

THE WOMAN IN WHITE: AN ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S MEANING-MAKING  
EXPERIENCES IN DEBUT

by

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(Under the Direction of Peggy Kreshel)

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the tradition of debutante balls with the intent to uncover why the tradition remains prolific in modern society. Using Paul du Gay's et al., (1997) adaptation of Richard Johnson's (1986-87) circuit of culture, it seeks to uncover the various "meaning-making" moments from its many perspectives [i.e. identity, representation, production, regulation, and consumption] and emphasizes the debutante's meaning-making experience, illuminating the debutante experience and purpose from the woman's point of view. Using a case study of the 2005 Blue Gray Colonel's Ball in Montgomery, Alabama, the stage is set for a glimpse into Southern debutante culture, tradition and the meaning-production inherent in the process. Applying Judith Butler's (1990) theory of "gender as performativity," it explores feminist concerns applied to debutante participation, questioning why and how the debutante institution may or may not be harmful for modern women.

INDEX WORDS: Debutante. Debut. Circuit of Culture. Richard Johnson. Paul du Gay. Gender as Performativity. Judith Butler. Feminism. Cultural Studies.

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I dedicate this thesis to my parents, David and Elise Neeland, who contributed greatly in both personal and financial support throughout my entire educational career and without whom my educational opportunities would not have been possible. I would also like to thank the support of my friends and extended family.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*The Debutante's Dream is a potent elixir—a dream of being almost royalty, a paragon of good taste and elegance, a name to be reckoned with. A collective family dream in which the pretty daughter is both proof of good breeding and a bid to improve the stock through grafting, via a dynastic union between the bud and a worthy sprig from a slightly higher branch on the social tree.*

*Karal Ann Marling*

*Debutante: Rites & Regalia of American Debdom*

Debutante balls are social events that serve as “a rite of passage signaling a woman’s entry into adulthood” (Ross, 1997, p.72). The act of debut and the debutante season (generally from late November through Mardi Gras season) are social institutions that originated in Great Britain in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The custom was instituted by Queen Elizabeth I who began the ritual of formally announcing and presenting young women who were of a marrying age and high social standing to potential suitors (Wilson & Ferris, 1989). The custom evolved into something more closely resembling its present form “when the daughters of the rising haute bourgeoisie of the Industrial Revolution began to be included in court presentations, along with those of nobility and gentry” (Wilson & Ferris, 1989, p.611). Queen Elizabeth II ended this tradition in England in 1958.

The custom had spread from Great Britain to the United States during the “Gilded Age,” a period from the 1870s through the 1920s, characterized by wealth and opulence. The original American debut is thought to have been held in 1870 in New York City and served to signal the wealth of the fathers who would lavish the extravagance of debut upon their daughters (Wilson & Ferris, 1989).

In the South, the tradition took on an added dimension, carrying with it not only an emphasis on wealth but on a “family’s antebellum status and lineage” as well (Wilson & Ferris, 1989, p.611). While the debutante ball is not a uniquely Southern institution, “it has exhibited more tenacity and vitality in Dixie than elsewhere in the United States or in Great Britain” (Wilson & Ferris, 1989, p.611), and it is widely *perceived* to be a Southern tradition. Among Southern cities rich in the perpetuation of this tradition are Charleston, SC; Montgomery, AL; Mobile, AL; Birmingham, AL; Atlanta, GA; Savannah, GA; Jacksonville, FL; New Orleans, LA; Washington, D.C.; Richmond, VA; Raleigh, NC; Jackson, MS; Memphis, TN; and Austin, San Antonio, and Dallas, TX (Wilson & Ferris, 1989).

Despite overtones of classism, racism, and sexism, the debutante ball survived the Civil Rights and Women’s Movements of the 1960s and 1970s as well as persistent concerns with the injustices of social inequality. Its continued vibrancy raises a number of questions: What accounts for the continued vitality of this institution? How do participants understand the debutante ball and the role they play in it? How do they integrate the meaning of the debutante experience into their lives?

Grounded in a cultural studies approach and feminist theory, this study will develop as a case study of women’s experiences in the process of debut. It will focus on participants involved in a single event, the Blue Gray Colonel’s Ball in Montgomery, Alabama, a ball originally established in 1950 to entertain visiting athletes in a “North vs. South,” Blue-Gray football game. The Blue Gray Colonel’s Ball’s ideals of Southern gentility, women’s proclamation into womanhood and society and its ostentatious display of wealth and power remain today. Steeped in history, and staged in the “heart of Dixie,”

the Ball provides a lens through which to examine the tradition of the debutante experience as it exists in contemporary Southern culture.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW: “WAVE UPON WAVE OF WHITE CAMELLIAS”

Scholarly research on the debutante institution and the experience of debut has been extremely limited. A search of literature in a variety of disciplines—history, sociology, business, and women’s and gender studies—resulted in a single academic article. In “The Consumption of Insignificant Rituals: A Look at Debutante Balls,” Escalas (1993) sought to understand the “motivations to engage in and benefits received from participation in a debutante ball” (p. 714). Using ethnographic interviews with former debutantes, Escalas began with four *a priori* expected motivations; young women are motivated to be involved in debutante balls: to receive emotional and material attention from parents, gain social status and/or acceptance, attend a fun party, and meet eligible men, leading to marriage. She found evidence of each of these motivations in her interviews.

In addition, other motivations for participation emerged: the opportunity to make new friends and have fun with current friends, the fact that the ball raised money for a charitable cause, and the tradition, symbolism, and ritual elements associated with the experience. Escalas concluded:

The significance of the experience....was almost completely ignored or denied. Neither the rite of passage symbolism nor the attainment of social status significance of the ball were accepted as motivation for participation...the informants realized the implications of their involvement [their willingness to participate in what some consider an archaic and sexist tradition] in this event but were unwilling to accept them ...the modern celebration of this ritual creates dissonance for the debutantes, which they could reduce by emphasizing positive motivations for participation (p. 715).

Other than this presentation at a national consumer behavior conference, I was unable to locate any academic research articles examining the tradition, production, or evolution of the debutante ball. Nor have researchers examined the power relations operating within the institution of the ball. Instead, it is likely that the general public as well as the scholarly community have come to understand the debutante experience primarily through the popular press, coupled perhaps with the occasional novel or film. Typically in the popular press, articles related to debut are on the “society” pages, which generally focus on social events or “upper-class” activities thought to be of interest to the broader public. Stories frequently attempt to capture the experience of debut with a particular emphasis on two elements: the spectacle of the ball itself as one of great opulence, and the beauty and dress of the women who essentially serve as the “primary actors” in the ball. Often, there is a third emphasis on perfection, with frequent mention of the “perfection” of the women in regard to their dress and beauty as well as of the “perfect” ball, setting up a fairy-tale narrative.

Several articles are included here to illustrate the approach, tone, and content characterizing these popular press accounts. In addition to the recurring elements mentioned above, an emphasis on the notion of elitism and privilege of upper-class status is common.

For instance, in “Doing the Debutante Dip,” Ross (1997) adopts an almost comical narrative voice in characterizing key players in the orchestration of a Boston debutante ball, focusing on one family’s preparation for the event. The beauty of the young woman debuting is emphasized repeatedly and the article is filled with comments

made by the debutante's father. The debut, he says, is "women descending in their white dresses, 'wave upon wave of white camellias' " (Ross, 1997, p.73). The ball's coordinator, Hope Baker, a woman described as "short, stolid...with a cherubic face," is also quoted repeatedly: "Oh, you all look so gorgeous ladies, now keep smiling ladies!" (Ross, 1997, p.74).

The description of Baker at work is reminiscent of a "fairy godmother," making a fuss to turn the chaos of a stressful event into one of perfection and beauty. Descriptive imagery, such as that of the "white camellias," emphasizes the ball as a grand spectacle of beauty and magic. The article makes sense of the debutante experience as a "fairy-tale come true," a picturesque, almost mystical display.

In "The Debutantes Had a Ball," *People* magazine reports on the 44th Annual International Debutante Ball in New York City. The story focuses on the debutante experience through the perspective of one debutante, Olivia Henrietta Elizabeth Trapp, who was picked for the article due to her "traditional image of the Eastern elite" (Carlin, 1998, p.42). Trapp, nervous and excited, exclaims, "Everything is perfect!", "Everyone expects perfection!", and "Now there's this whole sense of who's going to be the most glamorous," (Carlin, 1998, p.43). The article focuses on the elaborate decorations, the complexity of preparing and acting appropriately in the elaborate production and the weighty prices attached to debut. Here too, the debutante's appearance (Carlin, 1998) is emphasized.

In a newspaper story, "The Promenader," in the *Montgomery Advertiser-Alabama Journal* (Peep, 1952), the author captures the mood of the third Blue and Gray Colonel's Ball in Montgomery, the event examined in this case study. Dresses are described in

intimate detail. Perfection is reiterated throughout: “Perfect Party” boasts one subheading; “Symbol of Perfection,” declares another. Comments on the young women’s appearance are abundant. One woman’s dress is noted in admiration to have “accented her tiny wasp-like waist” (p.5C).

In these articles, the association of wealth with both social expectations and with perfection is an underlying theme. Not only is there an expectation that the young women will behave in a particular way that only the elite understand in the context of a debutante ball, but there is the expectation of perfection or at least the image of perfection through the debutante ball itself. The ball, as represented, might be interpreted both as a positive experience highlighted by the excitement of the debutante and as a highly stressful one. The debutantes’ excitement can be understood as anxiety over achieving the perfection her social class expects of her.

In “Gown on the Border,” *Texas Monthly* reports on the Colonial Ball in Texas, highlighting the tradition of celebrating George Washington’s birthday. The debutantes are described as “anointed young women” with dresses that cost as much as \$20,000 (Wilson, 1995, p.95). The article focuses on the tradition of celebration, the families with “old money,” and the events leading up to the ball in which the debutantes partake (Wilson, 1995). The ball’s exclusivity, as one created for and opened to only upper class participants with a certain familial lineage is highlighted. The emphasis on the young women as the “anointed” ones serves to further distance the average reader from the debutante herself; the ball is only appropriate for a chosen few.

In “Debutante,” an article in *Life* magazine, the author highlights the day of debut in the 1999 International Debutante Ball for Catherine Elizabeth Hamilton. Written in a



documentary style, the article quotes the young debutante throughout the night as it progresses. Hamilton tells readers about the lessons she has learned in her debut experience. She believes these life lessons will come in handy, and she also remarks on the people like her she will meet through the event and the memories that will result from the night (“Debutante,” 1999, p. 52).

The young debutante finds meaning in her experience through her new exposure to social etiquette and making friends similar to her as well as the opportunity to participate in a grand orchestration that will always serve her as a fond memory of celebration and excitement in times to come.

Taken together, articles from the popular press tend to report merely on the “who, what, when, where, how and why” of the ball. The complexity of the ball itself and the social relationships inherent in its staging are largely invisible. Instead, the ball is depicted rather simply as a “social event,” albeit an elaborate one; the debutantes are objectified, a part of the ball’s setting. While indeed providing important background for my study, this descriptive information hardly begins to capture the *meaning* of an event so rich in cultural significance.

With the exception of the single study identified at the beginning of this review, the *debutante’s* perspective of the *meaning* of the debut experience remains largely unexplored. Yet, that perspective can provide insight, unobtainable in any other way, into the prevailing ideologies underlying debutante balls today. How do the participants involved make sense of the social inequity inherent in a structure that emphasizes exclusivity and membership in upper class society?

Additionally, the history of the ball as a “rite of passage” into adulthood for women and the traditional emphasis on meeting suitors for a potential husband are worthy of close examination. Other points of interest are the debutantes’ expectations of the “coming out” experience, and of course, an examination of the experience itself. The addition of the debutante’s perspective as she consumes different aspects of her debut (i.e., expectations, the ball itself, reflection and reinterpretation of initial expectations) can serve as a lens through which to examine the process of cultural meaning-making. This study, as previously noted, is grounded in cultural studies and feminist theory. The following chapter briefly examines those theoretical underpinnings.

## CHAPTER 3

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CULTURAL STUDIES & FEMINIST THEORY

We use the word culture in these two senses: to mean a whole way of life—the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning—the special processes of discovery and creative effort. Some writers reserve the word for one or the other of these senses; I insist on both, and on the significance of their conjunction. The questions I ask about our culture are questions about our general and common purposes, yet also questions about deep personal meanings. Culture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind (Williams, quoted in Couldry, 2000, p. 24).

[Culture is] a terrain on which takes place a continual struggle over meaning, in which subordinate groups attempt to resist the imposition of meanings which bear the interests of dominant groups. It is that which makes culture ideological (Storey, 1996, p.3).

#### **Why study culture?**

Culture is a highly ambiguous, complex and contested concept (O’Sullivan, et al. 1994; Sardar and Van Loon, 1998; Couldry, 2000). The study of culture is both substantive and epistemological. It is substantive “in that it refers directly to the increased importance of cultural practices and institutions in every area of our social lives,” and it is epistemological in that it is concerned with the production and origin of knowledge (du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997, p. 1).

The study of culture has grown increasingly popular in numerous academic disciplines as scholars continue to explore culture as not merely reflective of existing power structures (i.e. – political and economic) but as constitutive of them as well. Du Gay, et al. (1997) note that “in recent years ‘culture’ has been promoted to an altogether

more important role as theorists have begun to argue that because all social practices are meaningful practices, they are all fundamentally cultural” (p.2).

## **Cultural Studies**

Like the concept of culture itself, cultural studies is difficult to define, partly because of its primary features, “its openness and theoretical versatility, its reflexive even self-conscious mood, and especially, the importance of critique,” (Johnson, 1986-1987, p. 38). Additionally, many different research approaches identify themselves as cultural studies but have important theoretical differences. This is particularly true of the British and American versions of cultural studies.

Cultural studies developed in post WWII Britain at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and the University of Birmingham. The work of Hoggart (1957), Williams (1958, 1963, 1983), E.P.Thompson (1978), and Hall (1980, 1981, 1982) are widely recognized as “foundational” texts.

At its core, cultural studies explores the relationship between culture and power structures. It looks at “the complex nature of culture in relation to issues of power; the power relations...which affect who is represented and how, who speaks and who is silent, what counts as ‘culture’ and what does not” (Couldry, 2000, p.2).

Thus, cultural studies is not an external examination limited to mere structural relationships, but includes the experiential process of how people interpret the world in which they live. Culture, then, is “the process through which we circulate and struggle over the meanings of our social experience, social relations, and therefore *ourselves*” (Byars & Dell, 1992).

In the U.S., cultural studies became increasingly important in the discipline of mass communication as an alternative and critique of the “dominant paradigm” of communication research (Gitlin, 1978). In a seminal piece, “A Cultural Approach to Communication,” Carey (1975) distinguished the transmission view of communication which characterized the dominant paradigm, with what he called the ritual view of communication. The transmission view theorized communication as “a process whereby messages are transmitted and distributed in space for the control of distance and people” (p. 3). In critiquing that model, Carey argued that “Society exists not only by transmission, by communication, but it may fairly be said to exist in transmission, in communication” (Carey, 1975, p.2).

Taking this view, communication research moved from an emphasis on technological advances in communication to the everyday interactions of life:

In a ritual definition, communication is linked to terms such as sharing, participation, association, fellowship, and the possession of a common faith. This definition exploits the ancient identity and common roots of the terms commonness, communion, community and communication. A ritual view of communication is not directed toward the extension of messages in space but the maintenance of society in time, not the act of imparting information, but the representation of shared beliefs (Carey, 1975, p.6).

Adopting this definition, cultural studies emphasizes the social construction of meaning. “Communication,” Carey (1975) wrote, “is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed” (p.10). Recognizing that meaning is socially constructed suggests that power relations are formed within and through these same symbolic processes. In effect, cultural studies not only has potential to uncover meaning but to uncover *processes of power* as well. In this context, research is seen to be

a political activity. Yet, it is precisely the reluctance to include power in cultural analysis that has distinguished the American version of cultural studies from the British. My own view of cultural studies is strongly influenced by the British version.

In addition, cultural studies is grounded in the belief that to understand experience and meaning-making, one must recognize the complexity of the world in which we live:

Believing...man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law, but an interpretative one in search of meaning (Geertz, 1973, p. 5).

The study of meaning-making from a cultural studies perspective requires a model that acknowledges the complexity of experience and meaning and also incorporates power.

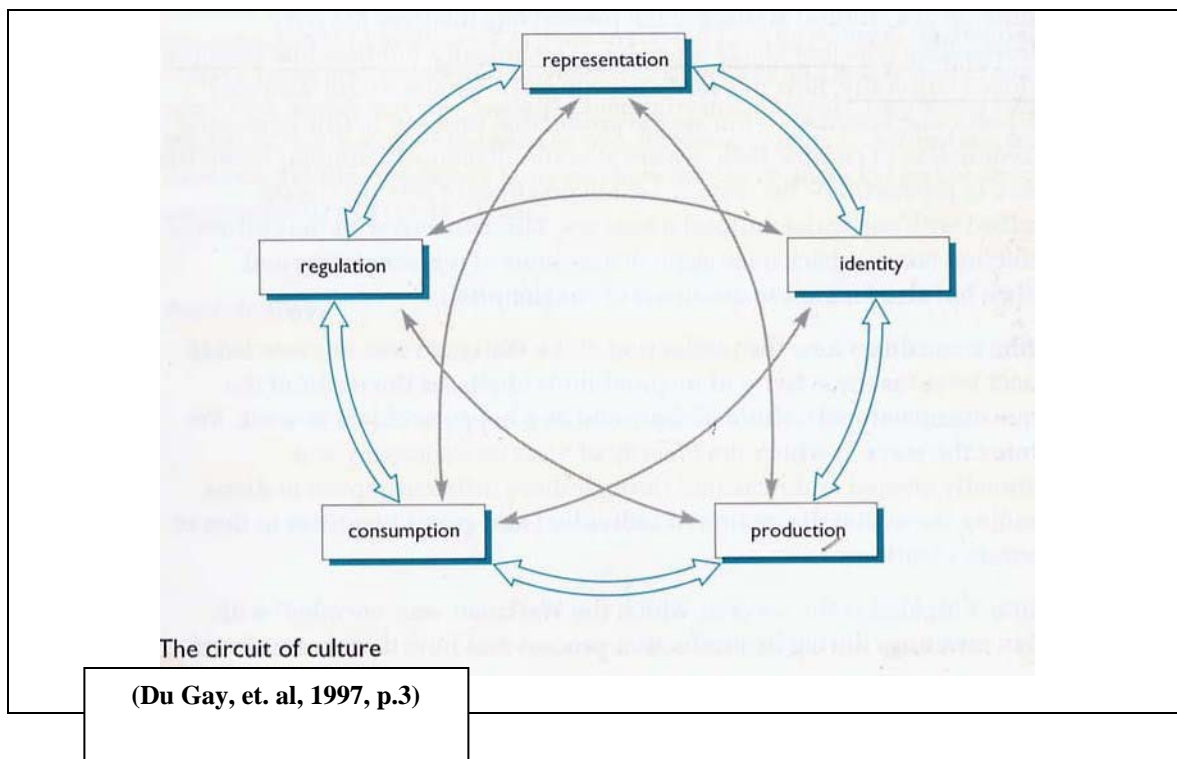
### **The Circuit of Culture**

What if existing theories—and the modes of research associated with them—actually express different sides of the same complex process? What if they are all true, but only as far as they go, true for those parts of the process which they have most clearly in view? What if they are all false or incomplete, liable to mislead, in that they are only partial, and therefore cannot grasp the process as a whole? (Johnson, 1986-87, pp. 45-46)

Richard Johnson (1986-87), a scholar at the Birmingham school, advanced a “circuit of culture” both as a “guide to the desirable directions of future [research] approaches,” and as a diagram of the circulation of meaning in culture. His model provided a circular framework through which to interpret various “moments” in the meaning-making process. He identified four moments: *production*, *text*, *readings*, and

*lived culture*. A more recent adaptation of Johnson’s model by a group of British Cultural Studies scholars (du Gay, et. al, 1997) shares many of the assumptions of the earlier model, but identifies five “moments” in which meaning is transacted: *representation, identity, consumption, production, and regulation* (Figure 1-1). Like Johnson (1986-87), du Gay et al. (1997) view these moments as interdependent, distinct, but not discrete.

**Figure 1-1:**



Thus, meaning is produced within a certain context, negotiated and ever-changing. *Representation* takes into account how meaning is reproduced through language and images. *Identity* “alludes to how a particular cultural product—text, object, practice—acts as a marker that identifies a particular group.....in other words, how

meanings create an identity” (Acosta-Alzuru, 1999, p. 46). Cultural products are encoded with meanings both in the *production* moment and in the *consumption* moment.

*Production* refers to how messages are technically and culturally produced within a certain context. *Consumption* refers to the meanings that are produced when people incorporate the cultural product into everyday life. *Regulation* refers to how meaning we make comes to define our cultural practice (du Gay et al., 1997).

It does not matter where on the circuit you start, as you have to go the whole way around before your study is complete. What is more, each part of the circuit is taken up and reappears in the next part...they are the elements which taken together are what we mean by doing a “cultural study” of a particular object (du Gay, et al., 1997, p.4).

Thus, the circuit of culture provides a framework in which to examine meaning-making processes, taking into account both the complexity of those processes and the power operating within them.

### **Debutante Ball as Text**

[Popular culture] is an area that is profoundly mythic...It is there that we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are represented. Not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time (Hall, 1992, p. 22).

[Viewing] culture as a particular way of life would allow us to speak of such practices as the seaside holiday, the celebration of Christmas, and youth subcultures, as examples of culture. These are usually referred to as *lived* cultures or cultural practices (Williams quoted in Storey, 2001, p. 2).

As suggested in the comments of Hall and Williams above, within cultural studies, culture, as well as our ways of defining culture, involves the experiential. More



recently, Meehan (2001) has called for the “need to theorize culture in a way that recognizes human beings as well as texts” (p.1).

The roles of cultural artifacts and cultural practices increasingly have been entering the academic study of communication through cultural studies. Much like more traditional communication texts, cultural artifacts have come to be recognized as constituting a form of representation and can be viewed as part of the overall communicative meaning-making process (Acosta-Alzuru, 2003). For example, Acosta-Alzuru (1999) identified American Girl dolls as a “part of the cultural universe of young girls in this country” (p. 7) and viewed the dolls, as well as the more traditional catalogs and books about the dolls as “texts,” consumed both by girls and their mothers. Similarly, Fursich & Roushanzamir (2001) examined corporate museums as a text. They emphasized the “social construction rather than the technological construction of texts as meaning” as a sort of set designed to “guide audience response” and reactions in a particular way which influences the meaning-making process (p. 379).

I posit, then, that a debutante ball can be viewed as a text in much the same way as a museum can be viewed and understood as a highly scripted and orchestrated text. In fact, the debutante ball constitutes a very complex text. Although it is an orchestrated production of sorts, its purpose is not only to be “viewed” or “consumed” by the audience, rather its main purpose is for the debutantes to “come out” and be presented to society. This observation has a number of implications. First, the ball is centered around what appears to be the subject, the debutante herself. This assumption of course then locates the debutantes as both “producers” of the ball itself (as they are engaged in the production of the ball as viewed by the audience), “consumers” of the meaning that is

derived from the experience for the debutante, and indeed as “representations” within the text of the ball. What is interesting to note, however, is the extent to which the context of the ball is highly-regulated, and the debutantes are produced as an object within the text. Therefore, the debutantes while appearing to be the subject are actually produced in a way that makes them objects even while they are part of the production of the text (as the text is actually built around the appearance of the debutantes as the subjects of the ball).

Thus, the reader or audience “consumes” the debutante ball in a fashion highly similar to that with which a reader or audience consumes the meaning presented for him or her in, for example, the highly orchestrated and craftily prepared text of a television program or a newspaper.

Using the circuit of culture in an oversimplified fashion, one can examine the debutante ball’s meaning as *representation*, its beauty, opulence, staging, and indeed, the “characters” of the debutantes and their partners; as bound to the woman’s *identity* as a debutante; as *produced* and made meaningful by the ball’s regulators and participants; as *consumed* by the debutante and by the audience as well as the readers of popular press accounts; and as *regulation*, the incorporation of meaning in everyday practice.

In this way, *the identity of a debutante is produced in all of these moments*. Her identity is bound to her own production of the meaning of debutante, to the regulators’ production of the meaning of debutante, by her consumption (i.e. experience) of the ball itself, and by her representation and subsequent consumption of her identity in popular press. Furthermore, each of these stages of the circuit of culture is interconnected and cannot fully be separated from the other. However, to study one or more parts of the

circuit of culture is to take into account all of these steps and processes as important components of meaning construction.

I posit then that a debutante ball, unquestioningly the quintessential socialite event, constitutes a cultural text. Furthermore, cultural studies grounds the assumption that a cultural text is a communicative one. As such, the debutante ball, like any social institution, creates and produces a particular set of consciousnesses and ideologies that can be examined within its context (Johnson, et al., 2004).

### **Feminist Theory**

Adopting a cultural studies approach, I view meaning as socially constructed and recognize the debutante ball as a cultural text. Adopting a feminist perspective, I am “working from the assumption that the communication of gender ideology is a central function of cultural messages” (Dow and Condit, 2005, p. 456).

Feminist scholar Rosemary Putnam Tong (1998) writes: “feminism is not a monolithic ideology ... all feminists do not think alike” (1). Indeed, feminism encompasses a range of different approaches: liberal, radical, existentialist, ecological, psychoanalytic, etc. Though these approaches vary widely in their explanations for women’s oppression and in their proposed solutions to the problem of oppression, they all share precisely that goal: seeking explanations and proposing solutions for women’s oppression. Like cultural studies, feminist theory also attempts to explain sources of power and to uncover processes by which power is maintained.

Feminist media studies and feminist mass communication research have become increasingly popular in light of the discipline’s interest in cultural studies. In a recent

article which surveyed the state of feminist communication scholarship, Dow and Condit (2005) suggest:

...the moniker of “feminist” is reserved for research that studies communication theories and practices from a perspective that ultimately is oriented toward the achievement of “gender justice,” a goal that takes into account the ways that gender always already intersects with race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class... Feminist research has demonstrated that all scholarship ultimately proceeds from evaluative, political assumptions, but feminist research does so explicitly. As a result, it is generally more self-reflective about operating from an orientation that links its specific data or theoretical or methodological concerns to a perspective that seeks to ameliorate the systems of domination that operate through the axis of gender (although never exclusively so) (p.449).

Thus, feminist scholarship is political in that it seeks to uncover gender inequities thereby allowing the opportunity for amelioration. For example, in *Material Girls: Making Sense of Feminist Cultural Theory*, Walters (1995) examines media images as a cultural text. She emphasizes the importance of the way in which representations are made meaningful. In other words, she examines how the audience interprets meaning through representations themselves rather than merely examining what representations appear to portray. To illustrate this point in an oversimplified fashion, critical feminist research seeks to identify how and why women internalize harmful images of women, thereby uncovering processes of meaning-making as well as notions of power.

## **Gender as Performativity**

One feminist theory of particular interest here is Judith Butler's notion of "gender as performativity" (Butler, 1990). Butler posits anti-essentialist notions of "female" and subsequently argues that gender is socially constructed. In her argument, she quotes the theorist, Simone de Beauvoir who famously stated, "One is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman" (qtd. in Butler, 1990, p. 270). In this way Butler explains that "gender is in no way a stable identity or a locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1990, p.270).

Butler also argues that gender is tied to social appearance and therefore tied to cultural norms and expectations which emphasize and dichotomize gender and sex. Her ultimate argument is that gender is something that is only held together through a variety of actions, maintaining and reproducing various social expectations that are inextricably bound to gender. Therefore, she theorizes that gender is performed in the various acts through which a biological woman assumes "female" as her role (Butler, 1990).

While this theory has implications for examining gender behavior in everyday life, it also has extremely important implications for the examination of the text of a debutante ball. Since the debutante ball is a scripted event, at first glance, one might assume that Butler's theory would not apply because the role of the debutante is one that is taught and subsequently acted out. In this way, it is not a self-assumed role of "acting as a woman" but rather one that is scripted for the debutante to assume. However, a different interpretation might suggest that the debutante identity is a gender identity entirely unto itself. Further examination will uncover the complexity of the debutante

identity in relation to the gender identity, exploring whether the role of debutante is a self-assumed gender role or simply the self-assumed performance of a role.

The debutante ball is of particular interest, in that a debutante cannot be reduced to something as simple as a performance of a particular identity. Rather, a debutante can be understood as a gender identity all its own, constructed, negotiated, transformed, and renegotiated in each moment of the circuit of culture. The assumption of the role of debutante as well as the consumption experience of the debutante ball can be examined using Judith Butler's notion of "gender as performativity."

### **Research Questions**

This study has one primary research question and two follow-up questions:

**How does a debutante understand and make sense of her debutante experience? In what way does she make sense of her identity as "debutante" in the process of her "production" as a part of the ball and as a "consumer" of the debutante ball itself? In what ways does Butler's notion of "gender as performativity" apply to the debutante ball?**

While this study involves the materiality of the ball itself, it also includes the debutantes' roles as both producers and constituents of the text, that is, as representations. Furthermore, since the cultural text is a lived experience, the debutante exists as both a producer and a consumer of the text.

## CHAPTER 4

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Research Design: A Case Study**

This research will develop as a qualitative case study. In Stake's (1995) typology, the case study is instrumental, in that it is not merely of intrinsic interest, but explores and then interprets participants' experiences with a goal of better understanding the "debutante experience." The case selected for this study is the Blue Gray Colonel's 2005 Ball in Montgomery, Alabama.

I chose the Blue and Gray Colonel's debutante ball to take advantage of my previous knowledge of and participation in the ball as well as for other practical reasons, including increased access to the ball's participants. In addition, because the ball is set in Montgomery, Al., in the "heart of Dixie," this particular ball is characteristically Southern, a point of interest in the development and perpetuation of debutante balls in the South. While Montgomery has an abundance of debutante balls, this one was chosen in part because it is held during the women's freshman year of college. As it is becoming increasingly popular to be debuted in several balls, this particular ball captures the women's *first* experience of debut and therefore naturally lends itself to a more viable case study in which to seek the answer to the research questions, than would a later ball, which might include participants who have had several debutante experiences.

Although I knew the focus of my study was going to be on the debutantes' consumption experience, one of my first methodological decisions was to include a preliminary interview to determine the foundation of the ball before those debutante

interviews began. In order to procure background information, I interviewed the Blue and Gray Colonel's Ball co-chairman (Although I mention that there are in fact co-chairmen of the ball, the one to whom I often refer throughout my research is this particular man whom I interviewed). I have included the information gathered in that interview, coupled with my personal experience as a former debutante, in the section which follows.

### **History & Background of the Blue and Gray Colonel's Ball**

The Blue and Gray Colonel's Ball in Montgomery, Alabama was established in 1950 by the City of Montgomery as a way to entertain visiting athletes who were in town for a Blue Gray (North vs. South) football challenge that pitted athletes against each other. The context of the ball changed over the years as the football tradition faded away, but the tradition to continue the ball remained in tact.

The first debutantes were daughters and friends of the eight or nine men who were the original organizers; eight to ten debutantes were presented. They were presented, "introduced to society," wearing white wedding gowns.

The ball has changed tremendously over the years as has the purpose and intent of the ball. The ball has transitioned from a small, private party to a community-wide event that takes 200-plus people to coordinate and orchestrate. Every intricate detail, from the elaborate decorations and choreographed debutante dances to the presentation order, the orchestra, the band, and the catering is given considerable attention. Typically, the production cost of this ball is approximately \$100,000.

The ball is overseen by an eight-member board. Military influence is clearly visible in the ball; Blue Gray Board members and participants often refer to the Board as



“the staff,” and members are recognized as “Colonels.” The organization is openly a men’s organization with the purpose of “recognizing the male leadership in Montgomery.” The ceremony is to recognize these civic and community leaders and to provide them with an opportunity to present their daughters to Montgomery society.

The staff handpicks Colonels to become a part of the Blue Gray organization; their daughters or granddaughters will become the subsequent class of debutantes. The Colonels are selected based on civic and social recognition, and the debutantes are chosen as a function of the Colonel’s standing as a member of the ball.

The program co-chairman for the ball admitted that the archiving traditions of the ball are extremely weak, partly due to the fact that members of the ball consider themselves to be forward-thinking. He points to the fact that the Blue Gray Colonel’s Ball was the first of the Montgomery balls to accept Jewish members and has invited African American members as well. However, to this day, there have been no African American debutantes. In addition, the co-chairman points out that other balls have traditionally recognized Montgomery families and that the Blue Gray Ball differs in that it is more inclusive, accepting long-time Montgomerians as well as new members of their community.

The Board itself is self-perpetuating, appointing new members when old members are ready to retire. For example, new members are nominated by old members, and these candidates are carefully considered by the Board. The 8 members of the Board must unanimously agree in order for nominees to be asked to join.

As the purpose of the ball has changed, so too have the roles played by the debutantes. As “coming out” is considered “archaic” by some, the main purpose for the

event is not to be viewed by society but to enjoy and participate in the “leading college social event of the Christmas season.” Even as this view is expressed, the term “coming out” and “debuting to society” are frequently used throughout the debutante process, and the experience is described as one of the most important, defining experiences in a young woman’s life. The ball is held the Saturday prior to Christmas and always recognizes college freshmen women. These considerations make the ball different from others held at different times of year that present women further along in their collegiate experience.

The Blue Gray Colonel’s Ball also differs in terms of its rigorous requirements. Debutantes must fill certain obligations such as recruiting dependable escorts and participating in two extremely intense rehearsals during which they learn a well-orchestrated and choreographed dance. They must learn how to properly curtsey and how to waltz with their fathers, and they must be prepared to do so on cue as the spotlight hits them. Throughout these rehearsals, the importance of proper social etiquette and manners is stressed.

According to the ball co-chair, the notion of tradition and loyalty to tradition is of utmost importance. As such, it is common to have presentees who are legacies (that is, they have family members who have been presented in the past).

A tradition of this ball, as of many other debutante balls, is the identification of a Queen. The Queen is “the titular representative of all other young ladies.” She is the Daughter of the Commander who is selected by the Board. She represents her family as well as all the other debutantes who have been considered for this position but have not been chosen. In this way, the Queen’s role is “purely honorific.”

The Queen's gown is typically more ornately adorned than the other debutantes, and she also wears a spectacular cape and crown as opposed to the debutantes' simple tiara. She is seated on a throne, positioned center stage during the production. The throne is typically atop a platform, and a red carpet extends from the platform, down the stairs which lead to the platform and often several yards beyond. Traditionally, when the Queen is presented, she rises from the throne and descends down the stairs until she reaches the main area of the stage where debutantes are lined up on either side of the red carpet. During the presentation, the Queen typically waltzes center stage with her Commander, the title given to the Queen's Colonel and presenter, and greets all of the debutantes who respond with a curtsy as she passes.

Each debutante wears a white wedding gown (without the veil) with white shoes, long white gloves and a tiara. The debutantes are presented one by one in a highly rehearsed production in which the Colonels escort the debutantes with their dates filing behind. As each debutante reaches center stage, her father takes her hand, and she extends her bouquet, places one foot behind the other, leans into a deep bow and tilts her head downward until her skirt billows around her. She then rises back up, re-tilts her head, withdraws her bouquet, and files to the side of the stage.

After this stage of the presentation, there is a choreographed dance in which the debutantes dance with their fathers and their escorts. At one point in the dance, the fathers step aside to allow the young escorts to take their places. This is referred to as "the changing of the guards," the symbolic "giving away" of their daughters. Typically, the dance ends in a magnificent finale, the grand Tableau, and guests are invited to join

the debutantes, dates and fathers for an evening of dance and fun. These formalities give way to a grand party.

According to the co-chair, women benefit from the debutante experience in that they are introduced to many adults in the community and have an opportunity to form close bonds with fellow debutante class members. In addition, the debutante experience is designed to instill a keener appreciation of the social life in the community and to heighten the woman's opinion of herself and her success as a socially responsible citizen.

In the context of our interview, the Blue and Gray co-chair recognized that others may not consider it desirable or honorable to be presented at the ball. He noted that several girls have declined their invitation to be presented because they felt the ball was "archaic rather than modern and exclusive rather than inclusive." However, he expressed his hope that the prevailing perception is one that views it as an honor to be asked to join and a privilege to be presented. In addition, it is an experience that socially benefits young women as well as recognizes their families for valuable contributions to their community.

## **Research Design\***

### *Assumptions Guiding Methodological Choices*

I began with the assumption that multiple realities are socially constructed, and dynamic (Berger and Luckmann, 1990). In a methodological sense, this assumption emphasizes the debutantes' perspective, privileging their voices over my own. That is, in

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\* IRB approval was obtained. All interviewees signed a consent form or gave verbal consent. (IRB Approval # 2006-10233-0).

privileging the debutantes' voices, this study will privilege the *emic* (culture-bound, insider) rather than the *etic* (researcher, outsider) experience.

Viewing meaning as socially constructed, cultural studies “aligns strongly with an anti-objectivist view of knowledge” (Johnson, et al., 2004, p. 17). Johnson, et al. write, “the object of knowledge is not something that we find as an object, separate from ourselves. Our participation in our subject of research is, on the contrary, inevitable” (Johnson, et al., 2004, p. 17). Thus, research is a collaborative experience. As Geertz (1973) noted: “[W]hat we call our data are really our own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to...” (p. 9).

Subjectivity is acknowledged, accepted and appropriate in the research enterprise. In addition, acknowledgement of subjectivity allows for examination and self-reflection on the motivation for one’s research.

***Subjectivity Statement: I was a debutante.***

I was a participant in the Blue Gray Colonel’s Ball in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1999 as a freshman at Mercer University. My immediate reaction when I learned that this was a family tradition in which I was to participate was that it was an antiquated ritual that put women on display. I viewed the cultural practice as objectifying to women and something that was overtly classist in that only “moneyed” Montgomery families were participants. In addition, I thought it was inappropriate that a “queen” to whom the other debutantes had to bow was chosen.

However, I eventually acquiesced to my parents’ desire for me to participate. Additionally, I noticed that my opinion changed throughout the process of the ball which

included an intensive all-day rehearsal over Thanksgiving break, a rehearsal the day of the ball, and the ball itself. Retrospectively, I realize that my opinion evolved in a large part due to the consumption experience of the ball, and the influence that experience had on my initial perceptions and assumptions about the ball. This observation as well as my own experiences will be further re-visited in the analysis and conclusion sections.

The steps in which we, as debutantes, participated happened very quickly. Then the experience was over; there was very little time for reflection during the experience itself. For me, the meaning-making process continued in later self-reflection. Recognizing the nature of my own debutante experience, this case study was purposefully designed to encourage self-reflection at various points in the experience in order to capture the dynamics of each debutante's meaning-making process. Specific methodological choices reflected these considerations.

### ***Methods***

As the assumed subject of the cultural text of a debutante ball is the debutante herself, she was the lens through which the research questions were explored. That is, I sought to illuminate the production of meaning within the context of a debutante ball from the debutante's perspective, focusing on her construction of identity both as a producer and a consumer of the cultural text. I chose in-depth interviews as my primary method. In addition, I coupled these interviews with non-participant observation at the 2005 Blue Gray Colonel's Ball. This observation was not conducted in a formal sense; rather, it was part of an overall effort to incorporate my knowledge and understanding of the ball into the interview process.

### ***Participants***

I was able to gain access to the debutantes more freely because I had been a participant in the same ball six years earlier. This afforded me an opportunity to position myself with the debutantes as a part of their collective identity, rather than as an “outsider” studying their debutante process. Furthermore, because my mother and family knew some of the people in the ball, I was granted access to contact information from the list of debutantes for 2005.

The list of debutantes, then, served as the cohort from which I was able to select participants. I contacted everyone on the list, and those who were willing became my participants. In this way, participants self-selected based upon their interest in my study. As indicated in the section which follows, my research design involved a two-stage interview process. I successfully obtained commitments from 10 debutantes out of 24 to participate in the initial telephone interview prior to the ball and 8 debutantes to participate in the “one-on-one” in-depth interviews after the ball.

Realizing that the debutante experience was intense and much more extensive than simply the ball itself, the study design included two interview phases. In this way, I hoped to capture the dynamics of the debutantes’ meaning-making as they engaged in the process.

### ***Phase I: November 28, 2005 – December 15, 2005***

This portion of the research was more closely aligned with the representation and identity moments in the circuit of culture because it dealt with ideas and images that the

women expressed prior to the consumption of the debutante experience. I wanted to uncover the richness of each debutante's experiences in the days immediately following the first rehearsal when her impressions surrounding the ball itself were beginning to form. This rehearsal served as the first introduction to the debutante ball itself, and as such, it can also be understood as the beginning of the consumption experience.

Regulation and production also entered in as the debutantes came to understand the expectations within this particular context as well as the rules that served to control the environment and produce the desired effect in an orderly fashion.

In-person interviews are ideal when trying to cultivate an environment conducive to uncovering rich, experiential data. However, I was unable to attend the rehearsal due to my own academic obligations, and the debutantes were only in Montgomery for one or two days, quickly scattering geographically to various academic institutions across the United States. Hence, scheduling and conducting face-to-face-interviews was impossible. As such, largely out of necessity, I conducted telephone interviews.

The semi-structured interview guide for this phase of the interview process was designed to encourage the women to speak openly about the experiences leading up to the ball and to capture their rehearsal experiences. I also probed each woman's thoughts regarding the "debutante identity," thus perhaps tapping into the earliest stages of the meaning-making experience regarding her role as a debutante (Refer to the Pre-ball interview guide in the Appendix).

In order to make the telephone interview process as comfortable as possible for the women, I used my familiarity with the debutante process and often talked about my own experience as a debutante. I also drew upon my family and community connections



to create a comfortable atmosphere of familiarity. I believe these efforts were successful in building the women's trust in me as an interviewer and in establishing a rapport that assured the women felt they could speak openly and frankly.

***Phase II: December 18, 2005- January 8, 2006***

Recognizing again that in-person interviews are best at uncovering rich, in-depth experiential information, I scheduled and conducted eight one-on-one interviews during my Christmas vacation. I contacted all 10 debutantes who had participated in the pre-ball interview; three of them were unable to participate in Phase II. In addition, I was able to successfully reach the Queen of the ball (whom I was unable to reach for a pre-ball interview) and ask her to participate as well.

In this phase of the interview process, because all the women, with the exception of the Queen, had spoken with me previously in the pre-ball interview, the level of comfort, familiarity and rapport was even greater than before. Interviews took place in the days just following the ball, so the experience was still fresh and exciting for the women; most of them seemed eager and extremely excited to reflect upon and explain the details of the ball. The Queen also seemed at ease in her interview, and she was gracious enough to include her full account of the entire experience in that one interview.

The second stage of interviews was designed to give the participants some time for self-reflection after the debutante ball. I hoped to capture the meaning-making process and sought to explore the notion of the women's identity being tied to that of the "debutante" identity. It also gave me an opportunity to compare the respondents' initial expectations prior to the ball and their impressions and reflections after the

“consumption” of the ball and the entire debutante experience (Refer to Post-ball interview guide in Appendix). This phase, then, focused primarily on the debutante as a producer of the text and as a consumer of that text.

In both phases of the interview process, a great deal of consideration was given to emerging themes; often an unexpected answer would guide me to probe in the direction in which the debutante led. As both “expected” and “unexpected” themes emerged, I was able to incorporate them into subsequent interviews.

### ***Data Organization and Analysis***

All interviews were recorded on a digital recording device and/or a back-up traditional recorder. The files were transferred as audio files on my computer, saved, and later transcribed for purposes of analysis.

During transcription, all debutantes were given pseudonyms and numeric assignments; I used this tracking method to take hand-written notes on each of the interviews and transcripts, paying particular attention to the debutantes’ evolving attitudes and opinions from the “pre” to the “post-ball” interviews. Two pre-ball interviews were conducted without a subsequent “post-ball” interview to follow. I conducted a stand alone “post-ball” interview with the Queen of the ball. These three interviews were analyzed in their own right.

The debutantes were assigned a number (e.g. “1”) with a subsequent number following the decimal which indicated whether it was a pre-ball interview (i.e., 1.1) or a post-ball interview (1.2). As a result, each debutante’s interview and stage of the debutante process could be easily tracked according to her numeric reference. As

previously mentioned, not all debutantes were available for each stage of the interview process; this system provided a clear indication of the debutante's particular stage of the debutante experience even if they hadn't participated in both interviews (See Table 1-1).

**Table 1-1**  
**Numeric References Assigned**

<b><u>DEBUTANTE</u></b>	<b><u>PRE-BALL INTERVIEW</u></b>	<b><u>POST-BALL INTERVIEW</u></b>
<b>Debutante #1</b>	<b>1.1</b>	<b>1.2</b>
<b>Debutante #2</b>	<b>2.1</b>	<b>2.2</b>
<b>Debutante #3</b>	<b>3.1</b>	<b>NA</b>
<b>Debutante #4</b>	<b>4.1</b>	<b>4.2</b>
<b>Debutante #5</b>	<b>5.1</b>	<b>5.2</b>
<b>Debutante #6</b>	<b>6.1</b>	<b>NA</b>
<b>Debutante #7</b>	<b>7.1</b>	<b>7.2</b>
<b>Debutante #8</b>	<b>8.1</b>	<b>NA</b>
<b>Debutante #9</b>	<b>9.1</b>	<b>9.2</b>
<b>Debutante #10</b>	<b>10.1</b>	<b>10.2</b>
<b>Debutante #11</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>11.2</b>

After each interview phase, I read, re-read and carefully analyzed the data obtained. In qualitative research, data analysis is thorough, rigorous and on-going. In this way, my thoughts about the interview process would extend to the next interview, and each subsequent interview would build upon the knowledge that I had gained from the previous one.

In my analysis of the transcriptions, I soon recognized a number of recurring themes emerging from the data. Certain themes were consistently shared opinions; they were positions and interpretations commonly held among many or all of the debutantes. Other themes emerged in a more complex way; while the subject matter and the experiences were similar among the debutantes, individual debutantes expressed different interpretations, indicating several had negotiated different meanings from the same experience.

In the chapter which follows, I will recount, interpret and analyze these women's accounts of the debutante experience, as well as provide an overview of the emerging themes in the context of the theoretical framework used in this study.

## CHAPTER 5

### ANALYSIS

This research examines the debutante ball as a cultural text. The framework of interpretation is the circuit of culture, introduced earlier (see Chapter 3), which provides a lens of analysis into how meaning is created and reproduced within culture. The circuit of culture provides a framework in which to study the social construction of meaning; that is, how meaning is produced, reproduced, transformed and negotiated in culture. The model posits that meaning-making takes place in each of five moments: identity, representation, consumption, production and regulation moments. These moments are distinct but not discrete. Each moment is dependent upon the others, and all are essential to the complex process of creating cultural meaning.

As noted in the earlier discussion of culture studies, within the circuit of culture, *identity* “alludes to how a particular cultural product—text, object, practice—acts as a marker that identifies a particular group” (Acosta-Alzuru, 1999, p. 46). *Representation* takes into account how meaning is reproduced through language and images. Cultural products are encoded with meanings both in the *production* moment and in the *consumption* moment. *Production* refers to how messages are technically and culturally produced within a certain context. *Consumption* refers to the meanings that are produced when the people incorporate the cultural product into everyday life. *Regulation* refers to the way in which meaning is produced comes to define our cultural practices (du Gay et al., 1997).

In this study, the debutantes in the ball are involved in the meaning-making process in rather unique and complex ways; they are at once producers and consumers of the text. That is, they are simultaneously consuming the debutante experience even while they are producing the very context of that consumption. An analogous situation might be one in which an actor is interpreting a play while playing the lead role.

In the previous chapter, I discussed how the analysis proceeded noting that themes began to emerge from the data quite early in the analysis. Here, themes are interpreted, analyzed, and categorized relative to the framework of the circuit of culture. The analysis is presented in three main sections: General Thematic Analysis; Meaning-Making Moments within the Circuit of Culture; Feminist Applications.

### **General Thematic Analysis**

This analysis is based on themes which emerged during the interviews. These themes were often interconnected and overlapping; they are dealt with individually but with acknowledgment of the larger context of the circuit of culture. The remaining themes can be understood outside of the context of the circuit of culture. They are included because they are important and accurate characterizations of the debutantes' experiences and they add an extra dimension to the depth of the findings.

#### ***Theme #1: The ambiguous identity***

If a word is given meaning through the specific context in which it originates, what does the word capture if the context has changed, and changed dramatically? Such

is the case of the perplexing and heavily charged word “debutante.” The meaning of the word “debutante” emerged when women’s clear purpose and function in life was to marry either within or above their social class and at a time when the debutante ball’s purpose was obvious. A young woman’s identity as a debutante was fairly unambiguous; she was someone who was to be presented as someone suitable to wed. However, as women have become increasingly financially secure, their sense of identity has shifted away from the necessity of marriage. How then do women who perceive themselves to be “modern” or “progressive” reconcile a traditional ritual of an earlier era in today’s modern society? How do they understand the purpose of the debutante ball? Do they internalize or distance themselves from the traditional “debutante identity” as they assume the title of “debutante” in very different times?

These were not questions easily answered by the women interviewed; they struggled to make sense of what it meant to be a debutante in 2005 and grappled over the purpose of the ball when they compared what they were experiencing as debutantes today with the traditional notions of being a debutante. In nearly every interview, the women expressed a static, consistent definition of “debutante” as defined and conceptualized in a very traditional sense. Yet, as I inquired into the meaning of a “modern debutante” or what it meant to be a debutante, a traditional role in a modern society, the meaning behind the word, and in essence, the meaning of the identity, became more and more ambiguous. Women were often only able to define the word through reference to its traditional meaning. Frequently, it was difficult for them to articulate how the meaning of the word had changed; there seemed to be little or no understanding of the modern meaning of the word debutante.

Women often explained that the traditional role of the debutante ball was to present a young woman of a marrying age to potential suitors. Similarly, debutante balls were also a social occasion for the entire upper-class family. Others noted that the debutante ball represented a rite of passage wherein a young woman was eligible to date, acknowledging that this did not hold true for modern debutantes as most began dating prior to their college and debutante experience. One young woman stated, “It’s just a word, you know--what it means to me, but it is an honor to be one” (3.1). She went on to say, “But I don’t really know what the word means; I know what they were in the old days, but you know, I really didn’t know how to explain that” (3.1).

So what does it mean to these modern women to be a debutante?

The question begged a multitude of answers. To some women, the debutante ball was nothing more than an extravagant social event; others explained that it was a “pre-wedding” (10.1). This reference was reflective of the similarity in the rituals as rites of passage. The debutante, in a way, can be viewed as the first step distancing the daughter as a young woman from her family; the wedding is the final step, that in which the daughter permanently joins another family. Some noted that the change in meaning of being a debutante was a move from a practical matter for the women to a symbolic one for the family.

In this way, the debutante ball served no pragmatic purpose for the modern woman except in the case of those who found it to be a worthwhile social event. One girl noted that being a debutante in modern times was simply that it was “time to be presented as adults to society and to be recognized that we are mature enough to make decisions on our own and live our own lives” (5.1). In this way, the debutante ball



although not typically associated with “marrying women off” still holds the association of a “rite a passage,” a passage and a crossover between childhood to adulthood.

In untangling the ambiguity and on-going evolution of the meaning of “debutante,” an emergent theme was the acknowledgement of the symbolic role each assumed as a debutante. For example, one debutante clearly articulated her understanding that she was a representation of her family:

it is more of an honor [for like] my family than it is for me because I am kind of a symbol. It is not really like I have done anything ... ..it [Montgomery] is a community that stands for nothing. Girls that don't really do anything – I think it is [like] their families and you are symbols of what they have been to the community (4.1).

Many women in the debutante ball had been told growing up that one day they would be debutantes. For these women, the ball and the debutante experience were something that they had internalized as an expected and often necessary and welcome step in their young adulthood. These women often held positive expectations prior to the debutante experience. Other women had been distanced from the idea that they would one day become a debutante, or perhaps, they had been chosen unexpectedly and were being introduced to this experience for the first time.

A single debutante did not fit into these categories. She knew of and accepted her debutante experience as a necessary step, but held a very negative perception about participating in the ball. Most often, women who entered into the debutante experience with negative perceptions left the overall experience with a positive one, but this debutante remained unconvinced. At the conclusion of the ball, she asked, “Why can't other people be in it? But, like, what makes me more special than anybody else? Nothing” (4.2).

She went on to further explicate her ambiguity surrounding her role and the purpose behind her debutante experience:

I don't want anybody else to think I am better than anybody else because I get to wear a white dress, gloves and a tiara- my Lord! [I don't have any idea really.] I just do it. I honestly don't know. I wish I knew what it meant (4.2).

This woman was expressing her frustration that the debutante ball was about presenting herself as a symbol of her family as well as someone with an elevated social standing. She was frustrated by the way in which the debutante ball clearly delineates one class from another and the “successful” and “civic-minded” Montgomerians from the other “average” families and by how she was to internalize this mindset as an affirmation of her identity. But her rejection of this elevated status and the ambiguity she felt about her own identity in the role of a debutante clearly provide evidence of her uneasiness in participating in the ball.

The notion of a debutante intimately connected not just to the young woman's family, but to her own identity however tenuous and shifting that identity may be is also worthy of close examination. Another aspect of that identity was evident in a related theme which emerged--that of the debutante identity as all-encompassing.

In the interviews, I asked each debutante what it meant to her to be a debutante and to describe her reaction when she discovered that she had been chosen to debut. One debutante responded with, “Well, I mean of course when you are a debutante you really know ‘cause you have been it all your life” (3.1).

She noted that the meaning had changed: “[in the traditional sense,] a “Deb” was a person that was unmarried, and that is the reason why you are a debutante; it is because

you are unmarried so you can meet your husband” (3.1). She acknowledged that this purpose of the ball has fallen out of favor in modern day, but noted “it is still an honor to be presented” (3.1).

When I asked her what it meant to be a debutante in today’s world, she said that she had been asked this same question, and she could not answer it. Despite her ambiguous understanding of its meaning, she was certain about one thing, “it’s supposed to be the best experience of your life...” (3.1).

### ***Theme #2: Tradition***

Tradition and legacy were dominant themes throughout dozens of informal conversations and in both phases of the interview process. Often when I asked why debutante balls continue, the simple response that seemed to explain the longevity was: “It’s tradition.”

Yet, this cliché does little to explain the purpose of the tradition or the reason that it has remained vibrant and is practiced in a similar fashion as in the past, seemingly unaware of the dramatic changes in society. It seems a tradition continued blindly; the choices and decisions of the past remain unquestioned and often are repeated unconsciously in our own lives. Debutante balls seem ideological in their power; historicized in tradition; normalized so that they seem to be the “natural order of things” and so, are rarely questioned; and eternalized so that tradition continues its strong and powerful course.

### *Family Tradition*

In addition to its social tradition, the debutante ball is also strongly linked to that of family tradition. As mentioned earlier, the debutante is a symbol of the larger connection – that of the family. Mothers have debuted, and often, their daughters follow suit. Similarly, older sisters or cousins have often debuted, and the tradition continues down the line to the younger siblings. For the woman prior to her debut, the experience is both a naturalized and an expected occurrence. This mother-daughter and older sister-younger sister family legacy shaped opinions of the ball and expectations prior to the debutante experience. Some debutantes I interviewed revealed extremely positive expectations drawing upon a family legacy which exposed them to the world of debutante balls, but this was not always the case. One debutante had negative perceptions of debutante balls based on her older sister's and cousin's experiences; they had reported that the balls paraded women around and were a silly display of wealth and outdated dances (10.1; 10.2).

One young woman explained the debutante ball in this way:

It's tradition. It is something in the South that has been done for so many years. It's a family thing and you can either look at it in a negative way or you can look at it and say, 'Well, it's something my family has done forever and it's something that I would like to continue to do' (7.2).

This debutante is acknowledging the negative perception that she has gauged from others often outside of the debutante experience, and in essence, is creating her own apology. The ball is a positive experience based solely on the fact that her mother and sisters had participated in it before her.

Of great import was the recurring response of women that they had decided to debut “for their family” or due to their family’s expectations, excitement, and anticipation that they would debut. One debutante stated that she was doing it only for her father and that she was going through the process for no other reason than “to make my dad proud” (4.1).

This last motivation was reiterated by many of the women I interviewed. While some recognized the debutante ball as a “male organization,” that the fathers had joined with very clear expectations of their daughters being presented, others simply stated that it was an event that would make their parents proud or excited for them to be a part. Clearly, in these cases, motivations to participate were often based on obligatory or sentimental expectations in order to please the family and to continue to live and relive a particular family tradition. Another dimension of this notion of debut as tradition emerged: it was a tradition that was inherently Southern.

### *Southern tradition*

Several women indicated that to be a debutante was “to be a lady.” One noted that she felt “truly Southern” during the rehearsal, and commented, “No one has this except in the South” (9.1). The fact that the debutante ball was “a Southern tradition” had great explanatory power for the women.

For example, one debutante indicated that she felt like Scarlet O’Hara, the character from *Gone with the Wind* who seemingly has become the media representation of the quintessential Southern woman. The women I interviewed frequently associated “lady-like” behavior and acting in accordance with traditional genteel norms of

femininity with Southern values, such as presenting oneself in an attractive fashion, presenting oneself as polite and gentle, and exhibiting respect for elders and men.

Other women associated being a debutante with being a Southern woman by emphasizing etiquette and proper manners. Women noted that the importance of etiquette and proper manners was a recurrent theme in the rehearsals for the ball and were clearly stated expectations of them if they were to fulfill their roles as “respectable” debutantes. In other words, they were to “be a lady” at all times. This phrase, “being a lady” is common in the South where societal expectations of favorable gender traits of the “Southern lady” and the “Southern gentleman” seem nearly synonymous with respectability. Indeed, the American Heritage Dictionary defines the word “respectable” as “good or proper in behavior or conventional conduct” and “acceptable in appearance; presentable” (Costello 1994).

When I asked one young woman what exactly was special about the tradition of the debutante ball, she responded, as if it required no further explanation, “I am a Southern girl....always have been” (5.1). She then went on to say that being a debutante meant that you were a “lady” and you understand the importance of putting forth a good attitude and presenting yourself well in public. These associations were bound up with having a positive attitude “like [her] mother” and being involved in the church, the latter perhaps due to her association of that institution with learning traditional morals and codes of conduct by which to model one’s life (5.1).

As noted in the introduction, debutante balls continue to be held throughout the United States, even in larger metropolitan cities such as New York City, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco. Thus, while debutante balls are more widely recognized and

accepted in the South than in other parts of the country, they are not quintessentially Southern. Still, according to the women I interviewed, the South has seemingly adopted the debutante ball as its own.

### ***Theme #3: Collective Identity & Shared Understanding***

The women, it seemed, all made sense of their experience in terms of a collective identity sometimes largely expressed as an identity gleaned from the desire to honor family traditions, sometimes a collective Southern identity. In our conversations, what might be called a collective debutante identity also emerged.

Women repeatedly noted that it was impossible to understand a debutante ball unless someone had gone through it. That is, a shared knowledge and the feeling that accompanied it were part of a collective debutante identity. This identity was often associated with and sometimes inseparable from other collective identities of being “Southern” that are tradition-focused. For example, women frequently located their experience in a North vs. South dichotomy, with comments such as, “people from the North just don’t understand,” and “they [Northerners] think it is hilarious” (6.1).

Also apparent in this collective debutante identity was the notion that those who were in the debutante experience or who planned to participate in it simply knew the importance and the significance of the debutante ball. Thus, the collective identity was located in another dichotomy: those who understood versus those who could not. This inability of others to understand was frequently used in defense of the propriety of or in direct opposition to outsiders’ criticism of the debutante ball. For example, one woman noted “a lot [of people outside of the experience] would say it is like showing off a

woman and that whole argument, but it is positive from what I get from everyone [those inside of the experience]” (6.1).

Debutantes developed and often articulated a “well-of-course-those-not-in-it-don’t-understand-it-or-are-critical-of-it” attitude. This attitude was a very important component of the meaning-making experience. Shared by those involved in the experience, it acted to reinforce both the significance and the importance of the experience and served as justification for some who seemed uneasy about their decision to participate. Additionally, the construction of this collective identity as an integral function of the debutante experience often altered women’s emotional responsiveness to the idea of the ball, much as did the ball itself. This was particularly evident among the women who entered the experience with a negative perception but had altered their opinion so that it aligned with the mainstream collective identity by the conclusion of the experience.

#### ***Theme #4: Production Roles vs. Self-Assumed Roles***

The debutante ball is a visual orchestration; everyone plays a specific part. Recognizing this, another theme that emerged in interviews was the debutantes’ careful delineation of not only their roles, but often those of the Colonels (typically their fathers) and their mothers.

Learning one’s part goes as far as choreography that affects one’s dress, one’s behavior, one’s position, one’s attitude and virtually every detail of the debutante presentation. But more so than learning a dance or behaving “as one should” within the context of a presentation, it became evident in the interviews (and I recognized this from



my own experience) that there were generally accepted roles that the debutantes and their family members assumed. While these roles often aligned with the roles played within the context of the ball itself, it seemed some roles were simply self-assumed; that is, they were unrelated to their “production” role. In any case, the clear delineation of roles was a consistent theme throughout my data.

In order to clarify these roles, it is useful to outline the expected roles to be assumed within the context of the production.

### *Debutante*

The debutante is the center of attention at the ball. She is expected to be poised, elegant and graceful. She is also expected to perform all dances and choreography expertly, on cue and with “class.” Her “moment to shine” is her curtsey during the “lead out” section of the ball; she has the opportunity to perform a graceful dip and handle the pressure of being “front and center” with grace, poise and beauty. Each debutante fully understands that this is her “moment,” a moment in which she simultaneously assumes the responsibility of presenting herself and of projecting herself as a symbol of her extended family.

### *Colonel*

The Colonel is the member of the Blue Gray organization who presents the debutante. The Colonel typically is the father of the debutante, but this is not always the case. He may be a debutante’s grandfather or even uncle in the case of a deceased or absent father. The Colonel must rehearse a waltz, and subsequently perform with his

debutante after the lead out in which each woman, one by one, is presented to curtsy for the audience.

### *Debutante's Escort*

The escort, the debutante's date, like the debutante and Colonel, must attend all the rehearsals and learn his role. The date escorts the debutante, dances the waltz and the Chicken-George, a traditional dance, and participates in the Tableau, the grand finale during which all debutantes and escorts march forward in unison. His primary role is to be supportive of the debutante and to be a gentleman at all times.

According to the debutantes, the date was not a "potential suitor" although he was a member of an upper-class family. Because it was necessary for the date to make a large time commitment in order to serve as an escort for the debutante, he typically was a family friend or an old high school friend. The women frequently chose Montgomery escorts because of their familiarity with the Montgomery tradition of hosting several extravagant balls; there was less to explain about the purpose and tradition of the ball. The escorts usually understood what was expected of them and felt privileged to attend such an event. The parents of those asked to be an escort considered it an honor for their son to assume such a role in a young woman's "coming out" experience, and generally, the escorts take their role seriously and without question.

### *Mother*

At the ball, mothers are often seated on the front row of the audience. In some balls, mothers are lined up and are presented as mothers of the debutantes before taking a seat. In this ball, however, they remain seated.

It is common for both the mothers and the Colonels to be congratulated for their daughter's presentation. The most coveted compliments are those made on the debutante's curtsy or her beauty, grace, and elegance.

Within the totality of the experience, as mentioned, individuals seem to self-assume roles. From the audience's vantage point, the mothers appear to have the least important role, but this is hardly the case. Although they have no visible role in the production that *is* the ball, their role, with the exception of the regulators, is the most important in preparing for the production of the ball.

The mothers secured all the details for the daughters. It was the mothers who went shopping for dresses with the debutantes, and who volunteered to take over the details of securing appointments for their daughters' hair, make-up, and nails. It was the mothers who picked up the debutante dresses, delivered them to the ball site and helped their daughters dress. It was the mothers who continued to help their daughter prepare for presentation until the overall look of the debutante was complete, and the mothers were satisfied with the outcome. The mothers, thus, were concerned "backstage" with the orchestration and details of the ball so that it might come together flawlessly; at the ball itself, they were seated on the sidelines.

In contrast, the father's experience was more sentimental. The ball, one woman noted, was a "father-daughter" kind of night. The ball highlights the father "giving

away” the debutante, her symbolic taking leave of the family and embrace by society during the “changing of the guards” (See Debutante Background Interview, p. 26).

The Colonel’s choice to join the male organization is the determining factor in whether a woman, be it the mother or the debutante, is able to participate in the ball. The Colonel serves as the financial support and has an expected role in the ball’s production.

Thus, the mothers invested more time and were involved with the intimate details of the ball; their satisfaction was the success of the production and the beauty of their daughters. In contrast, the fathers experienced the sentimentality and emotion of “giving their daughters away” and the pride of “presenting their daughters to society” as a member of their family.

Although the debutantes noted that the ball was a father-daughter experience, they firmly believed the debutante experience to be more about them. It was “their time to shine.”

### **Circuit of Culture’s Moments of Meaning**

Du Gay’s, et al. (1997) modification of Johnson’s (1986-87) circuit of culture, identifies five moments in which meaning is created, recreated, transformed and negotiated: identity, representation, consumption, production and regulation. In this section, the analysis draws upon the themes just discussed to more fully examine debutantes’ understanding of their debutante experience within the larger framework of the circuit of culture. Although divided into “Identity and Representation,” “Expectations to Experience: The Consumption Moment,” and “Regulation and Production,” it is particularly important to note that while these “moments” are discussed

individually, each moment is complex and all are interdependent within the meaning-making process. This section, then, will illustrate how each moment is inevitably influenced by the others in constructing the complexity of meaning surrounding the debutante ball and the debutante identity.

### ***Identity & Representation***

As mentioned earlier, the ambiguity of the debutante identity is one of its defining characteristics. Examined through the framework of the circuit of culture, it becomes apparent that the debutante identity is negotiated and renegotiated throughout the debutante experience. For instance, it became apparent in our conversations that debutantes made sense of their “debutante identity” in a number of ways. In many cases, they linked their “debutante identity” to that of a “Southern girl” or “Southern lady,” both in attitude and presentation, to family, to the tradition of debut, and to the symbolic rite of passage from childhood to adulthood.

Debutantes also recognized themselves as representing their family and in doing so they acknowledged their symbolic role. They viewed themselves also as symbols of growth and maturity, of the rite of passage to adulthood and of a new life “on their own,” away at college. Several debutantes noted that they represented the city of Montgomery.

The consumption experience, that is, how debutantes “make sense” of the debut experience in their lives, includes the rehearsal prior to the ball as well the events leading up to the ball itself. As such, consumption and production are occurring simultaneously. In rehearsals, debutantes are “taught” proper etiquette, the details of the orchestration of

the ball, and what is expected of them at the ball. In a sense, debutantes are introduced into the debutante society at the rehearsals.

They realize they are among a chosen few to have been selected to be in a position to debut, a position that is considered honorable, noteworthy, and significant. It is each debutante's responsibility to take this honor seriously and to handle the entire process respectably and respectfully.

Thus, the debutante ball is being "produced" in a way that enhances its overall effect as a successful, visually stimulating orchestration. To that end, the ball is being heavily regulated; the production elements are each influenced and shaped by the ball's regulators, the board, the co-chairmen, and the dance instructors. Thus, the web of connections between the moments is apparent; regulators are shaping the production of the ball at the same time attempting to shape debutantes as "actors" in the festivities. The debutantes are simultaneously consuming the experience and shaping their identity as debutantes.

In this production process, the debutante experience essentially is kept secret from the women until the rehearsal. This is true even of those whose older sister or other relative had previously debuted. In those instances, "potential debutantes" are allowed only to come for family photography and sometimes to the reception or dance following the presentation of the debutantes, but they are never allowed to see any part of the presentation. The element of mystery contributes to the "magic" of the debutante ball.

Most Montgomery women have obtained a rudimentary understanding of debutante balls from the local social paper, *The Montgomery Independent*. The "write-up" of the 2005 Blue and Gray Colonel's Ball is a standard example of the types of

articles that provide a glimpse into the elaborate event for those outside of the debutante experience. The article, “Emilie Parish\* Reigns as Queen of 2005 Blue Gray Colonel’s Ball,” depicts the elaborate presentation and provides a narrative of some typical ball events. The article also tells of an elaborate dance and notes that the “Maids of the Court” bow to the “Queen.” The fact that the women are always identified as a “daughter of” and a “granddaughter of” suggests that the family’s social position and reputation may be of greater import than the debutante herself (Garrett, 2006).

Although the production is captured in intimate detail, noticeable for their absence are quotes from debutantes or their family members. Hence, there is no insight into the women’s experiences of the event, or whether they viewed the event as one of importance in their lives. There is no explanation of the history of the tradition, the meaning or purpose of the debutante ball. The article also omits any mention of education and training as a means of preparation for the ball and does not discuss any of the events leading up to the ball (Garrett, 2006). Perhaps the operative assumption is that everyone understands the ball, for it is simply described as an extraordinary social event.

Articles like this “write up” and family stories served as the starting points for the young women’s understanding of what it meant to be a debutante. They began to picture what a debutante might look like (i.e., an elegant woman in a white gown surrounded by an elaborate setting) and formed a preliminary understanding of what occurs at a debutante ball (presentation, waltz, dance, curtsy). This patchwork of understanding

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\* Name has been changed.

only began to take on a personal and powerful meaning when the debutante's own experience began (Garrett, 2006).

During the rehearsal, the debutantes are shown a video of the previous year's ball. They see the lead out, the curtsey, the Queen's waltz, and the entire choreographed dance from the "changing of the guard" to the Tableau for the first time. The new class of debutantes, thus, is regulated and produced in very particular ways. At the same time, the debutantes are making sense of this text in a complicated, well-orchestrated production process, and beginning to shape their expectations for the event. Coupled with expectations the debutantes had from media representations, stories, and informal research gathered throughout their lives, the visual experience of the video helps the regulators and producers as well as the debutantes in the construction of the "debutante identity."

Generally, women came to the consumption experience feeling the first twinges of excitement and nervousness. They understood the debutante ball to be an incredibly grand, elaborate event of which they are the stars. Coming to this understanding, for some, is a moment of pressure. At the same time, it is the beginning of the "collective debutante identity." There are varied identification processes within this collective identity; the women connect with the importance of their family tradition, with the importance of the event as a Southern tradition, and with others, forming bonds within the debutante group.

The women begin to bond over their nervousness, and over the notion that to be a debutante is a selective and defining experience. Some of the women I interviewed were processing this information for the first time while others who had known that they "were



always a debutante” consumed this information as a message reinforcing what they had already been taught and what they already had believed.

### ***Expectations to Experiences: The Consumption Moment***

Many of the debutantes had formed their expectations of the debutante experience through oral traditions. As previously mentioned, many debutantes were daughters or younger siblings of debutantes. One young woman indicated she had known of the Blue and Gray ball from her family’s oral tradition for “as long as I could remember” (2.1). Her overall experience was positive; her expectations closely matched her experience of the ball.

However, her expectations had been firmly tied to the importance her family placed on the ball; she thought her debut was more important for her family than it was for her personally. When I asked if she would recommend the experience to others, she said she “might,” but only if someone in that woman’s family had participated in it in the past so that there was already a foundation of shared knowledge and of expectations prior to the ball (2.1).

Another debutante who had been excited and nervous prior to the ball, became more and more nervous as her excitement grew following the initial rehearsal (at the onset of the consumption experience). As reason for her nervousness, she particularly noted the emphasis placed upon the grandeur and “importance” of the ball both for her and particularly for her date. At the conclusion of the first rehearsal she observed that, “None of the escorts understood how important it was until they got there” (1.1).

This particular debutante continued to be heavily emotionally invested as the debutante experience progressed. During the post-ball interview, she recounted how overwhelmed she had been by the actual experience of the debutante presentation and by her surroundings. “Everything surprised me,” she said. “[The ball] went way, way past my expectations” (1.2).

She focused particularly on the setting of the event and the elaborate decorations that helped set the mood of elegance and grandeur when she said that, “The whole atmosphere just stood out much more than any other thing I will probably ever go to” (1.2). She described the room as “transformed” after all the decorations were in place and the various elements of the ball came together in an elegant orchestration. As her emotions rose during the event, she noted that her nervousness faded away, as she was “carried away by the ‘magic’ of the night” (1.2).

Another young woman’s expectations of the experience, like the first debutante mentioned in this section, were tied directly to her family. She felt that she was a symbol of her family and their accomplishments. She was not particularly excited about the ball but was acutely aware of her father’s excitement and her grandfather’s expectations that she participate, so she acquiesced in order to please them. During both the rehearsal and the ball itself, she never reconceptualized the experience as anything other than one in which she was taking part for her family; it was not particularly special for her (4.1; 4.2).

Even when admitting that some of the attention she had received was nice, she noted that she had shared that attention with over 20 other debutantes and that it was her dad’s night as well as her own. In this case, the debutante’s expectations proved to be

formative and unwavering throughout the consumption experience; her core belief about debutante balls was not influenced.

Another debutante indicated in her post-ball interview that the night of her debut was “one of the best nights of my life” (5.2). She had had very positive expectations, approaching the ball with great anticipation. She recalled being told by the ball’s co-chairman that it was “her night to shine” (5.2). This particular debutante’s expectations, in part, were based on her assumption that the debutante ball was solely a Southern tradition and were bound tightly to the notion of being “a lady.”

To her, being a debutante meant that she needed “to be someone worthy of being presented to society....someone that my dad would be proud to present, to acknowledge that I am his and .....I want him to be proud to say that I am his” (5.2).

Another debutante who described herself as less at ease than most in social situations growing up said that she was weary of getting excited about an event such as a debutante ball. In her initial interview after the rehearsal, she reported feeling uneasy and very anxious in response to the co-chair’s rigorous and detailed approach, emphasizing the expectations for the debutantes at the ball. She indicated that she was scared of doing something wrong and being yelled at by the co-chair (7.1.)

This debutante also identified practical details that caused her anxiety: the painful experience of the deep knee bend during the curtsey, the weight of the dress, the procedures of extending and retracting her flowers during the presentation. She had “low expectations” for the ball itself (7.2).

However, after the ball, she had changed her mind, describing the ball as “a great experience” (7.2). She indicated that initially, like so many others, she had thought of a

debutante as “one of those little rich kids that are presented to society .... It’s just a bunch of snotty girls whose parents are here to ‘let me show off my daughter’ ...other people think it is really funny” (7.2). This debutante said she should have started the experience with an “open mind.” Still, even though she had entered into the debutante experience with negative perceptions, she left the experience with very positive perceptions. “I completely changed my opinion,” she noted. “...it [participating in the ball] does have effects on you...” (7.2).

A debutante’s assessments were often influenced by older siblings or other family members. For instance, one debutante noted that her older cousin, who had participated in the ball, said that the debutante experience was “a joke,” a time when people would “show you off” (8.1). This negative perception was countered by her grandparents pressuring her to participate; she felt obligated to debut.

Another debutante had a similar negative perception prior to the experience based on her sister’s accounts of her own experience. After hearing her sister’s story, this debutante indicated she was almost “embarrassed” to participate in the ball.

Her sister had not questioned her own debutante experience during the time of her debut, but, in fact, changed her perspective later, after moving to New York City. The North-South dichotomy mentioned earlier, a dichotomy in which the North is aligned with progressiveness and is dismissive of tradition while the South is aligned with a stronghold on tradition, is evident here. Again, it is worth noting that this perceived dichotomy—the South’s cultural acceptance of the debutante tradition and the North’s cultural rejection of the debutante ball—is inaccurate. Debutante balls continue in the

North to this day. It is noteworthy as well that none of the debutantes interviewed mentioned this fact. Indeed, they consistently claimed the ball as a Southern tradition.

As this hesitant debutante progressed within the experience, she changed her mind: “over time [I] became excited about it” (10.1). She indicated that she began to “figure things out on her own –from everyone [inside the debutante experience] talking about it” (10.1). In a sense, she assumed the collective identity of debutante, which effectively overcame her negative expectations surrounding the ball. In the post-ball interview, she had adopted the view of the debutante ball as a positive social tradition.

And finally, what of the Queen, another debutante who had negative perceptions surrounding debutante balls prior to being asked to serve as the Queen of the Blue Gray ball? After the ball, she frankly noted that she had expected the ball to be “boring and painful” (11.2). She was afraid of what her friends might think of her. But, “it was a lot more fun than I expected,” she noted. “It was not nearly as uppity as I expected it to be” (11.2).

As has been suggested, and indeed, as is apparent in the discussion thus far, the moments of consumption, representation, and identity are webbed in complex ways to each other and to the moments of production and regulation as well. The actual debut experience is simultaneously produced and consumed by the debutantes themselves. The regulators of the debutante ball are also the producers in the sense that they are the orchestrators of the ball.

### ***Regulation & Production***

The tradition of the ball, its purpose, function, and orchestration are all introduced to the debutantes by those who might be called the regulators of the ball: the ball's co-chairmen, the dance instructor who teaches the women how to curtsy, and the Blue Gray organization. The co-chairman is responsible for a number of key elements in regard to the regulation and production of the ball, including upholding the tradition of the ball, reinforcing notions of privilege and protection, and the orchestration of the ball itself.

The members of the Blue Gray organization are selected by collective vote and nominate the upcoming daughters of the Colonels who are to debut. In this way, the tradition of the ball is perpetuated, and the structure of power is maintained and reinforced by those who ultimately influence and determine who will participate to further the ball's traditions, purpose, function and ideals. The members of the organization ensure that the ball is organized in a particular way such that pre-selected participants must pass through a thorough education process and receive essential knowledge about the ball. This process ensures that traditions are upheld and ideals are perpetuated as the ball continues throughout the years.

Inherent in the ball's tradition is the notion which might be understood as the "privilege and protection" of the ball. This is communicated at the ball's rehearsal by reminding the young women that their families are respected and renowned members of the Montgomery community; that as debutantes, they are chosen out of love and selected from a large pool of the most prestigious members in Montgomery society. As such, each woman is expected to recognize that her position as a debutante in the ball not only carries with it the weight of selection and privilege but also carries with it the weight of

time, care, and affection of the Colonels who joined the organization in order that they, the “chosen” young women, could debut. In this way, the debutantes begin to understand the experience as a privilege and a tradition, deserving of a measure of personal responsibility in order to ensure that the ball and its traditions are preserved.

An important component of tradition in the Blue Gray ball is the significance placed on the Queen. As the regulators and producers shaped the image of the Queen, she understood herself to be the representation of “everything that the Blue and Gray Colonel’s stood for because [her] breeding was that of amazing proportion” (11.2). The Queen recognized that she was to represent the entire organization and to be someone whom others could admire, “to look better, be nicer, be polite, not a leader, but someone that everyone would look to that night” (11.2). Furthermore, the Queen was acutely aware of the way in which the co-chairman, one of the regulators, tried to craft her image. She noted that she had been introduced to the members of the organization and the other debutantes in the first main rehearsal when the co-chairman presented a full speech about the importance of her family in Montgomery history. That speech, she said, was “horrifying and embarrassing” (11.2). She explained:

I don’t believe that, you know, breeding is what defines you and makes you a good person and a bad person..... I had always made it a point to not let [family history] be a determining factor of who I was and then it kind of turned out that he [the co-chairman] was going to make it one (11.2).

She went on to say that her family was not the defining characteristic of what she herself had done and accomplished in life, and it was frustrating because the co-chairman was “defining me by my great-great grandparents instead of by, ‘this is what she has done’” (11.2). This example illustrates the regulator’s powerful presence and influence

in the production of the ball, defining and attempting to shape the women's identities within the particular context to "fit" a prescribed "Queen identity" and, thus, reinforce and preserve the traditions of the ball.

The regulators of the ball also keep close watch throughout the ball's production on proper etiquette and manners; the ball *is*, after all, a formal event. This idea is first introduced as an expectation of every debutante when she receives her formal invitation in the mail. She is asked to respond to the invitation using a formal, handwritten letter of acceptance to the organization. Proper etiquette is reinforced throughout the first main rehearsal for the ball; the ball's co-chair tells the young women that he expects proper manners at all times and that everyone is to remain in control of themselves and their dates at an event that will be "open bar" and attended by a large number of young men and women who are under the legal drinking age.

The co-chairman continually stresses the importance of personal responsibility and particularly the importance of presenting an image of social respectability. In tandem with this message of presenting a positive image is the message that "over 2,000 guests" will be there to experience the presentation; it's "your [the debutantes'] time to shine," the debutantes are told repeatedly. The debutantes, then, are performing for the pleasure of others.

In interviews, several debutantes recounted the co-chairman's messages at the rehearsal. One in particular recalled the co-chairman telling the debutantes that he expected them to "read our Bible, keep a dictionary and a grammar book [close by]" (9.1). The message reiterated very clearly by most and perhaps internalized by many



debutantes, regardless of whether they expressed a positive or negative assessment of the debutante experience, was a simple but powerful one: “It is an honor to be presented.”

Finally, the orchestration of the ball itself was regulated in a number of ways. The debutantes were shown a video of the previous year’s ball; they could envision the grandeur and formality of the event. They were taught the steps of the presentation including the lead out, the various dances they were to perform (the waltz, the Chicken-George), and, of course, their curtsey. The importance of a flawless performance was repeated time and time again to the debutantes, their escorts, and their fathers/Colonels through both rehearsals and just prior to the event itself. The production could only achieve perfection if all members took it upon themselves to be personally responsible for learning and executing their roles in proper fashion.

### *Debutantes as Producers*

The debutantes can be understood not only as consumers of the debutante experience but also as producers within the context of the ball. They are staged performers in the production of the ball, ornamentation within the orchestration itself. Debutantes learn a particular role which they are to play in the context of the ball; they “produce” an image that becomes a part of the text consumed by the audience even as they themselves consume that text in the very moment of its production. In this way, the production of the debutante by the debutante is a significant part of the consumption of the debutante identity.

The ways in which the debutantes discuss their role and the importance of the role within the production of the ball have a great bearing on their understanding and their

desire to fulfill a particular identity as presented to them in the context of the experience. For instance, one diligent debutante, taking her role seriously after listening attentively to the regulators and the producers of the ball, began developing an idea of the nature of the image she was to portray. Being a debutante meant, she said, “to be someone worthy of being presented to society....someone that my dad would be proud to acknowledge that I am his and I was thinking about that...but that is pretty important to me because he is presenting me to two or three thousand people in the audience, and I want him to be proud to say that I am his” (5.2). Thus, the debutante image was not only reproduced by the young woman, it was internalized; it became her own desire.

This debutante indicates that “[she] I was thinking about that” (5.2). But it is noteworthy that her rationalization—her emphasis on the number of people that would be in attendance, the importance of putting forth a good image and making the family proud of her—seemed less her own than that of the ball’s regulators and producers. In becoming a debutante, then, this young woman seemingly reproduced the image sought by producers, and subsequently, consumed that very image, that identity as a debutante, in the process of her production.

## **Feminist Applications**

### ***Gender as Performativity***

Judith Butler’s (1990) notion of “gender as performativity” is of particular interest here. Butler posits anti-essentialist notions of “female” and subsequently argues that gender is socially constructed. Quoting theorist Simone de Beauvoir, who famously stated, “One is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman” (qtd. in Butler, 1990, p. 270),

Butler goes on to note that “gender is in no way a stable identity or a locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler, 1990, p.270).

As aforementioned in Chapter 3, Butler argues that gender is tied to social appearance and, therefore, is tied to cultural norms and expectations which emphasize and dichotomize gender and sex. Her ultimate argument is that gender is something that is held together only through various acts of maintaining and reproducing social expectations inextricably bound to gender; that is, she theorizes that gender is performed in the various acts through which a biological woman assumes “female” as her role (Butler, 1990).

While this theory certainly provides a lens for the examination of gender behavior in everyday life, it also has some important implications for the examination of the text of a debutante ball. Because the debutante ball is a scripted event, one could argue that Butler’s theory does not apply in that “debutante” is not a self-assumed role of “acting as a woman,” but is rather one that is scripted for the debutante to assume. However, upon further examination, the notion of culture in which rules, norms, and expectations are embedded, in itself is a script in which a woman either assumes her expected role or behaves outside of social expectations.

The debutante ball is of particular interest in the context of Butler’s work in that “debutante” cannot be reduced to something as simple as a performance of a particular identity. Rather, a debutante can be understood as a gender identity all its own; the meaning of that identity is constructed, transformed, and negotiated in each moment of the meaning-making process. Thus, the debutante’s assumption of the role of debutante

as well as the consumption experience of the debutante ball can, in fact, be examined using Judith Butler's notion of "gender as performativity."

One of the debutantes, for example, clearly revealed that her gender was connected to the performance of her identity as a debutante when she commented, "Well, I mean of course when you are a debutante, you really know 'cause you have been it all your life" (3.1).

Many debutantes constructed the debutante identity as an extension of their gender performance. The debutante ball, as noted earlier, is solely a male organization which heralds the women as symbols, as representations of family. Women have very little agency within the context of the ball; as debutantes, they learn to simply assume a pre-assigned role to play, a role that is controlled, regulated, and produced by men within the context of a debutante ball.

Some women seemed fully aware of the mechanisms of control by and for which the debutante ball is produced and reproduced; others seemed unconscious of the male control in the regulation of the ball's meaning, production, and perpetuation. It is, in fact, through this regulation and through the process of the individual debutante's consumption of the experience that debutantes often become aligned with the regulators' doctrine. In this way, the particular power structure surrounding the event, and, indeed, the larger social structure is perpetuated in the male favor. This phenomenon can be observed in the debutantes' internalization of the intent of the power structure within the context of the ball. One debutante noted, "I am ready to take on whatever I am supposed to be doing in society" (5.2). This same debutante also stated that she wanted "to be

someone worthy of being presented in society--- someone that my dad would be proud to present, to acknowledge that **I am his.....**” (5.2).

This woman’s self-identification as an extension of her father and therefore, by default, controlled to a certain extent by her father, as well as her readiness to “take on whatever I am supposed to be doing in society,” (5.2) are clear statements of her acquiescence within this particular male-dominated context. More importantly, it is an indication of her acquiescence to a male-dominated society. That she has internalized the notion that as a woman, she is “supposed” to be doing something in society, is central to Judith Butler’s theory. Butler suggests that women quickly learn the social rules and expectations in a very real way and also quickly learn that to survive in a male-dominated society is to effectively and persuasively “perform” gender, to do as a woman “should” do in society. This gender performance is effectively described as learning to fulfill a role that others have predefined and cultivated for women to play.

Within the context of the debutante ball, this notion of learning to acquiesce to male domination applies specifically to the debutante ball “curriculum” in terms of its regulators, its production, its reproduction of meaning, and its service to the existing power structures in society.

It is important to note that the above debutante’s expression of wanting to fulfill her expected role, both within the debutante ball and within life, provides an important lens through which to examine a woman who emerged from the debutante experience having learned exactly what the regulators wanted her to learn. Yet, it would be unfair to demonize this woman, for she is not unlike many women in today’s society; ideological work has been done and is ongoing. Unaware of our complicity in our own oppression,

many of us undertake actions in our everyday lives, never consciously recognizing the oppressive work we do.

It is also important to explore specifically the significance of the consumption experience and the formations produced in that stage of the circuit of culture. Within the context of the debutante ball, this particular “moment” of consumption reveals whether or not the debutantes have internalized the meanings produced vis-à-vis the other “moments.” It is apparent, for example, in the debutante’s previously mentioned comments, that she had indeed internalized the messages the regulators had intended.

However, the fact that meaning is produced/ encoded in a particular way with a specific intention *does not* ensure that meaning will be reproduced in a similar fashion or internalized in the same manner in which its producers intended. I do not intend to claim that the women who participated in this debutante ball are completely docile bodies and minds, easily persuaded, or that they have no power over the production of their identities as either being bound or unbounded to their subsequent “debutante identities.” The data supports this idea as well. For example, the Queen of the ball comments, “I had always made it a point to not let that [‘family lineage’] be a determining factor in who I was, and then it kind of turned out that he [the co-chairman] was going to make it one” (11.2).

This comment illustrates two very important points: the Queen’s cognizance of meaning production and her conscious choice to agree or disagree with the meaning produced. In this case, the Queen emerged from the debutante experience undefined as a debutante and a Queen by her regulators in the sense that she did not internalize the debutante experience or the identity as a part or extension of herself. Even though the regulators tenaciously tried to define and reproduce her in the debutante image, I would

describe the Queen's experience this way: she learned her role and subsequently performed it (in the traditional sense of the word), but she did not assume the debutante identity in any lasting (dare I say, meaningful) way. In their refusal to accept the debutante identity in male-prescribed terms in an enduring way, many women assumed a position of agency within the context of the ball, albeit a somewhat powerless one; they had acquiesced to participate in the ball in the first place.

Equally important is another observation regarding participation in the ball in general. Foremost, I think it is entirely possible to temporarily assume the role of a debutante and remain "untransformed." Furthermore, many of the women actually did so, and, in that, exhibited agency in the sense that they consumed the debutante experience merely as a learned role to be performed. For these women, Judith Butler's notion of "gender as performativity" would not necessarily apply.

Some of the women I interviewed clearly had internalized the debutante experience as an extension of their identity, as a production of sorts, learning to please those who had defined their role in life for them. These women, perhaps unaware of this great liability, had lost the fight for self-identification. They willingly assumed roles limited and defined by their gender as well as expectations assigned to them by others. In this sense, the role of the debutante was just one of many roles, though perhaps, one of the clearest they will assume in constructing, in Butler's words, "an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1990, p. 270).

The women who understand the process, who recognize the meaning produced and perpetuated within this particular context, and who emerge without internalizing the debutante identity are worthy of examination and critical analysis.

Women consciously and voluntarily decide to participate and/or engage in a debutante ball. Yet, it is quite possible for them to be part of the ball and to just as consciously separate themselves from the production of meanings with which they disagree. Typically, these women have chosen to define the experience in which they have engaged as something “fun” or “harmless.” They essentially have rationalized their participation to themselves and to others, consciously or unconsciously. In this way, women acquiesce to, and in so doing, appease male-enforced power structures of which the debutante ball is but one example (an example perhaps more noteworthy because of its social display), but self-protect by resisting internalization of its influences and messages.

I believe I am one of these women.

I take issue with the fact that I and many women like me whom I interviewed fulfilled the role of debutante because **others wanted us to do so**. Still, though we may not have internalized what we perceive to be “harmful” or “anti-feminist” messages, we in fact are living our lives in a manner that others would prefer. We, in fact, are surrendering in a rather general way to “gender as performativity” inasmuch as we are basing our lives and actions on what we have learned and what we are **supposed to be doing**. Although we have often limited the male influence in this context, the motive for our participation is clear and is always, in this instance, a surrender of individual agency. Additionally, women who have learned to self-protect, those who began with cautious, negative feelings, but changed their opinion of the ball and came to define their experience as a positive one clearly negotiated the meaning of the orchestrated



production and regulation of the entire debutante experience, including the ball itself, very differently.

## CHAPTER 6

### IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSIONS

Cultural studies as a broad theoretical approach recognizes the importance of the everyday in the social construction of meaning, legitimizes critical examination of these everyday experiences, and provides the framework, tools, and theoretical perspectives to undertake that examination. In the case of the debutante ball, cultural studies has given me an opportunity to examine my personal experience through others sharing a similar experience. The circuit of culture (du Gay, et al., 1997) provided a lens through which to examine the “moments” in which meaning is socially constructed, resulting in a deeper, richer, more nuanced understanding of the experience drawn from the explanations and reflections of those who experienced it.

This case study provided an important means by which to examine several women’s experiences within the same context. Interviewing eleven different women, I was able to gather a wealth of knowledge about the similarities and differences of the “debutante experience.” Finally, I was able to self-reflect on my own experience in 1999 by comparing it to these women’s experiences six years later.

My most significant findings were bound to the notion of identity, particularly as it is constructed and negotiated in the consumption moment, but equally bound up in all other meaning-making moments. The theme that was reiterated time and time again was a lack of understanding of what it meant to be a debutante prior to the debutante experience. Often the only knowledge of the ball, the only hazy image of the “debutante” which the young women I interviewed possessed, was tied to media representations, popular press articles, or family stories. Despite this lack of knowledge prior to the ball,

every one of the women I interviewed had a clearly formed opinion about the ball, sometimes positive, at other times negative. Of utmost importance was the emphasis many of the debutantes placed on participating in the ball for no reason other than to please their parents. This lack of personal ownership of what one would assume to be a highly personal experience was troubling. However, as I followed the women's progression from the beginning of the consumption experience (the pre-ball rehearsal) through the finale (the conclusion of the ball itself), the power of the consumption experience as a formative one for these women clearly was evident.

As I mentioned earlier, the women were consuming a cultural text that was *highly regulated* by those who produced it. Furthermore, the producers themselves had a vested interest in the continuation of the ball and, therefore, in the debutantes' ownership and successful completion of the experience. It was interesting to see the women's progression through the experience as they began to learn how to behave "like a lady" and the appropriate courses of action expected to be taken as a debutante throughout the process.

During this consumption process, most of the women began to take some form of ownership over the ball, particularly when they began to formulate their identity as part of a collective whole. As they observed other women around them enjoying the experience and accepting the regulators' direction and education, they too began to enjoy and accept the experience. Through this identification with a larger group, many women changed their opinion of the ball from negative to positive.

It is noteworthy that most debutantes indicated they would participate in a similar experience again even when they had initially opposed participating in the debutante ball.

It seemed that the ambiguity of the debutante identity was less important to the women as their self-identification through collective identification became more and more important.

Women viewed and accepted the experience as something that was both memorable and important, something they were doing to please their parents and something in which they were enjoying participating. Yet, even as the women began to alter their opinions toward the ball, most were still not able to clearly describe the purpose of the ball or the function it served for a modern woman in today's society. Even after the completion of the consumption experience, these women were unable to articulate what it meant to be a debutante in modern times.

What the women did understand upon completing the experience was that the ball as a tradition should continue because they had bonded and connected with other women throughout the experience, they had received positive feedback from their parents, and they had enjoyed the attention and the fun that participation the event had provided. These emotions and positively perceived outcomes quelled most of the debutantes' uncertainty and negativity surrounding the ball.

Earlier, I discussed the notion of "ownership" in terms of women making sense of the ball, even within its highly regulated context. Moreover, there is another very important element and dimension within this notion: the feminist notion of agency. Could women exhibit agency within the patriarchal context of the debutante ball?

In fact, most women did exhibit some form of agency. In using Judith Butler's theory, I discussed the difference between "performing" an expected role and personally assuming and internalizing a role as a part of one's self, as a part of one's identity. What

was visible in this study was the layered application of performance within this context, built around rehearsal and performance of a role. Although this performance was clearly one that was apparent for all to see, the women that I interviewed either assumed this identity or learned how to “perform” their expected role in very clear ways.

Some women had been forming their own identity as bound to the identity of a debutante since their early childhood, and this experience served as a powerful reinforcement of that identity. For other women, it seemed that they also assumed roles in a way that gave them a stable and static identity of themselves, and this debutante identity was one to which they could cling. These women who assumed the debutante identity were directly aligned with Judith Butler’s notion of “gender as performativity” as they learned how to behave according to what others deemed appropriate for them and what others expected of them. In these situations, women clearly surrendered agency within their personal ownership of the debutante identity.

Other women who took ownership of the experience continued to maintain a distance from the experience. They understood their role as just that -- a role. These women did not internalize the notion of a debutante as a larger extension of themselves. Rather, they “performed” the role, while simultaneously keeping a cognitive space around them. In this way, many women exhibited agency within a larger patriarchal context. Of course, women who never connected with the larger collective identity and who left the experience with a similarly negative perception at the conclusion of the experience were successful in the maintenance of this cognitive space. In addition, women who fully consumed the experience as their own, who enjoyed the experience,

could also sometimes maintain this cognitive space insomuch as they were able to perform and enjoy their role.

In this way, most of these women exhibited agency out of necessity, as a means to preserve a part of themselves within a context in which they perceived they were being asked to become something they did not fully understand or with which they were uncomfortable. After studying debutante balls with consideration to this notion of feminist agency and a reflection of my own personal experience, despite the many interviews that concluded on a positive note, I have gained a great deal of insight into the potential harm that these balls can bring.

I too performed my debutante role as something expected of me, and I learned to enjoy the fun and grandeur of the experience. Now, however, I have come to understand the production of knowledge within the context, and I have recognized the power the consumption experience has to alter women's opinions. This recognition leads me to conclude that the debutante ball is both troubling and harmful for the modern woman. The ambiguity surrounding the purpose of the ball and the notion of the modern debutante was not accidental; it simply is not easily explainable because it serves no positive purpose for women today. Rather, the women learn how to "behave" within a larger patriarchal context, and I saw firsthand that critical questioning was thrown aside once women connected with the men's dominant viewpoint within the context. Also of concern is the recurring notion that these women were participating in the ball not for themselves but to appease and please their parents. If being a debutante were something positive for the women, they might choose to participate in the experience of their own accord.

The circuit of culture provided a powerful means of analysis through which to examine the context of a debutante ball. Using this lens, I was able to uncover how tradition was passed down through the regulator's static conception of the debutante ball and the debutante tradition and the subsequent ambiguity of the women surrounding their identity and their role. I was also able to uncover the stages and processes of the meaning-making moments for these women as I saw firsthand the power of personal consumption tied to identity.

This type of cultural studies research has enormous implications specifically in terms of feminist theory. As meaning-production is uncovered, the reason we do what we do is made visible, and the cause of our unquestioning acceptance is unveiled. After a deeper analysis of the ball, I now recognize that this ball's meaning is passed down in this tradition created by the male producers. The ball does not exist for the women; in fact, many modern women in my study were initially opposed to the idea. Women had trouble reconciling its purpose in modern society because it often does not fit with their evolving perception of the importance of self-identification. This type of study allows for examination of traditions and provides revelation of meaning as processes of power are uncovered.

I encourage future theorists to question rituals, traditions, and cultural events similar to and different from the debutante ball. Where do these traditions originate? Why do we continue traditions if they have no current purpose? Who is being served in the perpetuation of these traditions? Who, if anyone, is benefiting? Who, if anyone, is being harmed? These questions are essential ones that women and men alike should contemplate.

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\* Name has been changed to protect confidentiality.

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## Appendix A: Interview Guides & Consent Forms

### 1. Telephone Guide Questionnaire for Pre-Event

Hello. My name is Elizabeth Neeland and I am a graduate student at the Grady College of Journalism & Mass Communication at the University of Georgia. I'm working on a research project entitled "Women's Experiences in Debut" for my thesis. I am gathering information from participants before, during and after their debutante experience. I am looking at a specific ball in Montgomery, Alabama, the Blue Gray Colonel's Ball.

I would like to get your assessment of the event thus far for purposes of my project.

I've got a number of questions I want to ask you, and most of them are designed to get your responses in your own words. I'd like to tape the conversation if you don't mind so I have full detail of your responses.

Your responses will be confidential, and your name will NOT be associated with your responses in any way.

Research at the University of Georgia that involves human participants is overseen by the Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding your rights as a participant can be addressed to the director of institutional research at 706-542-3199. This project entitled "Women's Experiences in Debut" is overseen by faculty advisor Dr. Peggy Kreshel. You can contact her at 706-542-5045 if you have any questions now or after you complete the interview.

May I begin with my questions now? It is possible for us to complete the questions in 10-20 minutes, but I don't want you to feel rushed in your responses. Your responses are of course voluntary and you may skip some of the questions asked. Many of the questions are open-ended.

**START INTERVIEW IF POSSIBLE AND RESCHEDULE IF NECESSARY.**

“Women’s Experiences in Debut”

- 1- Tell me about the events leading up to your debut.
- 2- What did you do to prepare for the event? Was there anyone who helped you?
- 3- What were your expectations about your upcoming debut?
- 4- Please describe any emotions you may have surrounding the event.
- 5- As a debutante, how do you perceive your role?
- 6- Why did you choose to accept your invitation to debut?
- 7- I want to give you an opportunity to speak freely in regards to anything at all that you may be thinking surrounding your upcoming debut. Do you have any other information or comments that you would like to add?

## 2. Consent Form

I \_\_\_\_\_ agree to participate in the research titled **Women's Experiences in Debut**, which is being conducted by Elizabeth C. Neeland, graduate student in Grady College of Journalism & Mass Communication at the University of Georgia. I understand that my participation is voluntary. I can stop taking part without giving any reason, and without penalty. I can ask to have all of the information about me returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

The reason for this study is for the researchers Master's thesis.

No compensation or incentives are to be provided to me for my participation.

No risks are expected. However, I am aware that this interview is intended to be recorded, transcribed and analyzed by the researcher for purposes of her thesis. By signing this consent form, I am acknowledging my consent in this research process.

The results of my participation will be confidential, and my name will not be associated with my responses in any way.

The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the course of the project, and can be reached by telephone at 478-718-4961 or by e-mail at [eneeland@uga.edu](mailto:eneeland@uga.edu). In addition, Dr. Peggy Kreshel, the major professor and advisor for the project can be reached by telephone at 706-542-5045 or at [kreshel@uga.edu](mailto:kreshel@uga.edu).

I understand that I am agreeing by my signature on this form to take part in this research project and understand that I will receive a copy of this consent form for my records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Researcher  
Ph: 478-718-4961  
[eneeland@uga.edu](mailto:eneeland@uga.edu)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Please sign both copies of this form, keep one and return the other to the researcher.**

### 3. Telephone Guide Questionnaire for Background

Hello. My name is Elizabeth Neeland, and I am a graduate student at the Grady College of Journalism & Mass Communication at the University of Georgia. I'm working on a research project entitled "Women's Experiences in Debut" for my thesis. I am gathering information from some of the same participants and from different ones as well both before, during and after their debutante experience. I am looking at a specific ball in Montgomery, Alabama, the Blue Gray Colonel's Ball.

I would like to get your assessment of the event thus far for purposes of my project.

I've got a number of questions I want to ask you, and most of them are designed to get your responses in your own words. I'd like to tape the conversation if you don't mind so I have full detail of your responses.

Your responses will be confidential, and your name will NOT be associated with your responses in any way.

Research at the University of Georgia that involves human participants is overseen by the Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding your rights as a participant can be addressed to the director of institutional research at 706-542-3199. This project entitled "Women's Experiences in Debut" is overseen by faculty advisor Dr. Peggy Kreshel. You can contact her at 706-542-5045 if you have any questions now or after you complete the interview.

May I begin with my questions now? It is possible for us to complete the questions in 10-20 minutes, but I don't want you to feel rushed in your responses. Your responses are of course voluntary and you may skip some of the questions asked. Many of the questions are open-ended.

**START INTERVIEW IF POSSIBLE AND RESCHEDULE IF NECESSARY.**



Background Questions:

- 1- When, how and why was the ball founded? (What was the purpose and intent of the first ball?)
- 2- Where was the first ball held?
- 3-How was the ball funded?
- 4-How were debutantes chosen?
- 5- How did they decide what to wear?
- 6- As “coming out” is regarded by many to be a tradition in the past, what is the purpose of the ball today?
- 7- Do people ever turn down the invitation to debut?
- 8- If so, what reasons do they give for not participating?
- 9- Have there been many changes in the ball over the years?
- 10- What did it mean to be a debutante in the year that it was founded, and what does it mean to be a debutante today?
- 11- What is the queen’s role in the debutante as compared to the other debs?
- 12- How do you think young debs perceive their role? Is this different from the way it was perceived in the past?
- 13- How do you think most young ladies come to understand their experience?
- 14-What do you think they gain from the experience?
- 15- How do you think others view this tradition?
- 16- Do you know of any historians or archiving traditions that would give insight into my research on this ball?

#### 4. Interview Guide for Post-Event

1- What was your experience like the night that you debuted? Please include as much detail as possible to recall.

2- Did you have any expectations concerning what you thought the event might have been like? Was your debutante experience similar or different to your expectations? Please describe those similarities or differences.

3- How would you assess your overall experience?

4- What part of the experience stands out the most to you?

5- What did you learn from your experience of being a debutante?

6- Was this experience an important one for you and/or your family? Why or why not?

7- Is there anything else that you would like to add at all concerning the event?

8- Would you recommend this experience to others?