

M. Gigi Durham

THE LOLITA EFFECT:
SEXY GIRLS IN THE MEDIA¹

She it was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster.

— Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*

Last Halloween, a five-year-old girl showed up at my doorstep decked out in a tube top, a gauzy miniskirt, platform shoes, and glittering eye shadow. The outfit projected a rather tawdry adult sexuality. “I’m a Bratz!” the tot piped up proudly, brandishing a look-alike doll clutched in her chubby fist. I had an instant, dizzying flashback to an image of a child prostitute I had seen in Cambodia, dressed in a disturbingly similar outfit.

I was startled and put off—but perhaps I shouldn’t have been. The little girl who came to my door is part of a widespread cultural shift that has become an American norm. Increasingly, very young girls are becoming involved in a sphere of fashion,

¹ The essay is an introduction to M. Gigi Durham’s upcoming book, *The Lolita Effect: The Media Sexualization of Young Girls and What We Can Do About It* (New York: Overlook Press, summer 2008). Published by permission.

images, and activities that encourage them to flirt with a decidedly grown-up eroticism and sexuality—and the girls playing with these ideas are getting younger and younger every year.



So why am I perturbed by this trend? I am a pro-sex feminist, by which I mean that I don't see sex as taboo or hush-hush; I think sex is a normal and healthy part of life, even of children's lives. I want my two young daughters—indeed, all girls—to grow up unafraid of and knowledgeable about their bodies, confident about finding and expressing sexual pleasure, able to be both responsible and adventurous in the realm of sex. I want to talk to my daughters honestly and communicate my perspectives and values about this complex aspect of human experience (and I want them to be able to have these same kinds of conversations with their dad, and with other people whose opinions matter to them). Above all, as they grow into adults, I want them to be able to think ethically about sex, just as I want them to carefully think through their ethical positions regarding everything else. These are the themes I try to emphasize when I teach classes in gender and sexuality, and when I present workshops to elementary- and middle-school children.

For years I've fought against the ways in which girls' sexuality has been denied, repressed, and moralized about. I despise the social double standards that celebrate boys'

“studliness” and condemn girls’ desires. I believe in girls’ power and strength, and in working to ensure that they have the space and safety to make free choices about their sex lives.

But the flip side of those proactive ideas is the cold recognition that female sexuality in our world is often exploitative, abusive, and harmful. Girls and women are battered, raped, sold, and slain, and these acts are sex crimes, motivated by gender and sexuality. An estimated two million children, most of them girls, are sexually abused every year through child prostitution and trafficking. There is such a thing as sexual harm. And there is a battle being fought against sex and ideas about sex that destroy the lives of women and girls.

All of these issues come up when I hear about three-year-olds wearing *Playboy* T-shirts to school, or grade-schoolers aspiring to be lap dancers. Many cultural critics these days see these developments as harmless, or even positive. Jennifer Baumgardner, coauthor of the feminist manual *Manifesta*, argues that when little girls sing Spice Girls songs or don stiletto heels, they are tapping into a spirit of “fierce, fun independence.” It’s easy to recognize how alluring these symbols of playful femininity are, and how they can be reworked ironically or campily to convey new messages about “girl power.” But is it realistic to believe that young children would be aware of these subversive and liberating possibilities? How should we respond to the increasing sexualization of girlhood, especially when it begins in kindergarten or earlier?

One angry mom calls these kids “prosti-tots,” and another describes them as “kinderwhores.” Others declare that corporate marketing machines are turning little girls into “sex bait.” It’s easy to see why. While the exhibitionist antics of Paris Hilton and the

Pussycat Dolls mesmerize small girls around the world, retailers like Abercrombie & Fitch create thong underwear for ten-year-olds adorned with seductive slogans like "Wink, Wink" and "Eye Candy." Not to be outdone, the British chain BHS has launched a line of "Little Miss Naughty" underwear that offers push-up bras and lacy briefs to preteens. In 2007, toy manufacturer Tesco sold a pink plastic "Peekaboo Pole Dancing" kit, complete with tiny garter and toy money for stuffing into it, on its "Toys and Games" Web site, until pressure from parents' groups forced them to reclassify the product—though it's still on the market.

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The turn of the new millennium has spawned an intriguing phenomenon: the sexy little girl. She's an all-too-familiar figure in today's media landscape: the baby-faced nymphet with the preternaturally voluptuous curves, the one whose scantily clad body gyrates in music videos, poses provocatively on teen magazine covers, and populates cinema and television screens around the globe. She's become a fixture in Western pop culture: we all know her various incarnations, from Britney Spears to the sex-kittenish cartoon girls of animé, from Brooke Shields's child prostitute in *Pretty Baby* to JonBenét Ramsey's beauty queen persona and the Australian preteen sex symbol Maddison Gabriel. She's been celebrated and censured, and she serves as a symbolic flashpoint for raging debates about gender, sexuality, the definition of childhood, and the criteria for social standards of acceptability.

Perhaps one reason for our fascination with the sexy little girl is her tricky double role in contemporary society—she is simultaneously a symbol of female empowerment and the embodiment of a chauvinistic “beauty myth.” She invokes the specter of pedophilia while kindling the prospect of potent female sexuality. “If you’ve got it, flaunt it!” we urge, while at the same time we decry the absurd and capricious standards of femininity that dismantle women’s lives. “Why the fascination with JonBenét?” we demand, as we scour the tabloids that blare the latest news of her case, accompanied by titillating photographs of the blonde six-year-old in showgirl plumes. The sexy girl fascinates us and repels us; she haunts our imagery and our imaginations, and we know her best by a nickname that evokes meanings far beyond their literary origin: she is Lolita.

The term has become an everyday allusion, a shorthand cultural reference to a prematurely, even inappropriately, sexual little girl—that is, a girl who is by legal definition not yet an adult and is therefore outlawed from sexual activity. Because of this legal and cultural taboo, she is also wrong—wicked, even—to deliberately provoke sexual thoughts. And the “Lolitas” of our time are defined as deliberate sexual provocateurs, turning adults’ thoughts to sex and thereby luring them into wickedness, wantonly transgressing our basic moral and legal codes. Everything about this Lolita is unacceptable, and therein lie both her allure and her ignominy.

The original Lolita—the twelve-year-old Dolores Haze, protagonist of Vladimir Nabokov’s 1955 novel—was a rather different girl. As the feminist scholar Alyssa Harad put it, “Lolita is the archetype of a special category of girl who seduces without knowing it, who works her charms unconsciously, even unwillingly, who attracts without

necessarily being, in any of the most obvious ways, attractive." It is clear in the book that she is the powerless victim of her predatory stepfather, Humbert Humbert. Nabokov's Lolita is a nuanced character whose sexuality is complex—like many preadolescent girls, she is sexually curious—but she has no control over her relationship with Humbert, which is abusive and manipulative. Yet the care with which Nabokov presents her case, and his emphasis on Humbert's malfeasance, has been overlooked in the years since the novel's publication. It is as though the very fact of Lolita's sexuality—the public acknowledgment that a preteen girl could be sexual, the bold focus on an incestuous liaison between grown man and little girl—has made her into a fantasy figure, an image of Humbert's projection rather than the sexually abused and tragic figure of the novel.

It is this fantastical Lolita who has entered our culture as a pervasive metaphor. She is eagerly invoked in the popular media, as a sign of just how licentious little girls can be. "Bring back school uniforms for little Lolitas!" demands London's *Daily Telegraph* in an article condemning contemporary sexy schoolgirl fashions. According to a recent *New York Times* article, girls wear skin-baring and infantile costumes like babydoll dresses and high-heeled Mary Janes to "evoke male Lolita fantasies." Tokyo's *Daily Yomiuri* refers to "the Lolita-like sex appeal" of nubile preteen Japanese anime cartoon characters. The "Long Island Lolita," fourteen-year-old Amy Fisher, was the target of media vilification as a wanton home wrecker. Even in an essay about a cathedral in Barcelona, critic Will Self writes, "La Sagrada Familia wins me over with its sheer wantonness as a building—this is the Lolita of sacred architecture."

It is evident from these and many other such examples that Lolita is our favorite metaphor for a child vixen, a knowing coquette with an out-of-control libido, a baby

nymphomaniac. This creature fulfills the fantasy projected by Humbert Humbert, yet she is worlds away from the original Lolita, who neither initiated nor provoked her nonconsensual sexual relationship with Humbert. She was sexual, true, as are virtually all humans, but she was not allowed to experience her sexuality in safe, ethical directions of her own choosing. Instead, her sexual appeal was an artifice imposed on her in ways that suited a molester's needs and vision. In truth, she was raped and victimized. Furthermore, she was deprived of her childhood.

Lolita may be an apt metaphor for the sexy girl in contemporary culture, but not in the ways the term "Lolita" is usually used. The Lolitas that populate our mediascapes are fabrications. They serve market needs and profit motives, and they are powerfully alluring, especially to the young girls whose vulnerability they exploit. They are framed in a clever rhetoric of empowerment and choice. But they skillfully conceal the narrow, restrictive, and ultimately disempowering definition of sexuality that is delivered by these images and their accompanying messages. Rather than offering girls—and the rest of their audiences—thoughtful, open-minded, progressive, and ethical understandings about sexuality, our media and our culture have produced a gathering of "prosti-tots"—hypersexualized girls whose cultural presence has become a matter of heated public controversy.

This is the Lolita Effect.

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Today more than ever, the sexy girl is at the center of a storm. Sex is a battleground in contemporary society, as anyone keeping track of news headlines is well aware. As our understanding of gender and sexuality grows more complex, debate about what is "right," "normal," or "acceptable" in the once-clandestine realm of sex has become more open and more intense.

Recent medical breakthroughs, such as the introduction of a cervical cancer vaccine or FDA approval of a "morning-after" pill, have unleashed storms of resistance from conservative groups, for whom these developments signal the imminent threat of uncontained promiscuity and underage sexual activity—arguments that are just as fiercely countered by mainstream and liberal pundits. The demands of gays and lesbians for the right to marry and to legally adopt children have been denied any claim to legitimacy in some communities while gaining ground in others. In many U.S. public schools, sex education is not part of the curriculum, in large part due to intense political and theological opposition. Meanwhile, the United States has the highest rate of teen pregnancy and abortion in the industrialized world—twice that of the United Kingdom, four times that of France and Germany, and more than eight times that of Japan.

Yet in this tumultuous environment, media images of sexuality are everywhere. Advertisements for such shopping-mall stalwarts as Victoria's Secret and Abercrombie & Fitch are notoriously erotic, and MTV and BET music videos routinely—indeed, almost inevitably—feature sexual themes and explicit lyrics. Currently, Shai, a French clothing company, is using an online hard-core porn video to sell high-priced T-shirts; Ivy League undergraduates are editing and posing in campus skin mags; and, according to a *Wall Street Journal* report, one-third of all video games feature sexual themes, including

sexual violence. These trends are periodically critiqued and condemned, but they are nonetheless everyday features of our contemporary society.

In this cultural context, children's sexuality is fraught with controversy, and the media are often the most obvious targets in any discussion of these issues. But the media's role in kids' lives is a contested one, despite years of research and reflection on the topic. Mediated images of sexuality have been identified as perilous to teens' healthy development, especially for girls. Mary Pipher, in her best-selling critique, *Reviving Ophelia*, noted that "because of the media ... all girls live in one big town—a sleazy, dangerous town," adding, "with puberty, girls face enormous pressure to split into false selves. The pressure comes from schools, magazines, music, television, and the movies."

Pop culture figures like Paris Hilton and Lindsay Lohan have been charged with promoting inappropriately hypersexualized clothing to grade-school girls all over the world. Media standards of beauty are implicated in a wide range of disorders affecting adolescent females, from body image to low self-esteem to poor school performance. Girls who watch sexualized media are more likely to engage in sex—and teen media contains ever-increasing levels of sexual content. We also know that teens seek out sex-related media content—not just for titillation or to defy social taboos, but to gain information about a baffling and complicated aspect of their lives. As one teenage girl explained, "You can learn a lot from what [media] have to say instead of being embarrassed to ask your parents."

In the face of these findings, "Blame the media!" becomes an appealing battle cry, but scapegoating the media as the source of all society's ills is both shortsighted and simplistic. The idea that contemporary children and teenagers are zombielike victims and

dupes of a media conspiracy is equally improbable—as the research shows, and as those of us who spend a lot of time around kids will already know. Children and teens are sharp, cynical, and savvy media critics. As one fourteen-year-old girl put it, “It’s television. I just kind of watch it. I don’t take it as an example. I know it’s just TV.”

Yet if it’s “just TV,” and if most of us are aware, at some level, that mediated representations of not just sex but all aspects of life tend to be sensationalized and unrealistic, why is there such widespread consternation about sexy girls in the media? Isn’t entertainment supposed to be fictionalized? If we care about girls’ empowerment, are these media images helping to challenge puritanical constraints that disallow girls’ desire and sexual development—or are they perpetuating gender roles and body images that are ultimately destructive? How do girls—and boys—see all this, and how are they dealing with it?

These questions are particularly difficult. Even for those of us who seek to be open-minded, nonjudgmental, and healthy in our approach to sexuality, media images and messages are minefields. Of course we don’t want girls and young women to have to cover their bodies in shame. But is it really okay for girls (and everyone else) to idealize and strive for body types that require diet aids, unhealthy levels of exercise, bulimia, and plastic surgery to attain? We don’t want sex to be a taboo topic or a scandalous secret—but aren’t there drawbacks to the media motif that a girl’s “hotness” matters more than almost anything else? Feminist perspectives on sexual assault have taught us never to blame the victim: what a woman wears is never a justification for rape. But at the same time, shouldn’t we be troubled about the availability of thong underwear for toddlers or low-rise jeans for ’tweens?

These are real concerns in today's world. At their core, they are ethical questions. They are the kinds of questions I hear frequently from parents, teachers, and students when I conduct workshops and teach classes on gender and the media. And there are no simple answers to any of them. Kids grow up in a media-saturated environment in which sex is emphasized. Media venues are by no means the only influence on social and cultural ideas about sex and body, but they are a significant one. Some parents report feeling as if they are fighting against a tidal wave of sexual messages aimed at their young children.

And they are. Market research indicates that children and teenagers are major media consumers: a 2005 Kaiser Family Foundation study found that eight- to eighteen-year-olds spend an average of six and a half hours a day with media. According to the marketing firm Teen Research Unlimited, American teenagers spend 11.2 hours a week watching TV, 10.1 hours listening to FM radio, and 3.1 hours a week playing video games. Teens and young adults spend 16.7 hours a week online. Both boys and girls rank MTV as their favorite cable channel, spending an average of 6 hours a week watching it. These numbers hold true across racial groups, with studies showing African American youth consuming two more hours of media content per day than white or Latino youth. In addition, nearly half of all black youth, and a third of Latino youth, watch rap music programming several days a week (a quarter watch daily).

On a typical day, a young person is faced with a media environment that includes more than 200 cable television networks, 5,500 consumer magazine titles, 10,500 radio stations, 30 million or more Web sites, and 122,000 newly published books. In China, teenagers spend an average of \$50 billion annually; like their American counterparts,

they spend about a third of their free time watching television, and they also read books, newspapers, and magazines extensively, which occupies 22 percent of their free time. That adds up to eight hours a week of media use for the average Chinese teen. One survey estimated that Shanghai teens are online more than 38 hours a week.

Following these trends, the spending power of South African teens is close to \$1 billion a year, and "TV is the favored way to reach them," according to an international marketing guide. *Business Week* reports that 47 percent of India's population is under the age of twenty, with a spending power of \$2.8 billion annually (some estimates put it as high as \$16 billion). Indian teens watch an average of twelve hours of TV a week. Eighty-five percent of teens worldwide report watching music videos regularly, and 79 percent watch TV daily. As marketing consultant Elissa Moses puts it, "From Manhattan to Madras and Milan to Melbourne, teens who speak different languages (although many speak English) all speak the same dialect of global consumption." She identifies today's youth as "mediavores."

Our world is saturated by media to such a degree that analysis of the media often seems either pointless or overwrought. It's easy to dismiss the media as "background noise" or "just entertainment." But there are real ethical issues at stake when we stop to turn our attention to media representations of life. The growing research area of media studies has shown us that television and film shape culture and society, rather than simply reflecting existing social patterns. For years, the portrayal of people of color, especially in seemingly innocent entertainment programming like *Amos 'n' Andy* or films like *Gone with the Wind*, served to reinforce racist social hierarchies and support dominant political ideologies. Currently, media portrayals of people of Arab or Middle Eastern descent as

terrorists and vandals have drawn parallel criticism. Similarly, women's rights activists have drawn our attention to different facets of media representation that have stymied women's progress. And analyses of sports coverage have demonstrated the ways in which male violence and power are glorified while other aspects of masculinity are devalued.

But sex is trickier. One problem with thinking clearly about sexual content in teen media, and especially the sexualization of girls in the media, is that it often breaks down into a good/bad dichotomy: you're either *for* sex or *against* sex. Being at all critical or analytical of sexual representation in the media instantly seems to imply that you're in favor of censorship and opposed to sex in general, that you think girls should be wearing chastity belts and taking pledges of virginity. For those of us who don't see sex as a bugaboo, that's a crazy position to be in. But it's equally damaging to celebrate "Girls Gone Wild" as empowering role models. So why are we forced to choose between fundamentalist Christian Joyce Meyers and pop singer Shakira as sexual guideposts in the media arena? Why is there no middle ground?

In the quest for an understanding of the sexual mores at work among girls and women in contemporary society—and impelled by a feminist interest in girls' health and well-being—I have been studying the media, gender, and sexuality for more than a decade. What has become clear—yet is not widely understood—is that media images of sexuality are quite specific, and are driven by a variety of factors, the most important of which is the for-profit structure in which they operate. As a consequence, the version of sexuality that proliferates in the mainstream media is not aligned with progressive politics, though the rhetoric around it offers the illusion that it is.

For example, in the 1990s, the Spice Girls adopted the slogan "Girl Power!" to market a highly conventional version of femininity; historian Joan Jacobs Brumberg observed that her college-age students related bikini-waxing to self-confidence; *Cosmopolitan* magazine, a publication famous for instructing young women to please men sexually, describes its audience as "fun, fearless females." Because of these rhetorical strategies, the rather circumscribed version of sex celebrated in these arenas is strongly linked with sexual emancipation and even feminism.

Now more than ever, it is crucial to disentangle these ideas. This is a political climate in which "moral values" are trumpeted as the reason for electing candidates, and abstinence is privileged over all other forms of contraception or sex education. It is a climate in which marriage is being defined in strictly heterosexual terms and the rights of sexual minorities are being denied. It is a climate in which legal access to abortion is under siege. Yet this climate is also breeding an explosion of sexually explicit images, in both mainstream and alternate venues. These political realities are framed in opposition to one another—"conservative" versus "liberal"—but if one pauses to critically examine the sexual imagery that is widely available, it is in fact not at odds with the conservative politics of the day. As indie journalist Lakshmi Chaudhry has pointed out, "In effect, the logic of the raunch culture is eerily similar to that Christian ideal of femininity, the Surrendered Wife. Both preach empowerment through acquiescence, promising greater happiness through the fulfillment of archetypal female roles."

The midriff-baring seductiveness of today's pop culture stars is framed in terms of liberation and power. There are of course such possibilities inherent in the idea of girls' accepting and expressing desire and pride in their bodies and embracing femininity. But a

closer look at the imagery would reveal that only certain kinds of bodies are positioned as sexual, and only certain types of sexual display count as desirable—and that desirability is still very much a matter of appealing to a traditionally defined male gaze, despite the fact that most of the audiences for these images are female.

In terms of a politics of liberation, these themes work against the utopian vision of a world in which all women—regardless of race, age, weight, physical ability, or other categorization—might freely relish, express, and experience the joys of sex in ways they actively define, and in which all women have access to accurate, comprehensive, and beneficial knowledge about sex. This diverse and emancipated version of sexuality is the opposite of what I have identified as the Lolita Effect, a kind of sexuality that both exploits and limits sexual expression and power, and is deliberately focused on young girls.

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The recognition of this reality is problematic on multiple fronts. Any discussion of sexuality (and especially children's sexuality) tends to fall toward one of two polar opposites: sexuality is either bad/dangerous/criminal or healthy/unproblematic/normal.

These categorizations force the entire discussion into pro- or anti-sex camps, drawing battle lines that leave many adults and children facing a seemingly irresolvable dilemma. Is it anti-sex to want to shield your child from certain kinds of sexual portrayals, in video games or in films? Is it pro-sex to want high school students to have

access to contraception? Neither may be true, yet thoughtful decision making becomes almost impossible, given these limited options.

The dichotomy, of course, is a false one. The realities of children's sexual lives and cultural contexts lies somewhere between these two polar extremes. Both "pro-sex" and "anti-sex" sides have valid arguments that are not necessarily mutually exclusive. We can examine relationships among sexuality, legitimacy, culture, representation, and politics in ways that neither demonize children's sexuality nor flippantly dismiss the real problems inherent in a cultural climate that does not put a high priority on children's well-being. This is an increasingly urgent discussion, given the worldwide spread of AIDS, the globalization of the media, and the volatility of contemporary politics.

On the one hand, children and adolescents are sexual beings whose development into adulthood depends now, more than ever, on the ability to understand and enjoy their own sexual lives and to successfully avoid the pitfalls of teen pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, and abusive relationships. On the other, it is equally important for adults to take some responsibility for guiding children and adolescents to adulthood. We need to be able to recognize and understand the potential dangers and problems in our social and cultural environment—problems that need to be analyzed, addressed, and even, at times, policed, in the interests of children's basic well-being and safety.

Government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and private agencies working for the benefit of children and adolescents are all doing significant work on these fronts. But philosophical differences often pit these groups against each other in unproductive ways.

For example, the Bush administration's funding for anti-AIDS programs, including the \$15 billion President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) in

Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, is constrained by prohibitions against using any of the funds in relation to prostitution or drug use—a condition that has drawn criticism from AIDS workers, principally because prostitutes and intravenous drug users are key carriers of the virus. On the other hand, the Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA) offers an informative and user-friendly Web site, including an excellent site for teenagers. But the site tends to be broadly critical of religious organizations, some of which are in fact working in support of progressive causes closely aligned with those of PPFA. In the scholarly realm, Judith Levine and James Kincaid argue that the claims of child sexual abuse are overstated, but the *New York Times* reports of increased pedophilia worldwide.

This tangle of agendas and viewpoints, often working at cross-purposes, further confounds our ability to assess the broader issues or come to any clear conclusions about them.

These “ground-level” complexities are complicated even more by debates about sexuality and gender in mainstream media and popular culture aimed at children and teenagers. Much of the analysis is resoundingly negative.

Experts on the subject recognize what many parents, teachers, and kids themselves can see: that movies, TV, magazines, and other media perpetuate sexist and harmful standards of beauty. They recognize that sexual portrayals in the media are often degrading to girls and women, and unnecessarily sensational. Most alarmingly, they recognize that the audiences for sexual media are getting progressively younger and therefore more easily influenced.

“In our hyper-commercialized consumerist society, there’s virtually no escaping the relentless sexualization of younger and younger children,” writes Rosa Brooks in a

Los Angeles Times opinion piece. "[T]he sexualization of childhood is big business—mainstream mega-corporations such as Disney earn billions by marketing sexy products to children too young to understand their significance."

A *Boston Globe* news story declares, "Bombarded by sexualized cultural forces, girls are growing up faster than ever." The article describes thirteen-year-olds dressed as prostitutes for Halloween, wearing "fishnet stockings, halter tops, miniskirts, and high heels," and tracks increased sexual activity among schoolchildren. It attributes these phenomena to "a tidal wave of sexual messages targeting an ever-younger set of girls" generated by advertising, music television, and the Internet.

But on the flip side of these critiques is equally compelling research that indicates that girls do try to negotiate the tyrannical messages with which they are bombarded, weighing them against information and approaches from other sources. It's important to see media representations not just as harmful propaganda, but as opportunities to discuss these topics and appropriate behaviors with children. Both girls and boys seek out sexual media content not just for titillation but for information, as it is not readily available in other places. This has its up and down sides, depending on what exactly children are absorbing from these messages, many of which are unrealistic, medically inaccurate, and sometimes violent.

There are, of course, progressive media targeted to kids that offer a more diverse, broad-minded, and empowering vision of contemporary female sexuality—examples might include *New Moon* and *Teen Voices* magazines, the Canadian TV show *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, and Web sites like adiosbarbie.com. But many of these are low-budget, with small circulations and minimal exposure; kids' awareness is slight compared

with their consumption of mainstream, commercial media products. Many girls also resist these messages, seeing them as moralizing or overly serious. Nevertheless, some girls are finding ways to challenge sexist and repressive media portrayals and to assert control over the way they choose to express their sexuality. Some become media producers and explore these issues on Web sites and blogs, in 'zines, and on film. One example is the award-winning short film *A Girl Like Me*, made by a sixteen-year-old African American girl named Kiri Davis to question standards of beauty among girls of color. Girls' activist groups like Girls For a Change tackle social issues and address community problems. A group of teen girls in Australia recently founded Girls Together to combat unhealthy body images in the media. Girls are also vociferous and intelligent media critics. The University of Chicago's Black Youth Project found that 70 percent of African American girls were critical of the representations of black femininity in rap music and videos. (Interestingly, boys were generally positive about the representations of both men and women.)

Sexual realities today are complicated, to put it mildly. Homophobia runs rampant in our schools, and gay and lesbian teenagers still attempt suicide at higher rates than others. Promiscuity is celebrated among boys but remains an easy justification for denigrating girls. There is still a great deal of resistance to publicly acknowledging preadolescent sexuality and ongoing confusion about how best to deal with it. Despite the current availability of legal contraception for minors, more female than male high school students are having unprotected sex, and 60 percent of all rape victims are girls under eighteen.

And on the whole, the mainstream media are carriers of the Lolita Effect. Most media aimed at adolescent and preadolescent girls focus on attracting male desire—"how to get the guy." And the route to that all-important end involves acquiring a specifically contoured body featuring large breasts, flat abs, and slender thighs; facial features approximating a Caucasian ideal; and a wardrobe and cosmetic stockpile whose elements must shift constantly in order to stay au courant. These stipulations are the basis of the Lolita Effect: a webwork of widespread myths about female sexuality, myths that displace reality and interfere with girls' ability to contend with their sexual development in proactive, diverse, healthy, and progressive ways.

In media studies, we don't consider myths of this sort to be fictions, though they seldom have a basis in fact. They have real impacts and real social ramifications; they become part of a social system that creates power hierarchies, spawns industries, and shapes our lives. Because of this, myth analysis is an important and specialized field of study, and it is crucial to recognizing, understanding, and combating the Lolita Effect.

But really, myth analysis shouldn't be the exclusive purview of scholars and academics. Myth analysis is a tool that everyone needs in today's media-inundated world. We need to deconstruct these myths—to figure out their origins, motives, and implications—to make good decisions about the media messages we receive constantly. In the realm of girls' sexuality, the myths of the Lolita Effect are so powerful and pervasive that it has become difficult to identify or confront them at all. But for girls, and the adults who care about them, being able to negotiate the thicket of these Lolita myths intelligently is a crucial part of growing up in the twenty-first century.

To help with that process, this book will provide a grounded, step-by-step approach to strategies for analyzing the myths of adolescent female sexuality in the media. I've identified five core "myths of sexuality" at work in the Lolita Effect: the myth of sex as girls' exhibitionism, the myth of sex in terms of an ideal body type, the myth of sex as linked to youth, the myth of sex as violence against women, and the myth of the male gaze. Each chapter of this book explores and explains a specific myth and how it works, while offering effective ways to challenge the detrimental effects of these myths in girls' lives.

In real life, sex is at its core a relationship, and a very complex one. It involves not just bodies but emotions, ethics, power, legal issues, and many other dimensions. Yet with the Lolita Effect, these complexities are blotted out. Sexuality is instead defined in strictly limited (and constraining) terms. So for many girls, relying on the media as a sexual guide is an iffy business: media imagery can be disheartening, anxiety-producing, stressful, disorienting. And even if it is not, in the realm of sexuality, the narrow definitions and body politics of the prevailing Lolita myth are a barrier to awareness, clarity, free thought, and effective action.

It is important not to buy into the Lolita Effect. There isn't a lot of existing research on how adults deal with these messages about girls, but it's clear that some parents accept and even encourage these ideas. One high-profile example is Patsy Ramsey, JonBenét's mother. Another is Teri Shields, mother of the actress Brooke Shields, who notoriously allowed the eleven-year-old Brooke to appear nude as a child prostitute in the Louis Malle film *Pretty Baby*. Lynne Spears, Britney and Jamie Lynn Spears's mother, has recently fallen under a great deal of criticism as a parent in the wake

of her celebrity daughters' highly publicized sex lives. Other parents are disturbed but resign themselves, recognizing the uphill battles involved in taking on the juggernaut of media culture. Girls themselves wrestle constantly with these issues; studies show they are certainly not passive victims of the media. But the images are so sophisticated and expertly contrived that their underlying dangers are often hard to spot.

If we're going to help girls gain control over their lives and their decisions, we need to try to broaden our perspectives and give our daughters the resources to make good choices. We need to be able to understand the media's role in defining sex and sexuality, and then deal with it in ways that work best for us. We can't do this without the right tools.

With this in mind, this book will rigorously examine the Lolita Effect. It will unveil the myths that make up the spectacle of girls' sexuality in pop culture and then offer strategies for responding effectively to this alluring, yet precarious, landscape.

