, can be queered through her conversion to liberal politics, becoming an ally for gay rights and sexual rights for youth, then all children are at risk of being “made strange”. Just as rampage killers have been identified as “the monsters next door” (Consalvo 2003), so can liberal youth emerge from the most conservative origins. If fictional rampage violence narratives and *The Education of Shelby Knox* are to be believed, threats to citizenship ideals can “come out” from just about anywhere. Rampage violence and AOUM sex education fictions align in their parallel arguments that gay tendencies transform innocent white children into violent anti-citizens.

Contemporary AOUM sex education curricula “wield enormous emotional power” because they employ “appeals to protect innocent children, especially their sexual innocence” (Irvine 2002, 197). The national narrative of childhood innocence continues to be maintained through the belief that children are controllable and socializable if the right methods are employed. Fictions of rampage violence and AOUM sex education, in their communication of parallel messages through diverse media, illustrate that “popular culture has the power to present incomplete, decontextualized, fantastical, and dangerous
conceptualizations of sex and sexuality” (Hentges 2006, 178). Moreover, youth identity is being intentionally created and formed through these fictions as a method of influencing definitions of American citizenship.

Concluding Thoughts

Fictional rampage violence portrayals and AOUM sex education curricula are narratives constructed out of the fear that children within white, suburban communities can no longer be controlled. As Stefani Etheridge Woodson argues in her article, “Mapping the Cultural Geography of Childhood or, Performing Monstrous Children,” children must be controlled to be considered safe. Woodson notes, “if a child is unable or unwilling to conform to expected socialization parameters, that child is labeled deviant or poorly socialized. An ‘uncontained’ child then becomes a ‘dangerous’ child” (Woodson 1999, 34). Just as urban seepage has been taken up as a rationale for white youth violence, so has queer identity been taken up as a mechanism to defend the protection of youth innocence, whiteness, and hegemonic masculinity.

Within fictions of rampage violence and AOUM sex education, youth have become “symbols of a declining democracy” as they are “located within a range of signifiers that largely deny their status as active citizens” (Giroux 1997a, 36). Within both these sets of narratives, it is the state that is portrayed as a victim of youth irresponsibility when state intervention is recognized as necessary to protect children from themselves and each other. Thus, the identity of the child has become a pawn through which to perform national hegemonies, a situation made possible because the child “is a body said to need protections more than freedoms” (Stockton 2009, 16).
Socially, politically, and legally, children are without the right to protect themselves from being constructed solely as a crisis to be solved.

_The Education of Shelby Knox_ demonstrates that contemporary anxieties regarding the need to heterosexualize white youth to create idealized future citizens extend beyond fictional narratives of youth violence. Indeed the narratives created around sexuality education for youth, when placed in comparison with the youth violence narratives examined in previous chapters, frequently overlap and support one another. Importantly, however, these two sets of narratives are merely illustrations of how adult anxieties influence such things as policy debates and curriculum decisions within the day-to-day experiences of American students. Feminist research can focus on a much larger range of material effects brought about by myths of youth identity that are born of adult anxieties. Through my above analysis of _The Education of Shelby Knox_, I pointed to several potential future directions for feminist research on youth culture and identity: the involvement of youth in education policy, youth activism and political interventions, and the curriculum choices in American schools are all possibilities. These topics can be added to a larger discussion that still needs to occur in feminist academic circles regarding youth rights and citizenship.

In the United States, “we are much more used to thinking about nationality and schooling together than about schooling and sexuality or about nationality and sexuality” (Epstein and Johnson 1998, 5). To claim that these three discourses are intricately connected is a critical act that undermines a dominant understanding of citizenship as heteronormative. These related discourses imply new identifications of the child citizen, the sexual citizen, and the sexual citizen as child. Protecting and regulating youth
sexuality, then, must be openly acknowledged as a form of interfering with definitions of American citizenship identity. “Outing” the use of fictional queer children as a way to uphold and strengthen hegemonies of masculinity and heterosexuality makes visible the ways in which narratives of youth violence and sexuality are not “simple stories, euphemisms, and platitudes” (Bruhm and Hurley 2004, xiii). Rather, narratives of youth violence and sexuality are complex mappings of contemporary American citizenship identity that can hint at the potential for new citizenship definitions.
References


Jarvis, Christine and Viv Burr. “‘Friends are the Family We Choose for Ourselves’: Young People and Families in the TV series Buffy the Vampire Slayer,” Young 13, 3 (2005): 269-283.


