

Mixed Messages: Slut Shaming in *Mean Girls* and *Easy A*

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Abstract: *Problems with slut shaming have received increased attention since the late 1990s, but actually changing rhetorics associated with the word “slut” is tricky. Two teen comedies that address slut shaming, Mean Girls (2004) and Easy A (2010), show how feminist conversations can become warped when translated into a mass market genre. The movies explicitly condemn slut shaming, but changing rhetoric involves addressing not simply the term “slut” but also underlying cultural narratives. The movies successfully challenge heteronormative competition and sexual double standards; however, they undo their positive messages as they rely on good girl/bad girl dichotomies that perpetuate slut shaming. These movies thus illustrate the difficulty in adopting feminist messages for commercial venues that are invested in wide public appeal.*

Keywords: *slut, slut shaming, teen movie, genre, Mean Girls, Easy A*

High school slut shaming as a specifically gendered form of bullying has received increased attention in the new millennium, both in academic research and in public conversations. Although many feminists argue that the solution to slut shaming is simply to stop using the term “slut,” more sophisticated analyses go beyond the rhetoric of individual words and call for the transformation of underlying cultural narratives that link a woman’s morality with her sexual behavior (Brontsema; Godrej 6; Mills 36). However, transforming cultural narratives is a slow process, and feminist thinking is often distorted as it enters the mainstream (McRobbie 539). While popular media can potentially challenge problematic social norms and offer progressive narratives that reach a large audience, popular media can also face constraints that limit and undercut an ostensibly feminist message.

Such a dynamic is visible in two commercially successful teen comedies aimed at a female audience: *Mean Girls* (dir. Mark Waters, 2004) and *Easy A* (dir. Will Gluck, 2010). These films explicitly condemn slut shaming, yet each movie struggles with its potentially transformative message because commercial success depends on some adherence to the status quo. As a genre, teen movies navigate contradictory expectations; youth audiences tend to appreciate fun entertainment and a rebellious message, but parents and public watchdogs often call for movies to provide a moral compass (Driscoll; Shary, *Generation*).

In response to public conversations and genre constraints that frame their productions, *Mean Girls* and *Easy A* offer direct criticisms of slut shaming and associated cultural narratives yet simultaneously reify problematic good girl/bad girl dichotomies. Tracing the connections between social conversations, genre constraints, and the movies' mixed messages is instructive for feminist activists committed to changing sexist rhetorics, especially those associated with the word "slut."

Increased attention to slut shaming

The releases of *Mean Girls* in 2004 and *Easy A* in 2010 coincide with the increased attention paid to bullying and slut shaming since the late 1990s in both scholarly and popular venues. School shootings—especially at Columbine in 1999—led more educators, researchers, and legislators to investigate bullying (Birkland and Lawrence 1419) and peer-to-peer sexual harassment (Stein). More recently, incidents involving cyber bullying and teen suicide have drawn attention to slut shaming as a specific form of bullying (Bazelon 9). During the same time period, commercial presses published books that analyzed slut shaming (Tanenbaum [2000]; White [2002]), and feminist writers who addressed slut shaming were becoming more well-known in online venues and via books such as Jessica Valenti's *Full Frontal Feminism* (2007) and *He's a Stud, She's a Slut, and 49 Other Double Standards Every Woman Should Know* (2009). In the context of this rise in research and public attention focused on slut shaming, *Mean Girls* and *Easy A* can be understood as participating in cultural conversations identifying slut shaming as a widespread social problem.

Each movie also responds to a specific publication condemning slut shaming. Most important for the creation of *Mean Girls* is Rosalind Wiseman's commercial book *Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence* (2002), which highlights a number of roles and behaviors common to high school girls as they try to find acceptance and popularity within a teen culture Wiseman labels "Girl World." Wiseman's anecdotal research is based on her experience working with teen girls in an educational program she developed to challenge relational aggression. In particular, one of the unhealthy relational aggressions she addresses is slut shaming. Tina Fey bought the rights to Wiseman's book and used it as fodder for the *Mean Girls* screenplay.

While *Easy A* is similar to *Mean Girls* in its engagement with public conversations about slut shaming in the 2000s, it adapts a text published long before Wiseman's *Queen Bees*: Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). Just as *Mean Girls* depicts teen girls' relational aggression as depicted by Wiseman, *Easy A* dramatizes a teen girl who is treated like Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, publicly shamed and ostracized for her (purported) sexual behavior. This

reworking of a nineteenth-century story points to an ongoing problem of slut shaming in American culture and implicitly suggests that such behavior should be relegated to the past. While the plotlines of both *Mean Girls* and *Easy A* were inspired by particular texts, I'm suggesting that they are better understood as also responding to wider conversations about slut shaming. In short, the movies redirect a public conversation *about* teen girls to an audience *of* teen girls.

Central to critiques of slut shaming is the question: How can slut shaming be stopped? Repeatedly, both scholarly works and popular books argue that simply excising the word "slut" from vocabulary is not enough (Brontsema; Godrej; Mills; Payne; Tanenbaum; Tirrell; Valenti, *Purity*; White). After all, another word such as "whore," "ho," or "skank" could replace "slut." Reclaiming the term "slut" as a self-determined and positive label is sometimes posited as an alternate solution, but this option tends to be most readily available for white affluent heterosexual women (Armstrong et al.). Reclamation efforts fall short to the degree that non-heterosexual girls continue to be either invisible or demonized, while girls of color or of a lower economic class are assumed to be sexually available and thus cannot safely embrace the slut label (Egan 136; Armstrong et al.). Therefore, avoiding or reclaiming the term might help somewhat, but the key to transforming the rhetoric of "slut" is to change narratives of sexuality.

Typical ways of "framing" girls' sexualization "grants some girls the hallow of innocence, normalcy, and health while others come to be viewed as promiscuous, deficient, and ripe for social sanctions" (Egan 17). The "good girl" is most often associated with an innocent and sexually pure white middle-class or affluent girlhood (Egan 136; Armstrong et al.). These cultural narratives are not benign fictions; they are implicated in everyday judgments and behaviors, many of which are extremely harmful in terms of individual psyches, individual physical health and safety, and widespread social issues associated with privilege (or lack thereof). Slut shaming is just one way the good girl/bad girl dichotomy is expressed and perpetuated, and it cannot be changed in isolation but instead is part of a larger attitudinal shift. To some degree, both *Mean Girls* and *Easy A* deconstruct narratives that perpetuate slut shaming, but as successful Hollywood teen movies that rely on easily digestible cultural scripts, both movies ultimately fall short.

Teen films and evolving portrayals of sex

At the same time that *Mean Girls* and *Easy A* respond to a time period in which slut shaming was increasingly recognized, analyzed, and critiqued, they also reach a mass audience by offering characters that are immediately identifiable and storylines that meet viewers' expectations. While less popular films may go further in challenging slut shaming, considering these two mainstream

movies is helpful in exposing typical cultural narratives and the difficulty of social change.

To be clear, sex is one of the hallmarks of teen films. After all, figuring out sexual identity and sexual choices weighs heavily on most teens, so such conflicts are regularly dramatized on the screen (Considine 204-05; Driscoll 71-74). Abstinence marked both the conservatism of the 1950s and the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s (Considine 216; Doherty 201). Most other decades showed boys enjoying sex while girls either resisted sex or suffered negative consequences (Shary, *Generation* 210; Shary, *Teen* 51). By the new millennium, “teenage girls in American cinema [...] emerged as more aware of their past mistreatment and misrepresentation and more in control of their destiny, both politically and sexually” (Shary, *Teen* 93). Still, parents and rating systems limit the portrayals of teen sex, so the overall trend in teen movies since the early 1980s has been to emphasize love and to characterize lust negatively, whether through romance-focused plots associated with John Hughes or via movies like the *American Pie* series, which revolve around sex but ultimately reward the characters who are invested in committed relationships (Kaveney 9; Shary, *Generation* 210).

In light of this general trend, it may be surprising that *Mean Girls* and *Easy A* are not the only teen films aimed at girls to challenge slut-shaming narratives, though they are the only two to achieve strong commercial success. *Saved!* (2004) explicitly addresses slut shaming, while *Coming Soon* (1999), *Virtual Sexuality* (1999), and *The To Do List* (2013) use comedic storylines to challenge the idea that girls interested in sex are “slutty.” Each movie suggests that sex and emotional attachment should often go together, but they avoid dogmatism by depicting diverse hetero- and homosexual desires or disrupting the romance narrative that privileges emotional attachment over desire. All four of these movies—as well as *Mean Girls* and *Easy A*—feature white female protagonists from affluent or middle-class families, mirroring research conducted with college students that suggests “the ability to define acceptable sexuality” is a privilege denied to all but “high-status women” (Armstrong et al. 104). Even these movies that redefine teen sexuality thus reflect social constraints, though they still deserve credit for challenging “good girl” narratives to some degree.

Unfortunately, as movies that thematize healthy female sexual desire, *Saved!*, *Coming Soon*, *Virtual Sexuality*, and *The To Do List* did not benefit from wide release and box office success. Reasons for variations in box office success are complex, yet it seems instructive that *Mean Girls* and, to a lesser degree, *Easy A* stand apart from these other movies. *Mean Girls* ranks sixth and *Easy A* ranks eleventh for top-grossing high school comedies (“Comedy—High School”), and both movies won categories in the MTV Movie Awards and the

Teen Choice Awards. The success of *Mean Girls* and *Easy A* is partly because they are fun, with strong protagonists and catchy dialogue. But part of the success is because both movies negotiate the contradictory expectations associated with teen movies.

As mass market movies with wide appeal and PG-13 ratings, *Mean Girls* and *Easy A* offer entertainment first and social lessons second. Still, movies and other media provide narratives that help viewers make sense of the world, so identifying what these movies suggest about slut shaming can be useful. To a great degree, popular teen films are caught in the same dilemma popular high school girls face, “determined by a fine combination of conformity and rebellion” as they try to be “acceptable to a wide range of people while also staking out an individual identity that makes them special and desirable” (Shary, *Generation* 61). Specifically, as *Mean Girls* and *Easy A* respond to both social conversations and genre expectations, they criticize slut-shaming behaviors while paradoxically supporting good girl/bad girl narratives that keep the word “slut” in play.

Mean Girls: Deconstructing heteronormative competition, demonizing female desire

To some extent, *Mean Girls* offers a feminist message against slut shaming. In the scenes leading up to an explicit call for an end to slut shaming, *Mean Girls* depicts a high school “Girl World” of heteronormative competition and sneaky aggression. The word “slut” is one weapon the girls use against each other in a contest for male attention. Thus “queen bee” Regina George (played by Rachel McAdams) pretends she has been labeled a “fugly slut” so that she can innocently accuse others of bullying. Meanwhile, friends Trang Pak and Sun Jin Dinh accuse one another of slut-hood and have a violent confrontation upon discovering they have both been sexually involved with Coach Carr. In these situations, the word “slut” is clearly part of unhealthy dynamics, used by girls who seek status and male attention by condemning other girls.

The message against slut shaming becomes explicit in *Mean Girls* when an outbreak of chaotic physical violence among the girls leads to the principal calling an assembly. In this pivotal scene that transitions from the violent climax to the gradual resolution of the storylines, math teacher Ms. Norbury (played by Tina Fey) tells the female students, “You all have got to stop calling each other sluts and whores. It just makes it okay for guys to call you sluts and whores.” Ms. Norbury is one of the few adults in the movie portrayed as credible and supportive to students, so her advice has the ring of conviction in the midst of comic elements. Ms. Norbury’s stance suggests that females should stand together to fight misogyny rather than compete for male attention.

Thus, *Mean Girls* does not simply challenge the use of the word “slut” and its synonyms. Instead, it pairs a critique of the slut label with challenges to a culture of heteronormative competition, in which girls vie for status and male approval—a dynamic that has been observed and commented on in several research studies that analyze slut shaming (Armstrong et al.; Duncan; Duncan and Owens). This culture of female competition plays out in the Girl World of *Mean Girls*, especially among a clique called the “Plastics” who forge their circle of friendship through rules and judgments that mark who is included and who is excluded. The dynamics are strongly critiqued even before Ms. Norbury’s speech, both through comedic elements and because the story is told through voiceover from the perspective of Cady Heron (played by Lindsay Lohan). Because she had been homeschooled in Africa by her zoologist parents and is entering a high school for the first time, Cady’s “anthropology of high school tribes is given added reflexivity” (Driscoll 60) that helps viewers recognize the oddness of the dynamics. Occasional cross cuts juxtaposing Girl World with savage animal behavior from Cady’s time in Africa emphasize the inhumane elements of the teens’ interpersonal behavior.

Throughout the movie, girls compete for boys and strive to improve their status by following “rules” about weight, attractiveness, intelligence, and expression of anger. From the start, the rules are portrayed as ridiculous and arbitrary, as in the oft-quoted line, “On Wednesdays, we wear pink.” In the final third of the movie, queen bee Regina George points out that these rules “aren’t real.” This phrase suggests that rules regarding appearance are social constructions, while it also uses irony to highlight the very real effects the fake rules have. In this case, Regina George cannot sit with her friends because she is wearing sweatpants on a Monday. Such moments of social exclusion are intertwined with Cady’s plan to depose Regina George and win the affection of her love interest (Aaron). Through these scenes, the movie challenges heteronormative competition and the overly prescriptive parameters of appearance and behavior to which teen girls are expected to conform—both of which are social dynamics that contribute to slut shaming.

Unfortunately, *Mean Girls* also relies on familiar tropes that are less helpful. In its focus on Cady’s storyline, the movie suggests that individuals are responsible for changing problematic dynamics of teen culture. While individuals may have *some* power, studies show that the best routes to changing slut-shaming environments rely on systemic change and people working together (Goldman; Tanenbaum 247-53). Cady’s problems, however, are exacerbated by her own poor choices, and, as the protagonist, she has the power to solve her own problems. Furthermore, Cady wins Aaron’s affection at the end of the movie, with this fulfillment of the romance narrative undoing the movie’s stance against heteronormative competition to some degree.

The movie also hints at but does not fully acknowledge the way Cady experiences privilege due to her status as a white, middle class, heterosexual, cis gendered, and able-bodied young woman who fits traditional beauty norms. Research shows that factors such as race, class, and sexual orientation affect social positioning and influence slut shaming behaviors (Armstrong et al.; Egan; Tanenbaum). Cady's ability to change unhealthy relational dynamics is more believable because she fits stereotypes for female movie protagonists, but ignoring the complexities of social positioning limits the thoughtfulness of the story.

In addition to the overly simplistic focus on individual rather than systemic change, *Mean Girls* fails to adequately address slut shaming because it relies on a strong divide between "good girl" and "bad girl" behavior. In short, girls are encouraged to be sexy but not to express sexual desire themselves. As noted, Cady Heron is considered a "hottie" in *Mean Girls*, and she expresses attraction for Aaron. In one key scene, viewers can see that Cady has integrated more fully into the Plastics as the four walk confidently down the high school hallway together with similar outfits and hairstyles. This scene is disrupted, however, when Cady eyes Aaron as he walks just behind Regina: Cady walks into a garbage pail, falling into it headfirst so that her legs and feet kick up in the air as the other three Plastics and Aaron walk on. While this moment suggests that heteronormative competition is destructive, the behavior that is punished is *not* aggressive behavior toward another girl; rather, Cady is punished when she looks at a male with desire.

Cady's other moments of expressing her attraction for Aaron are similarly associated with poor choices: Cady pretends to be bad at math, kisses Aaron while he's dating Regina George, and drinks too much before bringing Aaron to her bedroom. Cady ends up offending Aaron and vomiting on him in this latter scene. Aaron's attraction for Cady only returns near the end of the movie when she stops chasing after him and instead focuses on behaving ethically. In other words, Cady's "good girl" behavior aligns the ethics of honesty with the suppression of sexual desire.

Cady's portrayal would be slightly problematic in isolation. However, all the other portrayals of sexual behavior in *Mean Girls* are associated with unethical behavior or stupidity, so the ultimate message against slut shaming is further undone as good girl/bad girl categories are reinforced. Regina George, Karen Smith, Coach Carr, Trang Pak, and Sun Jin Dinh are the only characters presented as sexual, and they are all negative role models. Regina George is the villain of the movie, and she has sex with Shane on the sly while she is dating Aaron. In this situation, having sex is linked with dishonesty and betrayal. Karen Smith is portrayed as not only sexual but also dumb, as in a scene that leads to an incestuous encounter with her cousin. Coach Carr is similarly

unsympathetic as he has unethical affairs with underage girls—acts of rape that the movie treats as a lighthearted plot point. Coach Carr also displays stupidity while teaching sex education. Finally, Trang Pak and Sun Jin Dinh are minor characters who have sex with Coach Carr and fight each other (as mentioned above). They fit the stereotype of the submissive yet exotic Asian temptress as they avoid confronting Coach Carr and seem committed to holding onto their sexual relationships with him despite his lack of fidelity (Sue et al. 76); this racist treatment renders the characters unsympathetic sources of humor for viewers. All of these sexually active characters act as foils, highlighting the way Cady is only admirable once she learns to resist the dishonesty, sneaky aggression, and stupidity that are associated with her sexual desire for Aaron. In other words, *Mean Girls* reinforces associations of a girl's virtue with her lack of sexual desire, so Ms. Norbury's advice about not calling each other "sluts" rings hollow.

Easy A: Challenging double standards, prescribing appropriate female desire

Like *Mean Girls*, *Easy A* explicitly calls out slut shaming yet implicitly reifies problematic cultural narratives. While Ms. Norbury's speech is the clearest resistance to slut shaming in *Mean Girls*, a critique of slut shaming shapes the entire plot of *Easy A*. Olive Penderghast (played by Emma Stone) narrates her story through a webcast that traces her change in high school from a student who goes unnoticed to a notorious "whore"—the target of a hyperbolic rumor mill and an anti-slut campaign led by a student religious group. While the attention she receives upon gaining a reputation for being sexual at first feels positive to Olive, it gradually progresses in negative intensity until Olive knows "how shitty it feels to be an outcast, warranted or not."

Just as Ms. Norbury's statement in *Mean Girls* is taken seriously because of the way her character is portrayed, Olive's narrative is received sympathetically because her story displays her intelligence, her good humor, and her generous spirit. Furthermore, because she is the one telling the story, Olive provides viewers with a sense of "authenticity" and helps the audience identify with her (Fleishman 17) as she discredits the sexual rumors. Thus, even though Olive never says, "Stop calling girls sluts," that message is clearly communicated.

Easy A also goes beyond condemning the word "slut" by addressing underlying cultural narratives, focusing on a gendered double standard rather than the heteronormative competition that is critiqued in *Mean Girls*. To some degree, *Easy A* relies on the obvious as it highlights this double standard and the ways lying, gossip, competition, and social exclusion feed slut shaming. At the start of the movie, Olive is not sexually active and feels "invisible to

the opposite sex,” but once she is overheard lying to her friend about having sex, the rumor quickly spreads, with fast-motion editing dramatizing Olive’s change in status. Soon after, Olive pretends to have wild sex with her gay friend Brandon during a party to change his reputation and protect him from bullying. While Brandon is greeted as a hero, however, Olive is labeled as a “dirty skank.” Other unpopular boys come to Olive, asking her to have pretend sexual relations with them so their reputations can improve while her reputation worsens. The religious Cross Your Heart Club leads a campaign of shaming Olive, eventually picketing with signs such as “Expel Olive” and “Olive is a slut,” though the males who claim to have sex with Olive improve in social status. The movie thus shows that girls who are not sexually active are ignored while sexually active girls—or those with a reputation for being sexually active—are susceptible to quick and painful condemnation. Boys, in the meantime, tend to escape slut shaming, but they face unfair evaluations based on standards of masculinity that include sexual prowess with females.

The movie is slightly more nuanced as it uses a narrative of economics to expose the way women may be valued and ultimately devalued based on their sexual reputation. Brandon pays Olive to pretend to have sex with him, and the other males who ask her to lie about having sex with them afterward similarly offer her money. Eventually, the offers are insulting, such as a coupon for 10% off an oil change. Although played for humor, the movie suggests that Olive’s worth has decreased because of her slut reputation in ways that make her vulnerable to sexual violence. Early in the movie, a boy offers to pay Olive to pretend to have sex with him, and when she at first declines, he says, “I don’t need your permission, you know.” This line foreshadows a later episode in which Olive believes she is on a traditional date, but the male gives her a Home Depot gift card and insists that she owes him sexual favors. Olive’s reputation for promiscuity has devalued her to the point that this classmate believes she is not allowed to say “no.” While this serious point is not belabored within the comedic constraints of the movie, this scene becomes a turning point for Olive; she feels compelled to tell her story publicly and thus regain her reputation and her voice. The movie’s connections between sex, money, and violence help expose how deeply troubling slut shaming can be.

Still, while *Easy A* condemns sexual double standards, the movie is problematic in ways that are similar to *Mean Girls* in that it relies on individual problem-solving rather than systemic change, and it also reinforces good girl/bad girl dichotomies. To be fair, *Easy A* shows the gendered double standard is part of the high school culture and reinforced by religion, so systemic issues are recognized. However, the solution for addressing this situation is one that Olive manages as an individual. As explained above, Olive’s webcast creates the narrative arc of the film, and the end reactions from supporting characters

imply both that Olive is widely heard and that she is able to fix the situation simply by telling her story. Olive, like Cady in *Mean Girls*, experiences certain privileges as a white, middle class, heterosexual, cis gendered, and able-bodied young woman who fits traditional beauty norms. The ability to change one's own reputation may be less believable for characters whose social positioning does not fit these categories. Regardless, understanding slut shaming as a systemic problem means that the solutions must also be systemic, and both *Easy A* and *Mean Girls* fail on this count.

Easy A is also similar to *Mean Girls* as it avoids depicting healthy sexual behavior for women. Olive herself is completely chaste despite her reputation. She tells Rhiannon at the start of the movie that she is "not that kind of girl" when Rhiannon believes Olive has had sex, and Olive refuses to kiss her love interest until the moment is right at the end of the movie. The characters in the movie who know Olive best—and who are themselves presented in positive ways—never doubt that the rumors about Olive are false. Mr. Griffith (Olive's English teacher), Olive's parents, and Lobster Todd (Olive's love interest) verbally confirm that they know Olive is not engaged in several casual sexual encounters. In other words, Olive's choices about sex are essential to her identity, even when the movie seems to claim that people should *not* be judged according to their sexual behavior.

The DVD cover reinforces Olive's characterization as a chaste and therefore "good" girl. It features Olive holding a sign that reads, "A comedy about / a good girl / a small favor / and a / big rumor." This image explicitly labels Olive a "good girl" while the chalkboard behind Olive depicts the "big rumor": It has words such as "easy," "floozy," "tart," "cheat," "slut" and "tempres" with arrows pointing toward Olive, clearly labeling her in a way that she doesn't deserve. Olive's appearance positions her as a middle-class white teenager with no hint of sexual expression. She is wearing a yellow dress with a high neckline, her bustline is blocked by the sign describing the movie, and the shot is cut off at the waist. The only hint of anything sexual in the DVD cover is the scarlet red "A" of the title that is mimicked with red capital A's in the names of the actors (such as "EmmA Stone"). This reference to *The Scarlet Letter* does more to align Olive with canonical literary history than with sexual behavior. The ultimate message is not that slut shaming is bad but that slut shaming an innocent girl is bad. Unfortunately, a teen movie may be limited in its ability to criticize slut shaming while simultaneously depicting healthy expressions of female sexual desire.

Easy A thus associates most of the sexual activity of secondary characters with negative behaviors, though to a lesser extent than *Mean Girls*. Three women in the movie are depicted as sexual. One is Olive's friend Rhiannon, who focuses on being sexually desirable in ways that suggest insecurities. The

second is Olive's mom, who says she had a reputation as a slut when she was a teen that was due to her habit of sleeping around. Although Olive's mother is a sympathetic character so her sexual history could be a moment for individual sexual choices to be respected, she attributes her behavior to low self-esteem. Immediately, then, "sleeping around" is portrayed as the behavior of a girl who is emotionally unhealthy. Finally, the school guidance counselor is the female character whose sexual behavior is most prominent. Mrs. Griffith is not at all sympathetic as she cheats on her husband with a male student, gives the student chlamydia, and blames Olive. Here, the clearest expression of sexual desire is aligned with dishonesty and an abuse of power. The student is of age, so it is not considered statutory rape within the movie, though the teacher/student dynamic would lead to the guidance counselor losing her job. Mrs. Griffith is thus a female version of Coach Carr from *Mean Girls*, though she is depicted as more reprehensible.

Still, some instances of sexual relations are portrayed in positive ways in *Easy A*, unlike the sexual activity portrayed in *Mean Girls*. Sex within marriage is seen as a healthy ideal, portrayed both by Olive's parents and (somewhat) by Mr. Griffith as he flirts with his adulterous wife. Olive's friend Brandon leaves town with his boyfriend, so a committed gay relationship is depicted as a viable option as well. This relationship is also interracial, so *Easy A* goes beyond typical movie depictions of monogamy. Olive herself explains near the end of the movie that she may or may not have sex with Lobster Todd, and that is no one's business but her own. *Easy A* thus depicts more flexible sexual choices than does *Mean Girls*, but it ultimately upholds monogamous committed relationships as the appropriate place for sexual desire. Such a cultural script may be less likely to lead to slut shaming than the strong alignment of virtue and virginity in *Mean Girls*, but *Easy A* does not ultimately offer strong positive models of teen female sexual desire.

Final complications

Unfortunately, both *Mean Girls* and *Easy A* tend to associate girls' sexuality with immorality, even though both movies initially appear to stand firmly against slut shaming. It may be somewhat comforting to remember that teens encounter so many messages from so many sources that no single movie or genre is likely to have undue influence. Furthermore, teen movie viewers are savvy. Overstating the movies' potential negative effects ignores "the complex ways in which girls negotiate popular culture and, equally importantly, actually behave" (Egan 134). Rather than consider the movies solely in terms of the influence they exert on teen audiences, moreover, my approach has been to simultaneously position the movies themselves as the recipients of social influences. While many helpful conversations about slut shaming have taken place

in both academic and popular venues, conforming to expectations associated with particular genres can warp the message. This may be especially true for genres such as movies that operate within a limited time frame (as opposed to a series that might offer complicated and revised messages over time). Furthermore, challenges are particularly acute when feminist stances are adapted for mainstream commercial endeavors that rely on some adherence to dominant narratives to achieve widespread popularity (McRobbie 539). In the case of slut shaming, looking closely at *Mean Girls* and *Easy A* reveals how difficult addressing such an issue can be. The movies gesture toward a positive change, but they gesture from the vantage point of mainstream commercial endeavors that often limit how radical the messages can be.

In order to effectively address slut shaming through the transformation of problematic cultural narratives, feminists need to recognize such constraints. This approach allows for complex readings of movies such as *Mean Girls* and *Easy A* while also exposing the degree to which feminist principles are widely accepted or resisted. To explore narratives of teen slut shaming further, moving from movies to other genres—television series, zines, and sex-education YouTube channels, for example—would provide a fuller context and reveal more nuances in the ways slut shaming is addressed. Most importantly, considering a number of media forms may help feminists recognize not only the limits of particular genres but also where and how transformational narratives are most likely to occur. Rather than simply dismiss texts like *Mean Girls* and *Easy A* that straddle conflicting belief systems about slut shaming—or about other feminist issues, for that matter—we can use them as markers for where we have been, where we are now, and where we are headed next.

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