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Relational Aggression on Film: An Intersectional Analysis of *Mean Girls*

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Youth violence has long been a topic of interest among journalists, politicians, educators, and academic scholars, yet the popular construction of "Mean Girls" is a somewhat recent phenomenon (Gonick). Where much of the research on youth and media violence has focused on physical violence—fighting, killing, guns, and knives—in the late 1990s and early 2000s the discourse seemed to shift not only from boys to girls, but from physical violence to a different kind of bullying and aggression. Researchers refer to this behavior as relational aggression (Mikel-Brown), social aggression (Underwood), or alternative aggression (Simmons). This behavior is marked as a female phenomenon and is labeled as catty, vengeful, deceitful, manipulative, back-stabbing, or just plain mean. Perhaps the most shocking incidence of girl violence in media occurred with the national release of a 2003 home video of a hazing incident in the suburbs of Chicago. The incident took place at a powder-puff football game where high school junior-class girls were seen sitting on the ground as mainly senior girls and a few boys saturated them in feces and urine, throwing pig intestines, and fish guts at them. Approximately 100 students were present as the girls were punched and kicked. In the end, five girls were hospitalized, 32 were suspended, and 12 girls and three boys faced

misdemeanor battery charges (Chesney-Lind and Irwin). Today, a simple search of "girl fighting" on You Tube yields hundreds of similar videos.

Research has suggested many reasons for the growing trend of "Mean Girls," but perhaps the most common popular explanation rests in U.S. media culture. Images of both real and fictional accounts of female aggression contribute to a cultural impression that films, television, music lyrics, video games, and the Internet are culprits of normalizing violence for young adults, partially through shifting images of girls as victims to girls as fighters (Mikel-Brown). "Think *MTV*. Think Britney Spears. Think Paris Hilton. Think Christina Aguilera. Think *Fear Factor.* Independent access to television is one of the principal vehicles for exposing young girls to the socially toxic elements of American society" (Garbarino 70). Best-selling books such as *See Jane Hit* (Garbarino), *Sugar and Spice and No Longer Nice* (Prothrow-Stith and Spivak), *Odd Girl Out* (Simmons) and *Queen Bees and Wannabes* (Wiseman) galvanized attention to this type of violence, particularly as their contents were covered in media outlets.

News journalists also contribute to this discourse through real life stories of "girls behaving badly" with headlines such as *USA Today's* "Bully-Boy Focus Overlooks Vicious Acts by Girls" (Welsh), the *Boston Globe's*, "Shocking But True: Even Six Year Old Girls Can be Bullies" (Meltz), the *Associated Press'* "Girls Getting Increasingly Violent" (W. Hall), and an article featured in *Time*, "Taming Wild Girls" about programs aimed at teaching young girls how to avoid fights (Kluger). At the box office, the success of films such as *Heathers* (1989), *Cruel Intentions* (1999), and *Thirteen* (2003) further popularize this depiction of girl aggression.

Perhaps the most commercially successful example is the film *Mean Girls* (2004)*, a teen comedy exploring the darker side of adolescence and high school cliques. Inspired by Rosalind Wiseman's pop-sociology dissection of teen hierarchies in *Queen Bees and Wannabes*, *Saturday

Night Live alumnus Tina Fey created the screenplay for *Mean Girls*. Directed by Mark Waters (who also directed the remake of *Freaky Friday*), the film hit theaters in 2004, starring Hollywood party girl Lindsay Lohan as Cady, a new girl at school who is quickly transformed into a "Queen Bee." The film grossed nearly $130 million at the box office (The Numbers) as well as received high praise from audiences and critics. The success of the film was quickly attributed to the fact that "teen girls want to see movies that speak to them on their level, rather than giving them a sanitized way of life" (Puig) and that adults never forget "what it's like to be a teenager; it's a subject that's much more satisfying to revisit than to live through" (Zacharek). As film critic Philip Wuntch declared, the film "underlines the teen crises that virtually everyone experiences with varying degrees of intensity." With dialogue for Lohan such as, "I know it may look like I was being like a bitch, but that's only because I was acting like a bitch," the film's sarcastic and twisted look at the nastiness of high school girls offered a fictitious exploration of contemporary public concern about girlfighting and aggression. Studying visual images of girlfighting, even those that might be fictitious in nature, is important because as Lyn Mikel-Brown observes:

> TV and movies project a "normal" range of acceptable girl behaviors against which media-savvy girls are pressed to compare or distance themselves. Girls' friendships and peer groups, influenced by the media, are entwined and laced with anxiety and expectations that have little to do with their everyday experiences. (8)

Given current cultural discourses about "meanness" among girls, *Mean Girls* provides a salient, extended visual example of relationally aggressive behavior.

This essay begins with a comprehensive summary of studies on youth aggression, especially among girls, to critically analyze *Mean Girls* for its

representation of relationally aggressive behavior among young women. In *Mean Girls*, girlfighting and aggression are represented through the formation, maintenance and/or destruction of relationships, and the dual-function of the body as a weapon/target in this enterprise. In the film, Cady's journey up the social ladder of "girl world" is directly linked to learning the rules of competition among young women through understanding how to use girls' bodies to increase popularity and desirability. Moreover, the film presents relational aggression as a racialized construct, created and perpetuated by white women as a means to maintain hegemonic and heteronormative control over their school environments. The creation of a popular media space where "meanness" is labeled and tamed through hegemonic reconstructions of gendered and racialized assumptions about aggressive behavior offers a variety of feminist implications. To expand on current research and cultural discourses of "meanness," our essay interrogates these representations and offers suggestions for future research linking girl studies, the body, and popular media.

Violence and Aggression Among Girls

Placing best-selling books, news media accounts and popular films in the context of a growing body of research on aggression can help explain the recent phenomenon of "Mean Girls." Many communication and feminist scholars have investigated the nature of gender and interpersonal aggression, particularly its effect on relationships (see Alder and Worrall; Artz; Bright; Burman; Burman, Batchelor and Brown; Merten; Mikel-Brown; Putallaz and Bierman; Remillard and Lamb; Sikes; Steffensmeier, Schwartz, Shong and Ackerman). These researchers try to place female aggression within the cultural, political, historical, and material lives of young girls rather than focus on the problem as merely individual girls

acting badly. Unlike many journalists and authors, however, not all scholars agree that girl violence is actually on the rise.

Research on youth violence tends to focus on the most extreme forms of violence, such as aggravated assault and murder, with the most common measurement of youth violence being arrest records. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), about 15% of the more than eight million arrests were of juveniles under the age of 18, most of which were of adolescent boys. According to school violence statistics, there has been an overall decline in the last decade in terms of the prevalence of carrying a weapon to school or taking part in a physical fight, but overall, boys are still more likely than girls to engage in these kinds of behaviors (National Center for Education Statistics). As Michelle Burman and colleagues argue, "Numerically and statistically insignificant, female violence is easily dismissed as inconsequential compared to the problem of male violence" (443).

Some researchers suggest that rates of female violence may be changing. For example, from 1990 to 1999, the rate of aggravated assault rates for girls under the age of 18 increased, while decreasing for males (Garbarino). Christine Alder and Anne Worrall as well as Darrel Steffensmeier et al. argue that it is a problem to suggest that girls are simply becoming more violent based on increasing assault charges. Instead, they argue that the cultural perception of an increase in female violence can be attributed to a shifting definition of violence. For example, minor and major assaults are now counted equally in published statistics on violence. The majority of arrests for assault by girls actually involve a less serious form of assault, most without the use of a weapon. Thus, it may be somewhat inaccurate to argue that "violent" behavior among girls is increasing.

Other researchers argue that studies of girl violence need to move beyond simply counting instances of physical violence. Although girls are not as quick to use physical violence, they do witness a significant amount

of violence. Michelle Burman finds that 98% of girls report witnessing some form of interpersonal physical violence, which may contribute to a perspective among girls that violence is "normal" or even "unremarkable." Beyond physical violence, research also indicates that non-physical forms of violence are a prevalent problem for youth. Marla Eisenberg, Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, and Cheryl Perry found that although the prevalence of peer harassment can be difficult to estimate due to a variety of behaviors that may constitute harassment, most research indicates that about 75% of youth experience some form of harassment. According to a national report of eighth to eleventh graders conducted by the American Association of University Women Educational Foundation (AAUW), 83% of girls and 79% of boys reported being harassed in schools. One in four students reported being sexually harassed "often."

In the 1990s, researchers began to shift from looking at girls as victims of aggression and violence to examining girls as perpetrators of aggression and violence (Ringrose). Developmental psychologists in particular began using the term 'relational aggression' to examine how girls exploit relationships to intentionally hurt their peers (Crick and Grotpeter; Remillard and Lamb). Relationally aggressive acts can include gossiping, spreading rumors about someone, excluding a friend from a play group, name-calling, making sarcastic verbal comments towards someone, using negative body language, threatening to end a relationship if a girl does not get her way or threatening to disclose private information about a friend as a way to manipulate and control (Mikel-Brown; Remillard and Lamb; Ringrose; Simmons; Underwood). It can be direct and overt, such as telling a friend she can no longer sit with you during lunch, or it can be indirect and covert, for example discretely convincing your friends to not sit with a particular person at lunch. In particular, this research has found that girls engage in this type of aggression more so than boys (Crick and Grotpeter), and that girls' relational aggression increases in adolescence and early adulthood (Crick and Rose). Direct and indirect forms of

relational aggressions are often constructed as "rites of passage" among girls that will eventually be outgrown (Mikel-Brown). In this regard, "meanness" is seen as a phase that girls are supposed to simply transcend (Merten). Thus, parents and teachers often dismiss this kind of behavior by calling it "normal" girl behavior.

   Feminist scholars argue, however, that relationally aggressive behavior has very serious consequences for girls' self-esteem and self-confidence. This type of aggression has been found to cause distress, confusion, fear and overall psychological harm (Crick and Grotpeter; Owens et al.; Remillard and Lamb; Simmons; Underwood). Girls tend to define verbal abuse as more serious, hurtful and damaging than physical abuse (Burman; Remillard and Lamb). Although large groups of both boys and girls report experiencing harassment, girls are also more likely to report being negatively affected by it. According to the AAUW:

> Girls are far more likely than boys to feel self conscious (44 percent vs. 19 percent), embarrassed (53 percent vs. 32 percent), afraid (33 percent vs. 12 percent) and less self-assured or confident (32 percent vs. 16 percent) by physical or non-physical harassment. (38)

Girls also report that being a victim of harassment has led them to talk less in class, get lower grades on tests, cut class, lose their appetite, and even stop eating. A survey of more than 700 girls found results similar to the AAUW study, noting that 91% of girls reported being verbally intimidated by offensive name-calling, threats, taunts, or ridicule, and that this form of harassment increased feelings of humiliation, anger and powerlessness (Burman; Burman, Batchelor, and Brown). Almost 60% of these girls reported "self-harming" behavior – such as not eating, over-eating, making herself sick, physically hurting or cutting herself – directly after instances of verbal abuse and harassment (Burman). Additionally, this type of harassment was rarely a one-time event, but rather an ongoing part

of their everyday life. "Girls showed great awareness of the effectiveness of verbal abuse and intimidation as a means of self-assertion and of inflicting hurt on others" (Burman 87). Moreover, these offenses crossed economic, ethnic and cultural divides.

The importance that girls place on dyadic relationships, popularity, and peer pressure can directly influence the use of relational aggression. Girls tend to fight other girls largely to defend their sexual reputations or their connection to a boyfriend; thus, girls' popularity, self-worth, and social capital are both produced and reproduced by their relational links to boys (Artz; Mikel-Brown). As a result, girls tend to compete with each other for male attention, which in turn defines their identity in relation to their female peers. Aggression within the friendship circles of girls also differs greatly from male aggression, because boys are more likely to aggress outside of their friendship circles, rather than within them, while girls are more likely to compete with immediate peers groups (Dellasega and Nixon; Merten). Since girls recognize that maintaining popularity requires the support of unpopular girls, popular girls (particularly as they grow older) tend to act nice around their peers and instead direct their meanness and aggression towards the members of their own clique, all the while quietly gossiping about their unpopular peers (Adler, Kless, and Adler; Eder; Merten). Thus, gender significantly impacts the types of relationally aggressive behavior exhibited by youth.

Given the literature on relational aggression, it is important to interrogate mediated narratives that perpetuate a cultural discourse of relational aggression, specifically among young women and girls. These narratives "exploit public concern over teenage girls, depicted as living in turbulent worlds of manipulation, betrayal, crime, violence [and] sexual exploitation" (Ringrose 408). *Mean Girls* is a prominent example of how this discourse is culturally articulated. Its commercial success combined with its continued influence on popular culture warrants scholarly consideration.

"Man Candy, Hot Body and the Army of Skanks"

Mean Girls chronicles the experiences of Cady Harron (played by Lohan), the sixteen-year-old, home-schooled daughter of a pair of research zoologists who relocate to suburban Illinois after spending twelve years in Africa. Upon returning to the United States, Cady enrolls in high school for the first time, and learns that "girl world" has a complex set of rules, unlike the basic rules of nature. Cady is quickly befriended by Janis and Damien, a pair of eccentric students who warn her about "The Plastics" – Regina George, Gretchen Weiners, and Karen Smith – who are the most popular girls in the junior class. Regina plays the role of the Queen Bee to Gretchen and Karen as she manipulates those around her to maintain her status atop the social hierarchy. When Cady is invited to join the Plastics for lunch, and later extended an invitation to join their group, Janis convinces Cady to play along in the hopes that she can enact revenge on Regina for socially isolating her. Cady agrees, and enters the world of the Plastics. In a voiceover, she comments, "Having lunch with the Plastics was like leaving the actual world and entering girl world, and girl world had a lot of rules." These rules include purposeful relationally aggressive behavior that emphasizes horizontal violence, (hyper)sexuality, heteronormativity and white privilege.

Relational Aggression as Horizontal Violence

Among girls, relational aggression is a form of horizontal violence (Freire), or struggles between members of a marginalized group for power and dominance within cultural constructs of oppression. In essence, girls take out their own failures to meet cultural ideals on other girls because they have limited power to address cultural assumptions about female behavior. Mikel-Brown argues that girls effectively become "handmaidens to insidious forms of sexism" by enacting horizontal violence that utilizes "negative stereotypes about femininity against other girls, they do so to

distance themselves and thus to avoid being victimized by those stereotypes in turn" (149). In the film Cady laments, "The weird thing about hanging out with Regina is that I could hate her and I still wanted her to like me," observing ultimately that it was "better to be in The Plastics, hating life, than to not be in at all."

Throughout the film, the Plastics enact relational aggression that codes as horizontal violence. In terms of direct aggression, the film uses "three-way calling attacks" where one girl calls another to have a conversation, all the while, a third girl is listening in quietly. When Cady develops a crush on Regina's ex-boyfriend Aaron, Regina calls upon her Queen Bee status by involving Cady and Gretchen in a three-way calling attack where Regina is talking to Cady with Gretchen silently listening in. Regina discloses that she knows Cady's "secret" and that Gretchen was responsible for this knowledge. She then prods Cady into agreeing that Gretchen's behavior was "bitchy," only to then reveal to Cady that Gretchen is listening in. Once made aware of this tactic, Cady uses it later on Regina in the film to alienate her from Gretchen and Karen in order to obtain information that will help further damage Regina's reputation. Indirect aggression also comes into play when Regina misinforms Aaron that Cady writes, "Mrs. Aaron Samuels," in her notebook and saved his tissue for an African voodoo ritual. Regina then kisses Aaron, with Cady looking on. Instead of confronting Regina directly after witnessing this betrayal, Cady acts as if she did not see the kiss. Moreover, Regina avoids direct confrontation by asking Gretchen to talk to Cady about her own rekindled relationship with Aaron, and Cady adopts Regina's indirectly aggressive tactics, insisting that she is fine with the situation.

With Regina's goal to undermine Cady's crush on Aaron achieved, an infuriated Cady devises a meaner strategy for combating Regina by agreeing to Janis' plan to undermine Regina's power. The scene where Cady realizes, "I knew how this would be settled in the animal world" depicts physical aggression – showing images of girls jumping on and

hitting each other with animal noises in the background. The scene stops, however, when Cady voices, "But this was girl world. And in girl world, all the fighting had to be sneaky." Cady's alliance with Janis mimics the exact behaviors Regina uses to maintain power and control of her own clique. Cady and Janis launch a series of social attacks on Regina, such as disguising foot cream as face wash, passing weight gain bars as weight loss bars, and purposefully turning people against Regina. Thus, although the narrative may encourage viewers to interpret Regina's behaviors as unacceptable, Cady and Janis enact the *exact same behavior* when trying to gain control of the situation. These behaviors are purposeful, and are used specifically to cull power within the confines of the high school experience.

Perhaps the strongest example of competing horizontally for power and control is the Burn Book where Regina and her clique write nasty and degrading messages about other girls in school. On her first visit to Regina's house, Cady and the Plastics thumb through the book, where insults are almost always tied to the body and/or sexuality: "Dawn Schweitzer is a fat virgin;" "Amber D'Allesio made out with a hot dog;" or "Janis Ian—Dyke." The Burn Book stands as written evidence of indirect aggression, and becomes directly aggressive later in the film when Regina loses control over her clique. In a ploy to regain her status as Queen Bee, Regina copies and distributes pages of the book throughout the school, then tells the principal that Cady, Gretchen, and Karen created the book. The Burn Book exists as a physical manifestation of the "hidden" behavior, thus, being the only means by which the girls are exposed outside of their horizontal competition for power.

(Hyper)sexualized Bodies and Heteronomativity

Obviously, horizontal violence is the primary focus of the film's plot, yet the aggressive behavior depicted in the film also reinforces (hyper)sexualized and heteronormative behaviors. Deborah Tolman,

Renée Spencer, Myra Rosen-Reynoso, and Michelle Porche argue that girls are more likely to be popular if they unquestioningly adopt and voice a heterosexual script whereby boys desire and girls are desired; boys are central and girls are marginal. Thus, all girls are judged through the male gaze (Mulvey), ultimately encouraging women to cultivate bodies that are desirable for male audiences. The Plastics exhibit early on that they believe their bodies are their best weapon – and that maintaining the body as a site and object of sexual desire is central to their social and cultural capital. For example, one scene has the girls calling out their physical weakness such as "God, my hips are huge!," "I've got man shoulders!" "My hairline is so weird!" and "My nail beds suck!" The main course of action for the girls to remedy these perceived bodily problems is through maximizing their sex appeal.

Thus, Cady's body is central to her transformation. As her schemes become more complex and successful, indicated by her increased popularity, her clothes—the body's main ornamentation in high school—become sparse and sexy. In the beginning of the film, she wears loose fitting shirts and comfortable jeans, which are replaced with tight mid-riff and cleavage-baring tops and incredibly short skirts. In fact, one of the first things Cady does with the Plastics is go shopping. Cady observes early on that if she is going to survive "girl world," she must play by the rules of adorning the body, a lesson she learns the hard way when appearing at a Halloween party. When Cady arrives in a costume that covers her entire body and distorts her facial features, she finds that all of the popular girls are scantily clad, dressed in overtly sexual outfits. Cady laments, "The hardcore girls just wear lingerie and some form of animal ears. Unfortunately, no one told me about the slut rule." These patterns extend to their everyday dress as well, as each of the Plastics wears short skirts and low-cut tops on a daily basis. The result is a group of young women who dress as sexually provocative as possible. Perhaps the most hyper-sexualized example occurs when the four Plastics enter the winter

talent show and dance to the carol "Jingle Bell Rock" in Christmas lingerie – red halter tops and mini-skirts with fuzzy white trim, black leather belts and knee-high black stiletto boots. Cady's taming of her body to conform to the rules of the Plastics directly correlates with her rise in popularity.

Thus, the body becomes an outlet for sexual expression *and* a means of policing desirable behaviors. Mary Jane Kehily explains that body policing among peer groups in schools can serve as "important sites for the exercise of autonomy and agency within the confined space of the school" where social norms are not dictated by "teachers, parents, politicians and policy makers" (p. 214). As leader of the Plastics, Regina polices the bodies of her followers by imposing a dress code dictating her clique's body representation. The dress code stipulates that each girl must wear pink on Wednesdays, can only wear jeans or track pants on Fridays, cannot wear tank tops two days in a row, and can only wear their hair in a ponytail once a week. Moreover, each girl has to consult the rest of the group before doing anything that might be against the rules. Any girl who breaks the rules is not allowed to sit with the rest of the group in the cafeteria. Thus, when Regina wears sweatpants on a Monday, the group disallows her access to their lunch table, forcing Regina to realize that she cannot abide by the rules she created. She discloses to the group that the rules "aren't real," yet the girls in the group shun her for failing to follow them. In this way, the girls maintain and regulate policing behaviors over the body, reifying that the body is a girl's most central and cherished identity possession.

When girls fail to conform to these rules of bodily adornment, socially aggressive attacks move from the more general concept of body image to explicit (hetero)sexuality. Ultimately, Janis' need for revenge stems from the fact that Regina had "uninvited" her to a pool party in eighth grade because she believed Janis was a lesbian, thus starting a school-wide rumor about Janis' sexual orientation. The fact that her only friend is a

theatre-obsessed gay male serves to perpetuate this rumor even further. Janis was denied entry into the clique because of a perceived deviation from a socially acceptable heterosexual script. This underlying questioning of Janis' sexuality offers a potent example of what happens to a girl who does not conform to cultural standards of heteronormativity. In fact, Simmons and Wiseman both claim that the term lesbian can operate independently of actual sexual orientation among girls' peer groups, serving more as a marker of masculine traits, rather than of sexual preference. Moreover, given the current visibility of same-sex relationships and civil rights in the U.S., the use of *lesbian* as a socially stigmatizing marker is a way for the girls in the film to maintain their own purity by defining themselves against the "other" – "bad girls" who shun and reject men as central to feminine existence. The term *lesbian* rhetorically functions as yet another means of policing behavior to conform to a heteronormative script. When Janis "lands" a boyfriend near the end of the film, her sexuality is no longer questioned.

Moreover, when Ms. Norbury (Tina Fey) discovers that Cady is purposefully failing math to impress Aaron, she advises Cady, "You don't have to dumb yourself down to get guys to like you." Cady's reaction to Ms. Norbury's comment is to complain to the Plastics, saying that Ms. Norbury is failing her, claiming she was "so queer" when talking to Cady after school. The Plastics encourage Cady to address this "queerness" by writing about it in the Burn Book, leading Cady to creating the rumor that Ms. Norbury is a drug dealer. In other words, Ms. Norbury's direct rejection of the heterosexual script elicits coding from the girls as "queer."

Racial Coding and Relational Aggression

Beyond the issues surrounding sexualized coding, the film also participates in the racial coding of relational aggression as decidedly white and middle class. This is accomplished through the segregation of students of color in the film, and a representation of their behaviors as "violent"

rather than aggressive. Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks have referred to this as dichotomous thinking where people, things, or ideas are characterized in terms of their difference from one another. "Objectification is central to this process of oppositional difference. In either/or dichotomous thinking, one element is objectified as the Other, and is viewed as an object to be manipulated and controlled" (Hill Collins 69). This is introduced in one of the first scenes of the film, when Janice describes the social groupings of the school to Cady:

> Where you sit in the cafeteria is crucial. You have your freshman, roxy guys, preps, JV jocks, Asian nerds, cool Asians, varsity jocks, unfriendly black hotties, girls who eat their feelings, girls who don't eat anything, desperate wannabees, burnouts, sexually active band geeks, the greatest people you will ever meet and the worst. Be aware of the plastics.

As Janice goes through the list of students, it is clear that students are sitting according to specific social status groups (i.e. burnouts or band geeks), but when describing these groups the use of racial markers is only done for students of color. This kind of "othering" creates "white" as the norm, where race is used as an adjective for groups that are "other than" white. Although Janice describes the Plastics as the "worst" group, in the social hierarchy at the school, they are most certainly the dominant group. Hill Collins argues that domination involves attempts to objectify the subordinate group and this is done not only by the Plastics, but also by students who internalize this kind of objectification of "others" as well.

In the film, the significance of race is not just that groups of students self-segregate, but rather that the narrative of the film promotes a "color caste system" (Sahay and Piran) where whiter/lighter skin becomes the ideal symbol of status and power. The Plastics—Regina, Gretchen and Karen—are at the top of the popularity hierarchy and all of them are upper-class white girls. In essence, these white girls control the standard

of beauty and popularity, and anyone who does not conform to this standard (be it other white women, or women of color, or women of a lower socioeconomic status) cannot be considered "beautiful" or "trendy." As Christine Crouse-Dick notes:

> We seek the input of our friends, family, and cultural surroundings to give us indication of whether or not we are pretty enough or sexy enough to be considered a member of the group society calls "beautiful." In the midst of these questions, we (and others) compare ourselves with the standard representations of what is beautiful (popular culture stars, for instance) and with those women who surround us. If our image more closely resembles the standard socialized representations of beautiful and if those women who surround us fall shorter than we of resembling that standard, we sense we have achieved power, status, and control. (p. 27-28)

This is exemplified throughout the film in scenes where Regina, the Plastic Queen Bee, is held up as the standard of beauty. For example, shortly after Cady meets Regina, she refers to her as the "Barbie Doll I never had." By regulating the standard of beauty and popularity, the Plastics promote what George Lipsitz calls a "possessive investment" in whiteness. Lipsitz argues that this power of whiteness is not just about white hegemonic control over other separate racialized groups, but the power to manipulate "…racialized outsiders to fight with one another, to compete with each other for white approval, and to seek the rewards and privileges of whiteness for themselves at the expense of other racialized groups" (3).

The film reinforces this construction of white girls as "mean" and minority girls as "violent." Moments of the film where aggression becomes physical, the codes for behavior become decidedly "other than white." Throughout the film, there are distinct references to Cady's childhood growing up in the "jungle of Africa." After the Burn Book is

distributed and all of the girls begin fighting in the hallway, the girls are represented as "wild, African beasts," clawing at each other as sounds of wild animals plays in the background. On the DVD chapter menu this scene is called "Jungle Madness." Essentially, the message of the film is that when girls engage in physically violent behavior, it is analogous to the behavior of those who live in the uncivilized jungle of Africa. It is not the kind of behavior that "good white girls" engage in, which is further reinforced by the fact that the scenes with physical fighting include more African American, Latino, and Asian American girls than any other scenes of the film. Henry Giroux argues that, although violence appears to cross over designated borders of class, race and social space, representations of violence in popular media are "portrayed through forms of racial coding that suggest that violence is a black problem, a problem outside of white, suburban America" (59). This is represented through the construction of the Plastics as simply "mean" whereas the "unfriendly black hotties," and "cool Asians" become physically violent during the school fight.

During the "Jungle Madness" scene, negative stereotypes about minority students and violence are reinforced through the characterization that this type of physical fighting might happen in urban schools, but should not be occurring in suburban schools. Mr. Duvall, the African American principal played by Tim Meadows, comes out into the hallway with a bat in his hand to try and stop the girls from fighting. After he gets kicked by a girl he remarks, "Hell no, I did not leave the South Side for this!" – then hits the fire alarm, setting off the sprinkler system, as one African American girl screams, "My hair!" Edward Buendia and colleagues argue that citywide constructs such as "West Side" or "South Side" are "socially constructed boundaries that divide areas geographically along racial, ethnic, class and religious lines" (833), but these terms are also embedded in social practices that influence how educators view students and curriculum. The message in this scene is clear – Mr. Duvall came to a white suburban school because there was an expectation that

students would be "civilized," unlike the minority students he used to teach at his "South Side" school, the implication being that violence is expected of students of color.

The metaphor of Africa not only reinforces an "uncivilized" violent stereotype, but is also used in a reference to sexual behavior. When Cady visits a mall for the first time, she witnesses a multitude of public displays of affection among teen couples. Cady thinks to herself, "Being at the mall kind of reminded me of being home in Africa, by the watering hole, when the animals are in heat." She then imagines her peers running around like monkeys, as roaring sounds of lions and elephants fill the background, implying that teens engaging in sexual behavior are uncivilized African beasts. This is equally problematic because Africa is clearly being coded as Black in the film. For example, in the first scene, the teacher announces to the class that there is a new student from Africa in the class, and then says "Welcome" to an African American girl in the class, who comments, "I'm from Michigan." Later, when Cady meets the plastics, Karen asks her, "If you are from Africa, why are you white?" The use of Africa as a metaphor for both violent behavior and sexual behavior reinforces negative stereotypes of not just Africans, but of African Americans as well.

Racial stereotyping transcends a black-white dichotomy in the film. In particular, the oversexualized geisha stereotype becomes most prevalent among the "cool Asians." According to Stuart Hall Asian women are often stereotyped in media as faithful, submissive and self-sacrificing, colonial representations that are characterized by a structure of ambivalence from the dominant gaze. Moreover, scholars observe that media representations of Asian women as prostitutes are prolific, and that this practice "perpetuates a colonial group fantasy, in which the Asian woman embodies 'service,' especially for the white man" (Ling 294). This comes to bear in the film when Coach Carr, the white physical education teacher, is exposed as having a physical relationship with two Vietnamese

students, Trang Pak and Sun Jin Dinh. The use of Vietnamese women fighting over an older white man not only reinforces the colonial fantasy, but also links the girls' behavior to sexual servitude. Furthermore, Pensri Ho observes that Asian Americans know White individuals often assume they do not speak English, and thus, often resort to native tongues or remain silent as a passing strategy (167). Even at the end of the film, as many girls are resolving their conflicts, the dialogue between the two girls perpetuates their isolation and hyper-sexualization. When Trang Pak says, "Why are you scamming on my boyfriend?" Sun Jin Dinh replies, "You're just jealous because guys like me better," to which Trang Pak retorts, "N*gga please." As the conversation takes place entirely in subtitles, the white women in the scene, particularly Tina Fey, are shown as dismissive of the conflict between the Asian women in favor of resolving the white girls' "mean" behavior.

Decidedly absent from the film are Asian and African American men, aside from two main characters, Principal Duvall and Kevin Gnanapoor, an Indian boy who, in stereotypical fashion, heads the math league. In addition to being the brains behind the math league, Kevin's role is one that is distinctly tied to race. To begin with, he states early on in the film that he "only dates women of color." In the dance scene towards the end of the film he comes up to Janice and asks, "Puerto Rican?" She responds, "Lebanese," and Kevin says, "I feel that," which ignites a relationship between the two. Kevin is also a MC and during the talent show does a rap that starts out, "All you sucka' MCs got nothing on me…" It is interesting to see how one of the only Asian males in the film appropriates black culture as part of his identity, which can also be applied to the previous example of the Asian women appropriating the term "N*gga."

Implications of Representing Relational Aggression in *Mean Girls*

Examining *Mean Girls* offers several critical implications for feminist scholarship, particularly with respect to media representation and relational aggression. One of the most disturbing implications of the representation of relational aggression in the film is that these are innate, biological urges that girls simply cannot avoid and must be outgrown. Mikel-Brown observes that, "Girlfighting is not a biological necessity, a developmental stage, or rite of passage. It is a protective strategy and an avenue to power learned and nurtured in early childhood and perfected over time" (6). Yet, the film represents meanness as a phase. Ms. Norbury holds an intervention for the junior class girls and suggests "exercises to express…anger in a healthy way." In doing so, she helps the girls realize that they contribute to this cycle of aggression, illustrating that nearly all of the girls in the film felt harmed by relationally aggressive behaviors. This "happily ever after" ending depicts the girls as making up and moving on, causing "girl world" to undergo a radical transformation. Cady claims that, "All the drama from last year just didn't matter anymore." In the film's final moments, she deems "girl world at peace," suggesting that it is the older girls' responsibility to keep younger girls from engaging in this detrimental behavior. When a new set of shiny, white, beautiful freshman girls is introduced just before the closing credits, viewers understand that the first clan of Plastics has moved on, but the younger generation must still navigate the normative boundaries of (White, upper-class, heterosexual) girl world.

This idealized ending works to oversimplify the impact of relational aggression for girls, reinforcing the cultural myth that meanness among girls is simply a phase, a rite of passage, and something that girls will eventually outgrow. On the contrary, research suggests that "girl world" is rarely, if ever, at peace. In fact, Wiseman observes that overt

communicative behavior (for example, the scene where one girl apologetically says, "I'm sorry for calling you a fugly slut") cannot erase actual inflicted emotional damage young girls experience as a result of meanness. Culturally treating relational aggressions as a "rite of passage" falsely implies that this behavior among girls is unavoidable – perhaps even desirable, necessary, and innate – ultimately denying the potential communicative effects of such actions. Being a victim of these forms of relational aggression has been shown to decrease confidence and self-esteem among girls, negatively impact their academics, increase levels of depression and emotional distress, and increase the likelihood of engaging in self-harming behavior (AAUW; Burman; Dellasega and Nixon; Remillard and Lamb).

Moreover, as a direct result of relationally aggressive behaviors, girls frequently fail to directly discuss what went on between them to make one another angry, hurt, or upset. Thus, girls are not provided the communicative tools to resolve conflict, and even when they are, they are socialized not to employ them. Although the final scene of the film attempts to enact a form of conflict resolution, it is done so in a way that merely glosses over effective strategies for lessening meanness and completely neglects to explain why girls engage in this kind of behavior in the first place. This again naturalizes the behavior depicted for most of the film. As a result, it does not recognize that girls tend to harbor their feelings of anger and resentment toward those who have wronged them for years, even into adulthood. For example, Mark Leary and Christine Snapp find that behavior classified as hurtful conveys relational devaluation, and that the effects of this devaluation are felt quite strongly by women throughout their life spans.

In addition to the implications offered by the representation of relational aggression, the film solidly contributes to a discourse of body image crisis among girls. Relational aggression in the film is enacted via the body and sexuality. Ultimately, "Mean Girls" know that their body is

their best weapon. Part of the film's narrative closure comes from Cady's realization that being "Plastic" is not as desirable as she originally believed and that her newly acquired command of her body is merely a false agency. Cady's participation in the Mathletes team opens her eyes to the importance of valuing mind over body. While her friends are busy adorning their bodies for the Spring Fling dance, she dresses in khakis, her Mathletes shirt, and pulls her hair back into a ponytail. During the competition, she struggles to balance her aggression with her desire for her old self. When sizing up her opponent, Carolyn, as unattractive she realizes, "Making fun of Carolyn Craft wouldn't stop her from beating me in this contest. Calling somebody else fat won't make you any skinnier. Calling somebody stupid doesn't make you any smarter." Cady's successful metamorphosis lies in relinquishing her ties to the body as a weapon/target and re-embracing her intelligence and problem-solving capabilities. This further serves to reinforce that "Plastic" behavior, aligned with relational aggression, is actually a product of the body – it is biologically constructed and therefore unavoidable without embracing the power of the mind.

When Cady attends the Spring Fling dance after her competition, she learns that she has won the Spring Fling Queen competition. Upon accepting her crown, adorned in her khakis and Mathletes shirt, she tells the crowd:

> To all the people whose feelings got hurt by the Burn Book, I'm really sorry...I think everybody looks like royalty tonight. Look at Jessica Lopez, that dress is amazing! And Emma Gerber, I mean, that hairdo must have taken hours – you look really pretty. So, why is everybody stressing over this thing? I mean, it's just plastic. Really just. [Breaks it.] Share it.

The physical breaking of the plastic crown is representative of a symbolic breaking of the pledge of the Plastics' enforcement of rigid rules through

mean, bodily behaviors. Throughout the film, the use of the title "Plastics" reifies the notion that the girls lack agency – "plastic" bodies are not women's own, rather, they are commodity objects based on heteronormative Western beauty ideals (Bordo). Given cultural discourses concerned with body image and eating disorder issues among girls, as well as the proliferation of plastic surgery, the scene serves as a metaphor of young girls' attempts to break free from the unyielding, plastic structure of "girl world."

Given the film's problematic representations related to race and ethnicity, combined with this discourse of plasticity, relational aggression should be understood as an intersectional issue. The film invests in a culture of whiteness, while "othering" non-white characters. Lyn Mikel-Brown observes that "white girls are especially seduced by the status quo because it affords them special protection and security. That is, good white girls who play their cards right are promised good white boys, the eventual power brokers" (97). The film's representation of whiteness as the center of relational aggression is ultimately problematic in that the behaviors are correlated *with whiteness* rather than as a byproduct of cultural discourses of aggression that label non-white individuals as violent and deviant. In fact, although the majority of the relational aggression in the film occurs between its white protagonists, the women of color in the film are also shown as bound up in this "Jungle Madness." Clearly, the white women in the film have the most amount of power. For example, when Janis tries to compete for visibility and power unilaterally and horizontally, her attempts are further marginalized by the ambiguous discourse surrounding her sexuality and her ethnicity.

Gretchen's eventual ascension to the Queen Bee of the "Cool Asians" also shows that relationally aggressive behavior can colonize the Other and perpetuate a possessive investment in Whiteness (Lipsitz). In fact, the Asian women's experiences with relational aggression are ignored entirely by the teachers in the film, mostly because they are communicated in a

language other than English. It is particularly disturbing given the cultural history of the Vietnam War that the two most prominent Asian characters are under-aged Vietnamese girls fighting over having sex with a white male teacher. Thus, despite the problematic nature of relational aggression, the non-white girls try to co-opt this behavior, but as a result of their marginal status, are less successful in their execution of relational aggression.

While our study contributes to popular discourses surrounding intersectionality and film representation, future research is needed that interrogates the ways in which relational aggression is culturally understood. We suggest three avenues for future explorations that would increase our understanding of *Mean Girls* as a text and of relational aggression as a whole. First, scholars should examine how youth and emerging adult audiences read the film for its depiction of relational aggression. A qualitative audience study that allows respondents to articulate their conceptualization of agency as it relates to aggression in the film would offer much to the literature on relational aggression.

Second, the film is clearly intended as a parody, and this structure may contribute to the representations as they occur in the film. As scholars, we read the parodic content as culturally relevant to specific discourses of relational aggression, and as such, imbue the films' representations with a certain cultural value that scholars studying comedy or parody may read differently. Finally, scholars could study the film in its relationship to other teen films through a more historic analysis. Whereas teen films of the 80s emphasized the teen's place in a particular clique and culture, and teen films of the 90s touted a sarcastic and disconnected approach to high school, an entire cadre of teen films in the 2000s, including *Saved*, *Napoleon Dynamite*, and *American Pie*, among others, offer this "happily ever after" ending where teens can all get along. Is this a reactionary move to the continued publicity of the "real" research on teens throughout the later half of the 20th century, or potentially a byproduct of a teen universe

where life no longer ends at high school and where these are not "the best days of our lives?" Future research could benefit from examining these issues more extensively and interrogating the convergence of research, popular culture, and interpersonal communication.

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