Introduction

Growing Up and Rising Up

Nenetzin stands in the center of the plaza, her arms painted white, wearing a skeleton mask and a bridal veil. Along with a dozen other young activists all dressed as skeletons, she sings a song about remembering those who have died due to poverty, domestic violence, state repression, and other social and political injustices. It is “El Dia de los Muertos,” the Day of the Dead, and Nenetzin’s Mexican youth activist collective is interweaving tradition with political theater to educate others and build oppositional consciousness. At the end of the singing and dancing, another young skeleton steps forward to inform the audience that this performance was part of the construction of La Otra Campaña, a Zapatista-initiated campaign for building an alternative progressive politics in Mexico.

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Emma reports on labor issues for an independent, public access television show in Vancouver. She has presented stories on a speech given by anti-war activist Cindy Sheehan, a day of mourning for workers who have died on the job, and other “progressive, or working things that are going on around the city.” In addition to being a media activist, Emma also played a key role in the organization of a student rally in support of striking teachers. Emma and some of her pro-labor friends convinced a citywide student organization to take a stand on the issue and coordinated an exuberant display of student solidarity. Taking over a major intersection, the teens played music, danced, had fun, and demonstrated to the city that they wanted the district administration to return to contract negotiations with the teachers’ union.

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Manuela and I sit at her kitchen table, making pins out of foam, ribbon, and printed logos for tomorrow’s Communist Youth of Venezuela (Juven-
tud Comunista de Venezuela or JCV) concert and cultural event. We talk about Presidents Chavez and Bush, and discuss the future of social movements in Venezuela and the United States. As members of the JCV, Manuela and her comrades see themselves as having an important role in Venezuela’s revolutionary Bolivarian process. They spend most of their time and energy doing political education work with the many young people who are excited about Chavez and the possibilities of his government, but, according to Manuela, do not yet understand all of the economic and social problems and their potential solutions. Chavez speaks openly about socialism, and the JCV is trying to work with youth to mobilize for substantial, “real” socialism, not just a few minor reforms. To do this, they hold study groups, discussing global political economy and reading Marx, Lenin, and Che. And they organize community events, like the upcoming concert, trying to bring youth together to talk about the problems they see around them and to develop their collective knowledge.

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Pitu, a tiny seventeen-year-old with a pixie haircut and wearing a fluffy pink sweater, takes my hand and leads me around one of Buenos Aires’ most well-known comedores, a new set of social institutions that can be loosely translated as soup kitchens. A cooperative, self-governing, and democratic enterprise that includes a pasta workshop, soup kitchen, photo shop, textile factory, screen-printing operation, and bakery, this comedor provides prepared and raw foods, employment opportunities, and political and social community for its members. Pitu is the youngest member of the center’s youth group, a subsection of the organization where youth participants gather together to talk and learn from each other, and to work on their own projects or assist in the various facets of the organization’s operation.

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Lisette’s dedication to fighting against environmental racism and for community health and safety finally paid off in the summer of 2001 when a San Francisco Bay Area toxic waste disposal facility, which her youth organization had been trying to shut down for more than eight years, was forced to close. Motivated by her anger at the health problems her community has experienced because of the facility’s lack of concern for the well-being of neighborhoods of poor people of color, Lisette spent countless hours planning and implementing educational events, rallies, and press conferences. She and her peers also documented the company’s violations, went to plan-
ning meetings, confronted the regulating agency, and lobbied politicians. As an activist, Lisette has been focused primarily on this one campaign for several years because, she said, “I know everything is connected and messed up, but let me try to just focus on this one thing because, if not, then I just feel like it’s too much.” Now, with the facility closed, she and her group are moving on to new projects, and Lisette is hopeful that she’ll see some major “systemic changes” in her lifetime.

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These brief stories about five teenage girl activists provide just a glimpse of their vibrant political identities and practices. From the young Zapatistas with the braids and bandanas who climbed the fence at the WTO protests in Cancun to throw flowers at the police to the U.S. high school students designing curriculums to educate their peers about child labor and sweatshops, teenage girls in the Americas are participating in a variety of struggles for social justice. Radical cheerleaders at a high school in Los Angeles, wearing red shirts with black stars, chant against the U.S. war in Iraq and in support of striking workers while doing splits and pyramids.1 Forty-four juveniles were arrested at the 2004 American Indian Movement march against the celebration of the Columbus Day Parade in Denver, Colorado.2 Girls and queer youth are increasingly visible in the boisterous pink blocs that have mobilized at numerous large-scale protests since the initial pink and silver column at the IMF/World Bank protests in Prague in 2000. The MST land occupations in Brazil include whole families, not just adults.3 The YouthPower! program of Desis Rising Up and Moving in New York, Khmer Girls in Action, in Long Beach, California, and other community-based youth groups organize for immigrant rights and against the detention and deportation of community members. Philadelphia students have resisted the privatization of their schools. Teenage women working in export processing zones are forming workers’ organizations. Young sex workers are organizing for their rights to health and safety. Anti-capitalist urban youth are reclaiming buildings, setting up squats, and creating autonomous spaces. Across the United States, youth are fighting for increased spending on education and against the development of more juvenile justice facilities and youth jails.4 Teenagers are actively participating in indymedia centers and youth media projects, producing a variety of alternative media and challenging the corporate concentration of television, radio, and print news. And, on March 6, 2003, hundreds of thousands of students walked out of classes around the world to protest the impending U.S. bombing of Iraq.5
Within academic and activist circles in the United States, we sometimes get a fleeting impression of the teenage girls who participate in these and other struggles. Before beginning to seek them out for this book, I would see them in a photo of the workers’ meeting outside the export-processing zone, in an independently produced video about a protest at a trade summit, in a brief mention by an older activist of some “cool youth” they know, across the circle at a meeting, or chanting and dancing in the streets. But finding documentation of their stories, their organizations, and their words is not easy; they are rarely considered and written about as significant political actors. They appear, but they do not speak. This book aims to address this silence and to illuminate the experiences and perspectives of these uniquely positioned agents of social change through the analysis of in-depth interviews and participant observation with progressive and Left-leaning girl activists in five different cities in the Americas.

Girls’ activism is an extremely underexplored scholarly topic, largely invisible in the academic literatures on girlhood and on social movements. Research in the growing field of girls’ studies has focused primarily on girls’ self-esteem and psychology, sexuality and sexual behavior, friendships, school and peer relationships, media consumption, production and cultural practices, and issues of growing up and constructing identities in various contexts. These works often describe girls’ acts of resistance to dominant gender norms, or address girls’ consumption of commodified versions of feminism, but very few have made girls’ politics or political identities the central focus of study. Additionally, the volumes on feminist generations and the relationship between young women and feminism have largely ignored the specific experiences of teenage girls, focusing more on college-aged women. Indeed, the invoking of “girl” in these writings generally occurs in comments upon how young women do or do not embrace this identity and how this either empowers or diminishes them. Thus, actual teenage girls are virtually erased from the discussion as talk about “girls” in this context refers primarily to a debate about young women and their “girly” feminism (or post-feminism). This means that the stories of girls like those in this study, girls who are involved in a multitude of political struggles, are left out of these debates due to the elision of the terms “girl” and “young woman.”

A similar situation exists in the literature on youth movements. Studies of the student and youth activism of the 1960s and beyond have not often addressed the specific experiences of high school and middle school students, focusing primarily on college and university-based movements. In
studies of white student movements, youth has been collapsed into one category, with college students representing all young people, a situation that contains both age and class biases. Studies of the Chicano movement and the African American civil rights movement more frequently acknowledge the presence of younger activists, but the consciousness and experiences of these younger activists has not often been the focus of study and analysis. Social movement scholars, despite having noted the impact of race, class, gender, and generation on the activist experience, have generally not studied teenagers. The dynamics of age and ageism, the impact of being below the age of legal majority, the role of teens in social movements, and the characteristics of young people’s activism are all not yet a substantial part of the literature in this field. Girl activists’ ideas, stories, and theoretical contributions thus remain largely hidden from view. They continue to appear in both the public and academic domain only as occasional images—as visual objects rather than as intelligent and intelligible political subjects.

In contrast to girls’ absence from the literature on social movements in the Americas, they are figures of central importance to contemporary processes and discourses of globalization and global citizenship. Teenage girls and young women in the Global South are a major source of labor for the global economy. As structural adjustment programs and the shift to export-oriented economies erode subsistence economies and thus displace small farmers and producers, families are forced into greater participation in market economies, either formal or informal, and children and youth play an important role in this income generation. Young women and girls frequently leave the rural areas for work in the cities or export processing zones (EPZs) so that they can send money to support their families. Hired for their supposedly “nimble fingers” and assumed passivity, they make up a significant portion of the labor force in most of these zones, in maquiladoras, and in agro-business greenhouses. According to the AFL-CIO, 90 percent of the 27 million workers in EPZs are women, most of them between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five. An International Labor Organization document reports that nearly 2 million girls in Latin America work as domestic laborers. Teenage girls also labor for the global tourist industry in a variety of locations. They sell trinkets and souvenirs in the informal economy, are sex workers, and work as maids and servers in hotels and restaurants.

Meanwhile, in the Global North, business magazines identify the importance of teenage and “tween” girl consumption. Teenage girls represent the most highly sought after market segment in the United States, and a major
marketing research company reports that “the current generation of teenage girls has tremendous buying power.” Teenage and young women’s clothing has more fashion seasons than any other category of clothing, with stores aimed at this market changing their inventory for as many as eighteen fashion seasons. Girls’ studies scholar Anita Harris has persuasively argued that “it is primarily as consumer citizens that youth are offered a place in contemporary social life, and it is girls above all who are held up as the exemplars of this new citizenship.” Consumption and participation in the global marketplace are central features of contemporary images of idealized girlhood. The image of the girl is frequently deployed as a model for the “appropriate ways to embrace and manage the political, economic, and social conditions of contemporary societies,” and an indicator of the supposed potential benefits of global capitalism.

In addition to being central to the economic processes of globalization, girls—and youth in general—are also being targeted by a wide variety of social programs designed to encourage particular forms of global citizenship. Receiving significant money from governments and numerous private foundations including the Ford Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation, the Kellogg Foundation, Pew Charitable Trusts, and the William T. Grant Foundation, youth civic engagement programs are a widespread and growing part of civil society and the field of nonprofit organizations. The heavy investment in such programs indicates the political, and not just the economic, importance of teenagers, both male and female. Although most civic engagement programs are not gender specific, there are some significant indicators of widespread interest in girls’ empowerment and civic identities, a theme developed in the following chapter. Empowered girls are not just an ideal for other girls to model themselves after but are also models for contemporary citizenship more broadly. Girlhood is not an irrelevant social category, but one that is important to global capital and global citizenship, and, therefore, to our understandings of political resistance and social movements in the Americas. According to the transnational theorist Chandra Mohanty, “it is especially on the bodies and lives of women and girls from the Third World/South—the Two-Thirds World—that global capitalism writes its script, and it is by paying attention to and theorizing the experiences of these communities of women and girls that we demystify capitalism as a system of debilitating sexism and racism and envision anti-capitalist resistance.” The centrality of girlhood to the global economy and to global civil society provides a theoretically rich reason for looking at the political identities and practices of teenage girl activists.
Progressive teenage girl activists in the Americas, despite their numerous differences of national and local context, of ideology, and of biography, have far more in common with one another than we might expect. They make surprisingly similar identity claims, asserting many shared understandings of what it means to be a girl, to be a youth, and to be an activist. They also make quite similar strategic choices in their movement groups, continually committing their organizational and individual time and energy to ongoing political education, to building egalitarian activist communities, and to the construction of “positive” and hopeful feelings, messages, and projects. These three strategic clusters—the politics of learning, of participation, and of hope—emerged in all of my research sites.

Intrigued by the surprising pattern of strategic tendencies within girls’ activism, I follow the suggestion of prominent social movement scholar James Jasper that movement researchers study how and why movements make the strategic choices they do. Jasper suggests that strategic choices are not merely rational decisions made to further interests, but are deeply embedded in cultural and institutional contexts. Symbolic meanings permeate strategic action, and Jasper therefore calls on cultural sociologists to “specify concretely where they saw meanings and what effects those meanings had.”

Preceding Jasper’s cultural approach to strategic action in movements by nearly twenty years, Ann Swidler has also suggested a theoretical model for understanding the messy relationship between culture and strategic action. Swidler treats culture as a “tool kit of symbols, stories, rituals, and worldviews, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems.” And, like Jasper, Swidler views strategy not as a necessarily conscious plan, but as “a general way of organizing action.” Swidler also notes that in the context of explicitly ideological spaces, such as social movements, a group’s symbols, narratives, and doctrines have a much more direct influence on action than in other parts of more “settled” social life. Guided by this approach, I ask what, then, are the shared (and divergent) cultural toolkits and symbolic meanings that girl activists draw upon and reproduce as they formulate their political practices and develop their strategies for social movement activity?

In addition to enacting similar strategic approaches to politics, girl activists also express many shared understandings of their collective identities as girls, as youth, and as activists. These identity claims are some of the key symbolic and discursive resources that girl activists reference as they...
develop their strategic political practices. In constructing their activist identities, girl activists weave together a variety of discourses on gender, age, and generation. They draw upon widespread popular narratives about what it means to be a girl, to be a teenager, and to be growing up in this particular historical moment. Gender, age, and generation are each important aspects of girls’ identity talk and will all be recurring themes throughout this book.

Mary Bernstein has outlined three levels of analysis for identity processes within social movements: identity for empowerment, identity deployment, and identity as a goal. Bernstein notes that identity, at all three levels, can “help to explain the goals that a movement pursues, the strategies employed, who is mobilized, and what types of outcomes are achieved.”

In my analysis, I am particularly interested in the relationship between activists’ identity narratives, or their stories about who they are, and their choices around strategy. It is important to note here that I am not working with an essentialist notion of identity. It is not the case that girls take up shared strategies simply because they are girls. Rather, they take up these strategies because of how they have come to understand, negotiate, and redefine the meaning of girlhood, of youth, or of activist. What I propose is an active, engaged, culturally embedded process of the construction of identity narratives, which then guides choices for strategic action, not a simple linear relationship between identity as a fixed essence and strategy as a direct outcome. The relationship between identity and strategy is not determinate.

As girl activists construct and claim their political identities, they explicitly define themselves partly in and through sets of traits that support the political strategies explored in the second half of my analysis. For example, being open-minded and “still learning” are characteristics frequently attached to adolescent and student identities, while enthusiasm and optimism are things that girls themselves associate with their youthful energy and girlish hopefulness. The linking of these specific characteristics with various aspects of their own identities thus enables and encourages girls’ tendencies to make certain choices in their political groups and organizations. The relationship between identity and strategy is also not entirely unidirectional. Although I focus on how identity claims shape strategic choices, girls’ strategic choices and their approaches to practicing politics also play a role in their identity narratives. In what Bernstein refers to as a “feedback loop,” identity narratives may guide and support particular strategic choices, but these strategic choices also continue to reinforce various aspects of girls’ identities. Their
strategic actions become part of their stories of themselves as particular kinds of people.

Identity claims and narratives of the self are not, of course, the only component of girl activists’ shared cultural toolkits. The girl activists in this study take part in situated versions of transnational and cosmopolitan youth cultures, or what Sunaina Maira and Elisabeth Soep refer to as “youthscapes.” They are also all somewhat loosely connected to another transnational culture: the diffuse cultural and political formation that has been variously named the “movement of movements,” the “alternative globalization movement,” or the “global justice movement.” Although they organize around a wide variety of issues, the girls I chose to include in this research were, for the most part, involved in organizations that have some kind of direct or indirect relationship to this transnational network of movements against neoliberalism, corporate power, and empire. Even when they are not directly connected to this network, this highly visible movement culture provides an important backdrop and resource for their activism. This context figures importantly in girls’ generational identities. Girls’ political subjectivities and practices therefore reflect many ideas, narratives, images, tactics, and strategies from within this expansive social movement field. And this transnational political culture and its evolving profusion of open-ended, horizontal, and hopeful ideologies and practices is a key part of girl activists’ shared cultural toolkit. Therefore, in analyzing girls’ use of these strategies, this book also contributes to broader conversations about contemporary social movements and the possibilities for radical political practice in the era of neoliberalism.

Girl activists also share a structural location. As minors, they are excluded political subjects, marginalized within formal politics and within social movements. This marginalization, of course, plays a role in their choices for strategic action. The inability to vote or to run for office, the difficulty of setting up long-term institutions and organizations without financial resources, the importance of schooling and educational institutions to their lives, and the fact of parental power and authority all shape teenagers’ political choices in important and often unexpected ways. Girl activists also have some common social needs that can be connected to their experiences as adolescents and to the dynamics of this particular social category. Some of their strategies are not only political choices supported by self-definitions and transnational movement cultures, but are also actions that meet and fulfill some of these social needs. For example, spending energy on “building community” is not merely a strategic choice rooted in girls’ understanding of themselves as “relational” and good at socializing with others, but it also provides them
with necessary social networks and peer support as they struggle with the challenges of adolescence and growing up.

The similarities of teenage girls’ gendered, age-specific, and generational identity narratives, their shared social location as adolescents, as well as the contemporary transnational movement context, help to explain some of the consistent patterns in girl activists’ strategic choices. Within these patterns of action, however, there are also many important differences in girls’ political practices. Girls’ strategies for political contention are not homogenous or universal but are located in divergent national, racialized, and class-specific communities, histories, and social movement cultures. Localized political cultures and contexts lead to a diversity of forms of political action and strategy. As I discuss each strategic configuration, I also illuminate how it operates differently for girls in different settings, scenarios, and local political-cultural contexts.

*Local Political Cultures and Contexts*

Girls’ activism is both transnational and locally situated, a phenomenon well suited for a multi-site ethnography. Throughout this book, I aim to uncover transnational commonalities, connections, and patterns, but to also keep my analysis grounded in the divergent specificities of five unique urban areas, each one a significant social movement center within the Americas. These five sites, in the order in which I studied them, are: the San Francisco Bay Area, the United States; Mexico City, Mexico; Caracas, Venezuela; Vancouver, Canada; and Buenos Aires, Argentina. Each of these metropolitan areas has a well-known and well-documented social movement history, each continues to be a site of heightened political activism, and each has a particularly strong youth movement sector. They are, in short, “hotspots” for activism in general and youth activism in particular. Limiting my study to the Americas enables me to focus on some of the distinctive dynamics of the social movements and politics of this region, but each site is also a vastly different political context, therefore presenting me with a diverse array of windows into teenage girls’ activism. In order to introduce readers to these five local contexts, I provide very brief descriptions of a few key features of each location’s youth movement sector. Readers who are familiar with the movements and politics of these cities will find my descriptions here to be cursory and simplified. They are not intended to be comprehensive, but rather to introduce readers who are unfamiliar with these contexts to a few of the most immediately relevant particularities and literatures.
**SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA.** The San Francisco Bay Area has long been an important center of progressive and radical social movement activity within the United States. Its more recent history includes the founding of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, the emergence of a vibrant gay and lesbian movement, the American Indian occupation of the island of Alcatraz, a sizable and shifting set of countercultures including beats and hippies, and a new model of community-based organizing led by communities of color, developed by activists at the Center for Third World Organizing (CTWO). Furthermore, the Bay Area’s social movement history has been shaped by the enduring strength and legacy of student activism in the area. The Berkeley Free Speech Movement is often described as the beginning of the waves of college student activism that spread throughout the United States in the 1960s. Additionally, in 1968 San Francisco State University was the site of the first student strike for an ethnic studies department. Narratives about the importance of the Bay Area to progressive politics in the United States and to youth movements, whether accurate or not, continue to color the region’s perceptions of activists of all ages and generations.

Today, youth activism in the Bay Area is highly institutionalized. A multitude of community organizations either work entirely on “youth organizing” or include programs for youth within their broader work. Compared to much of the rest of the United States, California has a particularly extensive network of formalized opportunities for youth involvement in progressive social change. Furthermore, according to Ryan Pintado-Vertner, “the San Francisco Bay Area, due to its strong activist history, more liberal political climate, long-standing and developed philanthropic sector, and strong web of youth service agencies has the strongest infrastructure and most youth organizing projects, members, and funding.” This is partly due to the work of some CTWO graduates who introduced youth organizing to the Bay Area by involving youth in a campaign against lead poisoning. Once a few projects had been developed, many activists began to see these as models, and the number of youth activist organizations multiplied quickly throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. These nonprofit youth activist organizations were, by the time of my research, generally well established, with their own institutionalized patterns, curricula, and political practices. Although modeled after community-based organizations, they incorporate and develop elements of youth cultures, drawing particularly heavily on hip-hop culture. In the period during which I conducted interviews and observation in the San Francisco Bay Area (fall 2005–fall 2006), these groups were variously focused on educational justice, environmental racism, juvenile justice, gentrification,
community development, immigrant rights, and challenging the INS raids and deportations, or some combination of these issues. Although not all of the girls I interviewed in the Bay Area participate in structured youth organizations of this type, their presence certainly has a very important impact on the area’s youth activist community.

Mexico City. With an estimated population of nearly 30 million people, the metropolitan area of Mexico City is one of the largest in the world. As such, its social movements are also large, varied, and not necessarily integrated or connected to one another. Like the other cities in this study, Mexico City has a well-known history of student and youth activism. The young activists there often spoke of themselves as the political descendents of the student activists of the 1960s, several hundred of whom died in the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre. An annual commemorative march organized by young activists memorializes the 1968 movement and the ensuing repression and massacre of protestors. Another significant moment in the history of student and youth activism in Mexico City was the 1999 student strike against the institution of fees and the increasing privatization of the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM). Lasting nearly a year, the 1999 strike continues to loom large in the imaginations and political consciousness of young Mexican activists.

The centrality of UNAM and student politics to the Mexican youth activists can be better understood in the context of the particularities of the relationship between the various public high schools and the university. Many of the Mexico City activists who are discussed in this study were students at one of several high schools that are formally part of the administrative and institutional structure of UNAM. Some of these schools are preparatorias (called prepas), which follow a traditional curriculum and method of instruction. Others are Colegios de Ciencias y Humanidades, or CCHs, schools founded by student and faculty activists from UNAM in 1971 and which were intended to be more experimental and, in some cases, oppositional, in their approach to education. The students who attend both of these types of schools are, in part, governed by the UNAM administration and, until recently, could largely expect guaranteed entrance to UNAM upon completion of their high school educations. Because of these ties, high school activism in Mexico City is most closely aligned with college activism, rather than the more community-based organizations, as is the case in the San Francisco Bay Area.

I arrived in Mexico to conduct interviews and participant observation in the fall of 2005, a particularly interesting moment in Mexican social move-
ments. Within the domain of student activism, there had been a recent upsurge in the levels of repression experienced by student activists. In response to the escalating violence, several high school activist groups had begun sit-ins and takeovers of school administrative offices. In the broader landscape of Mexican politics, the presidential elections were only a few months away, and the Zapatistas, probably one of the most visible social movements in Mexico and in the Americas, had recently initiated a new phase in their struggle, a project they called La Otra Campaña, or the other campaign.46 Re-emerging on the national scene after a period of some quiet, the Zapatistas had called for a series of encuentros, or encounters, to discuss the project of consolidating and building connections between various struggles. A few of the girls in this study traveled to Chiapas to participate in the encuentros, and several others were actively involved in local conversations about La Otra. These two concerns, of increased repression and of the possibilities for a new Zapatista-style national politics, dominated the youth activist scene during my time in Mexico.

CARACAS. Recent Venezuelan political and social movement history has been dominated by the powerful presence of Hugo Chavez Frias, the controversial president first elected in 1998. Since his election, Chavez has been engaging the population in an ongoing social and political revolution.47 Chavez and his various supporters have written a new constitution, renationalized the oil industry, and devoted oil money to a variety of social projects, called missions, including literacy, health care, and job-training programs. The economist Mark Weisbrot recently noted: “In Venezuela, the economy (real GDP) has grown by 87 percent since the government got control of the national oil industry in early 2003; poverty has been cut by half, most of the country has access to free health care, and educational enrollment has risen sharply.”48

The opposition to Chavez comes largely from the middle and upper-middle class and the economic elite. The opposition parties have been well supported by the U.S. government, which continues to attempt to undermine the major changes being made in Venezuela by naming Chavez “a dictator” despite the fact that he has been elected in internationally certified elections.49 Since the opposition’s 2002 coup attempt and the ensuing protests that demanded Chavez’s return to power, many Venezuelan activists have argued that social movements and activism have been and continue to be vital to the survival of the Chavez government. In their view, it is not just a government that has been elected, but a government that has been defended...
by popular social movements and that must continue to be defended. This sense of democratic ownership over their government shapes the activist experiences, identities, and practices of the girls I interviewed, all of whom are at least nominally part of pro-government groups.

The ongoing political changes happening in Venezuelan, called the “Bolivarian process,” have brought many previously excluded and marginalized Venezuelans into social movements, political parties, and community organizations. Venezuelan social movements, then, are often very closely tied to the state, working alongside the Chavez government, the pro-Chavez parties, and the various missions. This is also the case for youth activism: many of the girl activists I interviewed were part of youth wings of political parties, particularly the Communist Party, or active in some of the different missions and state-sponsored programs for civic engagement or youth voice. I arrived in Venezuela in January 2006, starting my research there at the Americas meeting of the World Social Forum. It was only a few months after the World Youth Festival, an event that brought together fifteen thousand young people from around the world for political discussions, cultural events, and organizing. Thus, there was a decidedly internationalist tone to Venezuelan youth activism. Energized both by their own highly politicized national context and the spirit of hopefulness that seems to surround Venezuelan activists, and by their interactions with young people from other countries, the Venezuelan girls were an intensely positive group.

**Vancouver.** With its sparkling luxury high-rise condominiums towering above a neighborhood often referred to as “the poorest zip-code in Canada,” Vancouver is full of political, social, and economic tensions. In recent years, the British Columbia provincial government’s cuts to social spending have combined with the forces of gentrification and development, angering many and giving rise to substantial social movements, including youth movements. One of the most notable of these recent movements has been the Secwepemc community’s resistance to the expansion of the Sun Peaks resort onto unceded tribal lands. I went to Vancouver in spring 2006 after hearing about the vibrancy of the Native Youth Movement. When I arrived, however, I found that the movement had largely gone underground. Furthermore, gaining access to the groups that remained active proved to be very difficult.

Adult Vancouver activists frequently told me that I was there during an especially quiet period in the ebb and flow of the city’s social movements. After my departure, Vancouver movement politics have once again revital-
ized as the community organizes in resistance to the 2010 Olympics. This, of course, is one of the major challenges for scholars of social movements—it is difficult to always be in the right place at exactly the right time. Despite the “quiet,” however, there were several major movement organizations that provided an important backdrop to the struggles and practices of youth activists, including Vancouver’s Bus Riders’ Union, modeled after the Los Angeles BRU, the Vancouver chapter of No One Is Illegal, a grassroots anti-colonial immigrant and refugee rights collective, and www.stopwar.ca, Vancouver’s anti-war coalition. While a few of the girl activists I interviewed had connections to some of these organizations and movements, many others were more heavily tied into school-based humanitarian organizations, a tendency discussed throughout this book.

**Buenos Aires.** Like Mexican youth activists, teenage participants in social movements in Buenos Aires see themselves as part of a long history of student activism. As in Mexico, this history also includes substantial repression. From roughly 1976 through 1983 Argentina’s military dictatorship abducted, tortured, and caused the disappearance of tens of thousands of activists, many of them very young. For today’s high school students, this period represents the youth of their own parents and plays a substantial role in how their families see their newfound activism. Unlike other recent cohorts of youth activists in Buenos Aires, the teens I interviewed were born after, rather than during, the era of this Dirty War. And, instead of coming of age during the years of Argentina’s supposed neoliberal economic success, they were reaching adolescence and becoming politically aware during the 2001 economic crash and the ensuing popular rebellions. In December 2001, when the government froze people’s bank accounts in an effort to use these resources to manage their foreign debt, millions of Argentines took to the streets and forced the government to resign, then proceeded to refuse four more governments in just a few weeks. This rebellion, as a powerful and liberating opening of collective political space, plays an important role in the memories and identities of today’s teenage activists.

In the years since 2001, Argentine social movements have continued to explore some of the innovations that were developed during the rebellion, including participatory democracy, horizontalism, and organization outside the traditional political party structure. In addition to the divides between the autonomous movements and the Left political parties, the movements of unemployed workers (the *piquetero* movements) have also split into pro- and anti-government factions. In the 2006 Argentine winter, girl activists could
be found on all sides of these divisions. They were especially visible within
the piquetero organizations, the youth wings of various Left political parties,
and, most importantly, the activist-oriented student centers within their high
schools.

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Each of these five cities was a rich and exciting field site for my research on
girls’ activism. Beginning in fall 2005, I spent between one and two months
in each city, conducting participant observation and in-depth interviews
with seventy-five girl activists, approximately fifteen per location. For rea-
sons of confidentiality all of the girls’ names, and many of the organization
names, have been changed. The girls selected their own pseudonyms, a prac-
tice I’ve implemented in order to allow girls to contribute to the construction
of their textual personas.53 I continue to stay in contact with many of these
girls, sending updates on the progress toward publication of their stories,
and receiving replies from them about their political and personal lives. In
reading their messages, I have been struck by how committed to the proj-
ect many of these girls continue to be. They nearly always remember their
pseudonyms and remind me of them in their emails to make sure that I’m
connecting their words to the right persona. The research experience was
clearly not irrelevant or unimportant to them. My ongoing relationships
with these girls not only remind me of their generosity, warmth, and spirit,
but also of my responsibility to them and my commitment to producing a
book that they will appreciate and that respectfully shares their insights and
stories.

Of course, wanting to write a book girls appreciate and can recognize
themselves in does not mean writing only what they want to hear. While I
am generally very complimentary of their political practices, there are also
many implicit and explicit criticisms scattered throughout the text. Such crit-
icisms are intellectually and politically important, and they are meant con-
structively, but there is certainly a chance that some of my girl readers will
disagree with my assessments of the problems, silences, and failures of their
groups. I offer my critiques with a great deal of respect and affection for these
girls, and I hope that they learn from them, rather than feel betrayed or hurt
by my portrayal of them.

In addition to the issues of betrayal and what Lorraine Kenny refers to as
“writing behind girls’ backs,”54 representing girls also raises other important
methodological concerns around voice. My ongoing relationships with the
girls and their occasional involvement in the research process do not negate
the very substantial interpretive and representative power I have as the author of this text. That authorial power feels especially intense when considered in relationship to the translating process. My interviews took place in both English (in the United States and Canada) and Spanish (in Mexico, Venezuela, and Argentina), and all were transcribed in the language in which they were conducted. I worked with and coded the interviews and quotes in the original language, only translating a quote from Spanish into English near the end of the writing process. The translations are my own and far from perfect. Translators make countless small choices about how to select the “best” words and phrases to capture a given statement. The words people use to describe their political beliefs are quite complicated, and some of the particular and nuanced meanings of what the Spanish-speaking girls had to say has probably been lost in this process. The translation process has been further complicated by the challenge of trying to maintain girls’ own distinctive teenage voices. As I translated the voices of girl activists from Latin America, I struggled to keep them from sliding into the sounds, words, and rhythms of their peers from the United States and Canada, on the one hand, or into a flat and dry “adult” language on the other. I have made a good faith effort in these translations and hope that the girls themselves would still recognize themselves and their words. But, each translation is also a rewriting, a retelling. This means that I have not only authored the analysis around these girls’ voices but have also had a role in writing their voices. This is also partly the case for English speakers as well. While the words are much more their own, in some cases girls have asked me to remove some of the ums, uhs, likes, sorta, ya know, and other teenage filler words from their transcripts. I’ve tried to keep the flavor of their voices present in the quotes I use but have also occasionally removed some of these extra words in order to make a quote more comprehensible. (Re)presenting girls’ voices, particularly those that needed translation, has required some authorial choices on my part. Such choices are always part of the writing process for any qualitative study.

The challenge of writing about five different locations, each with its own internal diversity of experiences and perspectives, was often daunting. I have tried to identify themes and patterns in girls’ activist lives and practices without, I hope, flattening differences. In regards to terminology, I often distinguish between “North American” and “Latin American” girls and their organizations. This designation is a little awkward given that Mexico normally falls into both of these categories. However, I find that the Mexican teens have far more in common with their Argentinean and Venezuelan peers than with the girls from the United States and Canada. Therefore, lacking a bet-

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ter phrase, I use “North American” to refer to the shared characteristics of the United States and Canadian contexts and “Latin American” to refer to Mexico, Venezuela, and Argentina. In the analysis that follows, I’ve tried to remain attentive to the most significant and substantial differences in girls’ practices, particularly as they are tied to their national contexts and, at times, their racial and class identities, however, not all of the many differences can be discussed at all times, and there is certainly much more that could be said about each of these domains.

Located in their own struggles against and within the global flows of power, girls’ activism illuminates a set of radical political practices that aim to “counter the scattered hegemonies that affect their lives.” By tracing out these practices, this book challenges and responds to girls’ absences from scholarly and public discussions of social movements and to highly prevalent images of girls as either passive victims or empowered consumer citizens.

The first half of the book explores how teenage girls negotiate these dynamics of invisibility and exclusion as they construct their activist identities. In chapter 2, I address girls’ conceptions of what it means to be an activist and situate their activist identities in relation to more widespread discourses about girls’ empowerment, civic engagement, and youth apathy. Chapter 3 then turns to an analysis of how girls’ emergent activist identities are built upon rhetorical strategies that claim social movement standing and political authority for youth. Finally, my exploration of their identities addresses girl activists’ complex relationship to girlhood, arguing that they view girlhood as diametrically opposing activist identity yet simultaneously supporting it. Rejecting particular elements of girlhood and trying to escape the limits of the category itself, they redefine what it means to be a girl.

The second half of the book then examines girl activists’ social movement strategies and collective political practices. Each chapter in this section takes up one of their shared strategic tendencies, looking at how it is understood and enacted by girl activists in various locations and organizations. First, I address girls’ commitment to learning and the ongoing process of political education, and analyze some of the major differences between girls in North America and Latin America in terms of the creation of spaces for intensive and theoretical political conversations. I then turn to girl activists’ interest in building participatory activist communities, highlighting their contributions to our understandings of horizontalist political engagement. Finally, a discussion of girls’ spirit of hopefulness explores the ways that political optimism shapes political action. Taken together, these three strategic clusters reflect girls’ affinity for some of the most fruitful and dynamic elements of
contemporary adult radicalism, elements frequently discussed in numerous theoretical and philosophical texts on social movements and social change in the Americas. Resonating with these conversations on prefigurative, open-ended, autonomous, and horizontal political practices, this book provides an ethnographic accounting of how such practices are developed and worked out, on the ground, in various social movement contexts, from the perspective of girl activists, a group that, due partly to their identity narratives, seems to have a particular affinity for these modes of doing politics. Throughout my discussion, I aim to not only provide an empirical accounting of the shape of teenage girls' activism, and to elaborate the complex relationship between identity, culture, and political strategy, but also to suggest how girls' political practices can provide adult scholars and activists with some intriguing models for effective social movements and social change.