Feminisms at the Door: Gender and Sex at a Women's College

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Abstract

This dissertation is a qualitative study of early 21st century American female college students’ experiences of their gender, sexuality, and racial identities, and of institutional politics as their single-sex college transitioned to co-education. It is an ethnography that utilizes feminist theorizing to understand tensions between feminists of different generations or waves; the complexities of identities and institutions in which gender, sexuality, and race intersect (bell hooks and Kimberle Crenshaw); and the workings of dominant gender and sexual norms (Judith Butler). As the College prepared to ‘go coed,’ the prospect of introducing male bodies into this environment generated rich discourses about sexual differences, and the operations of individual and institutional power.

Data for this dissertation were gathered through individual interviews with five senior administrators and twenty-two students, a group interview with four students following one semester of coeducation, and participant observations over the course of four years. Historical and contemporary texts were analyzed for evidence of competing feminist discourses. Each chapter of this dissertation discusses my findings of feminist generational tensions between students and administrators; of Womyns College as both a nurturing place and a site for practicing resistance to gender, sexual, and racial norms; and of the difficulties of challenging societal and institutional impositions of femininity and heteronormativity.

This work contributes to the fields of education and women’s studies by providing a thick description of everyday life at a women’s college, and of a significant institutional transition – from a women’s to a coeducational college – in American higher education. It describes some young women’s negotiations of the constraints of femininity and
heterosexuality, and exposes how hegemonic notions about sex and gender work. It makes an argument for separatist spaces within historically masculinist and white institutions: intentionally created and institutionally sustained “homeplaces” (hooks) where radical subjectivities can be cultivated by members of non-dominant groups.
“Feminisms at the Door: Gender and Sex at a Women’s College”

by

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M.A., Ohio State University, 1983
B.S., University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1978

Dissertation
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Chapter 1: Feminisms at the Door

This chapter introduces Womyns College and describes my qualitative study there in the context of the feminist theoretical frameworks suggested by my findings. It outlines the contributions this study makes to feminist and educational theories and practices, as well as the limitations of the study.

Womyns College is a residential, liberal arts college in a small, rural town, in the northeastern United States. Prior to the mid-2000s, it had a 125 year history of providing postsecondary education for women, and it has always been small: at its height, enrollment was around 650 students*. Several times in the mid 2000s, the College was cited in national rankings as a liberal arts college that offered quality education at an affordable price. In the late 1990s, it received national attention for cutting its tuition and awarding leadership and community service scholarships in an effort to attract more students. Over the four years of my study, 2002 to 2005, enrollment hovered between 350 and 450 students. The word ‘isolated’ was banished from campus vocabularies as the College attempted to deploy language to invite applications and change perception. Attracting and sustaining a student body of diverse racial, ethnic, national, and sexual backgrounds challenged the College’s human and financial resources. The demographics of the College looked like this at the time of my study: 15% of the students self-identified as being ‘of color’; 2-3% of the students were international students; “non heterosexual”\(^1\) student numbers were estimated somewhere between “more than 15%” (senior administrator’s estimate) and up to 50% (student estimate).

*In order to protect the anonymity of my research site to the greatest possible degree, whenever my source for a quotation or institutional fact or description would reveal the name of the College where my study was conducted, I will insert an asterisk. My sources were a published history of the College,
Visually stunning, both the grounds of Womyns College and the village in which it sits are reflective of a pastoral way of life, the kind of place many founders of higher educational institutions sought out to seclude students from cosmopolitan distractions so that they might better concentrate on the development of their minds and the purity of their souls. Set in a village known for its “beauty” and “healthfulness”, the College has been characterized as “...stand[ing] thus where nature in her quiet refining loveliness must ever be one of the chief instructors”*. Sweeping lawns and an inviting circular drive lead up from a large, natural lake to the grounds of the College. In a protected alcove at the central entrance into the main building stands a statue of the Roman goddess Minerva. Her domain is said to be varied – wisdom, war, crafts, medicine – but most often her power is associated with intellect and learning. She is an apt and romanticized icon for the College: this statue is the only structure that survived the fire in the main building in the late 1800s. Prominently placed, she is described as the “gatekeeper,” a “symbol of continuity and permanence”*. In the years surrounding the United States’ Civil War, Womyns College, like many women’s colleges, opened its doors as a ‘seminary’ dedicated to the preparation – moral and intellectual – of teachers, with attendant religious overtones. In the address he penned for the opening of Womyns College, the founder stated that he wanted to do something “to aid in the elevation of female character”*. Feminism has long been on this institution’s doorstep, adorning its threshold, summoning hundreds of women to engage with the liberal arts and higher education.

1 This term was used by a senior level administrator on campus who picked it up from student vocabularies, because the term is “more inclusive” than ‘lesbian/bisexual’. “Queer” is also often used at Womyns College to describe this population.
Throughout its history, the College has had financial and leadership struggles*, perhaps reflecting difficulty in articulating its mission as a college dedicated to the education of women. At times, the fact that Womyns was a women’s college was all but absent in its publicity campaigns, a non-factor in the hiring of faculty and presidents, and buried in its appeals to prospective students and alumnae, as though the notion of educating women without men were so controversial that the College dare not mention it. Student enrollments reflected the struggles of this institution to remain vibrant: particularly in the past 25 years, enrollment has varied widely, and attracting and sustaining faculty, staff, and students challenged the College’s human and financial resources. Check your feminism at the door, please.

I confess to a longing for separatist, feminist spaces. My endorsement of all-female environments is informed by the spate of publications in the 1980s that characterized the unfair treatment of (primarily white, middle class, American) girls and young women in co-educational classrooms, the crisis in girls’ self-confidence, and female teenagers’ loss of ‘voice’ and myopic focus on bodily appearances (Brown and Gilligan 1992; Sadker 1994; Brumberg 1997; Orenstein 2000). I encountered these writings as a graduate student in education at Ohio State in the early 1980s and recognized my own experiences as an adolescent in these themes. Although I can now critique many of these studies as ‘essentialist,’ they were the grains of truth that sparked some of my earliest feminist thinking about women and girls as teachers and learners together. Informed by my graduate education at Ohio State and Syracuse, and by my work in higher education as a student and academic affairs administrator at both coed and women’s institutions, I have come to believe that all-female spaces – whether in the form of consciousness-raising groups, women’s studies classrooms, girl scout troop meetings, or
women’s church groups – give women permission to explore and re/construct experiences that are personal but have political implications, and suggest opportunities for collective action. Female separatist spaces offer fertile environments for women to attempt to understand each other as raced, sexed, classed – embodied beings; to talk with each other through writings, in formal settings and in informal conversations; to understand their experiences in and anger at a sexist culture; and to find opportunities to promote individual and structural change (Freedman 1979; Kreiger 1996; Reagon in Mohanty 2003; Collins 2000). Bring your feminisms through this door; they can help to explain and diffuse the sexism, racism, homophobia, discrimination embedded in social and political structures.

Some might describe women’s colleges and the social relations that take place within them as anachronistic, a vanishing way of life. The number of women’s colleges in the United States has declined from approximately 300 in 1960 to approximately 50 in 2010 (Harwarth 1999; Women’s College Coalition 2011). Although there is some evidence that enrollments and applications have increased at the most elite American women’s colleges over the past eight to ten years (Thulin 2011), applicants’ academic credentials (SAT scores, class standing) are not what they used to be: fewer and fewer female high school seniors are choosing to apply to, much less attend, women’s colleges (Miller-Bernal and Poulson 2006). Feminist arguments about the benefits of all-female classrooms and campuses (see literature review and most recently, Sax et al. 2009) are failing to convince young women (and their families) to enroll at single sex colleges. Whatever their sustainability, when academic communities are comprised of all and only women students, the everyday experiences that women report provide a unique problematic (Smith 1987). Feminism provides analytic frameworks to examine the misogyny
and homophobia that underlie contemporary popular perceptions of women’s colleges. In feminist theory, there has been a profound interrogation of the category of ‘woman’ and about women as an identity group, the foundation for feminist interests and politics (Alcoff 1988; Weedon 1999). Discussions of essentialism, anti-essentialism, and anti-anti-essentialism question and bolster the very subjects of the few women’s colleges that are left in the United States. Got feminism?

My research site was full of contradictions, as evidenced by social relations that both constrained and fostered some remarkable gendered and sexed subjectivities and identities. Recent feminist theories about the sex and gender of women (and men) move us well beyond the nature/nurture debate and deep into the sex/gender dichotomy (Alcoff 1988; Butler 1990, 1993, 2004). In what ways are both sex and gender socially constructed? How do women ‘play’ with femininity, construct a broad range of experiences and performances within that, and thereby call into question the universality of female experience? This study suggests that ‘being female’ is an unstable construct that is both (re)enacted and resisted by individuals in particular places and times, and that notions of female-ness are both entrenched and mutating in the 21st century in the United States. Increasingly, young women’s assertions of their complex identities have called women’s colleges to task in their claims to support multicultural and multiracial students bodies, and have called attention to just how fluid the categories of sex and gender are (Perkins 1997; Peril 2006). Women’s colleges have long been suspected of harboring and inflaming the ‘radical’ sexualities of lesbian and bisexual women (Horowitz 1984; Palmieri 1995; Miller Bernal and Poulson 2006). Transgender students at women’s colleges have recently caught the attention of the popular press: some of these students have found
that some women’s colleges are more accepting than coed colleges, providing them with more intellectual and less violent educational climates (Brune 2007; Quart 2008; Bregman 2009). The popular press has entertained these phenomena to demonstrate the convoluted missions of women’s colleges and the questionable need for single-sex higher education in a post-feminist world (Dixit 2001; Metz 2007; in Munoz and Garrison 2008). Can women’s colleges utilize feminism to effectively respond to the popular interest that appears in wolves’ clothing at their doors?

**Description of the Study**

I began this ethnography asking questions about constructions and performances of ‘being female’ in an all-female space. What happens when female-identified bodies occupy (most of) the public spaces and positions at a college? What happens to social relations between females when the male gaze (Mulvey 1975) is (theoretically) absent in everyday interactions? How are female bodies displayed and expressed? How do young women read each others’ bodies? How does race, gender, class show up? Does this environment leave intact or challenge the binaries of female/male, body/mind, emotion/intellect, private/public? (How) Do women students resist dominant ideologies of gender, race, class, and sexuality that might be embedded in their everyday lives and in the practices of the institution?

But my study – as qualitative studies often do – ended up posing its own questions and presenting its own themes. At Womyns College, I found evidence of anxieties about femininity and masculinity; clashes between second and third wave feminists; cross-generational intellectual and emotional allegiance to a beloved alma mater; gender performances that were both bold and predictable; commonplace and inadequate institutional responses to issues of
‘diversity’; and less optimism about the ‘liberating’ possibilities of single-sex education for girls and women.

My study raises questions about which ‘women’ belong at a women’s college, the conundrum of women’s (homo)sexuality, the role of institutionalized homophobia, and the impact of these issues on the very survival of a single sex institution. These issues are gendered and sexed; they have historical, philosophical (mission-driven), social, and political implications, and have yet to be openly, academically, and systemically explored.

My data were gathered from observations of and interviews with members of one small predominantly and historically white women’s college in the northeastern United States at intermittent periods over the course of four years. I initiated contact with two of the deans at this college as I began my doctoral coursework, with the intention of developing and honing qualitative research skills and methods. Initially I interviewed five senior administrators about the ways in which feminism “showed up” at Womyns College. The following semester, I conducted participant observations, trying to get at the ways in which this women’s college engaged ‘diversity’ issues. I finally formulated my dissertation topic as an inquiry into how women students talked about and made sense of “being female” in a single sex setting. As I studied postmodern and poststructural feminist theory, my intellectual frameworks changed: I began to explore the social and political construction of the subject of gender; the essentialism of the second wave feminist traditions from which most of my thinking had come; and questions about subjectivity, agency, and intersectionality. The women students at any women’s college were not going to be as predictable or stable a subject as I once thought. “Being female” needed fleshing out, poking and prodding.
I received permission from the Womyns College deans to conduct twenty-two student interviews and participant observations in two chunks of time: I recorded interviews and fieldnotes during the 2002-’03 academic year and again in the spring of 2005. The students’ interviews were filled with their own understandings of gender, race, and feminist theory, and this enriched my data collection and my own understanding of theory. The ‘demographics’ of my participants are outlined in Appendix A.

During this three year period, there were rumblings that the College’s Board of Trustees and President were (again) talking about coeducation in light of the College’s financial struggles, and, indeed, in the fall of 2004, the decision was made to admit men as full time students at Womyns College the following fall. This momentous institutional event brought fresh dialogue, conflict, insights, and emotions to my interviews. In particular, the students placed their notions about and experiences of femininity, sexuality, and their education at a single sex college in the context of loss and anxious anticipation. In the spring of 2006, after the College had completed its first semester of coeducation, I requested and was given permission to present my initial findings to a focus group of my study participants and inquire about their experiences with coeducation; that focus group interview constituted the last of my data gathering.

My findings will contribute to contemporary feminist literature and research that posit broadening definitions of ‘woman,’ and challenge the very same category. We will see the ways in which some young women negotiated intersectional identities (Crenshaw 1989, 1994), made multidimensional by virtue of their genders, races, sexual orientations, and socio-economic classes. The study reveals to what degree a small, feminist community – a
“homeplace” (hooks 1990) – gave Womyns College women opportunities to push historically rigid boundaries of gender and sexuality. Students believed that they had more agency, more freedom to craft their intellectual and personal identities at Womyns College than they would have had in a coeducational environment. This study also provides testimony of the power of heterosexual hegemony. My data show that generational rifts between ‘mothers’ and ‘daughters’ of feminism, and waves of feminist thought were alive and well, even palpable, in this particular setting. And, much to my disappointment, this study shows that ultimately, Womyns students’ actions were constrained by gender norms and market forces.

Theoretical Frameworks: Defining Feminisms

Julia Kristeva is credited with initially naming three “parallel” or “interwoven” lines of thought in feminist theory and practice (Gillis, Howie and Munford 2007). Jane Spencer represents Kristeva’s conceptualization of the three “attitudes” – more commonly referred to as ‘waves’ – of feminism thus: “First attitude: the pursuit of equality. Second attitude: the claim of difference. Third attitude: undermining the kind of fixed identity on which the first two have been based…” (Spencer 2007, 298). While some feminist texts characterize these attitudes as time-bound – with feminism becoming increasingly complex as our culture became marked by identity politics, globalization, and interdisciplinarity in the academy – many feminist theorists contend that these bodies of theory co-exist and inform each other at any given time, and that they provide different lenses on or analytical approaches to women’s issues (Siegel 1997: Hogeland 2001; Henry 2003).

At Womyns College, all of these “attitudes” were evident. The College’s senior administrators and long-time faculty members who identified themselves as feminist seemed
to adhere to liberal, cultural, and some radical notions of feminism as they discussed the mission of the College, their approaches to leadership and pedagogy, and the rationale for single sex education for women. Most of them would have come of age academically or professionally during the late 1960s and early 1970s, as the ‘second wave’ of feminism began to consider social and political equality for women as a starting point for, rather than the goal of, the feminist movement. In “matrophoric” (Henry 2003) terms – the mother/daughter metaphor in feminist theory discourse – these women (there were no men in the President’s Cabinet, nor any senior male feminist-identified faculty members during the time of my study) were, of course, the ‘mothers’ at Womyns. The ‘daughters’ were identifiable both by their age and feminist influences: almost all Womyns students at the time of my study (early 2000s) were traditional-aged college students, and they displayed allegiances to cultural, radical, and third wave feminist tenets. To some extent, these approaches to feminism and different interpretations of the everyday environment peacefully co-existed at the College: there were palpable nods to cultural and radical feminisms from students and administrators, and a buy-in to the sisterhood cultivated by the College and to the value of separatist education for women in a sexist culture. But many of the students in my study took deconstruction of second wave feminism quite seriously, and they were committed to challenging the gendering and sexing of ‘women.’ This brought clashes between generations of ‘W Women’ and feminisms at a crucial time in the institution’s history.

*Liberal Feminism (of the first wave) and the birth of women’s colleges*

If we take Spencer’s (2007) encapsulation of feminism’s first wave or “attitude” as “the pursuit of equality,” we have a broad understanding of liberal feminism. Liberal feminism is
associated with the drive for equal political and social participation for women: the campaign for the right to vote, and representation in the public sphere, outside of the home—to be seen as men were, as citizens and participants in political life— are often cited as linchpins of liberal feminism. Many women’s colleges, including Womyns, were borne of this feminism: whether or not the founders of these colleges were intentional about it, they were advocating for and providing postsecondary education for women—who were excluded from many private and public colleges and universities until well into the 1960s in the United States— that was equal to that available to elite American men. As Weedon points out, these feminist demands and campaigns were based on assumptions of “women’s sameness to men” (1999, 12), “concerned with the rights of the individual to political and religious freedom, choice and self-determination” (13). Liberal feminism, like liberalism itself, is based on a conceptualization of a master subject—“an abstract individual untouched by social relations of class, gender, or race” (ibid.). But this conceptualization would become a problem for feminism, profoundly impacting subsequent ‘waves’ (see following discussion). By the early 20th century, much liberal feminist work had been accomplished: in the U.S., women’s right to vote was won in 1920, and this is often seen as the culmination of feminism’s ‘first wave’. But liberal feminist agendas live on in the United States and transnationally in the form of campaigns for access to elite masculine domains—the military, national and international elected high office—and to basic human needs—health and reproductive care, adequate and consumable food supplies, bodily safety. While liberal feminism played a historical role at Womyns College (and all women’s colleges in the U.S.), it was not a prominent discourse at the College during the time of my study.
Cultural and Radical Feminisms (of the second wave)

Perhaps as a political tactic, first wave American liberal feminists embraced notions about ‘women’s nature’ and civic roles. While arguing for the same rights for women and men based on shared humanity, some first wave feminists also espoused cultural feminism: that women, by virtue of both biology and socialization, were different from men, and had particular value to society because they were women – as bearers and nurturers of children, capable of compassion for others, intrinsically in tune with the wonders of human relationships.

‘Women’s work’ was needed in both public and private settings. Women’s colleges were an important part of the cultural feminism of the first wave, committed to the cultivation of women’s moral character, assuring that the republic’s children were reared by virtuous mothers and taught by properly educated female teachers. As such, the colleges – including Womyns College – were initially referred to as ‘seminaries’ (Horowitz 1984, 11).

Cultural feminism picked up momentum as a theoretical/academic and practical foundation for feminist work at the beginning of the ‘second wave,’ in the 1960s and 1970s. Second wave cultural feminists abandoned notions about women’s shared biologically-based essence, recognizing political implications that would consign women to a domestic, private sphere and roles (Stone 2004). Second wave cultural feminism attempts to rescue femininity – as it is socially constructed in women’s caretaking capabilities – from historical dismissal, devaluation, and colonization in private spheres. It celebrates women’s work, aesthetics, public and familial participation, and cultural contributions, positing a female “ethic of care” (Gilligan 1982); women’s “ways of knowing” (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule 1986); and, in the professional realm, a managerial approach that is inclusive, concensus-building (rather than
competitive), and anti-hierarchical (Tannen 1990; et al). It makes for solidarity among women whose goal is to re-value feminine characteristics and approaches, including advocacy for girls’ and women’s educational institutions that were and are necessary to help young women cope with sexism and oppression. In chapter four, I will argue that much of the ‘Girl Power’ and related “Reviving Ophelia” discourses of the past two decades are extensions of cultural feminism.

In feminist theorizing, cultural feminism is sometimes conflated with lesbian-separatist feminism and radical feminism. But I use the term ‘cultural feminism’ in this dissertation to mean the belief that women and men are fundamentally different, and that the goal of feminist efforts is to rescue and re-value ‘female differences’ by exercising them in public and private spheres. While there is overlap between tenets and practices of cultural feminism and lesbian separatism (Adrienne Rich’s and Mary Daly’s work exemplify both strains together), I view cultural feminism as theory and practice that shows up in everyday culture—from popular psychology to justifications for women in the business world to arguments for female single-sex education.

Radical feminism can be distinguished from cultural feminism by its focus on sexism and patriarchy as the root of all women’s oppression; the goal of radical feminism is to expose and displace patriarchy as the dominant, universal structure and narrative. “Sisterhood” (Weedon 1999, 26) in shared experiences as survivors of sexist oppression becomes the basis for solidarity in radical feminism. Both Chris Weedon and Rosemarie Tong characterize the female body as the site for radical feminist contentions; as Tong says, “To the degree that a person is deprived of power over his or her own body, that person is deprived of his or her humanity”
Radical feminism actively resists patriarchal control of women’s sexuality and reproduction, and violence against women. Catherine MacKinnon’s and Andrea Dworkin’s anti-pornography work in the late 1970s and early 1980s represents the quintessential theorizing of radical feminism (see Tong, 116 ff): pornography is the symbol of male aggression toward and exploitation of women’s sexuality. Indeed, MacKinnon and Dworkin argued that any heterosexual sex act reproduces male domination and female submission (see Dworkin’s *Intercourse*); therefore women’s sexual freedom is the central site of the power struggle between patriarchy and feminism (Tong, 110). Lesbianism and/or separatism may be part of radical feminist political practice – one way to resist is to remove oneself from the oppressive system – but it does not define this “attitude.” As we will see in Chapter Four, there were elements of this radical feminist stance in Womyns College students’ concerns about personal and sexual safety as they anticipated coeducation.

So here – in cultural and radical feminism – is Spencer’s “second attitude” of feminism: “the claim of difference” (Spencer 2007, 298). I summarize the overarching tenets of this second wave of feminism or ‘difference feminism’ – which includes the cultural and radical feminisms I found at Womyns College – as follows:

- The experience of being female is distinctly different from the experience of being male in all cultures. Some differences between women and men are biological (sexed) and some are socially constructed (gendered).

- Sex and gender are distinct: sex, biologically determined and fixed; and gender, socially constructed and changeable. The biological and social differences between females/women and males/men motivate feminism: theorizing and acting on
constructions of gender demonstrate the political and changeable nature of oppression.

- Within and across cultures, these distinct attributes and experiences of females are theorizable, definable, and similar across races, classes, sexualities. Sisterhood, solidarity, feminist movement comes from these shared experiences.

- Feminist opposition and resistance is to patriarchy and male privilege.

- “The personal is political.” With radical and cultural feminism’s focus on the female body and experience, what was once experienced as personal and private becomes central to feminism’s structural and political analyses.

Second wave feminist theories based in ‘difference’ are instrumental and a sticky wicket: “[t]he problem of conceiving difference in ways which are not restrictive...remains a key theoretical and political question for contemporary feminism” (Weedon 1999, 12). It begs the question of separatism: if women are so different from men, perhaps institutions, organizations, and experiences that honor those differences are necessary or preferred by or better for women. But ‘different’ has often been code for ‘inferior,’ and ‘separate’ has often meant ‘unequal’ in American gender (and racial) politics and institutions. It has been argued by feminists and others that separate spheres – even those that were designed to promote women’s equality, e.g., women’s colleges – limit opportunities for intervention in “deep-rooted structures of contemporary capitalist societies...[which means that] relatively little progress [has been/will be] made in transforming either the sexual division of labor or dominant norms of femininity and masculinity” (15).
Further, these tenets have come to haunt the second wave of feminism from within (Alcoff 1988). In construing the only difference that matters as that between socially constructed women and socially constructed men, some second wavers homogenize the construction, experiences, and embodiment of all women. It seems to me that the greater challenge and more salient task in contemporary feminism is to theorize the differences between and among women.

**Essentialism and Feminist Thought**

Much of first wave feminist theory and some of second wave feminist theory rests in the assumption that women share a bond and/or a social position and/or historical exclusion and oppression based on biological sex (first wave) or socially constructed gender (second wave): there are properties essential to and defining of every woman – “that any woman must necessarily have those properties to be a woman at all” – and that those properties are universal – all women embody or are socially constructed by those properties (Stone 2004, 138). In first wave feminist theorizing, womanly properties were construed as “natural” and biological (the capacity to bear children). But second wave feminists, understanding the political danger in vesting women’s solidarity in immutable (or glacially slow mutable) biology, came to define womanly or ‘feminine’ characteristics as socially constructed, “an invariant set of social characteristics that constitute femininity and that all women, qua women, share” (139). These properties became the foundation for feminist analyses of women’s experiences and, further, for feminist movement.

This notion has been contentious within feminist theory, seen as “essentialist”—that is, blind to the variations in females’ lived experiences based on race, sexuality, socio-economic
class, nationality, abilities, political and personal choices, et al. Feminist analyses reflecting
notions of ‘sameness’ have been denounced as inadequate and exclusionary, particularly as
they pertain to the lives of women of color and lesbian women. Critics find that “universal
claims about women’s social position or identity are invariably false” and “politically
oppressive” (Stone 2004, 140). While these critiques have helped to usher in the third wave of
feminism, debates over essentialism within the second wave have been notably intense. The
anti-essentialists argue that “…to take certain privileged women’s experiences...as the norm”
“...replicat[es] between women the very patterns of oppression and exclusion that feminism
should contest” (ibid.). Those who argue for the legitimacy of some common ground or shared
experience among women – the essentialists – counter that without some ‘essential’ bond,
there is no feminism, no political or philosophical way to speak of women’s oppression or
collective interests: anti-essentialism undermines feminism. This quandary prompted
theoretical moves that have come to be called “anti-anti-essentialist” (Heyes in Stone, 136):
the notion that “some form of essentialism might be [useful] for feminist social criticism and
political activism” (ibid.). As race, sexuality, et al came to complicate feminism in the second
wave, so postmodernism and poststructuralism came to complicate it in the third wave. Anti-
anti-essentialism (‘strategic essentialism’ is its most often cited form) offers ‘ways out’ of
exclusionary feminist theories, practices, and politics; and ‘ways in’ to a more expansive
feminism in the realms of discourse and multiple, intersectional identities.

Kimberly Crenshaw’s article, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics,
and Violence against Women of Color,” takes some feminist and anti-racist work to task for
failing to find ways to negotiate the pitfalls of essentialism and its attendant political or activist inertia.

... [A] large and continuing project for subordinated people – and indeed, one of the projects for which postmodern theories have been very helpful – is thinking about the way power has clustered around certain categories and is exercised against others. This project attempts to unveil the processes of subordination and the various ways those processes are experienced by people who are subordinated and people who are privileged. It is, then, a project that presumes that categories have meaning and consequences. (1994)

Crenshaw brings together intersectionality and essentialism in an anti-anti-essentialist argument. She uses the term ‘intersectionality’ “...to articulate the interaction of racism and patriarchy generally”, and “...to describe the location of women of color both within overlapping systems of subordination and at the margins of feminism and anti-racism” (ibid.); and emphasizes that essentialism is both about naming identities and categories (social constructions) and the material consequences for those so named (the resulting social hierarchies of unequal power, inequality and discrimination). Like the anti-anti-essentialists, Crenshaw argues that, “[a]t this point in history, a strong case can be made that the most critical resistance strategy for dis-empowered groups is to occupy and defend a politics of social location rather than to vacate and destroy it” (ibid.). She goes on to argue for intersectionality as a naming and political practice that, in fact, allows for the agency of those who claim multiple identities and seek to build political coalitions: “...[T]he problem is not simply linguistic or philosophical in nature. It is specifically political... The solution...is to state what difference...difference ma[kes]” (ibid.).

This re-framing of the essentialism debate and its consequences within postmodern and feminist thought is useful to my study: it captures the dilemma the Womyns College
administration confronted as increasingly visible, ‘different’ students challenged who belonged at a women’s college, who belonged in the category ‘woman.’ By virtue of enactments of their intersectional identities that complicated gender, race, sexuality, class, ethnicity, nationality, et al, Womyns College students effectively exposed the essentialism of a second wave feminist agenda – that of educating ‘women’ – as inadequate. The administration’s response could have been to innovate an institutional mission and practices that named ‘women’ as a strategic category, and produced coalitions and learning around that intersectional category. Indeed, some of the deans were hired for and worked toward that very purpose. But in the context of difficult financial pressures and by ultimately choosing to admit men as full time students, the effect of the decisions and actions of the Board of Trustees and administration was to reiterate essentialism in the dualistic construct of coeducation, that, ironically and poignantly, came to materially privilege men’s attendance over women’s at the College.

*Third Wave Feminist Theory*

In many ways, ‘third wave’ feminism surfaced in response to the essentialism and heteronormativity that anchor the radical and cultural feminisms of the second wave. Within the feminist movement, third wave women dispute any essential ‘woman’ because the category is not representative of their experiences. Second wave tenets hinge on the sex/gender binary – that sex is biological and gender is socially constructed – and, as Applebaum points out, “…the notion of sex as nature remain[s] beyond interrogation” (2010, 5-6). But in third wave feminism, identities do not necessarily fit this formula and there has been a push to challenge feminism to “…deconstruct the distinction in order to uncover the heteronormative assumptions it preserves and perpetuates” (ibid.).
The ‘third wave’ is a celebration of differences among women, attentive to lesbian and bisexual women, women of color, and, to some degree, transgender women. It echoes postmodern thinking by asserting that there is no master narrative in feminism. Hammer and Kellner characterize third wave feminism as “insurgent” feminism, “talking back” to dominant and historic forms of “white feminisms.” Third wavers endorse the “politics of hybridity,” and along with the development of queer theory, “radical notions of gender and sexuality are a significant dimension” of this attitude (Hammer and Kellner 2009, 6-7). In the academy, poststructural feminist philosophers underscore this wave by exposing the ways in which women’s experiences and agency are foreclosed or predetermined by dominant discursive and material practices.

Snyder says that the personal narratives and stories of third wavers “illustrate intersectional [identities] and multiperspectival feminism[s] in response to the collapse of [any unified understanding of] ‘woman’.” “Multivocality” is perhaps more important to these feminists than “synthesis and action” or “theoretical justification,” both in keeping with and in reaction to postmodern threads in feminism. Celebration of all sexualities is a hallmark of the third wave, a “refusal to police the boundaries” of what second wave feminists cultivated in politicizing the female body (Snyder 2008, 175-6). Third wave feminism declares, “There is no one way to be a woman” (185). Here is Spencer’s “third attitude [of feminism]: undermining the kind of fixed identity on which the first two have been based…” (Spencer 2007, 298).

As my findings at Womyns College show, young feminists of the third wave are determined to question, unsettle, and dismantle the binaries that have framed previous feminist understandings – feminine or masculine, gay or straight, private or public. Their most
often employed tool is personal narrative. But perhaps in focusing on personal narratives and individual performances of gender, the third wavers in my study sacrificed or failed to make explicit the connection with ‘the political.’ The private became public, but did the personal become political?

The ‘posts’ characterize some discussions within third wave feminism. The prevalence of postmodern and poststructural thinking in the academy in the late 1980s and early 1990s contributed to the critiques leveled at second wave feminism – that second wave theories failed to be inclusive and complex enough – and, in this sense, third wave feminism is ‘post’-feminism: grounded in the ‘posts’ of the academy’s turn to high theory. As such, ‘post’ feminism in feminist theorizing signals a period of questioning feminism’s foundational element – all women – and anti-essentialist debates have dominated these academic discourses (Weedon 1999, 99-110). In popular culture, the feminist movement has been declared dead: women have achieved political equality through legislation and social movements, and access to formerly male-dominated arenas (including higher education) is no longer denied based on sex. We are in a ‘post’ – as in no longer relevant or necessary – feminist era. “…After nearly two decades of argument about postfeminism, there is still no agreement as to what it is, and the term is used variously and contradictorily to signal a theoretical position, a type of feminism after the second wave, or a regressive political stance” (Gill 2007, 147-8). In this dissertation, I generally employ the term ‘post-feminist/feminism’ to refer to positions in third wave or academic feminism that raise postmodern and poststructuralist questions within feminist theory.
Girl Power in the Third Wave

In attempting to “occupy female subject positions in innovative or contradictory ways,” third wave feminists have “actively play[ed] with femininity.” “[G]irl power…is a central strand” in this wave (Snyder 2008, 179). In her article, “‘Wake Up and Smell the Lipgloss’: Gender, Generation and the (A)politics of Girl Power,” Rebecca Munford defines girl power feminism as “a reclamation of girlhood as a space from which to negotiate speaking positions for girls and young women whose experiences and desires are marginalized by the …assumptions of a feminism that speaks for them under the universalizing category of ‘woman’” (2007, 269-70). Both Snyder and Munford characterize ‘girl power feminism’ in opposition to or in rebellion against an earlier (second wave) feminism.

But I see the seeds of girl power feminism in the cultural feminism of the second wave. In celebrating and attempting to re-value distinctive female attributes, cultural feminism prominently featured discourses of ‘finding voice’: Carol Gilligan’s In a Different Voice was groundbreaking feminist research in the mid-1980s in the United States, raising to a fevered pitch popular and academic discussion of women’s and girls’ suppression and silence. The premise of Gilligan’s scholarship in social psychology was that patriarchal culture and values silenced girls and women. Females’ propensity for caretaking and nurturing, and paying attention to relationships rather than rules often rendered them unable to claim (verbal) space or knowledge in classrooms. Gilligan’s theorizing spawned studies in education and psychology – the Sadkers’ Failing at Fairness: How our schools cheat girls (1994; the Sadkers’ research was co-sponsored by the American Association of University Women); Orenstein’s Schoolgirls: Young Women, Self-Esteem, and the Confidence Gap (1994); Pipher’s Reviving Ophelia: Saving

The early 2000s saw the publication of several mass-market books that actively promoted single sex education for girls and women based on the lack-of-self-confidence-in-girls literature: Stabiner’s All Girls: Single Sex Education and Why It Matters (2002) and DeBare’s Where Girls Come First: The Rise, Fall and Surprising Revival of Girls’ Schools (2004). Girls’ schools and women’s colleges embraced this literature. The National Coalition of Girls’ Schools website currently states,

We’re for speaking up … We believe [girls’ schools] play a vital role in helping young women develop their authentic voices and use them, loudly and proudly….The National Coalition of Girls’ Schools envisions a world where every girl will have access to the education and resources she needs to develop into a competent and confident woman, one who is equipped to assume whatever role she seeks for herself...” (http://www.ncgs.org/about-us/).

Girls’ schools and women’s colleges were positioned and positioned themselves at the crux of this manifestation of cultural feminism: females were/are different from males, differently voiced and differently able to exercise their voices, differently wired for relationship smarts and caretaking, differently impacted by school practices and cultures. Girl power feminism

2 The Women’s College Coalition used to have similar language on its website, with references to and summaries of the Sadker/AAUW and Orenstein books. The WCC’s website discourse has notably changed in the past few years, and now publicizes outcomes research: that women’s college students are more engaged and academically challenged than women students at coeducational institutions, and that women’s college graduates obtain high-profile leadership positions in all sectors of the workforce. See http://www.womenscolleges.org/perspective/nsse-study and http://www.womenscolleges.org/alumnae/do-you-know. Perhaps this indicates that women’s colleges are recognizing market trends, moving away from the deficit-in-women’s-self-esteem literature to argue for their existence as educational institutions worth their cost and as cultivators of successful workers and leaders.
celebrated these biological and social differences, and called for their recognition and re-
valuation by educational institutions in the U.S. “Reviving Ophelia”-type research and
discourses provided a rallying cry for recovering the voice and essentialized nature of girlhood;
girls’ schools and women’s colleges – including Womyns College – heeded the call.

Through her practice, clinical psychologist Mary Pipher, author of *Reviving Ophelia*,
found that, “…Something dramatic happens to girls in early adolescence...[T]he selves of girls go
down in droves...They lose their resiliency and optimism and become less curious and inclined
to take risks...” (1995, 19). She drew on the story of Ophelia in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* to
demonstrate the “…destructive forces that affect young women. As a girl, Ophelia is happy and
free, but with adolescence she loses herself...She goes mad with grief... Girls become
fragmented, their selves split into mysterious contradictions” (20). Pipher quoted Simone de
Beauvoir to further describe what happens to the “selves of adolescent girls”: “…Girls stop being
and start seeming” (21-22).

Marina Gonick’s assessment of these two discourses – ‘Girl Power’ and ‘Reviving
Ophelia’ – demonstrates some of the problems that arose from this positioning of students at
Womyns College.

My argument is that both Girl Power and Reviving Ophelia participate in the
production of the neoliberal girl subject with the former representing the
idealized form of the self-determining individual and the latter personifying
an anxiety about those who are unsuccessful in producing themselves in this
way. Both participate in processes of individualization that, as we will see,
direct attention from structural explanations for inequality toward
explanations of personal circumstances and personality traits. (2006, 2)

Gonick further asserts that, ironically, these discourses that promote a focus on the individual
undermine agency. While imbuing girls (and women’s colleges I might add) with a “form of
‘psychological knowledge’” that encourages girls to “...understand oneself...and act...upon oneself to overcome dissatisfactions, realize potential, gain happiness, and achieve autonomy,” educators and their institutions invoke “a technology” that produces “certain kinds of persons” (18) – in Womyns’ case, ‘The W Woman.’ Gonick calls this “psychological knowledge” “...a device for understanding..., monitoring..., and regulating...identities.” She says these discourses “...express a pervasive ambivalence” and “emphasize young female subjectivities as projects that can be shaped by the individual rather than within a social collectivity” (ibid.). These insular cultural feminist discourses, therefore, pose no “threat to the status quo” of heteronormativity, or “white, middle-class individualism” (10).

Individual exercises of agency were allowed and even encouraged at Womyns College, in the name of reviving Ophelias, helping young women to find their voices, and promoting a sisterhood of accomplished women. But the students were certainly prevented from using their voices as a tool for collective agency – in the form of their mighty protest against coeducation – to exercise influence within the College’s institutional structure. It was this reversion to control of the “self-determining individual” that suggested College administrators’ ambivalence about the ways in which Womyns College students produced and signified ‘W Women,’ and led to a generational rift between feminists at the College.

*Generational Tensions in Feminism*

It is easy to see the genesis of generational tensions in the ‘waves’ or “attitudes” of feminist thought as discussed above. In the past decade, discussions of these tensions, full of passionate claims and disclaimers, have often been framed as mother-daughter disputes, and thus assigned to the domestic sphere of familial conflicts, inconsequential, and laden with
psychotherapeutic metaphors (Henry 2003). A number of feminist writers and scholars argue that these depictions serve to reinforce feminism’s demise in popular culture.

To put into context some of the generational discord experienced at Womyns College, I will examine some discussions of the fragmentation in feminist theory and practice caused by the development of differing strands of feminism. While Baym (1995) argues that the “discord” in feminist theory is what sustains it, this same discord at Womyns College was not only not sustainable, but institutionally destructive: what becomes of a women’s college when there is “agony” over who its subjects are?

The metaphor of ‘waves’ in feminism suggests both overlapping and complementary components (one approach builds on another philosophically and theoretically), and distinct generations of thought (theories and approaches are temporal, informed by their historical, social, geographic, political settings). The liberal, radical, and cultural feminisms of the first and second waves take the universally understood, fixed category of ‘woman’ as their starting place; postmodern, poststructural, third wave feminisms question who is ‘woman’ and in that process, challenge and attempt to extend the definition and reach of feminism. McAfee (2005) contrasts these “two feminisms” as agonistic and continental. The most notable characteristic of agonistic feminism is, of course, its oppositional stance, its insistence on an Other at the opposite end of the binary; for these feminists, the enemy is patriarchy. Liberal, cultural, and radical feminisms fall into this category: “…liberal feminists seek more rights; cultural feminists seek greater validation of historically female practices and institutions;...and radical feminists want to attack the root of the problem, to undermine patriarchy’s project of oppressing women” (McAfee 2005, 141). The goal for agonistic feminists is to change practices, laws,
values to reflect the worth and inclusion of ‘women’ as human beings. This kind of feminism was evident in Womyns College’s history and structure as a separatist educational institution; in its perpetuation of the valuation of ‘true womanhood’ in ‘The W Woman’ and “sisterhood”; and in its endorsement of girl power and commitment to “reviving Ophelias” in the face of sexist oppression. The other feminism about which McAfee writes is continental feminism, that of the third wave and academic postmodernism and poststructuralism. Continental feminism functions in the realm of signs, language, and symbols – the “socio symbolic” or “communicative public sphere” – seeking to expose weaknesses in dominant, accepted ways of thinking, speaking, and doing. Continental feminism is critical rather than oppositional; its focus is “…on the field [that publicly produces meaning] itself, not on the hapless patriarchs, bigots, and misogynist policies these structures produce” (McAfee 2005, 147). Continental feminists seek to change signs, symbols, semiotics, meanings that constitute the public sphere. This is precisely what many of the students at Womyns College were attending to – attempting to resignify markers and identities, and reconstitute ‘woman’ and ‘sex’ by way of performances, language, even protest. They sought to change the very subject – as she is/was discursively and materially constructed – of a women’s college.

Though some of feminism’s problematic binaries and exclusions are sustained in McAfee’s analysis, these two feminisms were undeniably present at Womyns College. The antagonism that a shift to continental definitions of and questions about ‘woman’ brought to this environment, which was founded on cultural feminism, was evident. In “Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory,” Linda Alcoff describes post-structuralist feminism’s offering of a ‘way out’ of the oppositional, binaried stance of
cultural/agonistic feminism: “The only way to break out of this structure,...to subvert the structure itself, is to assert total difference, to be that which cannot be pinned down or subjugated within a dichotomous hierarchy...[T]o be what is not” (1988, 417). As poststructuralism counters cultural feminism, negating the female/male dichotomy, so some Womyns College students countered their institutional mother/sisters, attempting to negate the monolithic subject of a woman’s college, saying in effect, ‘I am not that’ (see Chapter Four).

Alcoff’s article contrasts the overarching problem of cultural feminism – essentialism – what that of poststructuralism – nominalism; this contrast also illuminates the tensions between women and feminisms at Womyns College. The subject in cultural feminism’s essentialism – and in the College’s history and practices under the administration in place at the time of my study – is ‘woman’ in a patriarchal, misogynistic, sexist, heteronormative system. Cultural feminism requires an “unambiguous” (Alcoff 1988, 408) woman, identifiable by her biologically and socially constructed characteristics; an essence of woman which provides a collective sense of identity, a basis for belonging to or demonstrating political and social solidarity with an oppressed group of human beings. For cultural feminists and the second wave Womyns College leaders, female bodies marked their belonging – as women or as students at a women’s college. The limitation of this feminism, this approach to women’s education, is that the ‘woman’ of cultural feminism and the ‘woman’ who meets the requirements for admission to a woman’s college “‘reflect and reproduce dominant cultural assumptions about women’” (Echols in Alcoff 1988, 413). Here again is the sticky wicket of this feminism: in attempting to represent, speak for, or educate ‘women,’ the College “valorized” the “attributes” that ‘women’ “develop under oppression,” and did not seem to know what to
do with those who refused those attributes. This is no basis for a movement (Alcoff 1988, 410), and it is an increasingly problematic basis for single-sex education.

But post-structuralism, for all its important questioning of our discourses, is not the solution for feminism either. The agency problem in poststructuralism troubles Alcoff, as it does me. Most eloquently, Alcoff says,

To the extent post-structuralists emphasize social explanations of individual practices and experiences I find their work illuminating and persuasive. My disagreement occurs, however, when they seem totally to erase any room for maneuver by the individual within a social discourse or set of institutions. It is that totalization of history's imprint that I reject. In their defense of a total construction of the subject, post-structuralists deny the subject's ability to reflect on the social discourse and challenge its determinations. (416)

Alcoff further points out that post-structuralism positions feminism “to deconstruct everything [-- with particular emphasis on deconstructing the subject of ‘woman’ within patriarchy--] and construct nothing” (418); it gives feminism a “negative struggle” and argues away ‘gender’ and gendered identities (420). This is the dilemma for third wave feminists: how to “ground a feminist politics that deconstructs the female subject?” (419). And it is the dilemma that gender-bending students pose for women’s colleges: if ‘woman’ as a category or identity is indefinable, unstable, ambiguous, what is the need for or purpose of a ‘women’s’ college?

Alcoff’s solution to feminist theory’s “identity crisis” is to posit a “gendered subject” of/for feminism based on “positionality” (422). She points to the temporality and social conditions that construct gender, granting it instability and fluidity, but asserts that a gendered identity can serve as a “political point of departure” (432). Then ‘women’ can claim “that their position within a network [of relations] lacks power and mobility and requires radical change” (434). Gender is a position from which one or many, having seen and experienced oppression,
can move in concert for political ends, toward change and a more inclusive future. This conceptualization renders oppositional gender categories unnecessary and allows for agency from a subject identified and situated temporally, politically, discursively, materially. Alcoff’s solution might have been applied at Womyns College, not as a ‘women’s’ college, but perhaps – if institutional will had been stronger and more consistent, and if the capitalist market of American higher education could have supported it – as a feminists’ college. But this was not to be.

Judith Butler Theorizes Undoing Gender

Judith Butler’s work on gender, sex, and desire provides a useful framework for examining identities, events, discourses, and tensions at Womyns College. Her development of feminist and queer theory in the realm of post-structuralism helps to make sense of ‘female-ness’ and institutionalized gender in a single-sex college for women: she expounds on the trouble with gender as a category and as an identity, individual and collective. Butler’s philosophical theorizing has pushed the boundaries of feminist praxis in initiating countless debates about the ways in which social and political transformation for sexual and gender minorities might be accomplished. Her theories center on the ways in which language and practice construct sex, gender, and desire: knowledge and power collide in the term ‘woman,’ ‘lesbian,’ and Others, thus articulating which human beings matter, which human beings can manage to have “livable lives” in our culture. It is in questioning the binaries that frame all discussions of sex, gender, and desire that Butler upends the category of ‘woman,’ and the

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3 I am less interested in Butler’s use of psychoanalytic concepts, and more interested in her work with conceptualizations of the subject in the context of a power regime.
subject of feminism and women's colleges. If we can be persuaded to unhinge definitions of
‘women,’ ‘female,’ ‘lesbian’ from the limitations and restrictions of our language and thought,
there may be opportunities – albeit limited ones – for discursive and material transformation
within ever-changing regimes of power.

In *Undoing Gender* (published in 2004), Butler reflects widely on her previous book,* Gender Trouble* (first published in 1990). She describes her “effort” in *Gender Trouble* “…to
combat forms of essentialism which claimed that gender is a truth that is somehow there,
interior to the body, as a core or as an internal essence…” (2004, 212). That is, Butler’s project
was/is to undo longheld feminist thinking about the biological vs. social constructions of sex
and gender, to “…disturb – fundamentally – the way in which feminist and social theory think
gender…” (207). Butler’s intention was/is to denaturalize gender, sex, and desire, and to
expose their imbrication as that which creates compulsory heterosexuality or heterosexual
hegemony.

*Butler’s ‘subjects’ constructed by norms*

Butler’s conceptualization of human beings as subjects who act in the world, who assert
an ‘I,’ is complex and evolving. She often asks and answers in writing, interviews, and lectures,
‘What constitutes a subject?’

The terms by which we are recognized as human are socially articulated and
changeable...[N]orms have far-reaching consequences for how we understand
the model of the human entitled to rights or included in the participatory
sphere of political deliberation. The human is understood differentially
depending on its race..., its sex...,its ethnicity...Certain humans are recognized
as less than human...[I]f the schemes of recognition that are available to us
are those that ‘undo’ the person by conferring the recognition, or ‘undo’ the
person by withholding recognition, then recognition becomes a site of power
by which the human is differentially produced. (2004, 2)
Subjects are constituted and recognizable by and because of social, political, legal norms that inscribe raced, sexed, et al identities. All humans are subjects, but not all humans are “intelligible” or “viable” subjects. Being identified as a viable subject and thus having a liveable life are virtually out of the control of any given subject because of the power of norms: “...when [norms] operate as the normalizing principle in social practice, they usually remain implicit, difficult to read, discernible most clearly and dramatically in the effects that they produce” (2004, 41). The norms that produce subjects are rendered almost invisible because they are practiced and employed, with little conscious thought or speech or action, everyday. Butler’s subjects do not exist, are not constituted prior to the norms; there is not a subject who freely and consciously chooses to subscribe to or reject social norms. Rather subjects are constituted by and with norms, and the dialectic of subject formation and norm enforcement is constant: the subject is continuously (re)constituted and regulated by discourses and power relations that exist and are subscribed to and repeated (or cited) in a particular place and time. These location-specific norms mean that some subjects are recognized, and others are discounted or excluded. Butler critiques this “form of qualified recognition” as oppressive, excluding some from “personhood” and “viable lives” (2004, 2).

Which subjects have “viable lives” and how are they recognized? As Butler herself asks, which bodies matter? (1993) The subjects who are viable, who have bodies that matter, are those who most closely adhere to dominant (gender, race, ethnic, sexual et al) norms; they are recognizable as ‘women,’ as ‘men,’ as a ‘female’ body, as a ‘male’ body, as a ‘heterosexual,’ as humans. The ‘normal’ binaries define and allow us to readily identify the intelligible, viable subjects. The bodies that do not matter are not readily recognizable as belonging to one
category or another. They become “unintelligible” or “deauthorized” subjects (1992), constituted through exclusion, abjection, Othering. To be recognizable, intelligible as a woman, then, is to adhere to gendered, ‘female’ norms. And adhering to these norms assures one’s recognition as human, as a subject within the heterosexual matrix.

*Gender as Performative and Constitutive of the Heterosexual Matrix*

For Butler, man/male and woman/female are phallogocentric terms (located in the Freudian psychoanalytic tradition and therefore inherently patriarchal and heterosexist) that do not describe biological bodies or socio-political identities; these terms and their meanings work together to impose, produce, and regulate “…a uniformity on bodies in order to maintain reproductive sexuality as a compulsory order” (1992, 17). ‘Woman/female’ is not assigned, depending on what is in/on our bodies, nor is it an identity that we choose to embrace to varying degrees.

Gender is not exactly what one ‘is’ nor is it precisely what one ‘has.’ Gender is the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine takes place along with the interstitial forms of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic and performative that gender assumes. (42)

Butler contests gender as a fixed, known, foundational assumption and, instead builds a case for thinking gender and sex together, contingent upon each other, intertwined, both socially produced and reproduced. Butler is taking us beyond the feminist notion of gender and sex as distinct – one socially produced and one biologically determined – and beyond the feminist contention that it is the single identity marker of ‘woman’ or ‘female’ that is subordinated and excluded in our culture. Her project is to destabilize gender and sex as naturally occurring identity categories *and* to point out the very material ways in which gender and sex operate.
Butler contends that gender and sex and desire (what we might call ‘sexual orientation’) are proscribed within a system of heterosexual presumption: sex, gender, and desire are always and already circumscribed by the dominance and status accorded heterosexuality in our culture. Within this system, there are always and only two sexes (female and male), two genders (feminine and masculine), and one desire (that between a female/feminine subject and a male/masculine subject). But Butler contends that these binaries – the either/or nature – of man/woman, male/female, masculine/feminine are “cultural fantasies” (2004, 214), and that, instead gender, sex, and desire are constitutive of each other. Butler calls the cultural preference for this binaried, historicized, and readily identifiable constellation of gender, sex, and desire the “heterosexual matrix” or heterosexual “contract,” “heterosexual hegemony” and “compulsory heterosexuality” in different works. (While she makes some distinction between these terms, I will use them interchangeably.) Societies work hard to produce and reproduce the heterosexual matrix as natural and foundational, to keep social practices and power structures intact. This, Butler says, imposes a “violent foreclosure” (1992, 17) on those bodies, sexualities/desires, genders, identities, practices, systems of kinship that, ironically, help to define heterosexual hegemony by being outside of it. This is how and why exclusion and oppression work.

This is what makes gender, sex, and desire “performative” – not chosen but acted out within a system that rewards heterosexuality and heteronormativity (1993, 237). Butler

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4 “The heterosexual matrix [in Gender Trouble] became a kind of totalising symbolic, and that’s why I changed the term in Bodies That Matter to heterosexual hegemony. This opens the possibility that this is a matrix which is open to rearticulation, which has a kind of malleability. So I don’t actually use the term heterosexual matrix in Bodies That Matter.” (Butler in Osborne and Segal 1993)
“undoes gender” by exposing it as performatve. She submits that gender, sex, and desire (thought together) are identifiable by human performances of them, and that heterosexual hegemony garners its power from the unquestioned repetition of these performances. But my use of the word ‘performance’ is not quite correct, and the distinction between ‘performatve’ and ‘performance’ in Butler’s work is important. All of us know how our female or male (and those are the only two identities available to us) bodies should appear and how we are read as ‘woman’ or ‘man’, what Butler calls producing a gendered body and its signs. This is what makes gender ‘performatve’ rather than a performance: performance implies that the ‘actor’ (or subject) is acting autonomously, choosing to act within or outside of the appearances, definitions, and discourses of her/his gender, sex, and sexuality. When Butler speaks of gender performativity, she is asserting that gender is knowable by repeated “citations” (1993) of the norms that humans ‘do’ to be identified as intelligible subjects – females/women, males/men.

To cite a linguistic or behavioral norm is not to choose or initiate that language or behavior; it is to employ or use it as a legitimizing, credibility-granting marker or sign. The constellation of gender, sex, and desire performatives that constitute heterosexuality is not a set of freely chosen behavior(s) or appearance(s); it is the reproduction of normed gendered, sexed, sexual behaviors that signals to the world that we – as a woman or a man – are congruent with our bodies. We know how to act.

How and Why Gender Norms Work

The repetition and reproduction of these behaviors and discourses of gender have created powerful norms that are “...situated within a diversity of cultural domains, the familial, medical, educational, social, economic [and] political...” (Segal 2008, 386). Gender norms
circulate linguistically and socially, serving a regulatory function: gender is “a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint” (Butler 2004, 1; emphasis added). That is, presenting oneself as a ‘woman’ is socially and politically mandated by a heterosexual matrix that is so deeply embedded and routine that we do not realize how prescribed our identities are: our ‘choice’ to claim the identity marker of ‘woman’ – or to resist it – is stunted. These norms and ‘female’ presentations are held in place and given power by the consequences and punishments for those who do not perform being a ‘woman’ in normative ways – social stigma, medical procedures, legal neglect, different and often derogatory identity labels and categories.

Norms regulate, dictate and limit human behavior by requiring that subjects “…operate within social practices as the implicit standards that normalize…” gender, sex, and sexuality; they make possible or impossible “the viability of our individual personhood” (2004, 2). Those bodies that are outside the norm, or not normal – those that are identifiable because they do not fit either the category of female/woman or the category of male/man, the Others – are necessary to define which are the intelligible subjects, the humans. This illustrates what Butler calls “…the doubled truth”: that “…we need norms in order to live, and to live well …[but] we are also constrained by norms in ways that sometimes do violence to us [because]...when we defy these norms, it is unclear whether we are still living, or ought to be, whether our lives are valuable,...whether our genders are real, or ever can be regarded as such…” (206).

**Linking Gender Norms, Performativity, and Agency**

For Butler, the power of heterosexual hegemony and gender norms precludes individual agency (one’s ability to act in the world, to assert oneself into the world): there is “no doer before the deed” (Salih), no ‘I’ prior to an act or assertion. “...We are not referring to a master...
subject – a liberal individual who knows and decides on a course of action...” (Butler 2004, 194).

Instead, the gendered subject, “…in being subject to regulation, ...emerges...” (ibid.). The gendered subject is “constituted” by hegemonic norms, subscribing to them by participating (often unknowingly) in discourses, behaviors, appearances – gender performatives. This scripting – being “constituted” by norms – allows only limited agency:

...[Norms] are called into question and reiterated at the moment in which performativity begins it citational practice. One surely cites norms that already exist, but these norms can be significantly deterritorialized through the citation. They can also be exposed as non-natural and non-necessary when they take place in a context and through a form of embodying that defies normative expectation. What this means is that through the practice of gender performativity, we not only see how the norms that govern reality are cited but grasp one of the mechanisms by which reality is reproduced and altered in the course of that reproduction... (218)

In a 2003 interview, Butler described a “conditioned agency” or “subjective agency” in which the subject is never outside of power regimes or social structures, but can disrupt them through “improvisation and...repetition and change...” Subjects can discover “what possibilities of agency exist for us of becoming different genders or gendered differently, given how we are made.” We can be agential when we subvert the norm – cite or repeat the norm in ways that allow it to be resignified, to stand for or mean something different. The successful subversion of the norm will reveal the ‘lack’ in the original, reveal that fixed gender – being either male or female – is a fiction, a fantasy.

...The critical relation depends...on a capacity, invariably collective, to articulate an alternative, minority version of sustaining norms or ideals that enable me to act...This does not mean that I can remake the world so that I become its maker. That fantasy of godlike power only refuses the ways we are constituted, invariably and from the start, by what is before us and outside of us. My agency does not consist in denying this condition of my constitution. If I have any agency, it is opened up by the fact that I am constituted by a social world I never chose. That my agency is riven with
paradox does not mean it is impossible. It means only that paradox is the condition of its possibility. (Butler 2004, 3)

Butler is pessimistic about possibilities for subversion: “changes in the symbolic take a long, long time” (2004, 212). Same-sex desire, acts that trouble gender, ‘genderbending,’ the language of ‘genderfucking,’ ‘transgender’ human bodies and beings, enacted or voiced over and over by numbers of subjects, may eventually challenge the semantic field and performative gender norms. After prolonged and consistent subversions, the norms that are “heterosexual imperatives” might be “twisted” or “queered” (ibid.), called into question, exposed as unstable.

Butler cites drag as the most concrete and promising possibility for calling into question “heterosexual imperatives”:

To claim that all gender is like drag, or is drag, is to suggest that ‘imitation’ is at the heart of the heterosexual project and its gender binarisms, that drag is not a secondary imitation...but that hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations...(1993, 125, emphasis in original)

Drag offers the possibility of exposing hyperbole through hyperbole. Most often enacted in gay male cultures, drag offers an opportunity for those humans who are excluded from viable subject-hood to bring into relief the hyperbole, the cartoon that gives us recognizable genders and sexes and sexualities. This reveals the instability of gender norms.

But any appropriation of gender has its constraints: “…there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion...[D]rag...reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes” (Butler 1993, 125). As the politics around the Drag Contest at W’s Big Dyke Party showed (see Chapter Six), those students who participated
in that exaggerated performance of gender would find themselves constrained by the very
norms they sought to subvert.

**Feminism’s and Womyns College’s Subject**

Judith Butler’s work troubles both the category or identity of ‘woman’ and the feminist
project to create social and political change: she argues that the category of ‘woman’ is
inherently exclusionary.

...[A]ny effort to give universal or specific content to the category of
women...will necessarily produce factionalization, and that ‘identity’ as a
point of departure can never hold as the solidifying ground of a feminist
political movement. Identity categories are never merely descriptive but
always normative and as such, exclusionary. (1992, 15-16)

Since ‘woman’ as gender is performative (only certain bodies are marked and will matter as
‘feminine’ ones) and caught up in the heterosexual matrix, ‘woman’ as an identity that might
create solidarity is always already inadequate and un-useable, even violent in its exclusions.
The norms that tether ‘woman’ (and ‘man’) to ‘female’ (and ‘male’) are fluid and fictional, self
perpetuating, not natural. For this reason, Butler argues, ‘woman’ as we know the category, as
it has been used for feminist political purposes, cannot “hold.”

But Butler is not entirely nihilistic in her thinking about the term ‘woman.’

The category of woman does not become useless through deconstruction but
becomes one whose uses are no longer reified as ‘referents,’ and which stand
a chance of being opened up, indeed of coming to signify in ways that none of
us can predict...Surely it must be possible both to use the term...and also to
subject the term to a critique which interrogates the exclusionary operations
and differential power-relations that construct and delimit feminist
invocations of ‘women.’ (1993, 29)

She is not heralding the “death of the category” (ibid.) of ‘woman’ but issuing a challenge to
feminist theory and practice to utilize this “constant rifting” (ibid.), the instability and tension in
the term ‘woman,’ as an opportunity to resignify the grounds of the feminist movement, to open up its reach.

Most pointedly, this is the question that transgendered students posed for feminism and Womyns College (and, indeed, for all single sex women’s colleges). Again, in Butler’s words:

How do drag, butch, femme, transgender, transsexual persons enter into the political field?...These practices of instituting new modes of reality take place in part through the scene of embodiment, where the body is not understood as a static and accomplished fact, but...a mode of becoming that...exceeds the norm, reworks the norm, and makes us see how realities to which we thought we were confined are not written in stone. (2004, 29)

“Homeplaces” and Margins: Location Matters

bell hooks’ thinking about margins and homeplaces as political sites, sites for social change is useful in my analysis of what happened at Womyns College during the time of my study. hooks has seen revolution in practice in the black community and asserts that in homeplaces and margins, individual and group consciousness can be raised. If marginalized voices can “intervene in the discourse in...way[s] that alter and transform...Postmodern critiques of essentialism [such as many feminists’ struggle with the category of ‘woman’] can open up new possibilities for the construction of self and the assertion of agency ” (1990, 28).

...Historically, African-American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous..., had a radical political dimension. Despite the brutal reality of ...domination, one’s homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist. Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts...., where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world. (42)
In hooks’ homeplace, subjectivity, affirmation, and resistance come together. Homeplace is one of the literal and figurative “…counter-hegemonic marginal space[s] where radical…subjectivity is seen, not overseen by an authoritative Other…” (22). Here, she is talking explicitly about domestic space, the homes of black people as made by black women. But domestic space comes to be representative of “the margin” when she discusses “spaces of radical openness” (145 ff). Thus, place, location, space becomes important to forming radical subjectivities and undermining hegemonic norms. In these spaces – material and discursive – there are possibilities for the exercise of subversive agency in “oppositional political struggle,” a decolonization of mind and body (145).

I am cautious about appropriating a black woman scholar’s perspective on black women as a framework for my study. hooks articulates a “radical black subjectivity” in the context of the “black liberation struggle in the United States” (1990, 15). I am utilizing hooks’ conceptualizations to help make sense of what was happening at a small, predominantly and historically white women’s college during the few years of my study. And while most of the white participants in my study described Womyns as a true “homeplace,” the four ‘black’ women participants were less ready to claim their alma mater as a “space of radical openness.”

hooks’ homeplace is necessarily gendered by virtue of its history as a place where “black female political consciousness” was cultivated and black women had authority as teachers, mothers, resisters. I think hooks would acknowledge that homeplaces were/are sites where the division of labor reinforces the heterosexual matrix. And she challenges us to recognize in black women’s homeplaces the history of both sexist and racist oppression (where black women not only took care of their own families, but also in white women’s homes where they
cared for Other children) and private space that becomes ground for resisting domination. For black women, homeplaces have “subversive value” (1990, 47) because they are transformed from private to political. hooks urges black families to reject “white bourgeois norms...where home is conceptualized as politically neutral space” (ibid.): in black women’s homeplace, the private and political merge – importantly – out of view of the dominant culture.

hooks’ rhetoric around “homeplace” creates a sense of a haven, a domesticated space that offers safety, comfort, family – “that special domain...where all that truly mattered in life took place” (1990, 41). But she is careful not to overly sentimentalize or valorize this location, instead calling for an analysis that both “honors” and “critiques” homeplace as the site that furthers “...the sexist definition of service as women’s ‘natural’ role” (42). Homeplaces are marked by community, and kinship relations that are sometimes but not always familial: they are locations where marginalized humans are recognized and recognize like Others, as subjects rather than objects. Homeplaces are “domestic spaces” that are “crucial sites...for forming political solidarity” (47); they function as shelters and as self-defined domains where critical consciousness is cultivated. For hooks, location matters as an impetus for agency.

*bell hooks’ Subject and Her Agency*

In *Yearning: race, gender and cultural politics* (1990), bell hooks discusses historical and contemporary practices and movements that demonstrate “…how the dominated, the oppressed, the exploited make ourselves subject” (1990, 15). In contrast to Butler’s claim that dominant linguistic, social, and legal norms construct subjects, hooks asserts that oppressed individuals and groups construct and claim “liberatory subjectivity” out of necessity, as political acts. The doer(s) precedes the deed.
How do we create an oppositional world view, a consciousness, an identity...which enables creative, expansive self-actualization?...There is an inner uprising that leads to rebellion...That space within oneself where resistance is possible remains: it is different then to talk about becoming subjects. That process emerges as one comes to understand how structures of domination work in one's own life, as one develops critical thinking and critical consciousness, as one invents new, alternative habits of being, and resists from that marginal space of difference inwardly defined. (ibid.)

Like Butler, hooks is looking to “...re-define the big word ‘human’ in terms of the marginal[ized]” (22). hooks describes her subject in psychological terms, granting agency and the possibility of individual and collective critical consciousness at the outset. A member of an oppressed or dominated group becomes a subject as s/he develops critical consciousness about “structures of domination.” From marginal space and with Others, the subject is able to act against, to resist. hooks argues for the practical employment of group identities -- collective “cultural identities” in the context of “political practice,” though she urges us to critique “identity politics based on essentialism” while affirming “the connection between identity and politics” (20). She is asserting that identity categories – ‘women,’ ‘blacks’ – are created when certain humans are positioned by the dominant culture as less than or Other than human. These identity categories become political tools that galvanize marginalized subjects “...to find ways to construct self and identity that are oppositional and liberatory” (29). The name or category ‘woman’ or ‘black’ serves a purpose, representing self-definition and determination as members of the identity group “mov[e] away from narrow notions of...identity” (ibid.). The name or category unites the “yearning” of its subjects, a “longing for critical voice” (27).

hooks is certain that “assimilation, imitation, or assuming the role of rebellious exotic other are not the only available options and never have been” (20). She says that “…ruptures [of hegemony]...create gaps that make space for oppositional practices...” (31). She argues for
theory building as a type of opposition or disruption; she calls attention to the role of “critical imagination” (19) as part of the struggle against dominating hegemonies and oppression. She acknowledges that theory-building is necessarily “shifting, fragile, unstable” (ibid.), and that subversion “happens much more easily in the realm of ‘texts’ than in the world of human interaction ...” (22). But hooks is also concrete and urgent in her calls and strategies for social change, and she asserts the importance of cultural margins – “homeplaces” and “spaces of radical openness,” where critical consciousness and “alternative habits of being” are developed. Non-dominant subjectivities (black, female, gay, those rendered “unintelligible” in and by the heterosexual matrix) can be self-defined, constructed, and determined from these locations in the margins where identities and subversion are hatched, encouraged, accepted, exercised. Chapter 5 of this dissertation explores Womyns College as such a homeplace.

**Contributions of this Study**

This study will fill a void in the literature on women's experiences in single-sex post-secondary institutions in the U.S. A search (of several ethnographic and educational journal contents and of the Education Resources Information Center/ERIC data base) for ethnographies that explored women college students' experiences in single sex environments revealed no sources. While there is some quantitative data comparing the aspirations, engagement, successes of women college students at women’s colleges with those at co-educational institutions, and Miller Bernal’s case study approach to analyzing women’s colleges (see literature review), I found no studies that sought to provide “thick descriptions” of the culture of a women’s college. Thus, “Feminisms at the Door” is a much-needed contemporary qualitative study that sheds light on the dynamics in a women’s single-sex postsecondary
institution. Further, my findings explore those dynamics as they affected the viability of one small women’s college in the early twenty-first century United States.

My findings and analysis offer a look at feminisms in practice, and the reality of generational differences that caused tension between feminists of different eras and approaches. Some students at Womyns College enacted broadening definitions of ‘womanhood,’ playing with feminine gender roles and sexual expectations. The single-sex and geographically isolated nature of the campus seemed to allow these subversions. My study confirms that women’s colleges can be sites for resistance of norms that (re)produce women’s femininity and heterosexuality, and that, simultaneously, a women’s college can house such traditions and values about womanhood that resistance is all but foreclosed.

An important contribution of this study is its framing of an ethnographic study with Judith Butler’s theory of gender norms and heterosexual hegemony. While I did not begin my research with the intention of ‘using’ Butler’s theorizations, my data strongly suggested them as I began coding and analysis. The inductive nature of qualitative research lent itself to this process. Several ethnographers have utilized Butler’s concepts to investigate gender as performative, individual subjectivity formation and individual agency, and the establishment and reproduction of gender norms in particular settings or groups. I discuss the findings of three studies and contrast them with mine: Gonick’s *Between Femininities: Ambivalence, Identity, and the Education of Girls* (SUNY Press, 2003); Hennen’s “Fae Spirits and Gender Trouble: Resistance and Compliance Among the Radical Faeries” (in *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 2004); and Renold and Ringrose’s “Regulation and rupture: Mapping ‘tween and teenage girls' resistance to the heterosexual matrix” (in *Feminist Theory*, 2008). Hennen’s study
focused on the ways in which drag performances, indeed drag lives, subvert masculine gender norms; it was conducted in what I assume was an American community at the “margins of the margins” (530). Gonick’s study, in an after-school program in Toronto, Canada, and Renold and Ringrose’s, in “semi-rural” primary schools in England, investigated ways in which gendered subjects – in both studies, girls between the ages of ten and fourteen – (re)produced and resisted feminine gender norms within a heterosexual matrix.

Hennen conducted observations and participant interviews within a community of “Radical Faeries” whom he describes as “queer folk...primarily (but not exclusively)...men with same-sex interests who explicitly reject traditional notions of masculinity” (2004, 500) by responding to the “historically sedimented association between effeminacy and homosexual desire” (530). He found:

By actively embracing and mercilessly parodying the stereotype [of effeminate homosexual men], Faeries do, in fact, achieve a kind of limited agency with respect to gender. However, the space opened by Faerie community is largely apolitical, or at least it seems to have become so in recent years. The transformations that Faerie culture enable are at the individual level and typically therapeutic. There is little in the way of an organized challenge to the larger sex/gender system beyond this at present. (ibid.)

This study is important in juxtaposition to mine for two reasons: Hennen (2004) asserted that “to test Butler’s poststructural theory empirically” an ethnographer must “...deemphasize the question of whether subjectivity is ‘really’ only the effect of sedimented discursive practice...”; he is saying that Butler’s contention that human subjects have little to no agency is not “pragmatic” for research purposes (1990, 530). This suspension of the question of whether or not subjective agency exists allowed Hennen to identify and reveal “a kind of limited agency” for individuals that served therapeutic purposes, but did little to “challenge the
larger sex/gender system.” My study at Womyns College echoed Hennen’s findings: Womyns’ students had some limited individual agency to challenge sex/gender/desire norms in an isolated community for a short period of time. But there was no long term impact outside of the College’s boundaries that challenged norms of femininity and masculinity, nor heterosexual hegemony. I will argue, however, that some of the resistances to and disruptions of gendered and heteronormative norms at Womyns College were political in nature (rather than individually “therapeutic”). I will present some participants’ perceptions that their feminist stances and genderbending behaviors threatened the College’s power relations (and its financial viability) to such a degree that it led, in part, to the College’s decision to “go coed,” reinstitutionalizing heterosexual hegemony and male privilege.

Gonick’s study is description at its thickest, theoretically multilayered, marked by complex, overlapping findings. She sought to flesh out some of Judith Butler’s theories about the power of social and cultural norms to shape “intelligible” or “viable” subjects, studying girlhood as a struggle for social recognition – the ways in which girls negotiate the relationship between “gender identity and normative femininity” (2003, 13). Gonick observed when and how ‘tween’ and teen-aged girls in a school setting talked about and recognized ‘femininity’ as they produced a video of fictional characters who would tell stories of girls’ lives. The girls in Gonick’s study demonstrated that their “gendered subjectivities” – variations on femininity – were always a question of the relation of self to other, “constantly open to renegotiation” (14). Gonick also explored the presence and power of Butler’s “heterosexual matrix” in her research setting, finding some “moments of slippage between...being desiring and being the [good, heterosexual] girl;” but ultimately concluding that boundaries of “good girl” sexuality were
“policing by a discipline of containment, a certain ordering of the body, and the gaze of others” (70). Gonick found that the girls in her study were, to some degree, aware of the instability and fluidity of femininity norms and that it left them struggling to find or enact a “unitary self” only by “splitting off or repressing other parts of [their] own or others’ subjectivities” (182); they were, in Gonick’s words, “ambivalent” about what they were to become. Only through fantasy – imagining female characters for their video who found “new modes of life...[that extended] the range of identities girls...might negotiate” – could ‘new’ (Butler would say they were there all along, simply unrecognized) “subject positionings outside of traditional gendered relations” be constructed (ibid.).

There are some parallels between Gonick’s study and mine. Both studies attempt to demonstrate an approach to, and perhaps suggest a method for finding out and tracing gender/sex/desire norms in a certain setting. Gonick’s participants were able to articulate what constituted being a ‘good girl’ by imagining subjects who could enact different femininities within a heterosexual matrix. Womyns College students enacted femininities with and against their older ‘sisters’: at times, they were very much captured by the performative that was “The W Woman;” at other times, some of them were able to act against that norm, in effect saying, ‘I am not that.’ Gonick’s study is an exploration of ambivalence about femininity and heteronormativity, showing the ways in which some individual girls/young women negotiate their subjectivities and conjure subversive feminine identities. My study is an examination of the power of institutionalized gender/sex/desire norms – structures of domination – that reinforce or demand conformity and attempts to subvert these norms in a particular time and place.
Renold and Ringrose’s study is similar to Gonick’s in its use of Butler’s theorizations as a framework; its participants (girls in mid-adolescence in social groups formed around school experiences); and in its optimistic focus on times and places in which girls’ individual agency ruptures dominant norms and the heterosexual matrix. Indeed, Renold and Ringrose state that their findings challenge the “bleak,” “melancholic” “feminist despair at the state of things” that can “inhibit the...mournful yet productive analytics required to perceive and map ['micro' or minute] movements in the social” (2008, 333).

Our question is... ‘how are ruptures and cracks and movement within this porous and malleable matrix already happening all around us and how do we map and see what operates at a level of movement that is often imperceptible?’ Here, we turn to the theoretical and methodological ‘toolkit’ that philosophers Deleuze and Guattari offer up as a way of looking for and mapping subversive movements upon and within a seemingly rigid and hierarchical, normative and dominant (and yet fundamentally precarious and unstable) phallogocentric heterosexual matrix. (319)

Renold and Ringrose looked for and found some girls who “troubled” the compulsory heterosexuality of a culture that demanded hypersexual, heteronormative femininity (they reference Angela McRobbie’s “postfeminist masquerade” and her notion of the “phallic girl”), “at once reinscribing and disrupting the [dominant] terrain” in “moments...that are often overlooked or missed in the search for grand narratives of resistance” (315-6). Their study showed that some girls “reterritorialized” heteronormativity and hypersexuality by prioritizing or appropriating other categories/norms: a group of “top girls,” who wore “sporty” clothing rather than “girly girl” costumes, signifying their desire to cultivate different relationships with boys their age; and the group of “spice girls,” a working class, multiracial group who resisted “white, middle class, repressive femininity” (325) by openly expressing aggression and anger. These are the “moments”, the micro movements that Renold and Ringrose found to constitute
some “sustained ruptures to the heterosexual matrix” (326): the girls’ speech, articulation of their desires, and disdain for “girly girl” femininity represented “…resistance and subversion within (not escape from) the regulatory force of the heterosexual matrix” (333, emphasis added). I submit that this is what I found at Womyns College: not a “pure or absolute line of flight” from gender/sex/desire norms and heterosexual hegemony, but “molecular” “reterritorializations” (ibid.) in some young women’s dress, speech, behavior.

Limitations of this Study

As with all qualitative studies, this one does not purport to be “generalizable”: what I found at Womyns College may or may not be found at other women’s colleges; other researchers would no doubt have found and focused on different phenomena at Womyns College, and would interpret their findings with their own lens and different theoretical frameworks than mine. Perhaps this limits the value of my study. However the dearth of research on contemporary women’s colleges at the historical moment when they seem to be in decline positions my study to be informative and useful to others who study women’s communities and gendered educational settings.

My participant pool over-represented students in Women’s Studies courses at Womyns: about one-third of my interviewees were Women’s Studies majors. All but three students held some kind of leadership position on campus at the time of my interviews with them. This is reflective of the abundance of student leadership opportunities that most women’s institutions provide, and of the way in which I gathered names for participants. My initial contacts for study participants were made on the recommendation of the Dean of the College and the Dean of Students; and my second ‘batch’ of interview names came from the solicitations of three
social science faculty members in their classes. This positioned my study to favor the voices, experiences, language, and insights of student leaders and social science majors at the College.

What is most inadequately addressed in this study is the complex intersectionality that showed up in the identities of the 22 women I interviewed at Womyns. While only a few of my participants articulated those complexities, I could have done more to illucidate the ways in which race, sexuality, gender, and/or socio-economic class for some individuals were invisible or silenced; and the people for whom gender or sexuality was not their foremost identity category. Had I pursued my research at a historically and predominantly black women’s college, I imagine that my analysis of the ways in which participants made sense of their gender and sexuality would have had added dimensions and been suggestive of other feminist/womanist theoretical frameworks.

Outline of the Dissertation

Chapter Two will review the academic literature on women’s colleges and single sex education in the United States, with a focus on that produced in the past thirty years. It includes discussion of two studies that served as conceptual foundations for my study, though mine took a decidedly different direction from those: it became both an ethnography of a particular place and time and the social relations within it, and a description of the ways in which feminist concepts materialized in a community of women. The literature review looks at some histories of women’s colleges in the United States and how notions of separatism have played out in them. It discusses contemporary studies from which claims have been made about the benefits for girls and women of attending single sex schools and colleges. Finally, the
chapter points out the challenges posed by an increasingly visible range of women’s sexualities and gender expressions at these institutions. 

Chapter Three outlines my research methodologies and methods, and my commitment to feminist research.

Chapters Four, Five, and Six display the richness of my data. Chapter Four shows the very real manifestations of generational tensions between “W Women,” and the accompanying clashes between administrators and students, and their feminisms. Chapter Five utilizes bell hooks’ notion of ‘homeplace’ to tell the story of Womyns College’s culture of devotion, its location on the literal and figurative margins, and its complications as a ‘homeplace’ for students of color. Chapter Six lays out the power of gender norms at Womyns College and some students’ attempts to undermine its heterosexual hegemony.

Chapter Seven concludes the study by summarizing my findings and their importance, outlining implications for practice, and suggesting further research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review begins with a discussion of two studies that are very similar to mine in their research design and subject, but not in their conclusions. The following section includes information about the historical foundations of women’s colleges: the cultures, curricula, campus designs, and student and faculty bodies were shaped by prevalent notions of women’s nature in the United States in the late 19th century. The influence of some of those notions is still palpable and evident in my study. The next section of the literature review covers recent studies about the (positive) effects of educating women without men; these studies are grounded in tacit acknowledgements of sexism and contemporary discourses that center concerns about the ways in which educational institutions negatively impact girls’ self esteem. Despite these well-publicized studies, there has been a demonstrable decline in interest in women’s colleges over the past two decades; research exploring that phenomenon is summarized in the following section. Finally, I move to a discussion of some of the contradictions with which women’s colleges (including Womyns College) continue to live: the pros and cons of separate, single sex education for girls and women; and the ways in which race and sexuality have complicated gender as it is put into practice by women’s higher educational institutions. The theorists and researchers who are cited in this literature review are, by and large, feminist in their scholarly orientations toward this topic.

Very broadly, my literature review revealed a rich body of historical writings about American women’s colleges, and a number of relatively recent in-depth quantitative and qualitative studies that explore the benefits of single-sex education for girls and women. There are gaps in the literature about the contemporary cultures of women’s colleges, and about
generational tensions on these campuses that expose contestations over women’s sex, sexuality, and gender. On these points, my study will contribute to the scholarship.

Two Similar Studies

While current ethnographic studies conducted in women’s and girls’ single sex educational settings are scarce, there are two relatively recent studies that informed my research and speak to the need for further research: Amira Proweller’s *Constructing Female Identities: Meaning Making in an Upper Middle Class Youth Culture* (SUNY Press, 1998) and Barbara Bank’s *Contradictions in Women’s Education: Traditionalism, Careerism, and Community at a Single-Sex College* (Teachers College Press, 2003). Proweller’s qualitative study was conducted at a private girls’ secondary school in the northeastern United States during the 1992-’93 academic year; her interview questions formed the basis for my interviews at Womyns College. Bank’s study combined longitudinal survey research with structured interviews of one class of students at a “non-elite” private women’s college in the midwestern United States between the years 1991 and 1997. Though both data sets are more than fifteen years old, these are the only qualitative studies I found that were set at single-sex institutions for girls and women, and the findings and conclusions drawn from these studies reverberate with some of the themes found in my research.

Proweller’s study of 34 students at Best Academy was designed to explore female identity construction in a single sex, secondary educational setting. Over a nine month period, she conducted field/participant observations, “semi-structured, in-depth” (1998, 222) individual interviews, and focus group interviews. Her conclusions were guided by her contestation of schools as reproductive agents (4-6), and her re-centering of the students at
Best Academy as active agents who shaped their own experiences and the Academy’s structures and practices. The central finding of her work was that in this single sex environment, the girls’ identities as females (and to some degree, their racial identities) were constructed by their socio-economic class locations, rather than in contrast to and dependent on boys’ subjectivities. Gender norms and expectations of heteronormativity were played out in “border zones” (200) where femininity was signified by things – GAP clothing, sterling amethyst earrings, and Mazda Miatas (75) – and things signified the socio-economic class positions of the girls’ parents. The Others at Best Academy were those girls who occupied a different economic position within what Proweller considers a broad middle class. Girls from less privileged middle class families were marked by being “more conscientious about their schoolwork because they ha[d] to work doubly hard to maintain the scholarships and grants-in-aid...” (200) that allowed them to attend a private secondary school. Racial difference was contained by “a polite and public language of naming race or silenc[ed] through omission…” (201). Classed (by virtue of their attendance at Best Academy) femininity (which was constructed against feminism and lesbianism) comfortably coexisted with academic achievement for the girls in Proweller’s study.

These findings about the ways in which girls in a single sex educational environment negotiated femininity as an identity marker presented themselves similarly in my study, though the identity markers that most informed femininity in my study were sexuality and race rather than socio-economic class. My research differs from Proweller’s in that it became a description of the culture of a single-sex institution that was shaped by its decision to ‘go coed’; this created a rich dialogue about women and education that was shaped by the language of
feminism, full of paradigm and meaning shifts and generational and historical tensions. From my study of young college women’s experiences of ‘being female’ emerged a contestation of the category of ‘woman,’ which called into question the very existence of a women’s college.

Bank’s study of a private, midwestern women’s college employed surveys and interviews as research tools. The study was conducted between 1991 and 1997, at which time the college ‘went coed’, admitting men as full time, residential undergraduate students. Specifically, Bank followed the class of 1995 through its four years at Central Women’s College (CWC), measuring students’ self-confidence and sense of achievement, attitudes about current social and political issues, adherence to gender norms for females, and the degree to which they enacted the stated values of the College. Faculty and student survey responses were analyzed with institutional data to paint a portrait of CWC’s institutional and student cultures. Bank explored three broad foundations of CWC as a women’s institution of higher education:

- The extent to which CWC (re)enforced traditional gender roles for its students;
- The extent to which CWC acted as an instrument of “careerism” (a term that evidences tension between an institution’s goal of preparing students to compete in the national/global labor market and its purpose of providing them with a liberal arts education);
- The existence of a sense of community among CWC students.

Bank found that the College’s culture, curriculum, and geographical isolation contributed to a “liberalizing” effect on students’ perceptions of traditional gender roles for women, but that students did not change or broaden their own personal aspirations, much less identify as feminist or with feminism (perhaps due to the strong influence of sororities at CWC).
Regarding “careerism,” the study revealed that more members of the CWC class of 1995 were career-oriented than liberal arts oriented; and, interestingly, that the majority of the liberal arts oriented students planned to enter “female occupations” (teaching, psychology, paralegal work), while a majority of the “vocational majors” selected “predominantly male occupations” such as law or business. Bank concluded that “…the historical connection – for women – between a liberal arts education and gender traditionalism persisted into the 1990s at CWC even though the emphasis on full time homemaking had all but disappeared” (80-81).

Bank’s study reinforced the current research on women’s college graduates: that CWC faculty members’ attention to women students enhanced their intellectual confidence and GPAs; that higher grades correlated with students’ willingness to take on and learn from campus leadership positions (and vice versa); and that CWC graduates’ reports of self esteem were higher than their coeducational counterparts’. Contradictory to these affirming results was the finding that CWC graduates did not articulate a sense of themselves as capable of high achievement, nor an ability or desire to take on non-traditional gender roles or career paths. Bank related this to students’ experiences of community at CWC: the students who formed an “important friendship, a friendship that was better than those one had formed prior to attending CWC” (133), were most likely to affiliate with and graduate from the College. Personal relationships – rather than pride in what they learned or who they had become – determined the allegiance CWC graduates felt for their alma mater: Bank suggested that this was a result of the College’s mixed messages to students who were discouraged from taking intellectual, personal, and social risks, while they were encouraged to become “autonomous career women” (134). Further, Bank found in her interviews that many students were
searching for opportunities to identify with a women’s community that the College failed to
cultivate because “…it never asked its students to take themselves seriously as women…, to
learn about the history and legacy of women’s colleges…, to analyze feminist theories and
ideologies…, to consider what it meant to call CWC a women-centered college…” (155).

Bank’s study offers some strong parallels to mine: both CWC and Womyns College were
“non-elite” institutions (CWC admitted 90% of its applicants, primarily from a regional pool;
Womyns College admitted 80-85% of its applicants, also from a regional pool*) and, as such,
characterized by student bodies that were less academically driven and more socially
influenced and influential than those students who attended more prominent women’s
colleges. Both campuses were geographically isolated; Bank argued and I found that a high
degree of “residential isolation” ensured that students had great influence on norms and
values, campus culture. Bank’s description of the homosocial and heterosexual student culture
at CWC stood in sharp contrast to the homosocial and ambisexual culture at Womyns College.

*Historical Foundations of Women’s Colleges in the United States

Histories of American feminist separatist movements and sex-based philosophies inform
the origins and establishment of women’s colleges (Freedman 1979; Horowitz 1984). Many of
the women’s colleges in the United States were founded in the decades of the mid-nineteenth
century when the separation of genders and races was legally, morally, and philosophically
justifiable and imposed, based on beliefs of biological and intellectual superiority/inferiority
and ‘natural’ social – public and private – roles. Women’s colleges were manifestations of
liberal feminism, born of necessity to allow women access to the rigorous intellectual liberal
arts course of study provided in prominent men’s colleges of the era. They served as a
“...valuable corrective to an intellectual tradition that had seen women’s experience as derivative” (Conway 2001, 7). However, many male and female benefactors who founded women’s colleges held religious, social, and political views – consonant with cultural feminism – of women’s unique natures, and ideological, curricular, architectural, and societal constraints were woven into these institutions’ histories, structures, and practices.

Smith-Rosenberg places the foundations for separate male/public and female/private spheres in “the emotional segregation of women and men...a world built around a generic and unself-conscious pattern of single-sex or homosocial networks[,]...institutionalized in social conventions or rituals” (1985, 60). “Female worlds of love and ritual” in nineteenth century America constituted separatist spaces in which women’s relationships with each other were formalized as “apprenticeship systems” (65) and “extended female networks” (66). “Unself-conscious,” “homosocial networks” became institutionalized in women’s college traditions and rituals that are practiced to the current day.

The ‘Seven Sisters’ colleges (a consortium formed by the highest profile, most elite women’s colleges of the late nineteenth century: Barnard, Bryn Mawr, Mt. Holyoke, Radcliffe, Smith, Vassar, and Wellesley) were harbingers of the promise and problematic of American women’s higher education. Helen Horowitz’s Alma Mater: Design and Experience in the Women’s Colleges from Their Nineteenth-Century Beginnings to the 1930s (1984) portrays the women’s college campuses as texts that can be read to reflect ideologies of and fears about femininity and gender. Most of the Seven Sisters colleges that opened their doors as stand-alone institutions (rather than Radcliffe and Barnard, which were ‘annexed’ to Harvard and Columbia respectively) were designed as secluded, separate spheres in which proper women
and acceptable female bonds might be fostered by institutional and organizational structures. Horowitz likens the architecture of the main buildings of the Seven Sisters’ colleges to asylums of the same era, built to confine and to impose order and discipline.

Assumptions about women living in close quarters with each other often presented as concerns about women’s hygiene or sexuality. In 1869, *Scribner’s Magazine* editor J.G. Holland gave explicit voice to the cultural fears of women in higher education institutions:

> No consideration would induce us to place a young woman, daughter, or ward in a college which would shut her away from all family life for a period of four years. The system is unnatural, and not one young woman in ten can be subjected to it without injury...[E]very physician or physiologist knows what we mean when we say that such a system is fearfully unsafe. The facts which substantiate their opinion would fill the public mind with horror if they were known...Diseases of body, diseases of imagination, vices of body and imagination...are bred in these great institutions where life and associations are circumscribed as weeds are forced in hotbeds. (in Horowitz 1984, 74-5)

The mid-nineteenth century also produced ‘medical’ theories that the development of women’s cognitive abilities put their reproductive capacities at risk by routing blood flow to the brain rather than the abdominal area. ‘Wandering wombs’ became a biological foundation for hysteria, and hysteria became a particularly gendered malady (Showalter 1998, Brumberg 1997). In 1873, Dr. Edward Clarke, a retired Harvard Medical School professor, published *Sex in Education*.

> Clarke concluded that if women used up their ‘limited energy’ on studying, they would endanger their ‘female apparatus.’ Although a girl could study and learn, Clarke noted, she could not do all this, and retain uninjured health and a future secure from neuralgia, uterine disease, hysteria, and other derangements of the nervous system. (Solomon 1985, 56)
Young women’s intellectual development and sexuality had to be contained, and Victorian ideals that tied women to private, home life and moral character development provided the framework for doing so.

The living quarters of the women’s colleges contained parlors and well appointed bedrooms for students and women faculty: it was hoped that these institutions would recreate familial structures in which faculty and students reproduced mother-daughter relationships (Horowitz 1984, 25). In time, increasingly academic faculty and increasingly independent students would reject this arrangement. Women faculty began to demand more privacy, moving out of the residences provided for them in close proximity to their students so that they could pursue scholarship rather than serve as housemothers and chaperones (Horowitz 1984, 185, 193). Simultaneously, student life changed: automobiles brought men from neighboring colleges to the campuses, and “The Life” (participation in drama clubs, student governance, and a middle/upper class, heteronormative sensibility about dress and appearances) became more important than student-teacher relationships (Horowitz 1984, 147ff; Palmieri 1995, 200). Female student and faculty cultures separated, dissipating the familial sense created by intergenerational communities of women learning and living together, and reinstating public and private worlds.

In the years following the two World Wars, women’s colleges (the newest generation included Scripps, Bennington, and Sarah Lawrence) built edifices that housed “elegant public spaces and Spartan private ones” (Horowitz 1984, 316) to discourage intimacy among women students. Increasingly heteronormative social mores – fuelled by heroic men’s returns from the battlefields, valorization of marriage and family, Freudian psychology, and the (re)emerging
‘science’ of domesticity – impinged on the all-female communities of the women’s colleges. Fears of race suicide were fed by the low marriage rates of women’s college graduates: “[t]he women’s colleges drew off ‘the best blood of the American stock and...[sank] it in a dry desert of sterile intellectuality and paralytic culture’” (280). The deviance of women’s college cultures became a topic for public consumption: unmarried women faculty and presidents became Others, the “third sex” (293). Preoccupation with academic women’s sexuality substituted for acknowledgement of their activism and intellectualism in the public sphere. Horowitz calls this a “post feminist” (306) time, attributing the decline of women’s colleges to the end of the Progressive Era and calls for the preservation of heterosexuality and attendant ‘family values.’

The early curricula of many of these institutions, when coupled with their architectural designs, were what earned women’s colleges the moniker of ‘seminaries’ rather than colleges. Seminaries offered professional training for women as teachers or as mothers for the Republic, emphasizing the fine arts and social sciences, eschewing the classical curricula of men’s colleges. Still, the women’s colleges were groundbreaking: their striking main buildings honored women’s intellectual capacities and signaled a claim on higher education for women in the United States (Horowitz 1984, 201). They represented women’s independence and the possibilities of new social roles, challenged the cults of true womanhood and domesticity, biological determinism, and mind-body/masculine-feminine binaries.

The history of Wellesley College offers an exemplary study in the ideologies that grounded many elite women’s colleges. The College’s beginnings (in 1875) marked it as a female seminary, rooted in the romanticized reform movement of ‘True Womanhood’ whereby women’s morality and natural purity were cultivated with the hope that they would disrupt
corrupted public spheres (Palmieri 1995, 10). Wellesley founders Henry and Pauline Durant created an “exclusionary women’s community” by insisting on an all-female faculty and women presidents at their institution, a promise kept until well into the 1930s on the former account and to the present day on the latter (18). Ironically, in attracting some of the women who constituted the first generation of institutionally educated scholars, Wellesley congregated a faculty committed to liberal learning rather than the ‘womanly arts.’ Internal struggles moved the College away from its evangelical beginnings and toward the realm of elite liberal arts colleges, with a curriculum to match that of prominent men’s colleges. Senior women faculty directed the institution, though professionally and personally, they experienced the “clash” (59) of intellectualism with ever-powerful expectations of femininity.

Most of the Wellesley faculty members were, and remained throughout their careers, unmarried; they were content to belong to a “community composed of female couples” (Palmieri 1995, 99). These women faculty members and their partners supported each other’s intellectual and activist endeavors, reflecting the highest aims of the Progressive Era when, for women, public and private spheres began to merge. “[T]he faculty flourished in what they called their Adamless Eden” (267).

But United States President Teddy Roosevelt’s concerns about “race suicide” prompted a turning point for women’s education and, thus, women’s colleges. Beliefs and ‘science’ about the biological immutability of gender and race ultimately shaped Wellesley’s future: women living in community without men signaled “degeneracy” (Palmieri 1995, 221), and fears about unmarried women and a decline in heteronormativity were given public voice. It was this stigmatization of academic women as “failures or freaks” that had a “corrosive effect” on
Wellesley’s community of women faculty (231). Many leaders of Seven Sisters institutions pointedly began to hire married male faculty members to provide alternative, ‘normal’ role models for their students. A new generation of scholars arrived at the women’s colleges with less of a commitment to social activism and more of an allegiance to masculinist scholarship based on models of “competitive, bureaucratic” (267) German institutions that valued research over teaching. The context and subjects of women’s colleges were profoundly changed by this collision of social, religious, and political notions about gender, race, sexuality, and higher education.

**Recent Research on Women’s Colleges**

In the mid 1970s, scholarly and popular discourse emerged about the prominence of women’s college graduates among American women “achievers.” This research has become a cornerstone for advocates of girls’ schools and women’s colleges: the Women’s College Coalition\(^5\), an association of American and Canadian women’s colleges and universities, utilizes this literature to argue for the advantages of single-sex educational institutions for girls and women. M. Elizabeth Tidball, a former professor of physiology at the George Washington University Medical Center, examined the 1966-1971 records of *Who's Who of American Women* to find that during the period 1910 to 1960, “graduates of women’s colleges were more than twice as likely to have been cited for career achievement as were women graduates of coeducational colleges.” (Tidball 1974, 51). She asserted “...that coeducational colleges have

\(^5\) “...makes the case for women’s education to the higher education community, to policy makers, to the media and to the general public” by “collect[ing] and disseminat[ing] information relating to the education of women and gender equity in education,” and the “recruitment and retention of women in math, science and engineering, and the development of women’s leadership.” (http://www.womenscolleges.org/perspective/nsse-study)
been preoccupied with the needs of their men students and have virtually ignored those of women” (52), and attributed the greater number of women’s college graduate “achievers” to the importance of women faculty role models who were “concerned with the emotional development” of “talented” women students (ibid.). Her examination of the Who’s Who rolls also revealed that “unmarried graduates were seven times more likely to be cited than those who were married...The relative paucity of successful married women reflects what our society expects and encourages” (51). Tidball investigated other traits of women achievers’ alma maters including the selectivity of an institution, faculty compensation, and college size; only college size correlated with high-achieving women students.

Tidball’s analysis has been challenged over the years: Oates and Williamson questioned her use of Who’s Who of American Women rather than Who’s Who in America; her failure to distinguish between the graduates of the Seven Sisters’ colleges and other women’s colleges; and her failure to consider the socio-economic advantages of the women who attended the Seven Sisters or other private, single sex colleges (Oates and Williamson 1978). Other scholars called into question her measures of “achievement” (Who’s Who listings are based on submitters’ self-reports) and suggested that her conclusions were “simplistic” (Rice and Hemmings 1988, 225).

A study conducted between 1987 and 1991 confirmed that students who attended “women only” institutions were more likely to report “intellectual self-confidence” (Kim 2002, 468) than women students who attended coeducational institutions. This study directly responded to some of the concerns raised by Tidball’s work: it showed that there was a significant intersection of gender and “higher” socio-economic class that must be
acknowledged when studying women’s college students; and that the percentage of female faculty members at particular institutions was not a “significant” predictor of women students’ “intellectual development” (471).

Tidball’s definitive response and summarized research came in 1999 in the book, Taking Women Seriously (Tidball, Smith, Tidball and Wolf-Wendel). The researchers measured ‘achievement’ by a less subjective measure (than listings in Who’s Who of American Women): disaggregated (by gender and type of institution) data of the baccalaureate origins of people who earned doctoral and medical degrees from 1910 to the early 1990s (1999, 33-54). The researchers found that women who earned doctorates in any field were twice as likely to come from women’s colleges as from coeducational institutions; and, more specifically, that women who earned doctorates in the natural sciences or a medical degree (as historically male-dominated fields) were twice as likely to come from women’s colleges as from coeducational colleges or universities (45). This text continues to be cited by single-sex education advocates as convincing evidence that women’s colleges are not the only, but the most likely producers of women achievers.

A 2002 study (which echoed some of Bank’s findings at Central Women’s College in the mid-1990s) explored differences between women’s colleges by analyzing the impact of “institutional culture” on students’ career aspirations for an advanced degree: graduates of a women’s college that supported “traditional views” of women – as evidenced by a peer culture that reinforced expectations of heteronormativity and motherhood – were less likely to attend graduate school than graduates of a women’s college that offered “contemporary,
empowering” views of women and overtly encouraged graduate school education (Ridgwell and Creamer 2003).

Other recent studies support the claims of women’s colleges that they are good for women because single-sex academic cultures cultivate intellectual engagement, provide an abundance of positive female role models, and promote women students as leaders. A 2002 study from Indiana University’s Center for Postsecondary Research gauged differences between women students’ levels of academic engagement at coeducational and women’s colleges. Academic engagement was measured by responses to the National Survey of Student Engagement, an annually-issued online survey that elicits students’ self-reports of educational gains; satisfaction with their college/university experiences as indicated by interactions with faculty members and peers; and participation in various activities associated with desired college outcomes (Kinzie et al 2007, 148). The 2002 study analyzed quantitative data from the responses of 42,000 randomly sampled first year and senior women students at 26 women’s colleges and 264 coeducational ones. Students at women’s colleges interacted with faculty members more frequently in and outside of the classroom than their coeducational peers; and participated more actively in the classroom and outside of it as peer tutors, indicating a “high level of academic challenge” and “deep engagement” in intellectual and creative activities. Additionally, women’s college students reported greater gains than coeducational women students in the development of quantitative skills (particularly for science and math majors), “self-understanding,” and “experiences with diversity” (160).

A 2009 study commissioned by the National Coalition of Girls’ Schools utilized the vast database of UCLA’s Cooperative Institutional Research Program to analyze responses of first
year women college students to the Freshman Survey, an instrument designed to describe high school students’ values and attitudes as they transition to college. Researchers Sax, Arms, Woodruff, Riggers and Eagan focused this study on the responses of approximately 6,550 female graduates of private, single-sex high schools and 14,680 female graduates of private, coeducational high schools. The research team found statistically significant differences between girls who attended single-sex high schools and those who attended coeducational high schools:

- Female graduates of single-sex high schools spent more time studying, doing homework, and interacting with faculty outside of class than their coeducational counterparts, indicating to the researchers a higher level of “academic engagement”.

- Graduates of single-sex high schools scored higher than coeducational school graduates on the SAT.

- Female graduates of single-sex high schools expressed greater interest in attending graduate school than female graduates of coeducational high schools.

- Single-sex high school graduates in this sample exhibited slightly higher levels of “academic self-confidence” (as measured by self reports of class standing, writing and public speaking ability) than female graduates of coeducational high schools.

- Single-sex high school graduates expressed greater awareness of and engagement with political issues, and a stronger interest in outside-of-the-classroom participation in clubs and activities than did the graduates of coeducational high schools.

- Graduates of single-sex high schools had greater confidence in their mathematical abilities and computer skills than their coeducational counterparts. Three times more
graduates of single-sex high schools expressed interest in engineering careers than did graduates of coeducational high schools. (Sax et al 2009, 7-10)

In the past two decades, these findings and assertions have been publicized to develop a “niche market” (Bregman 2009) for American women’s colleges. Women’s colleges have long been recognized as prolific producers of women scientists when and because other institutions refused to acknowledge that female (students’ and faculty members’) cognitive abilities were equal to those of males: Vassar, Smith, Bryn Mawr, Goucher, Mount Holyoke, and Barnard Colleges have been credited with increasing opportunities for women scientists at the collegiate level since the 1850s (Rossiter 1984, 10). In 1938, Mount Holyoke, Barnard, Smith, Vassar, and Wellesley and other women’s colleges produced 39% of women scientists (145). In the late 1990s, Wellesley, Smith, Mount Holyoke, and Bryn Mawr were four of the top fifty baccalaureate institutions to produce female doctorate recipients in the sciences and engineering (National Science Foundation 2003, Table 5-9). As an additional marketing tool, women’s colleges have capitalized on the momentum of girls’ empowerment rhetoric, often featuring their own prominent, high achieving graduates on websites and in media releases. Senator and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, journalists Gwen Ifill and Diane Sawyer, Children’s Defense Fund founder Marion Wright Edelman, authors Ntozake Shange and June Jordan are all graduates of women’s colleges (see http://www.barnard.edu/about/why.html and http://www.womenscolleges.org/alumnae/notables). Women’s colleges have managed to “...locate themselves on the national spectrum of higher education options as specialized
breeding grounds for women’s leadership in an increasingly competitive post-industrial society” (Marine 2009, 14).

Declining Interest in Women’s Colleges

Despite increased attention to and credible research on single-sex learning environments for girls and women, women’s colleges struggle to draw the interest of traditionally aged (18 to 22 years old) female college students. The number of women’s colleges in the United States has declined in the past half-century, from over 300 in the 1960s to 51 in 2010 (Harwarth 1999; Women’s College Coalition website). “According to a 2000 College Board survey, only 4 percent of college-bound women said they would consider attending a women’s institution” (Brownstein 2001, A39). As young women’s access to elite and public institutions of higher education has become commonplace and as high school girls’ interest in single-sex education has dwindled, many women’s colleges, dependent on tuition revenues, have been unable to financially sustain themselves.

Sociologist Leslie Miller Bernal has written extensively on women’s colleges in the U.S. and Great Britain. *Separate By Degree: Women Students’ Experiences in Single-Sex and Coeducational Colleges* (2000) compared the histories and cultures of four liberal arts colleges: one single-sex women’s college, two “coordinate” women’s colleges (these institutions share faculties and facilities with men’s colleges while maintaining separate but neighboring residential campuses, and separate administrative and student governance structures), and one coeducational college. The goal of her study was to “…determin[e] which institutional structure has best met women’s needs for education…” (4), and “…to show that single-sex environments...have a greater potential to challenge male hegemony than do mixed-sex
environments” (8). Miller-Bernal surveyed 793 women at the four institutions between 1984 and 1988, and conducted interviews with ten women from each college during their junior years. Her thorough research (testing interrelated variables, thereby preventing simplistic correlations) revealed what many of the previous studies of female single-sex college students and environments found: that students’ reported levels of self-confidence were enhanced by having the undivided attention of female and male faculty members and by taking on campus leadership roles (283). One of Miller-Bernal’s distinctive hypotheses was that all women’s environments encourage collective and individual senses of “gender solidarity” – appreciation for women’s movements and self-identification with feminist endeavors. Indeed, she found that by the end of their senior years, 72% and 74% of the women at single sex institutions “labeled themselves feminist,” in contrast to 49% and 46% of the women at coeducational institutions (278-9). She concluded,

Feminism and support for the women’s movement were greater among students who had at least some women faculty role models, who participated actively in classes, who perceived men faculty as being concerned with them, and especially among those who had taken courses on women’s issues. While only a few of these relationships were strong, they do show that the supportive yet challenging environments for which women’s colleges are renowned do make some demonstrable differences. (284)

Challenged by Coeducation: Women’s Colleges Since the 1960s (2006), co-edited by Miller-Bernal and Susan L. Poulson, analyzes the higher education market changes and social forces that shape and challenge current women’s colleges as “an endangered species” (ix). The book presents case studies of women’s colleges that have closed, become coeducational, remained single sex, or affiliated with men’s or coeducational institutions. The case studies explore ongoing challenges and the uneven successes of these colleges in their attempts to
honor their legacies and continue institutional practices that promote gender equality. The scholars included in the book examine current indications of feminism (or lack thereof) in student bodies, curricula, leadership, and guiding principles. Descriptions of women’s college students’ successful resistance to Trustees’ and administrators’ decisions to admit men stand as evidence of the vibrancy of student activism.

Miller-Bernal’s research and conclusions demonstrate the perhaps irresolvable tensions between the possibilities of women’s colleges as places full of alternatives and transformations, and the societal repercussions for institutions and students who choose that path. Our culture is ambivalent about, if not actively opposed to single sex institutions for girls and women, and there is healthy feminist debate about its merits. Some feminist theorists and researchers have endorsed separate female spaces as power and institution building in a culture that readily cedes neither to women (Freedman 1979; Krieger 1996; Tidball 1999). Others oppose the notion and practice on the grounds that these separate spaces were/are inherently unequal and exclusionary, and that they reinforce notions of women’s essential (raced, classed, nationalized, heterosexualized) nature (Schwager 1988).

**Contradictions and Omissions in the Literature on Women’s Colleges**

Within the scholarship on women’s colleges that I examined for this research project, three areas of feminist critique emerged: debates regarding the virtues of separatism; the omission of women of color in single sex institutions as subjects for study; and the conflation and complications of ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ for women’s colleges.
The Problem with Separatism

Historical aspects of gendered “separate spheres” are evident in the structures and practices of contemporary women’s colleges in the United States, perhaps inviting the critique that these institutions are outdated, throwbacks to the days when women had little access to public spheres. But politically and socially, members of non-dominant groups have intentionally established and inhabited separate spaces as a means to assert or protect self-determination (hooks 1990, 145-153): women’s and historically black colleges stand as examples of “thirdspaces” that harbor “communities of resistance and renewal” (Soja 1996, 84). In feminist circles, separatism often takes on the mantle of liberal or cultural feminism, the claiming of a separate sphere that empowers women, providing access to educational and leadership opportunities in a nurturing environment. Still, there is debate among feminist theorists and practitioners as to the value of single sex institutions and organizations.

Historian Estelle Freedman argues that the creation and maintenance of “a strong, public female sphere” was and is a viable political strategy for women. This “female institution building” “emerged from the middle-class women’s culture of the nineteenth century” (Freedman 1979, 513), migrating from private into public spheres by way of American women’s temperance, club, settlement house, and suffrage movements. Women’s colleges were part of this progression, founded initially to provide for women “training grounds for piety, purity, and domesticity” (517); they became institutions that “encouraged intimate friendships and professional networks among educated women” (518). These separatist institutions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries represented a “process of redefining womanhood by
extension, rather than by the rejection, of the female sphere…” (ibid.) – a cultural feminist endeavor.

Feminist theorist Susan Krieger embraces ‘separatism’ as a tool for self determination: an intentional “‘denial of access,’ that is, women denying men access to women” (Krieger 1996, 203) that allows women to organize “apart from men” (197). She further states, “...women and men rightly fear separatism because ‘when women separate, they are insubordinate.’ Separatism is an assumption of power...” (203). But chosen separatism becomes problematic in Krieger’s writing, as it does in practices and discourses of women’s colleges: her portrayal of separatist women’s organizations and processes reinforces essentialist notions of “traditional women’s ways” (209) as collaborative, “centrarchic” (208), necessarily egalitarian, and conflict-avoidant. In addition, she reproduces social and intellectual conflations of ‘separatist’ with ‘lesbian’ without interrogating the phenomenon.

One of the most compelling critiques of separatist practices and institutions acknowledges the importance of women’s institution building in the nineteenth century in that women’s colleges created “laboratories” in which female teachers, administrators, and students exerted independence and gained skills that would lead to collective action in the political realm (Schwager 1988). However, Schwager argues that girls’ and women’s access to educational institutions has not meant intellectual, political, or social emancipation for females in the United States, nor their authority within educational realms. Further, gender segregation in education has led to a decline in status for women and for the field of education, and perpetuated the devaluation of both. Schwager links this phenomenon to the anti-intellectual ideology of ‘True Womanhood,’ based in women’s seemingly immutable biological, domestic,
and republican roles. This is an ongoing contradiction for women’s colleges as ‘separatist’ institutions, and these fissures are present in my study.

Historian Linda Kerber explores the legacy of separatism by examining the notion of ‘separate spheres’ for men and women as a “rhetorical construction” (2002, 41). She excavates the use of the term primarily in the discipline of history, from Alexis de Toqueville to American feminists of the 1980s. It is in de Toqueville’s work that Kerber finds the origins of the trope of a “domestic circle” where women functioned as nurturers of children, husbands, and home (30). Kerber traces the development of a separate women’s sphere and its role in the American women’s movement as a foundation for a “women’s culture,” the radical and cultural feminism of the 1970s. Like Schwager, Kerber argues that the historical discourse of domestic, private spheres contributes to the devaluation of women’s work in the public worlds of education and social reform: the “…public/private split [served economic and social functions],…in which the most important psychic locus was the home, understood to be a woman’s place, but ultimately controlled by man” (33).

One could argue that any separatist agenda was (and perhaps still is) radical, establishing long-lasting institutions designed to redress sexist and exclusionary assumptions about women’s intellectual capacities and undervalued public roles. But my study at Womyns College suggests very material ways in which a contemporary separate sphere – an all-women’s environment chosen and maintained by women for women – institutionalizes a domain that is both affirming and restrictive. Social relations at Womyns College contested anti-intellectual notions about women’s ‘nature’ and reinscribed contradictory and confining roles for women. “…[T]he ideology of separate spheres – like all ideology – is not frozen in time but is in a
constant state of refinement until it fits reality so badly that a paradigm shift in conceptualization is unavoidable” (Kerber 2002, 47). It remains to be seen what that paradigm shift looks like for American women’s colleges in general, but for Womyns College, it meant a reversion to a dominant and dominating paradigm.

Black Women and Women’s Colleges

Notably, there are few sources that directly address the histories and experiences of women of color in women’s colleges. White women’s higher education in the United States, particularly in the women’s colleges, has been a focus for academic inquiry and curiosity in a way that African, Latina, Asian, and immigrant women’s higher education has not. None of the sources I discovered interrogate the impact of the Civil War on higher educational opportunities for black women in the United States, though many of the founders of predominantly white women’s colleges began their quests for sites and legacies in the aftermath of the War. However, there is a rich history of African-American women’s post-secondary education in single-sex institutions.

Though the majority of Black women have been educated in co-educational institutions, single-sex colleges for Black women, all of which have been located in the South, have provided unique educational experiences for those women who have chosen [them]...Bennett, founded as a co-educational school in 1873 in the basement of St. Matthew’s Methodist Episcopal Church in Greensboro, North Carolina, became a college for women in 1926...Spelman, founded in 1881 by Sophia Packard and Harriet Giles in the basement of Friendship Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, has always been for women only...

High on the list of priorities at both institutions has been the training of Black women for leadership roles, though the training of teachers was their earliest mission. (Guy-Sheftall 1982, 279-280)
African-American women were admitted to each of the ‘Seven Sisters’ women’s colleges between 1880 and 1960. Their presence at these institutions refuted ‘scientific’ notions that African-Americans were intellectually inferior to Caucasians (Perkins 1997), but their treatment was far from equal to that of their white classmates. Black female students were subjected to, and fully aware of, unwritten college policies that made them tokens – one black woman per class in many cases – and their diaries recount feelings of loneliness and isolation. Housing policies were the greatest obstacle to African-American women’s full participation at the Seven Sisters, but few black students were openly resentful of their struggles for equal and adequate housing. There was great pressure on these students to assimilate within a white peer culture and bear the assumption that they were “atypical Blacks” (25). They were expected to be dutiful and representative, “well bred future leaders,” “credits to their race” (26). They were “a privileged group” (23): most of these young women’s parents were formally educated despite ongoing segregationist practices, and many were middle to upper class. Many of the first African-American women to attend Seven Sisters’ schools were light-skinned (an insidious indicator of class within and without the black community), and a number were admitted to the elite women’s colleges unknowingly. Leaders of the Seven Sisters’ institutions justified their exclusionary practices, supported by fears of race suicide (most pointedly personified in Bryn Mawr’s M. Carey Thomas) and miscegenation. W.E.B. Dubois and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People became advocates for the students who were expected to leave these colleges once their racial identities were revealed or discovered, and for students who were denied access to housing or other campus facilities. It would be the 1960s before changes in institutional policies were forced and black women were actively recruited for full
participation at most of these colleges. My research at Womyns College shows that historically and predominantly white women’s colleges in the U.S. remain contested sites for black women.

*Sexual and Gender Anxiety at Women’s Colleges*

The sexual activities of women’s colleges’ students and faculty have never been far from the public’s imagination. Dr. Jill Ker Conway, President of Smith College from 1975 to 1985, found it “tiresome,” placing these obsessions within the context of ideologies of ‘women’s nature’ that have masked efforts to contain young women’s intellects and, perhaps less explicitly but more potently, sexuality.

...[A]ny grouping of women without men...couldn't be normal. Ergo it was deviant, and since women were defined by their bodies and not their minds and talents, it had to be sexually deviant, and the course of study had to intellectually weak. (Conway 2001, 122)

In the late 1800s and early 1900s sexologists conflated lesbianism and single-sex education for women, furthering the notion of women’s colleges as “hotbeds” and “hothouses” for abnormal female behavior. These analogies ran through the popular rhetoric of the time: Havelock Ellis referred to the colleges as “the great breeding ground” for lesbian sexuality (Peril 2006, 91). Famously, President Calvin Coolidge referred to women’s colleges as “hotbeds of radicalism” (Solomon 1985) in 1921, perhaps aware that alluding to bedrooms and Communism in the same metaphor would stir latent misogyny and provoke opposition to women’s colleges. That conflation persists to this day: contemporary discourses of women’s colleges recreate the spectacle of young women exploring boundaries of sexuality and gender (Dixit 2001, Inness 1997).

While surely public interest in the ‘perversion’ of young women’s sexuality when men are not around has been and is exaggerated, there is historical documentation of the women’s

Students at residential women’s colleges especially liked the separateness of girls studying and playing together...
Both single-sex and coeducational milieus provided a range of opportunities for female friendships to develop into primary sexual relationships. The erotic component in these friendships varied greatly. For most of this period [the decades surrounding the turn into the 20th century] openness about such “romantic friendships” stemmed from the belief that these relationships were part of growing up...Women’s campuses facilitated “smashing,” with its rituals of courting a special friend...
It is easier to generalize than to be specific on the nature of these relationships, because the relative openness about women’s friendships disappeared by 1920. In the homophobic reaction that followed...women distanced themselves from female intimacy, now viewed as “abnormal.” In the 1930s...[a girl]...might be expelled...for having too “intense” a relationship with another woman. (Solomon 1985, 99, 100, 162)

There was equivocation about lesbianism in an era when “female worlds” were full of “love and ritual” (Smith-Rosenberg): a woman student with too “intense” an interest in one of her peers was dismissed, yet the ‘Wellesley marriages’ between women faculty members were acknowledged and named. Today’s women’s college students are likely to talk openly about the LUGs and BUGs (Lesbian or Bisexual Until Graduation) in their midst, and many campus social events (Big Dyke Parties, Drag King Shows) provide sanctioned opportunities for genderbending. Surprisingly, though, there is little contemporary empirical research on lesbian women at women’s colleges.

There is a problem – empirically, philosophically, politically, and practically -- with the category of ‘woman’ for women’s colleges: she is no longer a coherent construction, no longer evident by virtue of her appearance, dress, behaviors, aspirations, class, race, true womanhood, motherhood, sexuality, sex or gender. Recent popular (New York Times and Boston Globe) and
scholarly (Marine 2009; Munoz and Garrison 2008; Perifimos 2008) writings have addressed the conundrum of women’s colleges enrolling and educating women who no longer identify as women, and males who have changed their gendered and sexed identities to ‘female’.

Institutional responses have included policy revisions (of only admitting students who were “born female” or are “anatomically female;” of embracing transgendered community members by changing student government constitutional language to gender neutral pronouns such as ‘ze’ and ‘the person;’ of creating gender neutral bathrooms/facilities), and presidential and community statements of commitment to gender diversity (Metz 2007; Smith College 2010).

While these institutional moves are not without conflict and controversy for current students and alumnae (including those at Womyns College), much of the feminist and theoretical discussion of transmen and genderqueer students at women’s colleges centers on these single-sex spaces as accepting, safe havens for marginalized and historically excluded learners (Munoz and Garrison 2008; Quart 2008). Legal explorations of this phenomenon focus on college’s rights to freedom of association; students’ rights to freedom of expression; case-by-case admission decisions as unequal treatment under the law; and women students’ rights to the “terms, conditions [and] privileges” (Perfimos 2008, 158) of attending an all women’s institution.

**Contributions of This Study to the Literature**

Women’s colleges and the social relations that take place within them constitute a vanishing way of life: perhaps financially unviable, they have come to be viewed as anachronistic and unnecessary in a ‘post-feminist’ age in which some women have gained access to many of the privileges and conventions of male-dominated, public spheres. And yet,
their current community members and alumnae are fervent advocates for single-sex higher education, buoyed by corroborating academic research. My hope is that this study’s exploration of these contradictions contributes to historical, educational, and sociological understandings of all-female cultures by providing a much-needed view of the environment of a contemporary women’s college as it transitioned to coeducation in the early twenty-first century. I hope that my study will be counted among good feminist empirical research projects, and stand as my participation in the ongoing dialogue that feminist theory brings to the understanding of human lives and institutions.

The study explores to what degree college women in a single-sex environment challenged historically rigid boundaries of ‘acceptable’ identities, behaviors, and appearances. It demonstrates some fluidity in the socially constructed identities of young women, portraying a range of lived experiences and changing definitions of ‘woman.’ It (painfully) shows the power of gender norms and heterosexual hegemony: this women’s college as liberatory space had its limits. My data reveal explicit and implicit notions about women’s sex, sexuality, and gender, and illustrate contested definitions, competing practices, and escalating tensions between generations and feminisms at Womyns College.
Chapter 3: Conducting the Study

This chapter will explain the methodologies – theories of research – that guided my data collection for this ethnography. It will describe the rationale and the methods – tools – that I used in implementing qualitative and feminist methodologies. I will describe my approaches to analyzing my data, including my own “situated knowing” (Haraway 1988) in relation to my research project.

Methodologies

Qualitative Approaches to Research

At its simplest, my dissertation is a “thick description” (Geertz in Bogdan and Biklen 1998, 28) of students’ experiences of their gender in an all-female student culture in a higher educational setting. My study is an ethnography, utilizing “…the framework of culture…as the principal organizational or conceptual tool used to interpret data…” (Bogdan and Biklen 1998, 29). As in all qualitative research, the context mattered, shaping students’ perceptions and experiences of this place in this time, even as the students shaped and reconstituted Womyns’ culture (4). Qualitative research recognizes that ‘what is’ – any phenomenon – is socially constructed and so, qualitative researchers look to see what those social constructs are and how those constructs are built and made sense of by study participants (6). At Womyns College, one of the most important constructs was ‘The W Woman’ – a sense of who belonged at Womyns and who might not – who was discernible from the norms that were continually being (re)created by current students – their discourses and behaviors – and by the institution’s history – its traditions, past attendants (the ‘sisterhood’), and leadership.
My findings suggested some feminist theoretical frameworks that provided context for my data and grounded my analysis. These theoretical frameworks did not however, guide my data collection and analysis; they informed them, and were revised and re-thought with each reading of the data. Data collection, analysis, and interpretation were an ongoing process: I worked to continually ask, ‘What do I see going on here?’ with fresh curiosity, questions, observations, and analysis. A “funneling” (Bogdan and Biklen 1998, 7) process occurred whereby I initially looked broadly at the ways in which women college students talked about ‘being female’ in a single-sex environment. As I gathered data through interviews and on-site observations, my questions changed and my analysis was honed by what I was seeing and hearing in my visits and participation at Womyns College.

Symbolic interactionism shaped my approach; that is, meanings were not assumed to be inherent, but became evident when social interactions were observed and made sense of by my study participants (Blumer in Bogdan and Biklen 1998, 25). There was no single ‘truth’ or set of truths to be found, and in this sense and like all qualitative studies, this one was not designed to be, nor is it, ‘replicable’ or generalizable (35, 36). I did not discover one true meaning of ‘being female’; qualitative research allows the researcher to capture multiple ways in which various women at Womyns College interpreted their experiences as females studying and living with other females. My interactions with the participants affected their responses, and vice versa: this ethnography is a “dialogue or interplay” (7) between myself and the women I studied. My own analysis, perceptions, and meaning-making became filters for what I heard and saw, and, of course, influenced the presentation of my participants’ experiences and meaning-making. I have no delusions that my interpretations of this data are authoritative or
objective. Another author might well interpret this data differently; indeed, another author
would undoubtedly solicit different data from these same participants. I and all of the study’s
participants are partial knowers (Haraway 1988), presenting our own truths from our specific
social locations and subjectivities. When I bring all of our perspectives and experiences
together in my interpretations and representations, I am contributing my vision, a view from
somewhere, a situated knowledge (ibid.) of this small culture at this time and place.

In keeping with Bogdan and Biklen’s characterization of qualitative research studies, my
investigation at Womyns College was naturalistic: because context matters in qualitative
research, the setting of Womyns College was a “direct source of data” and, to access that data,
I spent significant amounts of time in the setting. I became part of the setting, not only as a
researcher but as a consultant at Womyns (see below), and my “insights” were the initial
instrument of analysis (4). Descriptive data was gathered by way of tape-recorded and
transcribed participant interviews, and researcher observations (detailed notes and memos).
The responses to my questions were not quantifiable, but capture-able by the study of spoken
and written narratives at the College. Most of my questions began with ‘how?’ and ‘what?’ or
‘tell me about…’, inviting participants’ descriptions and understandings of processes; long
answers and stories were most informative. I had no real preconceived notion of what I might
find, no hypothesis to prove. As my data came together, it revealed commonalities and
diversions among participants’ responses, and these formed my study’s findings. My research
was an inductive process: the important questions and themes emerged as I spent time at
Womyns College.
Feminist Approaches to Research

I was also committed to practicing feminist research methods. As Marjorie DeVault describes it, a feminist methodology is one which “critiques...knowledge production [and thus research] as one site that has constructed and sustained women’s oppression” (1999, 30). Feminist research has a close historical, methodological, and practical alignment with qualitative research. Some feminist scholars would argue that qualitative methods best serve feminist agendas and belief systems in that they “do not break living connections in the way that quantitative methods do” (Mies 1991, 67). Like the symbolic interactionism of qualitative research, feminist methodologies hold dear the principle that research and theory need to be grounded in and defined by human experiences – ‘the personal is political’. Both feminist and qualitative researchers attempt to know participants by immersing themselves in the participants’ culture, and commit to grounding their research and theory in the meanings research participants make of their everyday, ‘real’ worlds. These tenets theoretically break down the objectification of research subjects, necessitating for feminist ethnographers the naming of their ‘subjects’ as ‘participants.’

Feminist researchers critique deductive approaches to research that test hypotheses or theories against empirically collected data; both qualitative and feminist researchers believe that empirical findings shape and suggest theory. Much feminist research sprang from women and feminist scholars who questioned the masculinist nature of ‘scientific’ methods, the objectification of research ‘subjects,’ and perspectives and projects which excluded females as (theorized or material) subjects. Early female researchers came to see their perspectives and projects as feminist when they critiqued theories and studies that represented white male
subjects as the only human subjects, asking, ‘Where are the women?’ and, ‘What might we know differently if women were part of this research?’ Indeed, “giving voice” to women and other oppressed peoples as a qualitative methodology is attributed to feminist researchers (Bogdan and Biklen 1998, 204).

Feminist research methodologies attempt to interrogate and theorize social and cultural constructions of gender, race, class, sexuality, nationality, et al within intersecting systems of power relations, including those created by academic research. At its core, feminist research is oppositional research (DeVault 1999): it questions the philosophical positioning of narrowly defined scientific inquiry as the path to knowledge. Feminist (and many qualitative) researchers argue that no science – physical or social – remains unaffected by politics or by the bodies, values, and social positions of the persons participating in and conducting it. Making visible the presence of the researcher in the research text is an explicit expectation in feminist projects (Kreiger in Devault 1999, 41; Mies 1991, 69); I discuss my place in this study in a following section.

**Butler Suggests a Methodology**

Because capturing individual and institutional meaning-making is so central to feminist and qualitative research, language and discourse analysis become significant tools. Participants’ interpretations of their daily lives and surroundings are the stories that make visible the culture being studied. Excavating meanings as they are represented by words, codes, traditions, texts is an important part of understanding participants’ experiences. Good feminist ethnographic studies include an examination of inherent and local power relations.
Power relations are revealed in the ‘norms’ that appear in and govern any culture. Judith Butler says norms are “constituted by” and “dependent on...complex institutional and discursive means” that are reiterated and reiterable, or “performative.” Norms are recognizable in research as “a phenomenological set of presuppositions [and] ‘act[s]’ which [are] both socially shared and historically constituted...” (1988, 530). She provides some guidance on how to identify and deconstruct both the norms and resistance to the norms in any given time and place:

“What this means is that one looks both for the conditions by which the object field is constituted, and for the limits of those conditions. The limits are to be found where the reproducibility of the conditions is not secure, the site where conditions are contingent, transformable...[Then] something other than a simple assimilation into prevailing norms can and does take place. The norms themselves can become rattled, display their instability, and become open to resignification.” (2004, 27)

Once my data began to echo some of Butler’s theorizations about the ways in which gender is socially constructed and constrained by and within norms, and some of the College’s power relations emerged, my research questions morphed. Instead of or in addition to asking, “What does ‘being female’ look like in an all-women’s environment?”, I needed to ask how the College constructed and recognized its “intelligible [female] subjects,” those that “mattered” (Butler, 1993). And what happened to those subjects who were no longer intelligible as ‘women’ or at least challenged the intelligibility and identifiability of ‘women’? To interrogate this, I looked for the ways in which participants talked about behaviors, dress, and language that marked femininity at Womyns. My investigation centered on the institutional and social norms that constituted ‘The W Woman’ during the period of my study, and the ways in which some students troubled and resisted heteronormative gender, sex, and desire there. I looked
for the ways in which gender was regulated; that is, how dominant gender performatives were rewarded and gender trespasses were rendered invisible or punished. The subjects of my inquiry were the norms, the constraining world of Womyns College, rather than the ‘women’ students themselves. These norms “…impose[d] a model of coherent gendered life” (Butler, 2004, 5) and were recognizable by their repetitions.

Like much feminist research, Butler’s work asks questions about the workings of power, the ways in which dominant social and political ideologies constrain individual agency. Her ‘subject’ is not an actor entering a political or social field; the ‘subject’ becomes visible because of the gender, sexuality, desire norms which are continuously reiterated and (re)constituted by power relations and discourses in particular places at particular times. These norms reveal workings of power that embed, naturalize, make sense of, and come to define which ‘women’ and bodies matter. This focus on the workings of power and Butler’s insistence that we “…think a [more complex gendered] world…” (1988, 530) are at the heart of feminist qualitative research.

Qualitative research, feminist ethnography, and an excavation of gender norms a la Butler, then, make for good methodological partners for my study. Ethnographic research, based in phenomenology, can focus on “symbols” or “interworked systems of construable signs” (linguistic, textual, in rituals or traditions), and “thick” descriptions of the “‘…social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes’” (Geertz in Bogdan and Biklen 1998, 28) that mark a culture. At Womyns, I looked for shared meanings of the signs or symbols that constituted norms of ‘female-ness’ in a particularly gendered place.
Methods and Tools of the Study

Accessing the Site

The original plan for my dissertation was to study ‘being female’ among students at one historically/predominantly white and one historically/predominantly black women’s college campus. I identified two ‘parallel’ institutions: both were very small women’s colleges that had struggled with enrollment and financial sustainability in their recent histories; one was in a rural, northeastern location in the United States and the other in a suburban city in the southern United States. I requested and was given permission to do research at the small predominantly white women’s college, Womyns College, but access to do research at the historically and predominantly black women’s college was denied. I then sought permission to interview students at another historically and predominantly black women’s college in the southern U.S.; my request was approved by that college’s Institutional Review Board. With support from a Syracuse School of Education grant, I visited that campus for ten days in the spring of 2005, and conducted participant observations (including class attendance and participation in a student women’s studies conference) and interviews with six students and one administrator. However, with the help of one of my research advisors at Syracuse, Dr. Marjorie DeVault, I decided that the data gathered from my visit to the historically black women’s college was not representative enough: without spending at least one full semester on that campus, I would not have data that was comparable to that I gathered at Womyns College. I scrapped my plan to do something of a ‘comparison’ study between two institutions and focused instead on in-depth and over-time research at Womyns College.
I began doing research at Womyns College in the fall of 2001 with interviews of the College’s senior administrators. In the fall of 2002 and spring of 2005, I conducted interviews with students, recorded participant observations and fieldnotes, and gathered texts for analysis. This study was made richer by the open and extended access I was granted by senior administrators at Womyns College (in particular, the President and two Deans). I happened to conduct my study at a particularly opportune moment at the College: as I planned my second batch of interviews and observations, the College’s Board of Trustees announced that Womyns would admit men as full-time students the following fall. The prospect of introducing male bodies into this environment generated rich discourses about sexual differences and the operations of individual and institutional power. My final research intervention at the College was a focus group with four of my participants in the spring of 2006, one semester after coeducation had been implemented.

Gathering Data

As Bogdan and Biklen note, all good qualitative researchers seek to employ “methods [that] are consistent with the logic embodied in the methodology” (1998, 31). For this study, as for much qualitative research, the primary research tools or methods were participant observation and in-depth interviewing. The use of these tools reflects the philosophical foundations of qualitative research – looking for the ways in which people make sense of their environment and experiences – and of feminist research – ‘hearing’ women who are experts in their own lives and searching for gender norms which shed light on power relations in our culture.
Gaining access to Womyns College was easy and joyful, made so by the Dean of the College and the Dean of Students, who were pleased with my feminist orientation and clear commitment to single-sex education for women and girls. The President of Womyns was also extraordinarily open, allowing me access to her diversity committee meetings, some Trustee and faculty functions, community meetings, and student organization meetings (with student permission). The deans and the President were eager to have my findings and perspective, and each dean asked me to help her with projects in her office at times during the four years I visited Womyns College: in return for access to the College community for research purposes, I helped to assess the student affairs division; conducted research on first year students’ transitions to the College and shared my findings with Womyns College faculty, staff, students, and parents; helped train Resident Advisors; assisted in the evaluation and planning of curricular and extracurricular orientation activities for new students.

During the spring semester of 2004, I was employed by the Dean of the College as an Academic Projects Coordinator, and assisted in preparations for an accreditation visit; provided research and support for academic initiatives; taught a first year student seminar; and served on the Academic Program and Policy Committee. The Dean and I agreed that I would not conduct any research during that semester. However, one of my ongoing challenges in analyzing my data was to separate my impressions, experiences, and memories from that semester from the data that I gathered with students and senior administrators during the course of my study. I was able to negotiate these boundaries by focusing my study on the student culture and relying only on the data that I had in writing – interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and textual analysis of some official College documents and public writings by senior
administrators. I have been thoughtful and careful about the details that are analyzed in my study, reviewing all data that is included in this dissertation to assure that it was gathered under the auspices of my research agreements with the Womyns College deans and the Syracuse University IRB.

My initial research at Womyns consisted of five, hour-long interviews with each of four deans (the academic Dean, Associate Dean, and Assistant Dean of the College, and the Dean of Students) and the Director of Admissions in the fall of 2001. In addition, I obtained an audiotape of the President’s 2001 interview with a local radio personality about the value of women’s colleges. I took notes on all of these conversations, and analyzed them specifically for language about the role of feminism in each of their lives and in their work at the College. These interviews were the basis for the material that revealed generational fissures between senior administrators and students in my study, as well as some descriptions of traditions, ‘The W Woman,’ and institutional values.

The Dean of the College and Dean of Students helped me solicit students for participant interviews. Each of them gave me a short list of names of students to contact to request interviews. Because these names came from the deans, my participant pool was skewed toward student leaders: five of my first six participants were either student government officers or Resident Advisors. To create a second pool of participants three years later, I asked the Deans to supply some additional names, but also distributed flyers to students via some faculty members (in Women’s Studies, Psychology, and Sociology). This second pool was far less ‘student leader’ heavy, but included some Resident Advisors, many athletes, the campus judicial chair, and a student who was awarded the campus’ most prestigious leadership award.
at commencement. In addition, my method of inviting student participation through certain faculty members probably increased the numbers of students in my study who ‘spoke the language’ of feminism. The methods by which I formed my participant pool meant that I was interviewing students who were perhaps more involved in and informed about campus life and institutional politics and changes than their peers; and that they were ready and able to articulate informed perceptions of what was happening in their community, particularly during the time when discussions of coeducation heightened campus tensions.

I conducted and audio-recorded in-depth interviews with each of these students on Womyns’ campus in a closed room. I completed six interviews in the fall of 2002, and sixteen in the spring of 2005. My initial interview questions were modeled on those of a study that was similar to mine: Amira Proweller’s study of girls’ identity formation or “becoming somebody” (1998, 4) at a small girls’ school in the United States; her interview questions investigated the links her participants made between gender and socio-economic class. I started my research as a study of ‘being female in an all-female environment,’ and my interview questions focused on how Womyns’ students made sense of their gender; the interviews most often became explorations of each participant’s gender, sexuality, and/or race. Based on participants’ responses to my questions in the fall of 2002, ongoing observations, and emerging themes, I revised my interview guidelines for the second batch of interviews in the spring of 2005. My interview questions included ‘prompts’ (the initial question I asked each participant to begin discussion of a topic; see Appendix B) and ‘probes’ (impromptu follow up questions that asked participants to think further about their initial response.
My participants and the work of feminist scholars such as Kimberle Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins reminded me that one cannot claim to investigate women’s lives without acknowledging the complexity and situated-ness of individual and collective identities. While only two of my participants talked about any parts of their identities intersecting (neither used this term) or ways that they saw socio-economic class and race coming together in campus dynamics, my participants’ complex identities are testament to the impossibility of analyzing gender in a vacuum (see Appendix A). Sexuality was particularly salient on this campus: eight of the Womyns’ students I interviewed identified as straight and ten identified as “queer,” “lesbian,” “gay,” “bisexual,” or “genderqueer.” Four of my participants did not talk about their sexual orientation during the interview, though all described campus discourse around issues of sexuality, and many described their own adjustments to being aware of and accepting lesbian relationships or “fluid” sexuality. This language around sexuality also reflects the phenomena at Womyns of women who were “lesbian until graduation” – LUGs – or “bisexual until graduation” – BUGs. As Chapter Six will show, these labels were terms of endearment and playfulness for those on campus who were sexual explorers; they were also terms of ridicule employed by women students who were unequivocal about their sexual orientation as queers, lesbians, bisexuals. Thirteen of the students in my study identified as “white” or “Caucasian;” nine used terms such as “bi-racial,” “Jamaican,” “Asian-American,” “South Asian,” “west Indian and west African,” and “Caribbean-American” in response to the question, “In what racial group would you place yourself?” When I asked, “What socio-economic class would you say you belong to?”, five participants identified themselves or their families as “working class” and/or “lower middle class.” They talked about the disadvantages of not having access to a car at the
rural campus, and some of the ways that they noticed socio-economic class when peers’
parents came to campus, but there was a sense that class was “...not on your plate of things to
deal with,” that “it hasn’t been a big problem” at Womyns. One participant who had lived
outside of the U.S. for ten years of her childhood talked around the question, critiquing the
notion of class in the United States and linking it to race and sexuality; she ended her musings
with, “I don’t know how more appropriately I can articulate that but...” Participants who said
they were “middle” class or “upper middle class” (15 of the 22 students) had a difficult time
articulating how that impacted their experiences at Womyns, although a few said they knew
they were “privileged.” Not only did their responses reinforce the taken-for-granted nature of
economic security; the responses also suggested an intellectual engagement with gender, race,
and class privilege in classrooms, rather than a personal or emotional motivation to understand
and discuss the lived experiences of Womyns students that were brought about by structural
inequalities. My participants were well represented in the Women’s Studies department: six of
the 22 women were Women’s Studies majors, virtually guaranteeing that my study would be
impacted by their intellectual and everyday knowledge of sexuality and gender. Three were
history majors; three were psychology majors; a number of them were working on
independent, interdisciplinary academic programs; three were science majors. At the time of
my individual interviews with each participant, nine were seniors, seven were juniors, and six
were sophomores.

My approach to these interviews was fluid; I did not hold strictly to the questions in my
outline, but tried to follow up topics that seemed particularly stimulating for each participant.
Each interview lasted between sixty and ninety minutes; the interviews were tape recorded and
transcribed verbatim, nineteen by myself and three by a paid transcriber. I carefully reviewed the interviews that I did not transcribe, listening to the tapes when the transcription was unclear or when shared campus language was misunderstood by the hired transcriber. I coded all interviews myself, first by hand and highlighter, and then as I became more confident in my coding categories, by using Microsoft Word.

*Reality Check via Group Interview*

In the spring of 2006, I invited all remaining interviewees (those who had not left Womyns or graduated) to a session to hear and react to my initial analysis of the interviews. This was meant to be “a form of conversation,” modeled on Fine and Macpherson’s “critical and collaborative group interview” (1992, 201). In this methodology – which embraces the historical roots of feminist research in consciousness raising groups – Fine and Macpherson offer a praxis (some would say an intervention) that encourages “‘personal stories,’ raise[s] questions, tr[ies] on other viewpoints, and re[envisions] stories as political narratives” (ibid). This “conversation” served several purposes: as a ‘member check’ that allowed me to hear how accurately the participants felt I represented them and their experiences and interpretations of being in an all women’s environment; as a step toward a collaborative research practice that might “mitigate the impact of [my] own social position” (Hurtado and Stewart 1997, 309) with analysis from participants’ multiple locations and perspectives; and an opportunity for participants to share their experiences, reflections, losses, and gains with each other after a semester of coeducation. I also hoped that the group conversation might support participants in articulating their experiences if they questioned or disagreed with my initial analysis or felt different from me by virtue of some aspect(s) of our identities.
Four students joined me for this ninety minute conversation on a (not too early) Saturday morning: two white students, and two students of color; two were straight, and two identified as lesbian or bisexual. I video-and audiotaped the conversation and transcribed the session from both tapes, comparing the tapes to check for accurate transcription. The conversation affirmed my analysis, with only minor corrections to my interpretations. But primarily, the four students wanted to talk about their experiences with coeducation and men on campus: they shared stories and checked with each other to confirm or deny rumors, and looked for corroboration of their feelings of loss and “craziness.” This was an exceptionally rich opportunity for me, both to have my research analysis confirmed, and to learn about the ways in which gender and power played out in this altered landscape for these four students.

Conducting this group interview was my last research ‘intervention’ at Womyns.

*Participant Observations and Text Analysis*

While the student interviews produced rich data about individual women’s notions and experiences of ‘being female’ at Womyns College, I did not design the interview questions to interrogate students’ knowledge of institutional history, context, or stability. I gathered that information through observations and some textual analysis. My participant observations came from attendance at two meetings of the President’s Committee on Diversity; one community meeting on classroom climate (called to address the experiences of Womyns’ students of color); and student organization meetings, including those of the Student Diversity Committee, the Women’s Resource Center, and the Lesbian Bisexual Queer Alliance. I recorded observations and fieldnotes from attendance at several campus events: one of the College’s “Accepted Student Mondays” (for prospective students who had been accepted to Womyns but
had not yet committed to attend); a day-long student activism conference organized and hosted by Womyns’ student government and interested students; a student photography exhibit of the student protests against coeducation; and the full, final commencement ceremony of Womyns as a women’s college. At these meetings and events, I did not use recording devices but took notes while in attendance, then followed up by writing detailed fieldnotes.

I read excerpts from the only formal written history of the College, authored by an alumna. I researched some of Womyns’ recent history in The Chronicle of Higher Education and the local and student newspapers. I read several essays by one of the College’s faculty members whose scholarship was about women’s colleges. I utilized College catalogs, recruiting materials, and the College’s website to clarify specific information about campus events. I read some local and national news coverage of the student protests. I analyzed several articles from the student newspaper that participants referred to in their interviews.

**Approach to Data Analysis**

While my writing in this dissertation presents data gathering and analysis as a linear process, both data gathering and analysis were ongoing: each informed the other, as they do in most qualitative research endeavors (Bogdan and Biklen 1998, 6). My analysis emerged from reviewing interview transcripts, and writing fieldnotes and memos, ongoing ‘notes to self’ about themes that were developing, questions that I had, and connections between observations and interviews. In turn, my interview questions and choices for observation sessions evolved as my analysis became more specific or differently focused.
My initial coding from the student interviews revealed categories such as the “bubble” or “orange juice concentrate” of the campus (its small, intimate, isolated character); the meanings of “sisterhood” to my participants; tensions on campus with regard to racial diversity vs. sexual diversity; different senses of psychological and physical safety (based on participants’ race and histories with sexual violence); “voice” and confidence; the visibility of same-sex relationships and attractions; feminine (“femme”) and masculine (“butch”) performances and readings of bodies; public displays of female sexuality; and the “drrrama” of living in an all-female community.

After all interviews were completed and transcribed, I began more comprehensive data analysis, coding all of my data again in search of the most prominent or significant findings (Bogdan and Biklen 1998, 182-189). This second coding reinforced some previous themes and revealed new ones: ‘The W Woman’ as a signifier of the kind of femininity/womanhood that was valued historically and consistently in this culture, and of the norms surrounding gender and heterosexuality; struggles with the College’s public image as a libertarian sexual culture and resulting generational tensions between students and senior administrators; race as a prominent identity marker that was an understated political issue among students; masculinity as a source of anxiety, ambivalence, and danger, reminiscent of radical feminist positions; and the significance of the geographic isolation and beauty of the campus.

Certainly there were more themes than the three I write about here, but these three – generational tensions; Womyns College as a site of comfort and resistance; and gender norms that revealed the fluid and problematic nature of the category of ‘woman’ at and for the College -- were prominent and infinitely interesting. Each exemplified or interrogated an issue
that was a recent or current topic for discussion and theory development in feminist scholarship. My findings at least echoed, and in some instances might inform, feminist theory.

**My place in the study**

Any good feminist or qualitative researcher displays an awareness of her/his ‘location’ within the research; it requires ongoing attention throughout the process. Who I am/was shaped the reception I encountered as a researcher and participant at Womyns College.

I confess to being a women’s college ‘wannabe,’ although when I was eighteen years old and had the opportunity to make that choice, I walked away. Since that time in my own life and based in my experiences as a college administrator at women’s and coeducational institutions, and as a teacher of Women’s Studies, I have come to believe that all-female spaces – whether in the form of consciousness-raising groups, women’s studies classrooms, girl scout troop meetings, or women’s church groups – give women permission to explore and re/construct experiences that are personal, but have political implications and offer opportunities for individual and/or collective action. I acknowledge that I am angered by the ways in which American historical, political, and social discourses have constructed women’s separatism as a failed experiment, an anachronistic, conservative project whose time has come and gone.

My position was both an asset and a liability for me as a researcher. On the one hand, I entered the research site with an informed curiosity about the lived experiences of the members of this separatist community, and about how well this all-women’s college was enacting its institutional mission. On the other hand, I risked being disappointed and disillusioned, and indeed, that was my experience as my analysis progressed. As I researched gender norms within the Womyns culture, I realized that this College was as reflective of
heteronormativity as any other social institution. The female and feminist agency that I had imagined in this utopia was constrained by hegemonic notions, histories, and practices.

I became, in some senses, a ‘native’ of my setting: by virtue of my race and gender and my situated-ness as a familiar presence over a period of several years at Womyns College, I was somewhat invisible there. I had worked with college students most of my adult life: I was comfortable on college campuses, and had an informed view of who traditional-aged college students were in the early 21st century (though of course, college students are not a monolithic lot and I connected differently with each participant). I had adopted some of their ways of speaking, and understood many of the colloquialisms, inflections, and cultural references I encountered at Womyns. I had an intellectual (rather than lived) understanding of the personal and community issues women college students, in particular, faced. This kind of knowing, however, constituted a double-edged sword for me as a researcher. While I could engage with Womyns’ students through shared vocabularies, a tangential understanding of their experiences at a women’s college, and discourses about local and global events, I had to consider the possibility that the conversation and perspectives coming from my mouth sounded disingenuous, dated, or ‘performed’ to young female college students. However, the overall richness of the data I gathered from the interviews led me to believe that I asked questions that most of my participants connected with on a deep level. One participant told me that some of her friends asked how they might participate in my study, as they had heard that the interview experience was “cathartic” in the face of coeducation, and a good opportunity to reflect on their lives at Womyns College.
My employment at Womyns College posed an additional challenge. While my daily participation in campus life during that spring semester afforded me some extraordinary views of the institution – its administrative, alumnae, and student leaders; the dynamics of the faculty; and the ways in which decisions were made – I was not authorized to ‘use’ these experiences for research purposes. But I knew things that were keenly descriptive on an anecdotal and institutional level and that could have informed my study. I had to remind myself that my job, as researcher, was to honor participants’ experiences as relayed through their stories and responses; and to represent my participants and the College in ways that ‘do no harm’ (Bogdan and Biklen 1998, 44). I have been careful to present my findings in my participants’ words, and to assure that I have direct data (quotes, writings) from students and administrators to support my analysis. Since my employment at the college was short-lived (five months) and prior to any pointed, open discussion about coeducation, I do not believe administrators or students perceived me to be ‘for’ or ‘against’ them in my study. My employment represented no conflict of interest for me as a researcher.

This challenge was exacerbated by the importance of protecting the anonymity of my research site. Within an ever shrinking cohort of women’s colleges, it might be easy for readers to identify the place where I conducted my study. Institutional politics are often not pretty in American higher education, and in the face of financial questions about its stability and philosophical questions about its commitment to women’s education, Womyns College was particularly vulnerable. Ensuring the confidentiality of my sources – interview participants, books and articles about the College, public quotes from Womyns leaders – required constant vigilance, even and especially in the writing of this text. I have checked again and again to
assure that the ways in which I identify the College and my participants safeguard their voluntary participation and openness.

To the women I interviewed and observed, I imagine that I appeared as a white, middle-aged woman, perhaps representative of their parents’ generation. As I introduced myself and my study to the participants, my feminist orientation no doubt became apparent, and I am aware that many women do not see or experience feminism in a positive light. My middle class-ness and education were most likely evident to my participants, based on the way I dressed and the questions I posed. Most certainly, my interviews and observations were affected by issues of race and sexuality – my interviewees’ and mine. In my interview with one of the women of color, I grew frustrated with what I ultimately felt was a lack of directness and ability to get to the point. As I reflected on my interactions with this woman, I realized that I had had this reaction when listening to some other African-American women. Perhaps my race gave this participant pause to trust me, and perhaps she was speaking in a way that allowed her to sound as though she was giving me a lot of information, when she was actually guarding her responses or feelings. In a couple of interviews, I sensed that participants’ knowledge of my sexual orientation may have influenced the ways in which they spoke about the tensions around sexuality at Womyns College: their speech patterns became more cautious, slowing a bit when they were speaking about lesbianism on campus; their language became less precise, even cryptic.

While there is some writing on the challenges of inter-racial participant observation and interviewing in qualitative research, there is much less about the influence of researchers’
sexual orientations on the ethnographic enterprise. In an attempt to address these dynamics, I listened to the advice of several feminist researchers:

- I used a “transcription convention” designed to demonstrate “respectful attention” to each participant’s words and to communicate “…our mutual search for the meanings of her experience…” It is my hope that the interview excerpts “…give…the reader a sense of the cadence of our talk…” (DeVault 1999, 89).

- I committed to “thick analysis” in the write-up of the study “to provide minimal documentation, when views are all-too-familiar and oppressive, while holding [myself] to a very high standard of analytic depth…” (Hurtado and Stewart 1997, 308). My fieldnotes record ongoing reflection about participants’ responses and (verbal and non-verbal) reactions to my questions about individual and community performances of sexuality, whether or not the participant might have known my sexual orientation and if so, how that might encourage or discourage their disclosures.

- I “did my homework” (Kenny 2000) by studying and incorporating scholarship by feminists of many racial and sexual locations, and about black women’s and sexual minorities’ experiences as college students.

This study was my apprenticeship in qualitative feminist research, and the question of consistency between methods, theoretical frameworks, and analysis was a profound one for this novice researcher. In feminist research, the standard is high. For example, one description of the principles of feminist research specified these elements:
- That the research make a contribution to “women’s liberation through producing knowledge that can be used by women themselves”;

- That “the methods of gaining...knowledge should not be oppressive;”

- And that a “feminist critical perspective” should “...question both the dominant intellectual traditions and reflect on its own development” (Acker, Barry and Esseveld 1983, 137).

I am more confident about my success in upholding the latter two principles than the first: by adhering to tried and true qualitative and feminist methods, my conduct of the study was respectful of my participants and the institution, under constant vigilance for exploitive or oppressive research practices. My grounding in feminist theory made me critical of dominant discourses and of the possibility of objective research, and provided me with a lens that calls into question academic standards for knowledge production (including the many approaches of and to feminist studies). But I found myself constantly questioning the ways in which my study might contribute to feminist and/or educational thought, theory, and practice. While my dissertation as an intellectual exercise has been stimulating and fun, I am unsure how useful it is to confirm feminist generational tensions or to expose the complex and fraught sexual, gender, and racial politics of an embattled institution. I view my study as primarily descriptive, helping to make sense of the culture of one single-sex higher educational institution for women. Still, there are some lessons here for those who are concerned about the sustainability of women’s colleges, and their stewardship of and responsibility for ‘women’s’ higher education. And I harbor small hopes that for the women students I interviewed and with whom
I shared my results, participation in this study may have sparked some introspection and critical thinking or provided them with an ‘aha!’ moment or two.

I am far less sure that my study suggests possibilities for change, and I am concerned about its place within feminisms that are increasingly transnational, border-crossing, complex, and culturally multiple. When I began my research at Womyns, there seemed a chance that what was going on there might respond to Judith Butler’s “critical question” of, “How might the world be reorganized [to honor] the complex ways in which gendered lives are crafted and lived?” (2004, 5) The Womyns College community’s private and public grappling with displays of gender and sexuality that were outside of heterosexual norms could have suggested ways out of constricting and hegemonic exercises in and of power. But students’ reproductions of feminine and masculine roles and the heterosexual matrix, and ultimately the College’s decision to ‘go coed’ set aside any possibility of or sustainable model for “undoing gender.”
Chapter 4: Generational Tensions at Womyns College

Discord erodes the ideal of a somnolent but rousable sisterhood underlying the worlds of diverse women... (Baym 1995, 2)

Generational tensions between senior women administrators and women students showed up at the College as tensions between second and third wave feminisms, the proverbial ‘mother-daughter conflict.’ My data turned up examples of the cultural feminist values of Womyns College ‘mothers,’ and the postmodern and anti-essentialist feminist values of Womyns College ‘daughters’. This chapter discusses the ways in which the sexed, gendered, and raced identities of the students demanded recognition of intersectionality in their everyday lives and in institutional practices. But students perceived that Womyns’ institutional mothers did not engage with this diversity and complexity, and that the College traded its radical mission – of educating women – for an ordinary one – coeducation.

Much has been made of the tensions between feminist generations in both popular and academic texts. Deborah Siegel’s essay, “The movement that has no name” appears in The Mothers’ Movement Online blog, and argues that the feminist movement has been co-opted to a point where the personal is personal again. In Harper’s Magazine, October 2010, Susan Faludi wrote of “American Electra: Feminism’s Ritual Matricide.” She worried that depictions of the clashes between aging, maternal, myopic second wavers and hip, deconstructionist, multivocal, grown-up grrrls reflected “internal dynamics that...operate as detonators, assuring feminism’s episodic self-destruction” (30). Academic analyses center on problems with both the ‘wave’ metaphor and the mother-daughter allusions that are used to define feminist generations, and the ways in which the notion of generational tensions supports the popular press’ claim that we are in a post – as in ‘no longer relevant’ – feminist era. Still, the contrasts between feminist
approaches – generational and political/philosophical – are useful in examining my findings at Womyns College.

A women’s college is arguably the most institutionalized structure for “female to female inheritance” (Spencer 2007, 298) in American patriarchy. The liberal and cultural feminisms that guided women’s colleges in the late 20th century have come up against skeptical public perceptions, but more interestingly, against postmodern and third wave feminisms and students. The generational tensions that were evident at Womyns College represented this collision of feminist thinking, a caricature of the problematized mother-daughter metaphor. The familial relations that had been intentionally constructed in women’s colleges (see Horowitz 1984), and persistent allegiance to “sisterhood” among Womyns College students and alumnae were amplified by the College’s traditions and geographic isolation; a sense of betrayal of these ideologies was particularly keen as the College struggled to transition to coeducation. The stage was set for a period of “sororal anxiety” (Gillis, Howie and Mumford 2007, xxviii) at Womyns College.

In the days following the Trustees’ announcement that Womyns would admit men as full-time students the following academic year, over one hundred students waged a protest of visibility and silence in the main administration building on campus and, later, in tents on the lawn in front of the building. A lawsuit was filed by two students, alleging that the College had reneged on its promise of a four-year, single-sex education. In public, members of the administration spoke favorably of the College’s decision to go coed: Womyns’ doors could remain open, the institution could be sustained. The President, as the first alumna President of Womyns College, became the primary target for students’ anger and disappointment,
representing what Patricia (study participant) called “a second wave movement mentality.”

The trope of the mother/daughter generational division in feminism manifested itself in the “lines” that were “drawn” (Alexandra, study participant) between generations of ‘W Women.’

The conflict was utterly oppositional: for all members of the community, one was either for Womyns as a women’s college or for it as co-educational; one was either for women or for men; among students, one was either present at the protest every day, missing classes, or did not care enough to participate; for all students and alumnae, one was either a true ‘W Woman’ or a traitor of that ideal.

I contend that at the heart of Womyns’ generational conflict was tension between cultural feminist beliefs and practices, and postmodern and anti-essentialist ones. In less than explicit terms, the administration – particularly the admissions office – and students had been engaged in dialogues about who belonged at Womyns and who did not, and about what was personal and what was political. As an institution, Womyns College was finding that the category of ‘woman’ as its target audience could not hold. When women were construed in cultural feminist terms – devalued, defined and constrained by sexism, and with a feminine orientation to relationships and connected rather than competitive learning – women’s colleges were needed to revive students’ silenced voices and to reconstruct women students’ true selves via ‘women-centered’ educational practices. Womyns’ students celebrated themselves as ‘women,’ but with much greater variation and agency than imagined or supported by their elders in the administration. Students were pushing boundaries of sex, gender, and sexuality, asserting complex identities, reinforcing that the personal was at least public if not political.

From the students’ perspective, some Womyns administrators attempted to contain students’
sexualities and gender performances; this suggests that these members of Womyns’ elder feminist generation believed that the ‘personal’ nature of individual sexuality should be ‘private,’ and that the College should/could/would not become a platform for intra-gender and sexuality politics to play out in public.

This tension put the College in a precarious position because of social, political, and market forces. Prospective female students were not attracted to women’s colleges whose message was a cultural feminist one, a discourse that would seem to always and already construct them as victims. Neither were they attracted to Womyns’ reputation as a place where gender and sexuality were “fluid”: dominant cultural values of unequivocal femininity and natural heteronormativity foreclosed this postsecondary option to all but the most open-minded of families and young women. Financial strain was broadcast as the motivating factor in Womyns College’s decision to ‘go coed.’ But if we listen closely to many of my participants’ experiences of institutional dynamics, it is clear that there was also anxiety about gender trouble, represented in irreconcilable feminisms. Referencing the terms and tenets of the second and third waves of feminist theory discussed in my introductory chapter, this chapter cites language and actions at Womyns that suggested these two ‘waves.’ In particular, I will call attention to the cultural, radical, postmodern, and anti-essentialist feminisms that came into conflict at the College.

The Protest at Womyns: “Lines have been drawn”

Within a few weeks of the College’s decision to ‘go coed,’ after student protests had disbanded, and in time for a public symposium on the campus, a photo exhibit depicting the
students’ opposition and activism appeared in the hallway of a heavily trafficked campus building. My fieldnotes described the exhibit:

At the entrance to the building, a bulletin board displays a large sign with ‘SOS’ in black letters and a woman’s symbol in the ‘O’. Small red rectangular signs with black lettering say, ‘defiance’ and ‘strike’...Along the right wall as one enters the building, is a straight line of six color photos mounted on foamboard. The card introducing the line of photos reads, “These photographs represent the student protest at Womyns College that took place after the Board of Trustees voted to make Womyns a co-ed institution...Over 200 students took over [the administration building] in order to reverse the decision. The protest lasted almost a week...The students who are blacked out in these photos have either already left Womyns or will be leaving Womyns at the end of this semester. Their disappearances will leave behind memories...as well as the question of how many more will go.”

My notes comment on the diversity of the students represented in the photographs: white, black, and Asian students were protesters, and “the faces of the students in each of the photos appear to be all different – i.e., this is not just the same group of students protesting in different places.”

Photo: 14 students stand in a line, arms linked, blocking the entrance to the President’s office... Strips of black cloth cover their mouths. The door to the President’s office is closed. There is a poster to the right of the office door that says, “We shall not be moved!”

Photo: Students are seated in the lobby of the administration building...Their arms are locked; strips of black cloth are over all of their mouths. Many of the women in this photo hang their heads; many gaze directly at the camera. The tone is very somber, not defiant or angry.

The public persona responsible for this photo exhibit was “Wendy W.”; her name represented any and all Womyns students, and widespread discontent with the College’s decision. Wendy W’s creator was among my study participants. She described the impact of the protest, first saying that “issues of gender or being a woman” were “brought up a lot more since the coed decision.”
Wendy: …[T]he biggest loss that people feel, at one point in time everybody felt like the administration was on their side. Now…you know, lines have been drawn and people…are either on one side or other of the line...The college has been forever changed you know before men even step on campus, the college is different now...

[W]hen the decision started rolling around, like the lines started to be formed. It was you know are you for or against co-ed? And you know there were people who were for it for different reasons you know but it became you’re either for it or you’re against it. And it wasn’t you know ‘why,’ it was just you are or you aren’t. Um and that was when it began. When [administration building] became the site of the protest, it was are you in [administration building] or not in [administration building]?...

Lines were even drawn between students and faculty you know like who could you trust and who could you not trust, and who was on your side and who was not. Same thing with the administration you know every member of the administration outwardly was you know against the protest...whether or not they were for coeducation. They were the administration and they were on the side of the Board...even though you know I knew and I think most people knew that personally some people didn’t agree, but outwardly this is what they were.

...Those lines never really went away you know, it continues to be very divided and you know in my capacity as a member of [student government] who has to you know be the person that goes between the administration and the students, I see that and you know what everybody keeps demanding of myself and the other [student government] members is you know what side of the line are you on and you know there is no ‘I am on the line’ [meaning ‘I understand both sides of this issue’] (laughs)...

Susan: Were you in [administration building] or out of [administration building]?
Wendy: Um I was in [administration building].
Susan: OK and I also take from your last comment that you wanted to be walking the line. Is that true?
Wendy: Yea, I mean it was hard for me because I sat in meetings before the decision was made and heard their supposedly compelling arguments for why it was made... I continue not to think it was the right decision although um I’m understanding more and more why they made the decision and ...why they will implement it when they want to. But...you know I love this place with very fierce love and um (pause) I don’t think that anybody who made that decision really understands...what it’s like to be a student at Womyns [now]...And so...I think that they kind of made this decision with like ‘we know what’s best for Womyns’ and without any regard to the fact that they don’t live here you know, they can’t really understand what it’s like to live here...
Susan: ...What did that tension look like between students, between those who wanted the college to stay all women and those who were OK with it...going coed?...

Wendy: Oh yea, I mean there were like fights (laughs) between students yea, I mean not like physical fights but there were verbal fights between students...There was the whole thing with the girl who felt like she was getting threatening phone calls...because she was openly for coeducation...

Susan: What’s it like now? What’s the tension like now?

Wendy: Um it might actually be worse now. Because (laughs) um you know there’s this popular opinion that now everybody should be over it? And I think that people aren’t, for the most part. Um I think if anything people kind of like were traumatized by the whole thing?...There’s also...a substantial portion of people who are planning on transferring...

Jane was a sophomore at the time that the coeducation decision was made, and was struck by the irony of Womyns’ mission in light of the administration’s response to the students’ protests. She transferred to another women’s college at the end of that academic year.

Womyns is...so good at creating these critical thinking women and I don’t know I think that’s one reason why the protest was such, the protest really shows what Womyns can do for women. It was 200 women using their voices to stand up for what they believe in, so I don’t know why the Board and the administration were surprised by it because that’s what they’ve taught us to do, use your voice...I think it’s a real tragedy because that’s something that’s come to...characterize Womyns...

Jordan, a Jamaican woman, articulated the ways that the protest was complicated by her identities. The conflict for her was not just about coeducation; it was about Womyns’

commitment to support a student body that was “diverse” by gender and sexuality and race and ethnicity.

...I participated in the protest...I really strongly participated in the protest for awhile but when I realized that that wasn’t gonna work um I kinda took a step back and became one of the people to let the administration know...like our problem with the decision is not that boys are coming. Our problem is the way you went about it...I work with the [intercultural programs] office, I’m on one of the diversity committees so I’m working right now to keep keep that
um alive because the boys are coming and because they’re making such a big transition, we need to not let that get lost. So that’s how I dealt with it publicly, and privately I just ignore it like (laughs) when I hang out with my friends, we don’t talk about coeducation...

Grace was particularly bitter about the responses of members of the Board and the administration in the aftermath of the protest, who referred to the students’ demonstration in the administration building as “our little protest,” belittling the time and work that students put into opposing the coeducation decision. She said there was a sense from the administration that they “let us protest”.

As the Board’s decision to make Womyns coeducational became imminent, the President’s rhetoric did not give any hint of how she felt about an abandonment of women’s education at her alma mater or about decisions to fast-track institutional projects that seemed to reinforce male privilege – a long-awaited science building and improvements in the College’s athletic offerings. For students, her betrayal felt particularly acute, a dismissal of the cultural feminism that was deeply embedded in Womyns’ history.

**Founding Feminisms at Womyns College**

Much of Womyns’ campus iconography was feminine and romanticized. In a protected alcove of the central entrance into the main building stood a statue of the Roman goddess Minerva, whose domain is that of intellect and wisdom. Other campus icons evoked the tension between femininity and power: there were stained glass windows of goddesses and muses in several buildings. Homes and student residences occupied central space on the campus, hinting at domesticity and familial relations as a foundation of the College.
In an 1866 letter, the founder of Womyns College wrote to his friend, the founding father of nearby Big University, saying, “I intend to educate wives for your boys, allowing they bring good recommendations”*. He echoed the Victorian ideals of womanhood of his time:

Feeling and appreciating a Mother’s influence extending thru a whole life has induced me to begin an institution to promote a higher standard of moral and intellectual culture than has yet been obtained by the ordinary...institutions to which you allude...I will have an institution that will educate American girls to fulfill the duties and take the position that a kind of Provenance has assigned (sic) to the better half of our race...and woman then can fulfill her mission without going to the polls or entering the arena of politics.*

Clearly Womyns College, like many women’s colleges, was not founded on explicit feminist principles. And yet, in the quote above, there is a thread that sounds like the cultural feminism of the second wave: women warranted intellectual training by virtue of their roles as “Mothers.” Well-educated women could ensure a “higher standard of moral...culture” through their natural, “assigned” “mission” in the private, domestic sphere. Womyns’ founder saw no need to have educated women function in the public sphere by voting or serving in political office. A woman’s place was in the social and moral realm, as one who would enhance “taste” and “culture”, “elevate the tone of social intercourse” in the interests of “refining” man*. The binaries of female/male are rife in the founder’s rhetoric: during the Victorian era, the ‘cult of true womanhood’ saw female nature as pure and male nature as coarse; women as loving and peaceful, men as rational and aggressive; women as supportive and secondary, men as autonomous subjects. There were vestiges of the Womyns founder’s cultural feminist beliefs deeply embedded in the College’s practices over a century later.
The Sins of the Mothers: Cultural, Liberal, and Radical Feminisms

Womyns College, as were many women’s colleges, was also established in the spirit of liberal feminism, a practical solution to the problem of exclusion: women were denied entry to most American colleges and universities until well into the mid-twentieth century, so women’s colleges had to provide postsecondary education that was as demanding as the men’s – in the words of Womyns’ founder – “that we might see progress in the mental training of our young women [rather than] in cultivating the ornamental talents”*. Only secondarily did women’s college leaders argue for separatist cultures. But this became a powerful discourse at women’s colleges with the advent of studies about schools that were “failing at fairness [gender equity]” (Sadkers 1994) and ignoring girls’ and women’s “ways of knowing” (Belenky et al 1986). It is this combination of liberal and cultural feminism that seemed most apparent to me in the institutional decision-making and practices at Womyns during the time of my study.

In its modern era, the College was led by women who had status as exemplary headmistresses, noted “female networkers,” and excellent faculty members*. Its first woman president was a nationally recognized stateswoman who took office in the mid 1970s. Since then, the College has been led by women, with the exception of several interim presidents. During its last decade as a women’s college, Womyns’ senior administrators sometimes articulated explicitly feminist messages, incorporating the popular discourses that supported young women’s experiences and ways of knowing as different from their male peers, thereby warranting a single-sex education that would bolster female confidence, leadership, and success. In an address in the early 2000s, Womyns’ President (who was President at the time of my study) pledged the institution’s “unwavering belief in the power of women to change the
world.” In a local radio interview, the President responded to the interviewer’s assertion that “the tide [had] turn[ed]” and that women’s single-sex education was no longer necessary:

Maybe the tide hasn’t turned totally yet. Although women are a majority of undergraduate populations, women’s education is still a radical notion...Women’s colleges are by definition, structured and designed to promote the success and empowerment of women. Not by default but by design. Everything on campus is there to help women self-actualize for success throughout their lifetimes. That’s very significant.

In the President’s response are allusions to radical feminism – sexism was still alive and well, and limited women’s “success and empowerment”— and to cultural feminism – institutions specifically “structured and designed” for women “promoted” their “self-actualization.” This articulation of second wave feminisms suggests that the College’s mission was to help young women find and ‘voice’ their true or ‘authentic’ selves, to provide for them an environment that nurtured all that was devalued about females in our culture. ‘Woman’s nature’ was encoded in assumptions about the ways that women students learned best, informed by academic feminism’s turn to cultural/difference theories in the 1980s and ‘90s. In the same interview cited above, Womyns’ President was asked whether or not she thought men and women learned differently. She replied,

There are differences documented through studies and I see those differences as a lifetime educator. Look at Carol Gilligan’s work that shows that men learn in a more hierarchical manner and women learn best from settings that provide opportunities to build relationships and through collaboration. In small classroom settings where girls and women know each other and are allowed to interact in relationship with the instructor, interact with ideas as relationship, and to collaborate with other learners is the best environment for women.

This celebration of women’s assumed essence as relational and collaborative had been integrated by Womyns’ students. When they were asked to describe someone at Womyns
“who is a woman as you want to be,” a number of students described her in very gendered terms: as “compassionate,” “readily available,” someone who “makes others happy, enriches others’ lives.” “...She’s good to her kids and she’s bright, you know what I mean? When she smiles at you, and remembers your name [you feel special]” (Jane). “...A typical ‘W Woman’ is kind (laughs), she’s generous of her time...she sacrifices other things to make Womyns you know thrive and be a nice place...” (Lisa). This ‘W Woman’ was rooted in the College’s traditions, discourses, and practices (see further discussion in Chapter Six).

However, at times in its history, the fact that Womyns was a women’s college was all but hidden, certainly not emphasized in its public announcements, publications, and marketing campaigns. In the words of one of the academic deans of the College, “it seems that we hide the feminist, women-centered nature of the college. [Instead] we say, ‘we’re a great liberal arts college.’” Another dean talked about the outcomes of an institutional goal setting exercise by senior administrators:

...I was struck by the fact that people couldn’t say anything about what it meant to be a women’s college, that we weren’t conscious of that. We have to really bring that out in some way, make sure we’re not avoiding it or embarrassed by it. How do we deal with it? Or use it? How do we make sure we’re using theory like Carol Gilligan’s work or Women’s Ways of Knowing?...I think if we were more confident, we would be more out there.

Popular cultural feminist theories guided this dean’s analysis of the College’s ambivalence about its mission.

**The Compliance of the Daughters: Students’ Cultural and Radical Feminisms**

Cultural feminism was the dominant shared discourse at Womyns. Celebrating female-ness, honoring women’s abilities and capacities for caretaking, reviving girls from victimization by a misogynist culture – all of these threads were evident at the College, articulated by
administrators and students alike. That Womyns purported to intentionally cultivate ‘feminine’ strengths and characteristics furthered students’ cultural feminism, their embrace of separatism and radical feminist thinking, and essentialism.

The trope of family and the language of “sisterhood” ran (unprompted) throughout my interviews. Students were especially sentimental about their roles as “daughters” of the institution during the final spring of the College’s existence as a women’s college; the line, “thy daughters ever sing” in their alma mater brought “sobs” and great sadness (Maria). Preservation of the College’s traditions promoted students’ experiences of being in a “sorority” or at “summer camp,” a “big giant sleepover.” The discourse of ‘The W Woman’ echoed the power feminism of ‘women having it all’ and students longed to emulate what they saw in their elders:

I can look at alums [alumnae] and I can be like wow they have like the exact same like career that I want, they have like the life that I want, they went to Womyns and I can do that... (Grace)

Jane spoke of seeing herself mirrored in her ‘sisters’ at Womyns:

Jane: I don’t know it’s just uh seeing seeing some of my own you know uh truly feminine characteristics echoed in another person just makes me hyper aware of uh their existence within myself I think.  
Susan: What are some of those feminine characteristics for you? 
Jane: Let’s see um for me that means being pretty aware of my emotions...

The essentialism of cultural feminism was pronounced at Womyns: women and men were fundamentally different; and, by and large, “…the notion of sex as nature remained beyond interrogation” (Applebaum 2010, 5). It was most explicit in Jane’s language: “…you feel like, ok we’re all women, that means we’ve all working from a similar you know starting point, we can all relate on at least a visceral level and that’s really fantastic…” Cultural
feminism was the foundation of her love for Womyns College and the reason she decided to transfer to another women’s college when Womyns went coed. Her talk consistently evidenced the ‘having it all’ feminism of her institutional mothers, the ‘girl power’ of her peers asserting their voices, the importance of separatism for women and girls in a sexist society.

I think it’s really important that young women today who are being told to be empowered, to be self-assured, to be confident really really hang on to these ideals and to these goals you know and make sure that they carry over into your life past being a young woman into being a full grown woman, in to being an adult...It still feels really fresh this idea of girl power, of women you know trying to be everything that they can and I think that that’s really been emphasized with the younger generation?...As young women we’re told, ‘you can be anything you want to be.’ You know you do not have to uh fit the standard in a lot of ways, we’re being taught to break the mold and I think it’s absolutely essential that those ideals remain ingrained in us once we move beyond the adolescent stage? um so that we can then impart them to future generations of women...I think it’s really important that I continue to assert myself as a woman in society and say I’m here, here’s what I’m doing, and I’m a woman you know? Not ‘but I’m a woman.’ ‘And I’m a woman.’

Voice and Cultural Feminism

In the 1980s, Carol Gilligan posited that females had a distinctly different moral voice from males’. She critiqued earlier moral development studies and theorizations as exclusionary in their research methods, and, with her own qualitative study, discovered a feminist articulation of ethical dilemmas informed by females’ gendered experiences in a sexist society. As her work progressed over that decade, Gilligan began to investigate the phenomenon of privileged young women (her sample was taken at a private girls’ secondary school in the U.S.) “silencing” their voices, or instinctively responding, “I don’t know” to an interviewer’s question, then articulating insightful observations based on their experiences (Gilligan, Lyons and Hamner 1990; Brown and Gilligan 1992; Taylor, Gilligan and Sullivan 1995). Gilligan was arguably the most recognizable feminist theorist associated with ‘difference feminism’ in the second wave,
and she was (and continues to be) roundly criticized for generalizing an essence of female morality when her research samples were limited in terms of gender, class, race, and sexuality. Still, her work resonated with a number of second wave feminist women, particularly in education, and the notion that certain “...adolescent girls begin to retreat in the face of their learning about the power of gender roles in society, as they learn that they are supposed to yield to men as adult women...” (Tronto 1994, 81) became a call to action. This was true at Womyns; those senior administrators who considered themselves feminist practitioners sought to foster girls’ “different voices” with their work in that single-sex environment.

The rhetoric of silenced women’s voices was prevalent in my data. As noted, this discourse arose spontaneously in the President’s conversations and public addresses, and in three of my four interviews with senior administrators. In my interviews with students, the word ‘voice’ arose spontaneously (I never used the word in a prompt question) in fourteen out of twenty-two interviews, in the context of “finding” their voices or “becoming a voice” while at Womyns College. It always signified empowerment, and their confidence in asserting their voices was a measure of the value of their single-sex educational experience. Some students arrived at Womyns aware of the ways in which they were silenced or passive in high school classrooms; others came to see their past silences as oppressive after integrating the College’s implicit mission.

Tasha: Basically I’m stealing [the President’s] quote...she found her voice at Womyns and I have found that to be very very true about myself. Um I was very outspoken before but um I have found myself to be more articulate, more in tune with what I think....I’ve definitely found my voice as a woman.

Maria: [I]n high school I was one of the people where if there were guys in the class you know like in a math or a science class I usually...wouldn’t speak up ‘cause they were always the dominant voice and I like being in a place
[referring to Womyns] where I’m encouraged to speak up and debate and I just like...the sense of being around other strong powerful women.

Susan:  What’s it like to be in a classroom of all women?
Jane:  uh it’s it’s really empowering...It means that uh people are going to be using their voices, they’re going to be standing up for ah what they think is right, and they’re more I think that women are more apt to contribute in an environment where they do feel comfortable...

Meg:  I feel like here I really got my voice and I’ve been able to become a leader and become the person that I want to be you know... I feel like in the classroom my voice has really grown like since I was a freshman. Like I would talk in my classes but not as much and now like sometimes (laughs) I’m the only one that ever talks in my classes... I feel like if I have a problem with any one... that I can be like “ok well I have a problem with what you did” and we can talk about it and figure things out. I just feel like all around I have a voice and it’s really important to me. I feel like it’s really feminist of me...(Laughs.)
S:  Yea, what is really feminist, how do you put those together?
Meg:  Well I think first of all women have been um like silenced and I think that at Womyns, everyone’s voice is heard and...what they have to say is real important and encouraged, and I think that doesn’t happen everywhere else...

Equally present in the students’ interviews were “I don’t know”’s, emblematic of the ‘Reviving Ophelia’ lexicon (see discussion of Mary Pipher’s work in Chapter One) as a sign of girls’ precipitous drop in self confidence in their mid-teens. In the early 1990s, Gilligan and her research colleagues noted that the increase in “I don’t know”’s in 14- and 15-year-old girls’ speech was significant when compared to their speech patterns in their early teens. The researchers attributed this increase to girls’ learning to “relinquish [their] own authority and voice”, a sense that they might lose the approval of others if they asserted their opinions, feelings, desires, or experiences (Taylor, Gilligan and Sullivan 1995, 44, 167-8). This speech pattern – saying, “I don’t know,” then proceeding to be quite articulate in their response to a question – was evident in varying degrees in all twenty-two of my student interviews. I was particularly struck by the frequency with which Jane employed the phrase, in stark contrast to
her explicit understanding of the concept of ‘voice’ and her unwavering belief that Womyns taught its women “to speak up,[to be] willing to contribute or bring something new to the table... to stand up for what they believe in.”

Even the ‘mean girl’ narratives that came out of my interviews can be framed in cultural feminist terms. Maliciousness and exclusion, gossip and “drrrrama” are particularly gendered discourses, attributable to the importance of relationships in girls’ and women’s lives, and to the self-hatred imposed by a misogynist society. Indeed, ‘mean girls’ have a clinical term assigned to them – ‘relational aggression’ – and ‘mean girls’ and Ophelias co-exist in the milieus that sustain them (see, for example, the work of Cheryl Dellasega, Rachel Simmons, Rosalind Wiseman). Womyns students’ complaints of “pettiness” and “phoniness,” “rumors” and “cliques,” “bitch”-iness and “co-dependence” were evidence of the centrality of relationships in ‘female worlds’ and a by-product of a separate female culture.

**Students’ Radical Feminism**

If the female body as the site of contestation and theorizing defines radical feminism (Tong 1989, 72; Weedon 1999, 27), then radical feminism was a dominant ideology at Womyns College. It became particularly visible as women students anticipated sharing their campus with male counterparts. The feminisms of the second wave maintain the binaries and essentialism of female and male, nature and nurture, public and private, and particularly so in radical feminism: men are Other, at the root of sexism, all potentially violent. In her article “Doing difference in different times: theory, politics, women-only spaces in education,” Leathwood makes the point that women-only spaces “...reinscribe rather than challenge gender
divisions” (2004, 451). Alice Echols notes that a derivative of cultural and radical feminisms is the “...denigration of masculinity rather than male roles or practices,” and an accompanying “...commitment to preserve rather than diminish gender differences” (in Alcoff 1988, 411). All of these were true at Womyns.

When asked what they liked least about attending a women’s college, several students said that they “missed the male point of view,” reproducing the essentialism usually attributed to women or to people of a named race.

Alfre: You know it would be cool to have [the male perspective] but for the longest time you just have [had the male perspective], and the great thing about Womyns is that you have the female voice which has so often been excluded generally from society...Like if they were [discussing] something that dealt with gender, men in particular wouldn’t think to invite women because women are just usually students in the conversation.

Susan: ...What would you say that you like least about attending an all Womyns college?
Sally: Um I think that people forget that men are people too (laughs) um and I’ve seen that come up a lot in um in with the coed debate and things like that and that people make a lot of generalizations about men and what men do and I think it’s very easy to do that when you’re in a single-sex environment.

The College, in an effort to broaden its appeal to its assumed heterosexual female audience, often advertised its proximity to Big University, which was full of smart men and opportunities for socializing. In reality at Womyns College in the student culture, there was a palpable distrust of men and masculinity. My interviews revealed a consistent discourse that portrayed men as strangers who required surveillance.

Susan: ....What I’m trying to get at here is [how] are you aware...that you’re in this community with all female bodies?...In what ways are you aware of that?

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6 On the other hand, Leathwood notes that the “real world” is the world of “patriarchy” and “compulsory heterosexuality” (pp. 451, 455), so why wouldn’t girls and women look for ways to escape it?
Melinda: (pause) Um it’s very much an us versus them subconsciously, it’s uh if there’s a guy on campus? I watch him...just because he is someone who is not traditionally a part of the campus. If it’s a professor I don’t really see them. I I see female bodies all the time, I don’t watch them though...

As Melinda described, the students were hyper-aware when a male peer was in their midst. In response to the same question I asked Melinda above, Jane said,

[It occurs to me that I’m in a community of all female bodies] when a male body is around, for sure even in the dining hall when someone has a boyfriend or a brother in I’m very much aware of him as Other you know, uh not necessarily us as women but more all right there is a presence here that is not like the rest of us (laughs). One of these things is not like the other (laughs)...So I guess that’s a good example of when I’m really aware of Womyns as um a collection of women um you know when there’s something there to compare it with. Otherwise we’re just people.

Another student described a time when her 14-year-old brother visited campus; as they entered the dining hall, “everyone stared” in a way that communicated to her that he wasn’t welcome. She described Womyns as “not a male friendly campus.”

Over the three year period that I conducted interviews, all but two students said they felt very safe on the campus, attributing their sense of safety to the College’s bucolic setting, the absence of male students, and the protectiveness of the College’s security guards.

Jane: Um I feel safe um one because I know that there is not um you know a dominant male presence on campus? Um a presence that I had been taught you know is a lot of times very predatory um you know something that you really need to be aware of...Whereas at Womyns I can be aware of myself as a person not as you know a woman who needs to be on her guard but as a person who just needs to be aware of the other people...I feel safe because um because I’m strong?...I don’t know, I feel safe because I’m comfortable...That’s something that always kind of occurs to me is all right I’m strong you know I can handle myself.

7 The interesting notable exception was male faculty members: nineteen participants, without hesitation, said the gender/sex of their professors did not matter. Perhaps this was about age, or having a relationship with the male as an authority rather than as a peer.
Jane articulated what many of her peers felt— that males were “predatory” or that their presence signaled danger. Several participants spoke of their experiences when their peers’ boyfriends were on campus: rather than ‘huh, there’s a man on campus, someone who’s not like me,’ students articulated a “…kind of, ‘oh my god, what’s he doing here’ kind of feeling…” (Fran). The awareness of a male presence changed students’ sense of safety.

Devin: Um the person who was next door to me last year had a boyfriend who was there a lot and they would fight and they would throw things but it sounded like he was beating her up and it really really scared me...When boyfriends come to campus it’s just it just gets violent, it seems...There’s a threat, yea, but not for all guys ‘cause we have lots of guys who it’s OK if they walk to the bathroom by themselves or whatever (laughs)...And we all know...everyone’s boyfriend who comes to campus because like ‘hey it’s a boy, who is he, who does he belong to?’ (laughs). They aren’t allowed to walk around campus without an escort. Um but I don’t know what it’ll be like next year and I just get so afraid when I think about it that I try not to.

As Devin intimated, the anticipation of the arrival of full-time male students on campus created a profound shift in the students’ sense of safety. In my interviews during the spring of 2005, the discourse changed from a characterization of men as strange and sometimes violent Others who had to be escorted and contained, to a characterization of every man as Threat, not only to the history of their institution, but to their psychological and physical safety. Fran expressed concern “…that next year the school’s not investing any money in updating security...You know,...we’re kidding ourselves if we think that just having 24 men is going to be an excuse for not taking measures to change, to set a standard for safety.”

Melinda: How are we gonna make this campus safe? One idea was that the dorms will be locked 24 hours a day, you won’t be able to just open the door and walk in, you’ll have to present a key. The coeducation dorms are gonna be on that end of campus so men will be coming through all of the rest of campus in order to get to the academic side, which is over here. They’re gonna be living over there, is that gonna be a problem? What about the students on campus who have had previous experiences of abuse or violence
with men, how do we make them feel safe on this campus?...Um we all like to be very reassured that the men who are coming here are going to be intelligent, responsible, sensitive men who know how to behave around women and are going to be good people to have on this campus. At the same time I don’t wanna put anybody in danger here so I frankly, as an RA, I feel like I would need to interview the guys on my floor (laughs)...

This discomfort with and surveillance of males was magnified in many of my interviews. Men and/or masculinity were essentially violent, a “connection drawn between biology and misogyny,” and a distrust in the “mutability of sexism in/among men” (Echols in Alcoff 1988, 411). The students’ fear of violence in male sexuality, while not irrational, was Dworkin-esque, rooted in radical feminism (see discussion in Chapter One): men were constructed as a constant threat to women students’ safety. Womyns was not a male-friendly campus, and the students liked it that way. For many of the students, this was an aggressive way to combat sexism: exercising the power to make men feel uncomfortable in their space.

The Rebellion of the Daughters

Patricia: I think that there’s an assumption that because we’re -- we were all labeled as female from birth that we all have some sort of common thread...So we have discussions about women’s rights and stuff like that. I see a lot of what I call a second wave movement mentality (laughs). Because there’s like ‘well, we’re all women’ and it’s like well, it’s more complicated than that...

At Womyns College, generational tensions translated into “stern mother[s]” telling “daughters,” who were intent on “differentiating themselves from their mothers,” “how to behave” (Henry 2003, 209, 213). Each generation of W Women was saying to the other, ‘I am not that.’ Astrid Henry calls this an inevitable “disidentification” (2003, 215), in which the mother “‘remain[s] in the position of dreaded other, or objects to the daughters’ emerging subjectivity’” (Chesler in Henry 2003, 221); and the daughter “distinguish[es] herself from her
mother [by trying] to chart new territory within feminism” (Henry 2003, 225). The mothers at Womyns—some powerful senior administrators and faculty—were in effect saying, ‘I am not one of those in-your-face, separatist, ambi-sexual women who bar men from their environment in order to learn and “hook up more than usual” (quote from one of W’s deans in the wake of the coeducation protest).’ The daughters at Womyns were in effect saying, ‘I am not one of those co-opted, untrustworthy ‘W Women’ who have burst our “bubble” and betrayed the Womyns sisterhood by allowing men to attend this college.’ In so doing, Womyns’ second wave generation surrendered their commitment to separatism as a feminist strategy, and Womyns’ third wave generation missed their opportunity to cast the personal in political terms.

The Personal is Public

If ‘the personal is political’ is a hallmark of the second wave of feminism (Snyder 2008, 184), this maxim was less than explicit at Womyns College in the early 2000s. The President’s assertion in the 2003 radio interview that “women’s education is still a radical notion” suggested that attendance at a women’s college was itself a political act. But beyond that, it was difficult to find evidence that the College was invested in helping students to make sense of their personal experiences and experiments in a world full of intersectional politics of gender, sexuality, socio-economic class, and race.

Complicating this, ‘sex wars’—a contentious phrase within histories of feminist thought—were at their height at Womyns College. The break between second and third wave feminisms is sometimes said to have its origins in the “infamous sex wars” (Snyder 2008, 188) that emerged from a feminist studies conference at Barnard College in 1982. However, it must be noted that the role of sexuality in women’s oppression has long been debated in the U.S.
from first wave feminists’ insistence on reproductive freedoms (Hammer and Kellner 2009, 3); to discussions of black women’s sexual slavery and forced sterilization (Springer 2002, 1062); to lesbian women’s assertion that heterosexuality had to be made visible, theorized and recognized as privileged in the feminist movement (Weedon 1999, 44-45). The issues have often been cast, by feminists and others, as a dichotomy of women’s ‘sexuality as danger’ vs. ‘sexuality as opportunity/pleasure.’ Third wave feminists have been described as decidedly in the latter camp in this dichotomy, “pro-sex,” championing sex toys for straight and lesbian women; “feminist pornography” that was “heavily influenced by marginalized or nonnormative sexualities”; “embrac[ing] a philosophy of nonjudgment” (Snyder 2008, 188). This tenet of the third wave was accompanied by a resurgence of personal storytelling and narratives to celebrate the multiplicity of women’s experiences and to enact open-mindedness. While perhaps the purpose of this move was to reinforce ‘the personal as political,’ Snyder points out that third wavers have not consistently connected personal experiences to structural inequalities: third wave feminists may believe that their stories dispute “dominant discourses” and “hegemonic narratives” but they “leav[e] readers to construct a [broader] critique...” (2008, 185). And so the personal becomes personal again, not only because of the limitations of third wave theorizing, but also because of our culture’s turn away from understandings of structural causes and collective activism, and a return to individualism (see also Gonick 2006, Henry 2003, and Siegel 2007).

So it was at Womyns: the ‘personal’ statement was not a particularly ‘political’ one. It was the blurring of any distinction between the public and private spheres that became the legacy of this generation of Womyns students, and, not surprisingly, the ‘female’ body was at
the core of this legacy. Perhaps students were trying to make a feminist statement by asserting their sexualities in public spaces: that women’s lives are seldom confined to either one sphere or the other; that there is a political and intellectual purpose in diluting the binary between public and private; that women should be in control of naming and displaying women’s bodies as political and social signifiers; that it is important to deconstruct women’s sexuality as one-dimensional, defined by heteronormativity and the male gaze.

Catherine: [I]t was my freshman year I think and... I just wanted to check out [the Big Dyke Party] and see like what it was all about. And it was like naked people everywhere...Like it’s you could go in and you see naked people and it’s just like completely normal, ...like there’s really no shock value anymore. Like you know nudity’s not really a big deal or anything...[S]ometimes like people go skinny dipping in the lake...and it’s not really a big deal and I feel like that’s very specific to Womyns. I can’t really picture anything like that happening at another school without you know something bad happening like without somebody being violated or being you know like yelled at or um making somebody feel uncomfortable.

Devin: [M]y first introduction to Womyns’ women’s bodies (laughs) was skinny-dipping in the lake first day I got here... But like people will say things like hey your boobs look really nice today (laughs) and it’s like uh that’s weird yea [but] certain parts, private parts aren’t as taboo...

For Womyns students, female nudity and sexual displays represented an un-self-consciousness about the female form, little need or desire to contain sexuality as a private matter, and a collapse of the private and public realms in their everyday lives inside the “bubble.” Personal and public boundaries were ill-defined, promoted by the small size of the institution, its remote-ness and sense of seclusion, and its composition and convergence of female bodies. Where students learned and played, acted out and up, dressed and undressed was not designated or confined: “we are so much less conscious of being looked at or being judged...” (Fran).
Interviewees were very forthcoming about their sexual relationships and their gender identities. Ten of my 22 participants readily identified themselves as “queer,” “genderqueer,” “a dyke,” “lesbian,” “gay,” or “bisexual.” Descriptions of “liquid lesbians”, “LUG”s or “BUG”s – women who engaged in lesbian relationships and/or sex while they attended Womyns– were common, and “The Womyns Web” and “Big Dyke on Campus” award conferred status on the community member who was the most sexually connected on campus. While this could be construed to signal a cultural shift within Womyns’ walls (see Chapter Six), for most students it represented an opportunity for fun and spectacle: “a crazy thing where like…people just end up being partially naked or come naked,” and drag performances as “highennes or wicked butches or you know S&M [dressed in costumes that suggested the sexual practices of sadism and masochism] (laughs)” (Catherine).

Rebecca was one of the leaders of the student organization, ‘Sex Advocates’. Her reflections on her involvement in this group call to mind the consciousness-raising of second wave feminists:

One of the things we did...was um we all had to like take a mirror and actually look look at our whole vulva area and draw it in some representative way. And then you know if you were comfortable with doing that and everything, we could come back to the group next meeting and kind of just share our drawings and we put them up in the Women’s Center, which I think they’re still down there...And I think that was something that definitely kind of opened my eyes and I think it opened a lot of other people’s eyes to just like the diversity and kind of exploring yourself as a woman and um you know just your sexuality and your body as a woman and that was a very kind of defining moment, just being able to talk freely with other women about um your bodies you know a very personal area of your body...

Later in her interview, Rebecca again brought up the importance of her work with Sex Advocates:
…I really want women to be more aware of their bodies and I really think it’s important for women to not be ashamed of their bodies...and just to take um empowerment over their bodies....I think that um women shouldn’t be afraid to uh kind of be open about their sexuality and I think there’s some empowerment role that can be used [to]...make the sex industry and the pornography industry less male-centered.

For her, participation in this group was profoundly personal and political. But Rebecca was an exception when it came to making political sense of open displays of sexuality. Most of the students I interviewed shared Fran’s view that while “sexually charged friendships” reflected an attitude that “sex is much more fluid here” – meaning the students’ frequency of and openness to having sex with/among women while in the “bubble” of Womyns– these friendships were part of the College’s culture of “volatile relationships”: “sex can happen between people and it won’t necessarily matter, or it can happen and it will be the biggest drama you’ve ever seen.”

Sex Advocates was one of the most visible, talked-about organizations on campus; its purpose was to inform Womyns College students about healthy sexuality. The organization’s bulletin board was in a hallway in the campus’ historic main building, across from the offices of the dean for experiential learning and later, the office of internships and career services. One of the deans told me that staff members in these offices had objected to the bulletin boards, particularly when the College hosted Family Weekend and visitation days for newly accepted students. My fieldnotes from an early visit state that the bulletin board had a statement of the group’s mission, and informational pamphlets and flyers with photographs of naked, androgynous bodies, suggesting three different sexual couplings: two females, two males, and a male and a female. Upon a second visit to the bulletin board, Sex Advocates had added a flyer for a “Masturbate-a-thon” and another flyer for a program the group had sponsored on “public sex.” The neighboring Women’s Center bulletin board focused on breast health and
posted a brochure illustrating how to do a breast self exam. Outside the door to the Women’s Center in the basement of the College’s main building was a bulletin board, showing a labeled drawing of a vulva; inside the Center on many walls were hand-drawn pictures of breasts and posters about “breast differences.”

The sensibilities of some of the College’s administrators and faculty members were offended by students’ public discussions and displays of sexuality and nudity. In particular, the displays of female sexuality posed problems for the admissions team when prospective students and their families visited campus. The admissions director’s response to the bulletin boards captured her dilemma and the generational tensions between Womyns’ mothers and daughters:

We have a [group called Sex Advocates] on campus and you know we’re all very divided about the photographs they put up on the bulletin board. You can imagine that that’s a nightmare for me. A photograph of a vagina, do you know what? 17 year old girls are probably ok with it, but 45 year old fathers? And 8 year old brothers? I had a mother call me because the bulletin board had information about a sex toy exchange...This mother said she spent the car ride home with her daughter trying to explain to her what that was, and that students here were filthy and they would never have anything to do with Womyns again.

The tensions between second and third wave feminists could not have been more pronounced than they were at this time in Womyns College’s history. The second wave feminists in senior administration, who seemed to passionately believe in the value of single-sex education for women in a still patriarchal and sexist world, needed to contain the students’ representations of women’s sexuality. In order to sustain enrollment, they needed to maintain public and private spaces and practices on campus, acknowledging but not broadcasting variations in women’s sexuality, while fulfilling the College’s commitment to the production of
successful professional and maternal ‘W Women.’ The students were committed to tenets of self-expression and exploration, embracing female sexuality, and the diversity and tolerance of feminism’s third wave. At Womyns, ‘personal’ meant ‘private’; it became public, but not quite political.

(Dis)Playing Femininity

Both Snyder (2008) and Munford (2007) talk about third wavers’ engagement with femininity rather than gender. In other words, rather than contesting the categories of ‘female,’ ‘male,’ ‘woman,’ and ‘man,’ these feminists are testing the limits of femininity, pointing out its ironies and contradictions, and “actively playing with femininity” (Snyder 2008, 179). “…[P]erformative strategies…rely less on dissonance between anatomical sex and gender identity…than on a tension between opposing discourses of gender within female-embodied sexed identity…” (Munford 2007, 271). Munford links this younger generation’s “playing with femininity” to Judith Butler’s concept of performativity: “…playful reconfiguration of the signifiers of ‘femininity’…destabilizes traditional categories of gender” (270).

Womyns’ students enacted their identities and subjectivities by playing with the signifiers of femininity. It “depended on the day” (Patricia), it was a “very personal thing” (Grace), it was “because that’s how I feel” (Jordan and Fran), rather than a commentary on the structures of gender. Still, some of the students understood that femininity had its constraints and dictates, and that they were only partially agential in the femininity they chose to display.

Grace: What’s different about being femme and feminine is that feminine is um a socially constructed form of womanhood and being femme is my own construction of what it means to be a female...I’m not creating my femininity...because you know someone’s telling me to, or because this is what I think it means to be a woman or that I can’t be a real woman without looking like this way, but feeling like you know this is who I wanna be....
Grace went on to say she was “...probably one of the girliest girls on this campus,” wearing make-up and blow-drying her hair every day before she left her room. Lin liked to dress “kooky” on campus, wearing outfits that did not “match” or “coordinate” – “a flower top with pinstripe pants [that had] dark blue and white stripes and... a green jacket”; this was her “style”. Sophie said “dressing up” was one of her favorite things: “…I like shoes a lot so (laughs) I have a lot of shoes and like cute little tops and things...I mean even when I’m just going to like Target or something (laughs) I’ll put on lip gloss.” Jordan said that she “always [wore] eyeliner and lipstick,” did not like “baggy clothes,” and liked to “show” her navel and the small of her back. But the most distinctive and intentional mark of her femininity was her walk:

...Like the way that I walk shows off my body...I don’t do it for like attention? I do it because like that’s how I feel comfortable...I definitely walk that way all the time but I was definitely taught to walk that way...like I remember my mom teaching me how to walk in heels and that was the way that she taught me to walk...I’ve been made fun of because I walk that way when I have on sweatpants and sneakers (laughs) um but I I don’t know, I guess I just adapted it and that’s how I walk now...

Fran talked about her identity as essentially feminine, but enacted her most pronounced femininity – “high femme” – within the context of drag:

Am I feminine and femme because I feel like I have to be or because I actually just am? And lately it’s you know what? I am. So, when I get ready to go out, I do try to present this feminine – I think that I wouldn’t go out in T-shirt and jeans. I would go out in something that felt more dressy to me, more girly dressy...

Susan: What is girly dressy for you?
Fran: I think cleavage is important. I think that things that are cut for women are important, things that are women’s clothes, bought in a store for women...I got a suit, H&M woman’s suit, and I really like it. I feel very femme-y in that one. I don’t know – getting dressed up, usually there’s heels, usually there’s kind of fitted something...I don’t wear a lot of accessories. Sometimes if I’m getting really dressed up, I feel like I have to wear necklaces...I have earrings, which I do wear sometimes. And when we did the femme drag, it
was all jewelry, all makeup – eyelashes, which were really fun. And that was high femme, though, which also was a dress and heels and very, very low cut.

For Jordan, her walk, dress, and make-up had a political purpose, though not one that challenged femininity and female gender construction:

...I think as women we need to assert ourselves as women and I think that a lot of people get confused when they see a woman dressed as (pause) um dressed a little more tomboyish or dressed like in men’s clothing because they’re like, ‘well you’re a woman and you’re you’re talking, preaching about women, but you look like a man.’ And I know that that’s trying to like break out of gender and like get rid of that social construct, I understand that, but I think that’s so slow coming...that I think first we need to assert ourselves as women...And so I think that men, not men, but like society needs to accept us as [women] first before they can even think about like breaking down the social construct of gender...

Patricia presented a “masculine femininity” as a statement of her identity within a heteronormative discursive and symbolic realm:

The reason I identify as both queer and a dyke is because, um, I also identify as a gender fucker from time to time...And I don’t necessarily identify as a woman every day. I identify as female, but I don’t identify as a woman every day...I also identify as queer because I’m immediately characterized as a lesbian most times when people see me. Um, so I like to get people to question that a lot and so when I say queer, they ask what queer means. And since it’s always used as a derogatory term, um, it gets like conversation started. And that’s the same reason I identify as dyke. Because usually it’s used as, um, something you’re supposed to be ashamed of or something that’s really negative. And I really don’t think so. And, um, I also think that dyke has a lot of gender meaning. I think that if you talk to people who identify as dykes, specifically on Womyns’ campus actually, it’s a much -- it’s a more masculine femininity.

While some Womyns’ students were playing with gender, there was still a great deal of coherence between presenting oneself as ‘feminine’ and identifying as both female/woman and heterosexual. Female-ness was troubled only so far by students.
A number of my participants were fluent in the ‘posts’ of third wave feminism – the postmodern and poststructural foundations and approaches that deconstruct gender and sexuality in attempts to disempower it. Influenced by a prominent third wave feminist who was teaching at Womyns at the time, students’ talk often referenced “fluid” gender, sexuality, and friendships; and some students invoked the distinction between “biological males” and “trans-identified individuals.”

Elise: [Our professor] talked a lot about what it means to be a woman and about like what it means to be like a lesbian woman and like all the femme identities and about like trying not to identify as like a man or a woman...[M]y group of friends this semester, we’re taking a femininities/masculinities class...We’re talking about femme stuff a lot and about the idea of like femme as a transgendered identity because it’s like an identity constructed outside of like the male gaze...A lot of us who are more um not feminine-identified started to talk about...what it means if we identify as like lesbians what it means if we don’t buy into like the gender system...and [we talk about that] in class but outside of class too.

In employing these feminist discourses – calling attention to ‘woman’ as social construct and an unstable category – the College’s third wave feminists were unsettling the very identity that gave Womyns its mission. They were pushing the College to “accommodate a wider array of [female] identity positions” (Snyder 2008, 187).

When I asked participants, “How are issues of gender or being a woman brought up or discussed at Womyns?”, seven of the 22 interviewees talked about transgender students and their resistance to them. Four different female-to-male (F2M) transgender students were mentioned as visible and ‘out’ over the course of my study; none of them were study participants. Though there was advocacy for and acceptance of a range of ‘female’ gendered and sexual identities at Womyns College, transgender students’ performances as ‘males’ were
not welcomed as part of a gender-bending agenda. For example, listen to Fran’s description of her classroom experience with Sam, one of the F2M students talked about in interviews:

...[T]his particular person has a lot of issues with his own masculinity and um, kind of picks on the [male] professor in a weird way that makes it very obvious that there’s this masculine tension going on...The student just kind of makes it an issue, is very condescending to other students in the room and condescending to the professor, remarkably enough...It’s something that I think he does, because he feels like he has to be masculine. And I talked about this a lot with my professors about how, you know, I really don’t like taking classes with him, because he does this kind of deliberately, to assert kind of a power thing.

Fran went on to say that she was resentful of Sam because the women’s community had decided to refer to itself as a “single-sex college” rather than a “women’s college” since there were students who no longer identified as ‘women’:

And I would feel differently about it if I felt like...he understood that male privilege is not really welcome here...And, I mean, there have been transgender students here who I liked, who are cool people, and who have understood that and have respected it, and he doesn’t. And that’s why I don’t really like the fact that I had to change my definition for him. But, at the same time I understand the need to distinguish between ‘women’s college’ and ‘single sex institution.’ So, we do – well, for example, in our mass e-mail listservs, it’s not acceptable to say, ‘hey ladies,’ when you’re addressing the entire student body anymore. And that’s because of this one student.

When I encountered Sam in a student group meeting, my fieldnotes indicate that I shared Fran’s perception of him (I attended the meeting and made my notes two years before my interview with Fran). I noted his “patronizing” behavior toward his girlfriend during the meeting: he spoke for her, called her “honey,” and, throughout the meeting, had his arm around her shoulders in a way that signaled possessiveness.

Meg had a similar reaction, sharing Fran’s disdain for the stereotypical brand of masculinity that she saw F2M students display at W:
We have two transgendered students and they don’t identify as women and that’s a little sticky right now ‘cause although I feel like they need a safe place to be and that Womyns is the best place for them to like be safe …I also kinda feel if you don’t identify as a woman, why are you in an all women’s space? …A transgendered student that graduated last year…seem[ed] to identify as male to place other women in submissive roles…I think it’s very important to have an all women’s space and that if you’re gonna mess that up then maybe you shouldn’t be here.

Fran and Meg were resentful of and rejected masculinity that was expressed through behaviors that were stereotypically, aggressively, heterosexually ‘male.’ They perceived that the F2M transgender students at Womyns re-enacted masculinity by oppressing women, reproducing heterosexual hegemony and all its power plays, at a time when they were attempting to subvert it.

However, Fran, Meg, and several other participants were open to and articulate about the suitability of their alma mater for transgendered people. Fran conceded,

...once you’ve gotten here, you can then define yourself as a Womyns student. But being a woman is kind of – it becomes secondary. I think it does become secondary, which is maybe why there is room for transgender spaces, for transgender transition[s]...

Grace talked about the student body’s openness to changing pronouns (from ‘she’ and ‘her’ to ‘ze’ and ‘hir’) in the Student Government Constitution, when faculty and the Board of Trustees were “shocked” (Melinda) or nonplussed:

...I’m on the constitutional review committee and we were like you know what do we want to do? Do we want to say ‘the students’? Do we want to say ‘he/she’? Or like let’s use gender neutral pronouns...So we voted on it and it passed and we were like you know regardless of whether or not the faculty vote to keep gender neutral pronouns or the Board votes to keep their section gender neutral pronouns, even if it looks weird, the students are going to keep theirs that way because we want to be accepting of everyone...
Theorist Susan Stryker says this post-structural move is a particularly feminist and third wave project – to “denaturise and dereify the terms through which we ground our own genders,” in reaction to the second wave’s problematic “untheorized female body” (Stryker 2008, 63). Indeed, students may have been reacting to the virtual silence of the second wave authority figures at Womyns, the senior administrators and faculty who gave little to no institutional recognition to the transitioning female to male students on their campus.

Further Gender Trouble

At Womyns, as in the ‘real world,’ gender was not only complicated by performances of femininity and masculinity and a broad array of sexualities – though those were the most prominent complications in my data – but also by race; and by race and sexuality; and by race, sexuality, and class; and numerous other permutations of complex identities. In her 1989 article, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex”, legal theorist Kimberle Crenshaw challenged feminist and anti-racism scholars to employ the concept of intersectionality as an analytical tool in order to broaden legal and academic analyses with at least cognitive recognition of multidimensional identities and political alliances. She decried the limitations of “single axis analysis” (1989, 139) – that is, analyses that only take into account gender or race – and then-current theoretical practices that “…fail[ed] to embrace the complexities of compoundedness” (166). She pointed out that an additive model of understanding identity (whether employed in legal practice or feminist theorizing or everyday talk) failed to take into account the times when discrimination was not a result of the “sum of [one’s] race and [one’s] sex..” (149), but the result of one’s full and total identity.

Intersectionality may provide the means for dealing with other marginalizations...
With identity...re-conceptualized, it may be easier to understand the need for, and to summon the courage to challenge, groups that are after all, in one sense, "home" to us, in the name of the parts of us that are not made at home. This takes a great deal of energy, and arouses intense anxiety. The most one could expect is that we will dare to speak against internal exclusions and marginalizations, that we might call attention to how the identity of "the group" has been centered on the intersectional identities of a few...

(Crenshaw 1994)

Thus intersectionality as a tool for feminist analysis re-centers a subject based on her/his identity markers as these markers come together – intersect – in her/his experiences. This is a more complex analysis than earlier feminist approaches that seemed to ‘add on’ identities that multiplied oppressions, as in, “The subject is a Latina lesbian female, therefore she is triply oppressed.”

Most of the participants in my study spontaneously articulated ‘intersecting’ ways in which they ‘identified.’ My first interview question was, “If you were writing an autobiography, how would you identify yourself or describe yourself? What would be the important parts of your identity you’d want to talk about?” While the question itself may have elicited multi-dimensional responses, the interviews were peppered with talk about race, class, nationality, religion, sexuality, (dis)abilities. For example, at various points in her interview, Jordan said, “I’m broke,” “black,” “legally blind,” “an athlete.” Patricia talked about being “working class,” “queer,” “Catholic,” and “having an auditory learning disability.” Complex identities were experienced by these College women in their everyday lives; only a few identified primarily as female or women, and some did not mention gender at all. More likely to be first in their replies were “gay” or “queer” or “lesbian,” “a friend,” “a sister,” or “a daughter,” “a Women’s Studies major,” “Asian” or “Italian” or “Jamaican,” “I grew up in [name of city or state],” “an actress” or “an athlete,” “pseudo-” or “budding intellectual” or “intelligent,” “opinionated.”
Tasha: ...I would probably describe myself as a person with very diverse backgrounds....I was born in New York City. But from the age of 3 til about 13 I was in Pakistan and a lot of my background comes from there...I would describe myself as somebody who’s very open-minded. There are things that I really value about myself -- I respect my level of professionalism um dignity, honor are very important to me. I’m a very family oriented person um I find my family is a necessity which most students at colleges don’t...

Lin: I I guess I would um identify myself as a first generation um Asian American...not necessarily um a child of immigrants but refugees and living in an environment where um there aren’t you know a lot of Asian Americans um or people that that look like you um (pause). I feel another issue that would uh be important to cover is you know growing up as as a woman...and definitely I would certainly cover the issue of class um you know being the first uh first generation to go college and um being a child of parents who never made it beyond the 7th grade. I think more than anything else, that has played a very um important role in my life...I grew up in um Rochester New York um but um it was more in the inner city part.

In responding to my first question, one of the participants spontaneously named and claimed marginalized identity markers that complicated gender in multiple ways.

Jordan: ...I’m Jamaican um I’m a lesbian, I’m an athlete um I’m a daughter and I’m a sister and I’m a friend and those are...most important to me as a part of my identity.  
Susan: uh huh. And do you have thoughts about how those come together for you?  
Jordan: um  
Susan: Are there particular ways, particular pieces that intersect or...?  
Jordan: ...Like the fact that um I consider myself specifically a daughter and specifically a sister has a lot to do with my family and my like my Jamaican heritage because we’re big on family. Um and um I think those are the only two that really ever connect for me.

Later in the interview, Jordan talked about being “femme gay;” that she liked to swing her hips as she walked to mark her femininity; that she loved being an athlete; and that being Jamaican was her racial identity, though she knew that her skin color – “black” – defined her at Womyns. Jordan spoke from experience about the dilemma for Womyns students who had multiple, non-
dominant identity markers: they had to join “cliques” that were separated “by gender, by race, it’s definitely separated.”

In terms of resonant racial categories in the United States, Womyns was, by any measure, a historically and predominantly white institution. At the time of my study, the admissions director put the percentage of ‘domestic’ students of color at 15%. Race – as defined by skin color in the Womyns student culture – was an important identity marker for many students: all student participants of color and those who came from various global locations spoke readily about their race, indicating a day-to-day awareness and experience of it.

Lisa: I think (pause) I think what impacts my experience at Womyns mostly is my race...because we have such a small percentage of blacks and who wanna...get involved with anything...We do I think we do a lot,...we’re leaders on campus.
Susan: ...Um do you feel safe here?
Lisa: (pause) hmm. Sometimes I don’t...sometimes I don’t feel mentally safe. Well sometimes I feel that (pause) you know people are lying to me? Just to tell me you know what they think I wanna hear um and so I’m getting the wrong information...I feel that I’m being set up or something (voice goes up, laughs)? Because I I am the only black person in a lot of my committees...and you know that could be intimidation...I think that there is an untrust that happens when you’re black at Womyns because no matter how much you give them and say ‘trust me, I’m gonna use this information how you would want me to use it’ ...then that doubt um and it could not just be for black people, it could be for everyone else, it’s just that boundary that we have up but I feel it’s personal um and so they end up not telling me you know current truth...

Susan: Um in what racial group do you locate yourself?
Sophie: Um. That’s that’s that’s a hard question for me to ask um I’m not (clears throat) I like I I think I can say that I’m Caribbean-American but I am not completely sure of my heritage um my father’s side is sort of a big question mark...My mother’s from Barbados in the Caribbean...
Susan: OK and how do you think that racial identity impacts your experience here at Womyns?
Sophie: um well there’s there is the black girl group and um you do find that everywhere all the different racial groups and um I associate with them [but] I can’t say they’re like my close friends and um I’ve had a hard time um I guess
melding into that group most all my life,...the African-American students. I’ve I’ve had a hard time sort of join like being comfortable in that in that group most of my life so like I kind of just bounce around...I’m light skinned (laughs) obviously, I’m pretty fair and my hair is (laughs) crazy colored and I don’t look like a typical African-American and when I used to play in the playgrounds with my younger brothers I used to get teased a lot and they would call me like “white girl”...And instead of um getting into hip-hop, I got into (laughs) rock in middle school and they all thought I was weird for that...so um like I inside I have a lot of resentment and all these angry feelings with that because of all like the name-calling and things like that...

At the end of high school and kind of when I was actually looking at schools um a lot of people were getting me to look at um historically black colleges and I started freaking out, I was like I don’t know I’m not sure you know I’m not sure if I’ll be comfortable there and I felt a little nervous like voicing that um but (clears throat) um I definitely think that played a part in why I chose Womyns...

There was a persistent concern among American students of color that ‘race’ and racial issues were marginalized or ignored at Womyns. They voiced frustration that their alma mater failed to recognize racism and to challenge community members to understand and confront it (see discussion in Chapter Five).

Susan: And what do you like least [about attending Womyns]? Jordan: What I like least um the avoidance of race issues I think. Susan: OK, can you talk about that some? Like how does that come out?... Jordan: Um people are really reluctant to talk about race like we’ve had incidents where we’ve been at school meetings and a faculty member has said a racist comment and no one’s addressed it...Like poor attendance [at programs] that deal with diversity. Um like people’s lack of interest in joining groups that deal with diversity. Or like we have a group [the President’s Committee on Diversity] that hasn’t met in three semesters um and the [student newspaper] has just printed an article ...about race, and there was a huge backlash toward it... You know people talk about a lot of things and they don’t talk about that. Susan: What was the article about?... Jordan: Um I read it only briefly...but it was an article basically about um how white women also have privilege ‘cause a lot of women can talk about male privilege um, and the article addressed white women’s female privilege and like [the author] talked about her personal experience um at Womyns and how she’s viewed it...And then the backlash to it was like that there was no evidence to support [the author’s assertion that there was white female
privilege at Womyns], like no no documented evidence like to support it. [But] that wasn’t the issue, like it was an editorial, it was an opinion piece and [so having evidence] wasn’t the issue, but we do that a lot, we turn something into something else um and it gets really frustrating. [My notes indicate that Jordan’s speech quickened during this exchange, signaling anger or anxiety about the issue.]

At times, Womyn’s senior administration attempted to address racial diversity and its challenges at an institutional level. The President appointed a special assistant for diversity and, later, an assistant dean of students for intercultural programs. But these efforts were never sustained and the individuals who served in the positions each left the College after one or two years of service. The last assistant dean of students for intercultural programs, who left Womyns the spring prior to coeducation, tested the College’s commitment to “diversity” by challenging the President and Board to designate a senior Cabinet position that would work with all of the College’s constituencies – faculty, students, staff, institutional policy, alumnae. The assistant dean’s and supporting students’ (including Jordan’s) pleas were not responded to, and, in the wake of coeducation, institutional attention to racial identities and issues was not apparent.

An editorial that appeared in the student newspaper three years prior to the one Jordan referred to revealed Womyns’ ongoing struggle to help women students of color feel at home there. Entitled “Being Black Me,” the opinion piece expressed another black student’s experiences of racism. The author talked about her peers’ wonder at her interest in white folk singers’ music, their certainty that she would “love” black women writers, and their assumption that she came from a high school where she endured violence daily; her hair was a constant object of curiosity.
At Womyns, I feel Black 24 hours out of the day. I can’t even forget for a second that I’m different…[A cameraman who was shooting a video for the Admissions office] asked all the Black people in the dining hall to sit at the same table [for the photograph]…[In class, as] soon as the professor mentions the word race or Black or people of color, I notice all eyes will either try very hard not to look my way or look directly at me. And then it starts. I feel compelled to explain myself, to speak for my race. At Womyns, I am constantly speaking for my race. It’s not just my opinion. I’m speaking for every Black person that ever roamed the earth…

I should get a salary for being a professor, I teach so much. That’s the worst part. I spend most of my days explaining my race to people. When someone asks you what do you think, what do you believe,…they’re really asking what do Black people think, what do Black people believe…I’ve become the Token Black Girl.

Though years apart, the author of “Being Black Me” and Jordan articulated the price of essentialism at Womyns, the ugly – or in Crenshaw’s words, “vulgar” – aspects of naming a group of people and expecting every one of those people to embody and represent the essence of that category. They had “…summon[ed] the courage to challenge groups that [we]re after all, in one sense, ‘home’ to [them], in the name of the parts of [themselves] that [we]re not made ‘at home’” (Crenshaw 1994). Jordan was ambivalent about her alma mater: one of the reasons she chose to attend Womyns was because it felt so “home-y” to her when she visited as a prospective student; but she contrasted her experiences of being gay and being Jamaican or black (as she knew her peers labeled her) at Womyns with those of living in communities that were also “home” and less essentialist in their expectations of blacks, gays, and women.

At home [in New York City] there’s um you know there’s all these different categories of gay people and…there’s a distinct um femme gay community…And…when you come up here if you’re a femme, you’re not really gay anymore because like there’s so many people who…they call dyke-y or butch and so they’re gay, and if you’re femme you’re not really gay?…I think that makes me aware of the fact that I’m a female because I mean I do play sports but like all intents and purposes I’m like a really feminine female.
The Privileges of Dominant Identities

Some of the white women I interviewed were able to talk about the ways in which their race marked them as dominant and privileged racial group members. Alexandra’s responses exemplified those of the small number of white women I interviewed (5 out of 13) who talked about racial climate on the campus, specifically in light of the College’s decision to close the office charged with working on intercultural issues just prior to the first semester of coeducation. These women identified themselves as allies or supporters or sympathetic toward Womyns’ students of color, but not without some level of cognitive detachment or indifference.

Susan: Alexandra, in what racial group do you locate yourself?
Alexandra: Uh white (laughs), real white.
Susan: There you go. How do you think that impacts your experience at Womyns?
Alexandra: Um I think (sigh) I guess it it I think it impacts it a lot because I know that there’s so much controversy surrounding racism and the treatment of uh minorities and diversity at Womyns and I want to be able to relate to that? And I want to be able to empathize but I I can’t you know ‘cause I’m white and I’ve always had this white privilege and you know there’s no question about my being white (laughs) and so white that you know, there’s a question about me being albino (laughs) but um and so I can’t you know I can I can sympathize but I don’t I don’t know what it’s like and you know I can be outraged on their behalf but it’s you know I’m still white and I still have that privilege...

For Fran, who appeared Caucasian, her Chinese heritage from an estranged father and her bi-racial status constituted a complication of her identity that made her feel “cool”:

...I don’t really identify with other Asian students, as much as I identify with other bi-racial people...I don’t speak [Chinese] at all...In a sense of kind of authenticity of being an Asian person, I think that I’m internalizing that as an issue – like I don’t feel really Asian because I don’t speak Chinese. And that’s important. So, I think that being bi-racial is a unique experience.

Susan: Okay. How do you think being bi-racial has affected your experience here?
Fran: It has affected my experience in that I get to kind of identify with people of color, and that’s kind of cool for me. Like I can say, yeah, I’m one of the minority students here and I have this experience with other ethnicity. But I’m also not, you know, included in the cliques of students who are not white. Most of my friends are white. So that’s important. Um, but when it comes to issues of diversity on campus, like I’m involved. I’m involved because of that status. And I think that my white friends get involved in it because they see that...So kind of being able to be a part of, or knowing that I have minority status in that way, and being conscious of it has really kind of brought me into that kind of activism more...And being first generation, born in this country is kind of cool...My Chinese grandparents are...coming out of Communist China, and my family was actually exiled from Communist China. So, that’s kind of cool...

Among some Womyns students, socio-economic class was readily identifiable. While the topic did not arise spontaneously in interviews or from field observations, once the question was asked in interviews (“What socio-economic class would you say you belong to? How does that impact your experience here?”), the five students who identified as “working” or “lower middle” class had a lot to say about their own financial situation or how they recognized students from families with money. Four of the students I interviewed indicated that they “probably” considered their families to be “upper middle” socio-economic class (one by virtue of having been “raised by nannies”). The other 11 interviewees who identified a socio-economic class for themselves or their families talked as though they were outside of this group, classifying themselves as “middle class.” Those who identified as “working” or “lower middle” class did so because they received financial aid or a scholarship; did not have a car on campus; paid their own cellphone bills; and/or had little to no spending money for trips out to dinner or shopping.

There was some sense that socio-economic class did not matter among friends or in the student culture at Womyns. As Meg said, “I don’t necessarily think that money is ever an issue
here.” The geographical isolation of the College contributed to this populism: “because we are very isolated um there’s not a huge call for money. I find you can exist at Womyns and not you know require any kind of money for weeks if you really need to” (Jane). Perhaps because of romanticized beliefs about the equalizing potential of sisterhood and the blindness that accompanies unearned privilege, white students in particular talked of accommodating financial disparities in their friendship groups by paying for each other to go out for meals or by sharing access to their cars. Alexandra, the “real white” student quoted above, talked about her socio-economic class in the same way many students in this study talked about their “fluid” sexuality; she claimed that she had crossed, “related to”, and lived upper, middle, and working class status:

Um well it’s interesting because I think I’m middle class but my parents are working class people who make a lot of money which doesn’t make a lot of sense...Um so I can identify with people who are working class and I think that that helps me you know... My father grew up very working class. My mom grew up very upper class so you know I kind of like came in the middle...And so um I grew up knowing that while I did have it you know it was very unstable and it could you know at any time be taken away from me um but because [both of my parents] work blue collar jobs I also know you know what it’s like to work a blue collar job...So I think I can relate to people who are not middle class and I can relate to people who are middle class, and because my mother’s whole family is very much um upper class, I can relate to people who are upperclass...[M]y parents you know...raised me to know that you know whatever class I’m in, I can always be in a different one, and usually lower (laughs).

But, as Jordan’s response revealed, race and class intersected differently when a student was a racial minority.

Jordan: It’s actually really frustrating because...it’s assumed here that you’ll have money like it’s assumed here that you’re a broke college student but that you have money somewhere, that you have like money in your bank account but...when I say I’m broke, I’m broke like I’m not going out to McDonald’s. And like especially in the education department it’s assumed
that you have a car to do [classroom] observations [for student teaching] and...if you don’t have a car, you can pay um security to drive you and like I can’t do that. And then when I say to people, like I don’t know how to drive, I don’t have a car, they’re like oh it’s cause you’re from the City, it’s like no, I don’t have the motivation to learn to drive, cause I can’t afford to buy a car um and so that really it’s frustrating...And then people complain about how much money they have to spend for tuition where I’m not spending any money for tuition, it’s probably because I’m in a lower socio-economic class um and then it gets kind of embarrassing, you just step out of that conversation...

The Importance of Intersectional Analysis and Practice

The ways in which gender, race, and socio-economic class together mattered for many of the women in my study illustrate the full, multidimensional, and often excluded identities that Crenshaw sought to illuminate with her development of the concept of intersectionality. This intersectionality that Womyns students brought to their identities represented another generational divide at the campus: while third wave feminists articulated and enacted some complexities of gendered and sexed identities, and women students of color complicated subjectivity and belonging, my participants perceived that the second wave feminists in charge shied away from expanding definitions of ‘women’. In their eyes, Womyns’ institutional culture as guided by its administrators and senior faculty, struggled and failed to understand and accommodate diversity – the lives and needs of an array of women students.

These tensions between generations of ‘W Women’ at the College echo tensions in contemporary feminist theory debates. Scholars Jennifer Nash (2008) and Kathy Davis (20080) cite Leslie McCall’s claim that intersectionality is perhaps the most important contribution of feminist scholarship in the past few decades. Nash points out its role in subverting gender and race binaries as “…a tool particularly adept at capturing and theorizing the simultaneity of gender and race as social processes[,]...demonstrat[ing] the racial variations within gender and
the gendered variations within race through its attention to subjects whose identities contest
race-or-gender categorizations;” intersectionality represents “…the experiences of subjects
whose voices have been ignored…” (2008, 2-3). Nash states that intersectionality brings
forward the critiques of women of color within postmodern feminist arguments that
“…destabilize the notion of a ‘universal’ woman…arguing that ‘woman’ itself is contested and
fractured terrain, and that the experience of ‘woman’ is always constituted by subjects with
vastly different interests” (ibid.). Davis explores the tension, deconstruction, and progression
between ‘old’ and evolving ideals in feminist thought in her 2008 essay:

...If the ‘old’ ideal of an inclusive feminism – the ‘common world of women’
scenario, as Mohanty put it – is abandoned as theoretically and politically
ethnocentric and imperialistic..., where were feminist scholars to find a
platform unified enough to warrant labelling their theoretical enterprise
‘feminist’? However tarnished the ideal of inclusivity has become, feminist
theory still needs a theoretical and normative platform if it is not to disappear
altogether. (71)

Davis goes on to argue that intersectionality provides that platform for feminist theory, that its
“...coincide[nce] with the need to problematize the theoretical hegemony of gender and the
exclusions of white Western feminism” (72) need not threaten the foundations of feminist
thought.

Intersectionality offers a new raison d’être for doing feminist theory and
analysis. The success of intersectionality is, therefore, at least in part,
attributable to the implicit reassurance it provides that the focus on
difference will not make feminist theory obsolete or superfluous. On the
contrary, intersectionality suggests that there is still important work to be
done. (ibid)

Like feminist theory, some of Womyns College’s leaders, as exemplified by the director
of admissions, thought they needed a “normative” and “unified platform” to sustain the
College’s single-sex mission. When that platform was troubled by students’ gendered and
sexed performances and our culture’s heterosexual hegemony, and complicated by students’ races, socio-economic positions, and relative privileges, the College’s leadership was unable to embrace those dynamics in a generative way, unable to see intersectionality as a “new raison d’être” for doing its work of educating women. What could have mattered at Womyns was some recognition of the ways in which individual and collective group identities intersected and were complicated in the lives of real women. But the tensions between the College’s history and traditions and its second and third generation feminists in conceptualizing, attracting, and sustaining its ‘women’ subjects became a stumbling block.

**Sustaining Gender**

At times, gender was complicated and multidimensional at Womyns: some individual students visibly “occupied female subject positions in innovative or contradictory ways” (Snyder 2008, 185).

...We’re always talking about [gender]...because we have so many different gender representations on campus. Um, like we have people who identify as female, people who are identified as transgender, and we have people who identify just so many different ways...But what does that mean, how does that play out? (Grace)

The students’ complex gendered, sexed, raced identities raised questions about the College’s mission and stability. Womyns students’ beloved separatist institution was endangered, financially and philosophically.

In the conventional educational market in which Womyns College found itself in the early 2000s, the only other option was to reintroduce and reinscribe the binaries that constructed gender and sex: if Womyns could not be a women’s college, it could only be a coeducational one that would inevitably privilege males and heteronormativity. The radical,
cultural, postmodern and anti-essentialist feminisms of the students in my study were overcome by a post-feminist – as in ‘feminism is no longer needed’ – climate that imperiled the College’s finances and mission. At the same time that an older generation of W Women began to look to coeducation to sustain their alma mater, third wave feminist students’ enactments of their personal narratives and identities challenged the subject of their college. Womyns’ community of students, faculty, and administrators could not seem to find a way to both “acknowledge and ground the differences among [its students], and negotiate the means by which these differences w[ould] find expression in constructing...” (Crenshaw 1994) a radically inclusive women’s institution.
Chapter 5: Womyns College as Homeplace and Margin

This chapter presents Womyns students’ perspectives and experiences that paint a picture of the College as a site for nurturance – a “homeplace” – and resistance – “a margin,” to use bell hooks’ terms (1990). However, there were differences in black women’s and white women’s experiences of their “homeplace”: while all participants expressed a sense of physical safety at the College, black women spoke of a tenuous psychological safety there. Finally, this chapter will describe some of the initial effects of coeducation at Womyns.

“Homeplace”

I had...the um longest struggle of calling this place home. Because I’m such a family oriented person I was always like nothing else is going to ever be home except for home where family is, where mommy and daddy are, where sisters are, but I got here and I found a mom, and I found a dad, and I found a sister...And then I’m like but this is home, oh but that is home [too]. The comfort, the sisterhood, the intimacy, the seclusion at times, um the ability to explore how radical or how conservative I am, definitely makes for a warm fuzzy pillow that I can land on. (Tasha)

For many women students prior to coeducation, Womyns College was a “homeplace”: there was a sense of “care and nurturance,” and it was “...a safe place where [marginalized] people could affirm one another and by so doing, heal,” a place of “shared history” where the inhabitants “..had the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture our spirits” (hooks 1990, 42). A homeplace also has a “radical political dimension” (ibid.), and among many of the students in my study, there was a cultivated consciousness of the ways in which sexism, heterosexism, and racism operated both on and off campus. Students learned to see themselves differently after being at Womyns for a time, and that re-visioning was taught and modeled by older students, and some faculty and administrators. There was a generational, familial passing on of information and understanding that many experienced as empowering.
Womyns students described their “homeplace” as removed from “the real world;” students often referred to themselves as living in a “bubble,” spacially and ideologically distant from dominant cultures and norms. Catherine spoke of her life in two distinct locations, “here” and “not here,” and “here” was “boxed in.” Sophie called Womyns a “safe haven,” “sheltered...not like society.” Jane said the “close proximity” of Womyns students fostered “deep connections” that were difficult to talk about outside of the community. Two students, Devin and Alexandra, spoke of it as a place for reinvention, to recover from past mistakes or to re-fashion an identity. Fran said Womyns “just kind of gives us all the freedom to do whatever it is we’re going to do, and not worry about a power structure...”

When I asked students to define the “bubble” or to talk about what made Womyns a “bubble,” they cited openness to and acceptance of ideas or behaviors that were taboo in the dominant culture, and the College’s physical location in a remote village surrounded by nature.

Tasha: Um because you’re here and you don’t censor yourself as much in this comfort zone...Like take sexuality....I’ve experimented over here. When I go back to New York City to my parents, would that be something that I would regret, would that be...a mess I made? It’s definitely it’s a problem in having a different identity that you have here than the identity you have outside the Womyns bubble. There is a bubble because the support circle that you find here, the um dynamic of the people that make up this community...

Sally: I think that at its most literal the Womyns bubble refers to the fact that we’re very isolated from the rest of the world. We are what we are right here in this little 5 mile radius... I will never forget my freshman or sophomore year one of my friends came up behind me and just like slapped me on the butt like you know um and...there was an upperclassman who...looked at this girl and was like you know if you do that anywhere outside of Womyns you’d get arrested (laughs)...Um and just these social norms are so different than in the real world um but they’re they’re what we make them and they’re comfortable and they’re um they need to be lost to a certain extent when you enter the real world...
Grace: This campus is like a little bubble, it really is because like I can do whatever I want here and I feel like no matter what I’ll always have a safety net... The way things are done at Womyns is very different than the way things are done out there. You know we can all be like gay and happy and liberal and say whatever we want and just be like women’s studies oriented and like I don’t have to worry... It’s just like that little bubble and like there’s so much drama... all the like little stuff that happens [can happen] ‘only at Womyns’...[Outsiders think] I’m not really seeing reality as the real world [where] everything is coed so you know why are you sheltering yourself? But I don’t see myself as sheltered at all.

Tasha, Sally, and Grace articulated the tension that occurs for occupants of homeplaces, where inhabitants recognize each other as subjects and dignify each other in ways that will not be affirmed “outside in the public world” (hooks 1990, 42). Because Womyns students created and monitored their own subjectivities and relationships, even the “drama” could be understood through their own lenses, rather than being dictated by a dominant framework that would belittle their interactions and experiences as “sheltered” – unreal or trivial.

Homeplaces are sites where members of marginalized groups exercise agency. Opportunities for “experimentation” (with make-up and sexuality, as performers and actors in campus theatrical productions, in joining different student organizations) were enthusiastically embraced by the students in my interviews. While not everyone partook of these opportunities, they were aware of them in their women’s environment, and there was a broad sense of security and safety. Participants referred to Womyns as a place of profound comfort for themselves as women. Like hooks, they described a “feeling of safety, of arrival, of homecoming...” (hooks 1990, 41) when they returned to their homeplace. For Womyns students, this sense of shelter came from not having to “worry about liking girls, you know?” to feeling comfortable displaying overt markers of femininity.
...Here I’ve become more comfortable about um who I am and so you know I I pluck my eyebrows and I I put on you know make-up um and I and I like wearing skirts and I I like wearing floral prints um and and I think it has to do with the fact that I I really don’t have to compete or I’m not trying to get anyone’s attention...There’s definitely less tendency for me to compare myself to to other women. (Lin)

For Tasha, Womyns as homeplace meant “not confronting traditional gender roles that women are assigned in the world,” coming to understand herself as ‘human,’ rather than being defined by her gender.

The comfort of homeplace showed up at Womyns in pajamas and knitting, two particularly domestic signifiers. Pajamas were de rigueur dress on campus. For many students, pajamas symbolized disdain for appearance: they were flaunting their freedom from beauty standards as attendance at an ‘all girls’ school’ did not demand the same attention to fashion and physical presentation that women on coed campuses were expected to exhibit. But pajama-wearing also signified that the women were serious students, so engaged in their studies and the development of their minds that they did not take time to get dressed up to attend class; they just “roll[ed] out of bed and [went] to class with a coffee mug...” (Tasha).

Kate: Well since we tend to go to class in our pajamas (laughs) and you know don’t really worry about putting on make-up...I have a friend that goes to [another institution] and I went to visit her one time and everyone like came to class they dressed like they were going I don’t even know where, like just all the make-up and like very tight clothing and they were just going to class!

Knitting was a commonplace and acceptable classroom activity.

Maria: A lot of women on campus are starting to knit so if you walk into like some classes you’ll see like women around the table knitting and still holding conversation...

For Patricia, knitting helped her to compensate for a learning disability.
...My learning disability to do auditory learning has affected me. I’ve had to create methods to make sure that like I’m paying attention in classes where I might not be able to...I have to work harder...I can’t focus unless I’m doing something else. So I usually knit in class. [When] I’ve had knitting in class, I can hear because my hands are doing something else...So [there’s] lots of knitting (laughs).

Jane would say that these domestic signs were so much a part of public, even academic life at Womyns because it was a “…cloistered community...It’s not that there are no inhibitions, but there’s no need to worry.” Fran said that because there were “no boys here...,” Womyns was a “genderless place” where she did not “worry about a power [dynamic].” Male approval was not a consideration for these women and it meant that they spent minimal time on their appearance and could publicly embrace a particularly gendered past-time.

For participants like Jane, Fran, and Meg, the “comfort” of their homeplace extended to a sense of physical and psychological “safety.” They did not need to “be on [their] guard” against a “very predatory” male presence, or worried about “getting catcalls and just getting objectified” by male students. (Interestingly, two participants alluded to getting catcalls from other women in public on campus, but they dismissed the incidents as “jokes.”)

Susan: What do you think makes Womyns “body positive”?
Fran: Um, honestly, I think it has to do with the absence of a male gaze. And people are saying you can go to school with your classy new pajamas, that’s what’s so great about Womyns....[Y]ou’re not really being scrutinized...So, I think that we don’t worry so much about what we look like in terms of what our shape is and dieting or fitting the right size and shape.

One participant said she felt that the “school has my back” when she or her peers engaged in risky behaviors such as drinking or taking drugs. And most interviewees trusted the College’s security officers, particularly the longtime female member of the team, without reservation.
Susan: And what makes you feel safe?
Sally: Um I’ve walked drunk as drunk can be back from the bar in the middle of the night and made it to my room safe and sound you know more times than I can count. At 5 o’clock in the morning when I’ve pulled an all-nighter and I’m running to the printing lab...(Smiling) um you know we’re more afraid of the skunks than we are someone on campus that could cause us harm. Um I leave my door unlocked and I sleep with my door open and no one has ever come in to do anything to me...

Maria: Um just the fact that I know I know everybody and just walking around campus like we’ll be walking and then we’ll see someone and we’ll immediately know that they don’t go to the school um. I think, even though some people might not agree, I think the Honor Code plays a big part of it and the fact that everyone signs the Honor Code. And I still don’t lock my door, I have never locked my doors all my four years here. I don’t know I just and I leave everything in my room I’ll leave my wallet out in the open but I just know that um I just trust everyone... I’ve lost my I.D., I’ve lost my license a couple of times and it’s always come back to me somehow so... I’ve never felt unsafe here um I’m perfectly fine with walking across campus by myself at like three o’clock in the morning um, walking up to the woods [parking] lot by myself, I have no problems walking alone...I trust I know all the security guards, they all know me...

Three interviewees spoke of their homeplace bubble as a haven for sexual assault survivors, and wondered what would become of these women’s sense of safety once the College went coed. Fran said,

...Right now, I feel safe on campus, but I don’t know....[The administration’s] line is that you can’t – it’s really unfair of us to assume that the men who will be coming here will be rapists and whatever. But, at the same time, the number of women here that I know of who have had some kind of sexual assault on them is really high. I think that [the fact that they chose to go to school here] has a lot to do with them feeling safe here...

For many of the students I interviewed, the absence of men at Womyns and the absence of the threat of violence were correlated, even causal. And the absence of men made this homeplace more than comfortable; it made it physically and sexually safe. But race complicated this sense
of security: for black participants in my study, there was far less of a feeling of safety than for white participants.

Black Women and Womyns as Homeplace

Of the 22 participants in my study, nine women identified with racial categories or labels other than white or Caucasian. (One participant identified simply as a “mutt;” in analyzing her talk around this, it seems she was avoiding the conversation for some reason.) Tasha as “south Asian,” from Pakistan; Lin as “Asian American;” Maria simply as “Asian,” though she felt that her adoptive family made her “Italian” culturally. Fran identified as “bi-racial”: her father was Chinese, her mother “white.” Four participants identified as “black” or knew others identified them as “black,” though all of them took issue with “black” standing in for all the complex, hyphenated identities of ‘not white’ people at Womyns and in the U.S.

Lisa: I’m black.
Susan: OK. Black and um how does that impact your experience at W?
Lisa: Well I think I’ve had positive and negative…I think in some cases people are looking for a diverse group of people and the fact that I’m black puts me in that diverse [group], when we talk about racial diversity it gets me a head up, it gives me a foot up... but I think that you know it hasn’t hindered me. I think it it’s helped me more than anything.
Susan: OK. Um and does does ‘black’ have certain connotations for you? Like why do you choose that word as your racial identity?
Lisa: Oh OK um well because African-American means that I came from Africa and I’m now an American um and I’ve always been here, my family’s been here for generations now so I just consider myself black because I’m completely Americanized. In fact I don’t know very much about Africa at all.

Jordan: I tell everyone to just call me black but I make it explicit that I’m not African-American, I don’t like to be called African-American um but in the same sense I know that as far as society goes, like no one cares if I’m African-American or Jamaican like if people are gonna like discriminate against me or whatever it’s gonna be because of my skin color, it’s gonna be because I’m black so um I don’t mind if people call me black, I just hate when people call me African-American....Like I want you to know that I’m Jamaican and I want
you to know that that’s my culture, that’s how I identify...Like um as part of
the broad scheme of things like I was like yea, whatever, I’m black you know.

Alfre: The racial group that I would identify myself in um so I’m west African
and west Indian. But being here at Womyns or in general, there’s always that
one check box you know what I mean, identify yourself as African-American,
black whatever you know (laughs)...I think when I first came to Womyns I was
just like “oh you can call me African-American.” But now that I’ve been
here...I’m like really I’m not so much [African-American] you know because
it’s not in my heritage, my father is west African and my mother is west
Indian...I can’t just put that in the African-American checkbox.

Skin color represented race at Womyns and the most visible – literally and discursively –
racial category was “black.” Black or brown or dark skin color and African features were the
markers of race at Womyns. Tasha explained this phenomenon: “When you come here, the
extent of exposure that some people have had is [to] black[s], so [if you’re not black], they
don’t know where to put you.” Perhaps as a result, the racial category that had some
coherence as a group identity at Womyns was “black” or “African-American”: there was some
sense of solidarity among black women and they were the only group that formed a racially-
based student organization. Patricia Hill Collins’ work on intersectionality in black women’s
lives elucidates this dynamic. The experience of being raced – “identified as black by a white
racist society” – uniquely situates black women’s subjectivity within sexed and raced matrices
of domination, and Collins postulates that knowledge gained from “lived experiences” as
“outsiders-within” the United States affirms the collective strength of black women. She says
black women have a “peculiar marginality” and are drawn together by common language,
experiences, and histories, coming to “self-definition” that creates and informs a “collective
angle of vision” or “standpoint” (2000, 1-19). In Collins’ work and on the Womyns campus,
 naming ‘black’-ness as an aggregate identity category serves as a strategic move: certainly not
all ‘black’ women’s knowledge and experiences are the same in either location, but the sense of solidarity summoned up by this “standpoint” provides ‘black’ women in the United States with a political identity (see Alcoff’s argument for ‘women,’ in this document p. 28), and provided ‘black’ women students with a shared recognition of their tenuous sense of safety on the Womyns campus.

Susan: Um do you feel safe here? You just alluded to that a little bit but generally do you feel safe?

Jordan: Um most of the time I do. My safety has definitely felt questioned...because we don’t know what’s gonna happen with the Diversity Office8. We found out freshman year that there’s like um a KKK [Ku Klux Klan] in [a neighboring town] and like it may be twenty minutes away and like it may be inactive, but like that’s a really big issue for a lot of women of color here. And the fact that the only office that deals with diversity might not be here, it’s definitely a safety issue for me um in that sense and not just in that extreme sense but like I’m not gonna feel safe here because...I feel like people are gonna be more um lax with what they say and how they act on what they might feel...So I can’t say I feel unsafe but I definitely feel like my safety is in the balance or whatever...But I don’t I don’t worry about violence on campus or anything like that like I don’t fear for my safety in that way...

Susan: So like are you distinguishing between kind of um psychic safety and physical safety?

Jordan: Yea.

Susan: and it sounds like you would say you feel physically safe

Jordan: Yea

Susan: but not kind of psychologically safe

Jordan: Yea, yea.

Jordan went on to say that there was “definitely a race issue” on campus and that, “as a W Woman who loves it here and is um of another race,” she felt a “responsibility,” even “an obligation towards women [of color] who come here and aren’t comfortable here.” She wanted younger women of color to “find a way to be comfortable” as she had.

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8 The College’s Diversity Office was open for about three years. It was created in response to protests by students of color around 2002. In the spring of 2005, the Dean of this office resigned, citing a lack of institutional will and support to address issues of diversity. The College discontinued the position and the office, beginning in the fall of 2005, as it ‘went coed.’
Lisa was another student who “loved” Womyns and my conversation with her revealed an allegiance to her homeplace that was complicated by both racial and socio-economic class dynamics.

Susan: Um do you feel safe here?
Lisa: (pause) hmm. Sometimes I don’t... Sometimes I don’t feel, not for my [physical] safety. Um sometimes I don’t feel mentally safe...I think that there is an untrust that happens when you’re black at W...
Susan: ...You feel like there’s a mistrust of you because you’re black?
Lisa: Uh huh. From some administration. I think students are very uh open you know I I don’t well um, hm there’s individuals you know in the student body who of course they look at race and they look at your class and they say, you know what, you can be of this race but you better be of this class.
Susan: You mean socio-economic class?
Lisa: Yea and if you’re not, they won’t speak to you. So certain students, it matters. It matters and I’m middle class which puts me ok with them. But say someone else who was black and who was a lower class and you know obviously showed it and everything they would not give them the time of day... And you know this because of questions they ask you, like what kind of car do you drive or where do you live, do you live in the suburbs, you live in you know a city or you know information that tells you where they are on the chain...
Susan: So class feels like a big issue on this campus.
Lisa: Oh yea. Some people actually they dress differently [?] so that you don’t even know their class, like they dress real funky and then you know you see their parents and you’re like what?...So it’s a big issue, it’s it’s I think it’s not the biggest issue, I think race is the biggest divider on this campus...[But] race is very under[ground] too. I mean the main things that are talked about on campus is you know gender and uh you know lesbian issues.

Lisa articulated an awareness of socio-economic class as a divider at Womyns, although she distanced herself from the repercussions of that dynamic, knowing that her “middle class” status “put her ok with [students marked by their questions and possessions as of a higher socio-economic class than others].” It was rare in my interviews, but notable: Lisa painted a picture of a hierarchy of class at Womyns in the context of her experiences of not feeling safe or trustworthy.
But for Lisa and other women of color in my study, race was the “biggest divider on...campus.” Her race made her feel at risk when she was aware of her position as “the only minority” in classrooms or on committees where she was “looked to for answers” because “everyone else was white, or looks like it.” She had a feeling of discomfort, of being exposed: as the only one, she represented all blacks on campus. She struggled with “...being true to yourself because you’re black.” Could she tell the truth despite or because of her skin color? It was her representative status as a black woman that created doubt and “phoniness” for her: she was aware that she could not be trusted with confidential or important information, and, in turn, she was doubtful that people “high on the food chain” were telling her the truth. Here is tangible evidence of the ways in which black women experienced a lack of “mental safety” during the time of my study.

hooks would describe Lisa’s experience like this:

...We fear those who speak about us, who do not speak to us and with us. We know what it is like to be silenced. We know that the forces that silence us, because they never want us to speak, differ from the forces that say speak, tell me your story. Only do not speak in a voice of resistance... (1990, 152)

hooks would not be surprised that Lisa felt dislocated within her homeplace because of her race. Indeed, hooks warns that homeplaces can be “destroyed” by oppression “from within” (ibid., 48). Jordan and Lisa articulated a hard truth about a women’s college that engaged with students about sexism but not racism: it became a site where members of the campus’ most visible racial minority group had to live with a sense of insecurity.

In the course of the Womyns students’ protests to contest the Trustees’ decision to admit men as residential students, a white student came to realize the limitations of “safe
space” for some of her “sisters.” Like Lisa, Elise talked indirectly about the hierarchy of identities and oppressions at Womyns.

Susan: How have you seen some of those tensions around race come up?

Elise: The protest was a really big thing um and it’s something that like I feel really bad about now because...there were like a dozen of us who like planned [the protest against like coeducation] and I was part of that...Even though there were students of color like in that group...I know that like students of color felt left out of it and they felt like there was this essentialist idea of like, well when we use terms like ‘safe space,’ like we want Womyns to continue to be a safe space, what we’re really talking about when we say that when we’re marching around like across the lawn is that we want it to be like a safe space for women and a safe space for like queer people here. But like in a lot of ways it’s already not a safe space for students of color and like their concerns weren’t getting addressed...Like if we really want it to be a safe space, why aren’t we concerned about their safety?

 Parsing Sisterhood

For some of the women students of color in this predominantly white educational institution, the desire for safety and comfort was “an unfulfilled longing” (hooks 1990, 152). Three of the four black students in my study cited evidence of cracks in the familial relationships that defined this small, remote, all-female community. The ideal of sisterhood was not realized for them, though they considered themselves W Women; they were Collins’ “outsiders-within.”

Lisa in group interview: I would have to question sisterhood...In the protest for me this whole sisterhood, like I don’t know what sisterhood is supposed to mean, like bonding, Odd/Even9? We enjoy ourselves with one another but on

9 Odd/Even refers to the Womyns traditions that placed women of different classes (those who graduated in years that ended with even numbers and those who graduated in years that ended with odd numbers) in competition with each other. These games and “sing-offs” were the traditions most often cited as building “sisterhood” and “school spirit.” Some students reported that hazing had become part of these rituals that were passed on from class to class. Patricia described Odd/Even like this: “I’m an odd line song leader which means that I teach all the odd liners who play on the team, all of the songs. And then you get up and you sing and you’re judged on spirit and sound and all these various other things...It’s just this crazy two weeks where all you do is think about purple and yellow or blue and green respectively. And you, um, form these amazing bonds. All of my friends -- all of my
a day to day basis, I don’t feel it, there’s not a sisterhood there, it’s just kind of blank you know…

Sophie: I just wanted some place sort of peaceful and I found that in Womyns and I liked the whole image, the sisterhood kind of thing and while there is truth in that, I think I found that it’s not completely true (laughs).

Jordan: I definitely got drawn in to the fact of um Womyns being a big big sorority and having this big overreaching sisterhood across the whole campus, and not that we don’t have sisterhood here, but um it’s not as big as I thought it was…It’s definitely clique-y like I think people just form really really strong bonds here and can talk about a lot more here because it’s small and because it’s a women’s college um and so there is sisterhood here but I think it’s definitely it’s separate by like um by gender, by race, it’s definitely separate…I thought [Womyns] wasn’t separated which is why I was so attracted to it…I thought the difference was that Womyns went across all sections…um most of the time it doesn’t and you deal with it (laughs).

Grace, a white student, commented on the breach in sisterhood that she witnessed during the students’ protest against the Board of Trustees’ coeducation decision.

I think that women of color often feel like they’re not included and it’s not like they aren’t W Women but that like you know they don’t feel like they can claim that as their own because it’s a white thing. And like…when we had the protest for coed stuff and like… I don’t think people realized it at the time but it became very like segregated and like women of color totally left [administration building] and were like ‘[you’re using] sisterhood’…The kind of sisterhood we were talking about was very white, middle class you know, this kind of sisterhood that really other people can’t fit into.

Notably, these students were the only participants who openly questioned the notion of sisterhood at Womyns (though some participants did not use the term at all in their interviews).

The sisterhood of Womyns’ homeplace was compromised by the ways in which gender oppression, racial oppression, sexual oppression were hierarchicalized and placed in competition for institutional resources and attention. Any attribution of a “homeplace” or closest friends are odd liners. And so it’s about …showing spirit. .. It’s about finding sisterhood on campus.”
“space of radical openness” that fostered gendered and/or sexed political solidarity at Womyns during the time of my study has to be tempered with an acknowledgement of the community’s silence and ongoing tension around racism.

The Beauty of Homeplace

Rosie ...I think that the minute you step foot on campus you know whether or not you’re going to fit. It’s something about the architecture, the atmosphere, the people that you interact with right away. You’ll know whether or not you’ll be able to find a place...

Susan: Okay. Is there any more you can say about the time when you step foot on campus and you feel the atmosphere -- what is that, and how do you know it so immediately?
Rosie: It’s kind of described here often as the “Womyns bubble.” I don’t really know how else to say it except...the layout of the campus and the structure just grabs you. I get to look at the lake every day from my window in my room. Um, and -- and it’s built with the history and the tradition of what a woman’s college is meant to be. [You have to be] open to receiving that feeling when you walk in the door, and take the extra step to really look around and talk to people and get to know what it’s like to have a Womyns experience...

From its architecture to its setting on a lake, the “Womyns bubble” was marked by its natural setting. Nature is often on the margin rather than at the center of our culture’s constructs, and it is often associated with shelters, refuges, homeplaces. This was true at Womyns, where the beauty of the grounds was (and I imagine still is) essential to the College’s allure. When asked, “What drew you to Womyns College?,” most of my interviewees promptly cited the College’s physical beauty; that the College was single-sex was not a primary draw and, for many of the students, it was an institutional characteristic that gave them pause. But the physical landscape was unequivocally appealing. While Sophie had been disappointed by her Womyns experience in some ways, she said, “…but I definitely like the lake.” Jordan called it “a
beautiful place.” The lake and/or campus was often described as “gorgeous,” or “absolutely beautiful.” Several students simply said, “I fell in love with it.”

Devin attributed her personal reinvention to Womyns’ institutional culture and to its location in the country:

...I never had any school spirit in high school um I thought I could I could reinvent myself here and I did! I was incredibly involved with [Odd/Even] for the first four weeks of school, five hours a night of work um but I really enjoyed it and those people I am still really close with all of them... like a sorority kind of (laughs)...I became really active ...
Susan: Um can you talk a little bit more about the reinventing yourself, like so it sounds like there was a pretty big transition for you from high school? Devin: Yea, yea um I was definitely a different person in high school in my behavior, I don’t know about my like core but my behavior outward is definitely different um I did a lot of drugs in high school that I don’t do now some part of that is I moved to the country and just, no access... And so that’s just a complete lifestyle change...It was a conscious choice moving to the country for college...

It is not my intention to reinforce an essentialist (and tired) connection between women and nature. There is nothing in my data that suggests this kind of association. What I mean to point out here is that the natural beauty of the college contributed to its significance as a homeplace for Womyns students of all races, sexualities, and gender expressions. This “bubble” was a removed site, making it ideal for hooks’ radical conversations and identity (re)constructions. The campus’ remoteness, in the country, and its natural beauty contributed to the students’ sense of a tightly-knit community.

Fran linked the natural beauty of this removed place to the traditions and familial relations that were fostered at Womyns. This created a sense of shared history with other ‘W Women’ – an element of hooks’ homeplace.

There is this Womyns culture that becomes very enchanting. It’s like this sisterhood thing – it’s kind of magical. We have Minerva. We have the
sycamore tree and dancing at the sycamore tree on the Maypole. It feels
surreal a lot of the times to be here. And that, I think, has to do with – that
changes the relationships that we have here, because we don’t – suddenly
we’re in this place where it is bound by different rules and we don’t feel like
we have to have the same kind of friendships that we’ve had before, and it’s
okay for us that we can’t live without each other.
Susan: Are there other ways that you’d describe the notion of sisterhood in
this community?
Fran: Um, sisterhood is really tied to traditions. It’s kind of a feeling about
being tied to every Womyns Woman who’s ever been here. And even the
ones who left midway through. We’re all still part of the sisterhood thing. It’s
very much about location. I think it’s very much about this place, this
particular place...Sisterhood kind of grows out of that,... being the only ones
who have ever been here, who’ve ever seen it, we are the only ones who are
a part of what makes it what it is.

Homeplace: Private or Public Space?

“A big sisterhood” and “sorority-like” were consistent descriptors when Womyns
students talked about their alma mater, a nod to the separatist character of a women’s college,
amplified by Womyns’ rural remoteness and its bucolic setting. Across generations of W
Women, this sense of sisterhood was cultivated by traditions of Odd/Even competitions, May
Day celebrations, plunges in the lake in “lingerie,” decorating Minerva, the College’s graduation
ceremony. This bond of sisterhood meant that each student felt as though she were “…part of
a legacy, you’re part of tradition, you’re part of something that has meant something to women
for years and years and years...” (Jane). The students in my study were convinced that the
“meshing” between upperclasswomen and new students could not be “reproduced” if men
were present (group interview). Womyns was a homeplace by virtue of the kinships created
among women who had a shared history in this secluded, beautiful location, and by an
awareness of oppression outside of the College’s walls, “in the real world.”
The President of the College and the Admissions Director were both alumnae, and in the students’ everyday lives, these two senior administrators represented the profound inter-generational connections between W Women. Students’ relationships with these institutional leaders were laden with expectations of sisterhood and like-mindedness. When these two administrators were at odds with the students over institutional priorities or direction, the students felt a sense of betrayal. The intense, intimate friendships that marked contemporary students’ homeplace strained the shared historical and communal values that bound one generation of W Women to the next. The Director of Admissions expressed a complex anger over “fights” about bulletin boards in public spaces, about the ways in which sexual and racial political issues arose on campus:

I was mad, I can’t even begin to tell you...In some ways I look at it and administratively we can be angry with some of them but you know we’re teaching these students to have a voice and don’t crush them when they do. And that’s exciting.

When it came to College policies and practices that denied, inhibited, or attempted to hide the students’ homosocial relationships, and when community discussions about coeducation grew heated, this generational divide was palpable (see Chapter Four). It can perhaps be explained by generational and ideological differences regarding ‘public’ and ‘private’ spheres, places, conversations, behaviors. But for the Womyns students in my study – as for bell hooks’ homeplaces – these lines between public and private were blurred, and they were attempting to introduce a public and political dimension to their lives at the College. As Jane said, they were “women focusing on their scholarship outside of societal codes” and they felt particularly frustrated and angry when resistance came from their own forebears.
The Margin as a Space of Radical Openness and a Site for Resistance

The students in my study wanted their Womyns “homeplace” to be both private and public, a “space of radical openness,” a site where subversive behaviors and identities were accepted and acceptable. In the essay, “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,” bell hooks explains her “personal struggle to name that location from which I come to voice – that space of my theorizing” (1990, 146). Her theorization of the margin is about agency, whether exercised through voice, theory, or location. And it is about subjects who can choose, subjects who can and do act. Her subjects are those “...who are unwilling to play the role of ‘exotic Other,’” whose “very presence is a disruption” (148). hooks’ empowered subjects – members of oppressed groups who develop “critical consciousness” – position themselves against “the side of colonizing mentality” and with “revolutionary effort which seeks to create space where there is unlimited access to the pleasure and power of knowing...” (145).

This engineered “space of radical openness” is in the margins – but not marginalized. It is chosen by marginalized subjects for its disruptive potential. This chosen margin is the place where oppressed people become agential, learning “counterhegemonic” or “oppositional world views” and creating avenues for subversion, outside of the view, the knowledge, the experience of the dominant culture. This is the ‘politics of location’ for hooks: the chosen margin is both a literal and figurative place

where one can say no to the colonizer,...speak the voice of resistance because there exists a counter-language. While it may resemble the colonizer’s tongue it has undergone a transformation, it has been irrevocably changed... (hooks 1990, 150)
I want to take further this notion of marginality as a seat of power, to suggest that even
Judith Butler alludes to a marginal ‘location’ that has radical potential.

There are advantages to remaining less than intelligible, if intelligibility is
understood as that which is produced as a consequence of recognition
according to prevailing social norms...[I]t follows that my sense of survival
depends upon escaping the clutch of those norms...Indeed, the capacity to
develop a critical relation to these norms presupposes a distance from
them...(Butler 2004, 3)

It seems to me that Butler is arguing for the same marginality – out of view, or at least on the
periphery, of the dominant culture – that hooks articulates. Outside the recognition of
prevailing social norms, marginalized ‘subjects’ gain some advantage by becoming
“unintelligible.” By residing in spaces that provide some “distance” from the hegemonic norms
that deny them subjectivity – at drag balls, at black churches, in women’s separatist
communities – sexual, racial, gender minorities have some modicum of self-determination,
better able to define “intelligibility” for themselves.

...I think that if I can still speak to a ‘we,’...I am speaking to those of us who
are living in certain ways beside ourselves, whether it is in sexual passion, or
emotional grief, or political rage. In a sense, the predicament is to
understand what kind of community is composed of those who are beside
themselves. (Butler 2004, 20, emphasis in original)

In Butler’s community of those who are “beside themselves” -- marginalized humans living with
like Others, both recognizing themselves as objects and fantasizing themselves as subjects –
there is strength in kinship. This kinship is differently imagined but similar to the familial
relations that hooks constructs in her homeplace and it is a kinship that supports survival and
resistance.

For Womyns students their “chosen margin” was the “bubble” of the College. Womyns
became both literally and in students’ fantasies a political “homeplace,” a “space of radical
openness” where subjectivities were revolutionized and rendered “unintelligible,” out of view of the oppressive dominant culture; a place where the boundaries between binaries – such as those that mark public and private space, male and female, homosexual and heterosexual – were blurred. The College’s culture as a single-sex institution contributed to the historical and discursive overlay of familial relations in “sisterhood,” and promoted some ‘alternative’ kinship patterns of emotional and sexual intimacy among women. For many students in my study, Womyns was both homeplace and a community chosen for its location in the margins.

“Beside Themselves” in the Margin

As I have argued, Womyns was a location in the margins where non-dominant sexualities were tolerated, sometimes embraced. Norms were “rattled” and abject subjects became “intelligible” in this community: the lesbian, the queer “imagined [them]selves otherwise” (Butler, 2004, 29). Whether as the Big Dyke on Campus, in the Womyns Web, or in their everyday kinship patterns, queer and lesbian women had status, if only “until graduation.” As Tasha said, “[At Womyns] some people view…being straight as being submissive...Working their way ‘up’ and being a lesbian is more of a self-empowering notion.” Those lesbians, queers, and genderqueers who chose Womyns or chose to stay at Womyns because it offered a margin were able to look “both from the outside in and from the inside out” (hooks 1990, 149). They were “beside themselves” with the joy of community, and aware of an ‘outside world’ that would not support their persistence.

Rebecca: I think being bisexual on campus as well as just in the world in general has been a big thing for me because um I think there’s also a lot of kind of myths about being bisexual – people think that you just are very promiscuous or you know if you’re dating one person that’s say male, then you’re gonna have to date a female too, or...just that you really don’t know what they are...I think I’ve come across some kind of uh not really prejudice
but...I know some lesbian women who clearly won’t date a bisexual woman because they’re afraid that...they don’t really know exactly what they want...But I don’t feel like it’s a big thing here, I feel we still kind of fit in...For the most part, I don’t think it’s a big deal.

Sophie said, “It’s like patchwork...We just all are women and (laughs) we just know we’re all women and we just go about and it’s it’s normal to be women.”

Finding “Voice” in the Margins

hooks speaks of language and “voice” together, specifically learning to utilize her voice in a new way after “confront[ing] silence, inarticulateness...I refer to that personal struggle to name that location from which I come to voice...” (1990, 146). For Womyns students, the College was the place that gave them voice, or the place where they found their voices; it allowed and valued their voices, taught and encouraged them to speak.

Grace: I think having a voice is really the most, the thing that I aspire to be the most, to have the most and...like you know, yea, be compassionate and a nice person and whatever but like for the most part, I wanna be one of those people who makes a difference and who is not afraid to back who won’t back down, is not afraid to voice their opinion.

Jane: [At W] there’s a real emphasis on making sure that these women are doing everything they can to cultivate a critical thinking and motivated self, you know not a woman who’s going to operate under sort of societal standards.

S: Uh huh. What do you think the standards...are about?

Jane: Well there’s an implicit set of behaviors...even in the classroom you know...there’s this code of silence that is certainly there which I do not want to be a part of by any means um and I think as soon as you get a [male] presence in the classroom...you’re going to have people who aren’t going to be as willing to speak up.

Patricia: Like when I go into my...classroom, I know that my opinion is going to be valued -- women aren’t stifled in the same way that I feel like they frequently are in other classrooms...From the moment that you step on campus, you’re expected to speak. And I think, I don’t really know where that comes from, but you -- you’re not going to get by if you don’t speak. You have to talk and you have to think.
While acknowledging the essentialism in these stories of women finding their voices, there is nonetheless an argument to be made that Womyns students had moved to the center in this margin where they could overcome the history of suppressed voices of women and girls in education, and disrupt the expectation that women would be seen and not heard in the public realm. Students’ active participation at Womyns worked the weakness of that historical prohibition: they claimed a formerly masculine subject position by occupying the seats and speaking in the intellectual space of higher education. By asserting their voices and inhabiting the center of the classroom, Womyns students were actively resisting the norm of lady-like passivity that, from their perspective, prevailed in coeducational institutions. Their voices made them subjects.

*Women’s Studies and Feminism as the Language of the Margin*

The “bubble” that constituted Womyns as a marginal space of radical openness and possibility was, in a sense, an escape from patriarchy, created and sustained at least in part by feminism and academic women’s studies.

Lin: I’ve noticed like with women here that they’re conscious of feeling left outside, they know outside it’s very um misogynist they um you know we live a patriarchal society and they’re aware of that. Whereas I don’t know if...women who haven’t had the experience of a single sex environment are are as conscious about that.

Eleven of my participants either identified themselves as Women’s Studies majors (in response to, “if you were to write an autobiography, what would be the important parts of your identity you’d want to talk about?”) or spontaneously spoke of the influence of Women’s Studies courses and language on the campus.
Grace: I’m a women’s studies major. People in the outside world would be like you know, why would you do that? Blah blah blah. But here it’s like everyone’s like, yea!

Devin said that because of the Women’s Studies department, there was talk about gender “all over campus...and I think it’s good for everyone.” Catherine said, “...pretty much everybody on this campus realizes that gender is socially constructed (laughs).” Sally, who was a chemistry major and a physics minor, said that she had learned to recognize and constructively confront misogynist and homophobic comments because of her experience at Womyns:

...I had to explain it and articulate it...you know about gender not being a binary system and...just hearing this stuff come out of my mouth, I was like, who am I? (laughs) ...[H]ad I not come to Womyns I don’t think “gender isn’t a binary system” would have ever (laughs) come out of my mouth!

Women’s Studies language and thinking had permeated this campus to the extent that even a chemistry major could articulate the limits of a binaried system of gender. It was the curriculum and language of the margin that moved to the center at Womyns during the time of my study.

But even within this “space of radical openness,” speaking the language of Women’s Studies had its risks in some circles. Elise linked the risk to her sense of safety:

I feel physically safe, I never feel physically unsafe here...But like at Womyns (pause) in terms of like my gender identity, I don’t necessarily feel like that’s a safe thing for me to talk about with people. And I also feel like when I talk too much about gender or race or sexuality and stuff like that, that people start to get uncomfortable, like people will be like you know stop being a women’s studies major for a couple minutes, or like you know everything doesn’t have to be PC [politically correct] or things like that...
She experienced alienation, being seen as the irritating, politically correct Other. Within the
margin, there was still the experience of being marginalized, and pressure to assimilate, to take
the path of less resistance.

Susan: You’ve used the word ‘feminist’ several times...[H]ow do people relate
to that term [here]?
Lisa: They’re comfortable outright feminists and they’ll let you know...
S What’s your definition of feminism?
Lisa: Oh um um just a person who stands up for women’s rights uh and just is
very adamant about it?
Susan: And do you consider yourself a feminist?
Lisa: Yes, yea.

Identifying as feminist or talk of feminism was less frequent in my interviews than allusions to
the College’s Women’s Studies program, but a number of participants considered themselves
feminist. In this marginal space it was acceptable to assert one’s feminist leanings.

Sophie: I never really thought about calling myself a feminist before I came to
Womyns and I did sort of have that idea that feminists are angry, man-hating
(laughs), um hairy (laughs), not shaving leg (laughs), lesbian kind of woman.
But that’s that’s not what all feminists are. It’s a very stereotypical view of
feminists and I think any woman can pretty much be a feminist if she believes
in what she’s doing helps women. I guess um I think a feminist can be
anything, just just wanting to be a female voice I guess.
Susan: uh huh. And what do you think has happened for you at Womyns
that’s made you make that shift from feminist being a negative term to it
being a more positive term or something you identify with?
Sophie: Um (pause) um I guess having a bunch of women around me and I I
think it was just sort of more realizing that I I didn’t really become a feminist, I
just kind of realized that I already was and um just becoming comfortable
with the term and and just speaking out...or being proud to say that I am a
feminist you know. I’ve had a few people, mostly guys, say things to me like,
“Ohhh you’re a feminist, ohhh why are you gonna do that? Ohhh that
moment is over.” It’s like, no it’s not (laughs). Definitely not.

Fran expressed concern that the campus would lose its feminist character once men
came to Womyns as full time students. She juxtaposed feminism with the presence of men,
seeing them as mutually exclusive.
There’s a lot of feminism on this campus and I’m worried it’s going to go away. And it seems so silly to say that just because men will be here, the feminism will die down. But realistically, people who have been recruited into a co-ed school have a different outlook.

Susan: How do you see feminism on this campus? What kinds of things have you seen that make you say this is a feminist campus?

Fran: I don’t know if it’s a feminist campus. I know there’s a lot. I think I feel that way because most of the time I come across an attitude that more or less matches mine in that we don’t really have a need for men. We can function without them. They are not really a part of the picture...like kind of – it doesn’t matter. You know, they aren’t really part of our equation and we don’t have to seek them out for anything. There are women here and that is enough. And that we can do anything and the idea that we don’t have to buy into cultural stereotypes about women, young women, about straight women even...And that we can identify misogyny when we see it, you know, and we know it and can immediately handle it, and have a response. And not that we’re just going to laugh it off, because it’s inappropriate to laugh it off. That’s one of these things – we don’t put up with it. And I’m afraid that we’re going to begin to put up with it.

This margin of Womyns College was a site of knowing for all of the students in my study. Each of them articulated some sort of knowledge gained – about self or an understanding of their “bubble” and how it differed from the world they would encounter outside of it – or voice claimed because of their single-sex environment, and many of them used the language of feminism or women’s studies to describe their transformation. In many ways, students derived agency from and through this language in this place. It helped them in their attempt to reproduce and resignify “norms of recognition” (Butler, 2004, 32). This margin of Womyns College represented the students’ “…struggle for a less oppressive social world…” (25), one that would acknowledge a broader range of gendered and sexual bodies. Womyns College prior to co-education was counter-hegemonic space, a margin where many students demonstrated the capacity to “develop a critical relation to the norm” (ibid.). Where else could Devin say, “…At Womyns, I’m a person and out of Womyns, I’m a woman. So I’m more aware of the fact that
other people view me as a woman when I’m not here...[Here] I can be more just a person, I can go beyond my gender, I don’t have to worry about gender here”?

Further, in this margin the norms that separate public and private space were rattled. The distinction between the two – which is historically so very gendered and raced in the United States – was blurred, the binary disrupted. Displays of women’s sexuality were prominent in both public and private spaces at Womyns; same-sex relationships and sexual encounters were everyday occurrences; women students spoke in all arenas, whether to confront an administration that they perceived as unresponsive, or in a classroom for the first time, or to a neighbor whose homophobic or sexist remarks were unacceptable. For some, sisterhood took on historic, social, and political meaning in addition to the familial and domestic. When asked how she thought things would be different when men arrived as residential students the following fall, Devin said, “...there’ll be more of this is what girls do in their rooms and this is what girls do outside their rooms...” Once heteronormativity – in the form of coeducation – was adopted at the College, many of the students in my study believed that the margin’s public and private spaces would be re-drawn, and political and personal practices would again be contained in their designated spheres.

The Demise of the Margin at Womyns

The spring term before coeducation came to the College, the sense of loss that Devin anticipated was articulated by a number of participants.

Susan: Can you speculate about how you think day to day life for women students will be different?
Catherine: Um I feel like a lot of the women here will be you know before they go to class might look in the mirror a little longer um, might worry ‘oh if I wear my pajamas to dinner like the boys might snicker at me’ or or not think I’m attractive or I mean even if you’re not trying to be attractive for men I
I feel like it’s just like in your brain, it’s just so ingrained that that you’re supposed to look nice and stuff like that… I really hope that it doesn’t affect the classroom because we have a lot of good discussions and I know people say oh you know a lot of women are afraid to speak in front of men and stuff like that, I really just hope that that doesn’t happen. I hope that people really stay strong, headstrong.

The College invested in a number of campus improvements prior to or as the male students arrived. Ground was finally broken for a long-awaited science building that had reportedly been stalled due to lack of funding; the building was completed within two years. Soccer and cross-country athletic teams were inaugurated. Buildings were made more secure, accessible only to those who had College IDs.

Rosie: We’re struggling with watching all of these miraculous changes go through and wondering why they didn’t happen before. Why it takes, um, a coed decision to boot all of these improvements… for example, the addition of cross country sports teams, um, as a high schooler, I qualified for states three times. I would have gladly run here… Little things like that, if that had been part of the initiatives beforehand to attract students, like why not then and why now? There’s a lot of frustration.

In the early spring of 2006, after one semester of coeducation at Womyns, I assembled four of my participants for a group interview. They reported that women students experienced many of the changes at the College as a loss of trust and power (discussed in more detail in Chapter Six). Practices and systems for responding to student concerns had become less dialogic and more formal: male students seemed to demand recourse to administrative structures and rules, to authority, and the College’s administration (whose senior members were unchanged from the prior year) complied. Same-sex female couples became invisible; guidelines advantaged male participation over female participation on governance committees; male students acquired social status, with women students flocking to their floor in the dorm and following behind them on campus. There was a distinct change in the women students’
sense of physical safety on campus: three sexual assaults (including two acquaintance rapes between students) were reported in the first six months of coeducation; there was an increase in reported thefts and vandalism (one incident targeted the photographic display of the student protest against coeducation); when disagreements arose, senior women students in leadership positions were subjected to intimidation by some of the new male students. Group interview participants were careful to attribute these changes to the new culture that came with male and female students. Still, they experienced the loss of their “homeplace;” their “space of radical openness” had been foreclosed.

One of the hallmarks of a developing feminist consciousness is the ability to recognize and articulate male privilege. It is the sort of knowledge that is gained from and in the margins, bell hooks’ “critical consciousness.” During the group interview, participants easily identified instances of male privilege in the context of Womyns’ rapidly changing institutional climate. They noted an exclusionary bonding among the male students, based in the hyper-masculinity that gets reproduced by male athletic cultures and in all-male living arrangements. The Womyns student newspaper reported that dormitory residents described the males’ residential floor as a “loud, annoying frat party” and a “whorehouse.” The introduction of a men’s soccer team at the College was described by one of the new male students, a contributing writer to the student newspaper:

...The first mistake the College made was in forming a men’s soccer team in its opening year of coeducation...It has borne a sort of ‘fratty’ cluster of men...This is not the time to placard the sweat-stained, macho male...patriarchal stereotype. Mr. Wham-bam-thank-you-ma’am has no place on this campus. Unfortunately, I would posit that the men’s soccer team -- whether intentionally or unwittingly -- is reinforcing just such an image.
For the women students in my group interview, the ways in which male privilege had shown up on their campus reflected a change – that only tangentially had to do with gender – in the type of student Womyns College wanted to attract.

Susan: Seeing what you’ve seen this year, do you all have theories or a different understanding of why the college went coed? Do you think it was because of finances?
Fran: I think finances were a huge part of it but I think um they wanted a different kind of population here.
Lisa: That’s what my friends are saying, they’re saying they want to get rid of all the lower class people, they want to get rid of all the minorities on campus, they want it to be a white, upper class college.
Fran: Straight college.
Lisa: Straight college, yea ‘cause originally Womyns was for the elite and I think they wanna get it back to that.

Fran: [The Board of Trustees] has a certain set of values and they’re mostly people who want Womyns to come back and see it come back a certain way...They want this college to be coeducational, nothing out of the ordinary. There’s no money in a place that advocates for more minorities, there’s no money in a place that encourages deviant cultural behavior...
Grace: ...We talked a lot during the protest -- you know marketing strategies and who they were trying to get to come here, and you know they didn’t market to the gay and lesbian population, they just didn’t go there and so it’s like what’s wrong with that population, why didn’t you try to pull from that?... I hate the possibility of [the College] succeeding [with] the mentality of heteronormative space, white space, liberal, middle class [space]...

The students’ perceptions that elitism and male bonding were being promoted along with coeducation at Womyns was underscored by a corresponding sense of the demise of sisterhood, a disregard for and diminished importance of traditions, and lessened emphasis on mentoring among ‘W Women.’ The Honor Code – which women students believed allowed them to leave doors unlocked and personal computers in public places, and to openly share academic work – lost its extraordinary powers of protection in the face of theft, threats of physical danger, verbal intimidation, and masculinism. The location of the College’s historical
commencement ceremony on the lawn in front of the administration building would be
changed to the lawn of the new science building that the College had rushed to build. The Big
Dyke Party became “Homo-coming.” The tradition of a new class of Womyns students and the
graduating class of seniors jumping into the lake “in their lingerie” as celebratory markers of
joining or leaving the community was not mentioned. The desire to pass along College
traditions to new students flagged in the face of tacit and explicit institutional acquiescence to
male privilege. The kinship experienced and modeled among ‘W Women’ went underground.

Grace: ...Each class has their own individual thing they’re dealing with and it’s
like none of us can really come together...We don’t really wanna come
together.
Fran: I think that we all tried to come together [in the protest], we all came
together and it showed how ineffective and powerless we actually were...
Lisa: We were very powerful I thought during the protest.
Fran: I believe that we absolutely were powerful but I think that what the
way the protest ended, the issues that were brought up after the
protest...really revealed to us that it doesn’t matter what we do. Um we
don’t have the voice that we always believed that we had. That they taught
us to be these strong powerful women and that they showed us how
ineffective that can be... I think the more involved you are...the more you’re
expected to pick up pieces of...the next generation...
Lisa: It’s very much like “where are you guys, why aren’t you helping
them?”...
Fran: Because it was just taken for granted before with the upperclassmen,
derlassmen just kind of meshed together and you helped each other
out...The professors and the administration, no one saw it, no one realized
how it was done so they don’t get it now and they can’t reproduce it.
Grace: You can’t reproduce it.
Fran: ...I can’t just do it, just be like ok you, you, and you, I’m gonna teach you
how to be a W Woman, like it doesn’t work that way.

Less than a year after the College admitted men as full-time students, this “homeplace”
for sexual and gender minorities at Womyns College had been lost. Students who had
experienced Womyns as a margin were left with a sense of powerlessness, ineffectiveness as a
group of women. Of these four students in my group interview, Lisa was the most accepting of
coeducation: “....Whatever Womyns is gonna be, it’s gonna happen just very organically...And whether that’s what we want it to be or not you know control is limited, you know we just have to trust...” Sophie said, “I know I didn’t want to allow my school going coed to stop me from expressing myself, like however I dress, I didn’t want that to affect any of that. So I can’t really say for anybody else but for me and my friends, we’re still gonna do everything the way we did.”

Grace: Trust is a big thing right now, trust after everything we’ve been through...Womyns really changed me for the better, it made me a leader and um taught me how to be vocal and taught me how to use my education to kind of further my voice. And so I trusted this place and it all kind of fell apart and so it made it hard for me to trust anyone, I think. I’m sure there’s a lot of psychological damage that has gone on...you know I mean people are really, their heads were really messed with and you can’t get around that.

Fran: And I don’t think that the administration helped that, I think that they picked up on this thing which is that, hey you know what (sinister laugh) we can call them crazy... because they look crazy, they looked crazy when they were protesting, they look crazy because they don’t like men, you know that’s crazy, how do you not like men? Who are you, are you some kind of radical militant nazi feminist thing like?

Grace: ...Like everywhere I go someone asks me did I protest men, do I hate the men?...

Susan: So it feels like you all got represented as crazy.

Grace: Right.

Susan: Overreacting...

Lisa: Overreacting yes, that was a big word.

Grace: If you call somebody crazy and if you keep calling them crazy for long enough, they start to believe that they’re crazy and I think that that’s what really happened you know, I feel crazy a lot of the time for still caring...

Fran: ...I’m gonna be 50 years old and it’s still gonna affect me. And it’s coming to terms with that [that] no one will ever understand this...I can see what’s happening to Womyns and I...[have] that like sadness in my heart for this college... To think that your alma mater is gone, it’s not actually gone,...but like it’s it is gone for me, that place is gone...

Lisa, Sophie, Grace, and Fran were “beside themselves,” grieving the loss of their experience of a ‘we,’ a community in the margin where different norms of recognition (Butler,
2004) were on display for a time. Then, as their margin became mainstream – “nothing out of the ordinary” in Fran’s words – the sexual and gender minorities at Womyns became less able to negotiate norms of recognition, less able to resist, less able to derive agency from their homeplace and the margin with its sense of possibility. Some of the students in my study felt “crazy,” and knew they were portrayed as crazy in service to norms that (re)produced hegemonic heterosexuality.

Most single-sex colleges for women were and are viewed with a certain prurient curiosity. For those who attend or lead or teach at women’s colleges or girls’ schools, there has always been the risk of being seen as “spectacle” – the pathology of an all-female landscape. From psychologist Havelock Ellis’ articulation of the historical fear of women’s colleges as “lesbian breeding grounds” to contemporary popular culture movies and articles about hysterical and hypersexual female students and teachers, Womyns students and administrators were well aware of this perception. This focus on female sexuality is understandable in a culture that thrives on compulsory heterosexuality: where the bodies of marginalized humans are gathered, the dominant cultural gaze constructs entertainment for its own consumption.

The students in my group interview understood their positioning in a “spectacle” (hooks 1990, 22) as a result of their critical relation to heterosexual norms, an understanding of themselves in the eyes of the dominant culture: they were part of a sexual fantasy not of their own making, seen as aberrant or deviant, “radical militant nazi feminist things” and “man-

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10 For example, a 2011 Broadway production of Lillian Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour*; the 2003 film *Mona Lisa Smile*; a 2001 *Rolling Stone* magazine article entitled, “The Highly Charged Erotic Life of the Wellesley Girl,” et al.
haters”. This contributed to their feeling of craziness and isolation – “no one will ever understand this”: they began to doubt themselves; maybe they were overreacting. If their homeplace or margin could have been preserved or re-created in some way, for some period of time in their coeducational College, they might have been able to recover those norms of recognition that allowed them to persist.

Fundamental to the process of de-centering the oppressive other and claiming our right to subjectivity is the insistence that we must determine how we will be and not rely on colonizing responses to determine our legitimacy. We are not looking to the Other for recognition. We are recognizing ourselves and willingly making contact with all who would engage us in a constructive manner. (hooks 1990, 22)

This is my argument for single-sex spaces for women in coeducational institutions; for students of color in historically and predominantly white institutions; for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people who live with heterosexual hegemony: within these institutions, there must be intentionally created and institutionally sustained homeplaces where marginalized, oppressed, otherwise “unintelligible” human beings can nurture and protect themselves “beside themselves.” There must be margins where radical subjectivities can be fashioned and resistance can be exercised. If these conditions can be found or created and institutionally sustained, there are real possibilities for differently gendered identities to persist, for social and political change to take root.
Chapter 6: The Construction and Disruption of Gender Norms at Womyns College

This chapter examines my data utilizing Judith Butler’s theoretical concepts as a framework for understanding what was happening at Womyns College. The attempts of the students at the College to “dispute” and “challenge” the “binary system of gender” were complicated: the “heterosexual matrix” (Butler 2004) or hegemony within which they were living constructed them as both complicit and resistant subjects. Many of them were attempting to “resignify” norms of gender and sexuality through parody (Big Dyke Parties and Drag Balls), appropriation of terms (claiming “queer-ness” and stretching notions of ‘The W Woman’), and/or engaging in political discourse (the language of Women’s Studies), demonstrating the “inefficacy” of the norm through acts of “subversion, of working the weakness in the norm…” (Butler 1993, 237).

The first section of this chapter is entitled, “Coherent Gender at Womyns College.” I will introduce ‘The W Woman,’ the archetype of the student and ultimately woman that the College aspired to produce and that Womyns students emulated. ‘The W Woman’ embodied historical and contemporary notions and norms of femininity, all safely within and reinforcing of heteronormativity. The second section of the chapter, “Enforcing Gender Norms at Womyns College” is a discussion of the ways in which practices at the College served a policing function, enforcing hegemonic gender norms by rewarding dominant repetitions of ‘The W Woman’ (students who were elected by peers or chosen by administrators to take leadership positions), and punishing subversive enactments (by students’ gossip about each other and by administrators’ refusal to grant visibility or voice to resistant students). The third section of the chapter, “Resisting Gender Norms at Womyns College,” explores occasions when students’
resistance to dominant gender and sexuality norms were most successful, “…moments...where
the coherence of [the binary system of gender was] put into question” (Butler 1993, 237). But
finally, I concede that the story of Womyns College as told by my study demonstrates that the
cultural – social and political – system that holds in place and is invested in the power relations
of heterosexual hegemony is practically impossible to change.

“Coherent Gender” at Womyns: ‘The W Woman’

There’s a very specific notion of gender involved in compulsory
heterosexuality: a certain view of gender coherence whereby what a person
feels, how a person acts, and how a person expresses herself sexually is the
articulation and consummation of a gender. It’s a particular...identity that gets
established as gender coherence which is linked to compulsory
heterosexuality. It’s not any gender, or all gender, it’s that specific kind of
coherent gender. (Butler in Osborne and Segal 1993)

At Womyns College, that “specific kind of coherent gender” was ‘The W Woman.’ In my
interviews, a fairly consistent subject emerged. When I asked student participants in my
interviews to “describe for me The W Woman,” there was usually a smile of recognition and a
ready answer: she was an iteration of power feminism, the raced, sexed, classed woman who
could ‘have it all.’ There were persistent descriptors and themes: ‘The W Woman’ was
“assertive,” “opinionated,” “strong”; in dominant culture language, “a bitch.” She was
“articulate,” “speaks out,” “combative,” “not afraid to use her voice.” All participants described
her as “involved,” or “incredibly active,” “a multi-tasker” to the point of being “overextended;”
someone who “has a plan,” “someone who gets things done.” The W Woman was
“empowering” of herself and others: “confidence” and “self assurance” “radiate[d] from her
body.” She was portrayed as “open-minded”, in particular referring to the campus culture of
tolerance for displays of female bodies and sexuality.
Womyns’ gender norms constructed the ‘W Woman’ as someone who demonstrated that she took her education seriously and knew what she thought. She confidently used her voice. In keeping with historic and contemporary practices of femininity, she exhibited compassion and attentiveness to others’ needs, while being a busy multi-tasker. Perhaps at odds with dominant constructions of femininity, but nonetheless important was the W Woman’s ability to function in an environment where men were rarely present and to exhibit openness to a range of female sexualities. But the W Woman would ultimately fill the traditional role of wife and mother: the campus was rife with stories of past and present students who were only “lesbian until graduation” (see following discussion). Several participants noted that the W Woman displayed a particularly feminine comportment: Lisa said, she “carr[ies] herself with poise,” standing “straight up, walks very stern, her hips are not going.” “A man” will know that a W Woman is “about business, not easy, ‘I can’t mess with her’.” My fieldnotes from a day on campus echo this conceptualization of the W Woman:

After a few minutes, I hear the sound of [someone] in heels walking briskly and authoritatively down the hall into the [administration building] lobby. [The woman who owns the walk] is wearing a black coat which is streaming behind her, her arms are full, over-the-shoulder bag on one arm. She is Caucasian with streaked blonde hair. She smiles at me and says, “hello!” I guess [correctly] that this is the President of Womyns College.

While there was awareness of and resistance to normative feminine dress in my interviews – “I put on whatever is clean” or “I wear a sweater that doesn’t have holes in it” – many students identified and displayed conventional “citations” (Butler) of femininity: cleavage, make-up, and body consciousness.

Karen: Um when I go out um I usually try on a bunch of stuff and go with what makes me look least fat. I mean I know it sounds shallow but go for the black, the slenderizing colors, yea. Or either that or I’ll wear things that I’ve gotten
positive reinforcement on before [like]...this tank top I have that my friend told me make my boobs look really big, so I’m like ok, where are the tank tops?

Sophie: I like to look nice if I’m going out and ...for me that usually means like not wearing boots or sneakers and I always wear like eyeliner and lipstick...I like clothes that fit me...just showing off my femininity?...I want people to give me attention because I look more feminine...I was taught to walk...in heels and...I do it all the time because I’ve been made fun of because I walk that way when I have on sweatpants and sneakers.

Jordan: ...A women’s studies major would kill me for saying this, but to me being feminine just means being a little more graceful about the way you move, and um a little more conscious of um the way you dress.

Feminine females (those who appear/dress/behave as ‘women’) and masculine males (those who appear/dress/behave as ‘men’) are demonstrating coherence between their gender and their sex, so that they are recognized and can participate comfortably in the heterosexual matrix. This is Butler’s “performativity” (1993, 232). The penalties (social and legal exclusions, the fear and reality of violence) for not presenting congruent sex, gender, and desire are what make heterosexuality compulsory. Even at free-wheeling Womyns College, these performatives and penalties were at work.

The Significance of Hair

One of the markers of femininity at Womyns was hair. It was “a big deal” (Fran), signifying degrees of femininity: long, curly hair was particularly ‘femme;’ short hair marked ‘butch’ or ‘dyke-y’ bodies. Tasha was keenly aware of the significance of students’ hair styles: at the time of our interview, she was writing a piece for the student newspaper on this very topic. After she arrived at Womyns and came to understand the culture, Tasha changed her hair to ensure that her gender display was congruent with her sexual identity. She arrived for
our interview with her hair in pigtails, wearing large hoop earrings and a white t-shirt with the word ‘LOVE’ over an image of Mickey and Minnie Mouse kissing.

Hair is a big thing at WC. Um I came here with short hair, my hair was probably as short as yours if not shorter, and um there was an underlying message of if you have short hair chances are you’re probably lesbian. And um I didn’t know about it and um then I started to grow out my hair...[P]eople read into it as like oh you’re trying to prove a sexuality type thing.

These messages about the power of hair were passed on from parents to Womyns students as well:

Fran: My mother said to me when I told her I was going to cut off all my hair – I’ve always had a lot of hair, and when I told her I was going to cut it, she goes, oh, God, don’t dyke it off (laughter)...She’s afraid that I feel pressure to conform to kind of a lesbian standard.

Catherine: Uh well my sophomore year I sort of chopped all my hair off and it was very very short and I sort of when I would wear baggier clothes, I looked like a young boy and (laughs) um I mean people obviously know me here so they know I wasn’t a boy but I I would go out and if I was wearing like a baseball hat or something like that, I would be called you know ‘boy’ or ‘sir’...[E]specially when I saw my parents or I went home I would have short hair but I would try and make it really girly, like put barrettes in it or whatever...

This seemingly universal and particularly gendered norm – of females’ long hair signifying femininity and short hair signifying a turn away from femininity – marked the coherent gender of the ‘W Woman.’ But my data show that some students were constantly defining themselves against the norm of the ‘W Woman,’ performing ‘I am not that,’ claiming exclusion. In addition to sporting short hair, wearing a bandanna to cover or hide one’s hair was a marker of a ‘not feminine’ and/or a ‘not-heterosexual’ identity. Many women in the College’s Lesbian Bisexual Questioning student group wore bandannas at the meeting I
attended, and two of my study participants who identified themselves as “queer” and “lesbian” wore bandannas to their interviews.

Grace: My style has changed since I’ve been at Womyns. Like when I came as a freshman I was very girly...and then I kind of adopted like the bandannas...
Susan: What does what does the bandanna signify?
Grace: (laughs) I don’t know...I think it can look very girly, I don’t think that [it] needs to be like you know very butch but I also think it’s something that I identify with dykes like you know, kinda gay...but it depends on how you wear it and like you know what your intention is. I think my intention was definitely to look more gay (laughs) when I was wearing the bandanna, yea.

For Meg, the bandanna was a symbol of not dressing up and a marker of difference:

I went to an RA [Resident Advisor] conference at [Big University, nearby institution] last semester ...And there were all the girls and guys like dressed up, and I wore jeans and a sweatshirt ...And one of the RAs that I was with had just shaved her head for the swim team and we totally looked like the big homos in the group and we walked in, the music stopped and everyone was like (draws in breath) like in the movies and that’s totally how I felt...[W]e had a nose piercing, short hair and bandanna, another girl with a lip ring carrying a bandanna, you know red overalls...and I was really aware of like how I looked and how other people were judging me and how I didn’t fit in with everybody else...

Meg went on to say that at Womyns, that collective inhale at the appearance of differently marked bodies would not happen, but that her identity as a queer woman would be understood. At Womyns, Meg’s bandanna could not signify ‘I am not feminine’ or ‘I am not heterosexual’ unless it was enacted against long hair, a recognized marker of femininity and heterosexuality. These enactments of femininity – both within and against the norm – at Womyns coalesced gender, sex, and desire/sexuality identities: the ‘W Woman’s’ long hair marked her as heterosexual; other performances against (but still within) that norm marked her as “kinda gay,” “queer.” These gender norms both shaped and were the effect of a system that presumed that the ‘W Woman’ was, or would ultimately be, heterosexual.
Wives and Mothers, BUGs and LUGs

The genealogy of ‘The W Woman’ can be traced from descriptions of the students its founder hoped to enroll in the 1860s, to the characterizations of students and student life provided by participants in my study. While I am cautious about over-determining the contemporary influence of the College’s historical foundations, those principles suggest certain gender norms that were still in place one hundred and fifty years later.

Like many women’s college founders, Womyns College’s benefactor accumulated his wealth by capitalizing on industrial growth in the United States in the early nineteenth century. Devoted to and inspired by his mother, the founder articulated his vision that “young ladies who shall here spend their school-life shall become not only intelligent and cultivated, but truly Christian women.” His ideal was of a “Home” where young ladies would receive an education that qualified them to

- fulfill their duties as women, daughters, wives, or mothers, and to practice that pleasant demeanor, to cultivate those womanly graces, to exercise that winning courtesy, which so befit those whom our mother tongue characterizes as ‘the gentle sex’.*

Over time, Womyns College disassociated itself from any religious affiliation, changed its status from a seminary to a college, and entered a more feminist era, contributing its share of accomplished women to public and private lives and work. Still, the College’s modern gender norms echoed the rhetoric of its founder. In a 2001 interview for a local radio station, Womyns College’s female president was asked if women’s colleges had historically been less about educating women and more about preparing future wives and mothers for prominent men. The President replied that that was
...only part of the story, we have to add some context. Historically those were the only opportunities for women at the time. It [becoming wives and mothers] is still part of the story; I’m a mom, I have 3 daughters. But...these were not finishing schools, even in the early 1800s these were places where women studied hard science, math, philosophy, law, curricula similar, equal to that at male colleges. This was very serious education.

The President was savvy to use the interviewer’s question to make a point about the rigors of single-sex education for women, and to address the dominant perception of women’s colleges as mere ‘finishing schools’. But she also seemed eager to address another overarching discourse about the women who attend(ed) women’s colleges: that, contrary to historical “race suicide” fears provoked by the ‘low’ or delayed marriage rates of women’s college graduates (Horowitz 1984, 280), women’s college graduates aspired to become wives and mothers like herself. Heteronormativity needed to be cited by the President as a counterbalance to the production of “seriously educated” women, and perhaps to address the lurking perception that women’s colleges continued to be “great breeding grounds” for lesbianism (Peril 2006, 91). The President was presenting Womyns College’s mission as one of educating women to be leaders and wives and mothers, communicating a specific view of women’s professional and personal possibilities.

In a 2004 faculty discussion regarding the future of the College, senior administrators and faculty brainstormed ideas for the direction of the school that would enhance its financial viability. Several faculty members suggested that Womyns could maintain its single-sex status by creating the “most rigorous nursing school in the country,” or supporting a massage therapy school, or excelling as a producer of master’s level schoolteachers. The feminized nature of these suggestions was notable, in that the suggestions assumed women’s ‘natural’ propensities as caregivers and circumscribed professional aspirations. These discussions and discourses
indicate that Womyns College’s leadership harbored an ongoing institutional ambivalence about educated women’s opportunities, particularly outside of caretaking roles and heteronormative family structures.

Another phenomenon at Womyns further illustrated the power of heterosexual hegemony, the pressure for congruence between “seriously educated” women, femininity, and heteronormativity. As on many women’s college campuses, the terms ‘BUGs’ and ‘LUGs’ had shared meaning at Womyns. Devin explained it to me:

...[I]t’s how a lot of people like to present themselves...you know ‘cause they’re here to dance and there’s no guys so they’ll dance with girls and you gotta have fun...You’re Bi[sexual] Until Graduation, you’re a Lesbian Until Graduation...I think there are some people who are very obviously one sexuality or another, [but] that’s not the majority of [this] campus.

For a time, Womyns’ BUGs and LUGs produced a different, very local norm – that of women openly having sex with each other. But ‘until graduation’ made clear the temporary nature of the norm: BUG and LUG behavior reinforced heterosexual gender/sex/desire as the norm. Recognition of the BUGs and LUGs at Womyns insured that the heterosexual matrix was held in place; the phenomena did not upend or resignify women’s sexuality in any broader cultural context because ‘until graduation’ assured the dominance of the norm once outside the “bubble” of Womyns’ collegiate culture.

Fran described another aspect of the BUG and LUG phenomenon that demonstrated still further allegiance to heterosexual hegemony:

...[T]hat kind of mentality, I think, plays into the idea that [here] it’s a little more acceptable to be dating a girl who looks like a boy than it is to be dating a girl who looks like a girl, because that’s so much more visibly queer.
Grace also struggled with the reproduction of heterosexuality in same-sex relationships at Womyns:

... I really like girly stuff, I blow dry my hair before we go out and I do stuff like that ...[But for me] to be seen as a lesbian here like I have problems with visibility all the time...[P]eople who know me here know I’m a lesbian but still like you know it’s much harder to get a ...girlfriend [if] you’re very very girly, than it can be [if you] look a little butch...

Several participants commented on the romantic or sexual popularity of “girls who looked more like boys” and of the women who found ways to exhibit facial hair for drag performances. While genderbending and fluid female sexuality would seem to flout dominant gender/desire norms, at Womyns, it also served the purpose of reinstituting ‘opposite’ sex attractions and underscored the impermanence of any sexuality other than heterosexuality. Fran’s analysis explains:

While Womyns is in some sense a queer campus, it’s not, because there are people who will have relationships with women here who will leave here and not acknowledge that they happened. And that does happen pretty frequently. And people who will identify as, you know, raging lesbians, you know, while they’re here, will leave and, you know, decide they are going to marry a man and don’t have to talk about that part of their lives anymore.

Though the sexual and gender fluidity that was evident at Womyns College during the time of my study could have signaled a temporary defiance of dominant cultural norms, expectations of fixed and coherent sex, gender, and desire were reimposed by the significance of hairstyles, anticipation that Womyns’ graduates would become wives and mothers, the ‘until graduation’ piece of the BUG and LUG phenomenon, and by students’ attractions to females who “looked like” males. The “coherent gender” embodied in the W Woman reproduced the reality and power of the heterosexual matrix.
Enforcing Gender Norms at Womyns College

My study revealed a number of examples of discourses and practices that “regulated” (Butler 2004, 43) or enforced gender/sex/desire norms at Womyns, and thereby preserved heterosexual hegemony. I will explore three of them, all intertwined, each of them propping up the others: awareness of external perceptions of women’s colleges and the students who attend them; Womyns College’s marketing and admissions concerns; and the gossip or “drrrrama” (Karen) that underpinned the “Womyns Web.”

Awareness of External Perceptions

Most of my student participants and the senior administrators I interviewed communicated at least tacit understanding of the ways in which popular discourse made spectacles of female single-sex institutions grounded in fantasies about female sexuality. From their characterization as “breeding grounds” for lesbianism by psychologist Havelock Ellis in 1902 to Rolling Stone’s 2001 expose of the “highly charged erotic lives” of Wellesley College students, women’s colleges have captured the public’s imagination as institutions that produce abnormal women – whether due to their addled brains and bookishness, their commitment to activism and careers, their decreased pregnancy rates, their “mannish” (Horowitz) appearance and aspirations, or their crushes on and “smashes” with each other.

[I was] travelling [back to the College],…talking with people who had attended a fundamentalist Christian rally and when I told them I was teaching at a women’s college, the look I got was (laughs). And it’s clear from their response that they thought, “well we don’t need those” or, “that’s a bad idea” and the message was, anybody who would [work at or attend a women’s college], there must be something wrong with them. So I think it’s about sexuality, and it’s about powerful women. And ultimately anything that puts women at the center tends to represent a challenge to certain ideas about power. (Associate Dean of the College)
Students I interviewed also had a heightened awareness of external perceptions of women’s colleges and those who attended them. For many, that awareness arose as they considered whether or not they would enroll at Womyns. For others, it came in the messages that they got from friends in their hometowns. Whatever the source, this curiosity effectively policed Womyns students’ sexuality, and it was particularly obvious when they talked to people outside of the “bubble.”

Alexandra: I dislike the connotation that if you attend a women’s college, you must be a lesbian or that it must be filled with lesbians um and that’s not so much the experience as what people think of the experience. As far as the experience goes...you know I don’t think that it differs enormously from attending a co-ed college.

Devin: I dated a guy in town and it’s like all he kept talking about was all the lesbians at Womyns. I think it’s kind of thought that all the girls are lesbian -- Not! I would hear from some random person about Womyns, oh it’s that school with lesbians on the lake (laughs) and when I came to visit for the first time, I stayed with a family that we knew and the mother took care to tell me that you know there’s a lot of lesbians at that school and I went OK (laugh) that’s nice (laughs).

Patricia: I think people automatically assume that there’s a majority of gay people, which isn’t true. It’s just that there’s more who are willing to talk about it, and more who may be experimenting than you would find if you weren’t at Womyns. And so, people say like everything’s gay. It’s like no, we’re just talking about gay issues for once. And as soon as there’s an increase in anything like that, um, people automatically assume it’s a takeover. And they assume that we’re not getting as much of an education, that we’re all man haters and, you know, that we shouldn’t be nearly as valued because we’re not in the real world or whatever.

Entrenched gender norms and heteronormativity were reinforced by Womyns community members’ awareness of age-old misogynistic dualisms: if women are learning together, they are not in the “real world,” which is only constituted when men are present; if a woman chooses a single-sex educational environment, she must hate men; if she is at a
women’s college, she must be sexual with other women; if a woman is sexual, she cannot be intellectual; and women’s institutions and whatever takes place within them are trivial and inferior, of little or no value. These popular discourses continue to serve as a powerful regulatory tool for heterosexual hegemony, discouraging young women from expressing interest in and considering attendance at girls’ schools and women’s colleges.

Admissions and Marketing Concerns

As applications to American colleges and universities have become oversubscribed and increasingly competitive in the last few decades, admissions offices have come to serve an essential public relations function for their institutions. Marketing became a *sine qua non* for women’s colleges in the early 21st century, as fewer and fewer female high school seniors articulated an interest in attending a single-sex institution, and women’s colleges were closing their doors or becoming coeducational on a yearly basis (Miller Bernal and Poulson 2006). This issue had been under discussion at Womyns College for much of the decade prior to my study, and the College had decreased tuition, increased scholarships and financial aid, de-emphasized its heritage as a women’s institution, highlighting its liberal arts mission and low student/faculty ratio to re-position itself in American higher education. Added to the College’s marketing challenges were its isolated setting, very small size, and limited practical or vocational courses of study.

To say that the Womyns College admissions office and senior administration were sensitive to external perceptions of women’s colleges and the innuendo surrounding them would be an understatement. So when the Womyns student culture embraced third wave feminist tenets of open acceptance of all kinds of women, sexual and gender “fluidity,” and the
“drrrama” of an all women’s community, the admissions office found itself in a conundrum of profound financial and institutional consequences when it came to attracting new students and the investment required of their families.

It’s unbelievably challenging and I think that the students forget even if 50% of our population is homosexual (and certainly I know that it’s higher than the average 10 to 15% you see at most coed institutions but I have no way to know that it’s 50%), the other 50% is not, and there needs to be a balance.

(Womyns College Admissions Director)

The admissions director was under pressure from students to accurately represent their alternative peer culture, of which most students and many recent alumnae were quite proud; from faculty members to get more of the “right” (Director of Admissions) kind of students for Womyns, those who were academically motivated and adequately prepared for college level work; and from alumnae and Board of Trustees members to enroll enough “full pay” students to keep the College financially healthy.

Participants in my study sensed reluctance on the part of the Admissions Office to talk with prospective students about the student culture. Grace, who was an out lesbian in high school, recalled that during her initial campus visit, the College tour guide and Dean of Students were “not very open about their gay community.” Elise speculated,

I don’t think that this school would ever hire me to work in admissions because I look kinda gay. You don’t see people who look like me in the brochures or anything like that. They um kinda ask the tour guides to downplay um gay stuff on campus and during the co-ed decision, one of the things they talked about was how if Womyns was co-ed like we wouldn’t have the lesbian stigma anymore...Um but like we don’t market ourselves as a gay-friendly college like that’s not something that we’re interested in doing, even though we could.

Heterosexual students were aware of this tension as well. Melinda said:
The admissions office parades prospectives through areas of the campus and uh insists that that uh (pause) the people in the viewbook (laughs) are the students of this college um the presentation of you know white heterosexual women on campus (laughs) with button down shirts and looking you know dressed up like they’re going to presentations. Not not a lot of people on campus do that. The student admissions ambassadors talk about the way that they’re trained to present the college and it’s frustrating.

Student lore had it that coeducation had historically been proposed as the College’s solution to “the lesbian problem”:

Um, there’s a document from the 1980’s which says that maybe going coed would solve the lesbian problem. And I think that many of the people who were there then are still here today on campus. Um, working with admissions, we had to fight to get two women holding hands in the diversity brochure. Um, up until this year LBQTA [Lesbian Bisexual Queer Transgender Alliance] was not in the list of student organizations. [Admissions reinforces a] dominant heterosexual experience. Um, if you read into a lot of what they’re saying about the types of students that they want to acquire [with coeducation], um, its white heterosexual women and men who come from money. Um, they need a more sustainable community. And sustainable to me means something very different than sustainable to them. (Patricia)

While many students actively refused the compromises asked of them, the efforts of the admissions office, senior administration, and Board of Trustees were not lost on them. They were aware of the ways in which the College’s practices, as represented by its marketing campaigns, policed their dress – “white button down shirts;” their sexuality – not “kinda gay;” and their affections – not “holding hands.” Students perceived that the College’s gatekeepers – admissions counselors, student tour guides, and the dean of students – kept silent about the gender and sexual expressions of many of the students. This is an instance of institutional enforcement of heteronormativity, underpinned by the demands of the “real world.” Many students, but particularly those who identified as queer, lesbian, or bisexual experienced these regulatory practices as dismissive of them as W Women.
Gossip has long been associated with idle women and girls of a certain class, a feminine guilty pleasure, a gendered norm that reaches a fevered pitch in any gathering of all women, making all women gossips and their gossip trivial (Code 2000, 328). Some feminist analyses have sought to paint it as subversively productive discourse (ibid.): “testimony” (Rogoff 2003, 268ff) or a counter-narrative with political potential, “…reflect[ing] moral assumptions different from those of the dominant culture;...provid[ing] language and knowledge...vital to individual and community life of subordinated classes…” (Leach 2000, 232). At Womyns College, gossip functioned somewhere in between these conceptualizations: it was less a guilty pleasure and more a tiresome part of everyday life, “testimony” to the potentially radical nature of this community. In this homosocial “bubble,” gossip perhaps did more harm than good, though if it had become part of a larger cultural discourse in a heterosocial context, it might have nudged desire and sexuality norms that solidify the heterosexual matrix. A number of interviewees resisted the notion that gossip at Womyns was solely a function of gender: many students wondered whether the gossip and “drrrama” were exacerbated by the size of the College. Gossip – its “pettiness,” “vicious”-ness, and as “bickering” – was the thing that 12 out of 22 of my participants liked the least about attending a women’s college, or it was the first thing that came to mind when they were asked about the difficulties or disadvantages of attending an all-women’s college.

Karen: I miss the boys (laughs). Honestly I need my testosterone (laughs). There’s a lot of people here get really catty. And there’s sooo much drrrrrama. I don’t know if you’ve heard that word before talking to other people but...people say things and they get blown out of proportion and I don’t know how much of that is because it’s a really small school and out in the middle of nowhere and we have nothing to do, and how much of that is
because of the same-sex environment, but the cat-fights here get out of control.

Lisa: [I don’t like the]…phoniness um (pause) pettiness um you know girls being jealous of each other
Susan: How does that come out? Like can you give me an example?
Lisa: Usually in the dining hall, dining hall’s the best place for that…um it usually comes out through gossip… (pause) usually not bluntly, not confrontational but little just gossip you know and phoniness um…‘cause they don’t want the other person to know they’re talking about them...

Susan: And what do you like least about attending an all women’s college?
Fran: Oh, probably the same thing everybody else likes least, the gossip. It does change the way that it works. Yeah. And a lot of the kind of girl bullying stuff that does still happen here…We have girls who go out of their way to make each other feel bad for really no good reason. And I don’t really know why.

Susan: Can you give me an example of um the kind of ‘viciousness’ thing that you see here?
Grace: Well I think the biggest thing is that there aren’t that many of us so the lesbian community you know say we make up like a hundred and fifty students here, that’s not that many people to go through you know what I mean? So what happens is someone will date so-and so and then you know someone else will come along and becomes this weird like triangle thing and then it gets very like well you know “she’s mine.” …Like last night my girlfriend saw her best friend’s girlfriend making out with my best friend in the bathroom…And then what do you do? Like you know…they were 10 feet away from us in the bathroom and so like you know why would anyone think that’s a good idea?
Susan: Yea. And so how does that become vicious?
Grace: Because then it becomes like intentional like… it’s not just that someone cheats on someone, it’s that the other person um becomes like they sought her out and that they were like viciously trying to take her away from her...

Gossip at Womyns functioned as a way to determine where people belonged – gossip might be an “issue with one person, but it becomes about their whole group” (Sophie)—and as “cattiness,” “phoniness,” a way to talk about an issue without interacting with or confronting a person. In this atmosphere where gender and sexual norms were being tested, gossip served a
regulatory purpose, defining boundaries between interesting and unacceptable behaviors, identifying who belonged in which groups of people, conferring status through the Womyns Web.

Maria: Um a lot of the gossip is because it’s an all women’s college and there is a there’s more... who’s sleeping with who, who likes who, well she kissed so and so but I know that she’s dating so and so and she likes her but she likes her and I thought she wasn’t a lesbian I thought she was straight, a lot of the rumors do go around that.

“The Womyns Web” was held together by gossip about the sexual and romantic linkings of students. For students, it was an institutional metaphor that created a sort of community among the women who were sexual with other women. The Web was so palpable in campus discourse that, when male residential students arrived on campus in the fall of 2005, “…there was a session [for] the men to talk about this Web, to find the Web, like it was this like tangible thing that they could get their hands on. They were looking for it...in my dorm, they went looking for it (laughter)” (Group Interview).

Jane: The Web is all the Womyns girls who sleep together (laughs). It’s the web that’s connecting and you can be like at the center of the Womyns Web and...whoever’s the Big Dyke On Campus is supposed to be in the center of the Web....The Web is just um um an interesting way of looking at your (laughs) own role in the social community um it’s you know who has slept with who, who has hooked up with who and it’s a way of saying (laughs) you know you fit here in the grand scheme of things...

Sally: The Womyns Web...shows sexual interactions between other Womyns students and (pause) some (pause) staff (laughs). And there are more peripheral individuals...it pops up in you know [so-in-so] graduated from Womyns in 2000 and in 2002 someone saw her with you know her basketball coach...um and there’s different definitions some people say you have to have slept with them,...some people say that if you kissed them it counts...

The women who made it into The Womyns Web acquired and set a standard for desireability in the community; according to Fran, the Big Dyke on Campus was at the center of
the Web and had “very privileged status.” The students regulated each others’ behavior – gender and sexual norms – through their conversations, determining who was and was not part of The Web, who was on the periphery and who was close to its center. There were certain behaviors that assured one’s place in the Web: though not explicit in students’ interviews, heteronormative and masculinist criteria emerged to determine who would be at its center. The Big Dyke on Campus was the person(s) who had been sexual with the most people at Womyns and most public about their sexual encounters. If one’s sexual partners “looked like boys,” this conferred more status (by virtue of the act’s heternormativity) than if one’s partners “looked like girls” (conferred less status by virtue of the act’s “queerness”).

If this ‘new’ (Butler notes that behaviors, discourses, identities outside the heterosexual matrix are not actually ‘new,’ just unacknowledged) norm of The Big Dyke on Campus – of women being openly sexual with each other, celebrated by the status conferred on the person at the center of The Web – was to emerge at Womyns, it had to be held in place by repetition, re-citation of the norm’s performance (The Big Dyke Party became an annual occurrence) and by those who were excluded from the norm. Womyns’ BUGs and LUGs became those who were “not real gay,” their status discussed and held in place by the gossip surrounding the Web.

Sally: Um socially sometimes I’ve felt excluded when students talk about being ‘real gay’ and being ‘not real gay.’ Um I’ve heard real gay students talk about um “Well I came out when I was in high school. I knew I was a lesbian when I got to Womyns and I didn’t [just] get drunk at a party one night kiss a girl and decide I liked it.” …I think that that’s an unfair statement to make but um I literally heard it and...I’ve heard it from you know some of my friends...

Susan: So the “not real gay” thing [is] kind of Lesbian Until Graduation?

Sally: The BUG and the LUG yea...that type of mentality or the Liquid Lesbian or I mean there’s...different stereotypical names that you can give...Like you know oh she’s um she’s horny so she’s trying to sleep with girls, she’s um she’s a BUG or she’s a LUG or ...whenever she gets drunk she likes to make out with girls, [but she’s] probably in the closet about it when she’s sober...
While the Web may have evidenced a short-term, context-specific new female sexual norm at Womyns – out in the open, conferring status on those women who acted on their desire for other women – two interviewees spoke of the damage it did in this small community:

Jane: But it’s also very um I don’t know it can be degrading, it’s used as a weapon, it’s also a running joke...
Devin: There’s lots of triangles on the Web and so if you’re friends with like one person you can’t also be friends with like that other person because they both had like dated the same person only one of them’s dating them now and (sigh)...There’s there’s a lot of tension I think...I don’t wanna say the Web in itself is the problem um but just like the community’s so small that even not the sexual web but just like the web of relationships is so interlocking and so intense sometimes...

As I will argue in the next section, this Web of connection could have represented subversive discourse: when measured against dominant cultural standards, campus discourse about women’s “fluid sexuality” would seem to construct new, or at least call into question old, boundaries for sexual behavior.

Resisting Gender Norms at Womyns College

The most recognizable gendered subject – The W Woman – became visible at Womyns College through her reproduction or re-citation of dominant gender norms, discourses, behaviors, appearances in that environment. As one of my study participants put it, those who had power at Womyns were those who had “clear gender expression” (Patricia) – the subject with the purposeful walk, the asserted voice, the long hair, the subject who was, or wanted to be, a wife and mother. However recognizable and identifiable the W Woman might have been, the norms that shaped her were not static – once defined and recognized as such, always defined and recognized as such. Many of the participants in my study were attempting to recognize and hail a ‘new’ subject of some status: the Big Dyke on Campus, at the center of the
Womyns Web, was defined in defiance of many aspects of the sexed, gendered, raced, classed Woman. Though the Big Dyke on Campus competition at the annual Big Dyke Party was caught in the heterosexual matrix by virtue of an aesthetic that rewarded the students who “looked more like boys” with the most romantic interest, the Big Dyke was recognizable by (presumably) desiring and having sex with other female gendered subjects; she was both part of and outside of the heterosexual matrix.

In posing the status of the Big Dyke on Campus against (and with) that of the W Woman, it seems to me that Womyns students were attempting to re-appropriate the term and identity ‘woman.’ Many of the students in my study proudly identified as “queer” – a term widely recognized as a successful reappropriation of language, and a term that came to have some currency on the Womyns campus without the abjection sometimes ascribed to it in dominant culture. In this context, I argue that the (girl)talk that fuelled the Womyns Web was a reappropriation of gossip when it conferred status on those who were its subjects.

Most certainly, this campus was a site for gender parodies and resignifications of female bodies and sexuality; a discussion of body practices, emotional and sexual intimacy, and drag events and performances at Womyns follows in the next section. I present some of the attempts students made to subvert gender norms, with the hope of resignifying their sex, gender, and desire subjectivities even as they reproduced them.

**Examples of students’ attempts to undermine and resignify gender norms**

In contrast to and often in direct conflict with their leaders – women who, by and large, represented a different enactment of feminism (see Chapter Four of this dissertation) – some Womyns College students were constantly playing within and with the gendered subject of
‘woman.’ They eschewed the female preoccupation with appearance by wearing pajamas and no bras or make-up to class; changed the Student Government Constitution’s pronouns to ‘ze’ and ‘hir’ to signify their inclusion of all genders; openly slept with each other; embraced (or at least accepted) public nudity and displays of ‘female’ sexuality; and actively resisted the presence of men in their midst (from a brother’s visit to the dining hall to a boyfriend’s overnight stay in the dorm to the admission of men as residential students). Whether for shock value, as an intentional rejection of the strictures of ‘female-ness,’ or to take part in a tightly knit friendship group, many of the women I interviewed “worked the weaknesses” (Butler) in norms that mark feminine bodies, prohibit intimacy among women, demarcate public and private behaviors and spaces for women, and prescribe a healthy influx of masculinity as the antidote for all-female environments.

An Athletic Aesthetic

Karen: I have a hard time because I’ve been a tomboy my whole life you know I played football and men’s lacrosse and I like to beat people up...And so I’ve myself struggled a lot with the issue of does being a woman mean you have to be feminine, can you be beautiful and not wear skirts um and I found that here I’ve become sort of a lot more in tune with what it means to be a woman because all through high school I denied it like I would dress like a guy ...You could not pay me enough money to put on a skirt. Please (laughs). I’d rather go watch baseball, you know. So I think that being here has sort of helped me get in touch with the fact that you don’t need to fit what society’s definition of women is to be a woman, and to be a great one. And you can sort of do your own thing and still retain that feminine touch even if it’s not in a velvet skirt...

Athleticism and femininity are often placed in contrary juxtaposition: the female athlete’s sexuality is assumed to be outside of the heterosexual matrix, a measure of her limited attractiveness, reinforced by the binary of active, strong (masculine) body versus adorned, decorative (feminine) body. But at Womyns College, being an athlete conferred
status, and revealed an un-self-consciousness about or disregard for femininity. Maria said, “All my other friends are athletes, they’re on the student athlete committee, they’re all captains of the teams, they’re all in leadership roles.” She was not embarrassed to describe her identification with a ‘masculine’ preoccupation – “[In high school] I just wanted to hang out with my guy friends who wanted to just like go play basketball on the weekends” – and contrasted that to the ‘feminine’ preoccupation of the girls she knew in high school who “…just wanted to go to the mall and go shopping.” In response to the interview question, “If you were going to write an autobiography at this point in your life, what important pieces of your identity would you talk about?”, several of my study participants cited being an athlete as their primary identity: “Oh god it’s like my life…it’s sometimes why I get out of bed…my whole heart is in it” and, “I’m an athlete and I love sports…and I love being active.” Athletic Womyns students did not seem to feel pressure to embody femininity; they were proud of their physical strength and muscular bodies.

Catherine: I like to view my body as just being very strong...you know I don’t really care how much muscle I have, I know some women are like “I don’t want to look too bulky”...but like for me like the more muscle the better...I work out a lot to increase my sports performance, not really to lose weight or anything like that...

Jordan: I hang out with a lot of athletes and they they have really um in-shape bodies and...like we’ll sit and we’ll compare muscles or compare like our abs together.

The athletes in my study were reworking dominant narratives about athletic females: they were females who developed their bodies and physical strength without regard for the stigma and social penalties they might incur outside the Womyns College “bubble.”
Resignifying Hair: Not shaving

Head-fulls of long or short, bandanna-ed or not hair were not the only measures of femininity and sexuality at Womyns College: visible hair in armpits and on legs and eyebrows mattered too. Several students commented on the recognition and meaning of body hair in their everyday culture; these stylized repetitions took on a different significance “in here” than they did in the “outside world.”

Tasha: People may pierce their tongues, people may get a tattoo, um they may not shave their legs or their underarms...I receive a lot of heat from the fact that I do my eyebrows, that I shave my underarms, and that you know you’re just giving into the whole social stuff of what a woman is supposed to look like. And uh shaving your legs and um I don’t know how true it is, but sometimes it feels like oh so if I don’t shave my legs I’m more of a woman, I’m more self-assured of myself than if I do shave my legs (Tasha’s voice goes up, as if questioning)...

Karen also talked about not shaving as a marker of transgressing femininity, bodies that “haven’t [been] shaved in five days” as “a huge topic of discussion.” Tasha suggested that the gendered norms of tweezing eyebrows and shaving legs and armpits marked false consciousness, a weakness in one’s sense of self as a woman: an unshaven body signaled confidence, an ability to revel in one’s true womanhood. The norms of the hairless feminine body were “twisted” or “queered” at Womyns: ‘real women’ did not need to be clean-shaven to be recognized as ‘women.’ In Butler’s terms, this is an example of a disruption of feminine gender norms; at Womyns, the unshaven female body flaunted and reappropriated a gendered practice that, in the “real world,” would confer abjection and repulsion.

Intimacy and “Homosociality” among Womyns students

[My attention was drawn to] gorgeous black and white, mostly historical photos of women together – athletic teams, performing what look like
College tradition rituals and ceremonies – often touching, portraying intimacy. (Fieldnotes from my first visit to Womyns College)

In her essay, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” Carroll Smith-Rosenberg discusses the “unself-conscious homosocial” networks that were women’s everyday lives in the private sphere in the mid- to late 1800s in the United States. These networks became institutionalized and acceptable in the single-sex educational settings for girls and young women that were founded during this time: women faculty and students were expected to reproduce familial, sisterly bonds of love and affection that became ritualized in college traditions. Over time, this homosociality absorbed the insinuation of homosexuality, diminishing the missions of women’s colleges with charges of harboring “hotbeds” and “hothouses” for rampant lesbian sexual activity. Homosociality in contemporary women’s colleges is much more self-conscious than it was during the Victorian era. Some Womyns College students seemed aware of this history, or at least of the sexual innuendo that accompanies any contemporary discussion of single-sex postsecondary education. Most of the Womyns women I interviewed fiercely defended and treasured their “intense,” intimate friendships with each other, whether or not those friendships had a sexual component. By refusing to keep those friendships private, by making them part of community life, they were attempting to re-dignify and resignify homosociality in their own terms.

Jane: ...Because we’re in close such close proximity and um always around each other uh I I was able to make a connection with a group of women that I will remember for the rest of my life uh you know, who I consider my sisters and will never be anything less...That’s just remarkable to me...I can’t stress how deep these connections run...You know not not just girlfriends I’ve had or or anything like that but just a core group of women who will always be inspiring...You can spend everyday all day with them, learning about them, learning from them um and... that’s how it works [here]...I get these really intense kind of borderline obsessive friendships (laughs)...If you find someone
that you just really love on a certain level, you’re gonna want to spend as much time with them as possible.

Sophie: It’s it’s more intimate I think you you get pretty close with your friends cause you’re with them all the time and you pretty much live with them so um you get a little closer and um it it feels like a more intellectual bond? Like a lot of my friends at home I couldn’t really relate to them the way I can relate to my friends here, like there are things that I just can’t talk to them about because they won’t really understand or won’t really care...and like I can talk to my friends here about just about anything and they’ll listen to my rants and raves (laughs).

Meg: Friendships here can get real intense very fast and I think that um I kind of think of Womyns as orange juice concentrate and that everywhere else is just orange juice and here it’s like concentrate...And I think that like people get to know each other very quickly and because it’s so small I think because it is a women’s college we have that comfort level that’s there and um I made really good friends very quickly with a lot of people...[My friendships here are] really intense and they’re really strong and I feel like a lot of the friends that I have now I’ll have forever.

In this “orange juice concentrate,” these intense friendships and deep connections did, on some occasions, become love affairs.

Fran: Being here, my relationships are a little more intense...We have more volatile relationships. And there’s an element of that being sexually charged, too -- that I don’t have at home necessarily.
Susan: What do you attribute that to?
Fran: An attitude that sex is much more fluid here, that sex can happen between people and that it won’t necessarily matter, or that it can happen, and it will be the biggest drama you’ve ever seen.
Susan: So, would you say your friendships at Womyns, then, are more – like when you say “intense,” are you meaning sexually charged specifically, or are there other ways that the friendships are intense?
Fran: A lot of the times it is sexually charged. There are other ways in that, you know, our friends are so important to us that we can’t imagine our lives without them. And that we can’t imagine leaving here and not seeing them everyday. But in terms of them being sexually charged friendships, that happens more than any other place that I’ve seen. You know, if I think of my top five friends, some kind of sexual encounter has come into it at some point...Or we acknowledged specifically that it will not happen, we had to say “this will never happen between us.”
In this context, the phenomenon of the Womyns Web constituted a counter-discourse: communal knowledge of these intense relationships demanded of everyone, on some level, an acceptance of Womyns’ homosocial culture and at least tolerance for women’s sexual desires for other women. This acceptance and tolerance signaled a reworking of the norms for ‘woman’ in this setting: W Women had to have open minds about women’s sexuality, because it was so public, so everyday on this campus. And “open-mindedness” was the most consistently cited characteristic of the W Woman. In interviews, my follow-up question to, “Describe for me The W Woman” was, “What kind of student or person or woman might not belong here?”

Jane: You cannot operate in [this] community and have a very closed perspective…it doesn’t work, it’s not conducive to a Womyns education or the Womyns lifestyle… So when you come [here] you’ve got to be prepared to see um you know see new people, learn new things and be exposed to um the gay culture, be exposed to um I don’t know the feminist culture…somewhere that is not necessarily representative of other places you might find?

Catherine: People who are ignorant or not open-minded…People who are not willing to make that change [from close to open-minded] are either unhappy or they end up leaving…

Susan: Open minded in terms of what kinds of things?
Catherine: Being accustomed to like new lifestyle changes uh you know diverse issues with sexuality especially on this campus um, and like race and stuff, being open. Um yea basically if if you’re homophobic and people know it on this campus like you (pause) you probably won’t end up staying if you don’t change your views.

Many participants emphasized that Womyns students who expected a heterosexual, collegiate party scene would be sorely disappointed. Maria went so far as to characterize the people who didn’t belong at Womyns as, “women with their blonde hair, maybe women at a state school who are all about like getting dressed up and looking impressive for like going out for partying.” Devin said that, “girls who wanted to go to the mall and go shopping, wanted to
go on blind dates” would not belong. For Jordan, the woman who wouldn’t belong at Womyns possessed several characteristics, but her final message was about open-mindedness around sexuality:

...Anyone can go here but I think it’s the difference between being happy here and [being] really considered a W Woman ‘cause like I don’t think that um a close-minded person can go here...because you’ll just be argued with all the time and won’t be happy...And I don’t think a true conservative could go here, like a lot of women on this campus can say they’re conservative, but they’re not, because if you’re partying at the BDP [Big Dyke Party] like that’s not conservative (laughs)...

Alexandra, a prominent student leader who was mentioned by several of my participants as an exemplary W Woman or someone they admired, went so far as to say that the community’s embrace of homosexuality made the campus “heterophobic.”

Susan: How do you think things like heterosexism and homophobia play out here?...
Alexandra: ...I think that people are very feel very silenced if they’re not homopho uh homosexual. If they’re if they’re if they’re gay they or if they’re straight they feel like they’re not able to voice their opinions and that their opinions don’t matter as much so I almost think that there’s (laughs) heterophobia?...You know I don’t know if that term exists but um if it does, it exists here or at least people think it does.
Susan: Yea. Um how can you give me an example of that? Like when have you seen that happen?
Alexandra: Um I think that people at Womyns who consider themselves straight are always encouraged to just come out, you know, just be gay. And um you know as far as clubs go and you know organizations and um activities that are put on are very oriented towards um being a lesbian and so people who are not can feel stifled by that and feel like they should either come out (laughs) or they should you know just leave.

In this part as compared to other parts of her interview, Alexandra’s speech pattern was altered; she was more hesitant and mis-spoke, interchanging ‘homophobic’ for ‘homosexual,’ stumbling over speaking for gay students when she meant to speak for straight students. She seemed to know that she was voicing an unpopular opinion. In another part of the interview,
she said that other students “...don’t really care anything about you except whether you’re gay or straight,” noting that sexuality was “such a taboo subject...everywhere but here – for people to just be so open with it, I was like ‘whoa.’” My reading of this interchange is that Alexandra, from her position as a campus leader, was attempting to express discomfort with a Womyns tenet without claiming it as her own discomfort. Her discomfort at expressing what would be a dominant opinion in the “real world” was evidence of resignification of gender norms at Womyns, where the fluidity of women’s sexuality was both a public performance and a public discussion topic. Within the student culture, heterosexuality had been denaturalized or at least decentered; the recognizable subject was one whose sexuality was fluid and known, not a secret or source of shame.

Womyns’ student culture – Meg’s “orange juice concentrate” – fostered an environment where women’s friendships and love for each other could be re-cited, differently understood as ‘normal’ or everyday. Students were not self-conscious about their intense relationships with other women. Grace talked about her relationship with another woman in a way that revealed shame at being “cheated on” rather than shame about being in a relationship with a woman.

...It’s one of the most intense places I’ve ever been in my entire life...like some people really love it and some people kind of thrive on that. I think I may be one of them but like at the same time everything becomes your business because you know it’s like if it’s not you, it’s your best friend or you know it’s like someone that you used to date...So everyone knows everything and ...so some things can be hard to deal with...It’s like you know I’ve been cheated on...So now the entire student body knows that I got cheated on and like how does that make me look and now the faculty know, you know what I mean?

Grace was not self-conscious about her relationship with another woman; she was self-conscious because the community knew she “got cheated on.” The stigma of homosexuality
had been minimized because of Womyns College’s shifting gender/sex/desire norms.

Exceptions to the experience of intimacy among Womyns students must be noted.

Alexandra was one of two participants who did not valorize her relationships, did not experience them as exceptional.

I think friendships [here] are very um malleable, very changeable, may you know evolve over time, may change and there’s always people coming in and leaving my friendships and my life at Womyns. Whereas my friends...from outside of Womyns are friends that I’ve had since childhood or since middle school and they’re friends that have pretty much stayed the same throughout the years... and they’re very consistent in my life as opposed to [here].

Karen echoed this characterization of impermanence in her relationships on campus.

I find my friendships here can be very fluid, sort of like you cycle through groups of friends... things ebb here and kind of you migrate from one set of people to the next... I haven’t really found that I’ve made like a best friend or a really good friend that’s sort of been with me since the beginning. Like I have really good friends now but there’s no guarantee that in four months we’ll still be hanging out as much. It’s different because when I was in high school I had like my best friends and we were attached at the hip forever. And then I came here and...you know people who were your friends and then aren’t, you think maybe I’ll go back to being their friend but I find at least for me it hasn’t been constant at all.

The Big Dyke Party

The annual Big Dyke Party was the lollapalooza of public displays of female bodies and sexuality at Womyns, a celebration that included exaggerated displays of binaried gender (attendees were “in men’s clothing” or “dressed very very feminine”), nudity, dancing, and drinking. Its climax was the naming of the Big Dyke on Campus. The Big Dyke Party (known on campus as the ‘BDP’) spawned other similar festivities: the Baby Dyke Party and the Erotic
Ball\textsuperscript{11}. All were described as “crazy” gatherings, opportunities for students to dress up or “dress out.” Attendees were likely to show up topless or in body paint.

A number of the students I interviewed downplayed the BDP’s sexual and spectacular nature; for many it was just a communal celebration. Jane said, “…The Big Dyke Party is...just a really good opportunity...to have a good time with other girls who you know certainly are not all lesbians but are all aware of the lesbian culture on campus and might be intrigued by it, might be interested.” And Catherine said, “It’s definitely not all lesbian or all you know bisexual...Looking around it’s you know a wide variety of sexualities and races and things like that...It’s just like a crazy thing...”

Gender- and sexual-bending were central themes in both of the BDPs that were described to me. Jane described it as, “a room full of girls trying really really hard to look like guys and act like guys...” Most people came to the BDP dressed in drag, “high femme,” “wicked butch” or “S&М.” Though it is not clear when the tradition started, at early BDPs, drag performers were “brought in from the outside.” But the BDPs mentioned in my study featured

\textsuperscript{11} Rebecca, chair of the student organization that sponsored the Erotic Ball, described it thus: “...Like we started it last year and last year our theme was ‘Our First Time’ and we had like this cherry theme with cherries everywhere (laughs) and the outfits that people came with, it was outrageous. I mean people coming in just like bra and panties, coming in like lingerie, I mean they’re coming in like leather outfits like you know bondage outfits anything like that and just the array of things people wore was so much fun...[W]e did different kinds of little activities, we had we actually did a diversity corner? where (laughs)...we had a little room in the back where we had paint and we had a big piece of paper, and it was like boob diversity and you could go and paint your boobs different colors and then put them up against the paper? ... [P]eople just get intoxicated for the event just because you have to and it was a lot of fun...It’s just open to anybody and you get large diversity of people just because it’s a dance on campus, not necessarily because it’s the Erotic Ball...This year our theme is Porno Prom so people can dress up as their favorite porn stars... But it’s a lot of fun.”
students in ‘men’s’ suits, women who “…had like sideburns and like…real [facial hair] attachment things…” (Devin).

Sally went to her first BDP when she was a senior.

This is the first one that I’ve actually gone to and…My freshman year I was a little afraid about the fact that it was the Big Dyke Party um I was a little like ahhh...[But this year] my roommate and I were like should we go and they said that there was gonna be a drag show and we were like what’s a drag show (laughs)... This year my main reason for going was that um a lot of my friends were performing in it and I wanted to go to watch...I knew kind of like 15 performers [in the drag show]...and 4 of my friends did this like boy dance parody. One of my friends shaved her head almost, she had very long blonde hair and now she has you know 2 inches of short blonde hair...[Y]ou know it’s fun to just watch your friends get up there and you know fool around um I think that it’s interesting because I wonder if at a different school some of the people that did get up there with you know socks in their pants and someone else’s hair glued to their face, you know danced around to ‘N Sync, would they do that at a different school?

There were two contests at the BDP: that for the best (often group) drag performance, whose winner(s) was named “Drag King” (see discussion in next section); and the contest for the Big Dyke on Campus, which was the crowning moment of the party. As noted earlier, the naming of the Big Dyke brought prestige to the designee, who was considered to be at the center of the Womyns Web – the most sought after sexual partner on campus or the student who had slept with the greatest number of her peers. At the BDP, judges (initially only students, but at the 2005 BDP a few faculty and staff members were invited as judges) awarded the moniker of Big Dyke on Campus to one student, based on her performance during certain ‘tests’ that suggested sexual acumen in the Womyns community.

…[T]he last thing you have to do is tie a cherry stem in a knot [with your tongue] and whoever does it fastest wins...Um before that they had to go bobbing for pussies, which is little cat figurines in the pool (laughs). Um before that they did pick-up lines um and they [had to try them out on] a
judge who’s the coach of something I don’t know I don’t play sports...um and before that they had to unhook a girl’s bra with one hand and whoever did that fastest. Yea and so that was [four] rounds. (Devin)

Jane reported that, “Last year the criteria was you had to unwrap a Starburst with your tongue, and then you had to...bring your partner on stage and undress them with your teeth.”

It is challenging for this feminist to make sense of the Big Dyke Party. In some ways the students were exploitive of each other, re-objectifying female bodies, but without the power dynamic of the male gaze. Certainly masculinist pornography was reproduced in the contests constructed for judging the winner of the Big Dyke contest, and in the status accorded the Big Dyke by virtue of her sexual conquests. Attendees at the BDP mimicked a binary gender system, either dressing up/out as males with facial hair or as femmes. The students were “forcibly approximating” (Butler 1993, 127) gender norms even while they were poking fun at them.

However, the Big Dyke Party could be read as a successful resignification of some norms within the heterosexual matrix. Womyns students unself-consciously manufactured a public celebration for their bodies and sexualities. In many ways the BDP was an appropriation of a major event on coeducational campuses – ‘Homecoming,’ complete with the crowning of a queen (the Big Dyke on Campus) and a (drag) king. Instead of a football game featuring male athletic prowess, the main events at the BDP featured female sexuality- and gender-bending prowess. The BDP “worked the weakness in the norm” of sexual celebrity and sexual double standards, publicly awarding a female for her sexual aptitude, according her enviable status in the community. The Big Dyke took the opposite of a ‘walk of shame’ – both her gender/sex and

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12 In fact, the year that Womyns College went coed, the name of the Big Dyke Party was changed to ‘Homo-coming’ to allow male students to participate.
her desire for other women were heralded in a very open ritual. Compulsory heterosexuality was de-centered, and a new norm was recognized and recited for a short time during the years that the BDP was staged at Womyns.

**Drag at Womyns College**

As parody, drag has the potential to surprise its observers into recognition of just how performative gender is. The caricature of female-ness and male-ness on stage is a reminder that all gender is put on everyday (Butler 1993, 2004). We are often startled by how woman-ly a male body can appear, and vice versa. At the same time, we can note how ridiculous a drag performance of the ‘other’ gender is; the binary is reinstated in exaggerated fashion, but it is not subversive at all. It fails to re-frame male-ness and female-ness in any way beyond the moments of that performance as entertainment and spectacle. In other words, drag as a true resignification of gender has its limits. Planning for the drag show at Womyns College’s Big Dyke Party in the spring of 2005 produced a “controversy” that provides a powerful illustration of this.

*Fran: Drag kings are real popular because they wear facial hair. They dress like boys, they wear facial hair, and they’re still girls. They’re still Womyns girls.*

The Drag King contest at the Big Dyke Party allowed students the opportunity to exhibit just how “fluid” gender was for many of them. In the months prior to the spring event, there was BDP buzz, lots of anticipation and planning around costumes, who might win, who would present the most outrageous gender performance, comparisons of current and past years’ theme and participants. At Womyns, dressing in drag or cross-dressing was a “dressing up” – rather than an everyday – event, theatre. As Butler notes, theatricality and politics often go
together in the queer community (1993, 233), and perhaps the Drag King contest was a political event for some at Womyns, though it was usually discussed as an opportunity for fun, a chance to dance and act out. But the spring 2005 Drag King contest became all about the politics of presenting gender.

When asked about a “hot topic” that was creating “buzz” on campus that semester, several of my participants talked about the group of students who wanted to perform “high femme” drag in the BDP’s Drag King contest.

Elise: …[T]he Big Dyke Party is next weekend and um there’s gonna be a drag king show and some students wanted to do drag, but they didn’t wanna do drag king…Some of the women on campus wanted to do drag queen and some of them wanted to do femme drag, and um they were told that they couldn’t do it. And then they were told that they could do it, but they weren’t gonna be judged for it as part of the contest, they could just do it for like fun or whatever. So like 3 people in LBQTA\textsuperscript{13} got like really angry and resigned, and there’s like a lot of tension about that right now…

Susan: Like why why would you not be able to do drag queens?

Elise: [The chair of LBQTA] just said it would be easier to judge like easier to have like specific criteria if it’s just drag kings. And I think that she thinks that um like if people do femme drag and they’re women then they’re not really doing like hard drag and it’ll be easier for them to win or whatever.

At Womyns, the only real drag was a performance that allowed females to dress as males: “hard drag” was an enactment or a fantasy of the opposite sex. The tradition of the Drag King contest, as well as the popularity of and preference for “Womyns girls” who “dressed like boys” and “wore facial hair” reinstated binaried genders/sexes and a heterosexual matrix.

Though most students discussed this highly anticipated communal celebration as an opportunity for radical and outrageous gender-bending and cross-dressing, two interviewees had insights into the limitations of the Drag King contest as a vehicle for challenging gender.

\textsuperscript{13} The sponsor of the Big Dyke Party was the College’s LesbianBisexualQueerTransgenderAlly (LBQTA) student organization.
The initial exclusion of women dressing up as women in drag illustrated for them just how performative all gender was, and the ways in which their community was restricting the queering of norms.

For Grace, this restriction had implications beyond the drag show; it was about her identification as “femme.”

...We [the femme drags] were told that we couldn’t compete, that it wasn’t allowed. So we’re like well it’s sexist you know like you could have the drag kings but you can’t have anything feminine?...I had this whole like you know what is drag?... And it was like the whole femme/butch thing feeling like...I don’t wanna be a drag king, but I really like drag. There can be femme drag and you know at Womyns, why can’t we recognize that? It’s supposed to be this open space but you’re completely excluding a performance for trying to be you know more of a creation of woman...A gender fuck, that’s what it is and like you know trying to understand that...What’s drag you know what I mean?...

Susan: ...Is being feminine important to you?
Grace: Yes...I identify as femme but that doesn’t necessarily mean that I’m feminine...I have feminine characteristics but I think that because I’m aware of that and because I’m aware of like the construction of femininity and how it affects women as a whole, I’m less likely to conform to that. But if you look at me, I’m pretty feminine, so you know I can say that I am feminine but that’s not what’s important to me. Like my femme identity is really important to me but I think I could still have a femme identity without necessarily wearing heels and lipstick...[B]eing femme is my own construction of what it means to be a female...

Grace contrasted her ‘own’ sense of herself – she referred to being femme as an internal marker or standard – with what she understood as an external social standard of being feminine (a gender performative). She was attempting to intentionally embrace or integrate ‘femme’ and consciously reject ‘feminine,’ an ‘I am not that.’ When there was resistance to her performing or impersonating ‘feminine’ – the socially constructed, externally imposed standard – she came to question the nature of drag. If the Womyns community could play with ‘being male’ via the Drag King contest, why couldn’t the community play with ‘being female’ via
femme drag? If the Drag King contest allowed an appropriation of maleness, why couldn’t the entire heterosexual matrix be revealed as drag, as play, as performative?

Patricia was also able to identify the BDP flap over femme drag as a flaw in the community’s sense of itself as a haven for radical genderbenders.

...The [drag king] group that I was performing with...refused to compete unless -- um -- the femmes were allowed to compete at the same level...Um, I often think that the [women] who are viewed as like the real queer people [at Womyns] are the people with the most masculine gender presentation, which I think is very symptomatic of our culture. I would hope that we could have broken it down, but that’s not the case...Um, and so, this year it took on more of a ‘let’s complicate things’ meaning for me. Like let’s not make it so simple, that this is what queer is supposed to mean.

Susan: What was the resistance to women in drag about?
Patricia: Um, I think their resistance was that, um, it wasn’t real drag, an issue of authenticity. Um women can’t do feminine drag. And it was like people won’t understand it. And I think that’s underestimating people. Like you can make fun of gender no matter what gender you are....I think that it was very clear when the women who did this got up on stage...that’s -- that’s really playing with gender...And isn’t that what drag’s really about is pretending to be something else? Looking at gender?

Initially, through the decisions of the leaders of the sponsoring organization LBQTA, the students participating in the BDP policed themselves by prohibiting ‘high femmes’ from participating in the Drag King Contest; they were bowing to the power of binaried genders within a heterosexual matrix. Even in this transgressive form — women putting on a Drag King contest, women doing public drag as spectacle — drag was copying normative gender. But some students pushed their beloved community to challenge gender more pointedly, to genuinely subvert the norm of female-embodied humans behaving as either ‘real’ ‘women’ or impersonations of ‘men.’ Womyns students entertained the notion and ultimately the performance of women impersonating women, women presenting a caricature of femininity. At this BDP, Grace and her femme troupe were allowed to fully participate and compete in
femme drag, and this performance revealed that “being a woman” was an “internally unstable affair” (Butler 1993, 126). As Butler points out, drag is just spectacle -- unless it can succeed in reproducing and contesting both/all gender norms. Drag became truly radical, a possible resignification of gender at Womyns, when women dressed in drag as women. This exposed the artificiality of congruence between sex and gender, and subverted gender norms and performatives. While there are limitations to drag as subversion, the high femmes’ participation in the drag show at Womyns College effectively exposed, for a short time, hegemonic gender as fiction. Femininity was revealed to be drag, spectacle, farce.

But this subversion was fleeting. In the final section of this chapter, I examine the ways in which the institutional culture of Womyns College policed students’ sexual behaviors and identities, and the ways in which the imminence of coeducation limited the students’ contestations of heteronormativity.

A Return to Heteronormalcy

However promising femme drag and the embrace of marginalized identities were at times when Womyns was a women’s college, the students’ destabilization of gender/sex/desire norms was not successful in “undoing gender” in any universal sense. The norms that were encoded in and by the Womyns Web – effectively labeling each student a BUG or a LUG, straight, or queer, highly sexual or not sexual enough – came to serve a regulatory function, valorizing those who were part of the Web, and discounting those who were not. The Web kept the campus gossip machine well-oiled, sustaining a powerful underground conversation across years and cohorts that reproduced women’s competition and jealousy. And the events and tellings at Womyns College – the crowning of the Big Dyke on Campus and the Drag King –
revealed that conventional gender norms and heterosexual hegemony were alive and well there.

“Regulatory powers” (Butler 2004, 52) at Womyns were exercised by students when they gossiped. “Regulatory powers” were accepted by the entire community when members discussed the external perceptions that painted their experiences and choices as aberrant. “Regulatory powers” were evident in the Admissions Office’s choice of tour guides and photographic representations: the Admissions Director was troubled by current students’ displays of sexuality and struggled with prospective students’ perceptions of the College as a sexually charged environment. Womyns’ reputation as “the earth-shaking epicenter of a consciously gendered culture” (a characterization of the College by a well-known transgender activist in the media fervor following the announcement of the College’s decision to admit men) had gone national. It is plausible that, in the context of heterosexual hegemony, the College’s financial struggles were exacerbated by students who insisted on publicly identifying as queer or Bisexual Until Graduation or lesbian or sexual: not only was it a women’s college (which appealed to only 3% of female high school seniors), it was a women’s college full of students who were insistent on exercising their voices and using their bodies, some of whom were intent on making visible the instability of gender. I do not mean to suggest that the Board’s and President’s decision to admit men as residential students was solely reactionary, based on the challenges posed by the student culture: there had been a number of attempts to bolster the College’s financial health, and admissions and retention records for over twenty years, and some of the tactics had succeeded in the short term. However, some of my study participants
believed that the leadership of the College was fearful of the reputation that followed Womyns students’ resistance to gender/sex/desire norms.

Susan: ...It’s floating very lightly out there in some of my interviews... that one of the reasons that the college decided to go coed was because of homophobia, because the institution is afraid of its reputation as a place that attracts queers and lesbians and is very open about that. Do you think...that that might be a piece of this?
Patricia: Yeah. Definitely...Um, sentiments of the Board of Trustees, I’ve heard them say like, you know, [in our student body] we need a more diverse range of sexual experience, [meaning we need to represent the] dominant heterosexual experience...I would say that that’s definitely true. I would say that there’s a huge homophobia problem as far as that’s concerned...

At the same 2004 Womyns College faculty meeting in which several faculty members suggested that the College carve out a niche for itself as an excellent nursing school or teachers’ college, another faculty member suggested that perhaps the College should market itself as a liberal arts institution for gay and lesbian students, since it already had that reputation and seemed to draw sexual and gender minorities. The suggestion was not responded to or picked up by anyone else in the room.

The year following the College’s admission of men as full time students, the openly lesbian Dean of the College was dismissed by the President. It is difficult to say that this decision was reactionary or prompted by homophobia, but surely the person in this high-profile leadership position could be said to be a signifier of the College’s values and direction. In her place, a prominently married (to a well known scholar at neighboring Big University), long-time Womyns faculty member was appointed as Dean. In previous writings, this new Dean had spoken about women’s colleges as places of alternative, transformative subcultures. But she had been a proponent of Womyns College ‘going coed’ as the only way out of its difficulties. Her thinking about the College’s transition to coeducation traced the frictions inherent in the
College’s founding by an entrepreneurial man whose goal was to provide training for women from wealthy families who would be models of refined Christian womanhood, and the contemporary female student body which was made up of first-generation college students who required institutional financial support; members of racial minority groups; and lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students. She expressed surprise that students who identified as queer, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender complained that their campus presence was suppressed by the College. The new Dean also speculated that the student protests in response to the coeducation decision provided opportunities for “greater closeness of students and more ‘hooking up’ than usual”*. This statement seems particularly dismissive of the students’ activism, recalling some of the discourses that hold heterosexual hegemony in place. The Dean’s articulations represent both a scholarly understanding of the social and economic structures that make women’s colleges an endangered species and evidence of our culture’s ambivalence about the blurring boundaries, definitions, and performances of ‘educated women.’

The president of an innovative American women’s university, who was also a Womyns alumna, was chosen as the commencement speaker for the graduation ceremony of the final single-sex class at the College. In her address, the speaker asserted that, “What makes us ‘women’s colleges’ in the 21st century is not the absence of men but the conviction of the absolute necessity of women’s education and advancement.” She applauded the ability of women’s colleges to adapt and remain “mainstream” rather than be “relegated to some exotic margin where only the curious wander.” She closed by saying,

We graduates of women’s colleges owe it to our alma maters to set them free...May your flame burn brightly as a hearth for your family, a beacon for
your children, an illuminating source of inspiration for your colleagues, and hope for your neighbors in all places on this small planet.

The commencement speaker’s allusions and references conjured notions of heteronormative families and women’s roles in them, harkening back to a nostalgic notion of women as moral guardians for future generations. Further, the commencement speaker summoned a narrative of Womyns’ history as an institution at an “exotic margin where only the curious wander.” Perhaps she was acknowledging the dominant discourses that circulate about women’s colleges, but it also powerfully reproduced the “exoticism” of women’s colleges as sites for “wandering” by the “curious.” All are somewhat sexually suggestive terms that placed institutions like Womyns outside the norm.

These perceptions from outsiders, suggestions of homophobia, the new dean’s characterization of the protest against coeducation, and admissions practices reinforced heteronormativity at Womyns and reproduced single-sex institutions as aberrant. Womyns students unwittingly policed themselves with their gossip and social rituals, even as some of them tried to fashion new systems of kinship and definitions of ‘woman.’ They came to feel that their voices – particularly cultivated by the mission of this single-sex college – were ignored, that they had no input and no recourse to the Board’s and President’s decision to ‘go coed.’ They were angry, resentful, and aware of the irony:

Grace: ...[T]he students aren’t powerful, like they say we’re powerful and it’s really interesting. They talk about the protest like they gave us the tools to do that, like they showed us how to protest [at the College’s annual activism conference]...You learn how to be a voice, you learn how to like take action and um but when it comes down to it at the school, the students aren’t the powerful ones...It’s very rare that we ever win that battle.
My group interview in the early spring after the College’s first semester of coeducation revealed ways in which the admission of men itself served a regulatory function, signaling a marked (re)turn from an “exotic margin” to heterosexual hegemony. Male privilege was evident; distinct public and private spaces were reinstated; male students became the most visible subjects of desire; and a strong student culture shifted to one in which authorities made decisions and allocated resources.

Grace: You know I was talking to one dean and he was like everyone [talks with] these guys, I talked to them, [a Vice President] talks to them, [the Dean of Students] has talked to them about how they’re having this unique experience blah blah blah. I was like how many first year students had that many administrators talk to them?...

Fran: So they’re interacting with all these higher levels of authority that other people don’t have access to because everyone wants to make sure that the men are OK and aren’t marginalized…I think there’s still the administration thinking that we’re treating everyone the same yadda yadda yadda….The really ironic ironic thing is that the person who’s not represented on this campus is the freshman woman.

Lisa: That’s right, that’s true.

Fran: And...so on every committee where there’s got to be a freshman, it’s going to be a man because he’s the minority in that class and the women in that class are not represented. (Fran is talking quickly.)

Sophie: And from what I can see they’re [first year women students] not saying anything about that, they’re ok with that and we’re like wait...

Grace: The first few weeks on campus I sat outside my dorm and just watched and like you’d see a man, you’d see like 4 freshman girls, like following literally. I didn’t ever think it would be that bad like I’d be able to...look at this in action...They’re all walking to the same place but you know he’s a few steps ahead and the girls are kind of like ‘just go get him’.

Lisa: Girls are always, the freshmen women...all go down to the [men’s] floor [in her residence hall] and they hang out and they’re friends you know just friends but um it’s just how [the girls] have to go down to [the boys’] floor, instead of the men going up to [the girls’] floor.

Lisa: [Women students in the first year class are all about] getting men’s attention, getting dressed up for class. What happened to pajamas? (Group laughs)
Grace: It’s weird because I think that there are still a lot of lesbians on campus, I just necessarily don’t think the lesbians are dating each other, you know.
Fran: They’re not as visible.
Grace: Yea, I think prior to this there were a lot of lesbian couples.

Susan: Do you have a sense of how [coeducation has] changed the culture of athletes [here]?
Sophie: It seems like [the administration is] pushing athletics more. Cause they
Lisa: Like more guy teams
Sophie: Yea, yea I was told by one of the guys, actually two guys, that they’re really encouraging the new guys to join the soccer team, like they’re really pushing it
Susan: A co-ed soccer team?
Sophie: No, a men’s soccer team, they were really like trying to get all the guys on campus on the soccer team so they came out with this snazzy brochure like with three guys in it and...then they just talked about...having Division 2 [a more prestigious level of NCAA competition than the College’s classification as a single-sex institution], I’m like what?

Grace (editor of student newspaper): We had two articles that were critical of the men’s soccer team and the male [dormitory] floor and after that issue was printed, ...four of [the men] came in and tried to physically intimidate me, got up in my face about it and they threatened to like take action against me... And it’s ok for them to be angry...
Fran: But they were handling it [wrong...There should have been] letters written you know...more of a dialogue instead of a physical intimidation tactic.
Grace: They went to the dean, they wanted to know what our by-laws were, who our advisor was, who they could get us in trouble with.

Ultimately the tight dialectic that was constructed by gender/sex/desire norms (the need for “coherent gender”) and performativity (individuals reenacting those norms to ensure their own recognizability), and the regulatory mechanisms that held in place a heterosexual matrix at Womyns College revealed to its women students that the different lives they attempted to structure were unlivable. BUGs and LUGs only demonstrated the temporary nature of fluid female sexuality, and reinforced the institutional history and discourse of ‘W
Women’ as wives and mothers. Intimacy and homosociality among women were undermined by the gossip that was The Womyns Web. The Web reproduced the desireability of masculine appearance, the only sexual/desire couplings that mattered as those of male/female, and the masculinist value of status from sexual conquest. Even the high femme drag that was allowed at the Big Dyke Party’s drag contest could not subvert the coherence of the gender/sex binary or resignify gender in any lasting way.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

This chapter summarizes my findings as they relate to concepts discussed in each chapter of this dissertation. I discuss the value of this study, implications for practice at women’s colleges, and, finally, make recommendations for further research.

Truth be told I began my dissertation with an agenda – to bolster the news that women’s colleges support women as learners and teachers, as agential subjects, as human beings in ways that coeducational institutions have not, and still can or do not. I expected to see students at women’s colleges changing, broadening definitions of ‘woman’ to include women of color, queer women, female athletes, really smart young women who might be labeled geeks or outcasts by their peers. I hoped to find women who were not daunted by cultural pressure to look good rather than be smart, women who did not care to interact or if they interacted with men on a daily basis, and women learning the language and theory of feminism. I found those women at Womyns College. And I saw other reasons for women’s colleges – or at least Womyns College prior to coeducation – to celebrate: women students were given their due attention by engaged and engaging faculty members in and outside of the classroom; feminist scholarship was alive and well in the teachings of young faculty members; women administrators provided inspirational role models for students, and mentored them in the ways of professional women’s leadership and decision making. Female student athletes were celebrated; lesbian and bisexual women were out and had status; brainy female student leaders were recognized and admired by their peers. Second and third wave feminist tenets were in action on this campus; this study offers an example of how to excavate and make visible feminist values and practices in qualitative research. Third wave feminist tenets were
explicitly taught and learned at Womyns College, and critiques of earlier feminisms were
articulated by a number of students.

What I did not expect nor want to find was that female subjects in a single-sex setting
have limited agency. Though I am discouraged by this finding, I saw unequivocal evidence of
the domination of a heterosexual matrix that demands particular genders, sexes, and desires of
“intelligible subjects” (Butler). I saw how the preference for sustaining dominant cultural
values and practices worked to undermine women’s subjectivities and autonomy, even in an
institution that claimed a commitment to women’s full intellectual, social, and political
participation. As such, this study provides a cautionary tale for women’s college leaders and
advocates.

Feminisms at the Door

One of the contributions of this study is its vivid illustration of the ways in which
feminism and differences within feminism showed up at a women’s institution. Rarely are
there opportunities to excavate feminist philosophies and practices from such obvious displays
as those that were at Womyns College. Further, the rich differences within and between
feminist waves and feminist generations were palpable during my study. At Womyns College,
feminism was taught and learned, put into practice, empowering many students and guiding
some administrators. Feminist thought of the second and third waves informed the
generational, mother/daughter conflicts at Womyns College. Cultural feminism was a
prominent discourse there, across generations and informing much of the College’s history –
cultivating women’s natural propensities as caretakers – and its modern foundations –
employing “girl power” concepts and documented gender inequalities in American education to
bolster its mission and traditions. Radical feminist discourses pointedly showed up as the College entertained the decision to admit men as full time students. Students avidly engaged with the language of women’s studies and tenets of third wave feminism as they attempted to push the boundaries of ‘womanhood,’ actively playing with gender and sexuality. These feminisms were important tools in my quest to comprehend what was happening at the College: feminist thinking was crucial to come to some understanding of the generational rifts through which administrators and students effectively said to each other, “I am not that.”

The feminisms at Womyns College’s door were not always welcome, however. In popular discourse, feminism has rarely been utilized as a tool for analysis; indeed most popular discourse positions feminism as inimical to progress – man-hating, over-reactive, and, as Womyns students themselves witnessed, “crazy”-making. In this cultural climate, women’s colleges have found it difficult to espouse feminist goals, missions, and practices publicly, and some women’s colleges – Womyns among them – have (perhaps less than freely) chosen to abandon feminist language, leaving feminism outside their doors. But for those who are interested in understanding gendered power relations and their infiltration of American higher education, feminist analyses provide a vigorous counterdiscourse to those who argue that gender equality has been achieved, that we are ‘post-feminist.’

I have employed theories of black feminists and postmodern and poststructural feminists to understand the necessity of embracing ever expanding definitions of ‘woman,’ gender, and sex. These lines of thought helped me to make sense of the importance of location – geographical, psychological, political – for marginalized, unrecognized subjects. Location can protect and expose, and marginalized subjects can utilize their locations to re-group and to act
out, to nurture and to resist. Indeed, these subjects may no longer be marginalized when they choose a margin, a door to open and close as they wish. In choosing a margin, bell hooks would say, they become central rather than marginal, agential rather than acted upon. Some Womyns students understood that their alma mater as a women’s college was one of these doors to a feminist margin; they sought recognition on their own terms.

I argue that these feminisms at the door, market forces in U.S. higher education, and homophobia all contributed to this College’s decision to ‘go coed.’ The transition to coeducation revealed fissures in the College’s inner workings and its historical and contemporary mission and philosophical foundations; the fissures demonstrated a certain ambivalence about the type of woman Womyns College was ‘producing’ and ushered in a final acquiescence to dominant gender norms, and heterosexual and male privilege.

A Summary of Findings

Womyns College was, because of its place in the geographic, social, discursive, educational margin, a haven and something of a “space of radical openness;” as a “homeplace” for genderbenders, queers, BUGs, LUGs, and open-minded heterosexual women, and even as a compromised “homeplace” for students of color, the College offered its students a “site for resistance” (hook 1990). At Womyns, “…[t]here were many who asked whether they were women, and some asked it in order to become included in the category, and some asked it in order to find out whether there were alternatives to being in the category…” (Butler 2004, 209).

In the years immediately prior to coeducation, Womyns’ students were successful in undermining a heterosexually hegemonic culture on a number of occasions. They were creating a different dominant culture that all participants in my study accepted as part of life in
the Womyns “bubble.” Some of the students understood the ways in which gender, sex, and
desire norms operated by virtue of studying feminist and gender theory. This was a self-aware
community, sometimes refusing gender, ‘female-ness,’ and femininity even as they lived it.

Generational Tensions

Chapter Four explores the feminist understandings and implementations of the students
and administrators in my study. Many of the students who participated in my study had taken
Women’s Studies courses at Womyns, and had developed an astute sense of third wave
feminism. They employed this feminism as a useful tool for analysis as they tried to understand
the disagreements and clashes with their elder “sisters” who were senior administrators. Those
participants who had not taken Women’s Studies classes had, at the very least, absorbed much
of the discourse of third wave feminism among their peers and engaged notions of “fluid”
sexuality and gender, and gender as a “social construct.” These theoretical understandings and
the everyday-ness of discussions in and out of the classrooms at Womyns constituted an
awareness of gender and sexuality norms. Many of the students in my study understood how
dominant, heteronormative notions about women’s sexuality and male privilege were at work,
particularly as the College transitioned to coeducation.

The generational tensions that showed up at Womyns College were along
mother/daughter and feminist lines. For the College’s leadership and in this institution’s
history, gender was ascendant, the only identity that mattered. The College’s philosophy and
practices underscored cultural feminism in its cultivation of ‘The W Woman,’ its expectation of
sisterhood, and its commitment to the restoration of individual women’s voices. While this
message may have initially drawn some students to the College, the students tried to enact
broadening definitions and performances of ‘women’ in which their gender was not necessarily their most important identity. These third wave feminists’ intersectional and genderbending identities challenged the mission and everyday functioning of the College. Difficult feminist generational tensions contributed to the demise of Womyns College as a women’s institution.

**Womyns College as Homeplace**

Chapter Five fleshes out Womyns College as a “homeplace” — a site “in the margins” chosen by marginalized people for their capacity to provide nurturance and collective support for active resistance to sexist and racist norms and practices. Womyns College could be characterized as a “homeplace” for its students who were seeking new norms of gender, sex, and desire: for a time, it was an environment that allowed many of them to broaden definitions and performances of ‘woman’ and femininity, utilizing the language of Women’s Studies. During this time it was a “space of radical openness” as students demonstrated some successful opposition to a particular system of heterosexual hegemony and restrictive gender norms. But in closely examining the different experiences of black women and white women at Womyns, the concept of “homeplace” was tested: black women had less of a sense of psychological safety and “sisterhood” in this predominantly and historically white institution. The four black women in my study were at times “outsiders-within” (Patricia Hill Collins) here: their skin color dictated that other aspects of their identities did not matter as much as their race.

For most of my participants, Womyns was a “bubble” that encouraged intellectual growth and the exercise of “voice,” intense relationships that reinforced sisterhood and intimacy, and an understanding of women as marginalized, whether by individual experiences
of sexual violence or by devaluation as a community of teachers and learners. Students were
taught and taught each other activism, and took the individual and collective risk to protest coeducation, exercising those voices that Womyns College had cultivated. Many of them experienced betrayal and dismissal, a bitter loss of “homeplace”.

*Disrupting and Constructing Gender Norms*

Womyns College was geographically and ideologically isolated, a small community “in the margins.” Women’s sexuality was displayed and accepted as “fluid,” ambiguous, not stable. Extraordinary kinships were formed in individual friendships and sexual relationships, by “The Womyns Web,” between “Odd’ and “Even” classes, in a racially fraught but nonetheless beloved “sisterhood.” Drag performances in the Drag King Contest and at the Big Dyke Party undermined gender and heterosexuality as fixed constructs and norms at Womyns. This context allowed Womyns College students to “work the weaknesses” of gender norms, exposing the artificiality of these norms in their everyday lives and on special occasions. A shared discourse and an isolated community of women where there was an expectation of “open mindedness” about women’s sexuality made for a place where individual and group consciousness was raised, and sexed and gendered marginalized voices and performances were visible, tolerated, and practiced, even dominant in some students’ perceptions.

But I reluctantly conclude that Womyns College’s decision to ‘go coed’ demonstrates the difficulty in changing heteronormative, hegemonic gender norms. The ‘W Woman’ constituted the College’s gender norm, which, though stretched by many of the students in my study, finally came to signify heteronormativity: expectations of femininity, heterosexuality, and wives and mothers were enforced and regulated by students’ gossip and social occasions,
the history of the institution, institutional leaders’ rhetoric, external perceptions of women’s colleges, and marketing and admissions concerns that were driven by the strained financial health of the College.

**The Value of this Study**

“The worth of a study is the degree to which it generates theory, description, or understanding” (Bogdan and Biklen 1998, 34). My dissertation study generates much description and some understanding of what went on at a particular women’s college: it reveals some of the stereotypes that have haunted women’s colleges from their earliest histories and persist to this day (such as the visibility of lesbianism and the seeming inevitability of “drrrrama” in single-sex gatherings of girls/young women) while providing rich context and studied explanations for those phenomena. To the body of feminist, qualitative, and educational research, this study offers up an application of a methodology to examine gender norms. There may be some theoretical lessons that can be drawn from this study – the ways in which feminism comes to be practiced in an educational institution; how and why strains of feminist thought and generations of feminists come into conflict; an example of how gender and (hetero)sexism, market forces and consumerism are foreclosing an institutional option in American higher education in the early twenty-first century; the role of location, geographical and psychic, in fostering social and political resistance.

My study could have generated better description and understanding had my pool of participants been broader. I chose avenues to find participants for my study that assured that my pool would be student leader and social science heavy: the two College deans were most likely to be in touch with student leaders, and the faculty members through whom I solicited
participants were in Women’s Studies, Sociology, and Psychology. The language of my participants and their ways of making sense of their experiences were influenced by their academic orientation and reinforced by my own training in and allegiance to the language and theories of feminist studies. Had I interviewed Womyns women who were not student leaders or more who were humanities and science majors, I might have found different understandings of and tolerance for the “fluidity” of gender and the prominence of sexuality as discourses. With a broader participant pool, I might have examined the meaning-making of students who were not part of the “Web” and those who chose not to attend the Erotic Ball or Big Dyke Party. I might have been pushed to more thoroughly analyze the invisibility of socio-economic class privilege or the intersections of race with class. These are notable limitations of this study.

However, this study does fill a void in the literature on women’s experiences in single-sex post-secondary institutions in the U.S. and globally, providing a “thick description” of the culture of a women’s college. It was particularly opportune that the decision to transition to coeducation at Womyns happened during the time of my study; I believe that the data gathered from students in this context were unique and profound, revealing insights and anxieties about gender and sexuality that would not have been articulated had that institutional decision not prompted them. This qualitative study’s in-depth, over-time descriptions and findings are informative and eye-opening for anyone interested in the status of women in the United States in the early 21st century, and for those interested in understanding and/or sustaining single-sex, postsecondary education for young women in a market-driven and heterosexualized culture. My study tells the story of an institution that struggled with its viability at a time when the philosophical and financial foundations of most
American women’s colleges were shaking and shake-able. The mighty forces of higher education costs and ‘products’ (liberal arts versus vocational and practical learning/training), and post- feminism (in terms of the belief that all meaningful women’s rights have been achieved and that valuation of the ‘feminine’ has reached its pinnacle) mean an increasingly small “niche market” for private women’s higher education in a patriarchal, capitalist culture.

In this market climate, then, a good argument can be made to let women’s colleges go the way of the dinosaur. Indeed, even in feminist circles there are calls for an end to separatist education for girls and women – debates about the ways in which women’s colleges reinforce hierarchical gender relations and stereotypes, and shelter young women from discovering the limitations and superficiality of gender norms. My study supports the arguments of many feminists that women’s colleges are inherently bound up in the heterosexual matrix, foreclosing any lasting ‘new’ configurations and enactments of gender/sex/desire identities and kinship relations. And I could let go of women’s colleges if ‘women’ as a political and social group could afford a lack of coherence and recognition. I could let go of women’s colleges if we, as a culture, had put any substantial dent in sexism. But the very experiences I document in this dissertation demonstrate the ways in which women of many races, sexualities, genders, nationalities are still disproportionately and violently impacted by entrenched gendered and raced power relations. In my view, this dissertation study makes an argument for women’s colleges – in the feminist values that can be and are communicated, albeit not without contention, by these institutions’ leaders and students; in that their historical, social, and political locations provide havens and sites for resistance for women; and as witness to the possibility of diffusing restrictive gender, sex, and desire norms.
Implications for practice

If Womyns College is any object lesson, women’s college administrators, leaders, and external governing boards (boards of trustees, etc) have an important role to play in American and perhaps global higher education: they can continue, at least somewhat explicitly, to provide feminist space for young women that demonstrates a commitment to taking women’s educations and minds seriously; entrusting institutional leadership roles to women administrators, faculty, and students; and encouraging female athletic prowess that is de-stigmatized. They can provide tools for women students to understand, cope with, and change dominant gender norms, explicitly teaching students (both in and outside the classroom) to recognize and analyze gender oppression. But if women’s college leaders hope and expect to attain these second wave goals, they must also anticipate, understand, and support students’ resistance not only to the “real world” but within the “bubble” — students’ feminism in third wave terms, whereby gender and sexuality and race and class inform some visible and vocal students’ expectations, analyses, and actions within their “homeplace.” The feminisms that show up at women’s colleges may not be easily reconciled, but they should be engaged.

Some women’s college students, particularly those educated in feminism, may look for and experience a sense of community with their elders in a single-sex community, but they may also act on the power relations that are inherent in that relationship, power relations created by differing (feminist or not) generational values, and different experiences of identities that are informed by race, sexual orientation, socio-economic class, geography, et al. At its best, feminism encourages, rather than backs away from, these revelations and exposures. This is a difficult balance for women’s college leaders who are charged with maintaining and developing
student enrollments, institutional endowments, and alumnae engagement in the face of still hostile dominant cultural perceptions.

Women’s colleges have historically provided havens for Others in our culture – those who were/are considered ruled by biology and body rather than intellect and mind, those who were/are thought to be relationship- rather than goal-oriented. These days, there are arguments for women’s colleges as strongholds for young women who are Other not only in terms of sex: queers and goths, science and anime geeks, feminist soldiers, lesbians and transgender people, women of color, and non-United States citizens. In the early 2000s, Womyns College had begun to cultivate itself as an inclusive educational institution, seeking to provide for women of color and international women the sense of “homeplace” it provided for its predominantly white student body. The College was intentional in its initial diversity initiatives, establishing an office for intercultural programs, and offering individual, merit-based leadership scholarships. But Womyns was unable to sustain its efforts in these areas, and as it transitioned to co-education, abandoned its commitment to Others. The Womyns students’ profound disappointment, hurt, and demoralization in the wake of the process that led to the decision to admit men as full time students stand as evidence of an institution’s neglect of its students’ most basic needs – to feel psychically and physically secure. The object lesson of Womyns College is that any institution that ignores the diverse needs of a diverse student body does so at its own peril.

Women’s college administrators and trustees must lead by taking up expanded definitions of ‘women’, demonstrating a pattern of inclusivity rather than exclusivity. And perhaps bold appeals to the very populations that women’s colleges draw – intellectual and
scientific women, women questioning and playing with their sexualities and desires, athletic women, women recovering from sexual violence, international women, women of color – are the key to their sustainability and growth. It seems to me that the women’s colleges that are thriving in this economic, social, and political climate are those whose leaders are willing to engage the difficult dialogues about enrolling and supporting ‘women’ who expand the historical, discursive, and material boundaries of this category: lesbian, bisexual and transgender women; American women of color; women from economically disadvantaged backgrounds; and women whose identities signal cultural and geographical pluralism. Some of the women’s colleges that have been at the forefront of these agendas are Barnard College in its “unequivocal” identity as a women’s institution (see http://barnard.edu/about/womens-college) and its open inquiries about the place for transgender students on its campus; Smith College in its embrace of F2M students and its accompanying changes in institutional language and practices; Spelman College, in its investment of institutional and private resources for the intentional cultivation of women of color as scientists and engineers; and Trinity University in Washington, D.C. in its commitment to women’s education as it recruits and sustains a multicultural, transnational, and non-traditional aged student body.

In light of my findings at Womyns College, I am ambivalent about women’s colleges as havens for transgender people, those transitioning from female/feminine to male/masculine (bodily, psychologically, socially). The ‘out’ F2M students at Womyns were re-producing the very behaviors and attitudes that have historically contributed to the political, social, sexual repression of women in our culture, the very dynamics that women’s colleges were designed to circumvent. The presence of such caricatured masculinity compromised Womyns as a
“homeplace” for some of the queer women there: rather than expanding performances of femininity and masculinity, the F2Ms mentioned in my study polarized gender and sex and desire, again. However, I am reminded that the problem was not the individuals who were acting within the confines of the performative, but rather the culture that creates and sustains only those models of gender that reproduce the heterosexual matrix. Here is more evidence at Womyns of the power of heterosexual hegemony, that the people who were attempting to ‘be’ a ‘different’ gender had only one other identity to imitate, and that even that gender transgression brought on violence in the form of exclusion. Perhaps women’s colleges can be the institutions that expose gender norms as both powerful and artificial. Still, the quandary of if and how to welcome ‘male’ bodies and behaviors at women’s and girls’ educational institutions remains; those institutions that have engaged the issue, rather than ignoring it as Womyns College did, are providing evolving models for practice.

**Suggestions for further research**

Initially, I requested and got permission to conduct research at two women’s colleges in the United States: one a historically and predominantly white institution and the other, one of very few remaining historically and predominantly black women’s colleges. I was intentional about wanting to include in the study a predominantly ‘white’ and a predominantly ‘black’ women’s college in order to explore the ways in which race (‘blackness’ and ‘whiteness’), as an identity construct, intersected with ‘female-ness’ in all-women’s environments. Had I explored the intersections of race, sexuality, gender, and socio-economic class with more consistent focus and analysis, my study would have been a more thorough exercise in feminist knowledge production. As I am writing this conclusion, it occurs to me that intersectional analyses should
be *de rigueur* for qualitative studies in feminism, women’s studies, social justice studies, education. Intersectionality should have been a methodological foundation and practical method for this study. Surely this approach to feminist research needs consistent implementation and further exploration.

Clearly this study on feminism, marginality, and the reproduction of and resistance to gender norms would have been enhanced by the inclusion of another women’s college site – a historically black or international women’s college in the U.S., or a public or private women’s college in a different culture or nation. Different research sites would have suggested, perhaps demanded different theoretical frameworks for data analysis. An additional site and an overarching intersectional feminist or possibly transnational feminist analytical framework would have supported different thinking about women’s subjectivities, the politics of location, and culture/nation-based power relations in single-sex higher educational institutions. The theorizations of black, third world, and transnational feminisms reconstruct, make complex, and multiply women’s subjectivities, and a future study conducted with any of these lenses would be a richer one than this, further opening up the social, material, and political category of ‘woman.’

...Seldom do feminist theorists take into account the complexity of life – that women are of many races and ethnic backgrounds with different histories and cultures...Seldom do they note these distinctions, because if they did they could not articulate a theory...I and many of my sisters do not see the world as being so simple... [O]ur theorizing, of necessity, is based on our multiplicity of experiences. ...Rather than having to view our world as subordinate to others, or rather than having to work as if we were hybrids, we can pursue ourselves as subjects. (Christian in James and Sharpley-Whiting 2000, 19-21)

Women’s subjectivities (experiences of themselves as autonomous, visible, valued subjects, rather than as objects) are informed by different local and global structural and social
contexts. But the difference is not threatening. Looking at data through intersectional, black, third world and/or transnational feminist lenses does not suggest dismantling the category of ‘woman’: one’s identity as a ‘woman’ will mean something different – but *something* – by virtue of her race, culture, class, sex, geography, et al. Different women’s different experiences account for relations of power and ruling in different ways, but all are valuable, knowledge producing. Utilizing one of these frameworks means that the researcher must intentionally de-center, de-normalize the experiences and storytelling of dominant identities and subjectivities. For example, if I had privileged the experiences of women of color participants throughout this study, instead of in a few separate sections of my analysis, I would have produced a broader, more inclusive account of the ways in which power relations and social norms operated in this particularly gendered environment.

This brings us back to the question of the subject of women’s colleges, and ‘her’ usefulness and contradictions as a tool for understanding the workings of gender. If we adopt Alcoff’s “gendered subject” (see Chapter One), transnational feminism’s genealogically situated subject, or black feminism’s intersectional subject – all in matrices that have consistent axes of domination in gendered lives – we have a fuller, more accurate and complex “…point of departure” – for education, for study, for analysis, for policy change. This feminist subject remains to be studied more pointedly, and women’s colleges present an infinitely useful research site where the experiences of queer and raced and feminine and working class subjects – Others – shed light on ever expanding human conditions.
## APPENDIX A: Student participants in alphabetical order by pseudonym
Race/nationality, socio-economic class, and sexuality identities are those self-reported in response to interview questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Race/nationality</th>
<th>S/E class</th>
<th>Sexuality</th>
<th>Leader</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alfre</td>
<td>Sr</td>
<td>History/Educ</td>
<td>West Indian, West African</td>
<td>middle</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>RA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexandra</td>
<td>Sr</td>
<td>Psych/Soc</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>middle</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Judicial, Protest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine</td>
<td>Jr</td>
<td>Psych/Women’s Studies</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>uppermid</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>RA, Athlete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devin</td>
<td>Soph</td>
<td>Religion/Anthro</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>uppermid</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Even/odd, Protest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elise</td>
<td>Sr</td>
<td>Women’s Studies</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>middle</td>
<td>Gay,gender queer</td>
<td>RA, Editor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fran</td>
<td>Jr</td>
<td>Women’s Studies</td>
<td>Bi-racial</td>
<td>uppermid</td>
<td>Lesbian, Queer</td>
<td>Class ofcr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>Jr</td>
<td>Women’s Studies</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>middle</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Judicial, Even/odd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>Soph</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>middle</td>
<td>“relationship with woman”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>Jr</td>
<td>History</td>
<td>Jamaican</td>
<td>middle</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Athlete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Soph</td>
<td>Communica-tion</td>
<td>“mutt”</td>
<td>middle</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>Jr</td>
<td>Women’s Studies</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>working/ lower middle</td>
<td>Gay, Lesbian</td>
<td>Diversity, RA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lin</td>
<td>Soph</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Asian-American</td>
<td>working</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>Soph</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>middle</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Diversity, RA, Std Gov</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Sr</td>
<td>History</td>
<td>Italian/Asian</td>
<td>lower middle</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Athlete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Class</td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td>Class</td>
<td>Sexual Identity</td>
<td>Other Groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
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<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meg</td>
<td>Sr</td>
<td>Women's Studies</td>
<td>White, Caucasian</td>
<td>middle Queer</td>
<td>RA, a capella</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melinda</td>
<td>Sr</td>
<td>Theatre</td>
<td>Caucasian, lower</td>
<td>middle</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>RA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>Soph</td>
<td>Women's Studies</td>
<td>White, working</td>
<td>Queer, Dyke</td>
<td>Even/odd, Diversity, Protest</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>Sr</td>
<td>Psych/Science</td>
<td>White, middle</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>LBQTA, Sex Advocates</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosie</td>
<td>Sr</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>White, “poverty level”</td>
<td>?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>Sr</td>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>White, upper middle</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>RA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophie</td>
<td>Jr</td>
<td>Environment Studies</td>
<td>Caribbean-American</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>POWER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasha</td>
<td>Jr</td>
<td>Public Affairs</td>
<td>South Asian, American-Pakistani</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>RA, Std Body President</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Interview Questions

Interview Questions, Fall 2002

1. How would you describe yourself? How do you identify yourself?
2. What influenced your decision to attend Womyns?
3. What do you like best about attending an all women’s college? Least?
4. Tell me what it’s like to be in a classroom of all women students. In your experience, how does the gender of the professor affect dynamics in the classroom?
5. Tell me about your friendships with other women here. How are those different from other friendships you’ve had with women outside of Womyns?
6. To what extent do you interact with Womyns students who are different from you in some way? How are they different? How would you describe your relationships with these women? How do you feel about these relationships?
7. How are issues of gender or being a woman brought up or discussed at Womyns?
8. Have there been particular events or experiences at Womyns that have made you particularly aware that you’re female/a woman? Tell me about it.
9. When you are getting ready to “go out” or when you “dress up”, what do you do/wear? How do you decide how to dress? Does it make a difference to you if males will be present wherever you’re going to socialize? How so?
10. What part does your body play in making you feel like a female/woman? How do other students’ bodies influence how you feel?
11. In what racial group do you locate yourself? How does that impact your experience at Womyns?
12. What socio-economic class would you say you belong to? How does that impact your experience here?
13. How do other important dimensions of your identity – your race, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, nationality, ability—impact your experience at Womyns?
14. Do you feel safe here? If so, what makes you feel safe here? When have you felt unsafe or uncomfortable on campus?
15. Who is powerful on campus?
16. When have you felt excluded at Womyns?
17. Who on campus represents a woman as you want to be? Describe what makes her so.
18. What do you see as your role as a young woman at this point in history? Who influences how you see your role as a woman?

Revised Interview Questions, Spring 2005

1. How would you describe yourself? How do you identify yourself? If you could write an autobiography at this point, what important pieces of your identity would you include?
2. What influenced your decision to attend Womyns? What about Womyns drew you here?
3. What do you like best about attending an all women’s college? Least?
5. What kind of student/person/woman might not belong here?
6. What are some current hot topics or buzz on campus?
7. Tell me what it’s like to be in a classroom of all women students. In your experience, how does the gender of the professor affect dynamics in the classroom? What does affect classroom dynamics?
8. Tell me about your friendships with other women here. How are those different from other friendships you’ve had with women outside of Womyns?
9. To what extent do you interact with Womyns students who are different from you in some way? How are they different? How would you describe your relationships with these women? How do you feel about these relationships?
10. How are issues of gender or being a woman brought up or discussed at Womyns?
11. Have there been particular events or experiences or periods of time at Womyns that have made you particularly aware that you’re female/a woman? Tell me about it.
12. When you are getting ready to “go out” or when you “dress up”, what do you do/wear? How do you decide how to dress? Does it make a difference to you if males will be present wherever you’re going to socialize? How so?
13. What part does your body play in making you feel like a female/woman? How do other students’ bodies influence how you feel?
14. What difficulties/disadvantages come when living and studying in an all-female environment?

15. In what racial group do you locate yourself? How does that impact your experience at Womyns?

16. What socio-economic class would you say you belong to? How does that impact your experience here?

17. Are there other important dimensions of your identity – your race, sexuality, religion or spirituality, ethnicity, nationality, ability, first person in your family to go to college — that we haven’t talked about that impact your experience here?

18. Do you feel safe here? If so, what makes you feel safe here? When have you felt unsafe or uncomfortable on campus?

19. Who is powerful on campus?

20. When have you felt excluded at Womyns?

21. Womyns has announced that men will be admitted starting next fall. What does the loss of this all-women’s environment mean to you? How do you think things will be different?

22. Is “being feminine” important to you? What does “being feminine” mean to you?

23. Who on campus represents a woman as you want to be? Describe what makes her so.

24. What do you see as your role as a young woman at this point in history? Who influences how you see your role as a woman?
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