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I Could Visit Her Blog Just Because She's so Stupid

A Study of how Gendered Norms and Discourses Surrounding Girls' Blogging Habits are Created and how the Girls' Negotiate Around Them

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Invisible Girl

“Ceci n’est pas une fille”



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Introduction

This publication is the end product of the Invisible Girl project, an international, Swedish-based and multi-disciplinary research project in which the interplay of power relations, gender, and age was the primary object of study. The project was global in its scope and included researchers and artists from Australia, Canada, Croatia, The Czech Republic, Estonia, India, Israel, Italy, Kenya, Madagascar, Nigeria, Serbia, South Africa, Sweden and The UK. Altogether 40 researchers have contributed to the publication with 32 chapters, including works of art, such as; poetry, video, cartoons, digital imaging, photography and installation.

The name of the project is inspired by Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* from 1952. Just like Ellison portrays black Americans as being socially invisible, it is possible to view girls as invisible in the sense that their actions and competences cannot be adequately described with the existing male-normative terminology. Is she made socially and linguistically invisible and not seen as a real person? Another inspiration is the philosophy behind Magritte's (1929) painting "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" [This is not a pipe], often interpreted as pointing out that the painting is not a pipe but an image of a pipe. The same metaphor illuminates the philosophical essence of the Invisible Girl. When we talk about blogging girls, gamer girls, helpless girls, out-of-control-on-the-internet girls, girls as foolish innocents who invite sexual predation - is this girls' reality or images of it? Are girls hidden in the notion of the gendered "Other", in the general idea of a girl category?

This body of work forms a counter story including the voice of marginalized groups with the explicit aim to challenge privileged discourses. From a norm-critical perspective the aim is to question accepted worldviews or implicit agreements about girls, how they are mediated by i.e. images, movies and stories, which produce sexist stereotypes, at different societal levels. Stories, which contradict and present the world from different perspectives, are important for exposing stereotyping practices and how they are developed. The overarching research approach of the Invisible Girl Project is critical and derives from the tension between common notions about girlhood,

girls' own experiences and contemporary research. We suggest that the understanding of the concepts 'girls' and 'girlhood' are socially constructed and that their associated meanings are continually shaped and re-shaped by social actors in particular situations. Certain historical, social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, religious and gender values may also inform these meanings.

Approaching the invisible girl as a verb rather as a noun this publication may be seen as an exploration of contemporary conditions for how girls become girls and form girl identities. We do not aspire to present a generalized image of The Girl. Providing examples of how to become a girl is an individual experience but also a global phenomenon, the contributions to our publication offer important aspects of what it could mean to become a girl today. How do girls define themselves? How do girls express their identities? What practices are instrumental when girls become girls? And how have these questions been answered in different cultural contexts?

Further, conditions for girlhood and for becoming a girl, e.g. the process of combining being female and being young, are influenced by particular identity factors. We understand these factors as multiple rather than distinctive. The individual formation of girlhood may intersect and interplay with various identity markers, and their associated fields of power, such as ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, class, religion and different individual abilities. We suggest that even if there are factors that form a common basis for girls' life situations, these situations are also lived and experienced in various ways by individual girls. It is about becoming a girl on social, cultural but also personal premises. We like to think of girls as individuals and uniquely situated and that the becoming of the Girl is shaped by a lived experience in dialogue with civilization as a whole. Becoming a girl is something personal but it also means being part of collective ideas of girlhood.

Girlhood and *girl* may also be understood as something associated with a situation rather than as a category or a quality. Becoming a girl takes place in a situation with certain constraints and possibilities on global, national, local and individual levels. Some

of the processes involved are managing contradictory situations, and finding individual freedom in the gap between what is possible and permitted. There is also a generational factor involved. Even if the experience of becoming and being a girl is limited by age, the memories of this experience will be lifelong and a part of each individual woman. As such *girl* and *girlhood* become part of a larger feminine situation and may be understood as a situational, inter-generational and gendered becoming.

We have organised the different chapters into four overlapping and interrelated parts; *Negotiating Identity*, *Bodily Existence*, *Girlhood Interrupted* and *Gender and Contemporary Media*. There could of course have been a number of other ways to divide the chapters. The reason we chose this particular structure is that it takes the reader on a journey from the inside to the outside. We get to reflect upon the inner thoughts of identity work, via ideas of the body and the constraints that interrupt girlhood to the setting that is provided by the media landscape. The following pages give an overview of the 32 chapters.

Negotiating Identity

The first chapter is Camilla Hällgren's *Gendered Other - Hidden Girl*, a philosophical view of girlhood and the mechanisms that make girls Others. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir among others, Hällgren describes a process that leads girls and women into taking a dual position in relation to their identity formation; as objects and as subjects. *Gendered Other - Hidden Girl* provides an existentialist foundation for the Invisible Girl project. The aims of this book are to understand what it means to be a girl and to become a girl. This first chapter forms a backdrop against which we can project the exploration, in text and in images. In the next chapter, *Working Hard to Create a Visible Self: Social Constructions of (In)Visibility in Relation to Girls' Stress*, the researchers Maria Wiklund and Carita Bengs problematise the stress girls experience, focusing on invisibility and visibility. The concepts of invisibility and visibility are useful in order to explain girls' and young women's experiences of stress since these concepts operate as symbols or markers for girls' status and recognition in different arenas and levels in society. One of the findings presented in this chapter is that the studied girls often experience themselves and their stress as

invisible. High workload and responsibility-taking, together with conflicting feminine positions, exacted a high price in the form of overwhelming distress and distrust in themselves and the world as a whole. In the following chapter, *The Politics of (In)Visibility: On the Blind Spots of Womens' Discrimination in the Academy* Nitza Berkovitch, Anat Waldman and Niza Yanay show how the invisible institutional culture participates in the production and propagation of gender difference and hierarchy. Photographs in nine magazines published by Ben-Gurion University over a period of 30 years are examined. The authors identify two ways of presenting women: Techniques of portraying stereotypical femininity and Techniques that undervalue women, their work and their achievements. This double process, i.e. the increase of women's representation along with the increase of traditional gender stereotypes, the authors term "the new blind spot of discrimination". In *Gender intersects: African women Negotiate visibility from spaces of invisibility in Sweden*, Joyce Kemuma describes how five black migrant women negotiate visibility in their new country. From their marginalised position in Sweden, these women use different strategies to counteract processes that deskill and disempower them. The Swedish society is described as a homogenous society, at least at a rhetorical level. Immigrants are expected to develop excellent Swedish language skills or they will not be permitted to study further and migrants are expected to speak without accent. Kemuma portrays women who are invisible in their position as non-European, but highly visible due to the colour of their skin and negative media reports on immigrants. In her chapter *The Girlish Condition - Big Issues on a Small Scale*, Camilla Hällgren explores conditions for being and becoming girls. Ideas about identity, gender, power relations and objectification are visualized as well as the contradictory condition of being both subject and object. How do girls learn about the feminine, objectified bodily existence? How could the sense of being objectified by the gaze of the other be pictured? What norms and values about femininity and body do girls have to navigate among when becoming girls? In Barbara Pleić Tomić chapter *Good Girl, Bad Girl: Adolescent Friendships and Construction of the Identity* the complex pattern of adolescent friendships and the special dynamic that marks the most

ambiguous relationship of them all – the one with the best friend – is analysed. This relationship is crucial to the forming of the young girl's identity, her way of perceiving herself and the world that surrounds her. Tomić asserts that adolescent friendship is never fully reciprocal, since one of the participants in the equation is always more submissive, more *plain*, more *loving*, and usually plays the part of background setting for the more mercurial, dazzling and selfish partner. Dina Rončević's chapter also deals with the construction of gender identities. As empirical foundation, she uses her own experiences of attending and completing a vocational retraining for an auto mechanic at an Electrical engineering high school - to examine and find her own social, as well as personal, position as woman. The author suggests that the auto mechanics context allows her to cover and experience most of the problems associated with the gender identity discourse. The chapter is called *Suck, Squeeze, Bang, Blow* and is colloquially used to signify the four strokes of a four stroke engine, but they also signify sexual acts, all of which are performed on a man or imply male sexual pleasure. The chapter builds on five units that altogether cover the issue of identity, what is imprinted on women through gendered ideas about their competences and what may become unavailable to women because of their gender. Using her own experience the author exemplify activism and how to reclaim visibility. In the final chapter in the identity theme, *Alter Gogo*, Andrew Esiebo presents a counter-story to the stereotyped picture that is often complemented to African women - as sad, exposed to famine, violence and poverty. Through the story of soccer playing grandmothers in a South African township, gender stereotypes as well normative roles and images attributed to women, in particular in their elder age are challenged. This forms a powerful socio-cultural scenario in which soccer becomes the means and the ultimate expression of an alternative gender and generational identity. This chapter takes us from identity work to the second theme – Bodily Existence.

Bodily Existence

To start off this theme, Julia Thorell explores the tension between what young girls show off to the world and what they choose to make invisible. Her chapter *The Closet* draws on the fashion blog dis-

course and exemplifies conditions for being a girl and forming a feminine identity. Picturing a young woman in an everyday scenario, who is spending her free day worrying about cleaning, eating, weight and what to wear, Thorell tells us about young women as insecure and adventurous, full of life and paralyzed by complex and the thought of being objectified. The chapter visualizes dilemmas women have to deal with when maintaining and keeping up with the feminine project. In the next chapter, *Wayne 4 Ever - I Tramp Stamp Myself before Someone Else does*, the authors Elza Dunkels and Maya Dunkels contribute to the development of a new terminology for visualizing gendered ideas about women's bodies. At the centre of their narrative is the tramp stamp; a particular tattoo placed on a woman's lower back. Using research methods found at the intersection of art performances, journalism and activism, the authors draw the empirical core of their study from the experience of tramp-stamping their own bodies. The authors address how girls and women are made invisible through suppressing mechanisms of sexist society, but also how they can reclaim visibility. In the chapter *Invisible Girl* by Sol Morén a photograph shows us a girl who is visible and invisible at the same time. Ana Petrov's *Constructing a Discourse, Regulating a Normative Body: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Serbian Girls' Magazines*, deals with the mechanisms of discursive representations of girls' and young women's bodies in printed media. The discourse in the magazines illustrates how girls' identities are strategically constructed on a linguistic level. By addressing "normal" girls and their bodies, girls who are excluded from the "normal" are defined as "problems". The girls become visible by adopting a dominated way of acting, living, working on the body and wearing a specific make-up. They avoid invisibility by undergoing the recommended procedures and thus becoming socially accepted. Kamilla Peuravaara's chapter *Negotiation Normality: The Complexity of Showing (off) Bodies* deals with invisible girls in two aspects. The first aspect is the actual theme of her research; young women's strategies to become visible, "to be remembered" as the informant Lisa puts it. The other aspect is the research itself; Peuravaara interviewed young women with intellectual impairments, a group relatively invisible in research. Peuravaara operationalizes the inform-

ants' strategies to make themselves visible into four different conceptual themes: marks of resistance, standing out, blending in and female masculinity. The next chapter is Jill Andrew's intense and powerful *Jilly's Underware*, which the author herself describes like this: "My underwear showed me the intriguing ways in which our visual encounters with objects inform the construction of the social. Indirectly, in my discomfort, my mother's gift taught me to embrace the perfection of so-called imperfection. I am still in awe of her." In the final chapter of this theme, Jill Andrew's second contribution *Popular Magazines, [Some] Black Women & Body Image* presents findings from a critical reading of women's fashion magazines. She asserts that the discourse of these magazines endorses western ideals pertaining to beauty and a body image that maintains hegemonic white normalized notions of femininity. Because of this, they at the same time omit racialised body stories of black women. Even though the chapter refers to other research texts, her standpoint has been arrived at through personal experiences. This chapter bridges nicely into our next theme, which discusses different disruptions in girls' and women's lives.

Girlhood Interrupted

The first chapter of this theme, *Jyotica* by Smriti Mehra, in the form of a film, could be the story of countless numbers of girls. The story is told by the powerful voice of a seven-year-old girl called Jyotica, who belongs to a family of migrant construction workers in India. The chapter exemplifies a girlhood shaped among the tensions of social hierarchies, un-organized labour force and the impossibility of education because the family is always moving from place to place. It also shows a girl with agency, strong voice and articulated ideas of how she would like to live her future life. In *Invisible Girlhood: the Never-ending Story for Sexualised and Racialised Minorities* by Anne Harris and Achol Baroch, we meet the circumstances, constraints, and opportunities presented by challenging traditional gender roles. The two authors find each other at the intersection of their different but similar states of marginalisation. The chapter deals with the invisibility and hyper visibility that exists at the same time. Achol, a Sudanese girl living in Australia, can never hide the visible difference caused by her brown skin. At the same time she is made invisible at many levels; in

relation to Sudanese boys and men and in Australian media. The authors suggest that the chapter in itself is a powerful act of making visible girls from radicalised and sexualized margins, rather than passive cries for recognition. *Nelly, the Invisible Girl* by Gun-Marie Frånberg and Marie Wrethander portrays the process of inclusion and exclusion in peer relationships. Based on a yearlong study of a fourth-grade class in Sweden, where participant observation was the principle means of gathering data, the reader is invited to watch closely Nelly's struggles to find friends in her new class. The researchers use the term *relation work* to describe establishing, cementing, breaking up and maintaining of relationships. None of the adults in her school notices how Nelly is ignored and excluded, thus she experiences a double invisibility; by her peers and by the adults in her school. The situation forces a young girl to solve a situation where professional adult agency is absent. The next chapter, *The Invisibility of Adolescent Mothers in a Yoruba Community in South-west Nigeria* by Agunbiade Ojo Melvin is built on interviews with adolescent mothers, 15-19 years, in Southwest Nigeria. It deals with the stigmatization of adolescents' sexuality in a traditional Yoruba society, where female virginity attracts high value. The author concludes that young women are expected to conform to these norms more than young men. This gendered division of responsibility is one of many factors affecting the young mother's situation. Further, the chapter describes how religious and cultural values influence many Nigerian parents' views on sex education. The young women's own, often unsupported, initiatives to create a feature for their children are aimed at renegotiating their social positions. In the chapter *Girls and Girlhood Interrupted: Two Decades of Statelessness and Militarized Violence in War-torn Somalia* the author Shukria Dini analyzes the impacts of prolonged civil war on Somali girls. What does it mean to be a girl in a violent and insecure environment? How does militarization affect girls and their girlhood? Through interviews with young girls and adult women the gendered outcomes of state collapse and civil war in Somalia is investigated. The author discusses the specific ways in which Somali girls are affected by the protracted political disintegration and the social upheavals. At a very young age, Somali girls shoulder new roles and responsibilities to safeguard the well-being of their families. Just like their mothers, these

girls are resilient and have developed coping methods to survive in a harsh environment. The author shows us that Somali women and girls are not only victims of the militarized conflict, but also actors and survivors who have endured insecurity and social deprivation for over two decades. The next chapter, *Visible Girl Invisible Lesbian/Mizrahi: Gender, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Israel*, is written by Yael Mishali. It examines the intersections of ethnicity and gender with lesbian sexual identity in the Israeli context. In Israel, the two designations *Mizrahi* and *Ashkenazi* serve to classify the population into two distinct ethnic categories, i.e. Jews who immigrated to Israel from Arab and Muslim countries or the Far East and those from western European countries or North America. The chapter focuses on Mizrahi women and the role their ethnic origins play in shaping their gender, sexual choices and identities. Drawing on critical race studies and feminist and queer theories, Mishali looks into the multiple exclusions that Mizrahi lesbians experience. The end chapter of this section, Janet Grey-Elsharif's and Claudette Morgans' *The Invisible girl and 'miss' representation of 'her story'*, is about black girls' life experiences within various school communities. The chapter draws on the narratives of black girls from birth to 13 years of age, focussing on the development of girls' identity and social processes in traditional African-Caribbean family roles. It deals with mythological structures, media representation of females and the restricted nature of the world towards girlhood. The findings of the study reveals how black girls are in a struggle not only for their personal rights as individuals to be acknowledged and respected in society, but also for their legal rights as children. Black girls feel marginalised and the writers call for initiatives to provide service to address exclusion and emotional resilience issues. This chapter leads us to our final theme, in which we find gendered connections to media.

Gender and Contemporary Media

In the first chapter of this theme, *Transparent Girl*, Marcus Persson and Mikael Eriksson Björling explore the permeating idea of how girls and boys best succeed in life. The author suggest that these ideas are grounded in society, by a functionalistic belief that women and men should excel at different skills, and thereby complement each other. This is further linked to young people's use of contemporary technology;

danger and the adults' will to safeguard their children and cope with feelings of societal risk. The author suggests that both boys and girls are competent users of contemporary media but because of gendered beliefs about children's ability, their respective uses of technology are viewed differently. This may influence girls freedom to use technology. As explained in the end of the chapter: the communication-and-play-thing becomes a social-and-control-thing for girls and a play-and-freedom-thing for boys. *She Who Can, Teaches* by Margaret Lloyd, is a poetic transcript drawing on research interviews from two surveys. One conducted in 2001 and the other in 2008. While the informants for the poem were all pre-service teachers training to teach specialist secondary IT or computer science subjects, some were straight from school while others were mature-age or career-change students. Some were questioning whether they should follow careers in the IT industry or continue into IT teaching. This poetic transcription forms one example of how women's competences are conceptually hidden in the gendered notion of who is supposed to be an IT professional or not and, further, how this influences what women themselves think they are able to do. Tess Jewell explores the ASCII code of a pornographic image in her chapter *webGurl dis/connects*. Her exploration draws on the idea that on their most basic level, even images are composed of text. She suggests that the mediated nature of the Internet allows users to choose how they define online identities, how they interact with others, and what they wish to learn about the world. However, the combination of anonymity and audience can also lead to rude or discriminatory behaviour. For girls in particular, accessing the Internet can be a complex experience with varying impacts on identity formation. At the same time that girls are exposed to a vast wealth of dis/information as well as to various online cultures, they are also introduced to the massive availability of online pornography and new arenas for sexual pressure. Messages about what it means to be a girl, and a girl online, often conflict. The author shows us how self-image and identity are constructed textually online, making the user as in/visible as she desires. In the chapter *I Could Visit Her Blog Just Because She's so Stupid*, the author Sofia Zettermark draws on the powerful relationship between bloggers and mass media to investigate the media discourse on

girls' blogging and how girls themselves understand their activities. The author suggests that the blogging girls are facing a contradictory discourse: On the one hand, girls are rewarded for being girly and encouraged to consume beauty products and care about their appearances. On the other hand, when following the rules of this discourse, and blogging about it, girls become invalidated and reprimanded by the media and in society more widely. This also exemplifies how girls and their competences are made discursively invisible. The author shows us how girls are highly aware of the cultural stigma and limitations of their femininity but also that girls have strategies for putting up resistance. In his chapter *Resisting the Subordinate Woman - a Young Girl Constructing Gendered Identity Online*, Patrik Hernwall analyses a self-portrait from a Swedish social networking site. The image is of a 12-year-old girl who has posted it herself together with a question: "why like me when you can hate me?" Hernwall first analyses the image from a stereotypical point of view, where the young girl is subject to societal subordination, and a sort of victim. Thereafter, an analysis is made from another point of view; the girl is seen as competent. Not only does she master the art of post-production of images, she also knows how to portray herself in accordance with, and in opposition to, societal norms and values. In the chapter *Can You See Me Now? The Digital Strategies of Creative Girls* the author Sol Morén makes girls visible as creative developers of the internet and of contemporary technology. Why do so many girls choose to blog? What is it that influences girls' choices of new technology? Interviews with students, artists, project managers and entrepreneurs suggest that social gender norms from the offline context are reflected in the online context as digital gender norms. For instance, girls and boys seem to prefer different communication tools. Another aspect of digital gender norms is that expressions of technical competence, which do not correspond to the predominant male norm, is not seen as important and consequently made invisible. In the chapter *A Blog of Their Own* the authors Alena Černá, Lukas Blinka and Francesca Romana Seganti explore blogs as tools used in girls' construction of self-representation and expressions of identity. Girls having mastered digital media now also have media rich bedrooms and that they use blogs stay invisible if they wish or to become

visible, when needed. The authors suggest that while this invisibility is in some regards deliberate and liberating, there are invisible girls hidden in the online world who are overlooked by the relevant experts and considered uninteresting – yet they are the creators and re-creators of a new sense of femininity. In the chapter *Outsiders in the Videogame World - Where are the Girls?* the authors Kathy Sanford and Sarah Bonsor Kurki explore the overall invisibility of girls in the videogame world and possible implications of their absence. The authors argue that participation in the videogame world provide important confidence and knowledge about technology and virtual spaces, something that is important for having equal opportunities to future life and career choices. The chapter ends with suggestions on what it would take for girls to be interested in videogames and how they could become integrally involved in these worlds of imagination and possibilities. Moving on to other media expressions, *The Princess with the Quasi-Feminist Agenda: a Glance at Two Disney Films Through the Lens of Feminist Criticism* by Nada Kujundžić scrutinizes the images and messages of Disney films. The idea of Disney films going feminist, or the emergence of feminist features of Disney heroines, is critically examined by closely looking at two recent films: *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled*. For anyone who sees Disney films as nothing more than "good clean fun" Kujundžić's chapter is an amazing journey through an often overlooked landscape in which our young girls spend quite some time. As the last chapter of this section and of the entire book, Zoly Rakotoniera's chapter is based on a novel, *Elle, au printemps*, written by Michèle Rakotoson. The chapter *Elle, au printemps: the Bildungsroman of an Immigrant Girl*, explores the theme of a female journey. The journey occurs in a cross-cultural context showing how an immigrant girl becomes visible in a post-colonizer culture. The journey takes place on different levels. In her migratory journey she goes through three stages to become visible; alienation, transition and integration. Arriving in a new country the feeling of inexistence or being nobody is present, since nobody takes notice of her. Her moment of transition is symbolically delineated when she finds herself at a crossroads. When she finally becomes part of French society she feels integrated.

The main outcome of our research project suggests

that becoming a girl is something personal, but doing girlhood also means negotiations with and being part of collective ideas of “the girl” and the feminine body. Girls have to navigate among a number of contrarious expectations. Being pictured as successful and as a winner in the educational system but also as someone in crises and in need of protection. Girls have to learn to deal with mixed messages and form their existence in-between gendered constrains and possibilities. However, we argue that somewhere between the lines of collective and global ideas of girlhood and contrarious expectations, there is a girl with agency who has capacity both to construct and reconstruct her social worlds.

The project as such is an example of what sometimes is called post-academic writing, blending methods, disciplines and theoretical tools. Post-academic writing can be seen as following through on the struggle of the humanities and social sciences to find a way of their own, and not simply copying positivist ideas and the methods of natural sciences. In order to investigate intricate and sublime areas such as the invisibility of girls, we needed to be brave, to go outside the borders that we ourselves and others put up for research. Thus, our initial call for participation was widely formulated; some may even argue that it was vague. We did not want to restrict potential participants’ views on how to contribute, but rather encourage a creative chaos and confusion in order to extract innovative perspectives on what it can mean to become a girl today. The only thing we wanted to be very clear about was the critical perspective. We could not imagine that the response to our call would be so overwhelming. We received so many critical and innovative proposals that we quickly decided to expand our original book plans. If emotion is one of the attributes connected with post-academic writing, this project certainly meets that requisite; we were deeply touched by the different stories that were presented to us. The different images of the invisible girl that you will find in this volume are sure to stir emotions as well as raise consciousness about life situations of girls around the world. The post-academic method is also mirrored in our approach to generalization. The possible generalization is on another level than covering all continents of the world or all ages, etc. Instead, we use the girl as an analytical category rather than a given essence, and thereby place the generalisation

in the reader’s processing of the chapters rather than in a table of contents.

At several points along the process we as editors had to put trust in our initial ideas and push forward even though we had no other project to copy or lean on. In such an innovative project there is bound to be conflicts between the contributors’ motives, methods, disciplines, former experiences, etc. To further complicate the matter, we had to communicate between countries, in different languages and over different time zones. Whenever there were problems, we reminded ourselves that nothing new comes out of copying the old. Today, when writing this introduction, we are deeply grateful that we actually took this leap of faith. This amazing collection of chapters, in so many different media, contributes greatly to the knowledge development. We know more about girls and girlhood than we did before. Also, we know more about how to collect the results of this kind of innovative research. As always in large projects there are a number of people and institutions to thank. We would be nothing without all those who contributed; the authors and artists first and foremost, our distinguished editorial advisory board who helped us review the contributions, our sponsors who trusted the project enough to provide the necessary funds, our colleagues at the Department of Applied Educational Science at Umeå University, who gave us the possibility to carry out this time and energy consuming work, and of course, our families who cheered us on and fed us during the most intense weeks.

In any project you reach the point where you want to abandon it and a time when you promise yourself never to do it again. Luckily, these thoughts dissolve quickly and we actually found ourselves planning for the next project somewhere in this process. We are equally excited about this new idea but we will not disclose it here and now. However, you have our word that it will be worth waiting for.

Umeå in May 2012

Gun-Marie Frånberg

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Theme I: Negotiating Identity *Chapter 1*

Gendered Other - Hidden Girl

Camilla Hällgren, Sweden

The objective of this chapter is to conceptualize objectification and how this could be seen as one of the conditions of the feminine existence and as such, interlaced in young girls existence and formation of identities.

Following the work of Taylor (1994) identity could be understood as a ‘...person’s understanding of who they are, of their fundamental defining characteristics as a human being’ (Taylor 1994:75). Adding an intersectional perspective, the formation of identity is informed by intersecting ideas of gender, race, class, ability, sexual orientation and age. These factors are linked to intersecting fields of power. Further, the formation of identity is seen as taking place in a given historical contexts, in particular situations and in relation to other people. (Crenshaw 1991; McCall 2005; Young 2005; de Beauvoir 1949, 2011) Thus identity formation, at its core, might be understood as situational, interpersonal and as a feature of human existence.

Drawing from existentialist ideas of what it means to be human, part of human existence is the inevitable experience of being in the world with other people (Heidegger 1927, 2008). This interpersonal play is frequently conceptualized as the duality between the Self and the Other. It is suggested that this duality is found in all societies and that the ‘category of the Other is as original as consciousness itself’ and also essential to our self-awareness (de Beauvoir 1949, 2011:6). The duality between Self and Others is seen as enabling us to position, differentiate and understand ourselves. As such, it is not only the interplay of the Self and the Other, but also to view someone as the Other, that becomes essential in the formation of a person’s self-awareness and identity formation (Sartre 1943, 2005; Griffiths 1999; de Beauvoir 1949, 2011). In order to differentiate a Self there has to be an Other.

One key media for identifying someone as the Other is the gaze. We look at others and we are looked upon. When this happens there are corresponding activities of control initiated in our minds and, fol-

lowing the existentialist philosophy of Sartre (1943, 2005), this process of looking at each other holds a struggle for dominance between two consciousnesses: Who will be the looked-at, e.g. the object? Who will be defined as the ‘Other’? And who will be the privileged subject; the one that has the right to define the ‘Other’? The one who finds himself being looked at, has lost the struggle and becomes positioned as the object (Sartre 1943, 2005).

The gaze may be coming from a real person, however, it may also be directed from our own thoughts, as a part of our consciousness; as the sense of being looked at; as the imagination of being observed by an audience. It is the awareness of being someone else’s object when you are looking at yourself: How do I look in the mirror and what would others think of me if they saw me now? How do other people think I look? What would my mother think of me if she saw me now? It is our awareness of being looked at but also what values we think that look are directing at us. Depending on the quality of the apprehended ideals in the look from others, this will have different influences on how we perceive ourselves. Or, as explained with the words of Sartre; ‘As I appear to the Other, so I am.’ (Sartre 1943, 2005:237)

As we have seen, the relationship between Self and Other is essential to creating self-awareness and ideas of identity, as well as defining someone as the Other. From an existentialist perspective, our understanding of our selves is also informed by our own thought of being looked at and the awareness of being objectified in the gaze of someone else. These acts of objectification and differentiating oneself from the ‘Other’ apply to human existence in a general way as rather uncomplicated experiences. However, the process of Othering could be loaded with values and depending on the values involved, Othering may also be problematic: Is the notion of Other shaped through recognition, absence of recognition or misrecognition? Who am I in relation to this other person? How do I value the Other? How does the other value me?

Gendered Other - Hidden Girl

If the identification of someone as the Other is governed by oppressive discourses such as racism or stereotyping ideas about gender, othering can be used as a basis for legitimizing acts of discrimination (Griffiths 1999). And, further, these discourses may inform larger discriminatory structures in society, experienced in cultural and social contexts. As a consequence, on the level of the individual consciousness, the ‘...sense of looking at one’s self through the eyes of others’ could become an internal experience of measuring yourself in relation to a world that looks disrespectfully on you (Du Bois 1903:3). As such, degradation becomes part of one’s self awareness and formation of identity.

In what way could Othering and the duality between Self and Other be relevant to understand conditions for the feminine existence and young girls identity formation? De Beauvoir (1949, 2011) offers a feminist variation of the existentialist theme of the duality of self-and-other and its associated struggle over being subject or object. De Beauvoir explains that for women there is no such struggle. Because of the asymmetric power relation between the two sexes, the scene is already set when the feminine self is played towards society. Women are culturally and socially defined as a subordinated correlate to man. They are essentialized, separated and degraded in relation to the higher ranked male norm. In that way, men are offered a free ride to the privileged position of being the subject, the one that defines the Other. Thus, for women, as a societal default-option, is to enter the position of ‘the Other’ (de Beauvoir 1949, 2011:7). This suggests that one key characteristic of the female existence is not only being a person with subjectivity and agency but, at the same time, having to interact in a situation where society, socially and culturally, recognizes women as objects, as the Other, as mere body, as a correlate (Rubin, 1975; Hirdman, 1988; Young, 2005; de Beauvoir, 1949, 2011).

As such, the feminine existence becomes a contradictory condition. To navigate a feminine existence in sexist society is to deal with the ‘...ever-present possibility that one will be gazed upon as a mere body, as shape and flesh that presents itself as the potential object of another subject’s intentions and manipulations, rather than as a living manifestation of action and intention’ (Young 2005:44). The experience of being both subjects and objects informs a ‘double

consciousness’ (Image 1) of being both an insider and an outsider in relation to society, to the self but also to one’s body (du Bois 1903:3; Young 2005; de Beauvoir 1949, 2011).



1. Double Consciousness. (Self portrait with smart phone in box of mirrors).

Women’s thought of being objectified by a male supremacist gaze and measured by others’ thoughts and attitudes about them makes women think about themselves, but also about their bodies, in certain ways; woman is her body but she also looks at it as an judging outsider. (Young 2005). Following existentialist ideas, this objectified bodily existence is another necessity of the feminine condition: Woman, like man, is her body, ‘but her body is something other than her.’ (de Beauvoir 1949, 2011:42) Following Young (2005) the objectified bodily existence is about a general objectification of women’s bodies and also, that women often takes up their own bodies as mere things: Do I look fat in this? I really need to do something about my hair. My lips are too thin and my breast are not big enough. Again, the oppositional condition of being both subject and object is present.

Altogether this suggest that the feminine existence is a contradictory existence. Women’s identity formation is informed by real and perceived observations and judgments from other people. Understanding gender stereotyped objectification as part of feminine existence and using terrains of thoughts mapped out by de Beauvoir, that the feminine situation is something women are taught to assume, it could be argued that learning to be a woman also means learning to be objectified in the gaze of a judging other. Further, drawing on the elements of childhood socialization

in the famous quote ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, woman’ (de 1949, 2011:289) learning to be objects is also central to young girls’ existence and formation of identities. As with adult women, girls are playing their identities towards an audience that already know how girls are, what they should look like and perform. And girls are learning about themselves through the eyes of this audience. When girls are socialized to become women girls learn not only to be seen as objects but also to objectify themselves. These double acts of objectification could also be understood as one of the ways girls are made invisible. Thus, interlaced with girls’ identity formation is the experience of being socially and conceptually hidden in layers of the notion of a gendered Other.

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Theme I: Negotiating Identity Chapter 2

Working Hard to Create a Visible Self: Social Constructions of (In)Visibility in Relation to Girls' Stress

Maria Wiklund and Carita Bengs, Sweden

In this article we problematise the stress girls' experience in the light of *invisibility* and *visibility*, including the gendered tensions around the social constructions of girls as (in)visible. Our analysis is based on a rereading of narrative interviews with Swedish girls experiencing stress-related problems. Issues of girl's health and illness are found to be undeveloped in the wider sociocultural context of both health research and cultural youth studies. Our analysis suggests that stress as an illness among girls seems invisible and diminished, and also that girls themselves feel invisible and not good enough. We emphasise that girls' efforts and the external demands on them need to be acknowledged and addressed instead of individualised. Furthermore, we relate the tension between visibility and invisibility, which seems central to the girl's distress, to limiting norms of femininity and gender orders. According to our analysis the girls' efforts to create *a visible self* seem to come at a price.

Introduction

R (researcher): What is stress for you?

I (interviewee): Tomorrow, lives ahead, like, what's going to happen with it. Or what you can achieve, how things will look tomorrow, what clothes to wear, whom to see. It's a lot of pressure just, what you accomplish. That's the biggest I think. And then I'd get very stressed, when it feels like you have so much to do. You're supposed to be good in every way possible, that's the hardest. (Int. 38, 20 years, unemployed)

The above quotation illustrates the variety of meanings that stress has for a contemporary Swedish girl. The focus of this article is on girls' and young women's experiences of stress and the significance of *visibility* and *invisibility* for their view of themselves as good and capable, as well as for their recognition and social positions in society at large.

Young people and their lives are highly visible in contemporary popular culture but less visible in other arenas. In research, attention is paid to girls' life worlds, cultural expressions and feminine identities, with diverse images of girls and their activities being highlighted (Ambjörnsson, 2004; Anoop & Kehily, 2008; Frih & Söderberg, 2010; McRobbie, 2009). However, issues such as health and illness are still largely unexplored or unarticulated in youth and girlhood studies (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2011). At the same time, research on children and young people within the health sciences and public health seldom takes account of their gender and the socio-cultural aspects of their lives. Girls have also been overlooked in feminist research (Gillander Gådin & Hammarström, 1998). However, scholars such as Harris (2004a, 2004b) and McRobbie (2009) who focus on contemporary femininities have, in passing, pointed to discursively shaped and gendered forms of problems and illness among girls including low self-esteem, negative body image, eating disorders, self-harm, depression, anxiety and suicide attempts. McRobbie (2009) refers to these as 'post-feminist disorders'. Historical perspectives on young women's maladies (Frih, 2007; Johannisson, 1994, 2006; Meurling, 2003) and gendered body ideals and their consequences (Bengs, 2000; Liimakka, 2008; Lunde, 2006) are examples of early research interest within the Swedish and Nordic context. More recent research has addressed girls' self-harm (A. Johansson, 2010), depression (Danielsson, 2010; Danielsson, Bengs, Samuelsson, & Johansson, 2011), stress and mental ill-health (Wiklund, 2010; Wiklund, Bengs, Malmgren-Olsson, & Öhman, 2010). Nevertheless, Wiklund (2010) concludes that research that focuses on and integrates perspectives on both girlhood, femininity and health is still rare. When the focus is on girls' health, they and their illnesses are often

constructed as 'problematic' (Annandale, 2009; Wiklund, 2010; Wiklund, Bengs, et al., 2010).

In this article we address the lack of health perspectives in the extensive research on girls, girlhood, and multiple youthful femininities within fields such as gender, cultural, media and youth studies. We also point out the need for sociocultural and discursive aspects to be taken into account in medicine, health sciences and public health. By applying a social constructionist and gender perspective to girls' experiences of stress, we draw attention to the highly topical issue of stress and mental ill-health among girls in Sweden and other countries (European Commission, 2000; SOU, 2006; WHO, 2005).

Our aim, more specifically, is to explore social constructions of girls as visible and/or invisible with a special focus on girls' and young women's own experience of stress and illness in their daily lives. We show that tensions between visibility and invisibility are central to the girl's distress, which is internalised and embodied.

Methodologically, our analysis draws on extensive interviews with 40 adolescent girls and young women, aged 16–25, who were experiencing stress. These interviews were conducted as part of a larger project on Stress and Health in the Young, Umeå SHY (see Wiklund, 2010, for a detailed description of material and method).

The narratives were initially subjected to qualitative content analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004) focusing on experienced stress and stress factors from a gender and sociocultural perspective. This paper is based on a rereading of these narratives about stress focusing on *visibility* and *invisibility*.

Although the majority of the girls who participated in the research project were born in Sweden, they came from a variety of sociocultural backgrounds. Several were students in upper secondary school or at university; others worked part or full time or were unemployed. A few were on sick leave. The reasons for their distress and their life-situations differed, but they had all turned to the youth health centre and signed up for a stress-management course because of their stress-related problems. Participants were individually interviewed before and after the course. On arrival they displayed a range of symptoms including anxiety and depressed mood, restlessness, sleep problems, aches and pains, eating problems

and fatigue. Some showed signs of acute stress and psychophysiological arousal, whereas others showed signs of more long-lasting stress and were 'worn-out' according to definitions used in stress-research (Arnetz & Ekman, 2006; McEwen, 1998). 'Living close to the edge' was interpreted as the common theme in their narratives (Wiklund, 2010). This theme illustrates how the stress-related problems encompassed the girls' entire 'existence' including body, psyche and social life, as well as existential aspects such as their understanding of the meaning of life. It is noteworthy that although their expressed symptoms indicated negative health development, their symptoms ranged from lighter stress reactions to more severe and prolonged stress conditions. Still, many functioned well in their daily lives, at least 'on the surface'.

Contemporary constructions of girlhood

Our research focuses on what it means to be and to become a young girl in a certain context and time, and how this impacts on experiences and expressions of health and illness. Theoretically we view girlhood, stress, body and health as socially and culturally constructed, as well as discursively² and materially³ shaped (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008; Birke, 1999; Fausto-Sterling, 2005; Lupton, 2000, 2003). Hence, we argue that social constructions of gender are closely intertwined with girls' experiences of body, stress and health (Wiklund, 2010; Wiklund, Bengs, et al., 2010). Gender is here understood as social structures, norms, values and practices connected to femininity and masculinity. It is moreover produced or reproduced in ongoing social processes, relations and actions (Connell, 2002). In addition, it is important to consider gender orders and unequal power relations in relation to health (Connell, 1987; Hammarström & Ripper, 1999), which also include girls' health and illness (Wiklund, Bengs, et al., 2010; Wiklund, Malmgren-Olsson, Bengs, & Öhman, 2010). This gender and social constructionist approach is in contrast to understandings of adolescence as a more psychologically and biologically determined period of development.

Our previous analysis indicates that girls face multiple stressors and high demands connected to parallel life-spheres that negatively shape their health. We argue, that these multiple stressors are related to social constructions of gender and also to *gendered*

societal discourses of modernity such as individualism, healthism and neoliberalism (Wiklund, 2010; Wiklund, Bengs, et al., 2010). The girls' and young women's experienced stress include the pressures of performance and educational success, caring for and adapting to the needs of others, and a constant struggle for social acceptance and value in relation to their body, appearance, and achievements.

In line with our observations, scholars such as Aapola, Gonick and Harris (2005) argue that social constructions of girlhood are attached to hegemonic societal discourses reflecting both negative and positive images of girls. 'Girl-power' is one example of a prominent discourse that emphasises girls' visibility and capacity within a new market economy:

'Girl-power' is a complex, contradictory discourse used to name a range of cultural phenomena and social positioning for young women. Associated with a new take-charge dynamism, this discourse re-writes the passivity, voicelessness, vulnerability and sweet naturedness linked to some forms of raced and classed girlhoods Celebrated by some for creating more expansive forms of femininity and critiqued by others for the way in which it is formulated around an individualism fraught with neoliberal ideals, the meanings and implications of girl-power continue to shift and change depending on the context and purpose of its articulation. What is clear about it is that 'girl-power' raises important questions about the relationships between feminism, femininity, girls and new subjectivities. (Aapola et al., 2005, p 19–20)

Harris (2004a) further argues that there are various ways in which girls are highlighted – and made visible – as potential 'winners' in individualistic and neoliberal Western societies. 'Girl-power', 'responsibility', 'capacity' and 'success' are some of the key features linked to youthful femininity. All these features imply self-management and self-invention (Harris, 2004a; Rose, 1999; Skeggs, 2004; Wiklund, Bengs, et al., 2010). Harris (2004a) also identifies two contrasting social constructions of contemporary girls: the 'can-do-girl' and the 'at-risk-girl'. The 'can-do-girl' represents a high-achieving, successful girl who makes the right choices and moves forward in life, and is thus constructed as in the 'vanguard' of new subjectivity; whereas the 'at-risk-girl' represents the alienated, powerless and problematic girl who fails to move ahead in life (Harris, 2004a). However,

these constructions are polarised and many girls fall in between them given the diversity of girls' and young women's social positions and living spaces. Only a minority of girls are able to live up to idealised images of success. This reality can be contrasted to the neoliberal discourse which conveys the idea that everything is possible and available to everyone; it is only a matter of strategic effort and good personal choices (Harris, 2004a). Skeggs (2004) too opposes the neoliberal discourse, claiming that individualism is unevenly distributed with respect to such categories as class and gender. Similarly same we have found that girls' and young women's distress can be understood in relation to neoliberal discourses of individualism and personal responsibility for achievements, health and social status (Wiklund, 2010; Wiklund, Bengs, et al., 2010). It is, moreover, important to note that girls' and young women's health and different life possibilities also depend on their socioeconomic background and their access to wider societal resources. In the following, the concepts of *invisibility* and *visibility* are used in a literal sense, but also as symbols and markers for girls' gendered status, positions, power and recognition in different arenas and levels in society.

In the tension between invisibility and visibility

When analysing our previous work in the light of social constructions of *invisibility* and *visibility*, we see that the girls' experienced stress, their social positions and stressors are related to both invisibility and visibility, both of which are sources of tension. This tension is present in several parallel arenas, both public and private. It manifests itself in achievements and results in school or at work, in social relationships, and in relation to body and appearance. Aspects of visibility and invisibility are also found in relation to the girls' and young women's contacts with professionals in such areas as school, health care and the labour market. While the symptoms and expressions of stress and overload are highly visible in some girls who are wound-up, emotional, restless, irritable, labile or exhausted, they are hidden or concealed in others.

Circumscribed and contested visibility

The interviewed girls' and young women's social and gendered positions, practices and lived experiences

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of distress can be understood by relating them to historical and traditional norms of femininity, as well as to dominant contemporary societal discourses of individualised femininity such as the 'girl-power' discourse. These are somewhat contradictory discourses, which the girls seem to have both taken up or/and resisted (Wiklund, Bengs, et al., 2010). Several of them raised crucial questions that point to their reflection on and frustration with the frictions and contradictions related to their social and gendered positions. Thus an apparent tension between being visible or invisible was brought up in relation to how to behave as a girl or young woman. At the time of the interviews the girls were well aware of the kind of behaviours and features that were expected from them in relation to normative femininity, such as how to look and behave like a 'good' and respectable girl (Connell, 2002; Frih & Söderberg, 2010; Skeggs, 1997). This was revealed in their experience of their own bodies (not having a perfect and ideal body) and in their daily practices (e.g., monitoring food intake, weight and exercise) which reflected their view of the female body as objectified, controlled and 'problematic' (Liimakka, 2008). Emphasised femininity, which accentuates compliance, nurturance and empathy (Connell, 2002), was also conveyed since several of the girls reflected on their felt pressure to be caring and adapt to the needs of others:

I want everyone to think I'm a nice person. I struggle so that everyone will like me. It's a little difficult for me to say no when people ask me something, I very easily take everything on just because I want to please everyone and help out with everything. (Int. 21, 21 years, half-time work, half-time sick leave)

Others talked of a traditional subordinated feminine position as 'silent and reserved' or 'shy and kind'. When looking back they could easily recount when and how they opposed these normative behaviours. One of the young women highlighted the conflicts between 'standing up for oneself or sitting quietly in a corner' and between 'being noticed or staying in the background'. She articulated her frustration about having to choose either to be visible, provocative and regarded as uncomfortable and a 'pain' or to remain silent and invisible – a social position she preferred not to have:

(...) like in school it's absolutely true, too ... that you shouldn't be seen and heard as much ... And then there's this choice between being seen and heard and being a nuisance ... and staying quiet (Int. 17, 20 years old, university student)

Another young woman described how because of her straightforward outspoken approach and her breaking of gendered norms she became almost 'too much' and too visible in others' opinion. There were also girls who more consciously challenged, opposed or resisted the claims of normative femininity and who talked of the difficulty of realising a feminist discourse of equal opportunity in their own lives. They highlighted the fact that gender equality was not taken for granted and that girls' and women's positions and possibilities were still limited:

I: (...) so right now it feels that society has a kind of image of how you're supposed to be, how you're supposed to be as a woman and such. And it feels like that stereotype and image, I have never wanted to be like that and I have never been like that and I have parents who have never felt that you have to be like that. And the people I hang out with have always thought that that was something good, well perhaps guys have been more like that, but then I have made a decision not to hang out with people who don't think that that's good ... And then the stress comes from the fact that I'm afraid that I'll kind of let myself be crushed by it. At the same time I can think that other people are so very small-minded when they don't permit other kinds of people, that you have to be a certain way.

R: How do you perceive the norms concerning how one should be as a woman, in your generation?

I: Well, then, nowadays you very often hear people say that Sweden has equality of opportunity and the like, but I feel that there're a lot of attitudes that women should make way for men, that the man is the one who should be smart and take a seat and the one who makes the decisions. And the woman is more, like, the silent one. (...) So I can feel, anyhow now it's, people react to that like, 'But, my God, why does it have to be like that?' But there are very few who actively take a stand and say 'That's enough'. (Int. 34, 23 years old, university student)

The above quotations clearly show that conflicting feminine positions were part of the girls' distress. These positions encompassed normative femininity and the discourse of 'can-do-girls'. Moreover, they were well aware of the gendered norms, attitudes and

expectations surrounding them. They worked hard to uphold parallel gendered norm systems and ideals, such as the traditional feminine norm of caring and responsibility, as well as taking on the feminist discourse of equal opportunity and the challenges of gender hierarchies. Thus, several of the girls and young women felt that their ability to create ‘a visible self’ was restricted and contested.

Invisible efforts and demands

In line with contemporary ideal images of individualised femininity and success, the girls and young women worked hard to create *a visible self*; implying ‘a subject of value’ (Skeggs, 2004; Wiklund, 2010; Wiklund, Bengs, et al. 2010). Nevertheless, many girls experienced that they themselves and their performance were not recognised or that they had to work even harder in order to become visible: ‘I want to be better than I have to be in order to get acknowledged’. Others felt that boys were better off in this regard and that ‘girls have to do much more than boys to get attention and be successful’. The girls described how they were involved in various forms of invisible work at home, in school and the workplace, which increased the pressure on them as this work was often not acknowledged or seen. Moreover, they voiced both high outer and inner demands. For example, one of the girls described how her family placed high demands on her and that she had to carry a heavy workload at home. This made her function like a ‘home-worker’ or ‘instant parent’:

I have a lot of responsibility. It is really tiresome at home because there’s a lot to be done the whole time. It’s me who washes up, cooks the food and cleans. I never have any peace and quiet. (Int. 28, 21 years, university student)

She, as well as other girls, talked about taking high responsibility in their close relationships, responsible both for their own situation and that of others, as well as caring for others and adapting to the needs of others. It could, as for the girl below, involve various aspects of ‘emotion-work’ (Dahlgren & Starrin, 2004; Hochschild, 1979) including conflict-solving within the family:

So in the family you could say that I have borne a hell of a lot of responsibility over the relations with my

dad, for example. My parents are divorced and since he met his new wife it’s me who has made sure that we’ve kept in touch, that we’ve met up and that we’ve had time when we’ve met up. And then that it’s been me who’s got worked up when there’s been a row. I’ve for example written a letter about my feelings. And similarly that I perhaps also take more of the guilt upon myself, or whatever you say, even if it’s not my fault. (...) So, yes, I have been adult when it comes to relationships even though I was a child, to my dad above all, and then it’s been the same with friends, I mean that I’ve given more than I’ve received in return. I’ve perhaps thought more of others than of myself and perhaps I haven’t put myself first. (Int. 17, 20 years old, university student)

Her words show her feeling of responsibility, and her sense of guilt when relationships did not work well despite her best efforts. It also reveals how she prioritises others’ needs before her own. The heavy workload the young women faced in relation to the family was further reinforced at school and/or at work. The majority also talked of high inner demands and self-expectations, often in relation to their achievements in school:

R: Would you like to tell about what you experience as stress in your life?

I: So what makes me stressed? Right now it’s school that’s stressful. So you have to get everything done and ideally you ought to study full time and have the highest grant and the highest credits and be, like, ‘in a class of your own’. It feels, like, that you have a bar up there you have to reach. That’s completely and utterly ridiculous. ‘Cause I’m one of those people that always has to be, like, perfect. Or I have been that sort of person. (Int. 20, 23 years old, in adult education)

For some the strained life situation leads to feelings of almost being ‘worn-out’ (Arnetz & Ekman, 2006; McEwen, 1998; Theorell, 2002). One girl, recently recovered from cancer, spoke of her struggle to cope with both her own high demands and the high external demands and the wound-up tempo she faced both at school and at work. She managed to handle her situation for a while but ended up on a part-time sick leave:

Sure, I did a good job at work. But at home it was as if ... I had almost no energy for anything. On a Sunday night I might have the energy to do something. My

days off went just on recovering, and then it was time for work again. So everything felt as if it was just work. I had almost no free time ... I've always placed such high demands on myself, that I should be so successful at everything. Then when I was sick and such, then I was lying in hospital for a week, and after that I was at home for two weeks from school. At the end of the ninth grade, the final grades, that was a nightmare. But I went to sixth form for three years like everyone else and took an awfully tough option. Where everyone was terribly ambitious and had good grades, and ... it was probably that ... I've always had such high demands and goals. Always worked my arse off to make it right. (Int. 21, 21 years old, half-time work, half-time sick leave)

While some girls acknowledged the external demands on them, others internalised them, blaming themselves, feeling guilty and talking of high internal demands. They viewed themselves as responsible for both the reason for being stressed out and for the solution. Sometimes felt they ended up in vicious circles:

So that you have to, of course, like, try to get a lot of work done all the time. But, then I think that it's, I think it's a little tough since I know that after I've completed something, I don't reward myself like that, rather than I just think 'What more can I do, what can I do more?' So, you know, it just becomes like one vicious circle. (Int. 33, 21 years old, university student)

As a result of this internalisation, external demands tended to become less visible. Thus we have the situation where health-related research commonly examines girls'/women's stress symptoms, but seldom the multiple or specific stress-factors or workloads that may have caused their problems (Becker, 2010; Wiklund, 2010). The internalising of young women's problems is thus a complex process in which those around them often ignore the external demands these women face.

Feeling invisible and never good enough

Many of the girls in the study could be characterised as 'can-do-girls', for they described themselves as high-achieving girls who always tried to perform well in school and at work as well as within the family. This was recognised to some extent, for example in school their effort was visible in the good grades they received. However, the school setting

also mediated situations where girls became visible in relation to less positive characteristics such as being regarded as deviant or not being recognised as 'Number 1'. For some this caused tension. The following quotation illustrates how one girl felt invisible as a friend, but visible as deviant and as someone who was not well.

I didn't thrive in school. I mean, it was actually a good school. But I felt like I didn't have any friends, not the friends I wanted. I mean, that's how it is in junior high school, it's always very stereotypical. If you stand out, and I stuck out pretty much so I was 'weird'. And I didn't seem any more 'normal' when I started feeling bad on top of it. So I felt very much like an outsider and very, very weird. Not that they, not that I was bullied. Ok, some of them were down right mean but I didn't feel like I fit in there. (Int 12, 18 years, upper secondary school)

The girls also expressed their problems, as young women, in accessing the labour market where their competence at times was made invisible or never regarded as adequate. Some blamed themselves for not getting a job:

You want to be able to get a job on your own merits, for who you are, and when you don't get it you feel as if you are not good enough, that perhaps I haven't got what it takes for a job. And then you feel a lot of pressure that you should be better the whole time. (Int 38, 20 years, unemployed)

Others, such as the young woman below who held a university degree, were clearly upset and frustrated when offered jobs that they regarded as 'banal' and 'wimpish':

When I was looking for a job they said, 'No, everyone here, we've all got so much experience' (laughs) 'Yes, it's a little difficult to take you on because you're quite young'. (...). You can't imagine how many places I've spoken to get some practical experience, it's so bloody difficult. And when you do succeed in finding something, you're given such silly, banal tasks. Anyone could do that, it doesn't matter if I am a professional or not, it doesn't matter if I have been to college. And then, then you feel discriminated against because of your age, don't you. So that, that builds up frustration, of course. You lose the meaning of life, you feel that life, 'Bloody hell, is this my life? What a barrel of laughs?' (laughs). (Int. 35, 24 years old, working)

The young woman experienced that her age, professional competence, university degree and former work experience had not been acknowledged or taken seriously. Such constructions of invisibility indicate unreachable qualifications and difficulties in getting access to the labour market, which caused feelings of stress among the studied girls. Some even tended to view it as a personal problem or their own fault. This individualisation, seen in some of the quotations above, is in line with what Harris (2004a) defines as social constructions of ‘never-good-enough girls’ who constantly have to work on themselves in order to ‘keep on track for academic and employment success’ (p.33). Girls’ failure versus success is thus constructed and understood as individual and ‘intrapsychic’ instead of being analysed in a broader context.

Stress as an invisible illness

Despite being ‘close to the edge’ of their capacity and fortitude, the young women often kept up a facade. Their stories reveal how stress as an illness is often disguised within the individual and is not always discernible externally. Consequently, several of their stress-related symptoms such as anxiety, worry, pain and sleeping problems, as well as their embodied suffering, were largely invisible to the people around them. For instance, one of the girls described how she felt panic when overloaded with work, and how worries and thoughts overwhelmed her by bedtime and at night:

R: How else do you notice, other than in your stomach, that you are stressed?

I: When I’m unsettled I can almost get into a state of anxiety or have a panic attack thinking about all the things, and at times you feel that you just want to break down because it’s all too much. But, yes, backache, tired all the time. On the whole, I think that the stress might be one reason why I don’t sleep well, because if I’m feeling better I usually sleep better at night.

R: So you think there are periods when you don’t sleep well?

I: Yes and quite often. But I definitely think that it’s the stress that affects me so that I can’t just simply shut off everything and chill out. (Int. 19, 16 years old, upper secondary school student)

Several girls suffered in silence, not talking about their problems. But stress as a phenomenon was also

talked about as quite common in young women’s lives, and was normalised. The communal experiences of stress led to a diminishing of their own suffering so that they felt invisible or just ‘one among many’. Some girls described how this also contributed to a sense of not being seen or taken seriously by adults, both parents and professionals such as teachers and doctors. One girl felt that she did not get any attention for her symptoms and that she was being shuttled between different caregivers without getting any help at all. This led her to question her right to care: ‘I didn’t really know if I had the right to seek help, if I was sick enough’. Another young woman described at length her experience of being belittled and humiliated in her contacts with health care. She believed that she had been badly treated because of her young age and her undiagnosed long-term ache:

If you turn up and you’re young and go to the doctor, they don’t take you seriously. They don’t believe that ... and it’s not visible either, of course, there’s no definite diagnosis and it’s not visible and so they don’t believe you. Even if they don’t put it in exactly those words, that’s what they imply. (Int. 2, 23 years old, now in full-time work, previously temporary work and a period of sick leave)

Several layers or intersections of age, gender and diagnoses appear central in contacts with health-care institutions (E. E. Johansson, Hamberg, Lindgren, & Westman, 1996; Werner & Malterud, 2003). Together with feelings of invisibility in professional contacts, this may impact the quality of care and the girls’ access to societal support services.

Managing alone and suffering in silence

‘Managing alone’ and ‘suffering in silence’ were prominent themes in many of the girls’ and young women’s stories. They felt that they had few people to share their thoughts with and therefore had to cope by themselves. Although they had some support from friends of their own age, they often felt that they were receiving inadequate or failing social support, especially from adults (Wiklund, Bengs, et al., 2010). They talked about failing family and parental support, or as one of the girls explained it: ‘my parents have so much to do with their own lives’. Another girl described how she had experienced massive bullying throughout her schooling, but nobody had acted or

supported her. To cope, she tried to manage alone by hiding and suppressing her feelings and working even harder:

It was like that the whole time. For days on end, the whole time. As a rule every lesson, every breaktime. And the teachers didn't say particularly much about it. In any case they didn't do enough. Yes, precisely because you have that the whole time, on a daily basis, I think it affects you. In other words, I think that it almost affects you more than if you just hear that you're ugly and worthless, that you have it routinely day after day, every damned day. And you have nothing to oppose it. And you still have to attend those damned lessons, for all that, otherwise I won't get my grades and then I won't be able to go to sixth form and then my future will be ruined. And then I'll end up feeling bloody awful, really bloody awful. I'll have to go and cry in the toilet if I have to. And that has probably shaped me quite a lot as a person, I can imagine. That I actually, that I just stay put and cry in the toilet. Well, perhaps not literally but ... My grades have been good. Psychologically it probably hasn't been so first rate. Yes, so, I felt really awful. Yes, in every possible way. Suicidal thoughts, depression and the like. You wonder what you've done wrong. And you tried, like, to improve yourself. Because I've never really been someone who just gives up and thinks 'To hell with that, I'm gonna stay at home from now on'. Rather I've, you could say, like that, attended class and thought to myself, like, 'now I'm going to fight in spite of it all'. So it's probably been a mixed blessing, too. So that sometimes it would have been better to stay at home and sometimes it would have been better to have protested by skipping class. And at the same time the question is whether it would have done any good. Because if you skip class it's always your fault, regardless of the reason. In any case I tried. I struggled on, and ignored. (Int. 40, 25 years old, on sick leave)

Her suffering became invisible as she suffered in silence. Few could see it since she tried to keep up a facade. Her description of 'crying in the toilet' represents her lonely and desperate situation. On a symbolic level the metaphor of 'crying in the toilet' captures her situation of being hidden and invisible – cut off from the social and supportive community. Her withdrawal to the toilet can also be understood as a consequence of social shaming and experiences of being 'wrong', rejected and disowned by her peer group. Shaming experiences often involve a sense of wanting to hide and withdraw, since shame operates

as a social punishment (Dahlgren & Starrin, 2004; Neckel, 1996). Because her social connectedness to her peer group was disrupted, she had no support within reach from them. She also felt a lack of support from her parents and teachers. Nevertheless, she blamed herself and tried to manage by keeping up her good work, well aware that her future was dependent on good grades and success at school. When reflecting back on her contacts with school and health-care services she was strongly critical:

'I've had a lot of contact with professionals, though whether I've had professional support, that's another matter'. (Int. 40, 25 years old, on sick leave)

The girl below described how she sensed a need to push things to the limits to get attention. She longed for help and relief but felt that she had to carry the heavy burden of responsibilities herself.

I want to push myself so hard that I like, break down in school, because then people have to take notice. But no one takes it seriously. 'I feel a little stressed out at the moment' – who cares about that? Stressed out, we all feel stressed out. So, I want someone to care, to take a little of the responsibility. But then that's not how society works today, is it. To get help you have to ask for it, and ideally you should help yourself. (Int 27, 18 years, high school student)

The above quotation also articulates the experienced diminishing of girls' stress and places it in the wider societal context of individualism. It further points to the girls' and young women's difficulties in accessing wider societal resources and support. Instead of internalising the problems, some of the girls expressed critical views both in relation to the lack of help and support and to the contemporary tough and individualistic societal climate.

Paying a price for (in)visibility

To sum up, the findings illuminate how the studied girls often experienced themselves and their stress as invisible, and how their efforts and demands were invisible to others, and sometimes also to themselves. Many girls felt that their achievements and performance were not recognised and that they were never good enough. Their constant struggle to be and become good and capable girls was not rewarded. Be-

sides, their efforts to manage alone became an additional strain. It is clear that several of them kept up a successful facade in line with the girl-power discourse (Aapola et al., 2005), while suffering in silence. The successful or cracking facade can be compared with similar social constructions and personal accounts of depression in the media (Bengs, Johansson, Danielsson, Lehti, & Hammarstrom, 2008). The experiences of stress were, moreover, often invisible to many adults. Adults were perceived as failing, unsupportive and unprofessional in their attitudes and handling of the girls' problems. Instead of offering relief or support, many adults placed additional burdens on the young women, for example through imposing demanding workloads at home and in school. Thus the girls faced high expectations from others and from themselves and did their best to live up to their high ambitions. Instead of speaking of unreachable external demands, many girls blamed themselves. Thus the high workload and responsibility-taking, together with the conflicting feminine positions the girls faced, exacted a high price in the form of overwhelming distress and distrust in themselves and the world as a whole (Wiklund, 2010). It is also clear that they had to 'pay a price' both for their invisibility and for their efforts towards visibility, chiefly through their experienced distress but also through their social relationships and their struggle around femininity. Hence, girls' invisibility and hard work for visibility were tied to contradictory demands, tensions and distress. Girls' position as invisible can be viewed both as a subordinated social and gendered position, and also as an embodied experience related to distress.

The study furthermore indicates that the girls' efforts to gain reputation, status and visibility were subject to certain requirements or limitations. We suggest that identification of the contemporary social construction of 'never-good-enough girls' by Harris (2004a) in a contemporary neoliberal context can be used to explain girls' feelings of incompetence and low value despite hard work. The feeling of 'never being good enough' pushed them to work even harder. Similarly, girls' success and failure can be seen as social constructions attached to discourses that emphasise individuals' responsibility and competencies, rather than recognising girls' access or lack of access to diverse societal and supportive resources.

In a wider sociocultural context, it is clear that the studied girls were both aware of and adapting to the restricting and regulating norms of an ideal and individualised femininity. They all had to relate to this normative frame of how to behave and appear as a girl. In doing so their potential visibility was also regulated and limited. The results illuminate how the girls applied contemporary norms of femininity as caring, nurturing and compliant while also voiceless and invisible. At the same time, they recognised the discourses of women's equal rights and the right to stand up for oneself as 'visible'. However, visibility was not given and not always on their own terms. Our analysis highlights girls' challenges to given gender orders, although the results also indicate that some of them had to pay a high emotional price for doing so. Based on the analysis we therefore argue that the observed increase of stress and mental health problems among girls and young women need to be discussed, and further investigated, in relation to limiting norms of femininity and emerging 'new-old' gender orders in contemporary society (Wiklund, 2010; McRobbie, 2009).

It is important to acknowledge girls' and young women's efforts and hard work, as well as the multiple external stressors they face. In particular, youth researchers and health professionals could gain new insights from viewing the stress and health problems experienced by girls and young women in a wider societal context, as well as paying attention to their complex social and gendered positions in contemporary society. If this is not done, there is a risk of individualising and pathologising their complex problems.

In conclusion, our analysis highlights and problematises how girls' experiences of stress is both visible and invisible and how gendered tensions can be found both on an individual level, in their private and public lives as well as in parallel arenas, and on a more discursive and structural level. The concepts of *invisibility* and *visibility* may help us to explain girls' and young women's experience of stress, for these concepts operate as symbols or markers for girls' status and recognition in different arenas and levels in society. Taken together, the girls' and young women's hard work to create a *visible self* seemed to be circumscribed by conflicts and contradictions, and therefore their visibility/invisibility came with a price.

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Endnotes

- ¹ In this article we use the terms “girls” and “young women” interchangeably as the girls in our study varied in age from 16 to 25 years. Moreover, in Swedish the scope of terms like “flicka”, “tjej” and “kvinna” differs from the scope of “girl” and “young woman” in English. See Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005:6, for an extended discuss of these terms in relation to maturity status and young feminist claims.
- ² Here we follow Lupton’s (2000:51) definition where discourse “denote the patterns of ways of thinking, making sense of, talking or writing about, and visually portraying phenomena such as the human body, (...) illness, disease and death”. Discourses can be “articulated and acted upon in a range of contexts”, for example in an individual’s explanation and understanding of illness, in texts, or in mass media reports about health and disease. Thus, discourses are sited within broader sociocultural and historical contexts. Furthermore discourses are both “delimiting, structuring what it is possible to say or do, and productive”.
- ³ Here we are inspired by Alaimo’s and Hekman’s (2008:1) ambitions to “bring the material, specifically the materiality of the human body and the natural world, into the forefront of feminist theory and practice”. We thus engage in the ongoing discussion about culture vs. nature. In line with scholars like Grosz (1994, 2005) we argue that culture *is* nature and nature *is* culture. We also agree with those like Birke (1999) and Fausto-Sterling (2005) who argue for more complex and nuanced ways of understanding biological processes within feminist theory. The view of biological processes as complex, responsive and adaptive is congruent with stress theory (Arnetz & Ekman, 2006; McEwen, 1998). For an extended discussion of *materiality*, see for example Alaimo & Hekman (2008).

Theme I: Negotiating Identity Chapter 3

Politics of (In)visibility: On the Blind Spots of Women's Discrimination in the Academy¹

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In the last three or four decades we have witnessed the rise of the notion of “gender equality” as a social and cultural norm and a goal in many countries around the globe (e.g., Berkovitch, 1999). In addition, more women (in numbers) are “shown” and “seen” in the media, government, corporations, academia, and high administrative positions, which creates the impression of “gender equality.” The question, however, is what does the growing number of women's representations within organizations and in the cultural sphere tell us. What are the consequences and effects of a heightened representation of women and their diverse images in the public domain for the ways in which femininity and womanhood are perceived? Does it change the traditional normative stereotypes or perhaps propagate them in sophisticated, veiled ways which cultural sociologist Angela McRobbie terms “feminist masquerade.” For example, McRobbie (2007) points out that post-feminist discourse on gender equality creates a masquerade that allows young women “to come forward on condition that feminism fades away.” In other words, playful cultural and political sense of freedom camouflages the fact that women are still circumscribed in multiple ways: new modes of constraint have emerged, while the older ones have become more toned and subtle.

Hence, the study of gender images, representations and equality today has to rely on methods facilitating a search for that which is not presented yet represented, what is “absent” yet leaves impressions and “messages.” One has to ask whether what we see as social change also denotes an actual imagistic change.

In this study of the “hidden messages” that images of women leave as impressions, we examined how

women in academia are perceived and how femininity is addressed by focusing on one university in Israel as our empirical site. In contrast to common methods of inquiry in the social sciences such as interviews, observations, or questionnaires, we studied official publications to see how one organization (the university) ‘photographed’ itself in pictures and words over the years. From this ‘pictorial kit’ or ‘found images’, in the language of image-based research (Prosser, 1998; Knowles and Sweetman, 2004), and the textual commentaries that were attached to the photographs we uncover what we call the “invisible message” that underlies and constructs the meaning of these images; images that the university puts forward as its official face. We focused on how ‘blind spots’—images which are presented as neutral, natural and ‘unsuspicious’, which we do not pay attention to because of their naïve presence—reveal, when unknotted, their ideological conservative basis and biases. We argue that these “naïve” images are also the most problematic, constituting the substance and material of the taken-for-granted, and as such have the power to reproduce and propagate stereotypic knowledge under the cover of attitudinal and imagistic change. This approach enabled us to look at the *invisible production* and transmission of images that are one means among others to signify the culture of organizations, their messages, knowledge and forms of identification. Theoretically, the emphasis on ‘invisible messages’ coincides with the semiotic paradigm in the field of visual culture, which regards “already existing images as texts which can be read to uncover their wider cultural significance and the ideological and other messages they help to communicate, neutralize and maintain” (Knowles and Sweetman, 2004: 6).

Unlike women's (and men's) magazines, advertisements, movies and other products of popular culture,

¹ This is a shorter and revised version of a paper published in *Culture and Organization* 2012

official university publications have by and large escaped the attention of scholars of gender and cultural studies alike. After all, the official goal of such publications, produced under the auspices of each university's public relations office, is to disseminate information about the university's achievements and current events as well as portray it as a site of scientific excellence and a home for talented young and senior faculty and students, men and women alike. Still, as we will show, the ways in which men and women are presented in photographs and texts reveal that these publications do more than that. Disguised as gender-neutral, they in fact mobilize the prevailing stereotypical assumptions regarding femininity and masculinity; by so doing, we suggest, they on the one hand project a vision of progress and excellence, but on the other hand, at the very same time, reconstitute and further embed an imagistic under-evaluation of women in society.

Academia serves as an extremely fruitful research site for identifying the workings of discrimination and the elusive reality of continued inequality because in organizations such as universities, being pivotal sites to promoting gender equality through notions of scientific excellence, the operating mechanisms of discrimination have to be more subtle than in other institutions. Hence, academia can serve as an "*extreme case study*" for exploring the mechanisms that create a complex politics of (in)visibility, and that produce contested and contradictory messages, which form the paradoxes of equality and discrimination. These paradoxes are the nodal point of academic life, but also of a larger institutional social organization of gender.

Many studies point to the fact that in light of the existence of clearly differential and hierarchical patterns of participation, academia has retained its gendered character (e.g., Alemán and Renn, 2002; Bradley, 2000; Deem, 2003). Yet, these studies also make it clear that, with the influx of women faculty and students, certain societal and juridical changes, the increasing commitment to gender equality, and growing pressure from both above (social institutions) and below (faculty, students) to secure equal access, the academy's patriarchal character has not remained unaffected. These twin forces—inclusion and marginalization—are the organizational setting that requires further investigation into the hidden cultural representations of these two processes.

Numerous studies, too many to detail here, have devoted much attention to the various aspects of gender inequality in the academy, examining its implications and exploring the factors accounting for it. Many of these studies, when referring to the gendered nature of academia, use a conception that is similar to Joan Acker's term "gendered institution" (1992). The term "... means that gender is present in the processes, practices, images and ideologies, and distributions of power in the various sectors of social life" (567). Benschop and Doorewaard (1998) offer a similar conceptualization, pointing to a set of institutionalized structures and procedures that constitute the "gendered subtext of organizations," although they pose as being actually gender-neutral, thus making it difficult to discern gender bias. This last point is crucial and has been taken up by researchers who have explored how organizational processes, cultural understandings and procedural arrangements produce gender inequality in the seemingly gender-free institution of the academy (e.g., Thomas, 1996; Valian, 1998).

Performing photograph-based research, we applied the insights from this line of inquiry to the field of visual culture to demonstrate how images constitute perception and experience as well as contribute to the study of power relations. Conceptually we argue that the way women are visually presented in the official publications of the university produces *ipso facto* a reality of female inferiority and a stereotyped politics of gender neutrality and equality. Our image-based analysis borrows its concepts and techniques from the Goffmanian method of gesture analysis and from the Barthian language of signifiers, representations and connotations that create the (hidden) message of the image (see, Leeuwen, 2001) in order to uncover the ideological and cultural messages that form this taken-for-granted stereotyped seeing. Drawing attention to university publications, we join an emerging line of inquiry that explored corporate annual reports and bulletins as actively participate in the creation of the gendered subtext of organizations, (Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998; Benschop and Meihuizen, 2002; Mills Helms 2005; Wilson, 2002). We contribute to this body of literature our analysis of the intricate interplay between the visibility and invisibility of images as part of the organizational power apparatus of the institution.

In this paper we examine the magazines published by Ben-Gurion University (BGU), the youngest, fastest growing university that prides itself on being a “progressive” university.² It was the first university in Israel to elect a woman president, who has publicly declared her strong commitment to the promotion of women. But here too, as in other universities in Israel, the overall presence of women among all faculty members is around 25 percent, of which only 10-12 percent are full professors. Yet, if we look over time, during the last three and a half decades, women have increased their numbers significantly. The percentage of women receiving degrees has grown by 1.6 times, and the percentage of those receiving a Ph.D. by 3.7 times (reaching 52 percent) and the percentage of women faculty has almost doubled.

We claim that the increase in the numbers of women faculty and students constitutes the way in which discrimination is defined and imagined. The increasing presence of women faculty has contributed to the legitimacy of a post-feminist discourse, which, while underscoring open possibilities for women, sacrifices the advancement of social criticism. As we will show, however, paradoxically the increasing appearance of women in organizations and the public domain allows for the increased repetition of traditional feminine representations by certain explicit and implicit means (which we set out to explore). This double process—the increase of women’s representation along with the increase of traditional gender stereotypes—we call the new “blind spots of discrimination.” This process comes to light when one examines the university’s cultural products, namely university publications, not necessarily through their content but through strategies of representation, which focus on various techniques that invisibly yet effectively create a vision of women’s unequal power relations with men and women’s status difference.

Data and Method

The official Ben-Gurion University publications consist of various newsletters, bulletins, magazines, reports and leaflets.³ They report events, inform readers about the outstanding achievements of the university’s students and faculty members, present

innovative studies, introduce promising researchers and award winners, and update readers about special projects and social events that take place on campus. Their current circulation ranges from 5,000 to 10,000 copies each.

We reviewed all nine publications that appeared during the years 1973 (date of the first publications) to 2004. More than 5000 photographs and articles in which individuals are seen or written about were identified and included in the analysis.

First, we examined frequencies of appearances of women relative to men and if and how they change over time. Then, following Goffman’s method of image perception (1979), we performed a systematic “gesture analysis” of the ways in which women are presented in the photographs and examined whether these representations changed over the years.

For this latter purpose, we identified two main tactics of presenting women. 1. *Techniques of portraying stereotypical femininity* through the following gestures: Passivity; Licensed withdrawal; Awareness of the camera; Feminine touch (women are shown touching their body or other objects in their surroundings); Exaggerated emotionality; Noncommittal; Appearance irrelevant to the situation. 2. *Techniques that undervalue women, their work and their achievements* through: Provision of either partial official information or none regarding the women represented; Wide smiles; Reduction of women’s relative size and space; Instability; Male ownership (men put their arms around women’s shoulders); Function Rank order.

The above tactics allowed us to see how the construction of the pictures conveys representations of femininity that are subtle yet consistent. For example, we could see that women are presented, again and again, as smaller, unstable, detached, smiling, posing, uncommitted, etc. Still, this kind of analysis treats each photograph as a discrete singular object. But, as we learn from critics Susan Sontag and Lynda Jessup, a photograph is not only an image with a fixed meaning that can be read outside of the context in which it is displayed. Rather, “... [I]ts meanings and the way we read it is shaped also by its titles, text and design” (Jessup, 1997:182).⁴ Sontag stressed that titles, names and texts attached to photographs

² There are six research universities that grant doctoral degree.

³ Some are available online: <http://cmsprod.bgu.ac.il/Eng/home/About/pressroom.htm>

⁴ For an elaboration on this point, see Barthes 1977(1964).

"anchor the meaning of the image," but are also "means of social control" by telling us the truth about reality (In McRobbie, 1994: 91). We paid particular attention to specific formulas of design, layout and accompanying text (titles and captions). Our analysis underscores the notion that visual meaning is formed not only by a single photo, but by accumulated images and imagistic repetition within a volume of supplied images. That is, to understand a single image one must recognize it within a chain of successive images in order to challenge its naiveté.

Modes of Representation

First we present briefly the result of our quantitative analysis⁵ and then we elaborate on our qualitative analysis that "reads" the photographs in their context.

*How frequently women and men appear in the university publications.*⁶ Not surprisingly, when we counted the respective frequencies – appearances of men and women in photographs and articles combined -- we found that men appear more than women. More precisely, men appear almost three times more than women. When we plotted the frequencies over time we saw clearly that there is an increase in the frequency of women's representation, in both absolute and relative terms. But to understand how the politics of visibility works, we have to examine exactly what is becoming more visible.

When we disaggregate the results for photographs and articles we found that though both men and women appear more times in photographs than in articles, this held true much more for women than for men: women appear three times more in photos than in articles, whereas men appear only ten percent more. Also, there is a much greater likelihood of reading about men in articles than of reading about women. This comparison adds an important layer of meaning to the difference in the frequency of appearances, in that this nuanced yet clear gendered picture/text bias attests to the differences in women's and men's visibility: women are visible, indeed, but through images, through representation (of their bodies and faces), while

men's visibility is enhanced through words (about their deeds and achievements).

This ratio has not changed significantly over time. This means that, again, relative to men, we still see more images of women than we read about their deeds or achievements. We still have fewer chances to learn about what women say, do and think but we will have many more opportunities to look at them.

Since our data showed that visual images are the main form in which women are represented in the official publications, we decided to examine in greater depth how women are shown and framed.

Employing a Goffmanian systematic analysis of the photographs we composed a non-weighted index for the two main techniques used to present women: stereotypical femininity and under-evaluation. We found that the majority of the photographs, about 60 percent, included at least one component of one or the other category.

To explore whether there were changes over time, we created a weighted index that enabled us to evaluate the changes in the *degree* of under-evaluation and stereotyping during the period under investigation. We found that over the years there has been no significant decline in the degree to which women are depicted in a way that under-evaluates them, while there has been an over-all increase in the degree to which they are portrayed in a stereotypical feminine way (graphs and exact figures not shown here).

When considered together with the fact that there has been an overall increase in women's appearances in photographs, the result is that we see *more* images of women in these university publications—intellectual, successful academic women—and yet these women are portrayed in increasingly stereotypical ways, ways that undervalue them and their achievements.

Photographs in Context: Display of Women as "Woman"

Two techniques of presentation that are included in Goffman's typology caught our attention: 1. Appearance irrelevant—in many photographs, the women are not relevant to the situation and are presented only for the purpose of decoration; And 2. Provision of either partial official information or none regarding the women represented. In the course of looking at the photos over and over again, in relation not only to

⁵ Detailed description of the method, figures and graphs presented in our full paper, currently submitted to Culture & Organization.

⁶ The count pertained to appearance alone. Thus, a photo that included both a man and a woman was counted twice, once as an appearance of a woman and once as an appearance of a man. We applied the same method in regard to articles..

the captions (i.e., whether any information about the women is presented), but also to the text, the overall layout of the page, we realized that the irrelevance and lack of information make women visible but at the same time invisible in very specific ways. We decided to probe it further.

Often photographs of women are included not for the sake of representing specific women, but for the sake of display or to fulfill certain functions, which are irrelevant to the women photographed. This takes two forms. One is when a photograph of an anonymous woman (or women) is attached to an article or a news item. It then fulfills the functions of illustrating an issue and/or providing a visual decorative element in the design of a page layout. The second is when an anonymous woman (or women) is photographed together with men (or a man). The woman is there either to enhance the status of the man (or men) appearing in the photo or merely to decorate a situation, usually of a ceremonial character (in that case, the caption informs the readers about the nature of the event, but not about the women).

Photographs of these two kinds comprise 44 % of total photographs in which women appear. In other words, in almost half of the visual images, women are presented without identity or voice. In fact, it is clear that it is their gender that qualifies them to be photographed in the first place. Thus, they are displayed as “Women” (in capital letters), and as “Women,” they serve the functions of ornamentation, illustration and/or status-booster for men. In other words, *it is the visibility of “Woman” that makes concrete women invisible*.

In what follows we will demonstrate these two ways of the simultaneous working of visibility and invisibility.

Photograph 1⁷ shows three young women sitting in a crowd of young people. The text below it tells us that this is a graduation ceremony, thus clarifying for the viewer that these are students participating in the ceremony. The subtitle provides figures of graduates in each school but no reference to these three women. We do not know who they are or what they studied. They are there to illustrate the graduation ceremony and to symbolize “graduates.” One might perhaps

rightly claim that ipso facto this image highlights the significance of women among graduates. Alas, though, the photograph’s main caption, in a big red font, says “Beautiful Degrees” (*ye-fot to-ar*), which is a play on the Hebrew words for “degree” and “good looking” that can also mean “beautiful women.”

The title is, of course, meant to be clever. But such a title is much more than clever. The combination of caption and photograph creates an image that degrades and belittles women’s scholarly achievements by focusing on how cute they are, rather than on their achievements.



Photograph 1

This impression is magnified when we look at how men are represented on the full layout of the page (not shown here). The two-page layout is filled with three articles on and photographs of men. The articles provide ample information about the men in the photos, their names, their fields of study and their innovative research. Clearly, the men were singled out, interviewed and photographed because of their deeds and achievements, whereas the women were singled out for their looks and attractiveness. Within such a constructed space of visibility women’s achievements become less visible.

The photographs that appear in the *2003 President’s Report*⁸ serve as examples of the second type: photographs that include both men and women, where the (anonymous) woman is displayed to bolster the position or role of men and to enhance their status. In the first four photos in the report, senior men are shown either talking or showing something

⁶ Taken from ABG, issue 6, July 2000. ABG – a Hebrew acronym for Ben-Gurion University - is a Hebrew bimonthly magazine intended mainly for internal readership.

⁸ The President’s Report (published in English) is a publication required by the Council of Higher Education regulations, can be said to be the official publication of the institution

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to the women. The young women are listening to the men, looking at what is being pointed at or shown to them. At times they handle something to help the men. Photograph 2 is one such example (for lack of space, the other three photos are not shown here). The status of the man, a concrete person with a name and voice, is enhanced by the presence of the woman—the “student-object”—and the way in which they relate to each other.



Photograph 2

In the following photograph (# 3 here) a young man (the figure on the left), probably a student, joins in. The older man, the dean, turns his face to him and away from the woman; the two men are talking, seemingly as equals and colleagues. The female student is left out and serves as the audience. She looks at them *both* and smiles. Here the power of gender operates even more forcefully. In the previous three photos, in which the dominant figure was male and the accompanying figure female, both gender and status structure the power hierarchy among the figures. In this photo, it is gender alone that becomes the signifier of power, overriding status, as we clearly learn from the difference in the location of the two students.



Photograph 3

In the two remaining photos in the issue, the senior figure is a woman. In these photographs, the two women are shown with male and female students. What is the relationship between gender and status? What role do women play here?

In Photograph 4, the male student is holding some sort of pipe and showing it to the female director. She and the female student are looking at the pipe and touching it with their fingertips. An analysis of this photo and its relations to the previous two reveals three modes in which the power of gender operates. First, as in Photograph 3, the main interaction is between the male student and the senior person, be it a man or a woman, whereas the female student is a secondary figure, situated on the periphery. Her presence is still important, however, since she fulfills the function of audience, a background that highlights the main action and a periphery that defines the center.



Photograph 4

Second, there is a reversal of status depicted here. It is a mirror image of the first group of photos (exemplified by Photograph 2) in which the senior person explains or shows something to the student. But there is no gender reversal. It is still a man who is active, whereas the women, both the senior woman and the student, are on the receiving end. The gender pattern is maintained and even strengthened, as gender seems to trump status. Third, the spatial arrangement of the figures reinforces this hierarchy. The male student takes up more photographic space, not only because he might be bigger physically, but also because he is positioned closer to the camera. The result is that the two women look much smaller by comparison, even smaller than they probably are in reality.

In the second photo (not shown here) there are three standing figures in a lab. The female dean is holding an open folder, which she together with a female and a male student are examining. This photograph, if looked at in isolation, is gender-neutral. But it can be interpreted otherwise when analyzed in relation to the other photographs that appear in the same issue. In these other photos, the senior male is accompanied by a young woman. This young woman is portrayed in a way that serves to underscore and aggrandize the role, position and seniority of the man. In contrast to the senior men, none of the two senior women are accompanied by any figure that serves as a “status booster”. They are portrayed as either equal to the students, as in this photo, or even as overshadowed by a male student, as in Photograph 4.

When we look only at frequency of appearances, it is evident that women appear in almost all the photographs of this 2003 issue of the *President’s Report* (seven out of eight). But a closer look at this specific issue reveals a replication of gendered relations in each and every one of the photographs: whether students or senior faculty, none of the women are positioned as the equal of men, not even of male students. There is only one photograph in which men and women are positioned as equals, but in that case it is a senior woman who is portrayed as equal to two students. In all of the other photographs, women are presented as inferiors. The politics of visibility that is played out in this pattern of organization of all the various combinations of men and women, seniors and students, is that of women enhancing the status of men, both senior faculty and students, and, as a result, diminishing their own status, thus recreating once again the gendered power hierarchy and reproducing, this time in visual form, women’s peripheral location in the academy.

To illustrate and summarize our arguments, here is one last analysis of a two-page layout, which appeared in BGU Winter 1999–2000 (pages 12–13) as shown in Photograph 5.

At first glance, it looks like an equal and comparable presentation of two professors in the university: a photograph of the person showing his and her upper body, a decorative illustration at the top of the page, a title, and a text. On the left we read about a woman professor who has recently published a book entitled “An Artificial Elongation of Life” and who is

now heading a new masters program in gerontology. On the right we read about a male professor who developed a new diagnostic kit (a biochip) for the detection of urinary tract disease. However, closer inspection reveals some crucial differences between the two visual presentations. First, note the titles. The woman professor is “Serving the Elderly,” whereas the male professor’s title is “Biochips with Everything.” The title relating to the female professor tells us that what she is doing is ‘care work’ rather than science. On the other hand, his title is scientific, not related to everyday life, and comprehensible only to (natural) scientists, although it could as easily have been “curing” or even “serving the sick.” The graphic illustration at the top differs along similar lines. On the left we see people—older people happily engaged in various activities. On the right there is an abstract drawing—colorful lines on a green background. In the man’s photograph, his head occupies the largest space, whereas hers shows her full upper body (and we will not elaborate here on the tilted head and big smile); behind him we see a shelf of books, whereas behind the woman professor there is dark empty space.



Photograph 5

These differences draw, unconsciously and unintentionally, on deeply embedded Western binary categories of mind and body, culture and nature, man and woman. Thus, this brief analysis reveals that what may seem at first glance to be equal terms of representation is in effect a highly gendered presentation of an academic man and woman.

In all these examples what we see is a complex interplay between presence and absence, truth (the presence of the image) and deception (presentation), presence and its manufacture. The photographs we have analyzed disclose the techniques and the images

through which a woman as 'all women' is constituted and invented by what Derrida calls the photographic *techne*, that single image which appears beyond art as an authentic reality.⁹ By this *techne* the photos of academic women, which appear truthful, bear witness, so to say, to the stigma the viewers process and (re)cognize in the world.

Conclusions: Highlighting Blind Spots of Discrimination in an 'Era of Equality'

In this article we call attention to what is not seen as being out-of-the-ordinary; to photos and their accompanying texts, which are not perceived as gender-biased, or "unnatural", and yet we call for their politicization. It is suspicion that drove us to research university publications. And indeed, our systematic analysis confirmed that, as we felt, the photographs and what they represent are "not us".¹⁰ University publications take the liberty to represent successful women, but "we" the subjects of their representation felt compelled to review, criticize and question the gender politics which these publications project. We have therefore put under scrutiny the images that the university, as an institution of knowledge and education, wishes to project in order to advance its public face and gain public legitimacy as well as resources. It is important to note that we do not assume that the photographers, editors and public relations staff are either aware or conscious of the ambivalent presentation of women in the university's publications. It is not the people whom we wish to critique, but rather the organizational culture. The production of ambivalent messages demonstrates precisely the intricate workings (particularly today) of symbolic discrimination and the invisible forces that must be uncovered. We have to look beyond the picture, to see its violent depictions and violations of subjectivities, often in the name of progress.

Conceptualizing official university publications as cultural products, we claim that the ways in which women are presented in them exemplify academia's propagation of traditional social norms, in spite of the university's intention to present itself as a

leading revolutionary force of knowledge in society. Nonetheless, our goal was not to reveal how visual stereotypes of women are reinscribed, an issue which has already been extensively examined, but rather to query how pictures can appear gender-neutral when examined alone and in isolation, yet reveal a systematic message of gender inequality and discrimination when looked at in context and in serial order, one picture after another. We argue that both phenomena—the growing numbers of women in the public sphere, and the masculine character of most social organizations and institutions—have to be considered together when exploring the contemporary patterns and meanings of gender discrimination and inequality in order to capture their elusive and constantly changing material and imagistic cultural forms. Today, women are entering most institutions in growing numbers. The feminist struggle to enable women's entrance and participation in public life has, to some extent, been won. And yet, while women are indeed more present, many questions regarding the nature of women's appearance in public still remain: what forms of knowledge are being explicitly and implicitly promoted by social organizations? What messages are being produced, and what are the mechanisms that stabilize (or challenge) the category of femininity? As we have shown, there is still a large gap between increased representation and the meaning of those representations, and this gap creates the *paradox of presentation and representation*. In other words, questions regarding equality and representation (visual, linguistic, imagistic) have to be opened up and extended beyond just numbers (how many enter, how many are promoted, how many reach ranks of power, how long it takes, and so on).

Following Joan Acker (1992), who points to the symbolic and cultural forces that shape the gendered character of institutions, we have demonstrated in the case of the university that visual and textual public mediums, which distribute images, categorizations and distinctions, form what Benschop and Doorewaard (1998) have termed "the gendered subtext of organizations." The academic world, seemingly the epitome of modernity and therefore of equal opportunity and excellence, shows just how such techniques work, and how "equality" in numbers and discrimination in message (whether visible or

⁹ For an insightful discussion, see Derrida's (2010) conversation on photography.

¹⁰ For a revealing discussion on "unmasking the 'real me'", see McRobbie, 1994, p.73.

invisible) operate together side by side to produce the almost imperceptible yet still dominant and effective order of masculine-feminine dichotomy.

The photographs that we have analyzed in this paper are “grounded” images—such as are produced by a gendered schema that has already become taken for granted and therefore transparent (Foucault, 1970) or habituated (Bourdieu, 2001)—signs without signifiers (Baudrillard, 2007). However, once the working of gendered ideology is unpacked and exemplified, one cannot stop seeing its repeated effects that continue to work and reproduce gender hierarchy as tacit knowledge. We are not saying that there have been no changes within the organization of gender in society. We are saying that one has to be careful not to be “blinded” by what some call progress and hence keep feminist criticism alive. In order to understand women’s continued Othering in the midst of changing patterns of gender relations, and to be able to detect the mechanisms through which discrimination is formed and operates, we need to acknowledge not only the image itself, but also its conscious and unconscious effects (and cumulative effect). Only then can one come to grasp the underlying masculine “laws” of production and the ways in which institutional social stereotypes continue to be mobilized and normalize the order of things as a way of controlling gender categories and, in consequence, concrete individuals. When, in photograph after photograph in chains of texts and images, we see women smiling, leaning, placed in the background, staring, reduced in size, overshadowed, or ornamenting a situation, what we come to see is women of high status whose mode of representation has turned them into “representative females” that adorn the prestigious university.

These marginalizing techniques, which create and maintain the blind spots of discrimination, form and reform the subtext of gender power relations and hierarchies and subject the viewer to apparently new scenes of knowledge, without challenging traditional assumptions about masculinity, femininity, men and women. In this way the university, supposedly an institution of innovative knowledge and a frontier of cultural change, acts as a conservative social and cultural force/agent, reconstituting and reinforcing gender discrimination in its public relations’ subtext. If there is one message to take from this study it is

that today we are seeing more images of women in organizations, but hence what we see is more stereotypical feminine images. If we believe that more representation is good, we have to ask ourselves how and in what ways. Cultural transmission of gender representations (pictorial and linguistic) works in tacit, often veiled ways, of which we are not necessarily aware. Social and cultural images require our persistent unknitting and exposure in order to change not only what we can see, but also what we do not see and yet are exposed to its effect and power.

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Theme I: Negotiating Identity Chapter 4

Gender Intersects: African women Negotiate Visibility from Spaces of Invisibility in Sweden

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International migration and especially migration from the South to the North is a challenge not only to receiver countries, but also to adult migrants negotiating entry into labour markets. Through ethnographic methodology, this chapter gives insights into the invisibility of adult black migrant women from Sub-Saharan Africa and how they negotiate visibility as they pursue educational and professional careers in Sweden; a country where non-Europeans are generally marginalised. The analysis focuses on when, where and how invisibility takes place among five black adult migrant women (wives and mother) and how they ‘negotiate’ visibility. Using postcolonial feminist theories, adapting an intersectional and critical discourse analysis, it is argued that the women use capacities from both the past and the present to negotiate visibility and sometimes ‘embrace’ invisibility. Analysis shows how these women’s multiple identities and positions are challenged, distorted, reproduced, and sometimes transformed in a constant quest for visibility in diaspora.

Introduction

Through life stories and ethnography methodology, this chapter is part of a project on how first generation, adult African and black women migrants negotiate visibility in Sweden— a Western white country that is culturally, socially, ethnically/racially, and language wise different from these women’s countries of origin. In Sweden, ‘a space without race’ (Sawyer, 2008) theorisation of marginality is concentrated around ethnicity instead of race and yet according to Sawyer, Africanness and blackness are used synonymously as markers of black people from sub-Saharan Africa. *African* and *Black* are, therefore, purposely used as synonyms in this chapter— a chapter about non-western and non-white migrants in Sweden.

Although these women by virtue of their skin colour are visible, a visibility Harris (2010) called hyper-visibility, they as non-Europeans and non-whites are invisible from many public spaces such as, education and the labour market. The focus is on how these women deal with invisibility as they negotiate education and professional careers as part of their personal integration processes into the Swedish labour market. The research question is: What role do the following aspects: professional careers from these women’s home countries, their race and or/origin, gendered roles (as wives and mothers), age, and Sweden as a migration space have as they negotiate education and professional careers? This question introduces an intersection of issues and/or localities within which these women’s diasporic experiences are analysed, rendering postcolonial feminist theories to be a relevant analytical framework.

The chapter assumes postcolonial feminist theories adapting an intersectional analytic and theoretical framework in understanding these women’s diasporic educational and professional experiences and invisibility. The chapter is also inspired by Fairclough’s (1992 & 2001) critical discourse analysis to interrogate Sweden as a migration space where discourse structures enact, legitimate, and reproduce relations of power and dominance— a place in which these women’s diasporic experiences are embedded. Experiences of invisibility among migrants and especially those from non-European and non-white origins, like the women in this chapter, are discussed and understood within exclusionary hegemonic discourses of migrants as the ‘other’. Embedded within existing discourses is a portrayal of migrants as ‘uneducated’ and/or ‘unqualified’ for the Swedish labour market, and a justification for their exclusion and compulsion to participate in

selective continuing education in a quest for relevant Swedish knowledge.

Method and The five African/black Women

Through a snowball effect, that is, by one person introducing me to another, I have interviewed five women from three Anglo-African countries over several years via life stories and ethnography methodology. I have mainly audio recorded in-depth life story interviews at their homes, written down and/or noted conversations or chats on related issues in appointed public places and through telephone calls. Life (hi) story interviews (Pérez Prieto, 1998, Kemuma, 2000; Kemuma, 2007) were used to generate personal stories considered as sources of getting to know (Goodson, 1992, 1996). The stories, considered meaningful in both content and form as praxis in identity performances (Mishler, 1999), provided the women an opportunity to tell who they were, who they are, and whom they want or have wanted to become. This is an opportune moment to share their desires, frustrations, dreams, and visions. In *The International Yearbook of Oral History and Life Stories, Immigration and Identity*, Benmayor & Skotnes (1994) stated that:

The personal stories allow glimpses into the lived interior of immigration processes. It allows understanding of how moving matrices of social forces impact and shape individuals, and how individuals, in turn, respond, act, and produce change in the larger social arena. These personal stories allow some sense of how individual immigrants, in situations of extreme and sometimes unpredictable flux, make sense of their experiences and thereby continually construct and reconstruct understandings of themselves and their larger social circumstances. (p. 14)

Life stories in this chapter are to be understood as ongoing processes within the context of adult migrants' lives, in periods of transition and destabilisation of professional careers, forcing individuals to make unexpected choices under conditions of great uncertainty and risk for which their biographical experiences had not prepared them (Elliot, 1997; Moussa, 1993; Kupferberg, 1998; Kemuma, 2000).

The five women migrated to Sweden entirely because of romance after having acquired second-

ary and/or post high school education, professional training, and working experiences. Women's migration for romance has been documented by Frånberg (1996) and Lundström (2010a), among others. Sara and Silvia migrated to Sweden in the late 1980s when they each got married to a countryman settled in Sweden. Silvia's husband was settled and working in Sweden, while Sara's was pursuing higher education. Pamela, Maria, and Mercy joined their spouses who due to opposing political activities toward existing authoritarian, punitive, and reprisal regimes fled their countries, and were accorded refugee status in Sweden. Pamela and Maria migrated in the early 1990s while Mercy migrated in the late 1980s. The five women's migration was therefore male-initiated and/or what Lundström (2010a) call "male-oriented", and not specifically to pursue education and/or work. *Pamela, Maria, and Mercy* had two children each before migrating, but *Sara and Silvia* had four children each in Sweden. *Maria and Mercy* each later had two more children in Sweden while *Pamela* had one more child.)

Coming from three Anglo-African countries, that is, countries that adapted the British school system and whose legacy these women were part of, they spoke the English language, which was used as a media of instruction in school. Accordingly, we used the English language during the interviews and chats. Prior to migrating, *Sara* worked as an administrator with secretarial duties after attaining a secondary education (ordinary level) for about two years. *Mercy, too*, attained a secondary education and trained as a secretary. She worked for about six years with an ambition to take more advanced courses for promotional purposes and become an executive secretary. *Silvia* attained high school education (advanced level of secondary education before university) but because she lacked a few points to attend university, she joined a teachers college and worked for three years as a primary/elementary school teacher. *Pamela, too*, had a high school education and trained as a primary school teacher; a profession she worked with for two years. *Maria* is a university educated teacher who worked for about five years as a secondary school teacher.

Maria, Mercy, and Pamela and their husbands knew nothing about Sweden as they received refugee status through the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). *Sara and Silvia*, on the other

hand, knew some things about Sweden— a country where their husbands had settled in for a number of years. Although their knowledge about Sweden was limited, when they received permanent residence permits and/or were accorded refugee status, their hopes soared and they envisioned a bright future ahead of them. None of them, however, had envisaged how life in Sweden as an African/black migrant, young women, mothers, and mothers-to-be would unfold. Nonetheless, coming from global Anglo-Africa and as ‘transnational citizens of the commonwealth’, they had expectations of being incorporated into the labour market using their accumulated educational and work experiences as well as their abilities to use the English language. They assumed that Sweden would accept their past experiences, making educational and professional integration and mobility a possible and conflict-free process.

Migrants from ‘third world’ or low-income countries to western affluent societies anticipate a better life through educational and professional mobility (Cuban, 2010). Such expectations are not a new phenomenon. White European migrants and colonial settlers in the USA, Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and other parts of the world all anticipated a better life economically and socially.

Made invisible ‘before entry’

As mentioned earlier, the women assumed a reception as ‘transnational global citizens’, but as non-European migrants with racialised physical features and black/ African skin colour they were automatically marginalised from the labour market (Mattson, 2001, 2004, 2005; Kamali, 2005; Mulinari & Neergard, 2005; Lundström, 2010; Lange, 1999; Nordin, 2005; Cuban, 2010). First generation, adult migrants’ educational and occupational credentials from countries of origin, especially those from non-Nordic, non-western and European countries, with the exception of ‘guest workers’¹ for whom arrangements are made before they migrate to Sweden, are disregarded as lacking relevance and equivalence to the Swedish labour market (Osman, 1999; Kemuma, 2000; Söderlindh, 1990; Carlson, 2002, 1996; Westin & Ding-Kyrklund, 1998).

Deskilling of migrants is also reported in the USA

and England (Cuban, 2010), where migrant women from the global south find it difficult to get meaningful benefits in the new labour markets due to education, work experiences, and skills from their countries of origin not being recognised, and room for educational and professional mobility being non-existent. Similar to the women in Cuban’s study, the five women did not envisage negotiating boundaries and differences as the ‘third world other’. Although these women had different ‘entry points’, given their reason for migration and their educational and work experiences, they each had dreams not only to pursue their professional careers, but also to pursue higher education and consequently, attain a higher place in the professional ladder. Discrediting migrants’ educational and professional experiences and legitimisation of education achieved in Sweden, as a bridge for integration of adult migrants into the labour market, constructs migrant’s knowledge and work experiences as being inferior to the Swedish ones. This, in turn, creates a challenge for migrants who are expected to acquire competitive, relevant Swedish education. Mattson (2001, 2004, 2005) has argued that this discrimination is based on the perception of migrants as culturally and racially different from White Swedes, an existing postcolonial racist or cultural racist view also found by Nordin (2005). Mattson stated further that migrants’ lack of social competence is based on an understanding of an existing ‘Swedish way of seeing and doing’.

Research has in an unequivocal manner depicted how discrimination, racism, and marginalisation affects the lives of non-European and/or non-western migrants, especially those from the global south who are blacks or with dark brown skins that migrate to western countries (Cuban, 2010; Lundström, 2010b; Tesfahuney, 1998; Hatoss & Huijser, 2010; Osman, 1999; Kemuma, 2000). The origin and/or race of these migrants rarely work to their advantage, as is the case for western migrants to western countries. Lundström’s study (2010a) on white, Swedish women migrants in the US discussed how these women’s whiteness is a recognised social capital and viewed as an asset. Her study affirmed values attached to different bodies and cultures, consequently, leading to different positioning in western spaces. This is also confirmed by Cuban’s (2010) quote below:

¹ Guest workers from Non-Nordic Countries are almost non-existent in Sweden since the 1967 legislation regulating guest workers to Sweden.

EU migrants, for example, are treated in a different way in the public sphere than those who come from outside the EU. One study by Rand Europe (Rubin et al. 2008), for example, shows that ‘third country’ women economic migrants (in Europe) are at a considerable disadvantage than EU members who move to a new country, with regard to access to public services, including education. (Cuban, 178)

These black women’s marginalisation confirms the cultural racialisation where migrants’ race, ethnicity, cultures, languages, and earlier experiences are seen as hindrances to integration rather than as assets. Their own bodies and ‘baggage’ are seen as liabilities and not as capital. Racialisation and notions of ‘otherness’ has previously been written about by others (Mattson, 2001, 2004; Kamali, 2005; Mulinari & Neergard, 2005; Lundström, 2010b; Torres, 2006), as a day-to-day experience for migrants in different spaces in Sweden. Racialisation is a clear excluding mechanism and a continuation of the deficiency model prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s (Ålund, 1978; Knocke, 1986; Matovic, 1989) where reasons for exclusion shift to migrants’ deficiency in the Swedish language and their problematic foreign pasts.

Paradoxically, the Swedish government and the Swedish Universities accept foreign students, including students from African countries using academic qualifications from their countries— countries where some of the migrants whose credentials are disregarded come from. The reason why migrants’ credentials are not accepted is, I believe, a conscious decision to make migrants invisible.

How did the five black women negotiate invisibility ‘before entry’ by virtue of being culturally and/or racially different? Like the women in Cuban’s study, they were deskilled and consequently, disempowered. They had no way of contesting openly, but instead suffered silently cursing their situation as migrants. According to these women, what hurt most was the realisation that their educational and professional knowledge and other competencies such as English proficiency were tantamount to zero. Disempowered and deskilled, they all in different ways became overwhelmed and depressed.

I felt all the Swedish people and others saw me as uneducated. This hurt so much and I was so depressed. I was ashamed also. I didn’t know what to tell my

people back in my country because many assume if you come to a Western country you come to heaven, but I and my husband and children came to hell.

This quote from Pamela is representative of the feelings of all the five women. The rude realisation ‘*was and still is as a dream*’.

Pursuit for relevant knowledge as more invisibility reveals

Language demarcates

Despite the fact that *Sara* worked as an administrator after attaining a secondary education, *Silvia* and *Pamela* as primary school teachers, *Maria* as a university trained high school teacher, and *Mercy* as a secretary, these women were forced to start at the basic adult education level (Grundvux- a level for Swedish students who did not complete compulsory primary education) in order to acquire relevant knowledge and skills that would hopefully lead to a future occupation. They were placed at this level because it was assumed that their education from Africa was so inferior that they were deemed fit to start at the lowest level of education for adults. However, before starting Grundvux they had to attend the Swedish language course for migrants (SFI) and thereafter, Swedish as a second language before they could meaningfully and advantageously participate in adult and/or continuing education. Learning Swedish language is complicated further by societal stress on ‘never being good enough’ ‘never being good enough’ (Carlson, 1996, 2002; Hill, 1989; Sjögren, 1997), making it harder for migrants to participate in continuing education of their choice (Franzén, 1990, 1996; Westin & Ding-Kyrklund, 1998; Osman, 1999). The stress on fluency or ‘good’ command of the Swedish language and failure to endorse migrants’ credentials, knowledge, and experiences made these women invisible. Migrants are expected to be eloquently gifted, with no accent deviating from inborn Swedes with Swedish as their first language. This expectation is, in itself, an inbuilt power over those assumed to be different.

Surprisingly, learning Swedish language and subsequently gaining Swedish knowledge and skills, although claimed to be the sure way into the labour market is negated by research and statistics (Mattson, 2001, 2004, 2005; Statistiska Centralbyrån, 2010).

Swedish credentials rarely lead to employment among migrants and especially non-Europeans. Employment of non-European migrants (even among those with Swedish qualifications such as the second-generation of migrants) is very low (Statistiska Centralbyrån, 2010). Statistics reveal that non-European migrants are less represented in the labour market when compared to Swedish-born and migrants from the Nordic countries. In the same statistics, it also shows that although there is a correlation between the level of education and employment, and that the higher the educational level the higher the integration into the labour market, a discrepancy still exists when it comes to non-Europeans and especially Africans.

Constantly defined (by both White Swedish men and women) as ‘other’

Sweden’s gender politics favours the Swedish white agenda by excluding themes like racism and migrants (Hübinette & Lundström, 2011; Pringle, 2010; de los Reyes & Mulinari, 2005; Keskinen et al., 2009). Lianason (2010) also disclosed how Swedish hegemonic feminism knowledge is in a selective way privileged in university course literature, perpetuating gender as the only social relation. She has suggested a need for counter-stories about relations of power. With the hegemonic Swedish gender equality, “non-whites tend to be depicted as “non-gender equal” (Hübinette & Lundström, 2011, p. 48). Yang (2010) another Nordic postcolonial feminist scholar interrogates gendered and sexualized racism in feminist teaching in an adult educational institution in Sweden, a women-only school where migrant students constitute half of the student body. Similar to the other researchers in this area, she placed Sweden among other European countries where ‘othering’ exists; consequently, dismantling the self-identity narrative of Sweden as unique and above other First-Worlds. Female teachers in Yang’s study self-identify themselves as ‘we’ and define migrant student’s as ‘them’; a distinct practice creating a difference— a difference that is constantly contested by the students demarcated as ‘the other’ and who question the stereotypical portrayal of migrants in society.

As indicated elsewhere, the five women did not envisage negotiating change, differences, and boundaries as the ‘third world African other’ marginalised because of who they are, where they come

from, and what they have from there. Moreover, their situation was compounded further because they were young wives, mothers, and mothers-to be, engaged in childbearing and childrearing in a foreign terrain. Using the narrative of the privileged Swedish gender equality, we could quickly assume that these women married third world men as ‘the oppressed other’, but the story is not that simple.

While studying Swedish language and later participating in adult education programs, they were constantly reminded of their differences by the Swedish teachers who were predominantly women. According to *Mercy*, their picture of ‘third world other’ is “*Lyrics that you do not want to hear being sung all around 365 days and especially by those who are supposed to give you the so called relevant knowledge*”.

In Kemuma (2005), a review of literature on experiences of migrant students in Swedish universities, Swedish language is used to highlight to the students how different they are. If their mastery of the language is not bad, teachers use patronising comments such as “you speak very good Swedish”, a general comment that is made without realising its patronising nature. Students and especially those born in Sweden find such comments not only unnecessary but also demeaning. de los Reyes (2004) wrote that teachers see students as collective ethnic stereotypical identities as opposed to individual university students. Their identity as “foreign students” is stressed more than their identity as university students.

The lyrics that these women do not want to hear are sung by white Swedish teachers, the social media, politicians, men, and women. In other words, as the ‘third world African woman other’, they are talked about and reproduced as the ‘homogenous problem other’ who is to blame for her invisibility. These women tell of Sweden as a migration space where discourse structures enact, legitimate, and reproduce relations of power and dominance and a confirmation that these women are not included in the Swedish gender discourse. Fennell and Arnot (2009) wrote about the contestation by non-western feminists for a deconstruction of universalisation in gender theory. One of the main reasons for such a contestation is the ‘othering’ ideologies, which Mohanty (1991), who focus on academic, western feminists’ constructions of a monolithic ‘Third World Woman’ termed as be-

ing grievous and myopic limitation in the way non-western people are talked about, heard, and written about. Gayatri Spivak invented the term ‘othering’ to indicate a process by which the West (Euro-American societies that self identify as “the West”) privileges its knowledge and creates differences between itself as the norm and other knowledge systems as inferior (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1991). According to Whitlock (2007), the West is constantly engaged in demarcating imaginary boundaries between “We” and “others”.

As students studying the Swedish language and adult education, the women were constantly demarcated as the ‘other.’ This process of othering is what Nordic postcolonial researchers (Hübinette & Lundström, 2011; de los Reyes & Mulinari, 2005; Keskinen et al., 2009; Lianason, 2010; Yang, 2010) and postcolonial theorists (Bhabha, 1994; Mohanty, 2006; Narayan, 1995; Said, 1978) postulated that colonialism depended on, in the (re)narrating of the colonized stories by the colonizer. Mohanty (2006), for example, argued that the stories of ‘Third World Women’ have been told on their behalf for generations constructing and reconstructing these women as if they are a ‘homogeneous other’; and although the representation is skewed, it is the authorising signature of western humanist discourse. Consequently, the condensation and paternalistic view, de-contextualises these women from their particular geographical, historical, and political localities, subsequently silencing and devoicing them. Ironically speaking for them, the West is telling them what they think they know about them as the other.

The five women were constructed as women from particular geographical, historical, and political localities, ‘well-known’ by the Swedish teachers— a context assumed not to have no impact. Subsequently, the women were silenced and devoiced although they often contested their portrayal using their ‘poor’ Swedish language, a reason that the teachers used to subdue and silence them further, leaving the women frustrated. They were never given a chance to narrate who they were, who they are, who they would like to be, or think can be. From the actions and decisions of those who placed these women in the lowest level of adult education, and later those who decided what courses they should enroll in –courses that targeted migrant women to work as caregivers for the elderly

or children— they all assumed that they knew what was best for these women. Swedish teachers also assumed to know what was best for migrant students. All these decisions and actions from ‘the knower’ assumed that the women as the migrant ‘other’ knew nothing. Forsell and Torres (2011) wrote about social work and elderly migrants, stating that:

...in order to be perceived as an eligible elder care recipient in Sweden today, an older person cannot just be in need of help, they need also to be an eloquently gifted person who is successful in both, establishing himself/herself as a potential client and worthy of public care and support. This suggests that those who do not command the Swedish language and/or who are unfamiliar with the Swedish system run the risk of being disadvantaged in the need assessment(p.7).

This shows how language further works to silence those already in the margin spaces. Although the five women went to different institutions for learning and encountered different teachers (men and women but predominantly women), they all shared the same story of being constructed as the ‘other.’ As the ‘other’, they were all silenced and disempowered. Their ‘Achilles heel’ and/or physical vulnerability as seen and exploited by those in positions of power were their positions as defenceless migrants.

Age and gendered roles as wives and mothers complicates

From the women’s stories, as wives and mothers with husbands who are less involved in childrearing, one can at the outset read of male dominance at various levels. All five women relocated to Sweden because of love and or because of their husband’s previous political engagement. As wives or wives-to-be, the women are the ones who easily give up their careers and projects for their families (Frånberg, 1996; Lundström, 2010). These women with loving and motherly care migrated to be a support in all spheres of life for what I call, ‘the husband’s project’.

Gendering is also a factor as the women migrated at the childbearing and childrearing age. Some of these women also argued that because their educational and occupational experiences were not recognised, posing a further challenge, they often found consolation in childrearing. *Maria* and *Pamela* decided to have children instead of participating in

an education they found to be below their qualifications. They argued that it was more meaningful to give birth, pointing to their 'biological clock that was ticking' instead of *'being held prisoners'*. Giving birth was used as a reason to stop studying or wasting time, as this education was far below their expectations, but age was also used as a justification.

Given their multiple roles as wives, mothers, and students, the women tried to reconcile their fragmented self or selves as well as transcend it. Consequently, they got comfort from their mothering roles and hoped for the best for their children, at the same time hoping that they would become good role models for the children and be good wives. Crucial in the adult circle of these women, therefore, was the childbearing and childrearing age, which obviously formed their gendered identity as women. Women like *Sara, Silvia, Maria, and Mercy* who conceived and gave birth within their first years in Sweden took a longer time to learn the Swedish language and gain other relevant knowledge. Furthermore, by the time the children were born, the women had not formed social contacts apart from their family members. This resulted in not only a longer time for these women to become incorporated into the labour market, but also in understanding how the new social system functioned. The longer they took in childbearing and childrearing, the more they lagged behind, in comparison to *Pamela* who had a child after being in Sweden for about six years. Although it took *Sara, Silvia, Maria, and Mercy* a long time to study and be integrated into the labour market, they saw their suffering as being less than their husbands who were also struggling to be integrated. These women sympathised with migrant men as being the ones who suffered more than women. They argued that as women they were happy to take time off to nurse their children. Although the women argued that taking care of children gave them time to think, the mothering roles isolated the women even further. The childbearing and childrearing period took away time from the women's engagement in educational and wage-earning activities. Breaks taken for childbearing and childrearing— gender discrimination as a result of their roles as mothers— delay women's plans bringing us to the classic gender (imbalance) relations, which are important to address. Women lag behind because of who they are, and as defined by so-

cially and culturally ascribed roles and expectations.

Pursuit for relevant education and entry into the labour market was generally complicated and delayed in all five women due to their age and mothering roles. These women were also aware and argued that it was difficult to pursue long and new educational programmes given their mothering roles and their age. Age was not only used as a justification for having children but also for not participating in education that required many years. For them to succeed in such programmes, they had to either neglect their families or choose shorter and hopefully less taxing programmes, which in their case left them the option of participating in short educational programmes designed for migrant women to become caregivers to the elderly or children. Given the oppressing odds, the women longed and hoped to get a wage-earning employment in order to contribute to their family's economic welfare. It is noteworthy here that the courses were gender specific, targeting migrant women to work in typically female dominated service providing careers. All these five women participated for many years in different educational programmes to work as caregivers, a career where they all said they were underpaid and had no chance of professional and economic mobility, just as the women in Cuban's study. While four of the women have grudgingly 'embraced' their new careers, *Pamela* has, while working pursued correspondence education in psychology in England, which she successfully completed. However, upon realising that this education was not going to lead to a new career, she has turned to business, which she argues gives her space from both from her job and from her husband and children. Her aim is to become a successful businesswoman in her home country. As a transnational, she has other obstacles to overcome like maintaining her job in Sweden and having control of her affairs abroad. In their study titled *Do attitudes towards immigrants matter?*, Waisman & Larsen (2009) found that negative attitudes towards migrants, and especially Africans lead to lower salaries. These five women were, therefore, doubly disadvantaged as women working in low paying jobs and as migrants from Africa.

These women construct their gender identity as socially constructed women with ascribed roles and as women with bodies biologically different from male bodies. The four women's sympathetic view toward

their male counterparts, and the fact that they took pride in childbearing and childrearing stems from the social construction of women with ascribed roles. *Pamela*, on other hand, contested for her space and took longer to have another child in Sweden. She also insisted that her husband take care of the children while she was away on business.

Although a clear gender relations agenda for feminist theories, the situation of these women migrants is complicated further by the fact that they are foreigners who do not speak the Swedish language eloquently without an accent, they came to Sweden after 23 years of age, and that their husbands as well as they themselves are marginalised and invisible as migrants 'other'.

Collins (1998) included race, class, and gender, which mutually construct one another. As a black feminist, she has argued that knowledge is socially constructed and that it is dependent upon diverse experiences and situations. The position here is that societal gender roles are socially constructed and that they are different in different societies and cultures.

In the case of migrants and refugees, gender is not the only stumbling block (Hatoss, & Huijser, 2010). Hatoss & Huijser argued that gender intersects with issues of class, level of education, language, denial of a immigrants' pasts, and traumas that come along with that and even race and marginalisation. All these parameters intersect at some point and work in complex ways. Mirza, in Ali, Mirza, & Ringrose, (2010), advocating for British Black feminism also emphasised intersectionality, especially in understanding the experiences of those defined as blacks in the UK. In her book *Young Female and Black* (1992), Mirza has demonstrated that subculture identity is not to blame for explaining the inequality that persisted in the UK. Instead, she focused on structural understanding of the process of inequality and introduced more parameters than the deficiency model of blaming immigrants' cultures for poor school performance. Contrary to popular belief that black girls were performing poorly in schools, she found that the girls performed very well in schools and even at work, but what was alarming was the unfairness they faced later in life, as they had low economic status and less prestigious occupations.

Negotiate visibility or 'embrace' invisibility

Using gender through the lens of postcolonial feminist theories, adapting an intersectional analysis, it is suggested that the women use resources at hand, both from the past and in the present, to negotiate and contest and/or 'embrace' invisibility in different spaces.

Disregarding past experiences and demands on acquisition of relevant knowledge, and placement at an educational level that is deemed appropriate for 'your class', is a frustrating and traumatising experience. This creates a hurdle too high to be jumped given these women's other roles and ascribed identities as adult women, ethnically and racially different 'other', and roles as mothers. This hurdle is complicated further by expectations to learn the Swedish language fluently; moreover, because as adult migrants these women spoke Swedish with an accent, the Swedish language was and still is used as a marker of 'outsiderness' by teachers, colleagues, and bosses who constantly question these women. Language, therefore, is a vehicle constantly in use in 'othering' and demarcating processes. The women are positioned in some relationship of hierarchy as the 'migrants black other' creating a feeling of 'them' against the 'civilized superior white'.

The racialised form of ethnicity is at centre stage as the major axis of differentiation and marginalisation— a marginalisation that is experienced through constructions of *Africans* and *Blacks* as outsiders par excellence, simultaneously creating spaces of invisibility. The realisation of marginality causes these women to sometimes 'accept' and/or 'embrace' this invisibility leading to an inclination to give up, and resulting in a risk of internalising the ascribed identity of difference. The exclusionist discourse as experienced and lived by these women assumes a magnified desire to hold on and/or withdraw. Although it may seem that the women had given up, they have contested for visibility in all spheres, including the labour market even if they still feel marginalised. They pride themselves in not depending on welfare 'handouts' as they called it.

This chapter has offered an analytical understanding of these women's diasporic experiences as women, mothers, wives, and black migrants or non-Europeans in Sweden— a country where hegemonic exclusionary discourses of 'othering' based on one's

background is ever-present. The women are marginalised by institutionalised and legalised protectionistic and ethnocentric exclusionary measures that are politicised and justified in the grand narrative, portraying migrants as the ‘problem other’ to receiver countries such as Sweden besieged with integration issues. This narrative makes migrants, and in particular those racially and ethnically different from white Swedes, more invisible even if they are visible when it comes to their skin colour and the negative portrayal in the media. These migrants’ narrative of struggle, negotiation, and resistance to invisibility is also marginalised by the grand societal ‘othering’ discourse. Instead, as migrants they are constructed and re-constructed as burdening the welfare system and not viewed as active people avoiding *handouts*.

This chapter has illuminated the necessity to analyse migrant women’s stories using different parameters. Gender alone, in my view, would not be able to explain invisibility contra visibility. As it has been argued, I too believe that gender intersects with issues of class, level of education, language, denial of a immigrants’ pasts, and traumas that come along with that and even race and marginalisation. All these parameters mutually construct one another, making the politics of location a necessary factor in analysing these women’s stories.

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Theme I: Negotiating Identity Chapter 5

The Girlish Condition - Big Issues on a Small Scale

With these pictures I explore conditions of young femininity, ideas about identity, gender and power relations. What could it mean to become a girl? To create my photos I work with gender theories, macro photo technique and 12 millimeters model train figures, in everyday scenarios: Big issues on a small scale.

Camilla Hällgren
Sweden



Appearance is everything.

Camilla Hällgren

The Girlish Condition - Big Issues on a Small Scale



- In case of emergency.

Camilla Hällgren



- In heaven, no one can hear you scream.

Camilla Hällgren

The Girlish Condition - Big Issues on a Small Scale



See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.

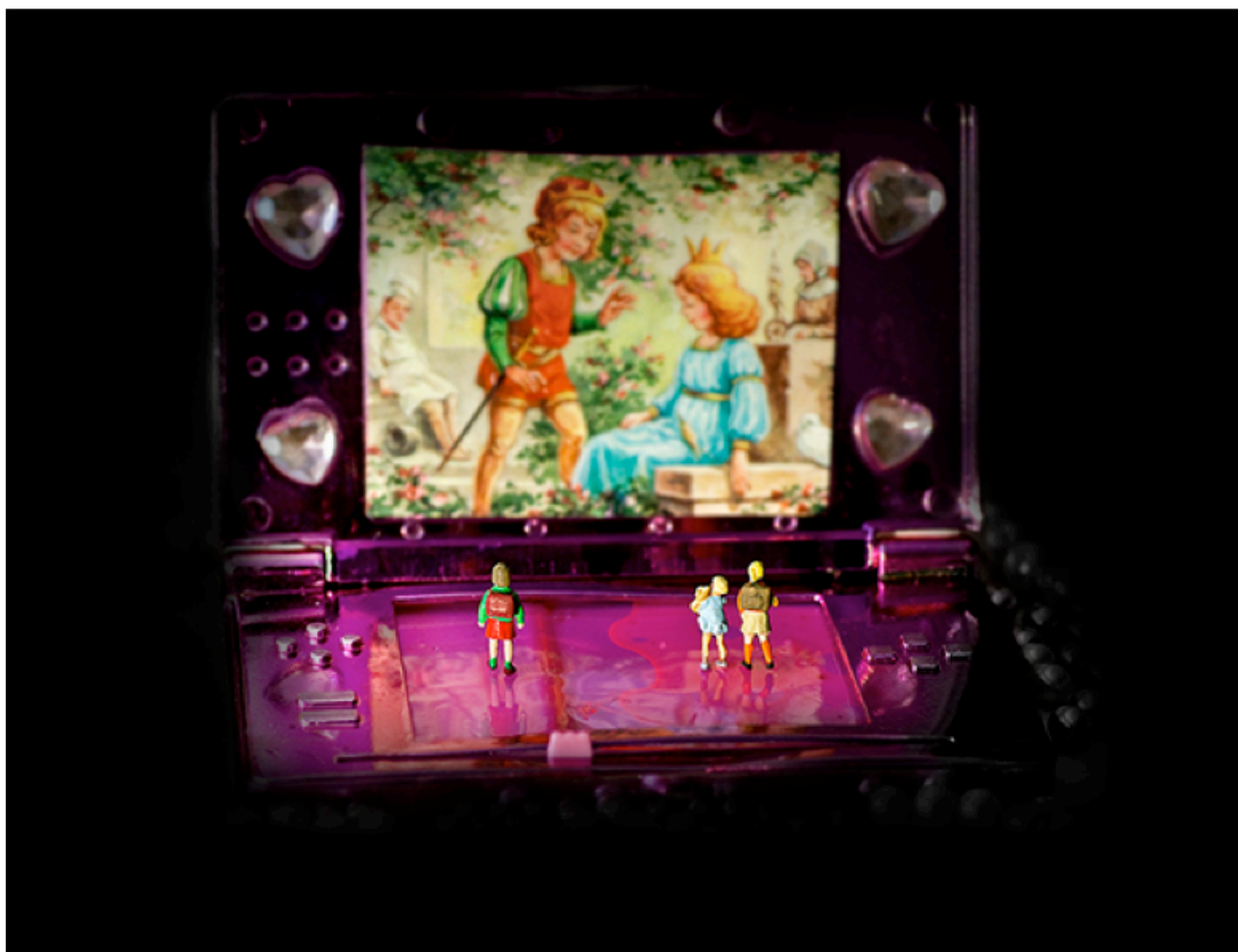
Camilla Hällgren



Searching for the Girl.

Camilla Hällgren

The Girlish Condition - Big Issues on a Small Scale



Learning the Game.

Camilla Hällgren



Life puzzles. IV

Camilla Hällgren

The Girlish Condition - Big Issues on a Small Scale



- Comrades, to the pump!

Camilla Hällgren

Theme I: Negotiating Identity Chapter 6

Good Girl, Bad Girl: Adolescent Friendships and Construction of the Identity

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Croatia

In this essay I will try to analyse the complex pattern of adolescent friendships and the special dynamic that marks the relationship between two types of girls established by the mainstream society – the “good girl” and the “bad girl”. I will use the examples of film narratives dealing with this issue to draw some conclusions on how this relationship works, how these types of girls are defined, and what is the role of the overarching social structures in forming them.

The analysis will also include more or less latent sexual overtones, expressed in experiments with the girls’ counterpart, and marked by indefinable and non-coherent *longing* for the other, but this covert sensual craving is not the most problematic part of this relationship. This type of relationships are filled with tension, often overtly or covertly violent, and usually result in a sudden and traumatic break, which marks the formation of the both participants’ identities in a subtle and far-reaching way. In the beginning there *were* both the “good” and the “bad” girl, but by the end of this process the boundaries between what is considered “good” and “bad” are much murkier and more troublesome to pin down.

Introduction – Defining the Good and the Bad

Since the beginning of time there was a good girl and a bad girl. But, do these two almost mythical creatures really stand on unbridgeable opposite sides, eternally divided by their characteristics, unable to reconcile their differences, functioning only as symbolic oppositions to one another? And is this opposition between them truly as irreconcilable as it seems? Is the good girl / bad girl dichotomy only a product of social practice which craves to systematize interpersonal relationships, a complex network of personal choices, inclinations and decisions, and especially fragile and

tricky hierarchy of adolescent friendships into neatly cut out boxes that maintain our widely accepted, but necessarily simplified views of life, love and relationships? It is easy to blame the overarching patriarchal system of government for the things that seemingly go awry in adolescent girl friendships; it can also be used as a cover up for all those unstable and invisible undertows that govern these relationships. Problems of identity, especially identity-in-development of which the adolescent girl’s can be used as a textbook example, are so thoroughly intertwined with the issues of interpersonal relationships, since the modern (and especially post-modern) theories have broken down the possibility of a coherent, well-organized identity with clearly defined boundaries of where one person stops and the other one begins. If a person is really only a indefinite set of interwoven, overlapping, opposing structures, or simply a kaleidoscopic projection of other people’s gazes, how can we even try to make a distinction between the symbolic figures of a good and a bad girl? And even if these two exotic species do exist, how can we explain their obviously inevitable mutual attraction which tends to dissolve in not so much a meltdown, but an explosion which irrevocably changes the boundaries of these two worlds, leading them to a state where there is no more need, will or power for maintaining the status quo of the previous mythical state. After they collide, there are no more good or bad girls – but what makes this need for their original existence so urgent? It seems that neither side truly prospers after this union, even though our society likes to make us believe that the good girls tend to be rewarded for their goodness, for their ability to stay on the path or at least to return to it after their brief experiment in the forest of the unknown. The punishments for a bad, uncontrollable, deviant girl vary from social ostracism, a profound

loss of status or possession, nullification of her power (social, mental, physical), leading to symbolic death, loss of what makes herself, or real, physical death. However, the status of the “good girl” remains more ambiguous than it may seem – her victory is never one-sided, and the thing that has been gained through the journey (experience, social status, inner wisdom, object of affection) resembles more a war booty than something that was truly belonging to her from the outset. Exactly this aura of something stolen or gained in an impure, scheming manner makes it so hard to maintain the “good girl” status that is being served to the audience who is supposed to learn a valuable life lesson from the story being told, and thus maintaining a status quo of the socially desirable good / bad, black / white, pure / tainted oppositions. But what goes unnoticed by this practice is that this ambiguity of dichotomous powers was present from the beginning, that is, before the state of insecurity and imbalance even took place. It is impossible to impose badness to a girl without the “white magic” of another of the opposite end of spectrum; however, these concepts are never as pure as they are supposed to be, from their very origin being polluted by the ink drops from the other well. All of the movie examples used in this essay are aware of this, whether they decide to ignore it or wisely play with the possibilities that it implies.

Patterns of a Friendship

It is interesting to point out that the storyteller or the point of focalization is almost universally the “good girl”; the story is almost uni-vocally expressed from her point of view, under her conditions, so it is reasonable to claim that the “good girl” occupied the position of the subject in the friendship narrative. The “bad girl” thus represents the object (of desire) and is prevented from expressing her viewpoint of the events that took place. Because of that, the story necessarily lacks credibility, being filled with lacunas of a departed participant. Also, the position of the storyteller makes the situation even more complicated. If the story is told from the first person (that always being the “good girl”) the storyteller is considered being unreliable, always lacking the transcendent knowledge of the events that the omnipresent narrator of the *Er-form* presupposes. But, even when the *Er-form* is used, the focalization, as it has already

been mentioned, is the one of the “good girl”, thus making this supposedly objective and impartial overview dubious.

Almost all of the examples of “good girl – bad girl” friendly relations follow a similar pattern:

Stage 1: the “good girl” notices the object of her affection; period of observation and growing desire to become “the chosen one”, that is, the one who is allowed to get close to the object, to become her confidante

Stage 2: the object notices the “good girl”; sometimes this is conditioned by a physical / psychological make-over of the “good girl” (for example, changing the fashion style as Tracy did in *Thirteen*, or exhibiting the will to cross boundaries of socially accepted behavior by doing a morally ambiguous favor as done by Marie in *Water Lilies*); usually this transgression means leaving the old, equally “good” but boring and predictable friendships behind (*Thirteen*, *Water Lilies*). It is important to notice that this part of the pattern is sometimes replaced with the friendship-from-the day-zero scheme, where the two girls are already friends when the beginning of the story takes place, and we are informed that this friendship has been developing since both of them have been little girls. However, we are also informed, overtly or covertly, that this friendship has never been quite equal, which is necessary for the story to unroll in the expected direction

Stage 3: the “good girl” gains special status becoming a confidante and “the best friend”; this stage is in movies usually represented in heavily edited succession of short frames, portraying the daily activities of the girls – shopping, hanging out, gossiping, etc. This stage is shown as idyllic, but covertly also anticipating something to go awry, pointing out that the balance has not really been established

Stage 4: introducing the cracks in the girls’ relationship, announcing the “good girl’s” inevitable “fall from grace”

Stage 5: fall from grace – the “good girl” is expected to having learned a lesson; the real nature of this lesson as a social construct remains ambiguous and somewhat threatening.

Social Status of the “Good Girl” – Crossing the Boundaries

The main question is what is actually there to gain and to lose for the both parties. We would say that the “good girl” enjoys a comfortable, secure and desirable status in the mainstream, patriarchal social structure which promotes and rewards this sort of behavior, marking it not only as the desirable, but often also as the only possible one. Playing by the book, staying inside the boundaries made by the constant pressures of the mainstream system results in being rewarded by the possessions that the same system promotes as the coveted ones: achieving a respectable social status, becoming a functional member of a society, that is, becoming an adult (with all the power that comes with it being emphasized, while the responsibilities being shoved gently aside), and, what counts as the most important thing in the mainstream narratives for females, getting *the guy*, becoming a wife and a mother. Being “good” neutralizes the dreadful possibility of social ostracism. However, even with these models of behavior being systematically promoted and reinforced by the mainstream social system (via its carrot-and-stick policy), it seems that occasional fall outs by random members of that society are being tolerated (with a benevolent parental sigh), almost as something expected and counted for – the punishment for this transgression often being severe, but rarely deadly. What may seem as a potentially subversive outbreak actually functions as another of society’s tricks: it is tolerated because the power structures count on it and tend to view it as a stepping stone in the process of maturing. The punishment is not severe because it is expected for the trespassing individual to safely (and humbly) return to her safe haven, with experience gained only to demonstrate that change is childish and ultimately impossible. After a short period of probation, the individual is being permitted to re-occupy her place in the social pattern, and to mercifully forget her short and unpleasant flirt with the Other Side (which does not actually exist, since it functions only as the system’s training ground, and thus does not possess the integrity of a truly homogenous space of subversive social practices). However, this rehabilitation program functions only if the individual is willing to play by the rules, that is, that she is made aware of her lack of judgment, of the other option actually being a no-

option, and desiring to re-establish the balance that existed before her brief encounter with the so-called opposition. To put it simply, the individual must not thread too far in order not to get permanently lost in the virtual space of the society’s opposite, which is programmed not to treat its permanent guests kindly. The good example of this problematic ending is the movie *Thirteen*, where the heroine’s fate remains open and deeply ambivalent; even after receiving severe punishment of the power structures it is not sure that this has been enough and that she will successfully reinstall herself as a productive, healthy member of the society. But even when the ending is closed, that is, restoring of the social order has been achieved and the subject has made peace with its position in it, the universal message can be as disheartening and horrifying as in the “ideal” case – the good example of this being both the book and the movie *Never Let Me Go*.

Social Status of the “Bad Girl” – Sirens, Sluts and Femme Fatales

And how does the “bad girl” figure function in this context? What is so appealing about her when she so obviously lacks everything that the social structures find necessary for a girl (becoming a woman) to succeed in a programmed world? It seems that her existence of a social outcast functions as a cautionary tale to an everyday “good girl”, so how come that, deprived of all of the benefits that the given society persuades us to be fundamental for functioning as a productive, well-organized (adult) member of its structure, she still ends up looking so seductive, so desirable, that more than one young (and good) girl decided to throw her better judgment out of the window in order to become close to her, to become like her, to become her? Her notoriety is what counts; her outcast status, her undetermined place at the hierarchical ladder, her bending of and ignoring the rules, her apparent negligence of what is expected and tolerated from a girl are the qualities that attract her “good” counterparts. Even the old warning that boys have fun with bad girls, but marry good ones (boys being, as it has already been told, the chief prize desired by every girl programmed by the society) does not seem to work; maybe the marriage is off, but the attention of boys is what is important now, in the given moment, since the married future is still uncer-

tain and blurred, just a misty haze far at the horizon. The attention of boys is one of the things that make a girl truly exist; it is one of the fundamental living blocks of her identity. Any girl that fails to provoke male interest is marked as undesirable, odd, not fitting, lacking the essential femininity that counts for progress in life. On the other hand, bad girls attract boys, but are also under constant risk of being labeled a slut or easy, adolescent language lacking the sophisticated elegance of *noir* books and movies in which these types of girls are being labeled as *femme fatale*, which hides no less disturbing images of devouring, uncontrollable, dangerous women under its elusive French origins. So, attracting boys and still evading of being called a slut is a thin line on which every bad girl learns to balance. In *Thirteen*, Evie Zamora manages to remain the object of adoration, but somehow eschews derogatory status; in *The Craft*, however, bad witch Nancy Downs is, among other things, burdened with the slut status although there is only one boy in the entire movie that she is connected with; her bad reputation derives from an isolated case inflated to a general understanding of her “slutness”. So, sometimes bad reputation of a girl depends more on verbal transmission than actual practice: the myth and the reality do not blend, resulting in a misstep between what is and what is expected to be. Floriane, the “bad girl” heroine of *Water Lilies* is well aware of this gap, concerned about her still existing hymen which functions as a negation of her achieved (and in her case, wanted) social status of a slut. Worried that the boys will no longer be interested in her if they discover her deception, she pleads her “good” protegee Marie to deflower her before her fateful meeting with the boy with whom she is supposed to finally give in. Floriane accepts hate and reproof of other girls because she (correctly) recognizes their envy as fear and thus the confirmation of her superiority. Floriane has early internalized the rule that the mainstream social structures imbibe into every girl’s mind: women cannot be friends since they are only contestants for the attention and affection of men. Seemingly disinterested and ironically detached from everything (even the synchronized swimming sessions in which she, obviously talented, functions as the main star), it seems that her only interest lies in meeting with different boys, although when analyzed closely, her lukewarm attitude toward each of

them shows that boys are not the thing that is actually valued – Floriane is a narcissus, in love only with her own image reproduced in glances and desires of boys and men who want to possess her. Because of this, she constantly has to pretend in order not to be unmasked as a fake, which would lead to losing her notorious status. The ending of the movie presents Floriane as a thing without essence, a beautiful object made for adoration from a distance, perfectly happy in her own enclosed world of mirroring gazes which establish her as an entity. However, her admirer Marie manages to break the circle and crack the spell that Floriane held over her; unlike Floriane, Marie is presented at rest, isolated from the gazes and completely introspective. Something has been learned, but like always when the “good girl – bad girl” myth is concerned, the objective of the lesson remains dubious and ambiguous. Marie has made peace with her previously neglected, equally “good” friend Anne (her undesirable status on the social scale and especially among boys being emphasized by her physical ineptness and unattractiveness), but we are not sure whether this comeback is as positive as the overall message wants us to believe (Marie’s epiphany that Anne is her “true” friend, after being blinded by Floriane’s radiant (but hollow) image). Is it not just another self-deception? After all, neither Anne nor Marie truly function as Floriane’s “good” opposites, being burdened with selfishness, deceptions, possessiveness that are uncountable in a truly mosaic black-and-white presentations of adolescent friendships among girls. The heavily clichéd movie *The Craft* seems like a school example of these demarcations, but its analysis shows that even in a classical Hollywood production aimed at the teenage population things function in a much more complicated way.

Breaking the Pattern: *The Craft* and the Issue of the Lesson Learned

In this movie the pattern we have previously established is a bit varied: first, as expected, we are introduced to the good girl’s world, more precisely, her past, which plays a prominent role in the narrative. But, unlike other examples, here the good girl is the one being approached to – actually, her first closer bond in the new surroundings is with a boy-object (whose role also differs significantly from the typical story pattern); the “good girl” actuates the interest of

the “bad girl” clique by exhibiting her special powers, which are wanted and needed by the “bad girls” clan – so, here the foundations of friendship are more overtly based on the principle of demand (but it would be wrong to assume that this demand, this need fullness is absent from all the other friendship patterns mentioned in this paper – in the beginning it was stated that “good girl – bad girl” relations always function on some *quid pro quo* base, although usually it is difficult to decode what the particular need consists of, since it is so well-embedded into patterns of prevailing social structures; usually not even the participants in the friendship network are aware of what is wanted, what is asked for); in this case it is actually the “good girl”, and not *vice versa* the one who is being persuaded into joining the relationship, and she remains reluctant until the previously mentioned boy-object fails to fulfill her expectations (also a common denominator for this type of narratives, but with a crucial difference exhibited in the later parts of the narrative, since the boy-object never manages to return to the previous state of grace); the next stage overlaps with the typical pattern introduced previously – that is, bonding of the girls, their rituals (both in a symbolic and a literal way since *The Craft* deals with teenage witches and witchcraft), discovering and strengthening their powers (it is presented to the viewer that they managed to fulfill their full potential only when all four of them are together, functioning under a pact); however, stage four overlaps with widening cracks in the girls’ relationship, that is, the “good girl” realizes that the “badness” of the girls has exceeded the anticipated level of “badness” authorized by the social structures – and tension reaches its peak with neutralization of the boy-object who thus fails to fulfill the role appropriated for the narrative – that is, a safe harbor for the “good girl” in the times of need. The role of the “good boy” is also anticipated by the social structures which, as it has already been told, value the ideal boy figure as the ultimate goal of every aspiring girl-becoming-a woman. By eliminating the boy from the narrative *The Craft* shows itself to be above some of the clichéd solutions common for the mainstream types of teenage narratives. Its relatively open end presents another twist in the tale: while the baddest of the “bad girls” is being thoroughly punished (by being confined in a mental institution, which can be read as one of the movie’s

nods towards the traditional cautionary tales and “mad women” narratives common for the pulp and two-pence horror stories as well as its *belles lettres* precursors), the “good girl” resumes her place in the social order, but from the final scene of the movie it is evident that some of the “badness” has remained in her power, moreover, what is more important, that she will not hesitate in using it if necessary. Something has been learnt, no doubt, and in *The Craft* this lesson can be applied in a truly practical manner. While the viewer is supposed to believe that destructive powers which Sarah demonstrates will be put into practice only in dire straits, that is, fighting against evil, there is no insurance that this will be its only possible implement. The outcome depends solely on her will to restrain herself – but a girl in possession of witch powers is already an anomaly in the society’s structures, of which she is well aware. And since it is obvious that the society does not hold sway over this anomaly (if it were so, all of the girls would lose their powers and the social order would be fully reestablished), it is illusionary to believe that it can control the ways in which this anomaly behaves and it is being used. Sarah is a social outcast in either way, so actual “goodness” or “badness” of her witchery is irrelevant: for Sarah it is impossible to return to social structures because her very being presents a crack in the society’s lines.

Love Is a (Destructive) Force

A common denominator of the movie narratives dealing with female adolescent friendships is the sensual attraction that seems almost unavoidable, whether it is incorporated into the narrative as just an occasional moment of experimentation or the driving force for the entire movie. It could seem that a “girl kissing another girl” scene becomes almost a cliché, and as such can be accused of shamelessly indulging the overarching aesthetics of the dominant “male gaze”. But, since the (covert) physical attraction between the protagonists plays such an important part in the narrative, it is not surprising that the final (overt) resolution of this tension is necessarily incorporated into the body of the film work. However, it would be wrong to assume that the sensual force that exists between the heroines is based simply on the level of pure physical attraction. Since the “good girl” is usually the one whose viewpoint we are able to be

introduced to, she is the one presented as the “craving subject”, while the “bad girl” figure functions as the object of attraction. And while this elusive, ephemeral object eventually answers to the subject’s cravings, the viewer (limited to the subject’s view) always feels that this exchange is unequivocal, that there is much more at stake for the subject than for the object, and that the object can deny its affection at any given moment without fatal consequences for herself (while they would be devastating for the subject). Even when, like in the movie *My Summer of Love*, the object is the one making the first step towards the fulfillment of a physical relationship, it is still the subject who is in constant danger of abandonment and abjection, and this unceasing tension is the component that makes the established relationship (in real barthesian terms) even more attractive and needful in the subject’s eyes. Trying to trace down the fascination that stems in the subject can be as elusive and unstable as these relationships are: Marie’s obsession with Floriane in *Water Lilies* manifests itself not only in her willing to deflower her new found friend as a favour for Floriane in order to protect her “slut” status (and this mechanical scene of deflowering strikes the viewer as much less sensual than the final kiss between the girls encouraged by Floriane and functioning partly as a reward and partly as a humiliation for Marie), but also in stealing the contents of Floriane’s garbage bin, rummaging through the objects that have been labeled as unwanted and unnecessary and thrown away in hope to find something so far hidden and unknown about Floriane, and ending in Marie gnawing on Floriane’s apple stub as a desperate means of getting closer to the object of her obsession. Similarly, in *My Summer of Love* Mona enjoys wearing Tamsin’s clothes and spending time in her house not only because of her lower social status which could not provide her with the commodities that Tamsin takes for granted, but also because wearing Tamsin’s dresses and breathing behind the same walls as she enables Mona to experience briefly how it feels to be in her love object’s skin. Because of this the final blow for Mona at the narrative’s end is Sadie’s (Tamsin’s sister proclaimed dead by Tamsin herself) request for her top to be returned – since Mona believed this piece of clothing belonged to Tamsin, the scope of the lie becomes overwhelming – not only that everything

she has been told turned out to be a lie, but the feeling of getting into Tamsin’s skin was also a fake one. This realization is devastating, but also liberating, and this is why Mona does not fulfill her promise to kill her lover after her abandonment: since she has never really had the insight she was made to believe she had, the figure of Tamsin becomes a stranger – still prone to punishment, though, but too disengaged for Mona to feel obliged to fulfill her promise. When Tamsin arrives at the scene to explain herself Mona is already detached, so her final action (of trying to drown Tamsin) serves only as the final move of self-liberation. *My Summer of Love* also has an open ending, with Mona walking down the road in an unknown direction (literal as well as metaphorical one), but the overall atmosphere of the ending can be described as a positive rather than *Thirteen’s* negative perspective. This is also enhanced by Mona’s straightforward direction on the road (which is connected with our cultural circle’s experience of linear time as a positive trait of progress), while *Thirteen’s* heroine Tracy is destined to ride in circles on a merry-go-round, hollow movement that in the viewer’s eye leads to a futile and barren repetition. From the narrative’s point of view it seems that Mona has learned her lesson (whatever this may be), while Tracy is condemned to endless repetition and retelling of past experiences, deprived of possibility to extract the expected nugget of wisdom from it, required for her return to normal patterns of social structures.

Escaping the Social Construct – Possibility for Changes: *Fucking Åmål* / *Show Me Love*

Basically, all of the previously discussed narrative examples offered the heroine’s solipsism as the only possible solution. Whether the viewer could read the open ending as a “positive” one, resulting in the “good girls” (conditional) return to the expected social models of living, or a “negative” one, with her offense being seen as too severe to be forgiven and redeemed, the closure that the “good girl” is faced with is always reserved for only one person. This corresponds with the society’s main overview of female relationships: true friendships among women/girls are impossible since all female counterparts are simply contesting rivals for the social prestige of a male – female relationship. However, Lukas Moodysson’s movie *Fuck-*

ing *Åmål / Show Me Love* functions as a rare and bright exception, where the ending of the narrative sets up a reinforced connection and unity between the heroines, instead of presenting the crumbling down of their relationship. Because of this we can view *Fucking Åmål's* narrative as pursuing a positive denouement, unlike the other narrative examples which were leading to a negative or conditionally positive, but inevitably solipsistic one. The difference of this approach can be seen from the beginning of the movie, since the viewer is presented with both sides' viewpoints, instead of being confined to one (the one belonging to the "good girl"). Both protagonists are equally represented, so the viewer is able to follow the chain of events from both girls' perspectives, and also has insight into events that the other part of the pair is not aware of. Also, the pattern applied before does not fit the narrative in question. Agnes is infatuated with Elin, a beautiful and popular girl known for being with lots of boys. After the initial maltreatment of Agnes from Elin's side and an unexpected bonding that follows, the two girls spend their time separated from each other, with Agnes feeling betrayed by Elin, and Elin dealing with her socially inappropriate emotions for Agnes. Elin also starts a socially acceptable relationship with a boy as a way of putting her emotions under control; however, in the end she ends the relationship and decides to face social ostracism together with Agnes. Elin and Agnes face the disapproval of their high school community by opting for a sensual relationship between two girls. This example shows that more positive presentations of relationship among adolescent girls are possible, and the narratives do not have to be modeled as stories of the survival of the meanest and strongest.

Conclusion

It seems that most of the "good girl – bad girl" friendship narratives function as a closed circle, without clearly established possibility for change of the basic social norms. Most of them accentuate the already pervasive myth of the impossibility of female friendships and the necessary betrayal that lies in the nature of every girl and stubbornly awaits the protagonists in the end. Every of this narratives states the issue of the lesson learned, but this lesson rarely seems to include the possibility of trust, love and mutual respect among the heroines. In this way, the overwhelming

social structures reinforce the order of things that is being considered acceptable and fundamental for our perception of gender relations and the process of growing up. The "good girl" is bound to opt for solipsism as the only possible way of establishing her own social coherence, which inevitably excludes all the possibilities for healthy, trusting relations with other girls. A bright exception is the *Fucking Åmål* movie narrative which clearly shows that this kind of connection, breaking the rules superimposed by the mainstream social structures between two heroines is not only possible, but also incredibly empowering.

Filography

Fucking Åmål / Show Me Love (1998); Directed by Lukas Moodysson

My Summer of Love (2004); Directed by Pawel Pawlikowski

The Craft (1996); Directed by Andrew Fleming

Thirteen (2003); Directed by Catherine Hardwicke

Water Lilies / Naissance des pieuvres (2007); Directed by Céline Sciamma

Theme I: Negotiating Identity Chapter 7

SUCK SQUEEZE BANG BLOW

Dina Rončević

Croatia

Suck squeeze bang blow consists of 5 units formed between 2007 and 2010 during which time I completed vocational retraining for an auto mechanic at Electrical engineering high school.

Apart from the works “Calendar“, “Defloration“ and textile collages, one of the units includes administrative documentation of the process while all of the above is encompassed and accompanied by text in the book.

I deal with the theory of gender roles while I examine and find my own social, as well as personal position. Identity, in this case gender identity, is the starting point of this work.

I chose the branch of auto mechanics because within this branch gender positions are stereotypically assigned which allows me to cover and experience most of the problems associated with the fore mentioned gender identity discourse.

Also, during the final stage of working on my diploma thesis I completed the elementary program of the Centre for Women’s Studies where I wrote about this project in the form of my final thesis which is incorporated in the book.

My graduation thesis about a regular service on a Kawasaki KLE comprises 16 pages of the book. I rode this motorcycle as part of my thesis so included in the book is the documentation regarding the purchase and ownership transfer, as well as documentation regarding my work in the Volvo service where I completed 1800 hours of practice, as is required by the school.

In the work “Calendar“, I dealt with the issue of identity on the Internet, and I based mine on the character of Eva. Eva is a member of a moto forum and is learning to ride her Kawasaki KLE to predetermined locations, markedly fetishistic and profoundly male. When I, that is Eva, arrived at these locations, I photographed them and later combined them in the form of a calendar accompanied by text. The text used

is actual advice from forum members about the motorcycle and riding which they posted on the forum.

Performance wise the work consists of the fore mentioned “calendar“, the road barricade on which I’ve displayed my motorcycle gear and an active web site with a blog I wrote during the four months I was learning how to ride a motorcycle.

“Defloration“ consists of a rumpled bed with white sheets, a nightstand with a night light and a myriad of notebooks and books I studied while learning about electrotechnics, mechanics, machine elements and other subjects required to complete my vocational retraining. The bed and the books are covered with motor oil.

Access to information about auto mechanics was at the time legally and officially limited to me. Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts was unable to enter my vocation gender appropriately. One year later, in 2008, the law regarding gender equality which states that all agencies and institutions are required to abide by the language standards regarding gender when issuing licences, diplomas and the like was passed.

I thought that knowledge of auto mechanics supplemented my identity. That is how I chose the title “Defloration“. It is my answer to the outdated view of women who become women only after being deflowered.

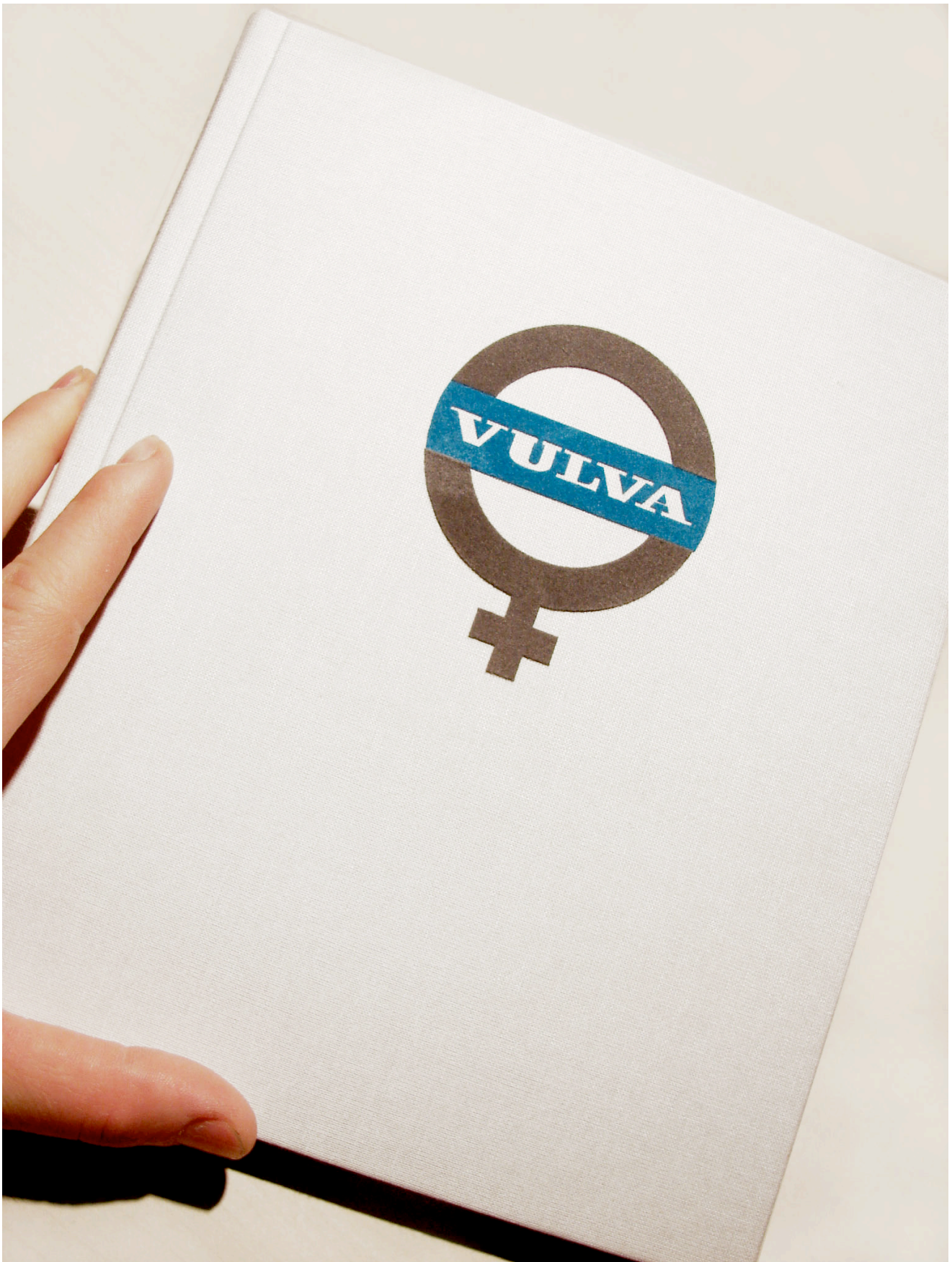
The bed is an element of intimacy, an intimacy in which I can fulfill my dirtiest desires for knowledge without gender degradation.

The title of the work, or book, is “Suck, squeeze, bang, blow“. I used the English words because they are directly connected to the topic of my work and are virtually untranslatable. These four words are colloquially used to signify the four strokes of a four stroke engine, but they also signify sexual acts, all of which are performed on a man or imply male sexual pleasure. The title introduces into the discourse the element of language as crucial for learning and

Suck Squeeze Bang Blow

acquiring new knowledge. If this element is gender-biased or, as it was in this case, excludes women altogether, we are faced with an enormous problem because language is the first and basic medium for the transference of knowledge. Mechanics as a discipline abounds with principles that seem to have been cut and pasted from the sexual. Naming, writing and speaking in this way only spreads the terminology of male superiority.

The textile collages present a typically female activity, one which I've practised since my early childhood and which was passed on to me by my mother. The photographs taken during my practise at the Volvo service served as a template. They are rather intimate and dark, especially when contrasted with the usual way of presenting mechanical elements - always clear, precise, open and bright. The textile collages present the fusing of that which is gender imprinted on me and that which is unavailable to me because of my gender.



Picture 1: Book

Suck Squeeze Bang Blow



Picture 2: Inside of the book



Picture 3: Calendar



Picture 4: Defloracion



Picture 5: Documents

Suck Squeeze Bang Blow



Picture 6: Textile Collages



Picture 7: Set Up

Theme I: Negotiating Identity Chapter 8

Alter Gogo

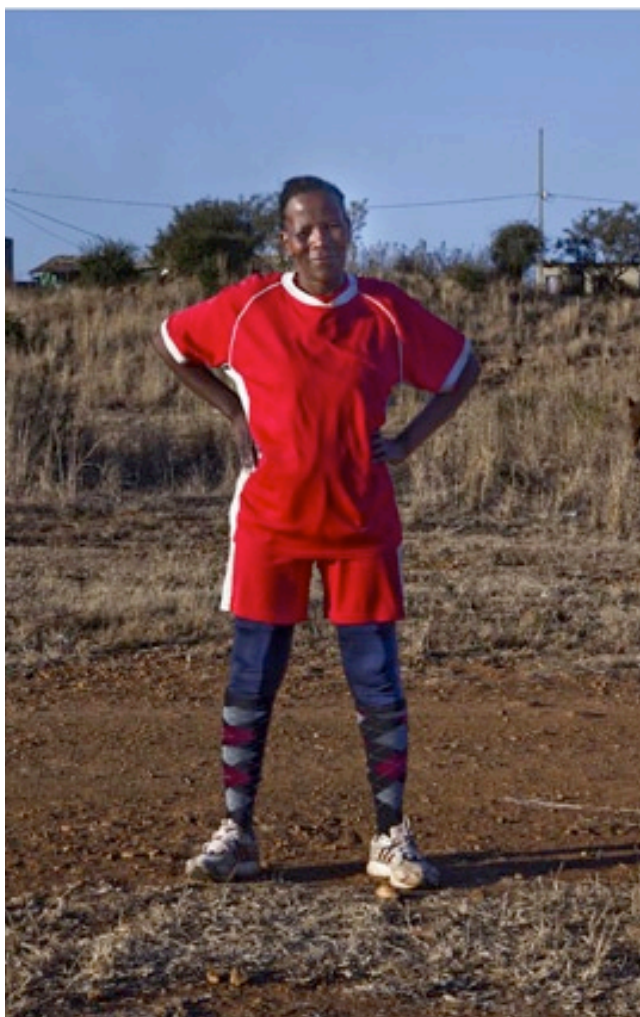
Andrew Esiebo

Alter Gogo by Andrew Esiebo, 2010. Football has captured the heart of Africans. It is the game that knows no boundaries of age, gender or status. It is often said as Africa's unifying game. One of the people in whom these phenomenon of football have reflected is the Gogo getters Football team in South Africa. Alter gogo is a diptych portraits series of grand mothers footballers in Gogo Getters football club in Orange farm, a township of South Africa. For them, playing the game has become an alternative to better living and making social relevance in their community. Football playing is their therapy for their health, social and physiological problems, like diabetes, high blood pressure, alcoholism etc. Alter gogo proposes an alternative image of African women. Quite often

the collective imaginary, African women are often located in the sphere of the "tradition". The image is the one of the oppressed woman, submitted to tradition and tribal customs, with no authority, freedom and conception of the self. Women's sad faces often complement African stories of famine, poverty and violence. Hence Alter gogo challenges gender stereotypes as well the role and image attributed to women, in particular in their elder age. The Grand mothers' regalia, their proud postures in the soccer field along with the charm of their intimate spaces and loves create a powerful socio-cultural scenario in which soccer is the means and the ultimate expression of a new gender and generation identity.

Alter Gogo





Alter Gogo





Alter Gogo





Alter Gogo





Theme II: Bodily Existence Chapter 9

In the Closet

Julia Thorell

Sweden

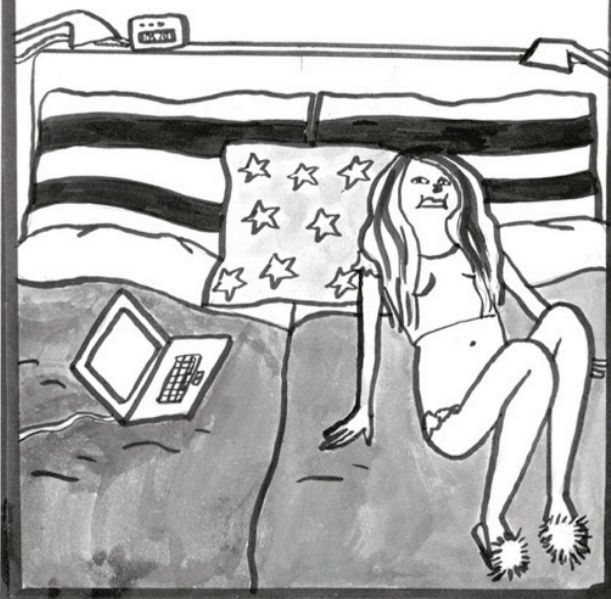
I like to make stories about young women, insecure and adventurous, full of life and paralyzed by complex. I am interested in the gap in-between what you show off to the world and what you hide. In the closet is a comic inspired by fashion blogs. I really enjoy fashion blogs and read a lot of them, and the female role that are presented there fascinates me.

The whole life of a fashion blogger is about looks and show off, and your life becomes your never ending perfect project. This is something that many women struggles with, fashion blogger or not, to maintain and keep up with the project. I hope to make this dilemma visible through my stories, with humour and respect.

In the Closet



Friday 08.30
TGIF!
(Thank God it's Friday)



Today's plan is to
clean the bathroom



In the Closet





In the Closet





In the Closet



Julia Thorell 2012

Theme II: Bodily Existence Chapter 10

Wayne 4 Ever – I Tramp-Stamp Myself before Someone Else does

Elza Dunkels & Maya Dunkels
Sweden



This paper contains a narrative of the experience of tattooing our bodies with a so-called tramp stamp, with the explicit goal of challenging gendered perceptions of our bodies.

We want to investigate the possibility to claim power in fields that primarily allot power to men and to put ideas concerning women's right to claim their bodies as their own into words. In particular, ideas concerning who has the right to speak about a woman's body and her conduct. The theoretical basis of the project consists of theories of gender as a social construction and the female as under-privileged in this construction. The research method is inspired by art performances and intersects with journalistic work as well as with activism. Our contribution to the knowledge development consists of four themes that help us further develop terminology regarding women's bodies. This development of terminology aims at making gendered ideas and actions visible. In this paper we call these mechanisms *deprogramming*, *offerings*, *property* and *reappropriation*. This project can be seen as a post-academic (Livholts, 2008; Ziman, 1996) way of contributing to the construction of terminology.

Introduction

June 2009. A man and a woman in their early twenties walk into a tattoo parlor in Camden, London. They tell the receptionist that the woman would like a tattoo on her lower back, with the text *Wayne 4 Ever*. The woman seems happy and slightly nervous

and says: "Isn't it strange that a guy won't pay for clothes and stuff you want, but if you tell him you want to get a tattoo with his name on, then he's willing to pay for it!"

The boyfriend is not allowed into the tattoo room, so he stays in the waiting room and makes some phone calls. Each phone call is pretty much the same; he tells his friends that he and his girl friend had had a few drinks and now they are in a tattoo parlor because she wants to get a tattoo with his name on it – a tramp stamp.

Tramp stamp is a derogatory term for a woman's tattoo on her lower back, often exposed when the carrier is wearing low-cut trousers and a short top. Like many tattoo genres the tramp stamp has socially constructed connotations associated with it. The term suggests that the female carriers of such tattoos are "tramps, whores, or other derogatory sexually promiscuous terms" (Urban Dictionary, 2011). In many cases a tramp stamp consists of a decorated name of the carrier's partner. The clash between the permanence of a tattoo and the possible temporariness of a relationship may be one explanation of the bad reputation of this particular tattoo genre. However, this cannot be the only explanation because there seems to be no corresponding name for a man tattooing his partner's name on his body. Thus, if the latter is the case, there is good reason to suspect that the socially constructed undertone connected to the tramp stamp is a gendered one.

According to Hawkes, Senn, & Thorn (2004), tattoos are just like any other societal practice surrounded by a solid gendered system, which both creates and preserves societal order. These gender boundaries are powerful means of preserving stereotypes and they help us organize the world according to gender structures. Consequently, if the boundaries are disregarded

this may cause confusion for many, but for others, defiance of the gender norms rewards them with feelings of emancipation and empowerment (Hawkes, Senn, & Thorn, 2004). Atkinson (2002) claims that the body is one of the most socially recognized signifiers of one's gender, enabling highly visible tattoos to counteract sexist structures in society. Patterson & Schroeder (2010, p. 23) use the dichotomy of depth and surface to explain the interest in other people's tattoos. "Though it resides on the surface, skin is taken to be a signifier of depth; appearance becomes shorthand for the moral character deep within." It seems that two co-existing traditions are detectable here. One tradition in which tattoos are used in order to say something of its carriers; her moral character, her societal position, and her history; and another tradition of challenging gendered perceptions of bodies. This second counter-culture seems to involve mainly women's bodies since tattooing has been a male dominated area in Western society.

This project is a way of inscribing ourselves in this latter tradition, but also a way to develop terminology to enable discussions about phenomena like gendered ideas of bodies. It is, of course, problematic to have a conversation when we lack words to describe what we experience. Simmons (2004) claims that a certain phenomenon in some sense does not even exist if we cannot agree on terminology. She exemplifies this using adult conceptions of girls' aggressions and points out that we lack words to even talk about aggression among girls because aggression is not a traditional feminine trait. Instead, we use language that is less complex and we tend to describe girl's conflicts in childish and normative terms; mean, sneaky, back-stabbing. It is vital that we develop ways of speaking about the body and gender and if Simmons and others are right about a phenomenon being invisible if the words are not there, then development of terminology is an important part of this struggle.

The initial idea for this project came up after witnessing the scene in the tattoo parlor described above. We were ill at ease, leading a whispering discussion about how we wanted to stop the woman from getting her tattoo. We interpreted the fact that Wayne needed to pay for the tattoo as the woman not having enough income of her own, having to rely on a man for both basic needs and luxury. If she wanted something nice for herself she could not get it by

saving her salary for some time. Instead, she had to find something that Wayne was willing to pay for. We found it almost symbolic how she was caught up in a sexist system and this led us to a discussion of our own place in the sexist system and how we ourselves turned out to be part of the suppressing of the young woman when we were judgmental about her getting her boyfriend's name forever engraved on her body. So the idea emerged that instead of trying to stop the woman from having a tattoo that we saw as suppressing, we ourselves should tattoo a tramp stamp on our own bodies. At a superficial level this could serve as a solidarity act with all the women who actually feel that they are compelled to tattoo a man's name on their bodies, but we could see a deeper aim. The tattooing could serve as an act of reclaiming our bodies; to tramp-stamp ourselves before someone else does.

Theoretical and Methodological Notes

At an early stage we decided not to hurry this project along. We wanted to be sure about it and we were also cautious about not falling for any peer pressure, neither from each other nor from others. We decided that if one of us did not want to go along with this, it would still be a project. In fact, we decided that we should still write a paper even if none of us actually got the tattoo.

The method is not a traditional research method; rather, it intersects with journalistic work as well as activism and is inspired by art performances. As a backdrop to the narrative we present our ideas regarding what suppressing mechanisms our project reveals and counteracts. The theoretical basis of the project is the idea that gender is a social construction (cf. Butler, 2004) and the discussions are underpinned by the idea of hostile and benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1997).

The Backdrop

The tattooing of our bodies is a way of addressing suppressing mechanisms of sexist, or normal, society. The mechanisms are systematic factors that we have encountered as girls and women but that we had not talked about with anyone, in some cases because we lacked the terminology. The following is an attempt to put these mechanisms into words and as a starting point we have chosen the terms *deprogramming*, *offerings*, *property*, and *reappropriation*.

Deprogramming

The first theme, deprogramming, is used to call attention to the immersiveness of sexist values; we need to complement research and theoretical discussions with sources just as immersive as sexism itself. Using our bodies to act on the subject and to take control over a process that is normally reserved for men, we hope to take one step further in the deprogramming process.

In a study of single sex schools in South Africa, Bhanaa & Pillaya (2011) note that boys do not need to be present to exert power over girls. The girls in the study act as if boys were in fact physically present even when they turned out not to be. Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, & Thompson (1998) call this phenomenon “the male in the head”, the fact that sexism is not as simplistic as men suppressing women. Instead, the process of doing gender is much more integrated in our lives, regardless of our place in the hierarchy; we perform gendering acts without giving it any thought. This fact might explain the slow pace in which a development towards equity is taking place. Both men and women treat boys and girls differently and, by doing so; reinforce gendered patterns of behavior (Frånberg, 2010). In the process of including these sexist values in our belief system we are taught where the boundaries are; we learn what makes someone a girl and not a boy. This practice goes beyond bringing up children and it is not restricted to what is appropriate behavior in different situations, such as obeying adults and finishing everything on the plate. Rather, this practice can be seen as equivalent to the indoctrinating practices of a sect or a cult, popularly called brainwashing. The self-regulation and the immersive nature of sexism is reenforced by disinformation strategies; both men and women are trained in doing gender. We use disinformation strategies just like a sect uses them; to influence girl and boys, men and women, to regulate their own and others’ behavior. In short, we must all be active in perpetuating sexism or it will not happen.

To counteract this self-regulation we suggest *deprogramming*. In this context the term is used to emphasize that the sexist society we live in can be construed as a sect or a cult and that any counteraction will have to have that very same point of departure. We have borrowed the term *deprogramming* from psychological literature dealing with cults and

resocialization (Galanter, 1989). Robbins & Anthony (1982) define the word as “the process of persuading cult converts to relinquish their involvement with cults”. Using the term deprogramming is thus a way of acknowledging that is not an easy task to step out of boundaries established by the surrounding world over decades. Instead, it may need drastic methods, far beyond reading books and taking classes. The deprogramming theme acknowledges that knowledge can be reached in different ways, not only through accessing and processing information but also through immersive methods. One could say that deprogramming addresses our emotions more than our rationality, in the same way that a cult would do.

Offerings

Another angle on power over the body is that women are often treated as *offerings* to society in general and to men in particular. Women more than men have to offer something to their context if they are not to be seen as being in the wrong place or even as worthless. An interesting example is the explosion of young female bloggers in the mid 2010’s. This phenomenon may be seen as quite harmless but instead it attracted a lot of attention, from the public and from media. In most cases this was negative attention, implying that these young women were not contributing to society. Instead, the bloggers are accused of dispersing meaningless messages to their readers and in some cases even strengthening sexist structures (Soxbo, 2010). These young women are thus expected to contribute to society while their male peers to a higher extent can use their youth to experiment and play, with no requirement for actual contribution or productivity.

Baumeister & Vohs (2004) introduce the theory of sexual economics, in which sex is a female resource in heterosexual interactions. They use economics to understand sexual interactions differently from the explanations offered by both biology and gender constructionism; sexual activities are, according to this theory, not only a physical act guided by biology and the two parties’ free will, but just as much influenced by market conditions.

Even in cultures where the tradition of dowry is outdated there remains an expectation on women to be a gift to the man they are with, to his family, to school, to the workplace, to men in general or to society. The offering is one of the possible manuscripts that girls

and women can choose from, but which is presented in a sublime way. In fact, most women we have talked to seem to understand the concept once presented to it but they have never given it any thought.

The offerings theme is apparent in the tattoo parlor situation that started this project; the woman offers her body to the man and in exchange he takes care of her. Since she does not have sufficient financial resources of her own, she is dependent on Wayne's good will and she has to offer him something – in this case a part of her body, for the rest of her life.

Property

This offering or dowry role of women is closely connected to girls' and women's bodies being seen as the properties of men and of the surrounding world. There are numerous examples of comments on girls' and women's bodies that would not be seen as appropriate were they about some other group. We are not primarily referring here to apparent verbal sexual abuse. Instead, we refer to what may seem as benevolent comments at a superficial level. These can, however, be just as hostile if the girl or woman internalizes them and they thus become part of her programming to becoming a proper woman. The idea of an ambivalent sexism, divided into hostile and benevolent sexism, is a concept developed by Glick and Fiske (1997). Hostile sexism is what we normally recognize as suppressing, degrading and stereotyping of women. However, Glick and Fiske (1997) identify another perspective, namely benevolent sexism. Acts of benevolent sexism are not as easily acknowledged as being sexist, something Eagly & Antonio (1994) illustrate with the claim "women are wonderful". It can be hard to identify sexism in this expression since it is not hostile towards anyone and we have learned to picture oppression as basically hostile. In fact, the offerings theme is just as elusive as is benevolent sexism; it can always be excused and defended. Why should it be a bad thing to be considered a gift to society? Doesn't everyone want to contribute? Who gets offended if she is called wonderful?

The act of tattooing your body with your partner's name can, among other interpretations, be seen as symbolically handing over the ownership of your body. When we in this project actually tramp-stamp ourselves, it is done because this gives us the upper hand; we tramp-stamp ourselves to reduce the

harmful effect of others putting the tramp label on us. However, it is not simply a passive, defensive act; it is also a pro-active way of reappropriation, which is our last theme.

Reappropriation

Sweden has a long tradition of state feminism – the interaction between campaigning from the people and integration policy from the state (Almgren, 2006). Family infrastructure has supported equal working opportunities for men and women, and the housewife has not been an integral part of Swedish family life for the last 40 years. However, a survey of 9000 mothers in 2011 shows that 45 % would like to stay at home with their children (Familjeliv Media, 2011). This is part of a development that is sometimes called *the rise of the new housewife*. By some this is interpreted as a backlash for equity struggles, while others see it as part of a trend towards reappropriation of female attributes. In this project we are interested in the reappropriation interpretation.

There is a significant difference between washing off the old meaning of a word and undermining its meaning. Hornsby (2001) claims that a reappropriation process actually makes use of the old, derogatory connotation to replace it. We had our tattoos made at different times and at different tattoo parlors. However, in both cases it was obvious that the tattoo artist wanted to make sure that we actually knew what we were doing. It was clear that the tattooists, a man and a woman, were aware of the social undertone attached to this particular tattoo genre.

We do not wish to wash off the old meaning of the term tramp stamp and the culture of degrading women that comes with it; instead, we want to incorporate the tramp stamp into a context of equity, rendering it harmless and making it useless as a derogatory term. We tramp-stamp ourselves before someone else does, thereby disarming a possible harmful comment.

Concluding remarks

The project to tramp stamp ourselves before someone else does can be seen as analogue to a wide range of reclaiming movements. Just like the movement for reclaiming the streets is more than about having a party in a spectacular place (Brown, 2004), our project is not only the physical act of getting a tattoo. The

tattoo is a statement and it can be used wisely or it can be used to deepen the conflict. As an example, we have discussed that we should not excuse our tramp stamps if people should ask. If we do, then the entire project has been a failure in the sense that it has not helped towards the claiming of power. However, if we feel the need to constantly excuse our tramp stamps, this would only prove that claiming power over our bodies is not as easy as we might have thought.

There are also some comments to be made on the solidarity aspect of this project. If we should feel the need to excuse our tattoos, this would counter-act this particular aspect of our tattoos. Excusing and explaining our tramp stamps would only add to making other women with such tattoos into victims, while raising ourselves to a more conscious, perhaps even ironic level. The fact that this project consists of a lifelong alteration of our bodies can be seen as an assurance against an ironic, from above, angle of our investigation. We did discuss other ways of achieving the same goals; dressing differently would be an alternative. The Swedish journalist Johan Ehrenberg (2011) wrote a series of articles describing his sex change, which uncovered prejudice and gendered preconceptions. Just like Ehrenberg's articles did not really describe a project – with a beginning and an end – the present tattoo project is just as permanent. Ehrenberg (2011, p. 5) writes: “We are only given one life. It has to be taken seriously; we need to try to lead our lives with no agenda, formalities or majority decisions regarding what is “normal””.¹

Our tattoos must not be seen as irony, although we have met this reaction. This is for life and we have actual tattoos. They will forever remind us about the context in which they were created. Perhaps the next generation will not understand this discussion. However, if we look at history and the slow pace of change so far, it is highly likely that even the children of the next generation will still be programmed into sexist behavior, that women will still be gifts to, and the property of, men and that there will still be a need for reappropriation. However, should this change take place and our tattoos no longer fight any actual injustice, we can still be proud that we took part in the struggle.

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¹ "Vi har bara ett liv. Det gäller att ta det på allvar, försöka leva utan dagordning, formalia eller majoritetsbeslut i form av omgivningens krav på "normalt" beteende." [Our translation from Swedish]

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Theme II: Bodily Existence Chapter 11

The Invisible Girl

Sol Morén

Sweden



This artwork was made especially for the Invisible Girl Project, with support from the Swedish artist foundation KC Nord. The photography was arranged

and taken at the archipelago of Stockholm during the summer of 2011, in cooperation with Hanna Persson, who acts as a model in the picture.

Invisible Girl

Entering a new world, in order not to fade away or become invisible, you must have the courage to start making at least a small part of the new world yours. When the little girl who is the the main character in the fairytale anime *Spirited Away*, becomes translucent, she eats some berries from the alien world, to slowly become visible again. [1] When I found out that the research project Invisible Girl was open for visual arts, I immediately visualized the image of *the invisible girl*. In my artistic practice the embodied vision often appears first, of course not in a void, but solitary, and the background, the artistic sources of inspiration or references has to be traced back subsequently. One comprehension of the artistic vision is that it arises from a specific approach to creativity, in which the unconscious is allowed to penetrate to the surface. [2] During the artistic process, I think in images, words represent themselves as pictures, or associations to other words that become other images. In my artistic vision I saw the picture of a girl whose hands and feet had already started to fade away, as she was slowly becoming more and more translucent. In the beginning of the tale, a symbolic dark tunnel leads the family into an unfamiliar world, or to use Freud's term *uncanny*, populated by spirits. [3] To understand the changes taking place in her life the little girl examines and develops the various possible charaters or selves that reveals themselves to her in the fairytale. According traditional psychoanalysis, fairytales could serve as metaphors that may help children to relate to different problems or transitional phases of life. [4] The artwork *Invisible Girl* symbolizes the transition between worlds, old and new selves, or one could say a *rite de passage*. [5]

[1] Miyazaki, Hayao (2001) *Spirited Away*. Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi (original title). Japan: Studio Ghibli. <http://www.ghibli.jp/>

[2] May, Rollo (1975). *The courage to create*. 3. pr. New York: Norton

[3] Freud, Sigmund (1963). *Das Unheimliche: Aufsätze zur Literatur*. [Hamburg]

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[5] A ritual or ceremony signifying an event in a person's life indicative of a transition from one stage to another, as from adolescence to adulthood. <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/rite+de+passage>

Theme II: Bodily Existence Chapter 12

Constructing a Discourse, Regulating a Normative Body: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Serbian Girls' Magazines

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Serbia

This paper deals with the mechanisms of discursive representations of girl's/young woman's body in printed media. The specific focus of interest here is a variety of body modification practices, including working out, tattooing, piercing, using make up, shopping, eating, and talking with friends. The significance of this analysis extends beyond the topic of body modification to the issues concerned with the nature of girls' embodied identities. Through the magazines' discourse young girls are prepared to become women by making a certain normal/normative type of body (the body that is represented and thus constructed as feminine, gentle, lady-like, that has 'everything a young woman should have'). I will argue that the magazines are one of the ways a girl becomes visible (meaning socially accepted). Consequently, the invisible girls are those who have certain characteristics that are not recognized as desirable or recommended (and are linguistically labeled as 'problems').

1. Introduction

In this paper I seek to co-articulate a sociological and a linguistic discourse analytical approach to gender. Drawing on the sociology of body and recent debates in the feminist sociology, I deal with the mechanisms of discursive representations of girl's/young woman's body in Serbian magazines. Accepting the poststructuralist understanding of gender as a performative category that is constructed through language, I explore the performativity of gender by analyzing the topics and linguistic solutions in the texts on girls in specialized girls' magazines, but also considering the texts on girls in women's magazines.

The problem of body has arisen from the analyzed data. By addressing the body of a (modern) girl, the

imaginary construct of it is formed in printed media. The construct is made by directly putting the very phrase 'a girl's body' in the texts, or by discussing topics about what 'a young lady' should know or do in a particular area. The specific focus of interest here is a variety of body changing practices, including working out (at a gym), tattooing, piercing, using make up, shopping, eating, talking with friends, and other regular everyday activities that are recommended in the magazines. Even though it is a discourse analysis (and not an empirical study), I argue that the significance of this analysis extends beyond the mere magazine topic of body modification to the issues concerned with the ways the girls' embodied identities are constructed. Namely, through reading and adopting the magazines' discourse, young girls are being prepared to become women by making a certain normal/normative type of body. That body is constructed through the magazine texts by certain linguistic means and it is usually described as feminine, gentle and lady-like. By suggesting specific procedures, ways of behavior and entire life-styles, the magazines specify and recommend what is necessary for a young woman and what kind of girl has everything a young woman should have. From this perspective, the magazines can be construed as a mechanism of regulating normative femininity.

I will here present the analysis of the articles carried out in the form of giving advice, which included two groups of articles in the magazines – the texts that are in the form of the questions and answers and the texts that are composed of listing groups of advice and recommendations usually formulated in the form of imperatives (what a girl *should* or *must* have or do). Conclusions should be a contribution to the linguistic theories of body construction. Refer-

ring to the problem of being 'invisible', I will argue that magazines are one of the concrete ways a girl can become visible by adopting a dominated way of acting, living, working on the body, wearing specific make-up. By undergoing those procedures, a girl becomes socially accepted. Consequently, the 'invisible' girls are those who have certain characteristics that are not recognized as desirable or recommended. In other words, according to the magazines' discourses, if a girl does not accept a mainstream life-style, she can be recognized as a 'problematic' teenager. As I will show, those girls are linguistically labeled as 'problems'.

2. Theoretical Background

Language and gender study is a discipline that has been evolving steadily since its inception in the 1970s. The study of language and gender does not necessarily include the author's affiliation to the feminist theory, but, nevertheless, it is often a result of acceptance of the poststructuralist approach to the study of language and society (Burr, 2001). There are plenty significantly different definitions of gender as well as analytical approaches to this concept in the linguistics research.¹ According to the theories that follow Judith Butler's argument about gender being a performative act, a sense of gender identity for an individual or a group develops via actions such as wearing certain clothes (skirts for girls), engaging in certain rituals (such as marriage), taking certain jobs, behaving in certain way (girls are quiet and polite, boys are rowdy) (D'Alleva, 2005, 72–73).² However, generalizations about gender can all too easily erase the multiplicity of experiences and representations of gender, since gender is anything but monolithic. Male and female, masculinity and femininity, are not

equally dimorphic everywhere, nor are they defined, represented or experienced in the same ways (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003, 47).

Referring to the theoretical background of sociolinguistics, there are, on one hand, perspectives that are predominantly oriented as poststructuralist and are mainly influenced by the theories of performativity, and, on the other, perspectives that criticize poststructuralist work for having too abstract theoretical dimension (see: Speer 2005, 67).³ It is claimed that sociolinguistics as a discipline could bridge the gap between abstract theoretical approaches to language on one side and concrete communicational situations on the other (Motschenbacher, 2009, 4).

Apart from feministic developments in sociolinguistic, but also partly within it, another related field of knowledge has emerged – sociology (and sociolinguistics) of body. By discussing the ways of linguistic constructions of gender and by analyzing linguistic gendering via body parts vocabulary, this paper draws on recent developments in the mentioned field. The approach used here is deconstructionist because the concept of prediscursively ('essentially' or 'naturally') existing female is not accepted. Rather, by dealing with linguistic means that are used for a construction of a normal/normative kind of girl (girl's body), I discuss the ways certain hegemonic gender norms are promulgated in the press. It is striking that the approaches like this oppose drastically to the discourse that is actually propagated via the magazines – the discourse according to which gender is treated as a clear-cut, natural and immutable category to be read from the body. As I will show in the following analysis, escaping from those norms are judged as being deviant, not normal, problematic, or 'not suitable' for a young girl.

¹ In all studies of gender, as well as in those devoted to language, there is often a distinction made between a biological category of 'sex' and socially structured identity label of 'gender'. However, since the late 20th century, the interpretation of gender usually refers to a category that has a performative potential. Gender is therefore often construed as an act of performance (Butler 1999, cf. D'Alleva, 2005, 73). Some authors further emphasize the differences between sex, gender and sexuality (Cameron and Kulick 2003, 1–14).

² For Butler, gender is 'performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results' (Butler, 1999, 25). Gender is, furthermore, 'the system of applied social roles' and a broad network of expectations in cultural practices that are constituted within the dichotomy of femininity/masculinity. It is also usual to discuss gender differences in the context of representation of the Other through different social, cultural and artistic practice (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003, 47). In the most general sense, gender is defined as a 'sign of cultural and social determination, agency, representation and identification of sexual identity' (Šuvaković, 2005, 550).

³ The history of gender and language studies is usually examined through three stages. The initial phase was marked by the publication of Robin Lakoff's book *Language and the place of women* (1975) which represented a starting point in the theoretical considerations of gender categories in language. The peculiarity of this period is the so-called 'dominance theory', i.e. the thesis that 'the language of men' is one of the key mechanisms for establishing and maintaining domination over women (Lakoff, 2004). 'Dominance theory' has been replaced by 'diversity theory', which is marked by the desire to put women in more equal position to men, but also the argument that 'women and men speak different dialects' (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003). The third phase began in the last decade of the 20th century and marked the influential works of Judith Butler and a thesis about the performativity of gender. According to the 'theory of performativity', human beings do not receive their gender characteristics naturally on birth, but rather, changes occur throughout life and are part of the overall construction of human identity, which is always implemented through language (Butler, 1999).

3. Methodological background (data)

Bearing in mind the mentioned, it appears that numerous and diverse sociolinguistic analysis of gender in the press (women's and men's magazines, newspapers, advertising) is exactly one of the forms of overcoming the aforementioned gap between theoretical abstraction and concrete communicational situations. In fact, there are many examples of sociolinguistic analysis of so-called 'women's' magazine (among which the most intriguing seems to be the case of *Cosmopolitan* magazine with its 44 local versions around the world), but analytical approaches to masculinity are not rare either, as well as a comparative consideration of men's and women's magazines and representations of femininity and masculinity (see: Machin & Thornborrow 2003; Stoll, 1998; Hackney, 2007; Del-Teso-Craviotto, 2006). However, it appears that girls' magazines are neglected in that aspect of analysis when compared to the case of *Cosmopolitan's* analysis or similar well-known women's magazines (for otherwise, see: Frost, 2005; Kehily, 2004; Massoni, 2004).

As I mentioned, this paper focuses on the analysis of gender performativity through theorization of articles dedicated to 'a young girl'. Specifically, the discursive representations of girl's/young woman's body in the printed media are in the focus. The analyzed data are from both specialized magazines for girls (magazines *Lili*, *Bravo Girl*) and articles on girls in women's magazines that seem to be often paying attention to bringing up children (magazines *Sensa*, *Lisa*, *Viva*), as well as the magazines for the young in general but with many articles written only for girls (such as magazine *OK*). The text corpus on which the study is based consists of all numbers of the mentioned (monthly) magazines published in 2011. I considered the texts that are explicitly in the form of questions and answers, as well as those which are formulated in the form of imperative that contains certain commands or recommendations (usually formulated as 'what a girl should or must do' to achieve a particular goal). I considered the articles that contain the phrase 'young (as well as 'modern', 'trendy') girl', but I also generally interpreted the magazines as channels that could bridge the mentioned analytical gap, thus actually producing a proper (expected) 'young girl (lady)' via linguistic

means. Even though the very term 'young lady' is not inevitably emphasized and her body is not always in the main focus of an article, the articles regularly consider the girls' 'needs' and they deal with things 'a girl needs to know' in order to achieve something or to look in a certain (trendy, modern, i.e. expected) way, or, in other words, to be recognized as a visible social being.

The departure point in my research is the thesis that the analyzed magazines offer different ways of discursive constructedness of young girls' body. Clearly addressing all what young girls 'should be', the magazines propagate specific and fixed (hegemonic) 'gender ideology'⁴ which creates a certain 'imaginary world'.⁵ As numerous sociolinguistic studies have shown, all levels of linguistic analysis may be ideologically important. Furthermore, the ideologies are constructed upon the interaction of the elements at divergent levels of linguistic analysis – grammar, vocabulary, text structure, as well as discussed topics, given pieces of advice, visual solutions and so on. Therefore, the present analysis offers a limited contribution to the critical analysis of a given discourse.

4. Results of the analysis of the magazines

Women's magazines have been regularly described in socio-cultural studies as generalist because they purportedly target all women and the practices they are interested in. However, the studies do not

⁴ It is common that linguistic analyses include deconstruction of the ideological background of a specific journal. The use of a particular style, lexical solutions and other characteristics indicate presence of corresponding 'gender ideology', which means descriptions and evaluations of people and their actions. Accordingly, the ideology can include a variety of representations of women, and there may be a different range of ideologies of gender. In accordance with the ideology or the type of women that is addressed, a magazine may be traditional, progressive, expert, or can combine styles and ideology. However, the relationship between language and ideology seems to be dialectical. The particular linguistic practices of women's magazines are influenced by the overall ideology of the magazines, and likewise, language contributes to the ideologies (Del-Teso-Craviotto 2005).

⁵ The literature on magazines assumes that magazines faithfully reflect social practices, and that they are read as such. When there is no neat fit between everyday mundane reality and the world according to the magazine, women's sense of the world and expectations will become distorted and confusion will ensue. However, many of the texts that tutor us in dealing with life problems have been set in imaginary worlds, e.g. fairy tales or worlds that are distant in time and space. Such is the case with Biblical stories and Hollywood movies and it is supposed to be the case with magazines. Such 'imaginary worlds' provide models which are not meant to be followed literally, but only imaginary, 'in spirit'. From this perspective, it is argued that magazines are constructed as a type of imaginary world, similar to those mentioned. In magazines' imaginary worlds, women appear to have enhanced agency and power, indexed through visual and textual discourses which are now globally circulated in the case of more influential magazines (such as *Cosmopolitan*) or at least at the local level in many other cases (Machin & Thornborrow 2003, 455).

inevitably confirm this characterization (see: Del-Teso-Craviotto, 2005). As I concluded from my analysis, there is in fact the overlap, since Serbian girls' magazines do reflect the expected hegemonic discourse. They all address 'normal' girls (and their bodies) and, accordingly, treat others as 'problems'. Having seen this linguistic situation, I divided the results of my analysis in the following way:

1. I will firstly present the linguistic means that are used for positive constructing of the visible girls (the construction which is expected, normative and aimed at 'normal' girls);
2. I will address the questions referring to the girls labeled as 'problems'.

I will finish the paper by some concluding remarks considering the overall role of the magazines in the discursive production of girls' assumed identities.

4.1. *The ways of being visible/normal/proper/trendy/stylish/modern 'young lady'*

Addressing girls' body appears to be one of the most common ways of constructing a stereotyped image of a young girl. The body is usually linguistically connected to the label 'modern girl' thus forming a discursive imaginary construction – an expectation from a girl. According to this discourse, it is rather recommended that girls should or must do certain procedures in order to express (or 'to be') themselves. In accordance with this is a variety of body modification practices that are regularly discussed and propagated in the magazines, such as working out, tattooing, piercing, using make up, wearing fancy clothes and so on. Moreover, recommended (i.e. expected) behavior refers to some other everyday activities, such as eating, talking with friends, going out, shopping. All of them are subjected to a detailed examination of the ways a 'young lady' should act (thus constructing her body and behavior). In the magazines, the recommendations are presented in the form of advice columns and texts written in a question-answer scheme. Besides the very scheme given in a 'question – answer' (or 'problem – solution') form, magazines' discourse promulgates certain normal/normative type of body by describing that body as feminine, gentle, lady-like, modern,

stylish, trendy, and even normal. This is evident from the content of the magazines' articles and also from the used vocabulary. It can be concluded that certain topics (which I will call 'semantic fields') and shared vocabulary are something that all analyzed magazines have in common. All of the mentioned magazines' characteristics represent basic linguistic means that are used for constructing an imaginary concept of a 'young girl'.

Semantic fields in the magazines have already been mentioned in general. However, all of them could be subsumed into a larger topic group that can be labeled as 'body conduct' (or, more precisely, body alterations). Namely, both girls' magazines and articles on girls in women's magazines promote the idea that all girls are likely to be the same – they are assumed to share the same characteristics, needs, desires, interests. Thus, the official discourse actually ignores the possibility that there could be important differences among the girls, such as race, ethnicity, social class, economic status. Even the category of age seems to be absent from the unified discourse promulgated in the magazines. In addition, it was quite surprising to me to find out that women's and girls' magazines show hardly any difference when linguistically analyzed. Both of them produce a discourse on girls as being a unified group with same expectations, characters and needs, and, of course, with almost the same (perfect) body and complete (modern) image.

This homogeneous image could be rarely contradicted by the magazines' specialization on certain topics. From the corpus of analyzed girls' magazines, *OK* is a magazine that includes a variety of topics and thus is aimed at more diversified potential readers. Namely, this magazine includes articles on image, body, going out, being trendy in many ways, but, also, it does cover some subjects that do not necessarily propagate modifications on body. Rather, there are often certain articles on school or celebrities' lives. For example, such is the article under the title 'School is cool!' (the title is in fact written like this, in English, not Serbian, see: *OK*, Nr. 83, September 2011). Aside from *OK* is *Bravo Girl* magazine that seems to be a match to *Cosmopolitan* – what *Cosmo* represents to women, *Bravo Girl* represents to girls. This magazine propagates the idea about a beautiful girl who needs to be prepared to fight for her boy. In order to do

that, she ought to be charming, lovely, and confident. The traditional, romantic role of girls is also evident from love stories that are regularly published in the magazine (for example, the story entitled ‘The fairytale life’, *Bravo Girl*, No. 75, 2001). Furthermore, *Lili* seems to be an amalgam of divergent approaches to the expected girls’ identity. This magazine’s articles could not be easily subsumed under one bigger topic since there are articles quite similar to those in the mentioned magazines on one hand, and the advertisements for cartoons on the other. The girl to whom the magazine is dedicated is regularly named ‘a princess’ or even ‘mama’s little princess’, but, still, this ‘princess’ is informed about ‘summer love’ and ‘accessories that are in for the summer’ (*Lili*, No. 94, July 2011). This magazine amusingly combine reports on a new cartoon and recommendation on clothes and make-up that are ‘modern’ and ‘in’, even for wearing both in school and for a boyfriend (see, for example, *Lili*, No. 95, September 2001). In comparison to the magazines specialized for girls, the articles on girls in women’s magazines differ in a way when the topic refer to mothers. In those cases, the articles are usually about giving adequate pieces of advice about bringing up ‘proper’ young girls (see *Sensa*, September 2011, or any number of *Lisa* and *Viva* that are magazines with regular columns about bringing-up the young).

From this perspective, it can be concluded that the magazines reproduce certain gender ideologies in more or less extend. Thus the analysis could bring to the conclusion that the magazines are not necessarily generalist, but address just a limited portion of women’s interests (Del-Teso-Craviotto, 2006). However, this ‘limited portion’ seems to be exactly the one that represents just how limited the magazines’ discourse is. According to this ‘limited’ topics, girls appear to be prepared, advised and encouraged to undergo numerous procedures just in order to make their body right, or as (socially) expected. Semantic fields referring to body or body modifications include the following general topics: love and romance, being and feeling good/cool, having modern image. Within these fields (that are present in all analyzed magazine) there are plenty of body references, since all of the fields imply the necessity of presenting a girl (meaning a girl’s body, image and outfit) in a certain way. In order to achieve a goal of looking in the ex-

pected way, the procedures that are recommended include various techniques, from ‘always having a radiant smile on the face’ (*Lili*, No. 79, 2011) to wearing trendy make-up⁶ and undergo piercing procedures and tattooing anywhere on the body.⁷ In addition to that, a girl needs to act in a proper way depending on the occasion. Usually, a confident posture of body and decisive character are recommended.⁸

At the level of *vocabulary* (i.e. lexical choices), the production of hegemonic gender ideology is not hard to detect. Most of the articles do not address just ‘girls’, but rather, the vocabulary used in them reflects an intense interest in the actual, precisely labeled type of the girl (the girl with peculiarities that are clearly named and sometimes elaborated in detail). Namely, the very word ‘girl’ is usually used with the attribute ‘cool’, ‘fun’, or ‘modern’,⁹ but is also referred to as a ‘young lady’.¹⁰ Moreover, her body can be described as ‘hot’ (*OK*, No. 82, August 2011) ‘magical’ (very often in *Lili*) and her total appearance and personality are referred to in the context of being superior to others (a girl is often labeled as a ‘queen’ or ‘princess’ of fun/confidence/beauty (see, for instance, *OK*, No. 82, August 2011).

A special group of recommendations refer to the words used for descriptions of the actions or procedures that need to be done. For example, make-up can be labeled as ‘hot’, ‘crazy’ (in a positive connotation), and the tan is usually suggested to be ‘flawless’ (*OK*, No. 80, July 2011). Every single part of the body (mostly the face) could be made ‘alive’, thus appropriating certain characteristics that are expected to

⁶ The examples for strong recommendations for wearing specific kind of make-up, i.e. being informed with what is trendy at the moment is unconditionally represented as an expected ‘normal’ and ‘lady-like’ behavior in all magazines without exceptions (see, for instance, *OK*, No. 83, September 2011).

⁷ Besides doing regular piercing anywhere on the body, some additional similar recommendations are often made, including wearing stickers on nails, doing temporary tattoo, or just wearing unusual decorative jewelry (*OK*, No. 82, August 2011, *Bravo Girl*, No. 78).

⁸ There are numerous articles that do not consider the concept of body itself, but on the level of girls’ behavior. They suggest what kind of actions are desirable and they usually include lists of recommendations about the tools for achieving a goal or getting to look like someone or in a particular way (for example, an article entitled ‘Before your sweet 16 you should do...’, *OK*, No. 83, September 2011, or ‘How to boost your confidence’, *Bravo Girl*, No. 79, 2011).

⁹ It seems that, according to Serbian magazines, the most commonly expected attribute for a girl is ‘to be cool’. This term is used when a person, behavior, or even things and interior design of a room is addressed (*OK*, No. 82, August 2011).

¹⁰ *Lili* magazine even has the attributes in the very subtitle of the magazine’s name. *Lili* is in fact described as a magazine for girls that are young, intelligent, fearless, fun, and honest.

be connected to people in general, usually with their actions (not only body parts).¹¹ However, listing body parts are common (often use of the nouns 'body', 'body spray', 'body treatment' as well as particular parts of it, such as 'lips', 'stomach', 'figure'). By naming certain shapes or body parts, it can be argued that the process of 'linguistic gendering' happens via body-part vocabulary, which consequently brings to stereotyped objectification of the female body (Motschenbacher, 2009).

Finally, when lexical choice is discussed, it is important to emphasize that all analyzed data may be subsumed under the group of 'giving strong recommendations', grammatically done in the form of imperative, with regular usage of the words 'should', 'must', 'need'. Sometimes, the girls are advised in the following familiar way: 'just do it' (where 'it' could be seducing a boy, wearing provocative clothes and make-up, piercing, working-out, loosing weight, and so on). The texts are sometimes simply entitled 'What is In, What is Out' and they consist of divergent types of suggestions that are listed (*Lili*, No. 96, October 2011). The articles with strong recommendations (even commands) can also refer to behavior in general, such as eating, shopping, and socializing.¹² An interesting and representative example of this group is an article under the title 'Be popular! Learn how!', in which a list is given with actual types of girls among whom 'you need to choose' since 'you can steal the secrets from the popular girls' and thus 'become one of them' (*OK*, No. 83, September 2011).¹³ The positive connotation of the recommended acts and procedures is clearly expressed in the opening paragraph in which it is said the following: 'Some girls are popular and loved everywhere and by everyone and they simply fascinate everybody who is near them. See why those girls have better life than others and steal their recipe for success!' (*OK*, No. 83, September 2011).

¹¹ For example, according to *OK* magazine, even eye lashes can be 'courageous' (*OK*, No. 82, August 2011).

¹² The representative examples consider boosting a characteristic, such as confidence (see: 'How to boost your confidence', or 'A Girl who has no fears', *Bravo Girl*, No. 79, 2011).

¹³ The girls' types that are listed are: 'a talker', 'a friend', 'the one that smiles all the time', 'a sport girl', 'coquette' and 'the queen of fun'. There are descriptions of those girls and recommendations of the ways in order to decide and to become one of them. The recommendations are formulated in the form 'if you want to be...then you should do...'. Everything listed is uncritically strongly recommended. For example, for the sporty girl there is the following advice: 'Bungee Jump? Yes, of course, I undoubtedly do want to try that too!' (*OK*, No. 83, September 2011).

4.2. *What about the girls who do not fit into the expected frame? The ways of constructing 'a problematic young girl'*

As I stated before, the descriptions of the girls who do not fit into the expected discursive field of social visibility are regularly named as 'problems', which is evident especially in the case of the analyzed 'question-answer' or 'problem-solution' discursive scheme. Within the listed semantic fields, there is an explicit use of vocabulary that implies the treatment of the look and behavior that are not recommended. Hence, what is important here is to point out to the lexical choice that is relevant for the present study. The lexical choice appears to be highly important in the articles on the body treatments, as well as in those that address a particular way of behavior. By using certain vocabulary, the magazines actually 'make' the problems by discussing them and by labeling certain actions and looks as problematic (cf. Ballentine & Ogle, 2005).

In comparison to the positive connotation of working on complete body and image when the 'normal' girls are addressed, in the case of 'problematic' ones there is a different situation on the linguistic level. Namely, I concluded so far that girls' magazines offer a stereotyped image of young girls' body that is usually expected to be feminine and lady-like. It is, however, even more intriguing how the female body is addressed when defined as a problem. I have shown that girls' magazines bear witness to the process of continuous objectification of the girls' body. But, the body is shown to be even more described in details and thus completely defined when a problem area of it is discussed. The discussion is usually connected with negative body images, thus formulating the enforcement of the normative imperatives (that are regularly in the form of actual grammatical imperatives). Thus the same articles usually offer the examples for both positive and negative connotations of constructing normative bodies. Namely, when a list is given with specific pieces of advice about doing something on the body, there are often a list of procedures that 'should' be done, as well as pointing to the consequences if 'you don't do it'. Thus, advice pages could actually be construed as the sites for the operation of power (for similar conclusions see: Currie, 2001).

I will illustrate this on the example of the mentioned article 'Be Popular! Learn How!' in order to show how both positive and negative constructions of girls' types coexist. When a specific type of the recommended girl is described, some 'warnings' are listed in order to show 'what you don't want to become'. However, the suggested type is always recommended (positive connotation), and the warnings refer to 'what could happen' to a girl if she doesn't manage to achieve to be the popular (expected, recommended) type. It is the clearest example of constructing 'problems' from the girls who do not fit into the expected scheme. In other words, this article bears witness to my basic thesis for this paper – if a girl is popular, her popularity is labeled as a consequence of certain image and acts, which enables the girl to become visible in a given society. In comparison to her, the other one, her opposite, seems to be invisible, since she is advised to 'be careful' not to become unpopular, which means that 'nobody will love' her. That is why she 'needs' to learn from those girls in order to survive (see: *OK*, No. 83, September 2011).

The magazines offer numerous examples of this sort of recommendations. They can refer to finding a boyfriend (in that case, it is suggested that 'you can change your situation and don't be single anymore') or overcoming certain type of character that is not labeled as desirable, but as a problem, such as being shy (*OK*, No. 82, August 2011), being insecure (*Bravo Girl*, No. 79, 2011) or not dressing elegantly (*Lili*, No. 97, November 2011). Most of the negative connotations are actually made in comparison to the positive ones in the same texts. Thus 'problems' seem to be something that can happen to a girl if she doesn't follow the rules of the hegemonic discourse.

However, there are also articles that do not contain both positive and negative predictions about girls during 'working on yourself' (her body or actions), but rather, they list just those with 'problems'. Besides suggesting 'saying no' to some real bad habits (such as alcohol), the 'no' imperative is given in the articles that deal with the 'problems' like having a few kilograms extra or not having flat stomach (*Bravo Girl*, No 79, 2011). The usual way of giving strong recommendations about not doing something is given in the same ways as in the case when positive suggestions are given – it is linguistically done by using modals. Thus, it is usually to have negative lists about

what a girl 'should not' or 'need not' or 'don't have' to do. It is often suggested that the girls should not give up looking or acting in a particular way just because of the lack of money. That is why the magazines offer plenty of suggestions for 'wearing masks' in order to hide their actual social background.¹⁴

5. Conclusion

In this paper I represented the results of the analysis of the magazines that I construed as a mechanism of regulating normative femininity. The conclusions lead to the confirmation of the theories that argue that there is a certain linguistic identity construction of a body. I showed that magazines could be one of the ways a girl becomes visible (meaning socially accepted), especially because of the fact that the invisible girls are clearly linguistically marked as those who have certain characteristics that are not desirable or recommended.

It would be interesting and relevant to carry out further analysis which would include examination of readers who buy and read all magazines or some of them, and, ultimately, to point to possible match of the imaginary constructs and their potential real implementation in actual everyday life. I argue that the significance of this analysis extends beyond the topic of body modification to the issues concerned with girls' identities. Through reading and adopting the magazines' discourse, young girls could be prepared to become women by making a certain normal/normative type of body. They, in fact, 'read their way toward adulthood' (Finders, 1996, cf. Botta, 2003 and Jackson, 2005). This would provide additional pieces of information about gender construction that is truly effective only if the recipient recognizes a performative quality of the category of gender. This is the point where normativity may have damaging effect on girls' subjective image of their own bodies which may see inadequate if they don't conform to the expected norms of the constructed bodies (Motschenbacher 2009, 18). The discourse in the magazines illustrates how identities can be strategically constructed even on the level of purely linguistic means. The findings of this study may appear to be predictable, but this serves to support the overall theoretical argument about identities being linguistically constructed.

¹⁴ Usually, there are the lists with alternative ways of looking cool and trendy, even if one doesn't shop in expensive stores. There are also recommendations from 'home-made cosmetics' (*Bravo Girl*, No. 70, 2011).

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Theme II: Bodily Existence Chapter 13

Negotiating Normality: The Complexity of Showing (off) Bodies

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Sweden

Sometimes I want some raccoon or red highlights
Just because
I want my friends to think that I am dynamite
And on Friday, rock city, high school dance
I got my bangs too high
That I don't stand a chance
A chance

I just wanna be myself,
And I want you to love me for who I am
I just wanna be myself,
And I want you to know, I am my Hair
Lady Gaga, *Hair* (2011)

The present chapter is based on a sociological qualitative study that focuses on disability, identities and gender, specifically on conceptions of the body and gender among young women labeled as having an intellectual impairment. It deals with the ways in which young women labeled with intellectual impairment construct themselves. The interviewees use four different strategies to make themselves visible as fashionable young women of today, e.g. as non-disabled. The strategies are defined as: *marks of resistance*, *standing out*, *blending in* and *female masculinity*. These strategies comply with conceptions of fashion, and they are at the same time expressions of different marks of resistance, and ways of striving for independence in the sense of self-determination.

Introduction

The lyrics referred to above, from artist Lady Gaga's¹ song "Hair", are an example of how physical appearance can play a central role in constructing identities today. Fashion, in particular clothes, makeup and

hairstyles, is an important part of presenting the self (Goffman 1980) in contemporary society. Some of the young women in the study frequently talked about Lady Gaga as a role model because she has the courage to go her "own way" and create her own clothes, made of plastic and beef.

The sociological qualitative study upon which the present chapter is based focuses on disability, identities and gender, specifically on conceptions of the body and gender among young women labeled as having an intellectual impairment, sometimes also called a learning disability (formerly mental retardation). Intellectual impairment varies in severity. The young women who participated in the study had a mild intellectual impairment, which means that they had reading and writing difficulties. However, they had no difficulties understanding the interview questions or talking about their experiences regarding conceptions of (the) body and femininity. The young women who participated in the study made themselves visible by for example "standing out" or "blending in" in relation to norms of femininity; they strived to pass as non-disabled young women, rather than being visible as intellectually impaired women.

Young women with intellectual impairment have been rather invisible in the research. Thus, the present chapter aims at highlighting their conceptions of bodies and gender by looking at the visualizing strategies they used.

Method

The empirical data in the study under discussion consist of group interviews as well as individual interviews with 12 Swedish women between the ages of 17 and 20 who attend a special class. The reason for the age difference is because the interviewees were part of a pre-existing group of young women

¹ Lady Gaga is a well-known American pop-singer.

at the school, from different classes, who knew each other. I established contact with the school through the snowball effect: I contacted the supervisor of the school and the teachers of the special class, and informed them about my study; the teachers then introduced me to the young women, and I asked them if they were interested in participating in the study. The young women actively participated in the construction of the interview themes, all within the overarching research topic of conceptions of the body and femininity. This means I had no pre-defined research themes upon entering the field. Instead, they were constructed together in the focus group interviews with the young women. Although similar studies have been conducted in Britain (e.g., Walmsley and Johnson 2003), this kind of participatory research has not been carried out in Sweden with this particular group of participants. Thus, the present study is of methodological importance. The empirical data dealt with here are from the individual interviews. Fictitious names are used throughout to ensure the anonymity of the interviewees. Special classes in Sweden are small, and the students are easily identified. Due to the risk of violating principles of confidentiality, I have chosen not to go into detail concerning the participants' specific ages and the classes they attended. Furthermore, such information is of no importance to the study.

The interviews were conducted at the school the young women attended. Within the Swedish school system, there are special classes for people who have been diagnosed as having an intellectual impairment. Special classes are usually located in the same main building as the so-called regular school. However, the special classes are in a separate part of the school building, with separate lecture rooms, indicating that the Swedish school system clearly contributes to the categorization and marginalization of impairment. This tension between inclusion and exclusion entails that the strategies of "blending in" and "standing out" like any young fashionable woman of today, rather than a young woman with intellectual impairment, are ubiquitous. The school as a context is also important to conceptions of the body. Schools can be understood as controlling and constructing young people's bodies, not only the speaking and listening body, but also the disciplined body, which should dress properly and sit still (Shilling 1993). The school can also

be described as an arena for expressing identities as part of the values and norms of contemporary society.

Contemporary society and the body

Contemporary Western society is sometimes described as an individualistic and narcissistic society in which individuals consume their identities (Bauman 2007). The body is described as an individual project, where diet, health and ongoing transformation of the body are in focus (Shilling 1993, Crossley 2001). Physical appearance and body modification become important parts of identity construction (Featherstone 2000), a process through which the body becomes the object of individual creativity and at the same time the object of others' desire (Johansson 1997).

Among young women, being fashionable is a way of expressing identity. This is done, for example, by making decisions about dress codes, make-up, hair color, tattoos and piercings. In the present chapter, showing (off) one's body refers to making the body more visible. It has been argued that, compared with a few decades ago, there is greater pressure on young people today to create their own identities (Ganetz 1995). Hillevi Ganetz (1995) illustrates the paradoxical balance trendy young women try to make between the need to identify with others and to be an individual with a unique style. What is seen as fashionable is changeable and depends on the context. Today, bodily expressions are described as becoming more radical (Atkinson 2003). Examples of this are tattoos, piercings and cosmetic surgery, which are new and increasingly popular ways for modern young women (and men) to construct themselves. Hence, tattoos have been rediscovered as a meaningful and viable form of corporeal expression, as a communicative act and a way of expressing identities (Atkinson 2003). Being fashionable by identifying with others while at the same time paradoxically striving to stay unique marks compliance and resistance. This is related to conceptions of normality in terms of the body and femininity.

In previous studies, femininity has been described as being limited to the surface of the body (Bartky 1988, Bordo 1999), something that only has to do with appearance, for example, the wearing of make-up and high heels. It has also been depicted as a visible surface that is made for and controlled by

the male gaze (Bartky 1988, Bordo 1999). The aforementioned studies portray femininity as victimized, however the present focus is on highlighting strategies of resistance, such as “bodily agency”.

Different strategies of resistance

Negotiating normality can be understood as dealing with the complex contradiction of marking resistance to oppressive norms of femininity, while at the same time remaining compliant in order to be a fashionable contemporary young woman. These contradictory strategies depend on lived experience as well as context. The four strategies are defined as: *marks of resistance*, *standing out*, *blending in* and *female masculinity*. These strategies are distinct but somewhat overlapping.

Marks of resistance

As has been mentioned earlier, today individuals’ bodily expressions are described as being more radical, literally getting deeper into the skin (Atkinson 2003, Johansson 2008). As previously stated, being tattooed is an increasingly popular phenomenon among young people, and is seen as a way of expressing identities and as a communicative act. For the young women in the study, tattoos were something they wanted to get in the future, if they did not already have one. Some of the young women wanted to get small ones that would be concealed when they were dressed, while others wanted large ones that would be seen. Tattoos were described by some of the young women as a way of becoming visible. Having tattoos may be understood as a mark of resistance and, at the same time, as a way of being compliant by being fashionable.

When I first met Liv, she introduced herself by name and quickly told me that she had a big tattoo on her arm; she said she got it so she would not be invisible. For Liv, tattoos are strongly related to identity. She talks about how tattoos can be seen as a strategy to be visible and not forgotten. Liv has several tattoos on her body and is planning on having more done. When I asked Liv if she has any tattoos that have a specific meaning for her, she told me about the wolf on her back:

Liv - The wolf symbolizes many things. I was teased when I was young, and I didn’t have any confidence. But now, I’ve built up my life and become stronger, strong as a wolf.

Kamilla – Do you get any reactions from others about your tattoos?

Liv – My grandmother isn’t so happy about it. She likes the wolf. But she doesn’t like the stars and the tattoo on my arm. But I say it’s my life. I can do what I want. Some people say they like them.

Kamilla – Have you gotten any reactions from your teachers?

Liv – There was one teacher who didn’t like them, but screw it! It’s my private life. I do what I want. They’ve commented on it many times... I don’t care so much about what they say. I can take criticism, and I can also give it.

Kamilla – Why do you think people get tattoos?

Liv – It can be because there’s some meaning behind it or because other people are doing it. One of my friends wanted to have one because others are doing it. I was irritated about that. You should do it because you want it, because it really hurts. Some people do it because they think it’s cool. My new tattoo will be my zodiac sign.

Liv describes the meaning of the wolf, for her a symbol of the experience of being bullied when she was young. It improves her self-esteem, helping her become “strong as a wolf”. No matter what comments she gets from teachers or friends, she is comfortable with her tattoos and plans to have more done. Liv illustrates her striving for independence, in the sense of self-determination. However, as stated, this can also be interpreted as compliance, i.e. being “trendy” and being the same as a “trendy” non-disabled young women. Tattoos have mainly been associated with masculinity, and for this reason, being tattooed can also be understood as resisting a stereotypical gender categorization. Tattooing and piercing among women have been described as a non-normative body project, i.e. a movement from a former “powerless self” that has been controlled by men to an “empowered self” through bodily practices (Pitts 1999). Tattoos may be understood here as marks of resistance and of striving for independence.

Standing out

Making an impression and being remembered are things these young women strive for through their physical appearance. Some of them prefer to “stand out” because that makes an impression; they wish to be remembered. To accomplish this, they regularly change hairstyles and hair color, get tattoos and

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wear clothes with strong colors, e.g. yellow and pink trousers. Some of the interviewees prefer to wear low-necked tops and short skirts and to create their own clothes, inspired by artist Lady Gaga. When I asked Lisa if and how she makes herself “stand out”, she explained how she makes herself visible by wearing clothes that are particularly colorful:

Lisa – Well, it’s like those yellow trousers, people remember them... If I was wearing black trousers, no one would remember me. It’s the superficial surface that makes you memorable. Why walk around and be fake?

Kamilla – Well, okay, but I wonder what you stand out from?

Lisa – I think it’s from those who are called normal or from the mannequins in shop windows.

Kamilla – But why do you want to stand out?

Lisa – To be remembered.

Lisa describes how she strives to be remembered using a moldable surface, but paradoxically, this surface should not be mannered. Lisa also mentions that, to her, “standing out” means not following trends in fashion that are on display in shop window mannequins. Lisa’s strategies can be understood as a resistance to conventional norms of femininity. According to Angela McRobbie (1993), conceptions of femininity cannot be separated from a consumer culture in which the media, e.g. advertising, play an important part (McRobbie 1993). Lisa not only illustrates the importance of being remembered, she also says that it is the visible surface that makes you memorable, and at the same time “why walk around and be fake”. This may be understood in the following way: a constructed surface is what, paradoxically enough, keeps you from being fake, instead, it makes you “real” in a contemporary society. The paradox of constructing the authentic surface can be seen in a similar way in the next quotation in which another participant, here named Tara, describes the importance of “going your own way” by not caring what others think of you while at the same time “staying trendy”. I asked what “standing out” means to her:

Tara – To dress in clothes you like and not care what others think, for example to recycle clothes and make something new out of them. You don’t always need to wear the latest fashion.

Kamilla – If you wanted to stand out, how would you do that?

Tara – Well, I used to have jeans in other colors, well, now I have my black jeans on, but I have a pair of purple ones, and I bought a red pair... You don’t always have to wear white, black or blue jeans, you can wear yellow ones, that’s awesome!

Kamilla – Okay, why do you think people want to stand out?

Tara – It’s become trendy.

Tara also illustrates the importance of not caring what other people think of you. At the same time, paradoxically, dressing like someone who “stands out” is also a way of striving for independence, in the sense of self-determination, and “going one’s own way” is described as being done “because it’s become trendy”. This shows that the strategy of “standing out” as a modern young woman is embedded in contradictory aspects of resistance; one wishes to be unique, but also to identify with others by following conceptions of what is fashionable, i.e. “being trendy”.

Other strategies were also expressed, such as the strategy of “blending in,” which here means passing as any young woman of today. One aspect of the implication of “blending in” deals with the conception of wearing clothes suitable for a certain age category.

Blending in

Some of the young women talked about strategies that make them “blend in” as a “trendy” young woman of today. Pamela, another participant, described her strategy to avoid being categorized as “someone attending a special class”, which has to do with conceptions of femininity, normality and age. The following quotation is her reply when I asked whether she felt the expectations of others concerning how to dress at school and, if so, what kinds of expectations:

Pamela – Yes, from my parents, and here you’re supposed to dress like you go to high school and not like you go to preschool, and here it feels like people dress like they’re in fifth grade... however, when I’m in this special class, I feel much better being with the others [at regular high school] because they’re normal people, so to speak... and now Tara, a friend of mine... she used to look like a teacher, but now she stands out in another way, she dresses much better, she has started wearing make-up and I just: “Wow, what a change!”

Pamela feels there are expectations of how to dress, depending on one's age. She also positioned herself against her classmates by saying that the young people at the regular high school are "normal", thus implying that she and her classmates are not. I questioned Pamela about what she meant by saying that the young people in regular classes are "normal":

Pamela – Yes, they dress nicely, and they kind of, well, this sounds really strange, but, anyway, when I got to hold Tara's laptop, I felt like I was studying with the others...

Kamilla – What did you say it felt like?

Pamela – Like I was studying with the others [at regular high school]. I felt it because I had a laptop in my hand, and it felt so awesome to hold a laptop and walk among the students, it was so, wow! Really nice! However, here [in the special class] we don't have any laptops, but the others have them... I'm so happy when I hang around with Tara and her friends because they're attending regular high school now, and they dress like they are doing it as well, and it's really good, because when I'm with them, people look and smile at me like I'm not as stupid as they first thought I was. They think that people who attend a special class are a bit weird, so, when I hang around with the others, I get lots of smiles. It was super-nice, and it boosted my self-esteem, actually, I'm really serious... it was very nice.

Pamela illustrates what holding a laptop means in regard to presentation of the self (Goffman 1990) at school. The laptop can be understood here as something that creates normality. The laptop can be described as an accessory, or a tool, that becomes part of Pamela's body; it changes the way she is viewed at school as well as how she experiences herself and her body in relation to how she is being looked at. By carrying a laptop and walking down the hall in the main building of the regular high school, Pamela is "passing" (Goffman 1990) as one of the young women who study there, as someone who can read and write and use a laptop, thus signaling intellectual ability. With the laptop in her hand, Pamela deconstructs the conception of what it means to be a student attending a special class by illustrating another notion of what it means to be a young woman attending such a class. At the same time, she is being compliant by constructing herself as a "respectable" (Skeggs 1997) young woman. Pamela describes how she is just inches away from being able to attend regular high

school. Her way of marking that and making herself visible is also by dressing in a certain manner. In the next illustration, Pamela describes what it feels like to face the expectations of others and conceptions of being able to wear the right kind of clothes and of dressing right at school. I ask Pamela why it is important to have the "right kind" of clothes:

Pamela – You're taken seriously, you're respected! Sometimes, some of the people here don't look very good, and the others stare. I'm the only one in the third year that dresses somewhat better. I don't mean to brag, but my brothers and sisters think I look normal both on the inside and the outside. I'm just short of attending a regular class... But, anyway, some dress kind of boyish and like that... I thought Liv was a boy because she has really short hair and... but, I think that suits her because she's like she is, and it's her style, and when I'm at the regular high school, I see that there are girls there who dress boyish too... well, there are a lot of them. Well, the teacher doesn't care about how we dress, but it's important to be able to stand up for who you are and dress the way you want to dress... I got an awesome comment from a guy at the regular high school who said I was really good looking, and I blushed!

Kamilla – What did he say?

Pamela – You're so good looking. Who's been styling you? I told him it was my sister, and he just, well, yes, you look like you're in a regular class, and I blushed!

Pamela's strategy can be described as one of blending in with a conception of what it means to be a "respectable" young woman at school. Being "respectable" (Skeggs 1997) has been described as the major class marker characterizing our way of speaking, whom we speak to, how we classify others and how we know who we are and who we are not. People who care most about respectability are usually not those who believe themselves to be respectable, but instead tend to be those who are not considered respectable. The regular high school seems to become a kind of measuring stick concerning conceptions of normality and ideals. The interviewees' ideas about normality and femininity depend on how the young women at the regular high school express themselves.

Gender norms are something the young women meet and construct in different ways. Pamela shows how dressing like a respectable young woman can be a strategy to resist conceptions of what it means to be

a young woman in a special class. At the same time, it can be interpreted as complying with what it means to be a young woman of today, i.e. the same as other young women at the regular high school. Female masculinity can be seen as another strategy to resist a stereotypical conception of femininity and can be described as making “gender trouble” (Butler 1990). However, it is a risky strategy that causes resistance.

Female masculinity

The young women’s accounts reveal how they construct themselves, and are constructed, as female, on the one hand, and as tomboys, on the other. They problematize the fine line between masculinity and femininity that implies certain ways of acting, dressing and what interests one should have. Liv describes what being a tomboy means to her:

Kamilla – You told me earlier that you’ve been called a tomboy. What do you mean by that?

Liv – You wear guy’s clothes. Hang around with guys and do other things. I was teased when I was younger. They didn’t think I was a girl, they thought I was a boy, but I’m both a guy and sometimes I’m a girl. I’ve been a tomboy my whole life. I was in this class where there were only boys. I was raised as a guy, and I don’t like dresses and things like that. I refuse to wear that. But I am a girl. You can’t choose your sex. You’re born the way you are, but you can always make another person from that. I don’t think about it that much.

Simone de Beauvoir’s famous quotation – *One is not born, but rather becomes, woman* (Beauvoir 2010, 283) – fits well with Liv’s description of the construction process, where she discusses how she was mostly raised around young men. Liv’s resistance to living up to expectations of how she “should” dress as a young woman may be interpreted as resisting fixed gender categories. However, although Liv is critical of the fine line between being a boy and a girl, she is also says “But I am a girl”, which rather illustrates a conception of gender categories as something stable and fixed. Thus, Liv claims that there is a fine line between femininity and masculinity, while at the same time implying that gender is something you are born with: a conception of a stable biological fact. It is important, however, to question whether there are limits to what constitutes a feminine body. Annette Kuhn (1997) highlights the following questions: *Is*

there a point where the feminine body becomes something else? What is the relation between a certain body and “femininity”? (Kuhn 1997, 199). Kuhn discusses bodybuilding among women, showing how the body is constructed instead of being a fixed entity associated with “nature”. Bodybuilding is thus given the same function clothing has in other types of performances (1997).

Judith Halberstam (1998) problematizes how female masculinity is framed as something unexpected that is rejected by so-called male masculinity, and how, by rejecting it, male masculinity appears to be the real thing. This picture is made clear in both Lisa’s and Liv’s experiences when they describe their resistance to others’ expectations, which are based on conceptions of gender. When I asked whether she has faced such expectations, Lisa talked about experiencing expectations concerning how she “should dress”:

Lisa – Well, in some situations, it’s expected that you should wear “girl’s clothes”, but if I would wear a tank top and sweater, it wouldn’t be me. I never wear that. It would not be me! If my sister, who always wears that, would suddenly wear Adidas clothes, people would stare at her, and, like, well, “have you hit your head?” or something like that... But if I would change schools and in the new school start wearing a tank top and sweater, then they would think I’ve been doing that every day... but if I come here to this school with a tank top and sweater, then they would, like, “...eeh, hello, are you sick or what?”. It depends on how they identify you as a person from the beginning.

Lisa not only illustrates conceptions of how one should act, dress and look as a girl, she also shows the importance of context and how the expectations people at school have concerning young women depend on the young women’s original appearance upon entering the school. This reveals a conception of identity as stable and can be understood to reflect gender categories that are resistant to crossovers, mix and change. Being seen as a tomboy can be understood as indicating independence and self-motivation and is accepted mainly among children, up until adolescence. Then suddenly, tomboys are seen as a threat (Halberstam 1998). In the interview, I asked Lisa how she felt when people express opinions about how she should “look”:

Lisa – I don't care that much about it. I know I'm a girl, but if they think I'm a tomboy, let them, I've heard that for so many years... But, when I was younger, I used to think: why do they think like that, they don't look so great themselves. But then I didn't think more about it, I went out to play football instead.

Lisa talks about being comfortable dressing like a tomboy, but at the same time, she feels bad when people comment about her looking like a tomboy. Previous research has shown that young women today are also doing things with their bodies, rather than only *being* their bodies (Young 1990, Ganez 1995). Iris Marion Young (1990) has emphasized how women use spaces in a different way than men do, and she stresses the role of socialization. She maintains that women in a sexist society are socialized to be disabled when it comes to athletic activities. For example, girls are taught to “throw like a girl” (Young 1990, 255). Lisa describes how she feels bad when people say she looks like a boy when she goes out to play football instead, something that has traditionally been seen as masculine because it is a space where “men do things” (Young 1990). Lisa also discusses how she wishes people who comment on her looks would instead keep it to themselves:

Lisa – At first I get a bit irritated. I would never walk up to a person and say those things to their faces, you just don't do that. You can think it inside your own head, but I would never walk up to a person and say those things. Of course, I get irritated, but then I don't think about it that much... They really come up to me and say those things. Or they can pass me, and when they're six feet behind me, they say it, I wish they could wait at least until they had walked thirty feet where I can't hear them anymore.

Kamilla – What are they saying?

Lisa – “Was that a girl or a boy?” And then I become, like, sigh.

An appearance characterized by female masculinity is met with resistance and wonder, indicating that there is a tendency to categorize people as either a boy or a girl. This illustrates the limits to what a feminine body should look like and how a feminine body should perform. But, as we have seen, Lisa wishes some people who categorize others by gender would keep it to themselves. Judith Halberstam (1998) argues that tomboys meet resistance because they are seen

as a threat, and she points out that social pressure for gender conformity is placed on all girls, not just tomboys. The young women are varyingly critical of conceptions of normality when it comes to the body, gender and age, but at the same time, it seems they cannot avoid such conceptions because they are also part of them. Hence, the young women negotiate normality when expressing their identities.

Concluding remarks – An ambivalent approach

The chapter has shown how the young women participating in the study negotiated normality while constructing their identities. This illustrates the complexity of showing (off) the body as a young woman of today, and the extra complexity of dealing with some situations when one is categorized as a young woman with intellectual impairment. Making one's body more visible may be described as a strategy for passing as a young fashionable woman of today, but it is associated with ambivalence. Zygmunt Bauman (1995) defines ambivalence as: *the possibility to assign an object or event to more than one category* (Bauman 1995, 1). Ambivalence is therefore a failure to categorize, where a sense of discomfort arises when one is not able to choose among many possible actions (Bauman 1995).

The strategies described by these young women may be seen as different ways of negotiating normality that depend upon the context and lived experience. These negotiations are based on the following strategies: *marks of resistance*, *standing out*, *blending in* and *female masculinity*. These different strategies may be seen as different modes of resistance and are related to bodily expression and conceptions of normality and femininity. Power exists everywhere and is changeable, and where there is power, there is room for resistance (Foucault 2002). The young women's strategies can thus be seen as resisting normality within gender categories, but also as resisting the consequences of being categorized as intellectually impaired. Furthermore, their strategies resist their lack of access to the regular high school classes and a disciplinarian school system and its conceptions of what it means for a modern young woman to dress properly.

The young women have an ambivalent approach when adopting these different strategies, adhering

to the established norms and, at the same time, questioning conceptions of normality. During the interviews, the young women constantly used the word “normal” in regard to different situations. They talked about “dressing normally” and “looking normal”. For the most part, such talk expressed a critique of this particular categorization of normality. For instance, the young women asked: What does it mean to dress normally and look normal? Is there anyone who is normal?

Ambivalence is thus illustrated in the young women’s accounts of how they show (off) their bodies as part of negotiating normality. One paradox is that the visible surface of bodies is described as malleable and changeable, but at the same time, paradoxically enough, it should not be controlled or mannered. The young women also feel it is important for them to be “themselves”. This was also illustrated in the introduction by Lady Gaga’s lyrics, i.e. how visual bodily expressions are of importance: being the surface, the hair and, at the same time, having a conception of being oneself. This implies that identity is a kind of essence, something that exists within itself (Butler 1990).

Contemporary Western society is sometimes described as individualistic; individuals control and mold their bodies as an important part of expressing their identities. The young women’s accounts reveal the complexity of being visible by showing (off) bodies. The illustrations of how the young women construct their identities, while simultaneously being constructed, can be understood as their expression of a meaning that is deeper than the merely visual, i.e. the surface. The young women – all of whom see independence, in the sense of self-determination, being noticed, remembered and not forgotten as important – use different strategies, which are characterized by ambivalence.

The complexity and ambivalence of showing (off) bodies in ways that are seen as trendy, but at the same way stressing “going one’s own way”, have been illustrated here. However, while the young women are striving for uniqueness, they are questioning what is so unique about it. As Tara puts it: *If we’re all different, then nobody is!*

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Theme II: Bodily Existence Chapter 14

Jilly's Underwear

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“Identity would seem to be the garment with which one covers the nakedness of the self, in which case, it is best that the garment be loose, a little like the robes of the desert, through which one’s nakedness can always be felt, and sometimes, discerned.”

James Arthur Baldwin (1924-1987)

In 1988 she was 10 years old and in awe of her mother’s perfection. Her mother’s full lips and white teeth glistening as she smiled, her thick jet black hair with a slight streak of silver on the side of her right ear, her svelte, statuesque mahogany posture and the resonating sound of her overzealous laughter at the smallest of jokes. Jilly was in awe of her mother’s love for her and her mother’s kindness towards the pigeons that would constantly poop on their 9th floor balcony. She was in awe of her kindness towards the strangers who lived next to them and would ask every now and then to borrow milk, sugar, eggs, bread or cheese—items Mommy Joe often referred to as the ‘bare essentials.’ They lived in Scarborough in a Galloway community housing apartment. Jilly was her mother’s only child and she — her only parent. While Jill never had many toys, life lessons were boundless. “Give the kindness you want to receive... always put your best foot forward regardless of the task and remember to *love yourself unconditionally*,” her mother would say. Putting her best foot forward Jilly would learn also had to do with presenting a meticulous image both in and outside of the house. Mommy Joe wore wedged shoes indoors, her Fashion Fair makeup and parted Jilly’s hair in two, kinky pig tails barely with any length decorated with eyelid fabric ribbons. The two of them were always *ready* in their well-ironed outfits, Jilly in crocheted socks with her cat slippers and most importantly — they always wore clean underwear without holes with intact elastic waists. Her Mommy Joe would always

say if nothing else one must always have “*well-fitting, clean underwear without holes with intact elastic waists*” should one end up in a hospital at any given time—first impressions count. In 1988 Jilly was 10 years old and she was in awe of her mother’s perfection and her mother was in awe of her.

In 1991 Jillian was 13 years old. She would soon be attending an Academy because her mother said she liked the clean lines of the school uniform and their commitment to academics. The year before attending Jillian had gained some weight and her mom thought the price of the uniform (many options had adjustable button holes and the polo shirts were loose-fitting) would be better than the constant purchasing of clothing Jillian was vertically and horizontally growing out of so rapidly. A week before beginning high school her mother gave her a gift. Inside the package was a pencil case, a geometry set with a special ruler that had a mini calculator on it, a journal notebook, a few other miscellaneous toiletries, navy knee high tights and one polka dot navy blue and white cotton underwear. The polka dot navy blue and white cotton underwear was a size 2X adult and in that moment, at 13 years old, *Jillian knew mom was not perfect*. The underwear crushed her but she didn’t let Mommy Joe see it. She didn’t scream and she didn’t cry. Jillian asked her mother if she thought it would have actually fit her and she said she was in a rush when she grabbed it and it “looked” like it would. Jillian tried it on over her pants and it literally covered her almost up to her chest like an oversized diaper. “Is this how my mother saw me?” Jillian wondered. They both laughed, Mommy Joe said sorry and life went on. It would be years again before Jillian ever actually fit into that underwear. In a single traumatic, yet visually and physically uneventful,

moment in 1991 the power and timing of that underwear changed her impression of herself, the way she saw her mother and made her question how others perceived her physical body. Jillian had never paid much attention to her weight but in that moment, on the brink of beginning high school having had a minor introduction to bullying in grades 5 and 7 from some kid named Morgan Harp because of her “nappy, short hair” and her “big forehead,” she began to spiral into an uncertainty of self. The shape, weight and representation of her body became omnipresent for her and, she was certain, for others.

Jillian stopped loving herself unconditionally. For years into high school she would walk the hallways of King carrying the weight of that polka dot navy blue and white cotton underwear in her psyche. The embarrassment and shame manifested in her as though she had been walking amongst her student peers wearing her underwear over her pants in public view. According to Erving Goffman an individual's virtual identity refers to how they see themselves and their own identity, while their actual social identity refers to how others see them (Goffman, 1990:12). The body plays an important role in mediating the relationship between people's self identity and their social identity. In the encounter of Jillian's mother presenting her with the underwear, her mother's impression of her body had been disapproving and, whether or not she or her mother knew it consciously, her mother's own svelte and statuesque body was in direct conflict with her *fat* daughter. She was in direct conflict with her concept of Mommy Joe's perfection.

This began Jillian's journey of second guessing her clothing selections and triple checking her image in the mirror before leaving the house. She would often go through her internal script, going over and over the person she'd be or hoped to be able to perform in the social according to what item she was wearing on that day. Luckily though in time, the second guessing became less about the insecurities of second guessing and more about trying on possibilities. *Jill was born. She had made a shift.* How would she negotiate in her 2x4 closet between social perceptions of

herself and her personal preferences and ideals? Jill's closet often became a jigsaw puzzle—a place where she'd try on different identities, remember memories associated with particular articles of clothing, put the old with the new, the ‘kinda tight’ with the ‘just-fit-right items, the darks with the brights you name the combination and she'd tried them in efforts to negotiate and construct the self and the meanings she wanted to project through, onto and with her publically seen body. It was a crucial exercise in self preservation following the affect of her mother's gift. Jill's private wardrobe afforded her opportunities to gather new ideas about herself by piecing together different parts of herself through attire. Jill began to appreciate her emotions, the feelings and the sense of possibility certain articles of clothing embodied for her. Much more significant than their aesthetic currency, these objects like her 2X underwear became apparatuses helping her see herself differently as she would mischievously (and if you know Jill today, she'd say politically and unapologetically!) wear the too large underwear sometimes under her clothes just because she could. It was comfortable and besides by embracing it Jill realized it took away its hold of representation over her.

While she did not scream nor cry, the day Jill received her mother's gift shifted her virtual identity for many years but as she'd learn in her adult self it did not break her spirit. The underwear had its own temporality. Jill's body and her mind's agency were much stronger than the fabrics of the underwear. Today her polka dot navy blue and white cotton size 2X underwear is too small and tattered. It's become a great shoe polish cloth she says. Jill sure did enjoy many years in it though —without holes and with the intact elastic waist that finally fit once she grew into it, through college and well into her first year of undergrad. Jill came to love her underwear big and cotton that way. “I can breath,” she told me. Her underwear is now just that *under wear—something* she could forget about and not have to obsess over it grazing her flesh raw causing negative discomfort as she moved in the world completing her tasks and building relationships along the way. Today Jill's

body's corporeality loves space and she likes to feel it! Neither her 2X underwear nor any other article of clothing represents her. Mommy Joe has since shaved her permed hair off and gone au natural, she has since stopped wearing her makeup and instead prefers a good coat of Vaseline she swears by protects her silken aged skin from the weather's elements. Today, Jill swears by baggy, sometimes oversized, cotton underwear—if she's wearin' em at all!

“My underwear showed me the intriguing ways in which our visual encounters with objects inform the construction of the social. Indirectly, in my discomfort, my mother's gift taught me to embrace the perfection of so-called imperfection. I am still in awe of her.”

— Jill Andrew

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Theme II: Bodily Existence Chapter 15

Popular Magazines, [Some] Black Women & Body Image

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Andrew critiques research assumptions informing popular understandings of body image and body image discourse in mainstream contemporary fashion/beauty magazines and argues that these normatives often work to omit the racialized body stories of Black women in these publications. These critiques include a) a critique of experimental psychology as the bedrock of body image discourse in popular magazines b) the interpretation of body image issues as only weight-based; and the assumption of the primary White, heterosexual, middle to upper class subject of body image issues; c) the assumed western origin of body image concerns and d) a critique of the appropriateness of the concept of ‘body image’ itself for many Black women. Jill Andrew notes that while her article references academic thinkers, it is well tempered by her personal opinion informed by experience and as such she is proud to have her standpoint reflected in her academic work.

I have read popular women’s fashion/beauty magazines since my youth. These are largely informed by and endorse western ideals pertaining to beauty, body image, and *doing* and maintaining hegemonic, [white] ‘normalized’ notions of femininity. Achieving the ideal female image promoted through the body image discourse of magazines such as *Vogue*, *Flare*, *Cosmo*, and *Chatelaine* appears to bolster some women’s cultural and visual capital by making them synonymous with success and progress. Female bodies perpetually calorie-counting, obsessing over exercise, adorned in designer fashions that are still able to be superwomen in the workplace are glamorized. These constructed superwomen must also be balancing aficionados at home with their “2.5 children,” in the kitchen *and* in bed with partners (usually positioned as heterosexual women due to the indoctrination of compulsory heterosexism) without much if any complaint or signs of fatigue.

I have noticed oftentimes when Black women are brought into the editorial conversation (or at least included as visuals on the page) it is often as a token nod to visual otherness. Her racialized Black body or how her blackness might change the argument or conclusion of the magazine article is often ignored in order to push the primary agenda for readers to relate — regardless of their race — to just another woman’s ‘everyday woman’ story. The need to acknowledge and discuss racialized difference is silenced and the push for a universal sisterhood in which the White woman’s story becomes the universal truth representing all women appears to be the goal. This push is not that far removed from early White women’s liberation and its appeal to a myth of sisterhood. According to Black feminist critical race theorist bell hooks, White women’s liberation promoted a myth of sisterhood while simultaneously ignoring the different social locations and needs of women of colour such as race and class (hooks, 1981: 12). Historically, White women’s liberation insisted that race and sex were two separate issues. White women’s central issue was sexism (patriarchy) and Black women’s issue was inaccurately seen as only race/racism (hooks, 1981: 11-12).

While many Black women’s raced body experiences are seemingly not included in mainstream magazine body image discourse, arguably because of this same lingering compartmentalization of racism and sexism, images of Black females’ bodies continue to be hyper-present in popular “urban” music videos as the doers and ‘experts’ on hip-thrusting, bootie-shaking stereotypically raw, primal body moves. This is an important observation I relate back to my discussion on mainstream magazine body image discourse. The racialized female body is not the desired norm of femininity or beauty and therefore it is not often central in mainstream fashion/beauty

magazine discussions on body image. However, in the realm of music videos which are usually more garish, sexually objectifying of women and which include the element of *moving* bodies as backdrops to usually racialized male performers, Black women's bodies are seen as right at home! Racially othered bodies are good to look at in oversexualized, tantalizing video movements but to actually write about these groups intelligibly, aside from "urbanized" stereotyping, as subjects and hear these women's 'everyday' body stories in mainstream magazines remains tokenistic at best.

There is an urgent need to further examine the myths and research assumptions that inform popular magazine body image discourse which makes it often inadequate in representing some Black female body stories of embodiment and disembodiment. By questioning the research triad (Stanworth, 2002) of these magazines, I argue that openness to new subjects and objects, more critical story/research topics; interview questions and archival materials (i.e. diverse theories representing multiple ways of knowing) would create spaces to foreground more diverse *herstories*. Just as an archive reflects the assumptions and agendas of its creator and comes into being as a result of specific political, cultural and socio-economic pressures and frequently features documents of the powerful and the privileged (Chaudhuri et al., 2010: xiv), so does the mainstream magazine. Mainstream magazines can be viewed as a site for the production and perpetuation of dominant knowledge claims. Sylvia Blood, clinical psychologist, states that body image discourse in magazines is largely informed by experimental psychology research and assumptions which do not adequately interrogate race (Blood, 2005). Magazine articles usually reflect Eurocentric ideals on beauty and body image and are usually published and edited by those whose very image is seen as the norm (Blood, 2005). Critiquing magazine archives, archival processes, assumptions of neutrality and their methods of knowing on the topic of body image will further illuminate whose subject positions are seen as worth preserving. It can also help to create new spaces for more relevant and culturally diverse discussions on body images not merely the singular.

Sometimes the story of one Black woman such as Saartjie Baartman historically (Hobson, 2005: 2) or contemporary celebrities like actress Gabby Sidibe,

singer Beyonce or media mogul Oprah Winfrey are made to represent all Black women. When Black people are talked about in society the focus tends to be on Black men and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on White women. Black is synonymous with the masculine and White with the feminine (hooks, 1981: 7). All too often society assumes that one can know all there is to know about Black people merely by hearing the story and opinion of one Black person (hooks, 1981: 11). Relating this back to popular magazine body image discourse, when 'women's' body image is discussed the assumed normative subject is the White female and the magazine's *interpretation* of the White female experience. I specifically draw attention to magazine *interpretation* because, while investigating the White female body experience is not the purpose of this reflection, it is not to be assumed that all White women are homogenous or that popular magazine accounts of their body image stories are entirely accurate either. The same is the case with Black women—there is no monolithic "Black woman."

Here I will examine some of the myths and research assumptions informing popular understandings of body image and body image discourse in popular fashion/beauty magazines. I argue these often work to omit the racialized body stories of some Black women. This includes a) a critique of experimental psychology as the bedrock of body image discourse in popular magazines b) the interpretation of body image issues as only weight based and the assumption of the White, heterosexual, middle to upper class subject of body image issues c) the assumed western origin of body image and eating problem concerns and d) a critique of the appropriateness of the word...the actual concept of 'body image' itself for Black women. I will end the paper with thoughts on future research areas that may help foreground the experiences of Black women's bodies. I am arguing for the need to politicize how body image is discussed and therefore how body image discourse in popular magazines is presented. It must be socio-culturally contextualized and understood within an anti-oppression, multi-racial, critical feminist framework in order for more minoritarian subjects, in this case, Black women's voices, to be heard. Body image research and popular body image discourse (and women's perceptions of their bodies), primar-

ily informed by experimental psychology, cannot be depoliticized and viewed exclusively as a psychological issue based on an individual woman's faulty or positive perception of herself (Blood, 2005: 25). The impetus of popular body image discourse must be dramatically reconceived.

Experimental psychology (EP) is the most recognized paradigm from which women's body image is researched (Blood, 2005). The mind separate from the body is seen to function as the source of meaning and knowledge about the body. From this perspective the body and its social experiences are subordinate to the mind's perception of the body (Blood, 2005: 22-24) hence the perpetuation of the dualism between mind and body. Blood argues that in psycho-medical models one's negative body image is often pathologized as an individual deficit e.g. something that the individual is supposed to be able to 'fix' through mind over matter, normalizing feminine practices or 'body work' such as dieting, exercise and cosmetic surgery (Blood, 2005: 94, 102). This echoes what can be described as neo-liberal boot strap ideology. I believe that this is why so much of the popular body image discourse revolves around an emphasis on personal transformation: lose weight, tone up or ship out and be disqualified as a body that doesn't matter. This individualization appears to satisfy the demands of a consumer culture rather than serving to analyze social systems of power, control and domination that work to exclude certain individuals and groups. It appears easier for some quantitative and medical models to individualize issues of body image than to consider the larger social systems at work co-responsible for many of these manifested 'individual' problems such as a culture obsessed with thinness and one that demonizes fatness as 'unhealthy' 'reckless' or out of control for instance. In another paper I could investigate how some politicized counter-narrative women-centered magazines, blogs and zines such as *Fat-O-Sphere*, *BITCH Magazine* or *Shameless* straddle between still being 'fashionable' and 'cool' while also implicating larger social forces in the socialization processes of women's bodies and discussing women's resistance. For this paper however, that is not my goal. I am focusing on *mainstream contemporary* fashion/beauty magazine body image discourses and how these can ignore Black women's body stories.

According to Blood, EP sees body image research as a real, stable psychological construct with a comprehensive body of work founded on agreed upon ontological and epistemological assumptions (Blood, 2005: 5). Blood argues against this perceived objective stability and instead argues that there is no 'true' concrete and unchangeable self. She instead sees identity and a woman's experiences of, with and in her body as multi-faceted with multiple 'contextual selves' operating in different social-relational settings (Blood, 2005: 28-30). Subjectivity becomes a site of movement and contradictions and cannot be seen as fixed. Furthermore, in body image studies, misperception of body size and shape is the central concern from an experimental psychology perspective (Blood, 2005: 25). These two points are critical to my argument in that if body image research and popular body image discourse primarily reflects White female subjects and weight-based issues; it then becomes problematic to assume the applicability of this research to Black female bodies and body stories. Additionally, weight and size are not always the singular issue for Black women and other racialized females. So it is possible for a Black woman's issues with her body to be overlooked if it cannot be neatly bundled into her misperception of her body weight or width. As EP research, almost always led by White, male scientists (Blood, 2005: 102), informs much of the 'expert' knowledge shared in popular magazine articles on body image it becomes clearer as to why some Black women's body stories remain at the periphery. I often wonder how I am impacted internally by the disciplinary and normalizing practices of the *act* of reading these magazines. While I have developed resistance strategies over the years so I am not constantly pushed to question my own body or interrogate my beauty, it remains clear that popular body image discourse does promote an environment of self-surveillance. For instance, some friends of mine have discussed initially not having problems with their natural unprocessed hair, only to fail a magazine's 'flip test' (the ability of one's hair to 'blow in the wind'—something virtually impossible for Black hair that hasn't been straightened chemically or otherwise) checklist on 'good hair' (aka permed or straightened 'flowing' hair) and then, while they continue to love their natural hair, every now and then that little inner voice of self doubt asks if a change

could be a good thing. According to Michel Foucault, discourses are social practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak (Foucault, 1972: 49). Therefore a magazine's focus on White female subjects and weight or long flowing 'good' hair as primary concerns of body image re-inscribe the hierarchical position of White female bodies as opposed to racialized women within body image discourse. It deems Black female bodies rendered invisible or so far removed from the desired norm they become fetishized as the exotic other or ghettoized into a one-time 'special' issue such as *Italian Vogue's Black* issue. For the 2008 special issue, fashion editors and photographers paid a one-time 'homage' to black models in response to a public outcry accusing the fashion industry of racism due to their minimal use of Black and particularly darker-skinned, more 'ethnic' looking Black models. Not much statistically has changed in terms of global Black model representation however. Simply attend any *Fashion Week* or pick up a random western fashion/beauty magazine and do a comparative headcount.

Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of the two bodily archetypes: the "classical" and "carnavalesque" body and Rosemary Garland-Thompson's work in feminist disability theory could be applied to how popular body image discussions are framed. I would argue that the Black female body, especially the fat or dark-skinned body, historically and in many ways today is positioned as the carnivalesque body — that of the unruly, lesser citizen, economically and intellectually. The fat female body is the body out of control or the one that 'let her self go.' In experimental psychology body image studies, this body is also contextualized as an individual pathology. Social forces are not implicated in the creation of this type of body. It's a personal failure. However, I argue that, the classical body in popular magazines, is positioned as the autonomous [white] female, or lighter skinned exotic, with the lean, toned "democratically" responsible and rational citizen's body (Elliott, 2007: 139-140). This female body actively participates in building more democratic currency by spending on bodily maintenance products such as Botox injections, personal trainers and tanning sessions (Elliott, 2007: 142). Garland-Thomson's work on feminist disability theory could also be used to further inform discussions on perceptions of Black women's bodies and

how racialized female bodies, fat bodies and disabled bodies have been constructed as disabled, deviant and in essence failed bodies outside of the norm. Overall, EP centralizes one female body as the norm and sees body image issues as individualized pathologies in need of diagnosis and the individual woman's self repair. They are not linked to other systems of oppression which may be more telling of a woman's relationship with her body. Weight-based concerns are primary to experimental psychology and as I'll illustrate next, this is not always the primary issue of concern to Black women.

While weight is an issue for Black women, it is not the most salient body image concern for Black women. Instead issues pertaining to skin colour or shade, hair texture and featurism (i.e. disliking ones buttocks, dark skin, naturally nappy or short hair, "fat" lips or "broad" nose facial features for instance) are physical aspects that appear to dominate Black women's conversations about their bodies and body image (Hesse-Biber, 2004; Patton, 2006; Poran 2002, 2006). Interestingly enough, I would like to acknowledge that within the last two years I have specifically noticed an increase particularly with celebrity Black women as spokespeople for Weight Watcher programs. Later in this paper I discuss how the thin body is also constructed as the economically successful body as well and Black women are not immune to this belief. The research informing and usually quoted as 'expert knowledge' on body image discourse in popular magazines is primarily grounded in quantitative data, conducted in clinical settings, focused on weight and on mostly white female focus group participants (Hesse-Biber, 2004: 49-50). Black women however are more likely to discuss body based issues in community rather than clinical settings (Hesse-Biber, 2004: 49) and may not initially discuss weight. In order for popular body image discourses to better address the issue of Black women's body images, strategies of resistance to contemporary psychic, physical, and colonial legacies of systemic oppression and how these impact the formation of embodied racial identities need further investigation. Current discourses of universalism and homogeneity assumed by the assumption of weight as the primary issue for all women in body image discourse do not address the particularities of racial formations in terms of what race is or what race *does*

to the particular conversation (Munoz, 2006: 679) in this case body image and Black women. Popular body image discourse must critique how visual images inform social meanings and how these are produced, circulated and consumed (Smith, 2008: 3).

Hooks argues that sexism is experienced differently by women of different race and ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, issues of body image, beauty and representation too are informed by the various social categories such as race, class, gender and sexuality not in additive ways but through their intersectionality over different times and spaces. Race and class break apart a singular reliance upon mainstream magazine assumptions of sexism, patriarchy and the myth of exclusively middle class weight-based body woes as the underlying cause of eating problems and body image issues for *all* women. For Black women, other culturally specific issues such as a woman's colour, shade or her physical features may trump her concern with her weight. This should not render her story irrelevant to mainstream publishers. Skin-bleaching and the desire of some Black women to have lighter skin or a thinner nose directly reflects a consumer economy that has glamourized the lighter more assimilated Black female as a more modern, competent image of Black womanhood and I argue these discussions, and their links to colonialism and racist ideologies, deserve to be explored in mainstream body image discourse. It is imperative to link the glorification of light skin to larger systemic issues such as the glorification of whiteness in the workplace and in the fashion/beauty industry.

Along with physical features such as skin colour that may further impact a Black woman's body image than her weight exclusively, hooks identifies food addiction and compulsive shopping as two not so usually identified addictions affecting black women (hooks, 2005: 52). Both of these illuminate the struggles Black women can have in attempting to deal with anxieties or stresses caused by systemic oppression such as colourism for instance. Often Black women are talked about as having a culturally specific thick skin or 'strength' that culturally immunizes or protects them from body image issues (Patton, 2006; Poran, 2002, 2006). This assumption ignores the reality that to be strong in the face of oppression is not the same as overcoming oppression and that endurance is not to be confused with transformation (hooks, 1981: 6).

Frequently observers of the Black female experience confuse these issues. When mainstream magazine body image discourse celebrates Black women's assumed 'strength' against body image issues this is also perpetuating the Black superwoman stereotype. Black women are not saved by their culture or immune to body image issues. This assumption more so reflects the inadequacy of the magazine to address examples of issues I have mentioned above that are more likely to speak to the Black female body experience and the oppressive experiences Black women may have in relation to their bodies and how they are perceived. Magazines creators must have courageous conversations about whose flesh 'flesh tone' pantyhose, bras or girdles are made for and why the concept of 'flesh toned' has gone unchallenged in the mainstream vernacular before they can assume to know what is or is not affecting Black women's embodiment.

Not only does popular magazine body image discourse assume a White female subject, but women's body image and eating disorders (EDs) are assumed to be a demographically western issue generated mostly by women's exposure to western magazine images, beauty ideals and White patriarchy (Nasser & Katzman et al., 2001). This depoliticized assumption left unchallenged sees women merely as dupes of media coerced by celebrity images. It does not address the other transnational issues that impact racialized women's body identity. Research shows that body image issues such as eating "disorders" can develop as women from developing countries experience sweeping changes in their socio-political status. Increased emphasis on individualism, contradictions in female role expectations as a result of rapid cultural economic transition and increased commercialization of culture linked to urbanization impacts women's body identity (Nasser & Katzman et al., 2001: 6, 11, 25-30). Researchers concluded in the case of some Japanese women from low socio-economic backgrounds diagnosed with eating disorders in the early 1990s, while these women were diagnosed with clinical anorexia nervosa, they did not suffer from traditionally expected body distortion associated with anorexia nor did they voice body image perception concerns — two western experimental psychology benchmarks. These women interpreted their inability to eat in terms of gastric distress (e.g.

symptoms of bloating) rather than a fear of fatness or a desire to be vain (Nasser & Katzman et al., 2001: 6-7). This example illustrates that body image issues are not only experienced by western White, middle-upper class women. EDs are under diagnosed in minority groups because of the powerful class-bound assumptions of health providers and in some cases the disordered eating patterns could be as high as or higher than they are for Whites (Nasser & Katzman et al., 2001: 25). Women's understandings of these issues are not always related to their desire to lose weight, attain a celebrity look or perception of fatness. Magazines may celebrate the thinness of an Asian woman's body but rarely will a mainstream article delve into the global environments operating to create these bodies. Magazine body discourse is almost always appearance-based without much critique of the story *behind* the image.

With the major political transition from the apartheid government to political democracy in the mid 1990s, the South African Black population has experienced not only new political freedoms but also dramatic challenges to their own sense of cultural and personal identity. Due to the legacy of apartheid and the marginalization of health care barring many Blacks from adequate treatment, institutionalized racism may have led to the dismissal of the presence of eating disorders among Black people prior to the democratization of the country (Nasser & Katzman et al., 2001: 26). Post apartheid South African women have in recent years experienced a period of significant gender and racial emancipation as many of them have sought success beyond rural communities into urban corporations. Corporate "Power dressing" for South African women, once characterized by traditional tribal outfits, face and body paint, beads and reeds, has moved significantly closer to a western style of dress. Fatness, once celebrated by the Black community as a sign of wealth and health, is increasingly shunned by urbanized Black South African women who are increasingly seeing gym memberships and dieting as crucial to their success (Nasser & Katzman et al., 2001: 29-30). With increased urbanization comes a re-negotiation of the balance between rural and urban values. Body image and body related experiences cannot be demographically linked to the West alone. Westernization does play a part in how some women construct their relationship with their

bodies. However the above examples have shown that there are other transnational factors impacting how women negotiate their body identity. Many mainstream fashion/beauty magazines attempt to address cultural diversity by including sprinkles of colour haphazardly. For Black and other racialized women to find a connection with popular body image discourse the conversation must include multiple social categories of identity such as race and class.

Beyond breaking the western origin assumption of body image issues, in recent years some women of colour have challenged the usefulness of the concept of "body image" itself as applied to Black women's body stories. *NAKED* is one of the few contemporary anthologies representing the personal body narratives of over 25 African-American women sourced through in-depth, qualitative interviewing. This anthology was created because the editors recognized an absence of Black women's body stories in popular narratives. This speaks to the growing body of marginalized groups that must construct their own archives through oral history, personal testimony, narrative and participant observation because of the lack of representation of their histories past and present in contemporary texts (Marcus, 2005: 201). Some of the women in the anthology are celebrities but the majority of the contributors are everyday Black women speaking about their issues with hair politics, weight, skin colour, sexuality, HIV/AIDS, violence against women, discrimination in public spaces and how these have informed their feelings about their bodies. Traditionally, work that theorizes about the body through the situation of women, particularly if it makes use of qualitative, personal experience, has rarely been accorded the privileged status of theory (Bordo, 2003). Since most popular magazine body image articles are informed by 'objective' experimental psychology theory and address women's issues with their bodies as appearance-based 'body image' the absence of some Black women's body stories about issues of race, identity and oppression such as those presented in *NAKED* is not surprising.

NAKED addresses how for Black women the term 'body image' itself may be problematic because it may signify what it has been normalized to immediately signify (thin/skinny) for many White women. At the onset, editors of the anthology speak about the blank

stares they got from many of the Black women they interviewed who had never heard the term ‘body image’ as describing how a person’s perception of their physical form impacts their overall self image and behaviour (Byrd & Solomon, 2005: 2). Some of the women assumed body image was strictly a pastime of college students, career academics and White feminists. In the end, the editors explained how they adapted their description of the project in order for it to have more currency within the Black female experience of their interviewees and contributors. “Instead of debating semantics, we adjusted our description of the project. “An anthology of personal essays and oral memoirs about Black women’s body images” turned into “Black women are gonna talk and write about how they feel about their bodies and how these feelings affect their self-esteem and behaviour.”(Byrd & Solomon, 2005:2). *NAKED*, by adjusting their description, illustrates how the specific subject of research can shift and how, being open to these necessary negotiations can create a more well-informed and authentic project (Smith, 2008:12). The editors, both Black females, viewed the input of both the anthology’s interviewees and its intended audience as crucial to the authenticity of the project.

Most mainstream fashion and beauty magazines have White female editor-in-chiefs. While every section of a magazine has its editor, it is the editor-in-chief and sometimes the managing editors that make final text and visual decisions for every issue. hooks, speaking about racism in the feminist movement, suggests that racialized women will know that White women are taking racism in the feminist movement seriously when they work towards unlearning racist socialization *prior to* assuming positions of leadership where they are making contact with women of colour (hooks, 2000: 56-57). hooks sees this as crucial if White women are not to perpetuate and maintain racial oppression or, unconsciously or consciously, abuse and hurt non-white women (hooks, 2000: 57). I argue, magazine editors should be charged with a similar task. Being at the helm, defining for millions of women for whom and what women’s issues are or should be is a responsibility that cannot be performed with imperialist blinders on. If the term body image is culturally exclusive it may not elicit the stories of Black female bodies.

According to Sociologist Becky W. Thompson, asking some Black women and other marginalized groups of women about their “body image” takes for granted that they imagine themselves as being in control, feeling ownership of or even aware of their physical body’s “image”. This is an assumption that many women quickly dispelled with Thompson when discussing their disembodiment (Thompson, 1994: 16). Thompson quickly realized that, for some women, responding to social injustices directed at their bodies included trying to escape from the very location of the pain — their body. In Thompson’s life history interviews with 18 marginalized women ages 19 to 46 of diverse ethnic, class and sexual orientations, she argues that eating problems can actually present themselves initially as ways of survival — a coping strategy against social disorders, as she calls them, such as racism, homophobia, poverty and violence against women. Thompson calls eating disorders ‘problems’ because she argues they need to be situated within larger *social* disorders and not individually pathologized as is the case with traditional biomedical or experimental psychology models of investigation (Thompson, 1994: 4). Thompson abandons the concept of “body image” and instead thinks about women’s relationships to their bodies as forms of “body consciousness” (Thompson, 1994: 18).

According to Thompson the term “image” has a psychological, individual connotation. She uses the term ‘body consciousness,’ which she states links an awareness of one’s social standing *directly* to social conditions rather than as unrelated. Linking a woman’s body consciousness directly to her race, gender or sexuality, Thompson says, more holistically represents women’s complicated, intersectional relationships to their bodies and their ability or lack thereof to see themselves as grounded in and connected to their bodies than the concept of “image” (Thompson, 1994: 18). Thompson’s critique of the term body image echoes the arguments mentioned by the editors of *NAKED* presented earlier. While simply substituting one term for the other may not alleviate all tensions, I do agree with the authors’ views that the term body image may not be as all encompassing as many think. It is possible that the popularity of the term ‘body image,’ so easily conflated with weight, exercise and constructions of White femininity in popular magazine body image

discourse, is ill equipped for addressing the larger macro issues of injustice marginalized women face that impact identity.

Taking the discussion on the concept of body image further, Gail Weiss argues that the problem with viewing the body as a singular entity is that the body is never isolated in its activity but always already engaged with the world (Weiss, 1999: 3-6). A Deleuzian approach to the body argues that bodies should be understood as entwined in a process of becoming namely as assemblages being made and unmade through its movements and its connections with other beings and things, rather than as a separate fixed or stable unit (Helps, 2007: 130). According to Weiss, there is no such thing as “the” body or “the” body image because these are not natural phenomena. Rather than viewing body image as a cohesive, coherent phenomenon that can be measured and tested in relatively uniform ways (e.g. body image true/false surveys found in many mainstream beauty magazines) which underlies many empirical accounts of body image research, Weiss argues for a multiplicity of body images, body images that are co-present in any given individual and which are themselves constructed through a series of corporeal exchanges taking place both within and outside of specific bodies (Weiss, 1999: 3-6). Both Thompson and Weiss urge for a move past individualistic, static notions of body image towards a more nuanced, multi-dimensional understanding of women’s complex identities and how these inform their awareness of their bodies and therefore their ability to demystify and question dominant discourses on body images.

In conclusion I have examined some, and I reiterate *some*, of the myths and research assumptions informing popular understandings of body image and body image discourse in mainstream fashion/beauty magazines. I have argued that these often work to omit the racialized body stories of Black women. These included a) a critique of experimental psychology as the bedrock of body image discourse in popular magazines b) the interpretation of body image issues as only weight based and the assumption of the primary White, heterosexual, middle to upper class subject of body image issues c) the assumed western origin of body image concerns and d) a critique of the appropriateness of the concept ‘body image’ itself for Black women. Future research must challenge the

universalism inherent in magazine body image discourse that privileges a Eurocentric lens of beauty and White femininity in body image discourse. Special tokenism such as the *Italian Vogue Black Issue* is not enough. Conversations on race must be linked to how women experience their bodies. Articles on body image usually pathologize women’s feelings about their bodies and promote a need for self transformation such as exercise or weight loss. However, in the case of Black women, while weight loss may not be the primary concern, this does not preclude other body issues for Black women. The [White] thinner, lean body is often glamourized and while the fat White female body is also seen as a failed body, the Black female body must contend with a plethora of contradicting labels from the asexual, the over sexual to the primitive grotesque (Hobson, 2005). Experimental psychology body image research, I have explained, sees body image as an immutable, objective state and therefore popular magazine body image surveys can quickly deflate a woman’s ability to think about her body on her own terms if her answers happen to fall outside of the quiz’s parameters of what a ‘good body’ or positive body image may be. At the core magazines are sites of dominant knowledge production and currently topics relevant to Black women that may draw out their body stories are not readily available in mainstream fashion/beauty magazines. Black female “images” may be more present in mainstream magazines but I ask are actual stories illustrating the critical complexities and issues of importance to Black women lives? As Hobson suggests the process of re-presentation can only come about once the gateways that lead to representational power, including access to media production and cultural managerial positions are opened to underrepresented groups (Hobson, 2005: 18). I would reinforce that being from an underrepresented group isn’t enough. Those few racialized members who have secured positions of decision-making power on magazine mastheads must have a critical, oppositional eye otherwise they too will contribute to the production of hegemony where racialized voices remain at the periphery. Traditional discourses must be contested, new ones created and made more accessible in order for racialized women’s narratives to come to the forefront. As the majority of women access popular ‘mainstream’ magazines, it is crucial that racialized women be able to see them-

selves in these pages not only as inanimate backdrop objects but as subjects at the forefront informing narratives on body image. Creating our own “Black” focused magazines is one form of resistance but this also takes “dominant” magazines off the hook for addressing systemic White privilege and its resistance to visual difference and experience. It also assumes that Black focused entertainment or beauty magazines aren’t also contributing to the perpetuation of normative, limiting beauty ideals for Black women. In the end, our body stories cannot be ignored or diluted and we must be prepared to agitate and insist that they are not only counted but that they *count*. As a wise person I know once said, “If you are not at the table, you are on the menu.” We must be at the table.

“If I didn’t define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people’s fantasies of me...for me and eaten alive.”

— Audre Lorde (1934-1992)

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Popular Magazines, [Some] Black Women & Body Image

Thompson, Becky W. *A Hunger so Wide and So Deep: A Multiracial View of Women's Eating Problems*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

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Theme III: Girlhood Interrupted Chapter 16

Jyotika

Smriti Mehra

India

This is a short video piece of a conversation with a seven-year-old girl, Jyotika, who belongs to a family of migrant construction labourers in India. The construction industry is the largest unorganized labour sector in the country. It is a hierarchical model and Jyotika sits at the base of the pyramid. These workers are managed by contractors or *mestris* who bring them from villages to the cities to work on projects. Most often families move together from site to site depending on where they are put to work. Jyotika's family works mostly on building houses. The irony of their situation is that every time they complete a house they displace themselves. Because they are always moving from place to place they live with very little. They live in makeshift shacks which afford nothing more than one small room for the entire family to live in. Children have a chance at education only if they are left behind in the village with their grandparents.

Jyotika is located in Bangalore at the time of the interview and she gives us an insight into her life through a series of questions posed to her in the form

of a game. She is encouraged to respond to certain words that lead us into her worldview.

The video starts with the question, "What is a house?" She responds with, "Building."

"What is your house?"

"My house is a hut."

From the conversation we find out that she is living with her mother's sister's family that consists of her aunt, uncle and their two young sons. Her parents are back in the village. She spends her time playing and looking after her two little cousins.

The video does not depict her face. It is a powerful conversation that is illustrated with drawings in the sand. Jyotika has a very powerful voice and is very articulate. She talks about the park she plays in, money, happiness, work and her future as she knows it at that point of time. As questions are being asked she answers fearlessly and in time starts asking questions in return and the dog turns into a cat.

The piece ends with the question of what she sees herself becoming when she grows up. To which she replies, "I'll build houses. Nothing else."

Theme III: Girlhood Interrupted Chapter 17

Invisible girlhood: the Never-ending Story for Sexualised and Racialised Minorities

Anne Harris and Achol Baroch
Australia



Black girlhood is secrets in the midst of all of this attention to girls' voices (Brown, 2009, p 21)

You can't be what you can't see. (Wilson, 2011)

Introduction

Minorities of all kinds have long noted the power of the periphery, the magic of the margin, and its ability to contribute to the construction of a happy or 'bearable' life (Ahmed, 2010). Gender, sexualities and racialised minorities understand both the constitutive nature of these categories, and the inevitable border-crossing that make such epistemologies their own reifying closets of both invisibility and spectacle. It is with caution, therefore, that we as co-authors approach the subject of Sudanese girls and women living in diasporic contexts, grappling with processes of resettlement which carry their own closets and epistemologies of gendered and racialised performativity and rituals. The authors speak from our shared and separate histories that are informed by our cultural, racial, gendered and sexual histories, and the ways in which these histories both inform the present and interrupt it.

We both live in resettlement in Melbourne, Australia, and despite very different circumstances having brought us here, we note many similarities of

perspective and politics which continue to inform our friendship. While this chapter will focus on Achol's experience as a Dinka Sudanese Australian young woman, it is an example of a border-crossing dialogue in which Anne brings her gay American and older perspective to bear upon our current positionalities in a country in which global movements of refugees and gayness inform our ability to remain both visible and invisible. As borderland scholars continue to note, this space and place of intercultural alliance is fraught with tensions and uneasy communication between brown and white women (Brown & Grande 2005), but for the shared agenda of increased and more authentic representation, such alliances are worthwhile. The recent independent film sensation *Miss Representation* comments on the need for visible role models for young women with the phrase "You can't be what you can't see," (Wilson 2011) and links the power of media representation to contemporary identity construction. Problematising media as "an instrument of change" which can only "awaken people and change minds" depending "on who is piloting the plane" (Couric, 2011), diasporic Sudanese young people like Achol are taking control in numerous ways, sometimes alone and sometimes in coalition with others like Anne.

This chapter addresses the circumstances, constraints, and opportunities presented by challenging traditional gender roles as women living in a country different from the ones in which we have both grown up. For Achol, her ability to participate in something she understands to be a notion of 'girlhood' has been short-changed by an Australian resettlement experience that did not allow her a period of schoolgirl-hood. While this was the dominant fantasy she maintained throughout her refugee transit experience, once here in Australia Achol was unable to access this education

system and therefore construct herself the kind of girlhood experience she had imagined. She became pregnant soon after arrival at age 17, foreclosing opportunities for other girlhood experiences and functionally advancing herself into the performative role of ‘woman’ and ‘mother’, even while mourning the loss of her fantasy of a Western girlhood experience.

Anne, on the other hand, brings a notion of the perennial ‘girlhood’ of being gay, in an increasingly conservative global politics in which – despite a ubiquitous ‘equal love’ movement – LGBTIQ agents are often still framed as caught in a never-ending adolescence. This intersection between Achol’s foreshortened adolescence and Anne’s extended one is the focus of this chapter. Petrovic and Ballard (2005) note how the categories of ‘girl’ and ‘lesbian’ often represent a tension-filled intersection that many try to avoid for a variety of reasons in a wide range of contexts. But in this chapter, Achol and Anne recognize and acknowledge this history of tensions – including miscommunications between lesbians and non-lesbians, and women of colour and white women – that have plagued our movements for equality, and in this spirit we join together to speak to the vexing problem of the simultaneous visibility and invisibility of girls.

We write in the spirit of an emerging and pulsing autoethnography (Poulos 2009, Ellis 2002; Harris 2011) movement which understands the need for a ‘methodology of the heart’ (Pelias 2004), concomitant with a research ethics of care (Fine 2008) inherent in telling one’s own story, especially when it touches another. The need for stories “that urge us to shift the energy of pain and loss and secrecy toward the light of joy and integration and communication” (Poulos 2009, p 26) in these late capitalist times is crucial. To this end, the co-authors invite readers to engage in a troubling of ‘angels’ (Lather & Smithies 1995) in which the category of girls and girlhood remains both alluring and problematic for both insiders and outsider, as does the category of research.

You gotta see it to be it

Happiness provides us with a full stop, a way of stopping an answer from being a question.
(Ahmed 2010, p 203)

Happiness, like visibility, can offer a hollow promise. Yet it can be a strategic stopping place, a pause, a

vantage point from which to reflect and take stock. One such stopping place was found by these co-authors in 2008 in Melbourne Australia, when we met as a consequence of Anne conducting her doctoral study using the filmic methodology ethnocinema. Achol was at that time 6 months pregnant and had just dropped out of her TAFE ESL class¹; Anne had been a high school teacher for ten years and wanted to join arts practice, social justice and education, and saw research as a way of doing this. We met frequently for filming, which we shared, and quickly became friends. Through our many conversations about gender, race, global mobilities and American and Sudanese culture, we decided to keep working together creatively and discursively after the doctoral project was complete, as we continue to do.

The ethnocinematic methodology used in *Cross-Marked: Sudanese Australian Young Women Talk Education* (published as *Ethnocinema: Intercultural Arts Education*, Springer, 2012) sought to understand the educational experiences of Sudanese young women through their own voices, and to seek recommendations based on their own experiences, for how the education system might improve delivery to young people from refugee backgrounds, particularly girls. As Ellsworth (1997) advocates, the project was a collaborative project based in its emerging ethnocinematic methodology that recognized the performative aspects of teaching and learning (including the teacher/student relationship), and the ways in which media forms might be employed to address silences and invisibilities. The project comprised seven films, made in collaboration with sixteen young women (including Achol), which were then uploaded to YouTube and achieved a public life of their own which was shared by the young participants. Achol’s film, one of the seven, is entitled *Singing into Language*, which can be accessed on YouTube and from which we draw in this chapter. Like Lather, Anne and Achol were committed to producing a “messy text” (Lather 2007, p. 136), which was “widely accessible to [the participants], those they care about...and the wider community” (2007, p. 34). Such public pedagogical outcomes that are conceived, created and distributed

¹ TAFE (Technical and Further Education) in Australia refers to a publicly-funded post-secondary program, college or institution that offers a range of technical and vocational education and training courses and other programs, bridging courses between high school and university, and adult education courses.

in an accessible manner continue to be championed by those like Giroux (2003) and other critical pedagogues. For Achol and Anne, it was the beginning of a friendship and continuing collaborations.

Experiences of education, like girlhood, call for interruption of the ways in which both can be contradictory and simultaneous multiples. The commentary and social critique of the co-participants' lived experience consistently addressed invisibility versus hypervisibility (Harris 2010b; Harris & Nyuon 2010a) and race. As Brown highlights, "Black girlhood is invisibility in the midst of hyper-visibility" (2009, p 21); it persists as a double-bind. While a majority of the co-participants felt that they remain almost completely invisible in mainstream Australian media and (cultural forms), on the street in their day-to-day experiences they are relentlessly visible. Constant comments about the darkness of their skin and their height predominate; many remarked on the ways in which they fear they will never be accepted in this country because they are "too tall, too dark, or too something to be Australian" (Harris and Nyuon 2010a, p. 73). These young women also commented about their disappointment and frustration at remaining relatively voiceless and invisible in relation to Sudanese boys and men who more often speak on behalf of the Sudanese community. As Achol and others have described, the public persona is a relatively new phenomenon (Harris 2010b) for Sudanese women, both at home and in Western resettlement. This remarginalisation within cultural communities (and double marginalization within Western discourses) is not limited to the Sudanese, but for Sudanese diasporic women navigating such extreme adaptations of lifestyle and gender roles, it represents a significant additional layer. This chapter focuses on the ways in which invisibilities can become borders reinforcing separations – particularly between girls and women – and the ways in which ethnocinema as a research methodology has allowed dialogue between these co-authors, across borders of race and sexuality.

Achol's film (and the others in the series) seek to create a dialogue between speakers/non-speakers about girls engaged in navigating race, education and gender, but also a dialogue about speaking, in which – in the Freirian ontological view - the task of interpreting the world is driven by a desire to 'become more fully human' (Kincheloe & McLaren

2000: 290). As Achol reminds her viewers, language is a collective endeavour, a tool for relating which requires context in order to learn and make meaning:

*In your own country it's more easy because the parents, the family, the cousin, [it's the] same language everybody's reading. Your cousin finishes his uni, your auntie's a doctor, your father's a teacher – everybody know how to speak it, everybody know how to read it, and they help you. (Achol Baroch, *Singing into Language* 2008)*

Sudanese Australian students are not without context, but their context for learning English language has shifted from the home to schools and the public sphere. *Cross-Marked* (and all ethnocinematic projects) offer the possibility of establishing a dialogue based on the experiences, and in the contexts, of the co-participants. Ethnocinema – and other forms of cross-cultural, collaborative video-making – allow these young women to speak for themselves and participate in their own representation, and in so doing confront the equally complex task of framing visibility itself.

The invisibility cloak and the paradoxical freedom of the 'closet'

Anonymity online can afford us the magic of putting on our invisibility cloak, like Harry Potter, and provide us with opportunities to observe and learn that are not possible in a traditional environment... anonymity acts like a veil that permits the redefinition of self. (Baggio 2012, p. 65)

We as co-authors and friends have discussed the ways in which we might represent the two extremes of 'invisible' and 'hyper-visible' in heteronormative and hegemonic Anglo culture, and the agency of not subscribing to either binary extreme. Like Harry Potter, we wish to be both strategically invisible while fully present and agentic. While Anne can pass as 'invisible' at times, creating anxiety about her continuing need to come out or not come out as a gay woman, Achol can never hide the visible difference of her brown skin. Yet we both recognize the context-specificity of our own in/visibilities, and so for strategic convenience we position ourselves as Anne within the 'invisibility' and Achol within the 'visibility' sections that follow.

Lesbians, like other gendered minorities, are finding power in self-representation through increasingly accessible media production and distribution forms like video, YouTube and Facebook. Driver (2007) notes the complex relationship between girls and the media, and the ways in which media representations collude in rendering gay girls invisible. Like our brown-skinned sisters, lesbians face “social invisibility and silence, [and] years of being dismissed as strange, immature, deviant, and confused” (2007, p 180). Anyone who believes that the global Equal Love campaign for same-sex marriage equality has rendered lesbians and gays equally visible is mistaken, yet even within this movement notions of acceptable lesbian identity are tied to normative female roles like mother, wife and family units. What then for those lesbian and brown-skinned girls who seek media representation that does not in other ways opt in to hegemonic notions of femaleness?

Sedgwick (2003) and Povinelli (2006, 2011) comment on some gender-based challenges in this late neoliberal period of nation-state clashes and shifting social projects. In a post- 9/11 context, Sedgwick reminds us of the “surrounding relations of visibility and spectatorship, of the tacit and the explicit, of the possibility or impossibility of a given person’s articulating a given enunciatory position” (p 72), and the ways in which such dualisms continue to cripple us as global flows add to contemporary anxieties about abandonment, identity and belonging. For Povinelli, like Anne here, clashes between her (homo)sexuality and love of more traditional (in her case Indigenous Australian) friends and family create the “condition that I leave some aspects of my sexuality behind” (2006, p 73). “As a result,” she reminds us, “this deeply personal relation has made me personally implausible, my political allegiances awkward” (p 73). We have experienced such awkwardness and invisibilities in both our individual and in our shared cross-cultural friendship, and Achol, Anne and others who consider ourselves “cultural topographer, border-crosser, and hunter of myths” (de la tierra, 2002 p 359) know the pain of belonging/not belonging. Such tensions are an embodied expression of visibility/invisibility-in-motion.

Yet what hope of integration is there, when media spectacle demands sound-bite identities in the face of shattered notions of home/self? Ahmed eviscerates

modern archetypal discursive categories such as the ‘feminist killjoy’, the ‘unhappy queer’, ‘melancholic migrants’ and the ‘angry black woman’. She shows the ways in which hegemonic cultural constructions of happiness that continue to dominate the media always point back to straight, white, married, middle-class lives. For those like queers, blacks, migrants, refugees, single mothers, the working and unemployed classes, and those whose lives are ‘shattered’ away from the ‘intact’ mainstream dream, the media machine would prefer to keep us invisible or vilified.

From ‘gay girls’ who often continue to be infantilized for their androgyny, single-ness or childlessness, to ‘black girls’ who struggle to see role models in popular media at all, visibility is an imaginary and double-edged sword. The notion of “cultural invisibility” (Krizek, in Banks & Banks 1998, p 113) continues to plague lesbians and gays, despite a history of direct action movements like ACT UP and Marriage Equality. Histories of cultural diversity indicate how relentlessly minorities are drawn to the freedom of ‘passing’ and the ways in which it doesn’t work. This hidden closet of fear is often subtle and never-ending, for those minority members who live liminal existences in which the possibility of passing is destructively ever-present. Lesbian and gay parents still often “mask their identity in the school for realistic fear of public reprisal in their community. In so doing, they also rendered themselves invisible as a functional family unit” (Kroeger 2001, p. 83). The temptation to write about the power of being out is mitigated by the grim reality of ongoing homophobia. Perhaps most crippling is the internal dialogue of those lesbian and gay children, parents and educators who must engage in painful internal debates before we even broach the external ones. Sometimes invisibility is the freer option.

For younger gay girls invisibility can mean being elusive, free, unable to be apprehended or controlled. As girlhood studies scholar Anita Harris points out, “At the same time that can-do girls are being celebrated for sassiness and public visibility, what they are able to say is perhaps more limited than ever” (2004, p 133). Yet the threat of invisibility in this imagistic global culture continually outweighs other possibilities. In schools, as in most other public spaces in which girls and young women construct and reject identities, being ‘weird’ is no longer the

dreaded worst that can happen where “the risk of pathology seems to be replaced by the risk of invisibility, and invisibility is surely not-human-ness” (Youdell 2011, p 92). This implied ‘not-human-ness’ is a kind of non-existence, and it drives the obsessive performative rituals that dominate Facebook and other image-based networking sites including YouTube. Rather than being non-school spaces and places, such social media sites are increasingly the places of most pedagogical agency, albeit often not the kinds of learning that teachers and parents desire. For many kinds of non-dominant coming-of-age others, online visibility is the only kind that matters.

Visibility and open spaces

...as though to make something visible as a problem were, if not a mere hop, skip and jump away from getting it solved, at least self-evidently a step in that direction. (Sedgwick 2003, p 139)

For the Lost Girls of Sudan, young women who are not ‘seen’ in Kakuma and other refugee camps, invisibility can mean death. It means not being selected for relocation to the United States, Australia, or other sites of resettlement (Harris 2010b), or being left behind, likely continued poverty, and reduced chance of recovering from the ravages of war and displacement. Yet in the same context, Achol and other survivors have described the vulnerability of being visible as a single girl in a refugee camp. In cultural recognition of the dangers of this vulnerability, many Sudanese girls were placed with families not their own at Kakuma and in Egypt, thereby rendering them safely invisible to those who might take sexual or economic advantage, yet removing their chances of resettlement like the Lost Boys, as they simultaneously disappeared from view of the United Nations workers who made resettlement decisions. So when is being a visible girl a good thing?

Kirk, Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2010) identify the need in the face of an explosion of interest in girlhood studies to “work across disciplinary borders” (2010, p 15) and across “different fields, generations, and geographic spaces” (p. 15), as we are trying to do. Seemingly simple questions like ‘who is a girl?’ become complicated when coupled with diasporic cultural integrations in which home cultures may not have articulate categories for girlhood or adolescence

(like in the Sudanese culture), or girlhood as a new category of being. We both agree with Kirk, Mitchell and Reid-Walsh that we might begin to question “age itself as a definer of girlhood” (p 17), whether in intercultural contexts, or intersexual ones. Hollway’s (2009) argument that late modern western history is “producing more individualized individuals” (p 218), is one great difficulty confronting some young women integrating from collectivist backgrounds like Sudanese. While one might imagine the cultural ‘tall poppy’² imperative of Australians would be the closest western notion to a collectivist society, it is still a cultural difference that confronts those like Achol who are “just learning how to be this way.”

Yet for others, like Butler, lives must be “recognizable” (2004, p 31), or visible, to approach bearability or goodness. For those emerging from pasts in which the struggle was for survival, this shift to the so-called good life of the west (Butler 2004; Berlant 2011) can be both alluring and confusing. In yet another transfiguration, those like Achol “have to learn how to be alone here” and find a life that is livable, “somewhere between the subject [doing the bearing] and the world that throws ‘things’ up” (Ahmed 2010, p 97). The act of being seen is representative of a relationship, not just an individual decision: to be *seen* requires an object that is see-able, and a subject that is able or willing to see.

Western discourse continues to position visibility as preferable to invisibility, with imperative ties between agency, affluence and visibility. From the Greek depiction of Hades (literally, ‘the unseen one’), to the maladjusted introvert stereotype, transgressors like Harry Potter celebrate the dual nature of invisibility, which both protects him and offers him freedom. Such invisibility can offer one counter-narrative for Sudanese and other recently-arrived migrants, for whom a pervasive marketplace agency is often elusive. To fit in, Achol believed when she was preparing to come to Australia, was to go to high school, to shop and to go driving with boys in their cars. This is how western girls expressed power.

² Australians have a symbolic practice and phrase called the “tall poppy syndrome”, which cautions against any individual ‘sticking up’ too far from the group. That is, it is not socially acceptable in Australian culture for individuals to self-promote or otherwise draw attention to themselves. Despite being a western nation whose cultural values are often conflated with American ones, this distinctive characteristic is proudly conjured as quintessentially Australian and representatively distinguishes the self-effacing ‘good guy’ from the arrogant.

Such narratives of “power, visibility, and the occupation of public space are achieved through shopping, but shopping depends on disposable income and [the] cultural capital” (Harris 2004, p 91), and leave those like Achol feeling alienated, invisible and un-Australian. Yet many LGBTQ others are also fighting back against their unfulfilled ideal high school experiences, including scholars who fight “the persistent invisibility and silencing of non-normative sexualities [that] render ‘lesbian’ almost unspeakable in many discursive fields” (Youdell 2011, p 43). Such discursive fields extend from university staff rooms to high school PE classes, and require more diverse possibilities for girlhood.

While we are not necessarily advocating a new twist on Spivak’s strategic essentialism, a notion of strategic invisibility may offer a fresh constitutive positionality. As Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2009) and other Bourdieuians continue to highlight, many young people (not just former refugees) struggle with the demands of class and cultural mobility. Particularly for those like Anne who grew up in working class families and become middle class adults, and for Achol whose transplanting into other cultures means she now moves in white-dominant contexts, strategic invisibility can be a life-saver. Finding those with whom one can disappear for a while and blend in can provide welcome relief to the demands of integrating or crossing borders. Role models are crucial in allowing such young people to imagine and then build identities within the new lives and lifestyle spaces to which they aspire.

Africanists like Falola & Afolabi (2008) have noted the need for documentation of the ‘New African Diaspora’ to counter its current invisibility, yet we demand more diverse representations that mitigate against Ahmed’s singular archetypes. Within education, too, we seek to extend hooks’ critique of the academy and other sites of institutionalized race- and sexualities-based invisibility, which now include public pedagogical places and spaces like the internet and social media. This is where children learn, and if media processes like ethnocinema advance “a transnational, feminist, anti-racist, left critique” (hooks, 2003, p 8) we can trouble “the old academy” (p 8) into something more suited to global knowledge production. Young queers and new migrants know very well where they can find the information they

need, and they don’t waste time by asking adults for it.

Currently the poor image Sudanese Australians suffer in schools and mainstream media is largely negative or nothing at all. Viewed in relation to Bourdieu’s acts of resistance, diasporic Sudanese girls are moving against the supposed autonomy of economic and cultural ‘restrictive fields’ (2008), deploying skills in cultural shape-shifting toward the demands of resettlement. In such acts we might discover new ways of bridging cultural and methodological distances, simultaneously from educator and learner positionalities. To do so, Fine (2008) and others suggest an ethics of care as researchers and co-participants, practicing affective relationships which can be intersubjectively and interculturally driven. The power of video products lie squarely within this adaptability and portability.

Conclusion

A bearable life is a life that can hold up, which can keep its shape or direction, in the face of what it is asked to endure. (Ahmed 2010, p 97)

For the empowerment of girls and young women it is crucial, but not sufficient, to be culturally visible. In this chapter, we have tried to argue for a mediated in/visibility in which agents control their/our own constitutive performances of self, with a critically reflexive knowledge of the power of such absence/presence. Visibility is imperative. We know this now as a global culture like AIDS activists knew in the 1990s that silence equaled death. Yet in our increasingly visual existence, a picture may paint a thousand words, but it is not enough for real agency.

Collaborative creative and research projects allow co-participants to reflect on experiences from within our communities, shared between our communities, but also for those experiences to be heard and contextualized by others (“I want somebody to hear it!” as Achol has said [Harris, 2012]). As Lather has noted (drawing on Foucault), if research has any ‘gift’ to offer storyteller/co-participants, it is not in empowering us/them but to “situate the stories within these larger frameworks” (2007, p 29). Importantly, ethnocinema also offers the possibility of ‘getting lost’ (Lather, 2007) together in multi-dialogues: between researcher/artists, viewers, participants, their peers. The imagined conversation

between video creators and audiences is a strong step toward assisting others to understand the world in ways that are different from their own, particularly in an era of increasingly global mobilities. For girls from racialised and sexualized marginalities, acts of making ourselves visible can become tools of coming together in shared endeavor, rather than passive cries for recognition. In our mutual recognition, even across extreme differences of race, age, sexuality and cultural backgrounds, we are creating emerging kinds of visible communities.

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Theme III: Girlhood Interrupted Chapter 18

Nelly, the Invisible Girl

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This article presents outcomes of a research project designed to study the ways children order their social environment in school, and particularly how they form peer relationships in this environment.

Interaction and communication between children in school, and the ways school as an institution forms a resource and a framework for children's peer relationships, are described and analysed. The example of one girl, Nelly, is used to illustrate interaction and communication between children. Processes of inclusion and exclusion are taken into special consideration. The purpose of this project is to develop deeper knowledge about social conditions in school and a more differentiated understanding of the mechanisms involved in the processes of inclusion and exclusion in peer relationships.

Introduction

School is a complex institution in which several actors and categories of actors interact (Goffman, 1961, 1964, 1983). Children usually need to simplify this complexity, and often categorise things in their surroundings, including other people, in terms of what they already know, what they feel they have in common with others, and what is communicated. Corsaro's (1985, 1997) concept of peer culture has been central in conceptualising social relations work in school. Peer cultures are described as the socially constructed products of children's ongoing relations work, as children try to cope in the environments that adults have organised for them. Through face-to-face interactions involving both the interpretation of signals and the effort to symbolically represent and signify ideas and feelings, groups of children can constitute several (discrete or overlapping) peer cultures in any single institution at any time. These cultures are characterised by certain key shared elements and specific shared articulations of identity. Sorting and differentiation play important parts in this symbolic work.

Procedure

The research study was conducted during one school year in one fourth-grade class in Western Sweden. The ethnographic approach of participant observation was the principle means of gathering data. Visits to the school were made on average twice a week during the study period and observations were carried out both in the classroom and during breaks.

Fieldnotes, mainly inscriptions and transcriptions (Beach, 1997; Clifford, 1990), were taken in order to portray events and speech between informants as accurately as possible. As part of the data production, two group conversations were conducted with the children. The groups involved between two and four children who normally associated in school. The conversations concerned how the children initiated, established, and developed peer relations and friendships at school. Situations reported in the fieldnotes were used to initiate the conversations, which were tape-recorded and transcribed as running text. The text was occasionally re-written according to the transcription principles of conversation analysis (Linell, 1994). The main analytical interest was in how children manage relationships and friendships at school.

Doing relations: relation work and relation projects

Much of the social relations work children do in school is aimed to develop a sense of belonging and identity. It involves both experimentation within social relations and making and breaking relationships within which this experimentation can take place. This is termed *relation work* and it takes place in visible interactions within peer cultures.

To experiment with social relations in large groups is quite difficult. It is even more difficult for children. They must differentiate and identify individuals with whom relationships can be formed. In this report the

term *relation projects* is used to denote a specific social projects in which children work with specific social goals within identified constellations of people. Relation projects are individual expressions of relation work and therefore involve establishing, cementing, and maintaining relationships, but also breaking up and ending relationships, and excluding and distancing certain individuals in order to form or consolidate relationships with others (Bliding, 2004; Wrethander, 2007).

Relation projects are continual and comprise a large part of everyday school life. They are difficult to separate from other activities and take place during lessons and breaks, in different arenas and parts of school environment, and both parallel to and integrated within other activities.

In analyses of children's relation-work, school is presented as an institutional context for formally organised activities, and compared to other structures and resources available to children in their relation projects. Using Goffman's terminology (1961a, 1983) school can be seen to have two parallel, but integrated, roles: one as a *formal instrumental organisation* that children must adapt to, and another as a setting for children's own projects for ordering and creating meaning in their social life. Goffman calls the use of legitimate resources to bypass the organisation's assumptions and achieve other needs or wants *working the system*. Corsaro (1997, 2000) describes this process as *secondary adjustment*, a part of the complex processes of creating peer relationships and a peer culture in pre-school.

Goffman's ideas about how people interact in different *social situations* (1964, 1983) in *situated activity systems* (1961b) have been used in this report to identify and describe certain key elements of children's interactions and relation projects. A *social situation* develops, according to Goffman, when two or more people meet and are able to interact. The framing of the situation and the rules and logic of interaction determine what can take place. Systems of rules and expectations of possible actions are created through repetitive activities that comprise the situated activity system. Situated activity systems provide the range of possible (appropriate) roles in a situation and the rules and norms for assessing and responding to social performances. In this way every social situation brings with it a set of rules and

expectations about how things should be and how people should behave.

Children's appropriation of formal school facilities, including lessons, rules, and physical artefacts, for use in relation work contributes to what Goffman (1961a, 1983) calls the *institutional underlife* of school. This institutional underlife formed by the children's relation projects may function in opposition to the general (formal) institutional order and may occasionally disrupt or interfere with it, but it is also parallel to and integrated with the formal learning projects of the school. The relation projects are not generated deliberately as oppositional elements, but rather as means to develop a social order in children's everyday school life.

Inclusion and exclusion

Children's relation work involves both inclusion and exclusion practices. Exclusion practices can be used either to directly exclude a person or persons or to signal symbolically a common relation between some people against others. Acts of exclusion do not appear in isolation, but are in one way or another always connected to acts of inclusion. Therefore inclusion and exclusion can be described as two sides of the same coin and as connected parts of the same project of relation building (Bliding, 2004; Wrethander, 2007).

In this article we focus on one girl, who for the whole school year was excluded from the relation projects of the other children in her class. (In the following R. refers to either of the researchers.)

Nelly

Nelly, a participant in this study, was one year older than her classmates because she was held back in third grade. Her classmates frequently pointed out the fact that she was one year older. Her best and only friend, Mimmi, was in fifth grade, where Nelly also belonged. Nelly sometimes received special education in a small group that focused sometimes on special needs in general and sometimes on language support, since Nelly has a non-Swedish background. The special measures arranged for Nelly also contributed to her classmates' construction and designation of her as different and an outsider: 'not a fourth-grade-student', 'not a ten-year-old', 'slow', and 'a *wog*'. Nelly, who was born in an East European country did not differ in appearance from other Swedish

children. Lina, a classmate who was adopted from India, was the only dark-skinned child in this class, but was never called a 'wog'.

Nelly presented herself soon after school started as excluded from relations with the other girls in class. She tried to draw attention to her situation in class and she did not want to go out during breaks. When asked what she usually played during breaks, she said she mostly stayed alone because nobody wanted to play with her. She attributed her isolation to her origin from another country.

Earlier this year Nelly tried to socialize with girls from class. She was seldom directly rejected, but she was excluded anyway because the other girls ignored her attempts to participate.

The role of a spectator

Nelly is thus often ignored in the activities of the other children and is made invisible by her classmates. She chooses the role of a spectator in the others' activities. On one occasion when Nelly was invited to play, the following scene took place:

Morning Break

Nelly asks if R. wants to play outside during the break.

R: Yes.

Nelly: Then I will join you.

Lisa asks if R. would like to jump the rope with them.

R: Yes, but Nelly wants me to do something else.

Nelly: What?

R: Lisa wonders if we are going to jump rope. Are we?

Nelly: OK.

Nelly and R. are coming out. Lisa and Roger are there too. Roger and R. are holding the rope. Nelly tells us that she does not know how to play this. It has been such a long time since she did it last time.

R: Watch Lisa! She can show you.

Lisa does not answer; she jumps. Then she changes position with Roger and he starts jumping. Sanna comes out and takes her place in front of Nelly.

Sanna: I am going to start. That's what I said in the classroom.

Nelly stands next to them and watches. She has not yet joined in.

Nelly: I think I will watch them playing instead.

Sanna is jumping and the others comment on Sanna's jumping. They neither see Nelly nor speak to her. After

a few minutes Nelly leaves them and watches some other children playing instead.

(Fieldnotes)

On several occasions Nelly's classmates ignore her approaches to different activities, often games, during breaks. If these games are seen as a situated system of activities (Goffman, 1961b) the participants each play different situated roles.

In these situations Nelly takes the role of spectator. She sometimes says that she is uncertain about the rules of the game. This could be understood as a way of asking for access to the activity, but she does not explicitly ask to join because she knows she is not welcome. On the other hand, the girls could use her failure to ask as an excuse for not including her, reasoning that if she does not ask, they cannot know her wishes.

The construction of invisibility

In the example below Nelly again assumes the situated role of a spectator that she has been given, but which she also accepts in the situated systems of activities. Her invisibility is thus constructed in an interaction with the other children, but she probably does not choose this construction consciously.

Afternoon Break

Nelly and R. are going outside together. Caroline, Sanna, Jenny, Roger, Axel, and some girls from third grade are throwing 'the crow' (a ball) against the wall. Lina also comes out.

Lina: I want to play, too.

Nelly turns to R: We'll watch them play for a while.

Nelly and R. watch them and nobody speaks to them. Two girls from third grade ask if they can take part. Caroline says they are too many. Amanda who also is watching says that the girls already said that they wanted to join this game. The children divide themselves into two groups and play in parallel.

After watching for some minutes Nelly asks R. to leave with her and go under a roof because it has started raining. Elin and Amanda are already there. They ask R. if R. wants to join another game. R starts playing. Nelly is watching and R asks her to join.

Nelly: I am just watching.

(Fieldnotes)

Games during breaks are regular activities that include rules, standards of behaviour, and discrete sets of possible roles. Nelly's situated role in this type of activity was usually to be a spectator. During another activity with balls she also took on that role by proposing that she and R. watch some of the others playing. Even though Nelly did not participate directly in the game, she participated in the activity as a spectator, a situated role that meant standing apart from the other children.

The girls in class always agreed about whom they wanted to work with during gymnastics lessons, although these agreements were not always given in advance. There were also opportunities to ask to work with someone during the lesson. One day when R. spent time with the girls in the locker room, Sanna told R. that she had received several of these invitations.

In the locker room before a gymnastics lesson

Sanna, Caroline, Lina, and Nelly enter the locker room and change clothes. Sanna, Caroline, and Lina discuss whom they are planning to work with during the gymnastics lesson.

Sanna: Soon I'll have to make a schedule because everybody wants to work with me in gym.

R: Do you decide before whom you are going to work with?

Sanna: Yes, and everybody wants to be with me.

R: Do you mean on the same team then?

Caroline: No, if you are going to do something in pairs, throw balls, or something like that.

Sanna: I will decide that from now on I'll be with everybody in gym.

Caroline: You can't do that. The three of us could take turns with each other.

Then Sanna, Caroline, and Lina leave the locker room together. Nelly is left and she leaves the locker room alone.

(Fieldnotes)

These agreements about working together are used as tools to establish closer relations or to mark out affinities and fellow-feelings. When Sanna says that she intends to work with everyone during gymnastics lessons, Caroline protests and says that is not possible because the exercises only permit pair constellations.

She suggests that the three of them, herself, Sanna, and Lina, take turns forming pairs when opportunities arise. Nelly, who is also in the room, does not take part in the agreement, even though she could make a pair with one of the three girls. She neither asks to pair with one of the girls nor is invited by the other girls. Situations like these were not unusual for Nelly. These pairing agreements thus work as tools both for inclusion and exclusion. In this case, exclusion can also be seen as a consequence of an inclusion. Nelly is totally ignored by the other girls in the locker room and is thus made invisible in that situation. Later, when talking about this situation, the girls legitimize and justify their actions.

Who is responsible?

Conversations with Sanna, Caroline, Lina, and Nelly often turned to the gymnastics lessons. Nelly tried repeatedly to draw attention to her exclusion, but was given no support, even though R. tried to give her space to express her feelings.

Nelly explains during the group talk that she finds it very boring to be alone all the time, but Sanna wants to talk about her own popularity and ignores Nelly's attempt to express her situation. Nelly admits that she does not ask to take part and prefers to be a spectator, standing beside the activities. When Caroline asserts that Nelly never asks to take part, Nelly tries to explain that there is no point in her asking, since she will be excluded anyhow.

Sanna and Lina continue to explain the complicated rules of inclusion and exclusion in their own way. They do not listen to Nelly's vague attempts to explain her situation. They are more interested in explaining their own problems of planning their days and handling the relational demands of several different classmates.

Her classmates say Nelly's exclusion is her own fault, because she does not ask to be included. When talking about this in her peer group, the other girls assert: 'You don't even ask to!' The one who has to explain this is Nelly herself, and she is thus made responsible for not being included.

We are always responsible, both intellectually and morally, for taking part in social activities and constructing rules for social interaction. In this way we are held *accountable* for our actions. According to Buttny (1993) this expression has its origin in the

metaphor of ‘keeping an account of one’s conduct’ (p 7). *Accounts* make actions understandable and place them in context. Referring to Garfinkel (1967), Shotter (1984) describes how ‘accounts’ function:

[A]n account of an action or activity is concerned with talking about the action or activity as the activity it is; it works, if it works at all, to render the activity, to those who confront it or are involved in it, as something ‘visibly-rational-and-reportable-for-all-practical-purposes, i.e., ‘accountable’ (p. 3).

Edwards (1997) asserts further:

When people describe events, they attend to accountability. That is to say, they attend to events in terms of what is normal, expectable, and proper; they attend to their own responsibility in events, and in the reporting of events; and they invoke notions of motive, causation, justification and cognition (p. 7).

Goffman (1971) describes how people conduct *remedial work* or *remedial interchanges* to explain or repair their actions in situations that could be morally questioned:

The function of remedial work is to change the meaning that otherwise might be given to an act, transforming what could be seen as offensive into what can be seen as acceptable (p. 109).

The deals made about pairing in the peer groups can be seen as important arenas for and central tools in the girls’ relation work. When the girls explained in different ways that Nelly could not claim to belong to their peer group, which negotiated pairings for gymnastics class, their arguments and rules of appropriate behaviour very efficiently excluded her from any opportunity to take part.

The solution

Later Nelly explained that she did not want to stay at this school. She wanted to change because she felt totally alone in this school and she had no friends. At the beginning of the school year Nelly tried to make social contacts with her peers, but she was neglected and ignored. Soon she stopped seeking access to their companionship and told teachers that she was denied access.

Morning break

Nelly and R. are still in the hall. The children have painted with watercolour on a window and written the names of all the classmates. Nelly starts wiping her name out with her finger.

Nelly: I am just taking myself away because I do not belong to this class. I want to go to another class.

She wipes out all the letters of her name.

(Fieldnotes)

In this way, Nelly excludes herself from the entire peer group – the class – at the same time as she expresses her vulnerability.

She played instead with her best friend in another class, which was seen as a negative act by her classmates. This became another argument for excluding her in her own class.

Discussion

It is important to point out that children who are targeted and objectified in the relation projects of others, in the interests of those others, are not excluded from the peer culture. Those children are very much part of the peer culture, but they are a part that is constituted as a symbolic and active resource for the others and that is, in essence, denied an active subject identity. Difference and sameness are two key categories in relation projects and are used to rationalise interests in forming friendships or not with other children. Relation projects are about establishing relationships with certain children, but not with all children. In order to generate a relationship with one child, another child often has to be excluded, and exclusion may be seen as a natural consequence of an inclusion activity.

Relation projects form an integral part of the everyday life of school children in forming peer cultures (Corsaro, 1985, 1997) in which they make sense of and create order in their social world. The various formal and informal facilities offered by school are used as resources in these activities. In Goffman’s (1961a) terms children work the system and create an institutional underlife at school. In these cultural practices children both *reproduce* parts of the general culture and *produce* their own specific and unique peer culture.

The relationships children develop are in constant flux and are under continual threat. They imply

commitments and responsibilities, involve cultural routines, demand cultural knowledge and sensitivity, and use social norms and rules of behaviour (Eder, Evans & Parker, 1995). Behaviour judged as wrong can lead to serious consequences with risks of conflicts and exclusion. Actions that can be defined as negative may be used as resources in exclusion practices, making exclusion a constant real threat and subjective fear. Children need constantly to be on guard and to become skilful at manipulating situations and other children. These things form parts of the immense complexity of children's relation work (e.g. Evaldsson, 2007; Goodwin, 2002a,b, 2006; Svahn, 2012; Tholander, 2002)

Nelly's situation was described and analysed to illustrate some facets of this complexity. Nelly is made invisible by herself and by her classmates. No matter what she does, she is still ignored and excluded from the other children's social relation work: she simply does not exist. Her powerlessness is made very clear when her acts are ignored, while the responsibility for her situation is, by the other children's accounts, her own.

The complexity of her situation is even more difficult to grasp since it seems to be impossible to break the patterns. The actions described mean different things to the different people involved in the construction of Nelly's invisibility.

But what is the role of the absent adults in this construction?

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Theme III: Girlhood Interrupted Chapter 19

The Invisibility of Adolescent Mothers in a Yoruba Community in South-west Nigeria

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Adolescent motherhood in many sub-Saharan African countries has remained daunting. Motherhood at this stage is portrayed as uninspiring. With empirical data from the 19 semi-structured interviews held with adolescent mothers (15-19years), this chapter examines the invisibility of adolescent motherhood and their agency within the Yoruba socio-cultural context. The findings revealed a continuum of struggles for the adolescent mothers as reflected in the stigmatisation of adolescents' sexuality and uninformed sexual negotiations. This influences the level of invisibility adolescent mothers undergo before invoking their agency for visibility and identity rediscovery. A number of the participants had passive concerns for non-pregnancy consequences of unprotected sex and preferred pregnancy termination to protected sex. However, pregnancy occurrence became a vehicle for defining participants' social identity and access to available opportunities. The struggle to maintain the continuum between what is normative and fashionable was overt in the desperation to terminate pregnancy against all odds by some of the participants and the contraction of emergency traditional marriage ceremonies by some parents to reduce shame. While pregnancy was a ground to establish a marriage in some cases, it was not sufficient as some of the adolescent mothers left their partners shortly after child delivery. Against the challenging environment and inadequate support, the participants expressed fears over the plausible influence of their past and present on their future and that of their children. To overcome this fear, some of the participants engaged in economic activities backed with prayers and patience in empowering themselves and ensuring that their children were educated. While these self-initiatives are aimed at renegotiating their social positions, complementary and participatory efforts at all levels

are essential in minimising the implications of early motherhood on their psychosocial well-being and that of their children.

Introduction

Unintended adolescent pregnancy and its stigmatisation has remained a challenge in many developing nations (Braine, 2009; WHO, 2007; Yardley, 2008). This is more pronounced in social settings where fertility within marriage attracts high premium (Braine, 2009; Hollos, Larsen, Obono, & Whitehouse, 2009). Although pregnancy could be stressful to both adolescents and adults, but the stigmatisation makes it more stressful for the adolescents than their adult counterparts. Based on Weiss and Lonnquist (2006) conceptualisation of social stressors and life events, the nature and dynamics of social forces and circumstances are significant in stigmatising pre-marital fertility. Adolescent pregnancy stigmatisation is one among other societal measures and practices that has increased the invisibility of adolescent mothers (Atuyambe, Mirembe, Johansson, et al., 2005; WHO, 2007). This is in addition to the limited research attention and absence of social policies aimed at empowering adolescent mothers especially in developing societies and the sub-Saharan Africa in particular, where a number of adolescent mothers are allowed to bear the burden of early motherhood alone (Braine, 2009). All these measures and practices amongst others have been dysfunctional to the optimization of adolescent mothers' agency in initiatives directed at improving their wellbeing and that of their children.

Despite the challenges of adolescent motherhood, some adolescent mothers go on to lead highly productive lives facilitating their development and that of their children (Chohan & Langa, 2011; Lewis, Scarborough, Rose & Quirin, 2007; Yardley, 2008).

A key factor that has helped a number of adolescent mothers to overcome some of the challenges of early motherhood is the availability of qualitative support and opportunities to rediscover themselves (Cohan & Langa, 2011; Yardley, 2008). The limited attention given to this social category of adolescents has somewhat made their voices and active involvement in reconstructing their motherhood experiences and their children's future invisible. In the literature, limited attention has been given to the agency of adolescent motherhood (Cohan & Langa, 2011). Investigating adolescent mothers' agency through focus on their everyday practices, motherhood experiences and how they interrogate their invisibility and that of their children has some benefits. Thus, this chapter explores the adolescent mothers' agency by focusing on how adolescent mothers interrogate their invisibility in reconstructing their social positions and that of their children.

This chapter starts with a sociological overview of stigma as found in Ervin Goffman's (1963) work. Within this framework, the stigmatization of unintended pregnancy within the Yoruba cultural context was examined by reflecting on cultural values as depicted in songs and wise sayings. The choice of situating the study within the Yoruba cultural worldview was purely analytic and not a function of peculiarity of adolescent pregnancy nor its stigmatisation among the Yoruba people. Next are the methodology and a thematic presentation of findings. The chapter concludes with a discussion of findings and the implications on the visibility of adolescent mothers within their cultural context.

Background

The use of stigma in sociological discourse has been popularised through Goffman's book on *stigma: Notes on the management of Spoiled Identity*. The work has stimulated other research efforts on the 'nature, sources, and consequences of stigma' (e.g. Link & Phelan, 2001). An array of research activities on stigma from diverse approaches and outcomes are abundant in the literature (Link & Phelan, *ibid*). From Goffman's position, stigma is a social phenomenon created by social actors and strengthened through various interactions in order to protect an underlying motive, an attribute, Haghghat (2001) linked to the pursuit of self-interest.

In traditional Yoruba society, female virginity attracts high value but with more responsibility to conform on the females than their male counterparts. Within this social framework, the conceptualisation of virginity says females must maintain their virginity before marriage and in the event of deviation; there are sanctions for them alone without any visible ones for their male partners (Fadipe, 1970). While the emphasis on virginity is fading gradually, pre-marital pregnancy continues to attract stigma. Conceptually, Link and Phelan (2001) attributed the presence of stigma in any social context to the presence of the following five interrelated conditions: (1) *people distinguish and label human differences*. (2) *Dominant cultural beliefs link labelled persons to undesirable characteristics*. (3) *Labelled persons are placed in distinct categories to accomplish some degree of separation of "us" from "them"*. (4) *labelled persons experience status loss and discrimination that lead to unequal outcomes; and that* (5) *stigmatization is entirely contingent on access to social, economic, and political power that allows the identification of differentness, the construction of stereotypes, the separation of labelled persons into distinct categories, and the full execution of disapproval, rejection, exclusion, and discrimination*.

In socio-cultural settings, where fertility within heterosexual marriage is the only socially approved means of procreation, the freedom of expressing, and exploring alternative ways of experiencing sexuality are the prerogatives of the group than the individual. Among the Yoruba people, some derogatory words are used in describing sexual exploits that resulted in unintended adolescent pregnancy. Examples include words like *oyun eye* (Bird pregnancy) *oyun ibanuje* (sorrowful pregnancy), *oyun ko yun* (unwarranted pregnancy), and *oyun eleya/esin* (shameful or embarrassing pregnancy) among others. Such meanings are either expressed verbally or non-verbal in various interactions with adolescents especially the female ones with such pregnancy. Popular musicians among the Yoruba people like King Sunny Ade, Chief Ebenezer Obey (now Evangelist Ebenezer Obey), Wasiu Ayinde barrister, and Adewale Ayuba to mention a few preached against pre-marital sex, abortion and depict the stigmatisation of adolescent pregnancy in songs. For instance, Adewale Ayuba a prominent 'Fuji' musician described the consequences of

adolescent unintended pregnancy and labelled such pregnancy as *ile mosu* (a term used in describing females that have given birth but are still living with their parents) in his album entitled 'Bubble'. Here is an extract from the album:

Iwe la ni komo o ka Oyun lomo logbe wale
Nigba tonse o, Iya re o mo, Baba re o mo
O digba toyun ba yo, won ama naa eee oo,
won ama be o o.
Won ani ko niso lo do eni to oloyun
Won b'omo b'omo fun osu mefa
Ko s'eni to oloyun, ha oti kekere dale mosu.

Meaning: The girl child was sent to school, but she returned home with pregnancy

When she was indulging in premarital sex neither the mother nor the father knew

However, with the occurrence of pregnancy, she would be beaten and persuaded to reveal the person responsible for the pregnancy

She was persuaded for over six months, but she failed to identify the person responsible, Eventually nobody owned up to be responsible for her pregnancy,

Now she is a mother and a wife in her parents' home at an early age.

In society's wisdom, such negative meanings would serve as deterrent and encourage adolescents to delay child bearing until marriage. The use of derogatory terms could be dysfunctional to the psychosocial well-being of adolescents as parents and their offspring (Orr & Miller, 1997). Negative messages may affect the self-perceptions, out-look of already pregnant and parenting adolescents, and as well, set them on the path to failure (Lewis, et al., 2007). Children born out of such context may also grow to believe the negative meanings and start acting in that direction in their interactions with others. More so, they have been tagged 'failure' right from their mothers' womb. However, in reality the mere occurrence of unintended pregnancy does not imply a total surrender, as there are adolescent mothers whose stories have changed due to personal determination and support from their society (Chohan & Langa, 2011; Lewis et al., 2007). Ironically, such adolescent mothers are often invisible in terms of bringing their initiatives and efforts to a wider audience (Chohan & Langa, 2011).

In the Yoruba parlance, there is a common saying that '*Omo eni kii buru titi kii a fi fun ekun paje*' (no matter the degree of waywardness or stubbornness of one's child, no rational parent will donate such a child as food to a Lion). Cultural dispositions as contained in the statement may be useful in explaining some existing variations on acceptable correctional measures and ideologies for delinquency at the home front and within cultures.

In Goffman's (1963) lens, adolescent mothers would behave like the executioner. They would move tentatively or resolutely move forward but with their eyes downcast, accepting their fate as stigmatized individuals, incorporating stigmatized identities into their own sense of selves and harbouring persistent shame at their transgressions. At the public scene, unprotected sexual intercourse and unwanted pregnancies consequences are easier to observe on the female than on their male sexual partners. Do adolescent mothers remain in this passive state without invoking their agency in making themselves visible within oppressive social structures? The next section presents the empirical evidence in support of adolescent mothers' agency as they interrogate their reality within a cultural context.

Methodology

The Study Setting

The study was conducted among adolescent mothers with unintended pregnancy occurrence in a Yoruba community in Southwestern Nigeria. The Yoruba people are Nigeria's second largest ethnic group. Like in many sub-Saharan African countries and other developing nations, unintended pregnancy is common among the three major and other minor ethnic groups in Nigeria. Teenage pregnancy in Nigeria is high. Based on the Nigerian Demographic Health Survey, 4.3 per cent of women age 15-19 were currently pregnant. Five years later, higher proportions (23%) of women age 15-19 were currently pregnant or had given birth at the time of the survey (NPC & ICF Macro, 2009). Earlier evidence showed that in 2003, 16 per cent of pregnancies among girls and women aged 15-24 had been unintended, compared with 10 per cent in 1990 (NPC & ICF Macro, 2004). The low use of contraceptives and lack of adequate knowledge on sexuality may have influenced the

situation. Mixed ideological positions have dominated the sphere of sexual health promotion in the Nigerian society (Federal Ministry of Health, 2007). A dominant position in this direction is the emphasis on abstinence with less emphasis on protected sex. Within this context, low use of contraceptives which has been found among adults, young and adolescents becomes more strengthen as a number of sexually active adolescents may avoid public disapproval by not abstaining from contraceptives while engaging actively in sex.

Agriculture is the mainstay of the local economy, with Cocoa, Palm oil, and Kola nuts as the major crops. There are number of commercial banks in the community and educational institutions ranging from public and private owned primary schools to tertiary institutions. In the community, health care service provision is organized around traditional and modern medical systems. While traditional medicine is closer to the people, modern hospitals are few. Although in comparison to communities within the environs, the community has comparative advantage in terms of the physical presence of modern health care facilities. However, the reality is that not all the services available at these health facilities are accessible and affordable among the various social categories including meeting the reproductive health needs of adolescents and unmarried youths. While statistical information on non-orthodox practitioners in the community may not be known, traditional medicine is well established among the Yoruba people with high level of patronage from the populace. To date, traditional religion is practiced alongside with Christianity and Islam. The presence of Higher Institutions, religious, and corporate bodies inclusive may have contributed to the growing rate of urbanisation and possible effects on values and lifestyles.

Design

An exploratory, qualitative design was employed to capture the efforts of adolescent mothers (15-19years) at making themselves visible against various forms of invisibility. A face-to-face semi structured interview was employed. One-to-one interviews build rapport between the researcher and the participant as well gives the participants the opportunity to think, speak, and be heard (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Sample Selection

Only adolescent mothers (15-19 years) who had unintended pregnancy that resulted in a life birth at most within the last 3 years before this study were purposively recruited. The purposive selection of participants was with the assistance of two key informants who knew a couple of adolescent mothers in the study location. The two informants are health workers. One works with a maternity centre and the other, a traditional birth attendant. This resulted in the selection of a core group of 13 participants. Thereafter, the core group of the participants through snowballing was asked to identify friends and acquaintances that they perceived to be 'similar to them'. Despite the limitations associated with snowballing technique, it was deemed necessary for a study of this nature (Karasz & McKinley, 2007). From the peer referral, additional 12 adolescents were recruited, but 6 among them refused to participate in the study principally on the grounds of lack of interest or not wanting to discuss their experiences for now. With this, only the experiences of 19 willing participants are presented in this study.

Interview procedure

A semi-structured interview schedule was used to focus the discussion on the adolescents' relationship with their partners before the occurrence of the pregnancy, post-pregnancy initiatives aimed at enhancing their visibility, and a subjective assessment of how their past and present could affect the future of their children. All the interviews were conducted in the participants preferred language (Yoruba language the indigenous language of the participants). Two female community health workers who had extensive experience with adolescent mothers assisted the researcher in the data collection. The research assistants were trained with the structured interview guide. The interviews were conducted in convenient locations suggested by the participants. The interview sessions lasted for an average of forty-five minutes.

Analysis

A thematic content analysis approach as suggested by Ryan and Bernard (2003) was adopted in analyzing all the interviews. The primary aim throughout the analysis process was to make sense of the rich data in order to construct a sense of common themes,

patterns, and shared experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). The initial transcription of all the interviews was done in Yoruba and was later translated to English language. Both the Yoruba and English transcriptions and translations were later given to an expert in both languages to ensure proper and accurate translation. As the analysis progressed, each transcript was read and notes were made. After reading the transcripts several times, key quotes and explanations were noted and extracted from the rest of the transcripts. The findings are presented in four salient themes supported with relevant individual extracts.

Ethical consideration

All the participants were briefed on the research objectives and their approval received before the interviews. Participants were fully informed of their rights to discontinue with the interview at any point and their consent was obtained in written (Strydom, 2002). Similarly, permission was obtained from all the participants for the audio recording of their responses with guarantee of confidentiality.

Findings and Discussion

Profiles of Participants

None among the participants had completed their secondary education before conception. Majority of them were in school at the time of conception. Before childbirth, 13 of the participants had up to junior secondary school education, but only six eventually completed their secondary school education after delivery. Only one participant among those who completed their secondary school education had commenced post secondary education in a polytechnic after delivery. There were Christians (11) than Muslims (8) among the participants. The average age of the participants during the fieldwork was 16.3years.

The participants' occupational status showed that 3 of them were traders, 7 were artisan with majority into Hair Dressing and Tailoring, only a few were employed(3) as menial workers, while 5 of them were apprentice at various levels. During the period of pregnancy, only two participants were allowed to stay with her parents. More than average of the participants stayed with the person responsible for their

pregnancy (10) and a similar proportion (6) stayed with their father/mother-in-laws; interestingly, one of the participants claimed that she stayed with a stranger during the pregnancy period. In consonance with the literature (e.g Agunbiade & Uzoma, 2012; McIntyre, 2006; Mensch, Grant & Blanc, 2006; Oyefara, 2009), a reverse in trend emerged after the participants had given birth. Eight of the participants relocated to their parents' home, while a slight decline was observed in the proportion of adolescent mothers that stayed with their partners(5) and father/mother-in-laws(4) after delivery. Living as a single mother only emerged after childbirth. Despite the traditional apathy towards single motherhood, the practice is gradually becoming normalised among the Yoruba people especially among female adults who probably had a child as an adolescent or an adults that desires a child in or outside marriage (Oyefara, 2009).

Trust and Betrayal in first sexual experience

Ten of the adolescent mothers had their first sexual experience when they least expected. Four among the participants had such experience between 5 and 9 years of age. Child sexual abuse has been found in a number of studies within and outside Nigeria (e.g. Johnson, 2004; Obisesan, Adeyemo & Onifade, 1999; Ogunyemi, 2000). The entire participants described child sexual abuses as a common occurrence among their peers without the awareness of parents or their significant others. It was only when they are caught in the act or obvious bruises on the girl's vaginal that it becomes obvious to others including their parents. A common pattern in the cases reported by 15 of the participants was sexual touch on their vaginal. Ironically, some of the participants did not ascribe such experience to sexual abuse since no penal penetration took place, but even then, it must be kept secret, as they were afraid and not sure of how people will react to them. The asymmetrical power relations between a child and an adult may have influenced the perception and positions of some of the adolescents even in the face of sexual exploitations (Johnson, 2004). Similarly, the plausibility of interpreting early sexual initiation as a phenomenon that pose short and long term effects may be difficult due to reasons such as age, limited understanding of self, rationality power and poor sexuality education (Johnson, 2004; Lalor,

2004). Generally, participants conceal their early sexual experiences from their parents and siblings. This supports the culture of secrecy, power dynamics, and an indication of unwillingness to tackle early signs of sexual violations at the home front. Three of the participants said they would have divulged the information to their parents, but found it rather difficult, as the abusers were unsuspected but known people within their neighbourhood.

I grew up in a neighbourhood with many other children. There was a young man in my compound who used to play with me. Unknown to my parents and others, each time I am alone with him he would 'finger' me and ask me to touch his thing (penis). I started enjoying it, until his family eventually moved out of our compound. With this experience, I started having the urge to have sex. When I was 12 years old, I met a 'guy' who was also older. He approached me for friendship and I accepted. Four months later, he invited me to one of his friends' place without knowing that he had plans to have sex with me. I struggled and cried, but he overpowered me and forced me to bed. It was very painful but he pleaded that it was the work of the 'devil' and persuaded me to forgive him. I forgave him and accepted him back, but the urge for sex became more frequent that I started 'seeing' other boys in my school (Adolescent mother aged 19 and petty trader).

... A cousin was the first person to arouse my interest in sex. I was about six years of age and he was about 15 years. At the inception, he often puts his fingers in my vaginal. He did not force me into it but I could not resist it either. This continued until the day I eventually lost my virginity. Then I was already 13 years. I felt disappointed with myself, but I could not inform any one about my ordeal. (Adolescent mother aged 17 and a hairdresser apprentice).

Concealment and nondisclosure is a common occurrence in parent-child interaction (Petronio, Reeder, Hecht, & Mon't Ros-Mendoza, 1996). This has been associated with multiple factors (Smentana, Villalobos, Rogge, & Tasopoulos-Chan, 2010), including cultural beliefs. The culture of silence on child sexual abuse coupled with power dynamics create more problems for the child even when the willingness to disclose at the home front may be present. There are challenges in the negotiation of boundaries between privacy and disclosure. As espoused by Petronio (2002) in the Communication Privacy Management

theory, 'as social actors we try to weigh the demands of the situation with our needs and those of others around'. As a dialectical theory, the emphasis is that the process at which social actors manage the relationship between concealing and revealing private information is a complex one with links with other sphere of life (Petronio, 2002). Against the backdrop of early sexual exploitations within a culture of silence, the participants concealed their sexual activities, failed to engage in protected sex but were conscious of pregnancy than any other associated consequence. The distaste for pregnancy was not commensurate with their sexual negotiations. Often times, sexual occurrence was unplanned and engaged in without any form of protection against either pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections.

I never thought it could happen the day we had it. In fact, it was sudden and I could not resist him (Adolescent mother aged 19 and a post secondary school student)

Oyun kee(pregnancy) that was the last thing to wish myself. So when it came I wanted to terminate it by all means, but the boys' head (inner head)will not allow me (Adolescent mother aged 18 and a fashion designer apprentice)

Pregnancy occurrence and relationship with partners and others

The outcome of participants' experiences with unprotected sex came with mixed feelings. For some of the adolescents, the seemingly romantic relationship turned sour with the occurrence of unintended pregnancy. In congruence with the participants' expectations, a number of their partners were unprepared for pregnancy, yet they desire the pleasures in sex. As shown in the literature, the active indulgence in early sex and the non-use of protective measures are connected with societal aversion to adolescent dating and adolescents' desire to keep their intimate relationships secret. Adolescents' engagement in intimate relationships is engulfed in secrecy as they conform publicly by denying their involvement in intimate relationships (Smentana, et al., 2010). However, the occurrence of pregnancy revealed their secret acts and a shift in positions as some of the participants narrated denials and frustrations from their partners.

I told the person who impregnated me, but he refused to answer and never showed up. I stayed with my parents throughout the period of my pregnancy. My father assisted me financially. It was after I gave birth that my partner showed up (Adolescent mother aged 17 and a hairdresser apprentice).

There were a few exceptions in terms of partner denial and neglect due to unintended pregnancy. Four of the adolescents who were living with their partners described how their partners and the in-laws accepted them. A further probe showed that some of the adolescents' partners were much older and financially independent. With parents and partners' support, circumstantial marriage was contracted as described by the participants. This form of marriage entails an emergency arrangement of traditional marriage ceremonies to tie the knots as espoused by two of the participants. It is noteworthy that some of the participants started living with their partners without any marriage ceremony except on the ground that they were pregnant.

I was fortunate in my own case, my partner accepted his responsibility because he trust and loves me. More so, he wanted to settle down (Adolescent mother aged 18 and a petty trader)

My partner took me in and we have since lived together as couples. It was not easy for us initially. (Adolescent mother aged 19 and a post secondary school student).

For a majority of the participants, pregnancy period was unpleasant and undesirable in their relationship with others. Physiological make up of adolescents make their bodies unripe for early pregnancy especially in those below 18 years of age (Braine, 2009). However, physiological changes associated with adolescent pregnancy carries additional social meanings that are synonymous to identity reconstruction and consolidation. Prior to the bodily changes associated with pregnancy, many of the participants narrated how they enjoyed good rapport with their friends, significant others, and other members of their community. Their appearance in social gatherings was not repulsive, but with the pregnancy, their social interactions were redefined. Thus, their pregnancy became a vehicle of measuring their non-conformity to social norms, their identity, and access to avail-

able opportunities to realise their future aspirations. These meanings also provide frameworks through which other adolescents were tutored in the best way to behave. Even after childbirth, the stigma continued despite their on-going self-initiatives at reconstructing their lives with minimal encouragement from their mothers in particular. Their experiences also recounted how a number of community members and even some of their schoolmates held on to their past sexual exploits and used that to define their interactions in many ways:

Immediately it became obvious that I was pregnant, I was sent away from school so that other pupils will not imitate me. This was expected, so I wanted to get rid of it (terminate the pregnancy) at all cost (Adolescent mother aged 16 and a menial worker).

...I will never forget the day my schoolmates humiliated me when I went to my school for my Junior West African Examination Result. Before I knew what was going on, the students started calling one another to come and see me because I was pregnant. (Adolescent mother aged 17 and a fashion designer apprentice).

A number of the participants did not seek antenatal care at a modern healthcare facility, those who went, did that late. The participants' explanations for late antenatal care rest on their condemnation of themselves as deviants from social norms. Some wanted to terminate the pregnancy because they were afraid of earning the social tag 'omo buruku, oni see ku see' (a bad or wayward child indulging in immoral acts). This way of thinking might have effects on their identity and interactions with others.

I stopped going to the church when I noticed that I was pregnant. I was suspended from engaging in some church activities and my partner was invited for questioning. We were both sober and asked for forgiveness. We served some punishments in our churches and our pastors later encouraged us to live holy. I have learnt my lessons. To date, some of our church members find it difficult to believe in us because of our past. (Adolescent mother aged 18 and a petty trader).

Post-pregnancy initiatives aimed at enhancing visibility

The post pregnancy experiences of a number of the adolescents' mothers were with mixed reactions.

The Invisibility of Adolescent Mothers in a Yoruba Community in South-west Nigeria

Two among the participants that moved into their partners' homes described their experiences as a sharp deviation from the assurances received before and during pregnancy. On several occasions, the two participants narrated how their husbands neglected them and failed to care for their own needs and that of their children. The neglect led to series of confrontations and disagreements. With this development, the two participants sought for help from their parents and parents' in-law who mediated into the matter. However, their financial status grew worse as their partners could not provide them with the needed financial support. On few occasions, one of the participants fought with her partner over perceived flirting and cheating with another girl. Her parents' in-laws rebuked her actions and described her as a hot-tempered mother who needs to grow up. This event spurred her into an urgent need to act.

It was a great disappointment as my lover changed suddenly. My mother and one of my siblings gave me N15, 000 thousand Naira (equivalent to 100 US Dollars) to start the sale of Mobile Phones recharge cards. Since then my finance has improved a little (Adolescent mother aged 18 and a petty trader)

There are variations in the visibility efforts of the participants as they struggle to reconstruct their identity and independence. A number of the participants engaged in different economic activities to survive the high cost of living in the absence of social welfare for many Nigerian youths. Child labour has remained a problem in many developing nations (Edmonds & Pavenik, 2005; Togunde & Carter, 2006). With the high proportion of Nigerian children involved in child labour (Togunde & Carter, 2006); this creates additional problems for the adolescent mothers as they struggle with children and single adolescents in market places, and commercial motor parks for customers.

I often struggle with other single youths and adolescents to sell plantain chips to customers at commercial motor parks in this community. Since my baby is just two years, I have to back her and hawk my plantain chips. It has been very rough. (Adolescent mother aged 19 and a petty trader)

With my daughter in my mothers' place, I assist in meeting some domestic chores for some of our church members during school vacations and on weekends.

This has provided me with little money to support my education (Adolescent mother aged 19 and a post secondary school student).

In their visibility efforts and experiences, a recurring challenge in their reposition efforts is the erroneous perception of adolescent mothers by some men as cheap sex commodities. Some of the participants described how some youths and married men wanted them for casual sex. This was hinged on the belief that they became pregnant because they were loose sexually.

I engage in menial work in a canteen in town where a number of commercial bus drivers patronise. Now, two of these drivers have been on my neck for sex and I am not interested (Adolescent mother aged 18 and a menial worker)

There is a university student in my area who wants to be 'sleeping' (sexual intercourse) with me for fun and I know he would never marry me (Adolescent mother aged 18 and a fashion designer apprentice).

Past, present, and the future of their children

A subtle manifestation of agency was brought to the fore as the participants retrospectively assessed their past and present. In their assessments, the Yoruba soft philosophy of determinism was invoked as the participants described their present challenges of becoming a mother too early as a fate. Two of the participants expressed an unpopular but culturally shared view on the role of evil machinations as a likely contributor to the occurrence of unintended pregnancy. Both participants recounted how their background from polygamous families influenced the untimely occurrence of pregnancy. One of the participants unequivocally narrated her stepmother's role in influencing her unplanned pregnancy. The stepmother placed a curse on her to misbehave and dropout of school because she was more brilliant than her stepsiblings were. This view does not indicate a denial of circumstantial and personal contributions; however, a more general position among the participants was that some of their challenges were bound to happen. However, with patience, determination, prayers, and support from the society, the participants expressed optimism that their current efforts could make a lot of difference in enhancing their visibility.

Despite the optimism, there were moments of despair and apprehension as the participants assessed their future and that of their children. A more overtly demonstrated fear was in the choice of re-marrying among those not living with their partners. The chance of securing a marriage later with another man was a worrisome future as they were not sure if the new partner would love them and their children.

It is hard to see someone that will truly love you especially after giving birth and you are still single. Unless you conceal the information at first, but that will back fire with time (Adolescent mother aged 19 and a post secondary school student).

I am afraid of marriage, but I hope to get into it in the distant future (adolescent mother aged 18 and unemployed)

In the same vein, the participants described their social environment as unfriendly for child upbringing. An instance was the increasing desire for materialism among younger people and the inequity in accessing the socially approved means to desired ends especially between children of the poor and that of the rich. Five among the participants described how generational poverty has contributed to their present situation. In their own assessment, poverty incapacitates the mind thereby hindering people's thinking capacity. One among the participants described her lofty dreams of becoming a medical practitioner but lost that to her inability to cope with material lack as she fell into the hands of exploiters. Against the challenging environment and inadequate support, the participants described the increasing cost of living, lack of employment opportunities and skills acquisition centres as worrisome to their well-being and that of their children. In the midst of these challenges, the participants also adopted measures like prayers and active involvement in religious activities in enhancing their visibility.

Discussion

This chapter presents the efforts of adolescent mothers (15-19 years) in making themselves visible within their socio-cultural setting. The emerged findings revealed a continuum of struggles for the adolescent mothers as reflected in the stigmatisation of adolescents' sexuality and uninformed sexual negotiations. This influences the level of invisibility adolescent

mothers undergo before invoking their agency for visibility and identity rediscovery.

Participants' narratives on their sexual history showed a commonality of childhood sexual abuse. The most reported pattern of childhood sexual abuse was the touching of their sexual parts (vaginal) by older males. Often times, they were lured into the act without their consent and awareness. This unbalanced power relations is common with most child sexual abuse cases (Lalor, 2004; Madu & Peltzer, 2000). At this stage, participants' experiences with sex also showed dissatisfaction, betrayal, lost of trust especially when the people they trusted exploited them sexually. However, their dissatisfaction with non-negotiated sex was short lived as some of them continued in this direction by submitting themselves to continuous unprotected sex. This may be associated with the psychological consequences of child sexual abuse (Johnson, 2004; Lalor, 2004).

None among the participants interpreted their first sexual experience as rape even though there were indications of rape as portrayed in one of the accounts. Three of the participants whose partners forced them into sex later reconciled and continued in their sexual relations after their partners pleaded for forgiveness. However, there were those who felt disappointed with life, lost trust in people around and refused to continue with such relationships but formed new sexual relations. In all the cases, participants maintained silence on such sexual events. This is similar to Meursing, Vos, Coutinho, et al (1995) findings in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe that a culture of silence clouds the unwillingness to seek legal redress or professional help in child sexual abuse events. Failure to seek prompt professional help may have psychosocial consequences on the victims as well as their sexual health (Johnson, 2004; Lalor, 2004). The silence on divulging sexual abuse cases may be associated with the presumed negative consequences that public knowledge might have on the child and the family's image and the absence of a culture of seeking redress even in other spheres. For instance, medical errors in therapeutic encounters are often rationalised as divine will.

At the societal level, there have been efforts to increase sexuality knowledge through education (Federal Ministry of Health, 2007). However, at the household level, religious and cultural values are

affecting the acceptability of sex education by some Nigerian parents (Izugbara, 2008). Tackling child sexual abuse by separating science from cultural beliefs and ideology is necessary when addressing adolescent reproductive health concerns. The sexually abused adolescent mothers in this study find themselves in dilemma because of the unfriendly environment and society's hypocritical disposition towards sexuality issues. The society preaches abstinence from sex to adolescents. Yet, participants' accounts showed that those who defiled them sexually were members of their communities. The undue emphasis on 'others' than the 'self' is culturally restricting the needed efforts that could promote adolescent sexual health. Within this context, some of the participants were swept away with the pleasures of sex with little concern for the implications of unprotected sex. Yet, the psychosocial and health implications of child sexual abuse and unintended pregnancy were largely bore by the adolescent mothers than their Significant Others. At the home front, more efforts are needed to complement the existing initiatives aimed at creating, improving and sustaining youth friendly environment for better access to reproductive health services in Nigeria (UNFPA, 2004).

With the emergence of unintended pregnancy, the participants found their experiences traumatic as they confronted their bodily changes with desperation to revise it but with futile outcomes. Participants' active engagement in unprotected heterosexual relations, low or non-use of contraceptives and preference for pregnancy termination is similar to findings from prior studies (e.g. Ilika, & Anthony, 2004; Oye-Adeniran, Adewole, & Umoh, et al., 2004). However, unintended pregnancy is just one among other consequences of adolescents' engagement in unprotected sex with multiple partners (Silberschmidt & Rasch, 2001). There are sexually transmitted infections like the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), which has no cure yet. Okal, Luchters, Geibel, Chersich, Lango & Temmerman (2009) in a study among male sex workers in Kenya report how cultural beliefs direct sex workers into actions that constitutes unreasonable risks. In this study adolescents' act of unnecessary desperation was absent in their attitudes towards modern contraceptives and protected sexual intercourse. Young people remain at the centre of the HIV/AIDS

epidemic in terms of vulnerability and potential for change (UNFPA, 2010).

For many of the participants, their pregnancy became a vehicle of defining their social identity and access to available opportunities. This finding lends credence to earlier findings by Atuyambe, et al, (2005). Social actors imaginatively rehearse other actors' previous and current actions or inactions and form frameworks on which subsequent social interactions are negotiated. The macro-micro subjective interaction depicts clearly how the participants, their parents, and members of the community struggled to maintain the continuum between what is normative and fashionable. This may be seen in the desperation to terminate the pregnancy against all odds among some of the participants. In the Yoruba language, '*Ile mosu*'-is a term that is used in describing women that have given birth but are living with their parents or relatives' homes. This social expectation was depicted in participants' accounts of their parents' disappointments with their unintended pregnancy. To avoid such labels, parents and family members often strive to contract a marriage between both parties by sending the adolescent to stay with the person responsible for the pregnancy.

Hence, in most cases the adolescent mothers are forced to stay with partners that have accepted responsibility of the pregnancy in order to cover shame and explore the possibility of working out a socially acceptable marriage and the legitimacy of the child. The chances that such social arrangements would work may depend on several factors such as the age of the partner, economic status of both families and the willingness of the man to accept the paternity of the pregnancy and the adolescent as a wife. Sometimes some men will accept the child and not the mother. In such an instance, such adolescent mothers earn the label *olomo mi* (Mother of my child) and not *Iyawo mi* (my wife). This may be associated with the level of unpreparedness for pregnancy and an indication that quality of marital relations cannot be based on fertility in marriage alone. While pregnancy may be a ground to establish a marriage, it is not sufficient to sustain the marriage. This may be observed in the reversed proportion of adolescent mothers that moved into their partners' homes in pregnancy but moved out again shortly after child delivery. The findings revealed that after a short period some of the adolescent mothers especially those who never had

any form of ‘emergency’ marriage ceremonies went back to their parents’ homes or a relative place. The choices of living as a single mother becomes more complex with the perception of adolescent mothers as sexually loose beings. Single motherhood is unpopular and is termed ‘*Iya da gbe*’ among the Yoruba people. Such mothers are considered irresponsible and an opportunity to prostitute. If care is not taken, such women are likely to remain single because of the stigma and the social perception that their sexual value would have reduced after child birth.

Among the participants, personal initiatives and engagement in different economic activities are common measures of surviving the high cost of living in the absence of quality network of support. The participants mentioned no formal support. Only a few received informal support in one form or the other from sympathizers. Majority of the participants received qualitative support from their mothers than any other person. This finding supports the Yoruba notion that *ti omo oba dara ti baba, eyi to oba ku die fun ti iya re ni* (the good child belongs to the father while the wayward one is of the mother). The culture places much responsibility on the mother in childrearing. A good mother (*Iya rere*) must aspire towards inculcating virtues and values that will make their children relevant to themselves and the society. Songs, works of art, music, language, and religion among other mediums are employed in perpetuating this cultural view (Makinde, 2004). One among the participants also enjoyed informal support from some members of her church who were sympathetic to her plight. Even in this case, the participant narrated that the support was more of freewill from the members and not a policy of the church. It is understandable that many religious organizations would find it difficult to make it a policy since Christianity for instance frowns at premarital sex (Nweneka, 2007). Thus, making a policy that adolescent mothers should be supported may be translated in some quarters as an overt support for pre-marital sex. Although in the case of this participant, her commitment and active involvement in church activities might have informed the basis of arriving at the conclusion that she has genuinely repented of her past. In addition, it also depends on the way her past has been interpreted by such church members. However, the little form of informal support enjoyed by the adolescent mothers in this study

made remarkable effects on their dispositions to challenges of adolescent motherhood in the community. Largely, no quality form of formal support is available for adolescent mothers in Nigeria (Oye-Adeniran, et al., 2004) and in other parts of Africa (Atuyambe et al., 2005; Mngadi et al., 2003; Moore et al., 2007).

Despite the personal efforts and the limited informal supports, many of the young mothers lamented on the difficulties of becoming a mother at their tender age. There were moments of despair and disappointments as the participants reflected on their experiences. This supports Barker and Rich (1992) finding that adolescent perceives unwanted early childbearing as an event with negative effects. In addition, some of them wished they never had such experience especially with the need to struggle for survival for themselves and their children. This is similar to Atuyambe et al., (2008) findings and supports Sam (2008) report that motherhood in Nigeria is quite challenging. The social economic hardship in Nigeria has made it difficult for an average parent to provide for their households (Togunde & Carter, 2006). To reduce the cost of education, basic education from primary to junior secondary school is free in Nigeria. In addition, in recent times some State Governors have helped with the payments of West African Examination Council (WAEC) fees. This may have immediate financial relief for some households, but sustainable efforts that will empower a number of households to live above poverty and provide for the basic needs of their families are urgently needed. The poverty rate in a number of households in Nigeria has remained focal to the promotion of labour (Togunde & Carter, 2006), and early exposure to unprotected sex and the associated health consequences (Isiugo-Abanihe & Oyediran, 2004; Omokhodion & Omokhodion, 2001, Omokhodion & Omokhodion, 2004).

In interpreting the findings, it is important to note that participants were recruited within a Yoruba community and not from the six Yoruba States in Nigeria. Hence, the findings may not necessarily be representative of the experiences of the larger population of Yoruba adolescent mothers in Nigeria. However, the insights from the participants’ experiences reveal the invisibility of adolescent mothers and inadequate attention to their agency as social actors who are capable of interpreting and reconstructing their realities for enhanced visibility within their cultural context.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In light of the study findings, the prevailing socio-economic and political challenges in Nigeria, are constantly mounting pressures on adolescent mothers at the home front and the public sphere with implications on their psychosocial well-being and that of their children. This represents an additional burden on adolescent mothers as they struggle for visibility after child delivery within challenge environments. However, minimal support from the community and the government will complement their existing initiatives at empowering themselves for a brighter future. Within communities, adolescent mothers can be targeted for economic empowerment and skills acquisition such as provisions to resume schooling after childbirth. Thus, adequate understanding of how social resources influence the likelihood of stressful circumstances occurring during pregnancy and after child delivery; appraisal of these circumstances; the extent to which role enactment is problematic; the ability of individuals to cope; the coping mechanisms they adopt; and the extent to which the stressful circumstances result in negative stress outcomes are necessary. In line with Okereke's (2010) position, some of the existing programmes aimed at improving access to reproductive health services may have achieved a level of success, but more efforts are needed at all levels in addressing the increasing prevalence of unintended adolescent pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections in Nigeria.

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Theme III: Girlhood Interrupted Chapter 20

Girls and Girlhood Interrupted: Two Decades of Statelessness and Militarized Violence in War-torn Somalia

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Somalia and Canada

The protracted political instability and militarized violence in Somalia has filled life with insecurity and all kinds of uncertainties for all Somalis – men and women. Somali girls in particular, are at a very disadvantaged position in this war-ravaged nation as they continue to be the most invisible lot before policy-makers and donors. This Chapter analyzes the negative impacts of statelessness and prolonged civil war on Somali girls. What does it mean to be a girl in a violent and insecure environment? How does militarization affect girls and their girlhood? The analysis is crucial because it enables us to understand the gendered outcomes of state collapse and civil war in Somalia. In this paper, I will examine the specific ways in which Somali girls are affected by the protracted political disintegration and the social upheavals, due to their gender. At a very young age, Somali girls shoulder new roles and responsibilities to safeguard the wellbeing of their families. They are the cooks, cleaners, baby-sitters and income-earners for their families, with no access to education, basic healthcare, or even time to play, while girlhood years waste away. Just like their mothers, these girls are resilient and have developed coping methods to survive in a harsh environment. Despite being resourceful, they have remained socially and economically marginalized and as long as the conflict in Somalia persists, girls will be severely affected.

Introduction

The term ‘girl’ exists in the Somali language, for example, terms such as ‘*gabar /gabadh*’, ‘*dhoocil*’, ‘*foodley*’ are interchangeably used to refer to girl child from 5 to 15 years old. Girlhood known in Somali as ‘*gabadh-nimo*’ - that refers to the state or time which girls experience being girls. Another term is also used

such as ‘*ciyaa*’ and this is used across boys and girls – state of childhood that boys and girls go through. What happened to young girls when the Somali state collapsed in the early 1990s following the deadly militarized violence? In what ways were young girls’ girlhoods experiences were affected and interrupted due to the political and social upheavals? There are not enough research and literature that capture the ways in which Somali women and girls are affected by the ongoing militarized violence in Somalia. The few existing documentations have highlighted women’s vulnerabilities to the ongoing militarized violence.¹ The conceptual framework for this study is a feminist framework that captures the experiences of girls as both victims and survivors during conflict and during recovery. This framework recognizes both the impact of state collapse and militarized violence on girls and the need to examine such effects on girls separate from women’s. In this Chapter, I draw on some feminist scholarship to make sense of the hostile stateless environment confronted by Somali girls in war-torn Somalia.

This Chapter sheds lights on some of the effects of statelessness, the absence of state protection, social services and the ongoing deadly militarized violence Somalia on girls. It is worth noting the militarized violence has also affected Somali boys and it is a research in itself. I am focusing on girls than boys for two reasons: first, unlike boys, Somali girls are in a disadvantaged position in war-torn Somalia and social upheaval. Second, that there are not literatures

¹ Debra Timmons, *The Sixth Clan- Women Organize for Peace in Somalia: A Review of Published Literature*, University for Peace 2004; Judith Gardner and Judy El Bushra, eds. *Somalia: The Untold Story: The War through the Eyes of Somali Women* (London: Pluto Press and Catholic Institute for International Relations); “Neither Safety Nor Dignity”: Rapid Protection Assessment Report with a focus on GBV Mogadishu IDP Settlements INTERSOS Somalia (25-30 October 2011).

that specifically capture the particular ways in which state collapse and armed conflict impacted on Somali girls. Some of these effects include lack of security due to the lack of state protection, education, losing loved ones, shouldering numerous roles and responsibilities, gender-based violence, trauma, early marriages and the loss of having a free time to play as well as the absence of growing up in a stable and normal environment as a girl child. I argue that an examination of the effects of state collapse and armed conflict on girls may yield new and useful insights / policies that will effectively address gender-based violence against women and girls in post-conflict Somalia.

To fully capture the particular ways in which the militarized violence that persisted in war-torn Somalia impacted on Somali girls, it is not only important to identify the aggressors that perpetuated such violence but also the outcomes of their armed struggle waged against the previous military regime that governed Somalia for 21 years. The armed opposition groups that rose up in the 1990s in Somalia were initiated by military and non-military men who waged a deadly military campaign against another masculine / male-dominated military regime that ruled Somalia for over 20 years. Both warring groups – whether they were the opposition and the government groups were driven by power to rule and to defend its power. The opposition groups were organized along clan lines and lacked a political vision to govern Somalia after they toppled down the military regime and this was one of the factors that led to political instability and military violence in Somalia. The leaders of these armed groups whom waged their military war against the military government appealed and mobilized their clan men and women whether living inside and outside Somalia to support their ‘struggle’ – ousting the military regime and restoring a new government where each clan can be part of it. They directly and indirectly promised the Somali people that they would bring good governance, justice, and better opportunities for all and sought the support of their clan men and women and expected each clan members to side with them. In response, the public granted both their financial and moral support to their clan-based opposition movement, with the hope that their lives as citizens would improve. With the financial and psychological support of the public who were mobilized and organized across clans, the clan-based

armed opposition groups were successful in ousting Siad Barre from power. However, they have failed to restore order, and establish civilian government that was to delivery security, development, justice, fairness and democracy for all Somalis. Instead, they subjected the people whom provided them financial and moral supports with violence, killings, lootings and displacement. Thus, chaos, anarchy, lawlessness, militarized violence continue to haunt the people of Somalia.

The collapse² of the Somali state and its institutions in the 1990s has ushered a prolonged period of dangerous statelessness, lawlessness and anarchy for the people of Somalia. The absence of state and the rule of law gave birth to warlords and their armed militias³ who triggered a deadly and prolonged militarized violence that destroyed and maimed many lives (Human Rights Watch 2008). The warring groups in war-ravaged Somalia are many and their diverse violence even continues to affect all Somalis particularly women and girls today.

In Somalia, the aggressors and perpetrators are many and they include: the warlords and their armed militia groups⁴ and now an extremist religious group who uses violence as a tool to control the public and gain power in Somalia. In the 1990s, the warlords and their armed militias organized along clan lines to oust the military regime and did not have any road map to instill a government afterwards. The only positive outcomes of their armed struggle was that the warlords and their militias succeeded in removing the military regime from power in the early 1990s and this has brought an end to over two decades of military rule in Somalia. However, the warlords

² Somalia has been a nation ravaged by militarized conflict for over two decades now and is categorized as one of the most failed state in the world. ‘The Failed State Index 2009’ Foreign Policy, Washington DC, 2009, accessed at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/06/22/2009_failed_states_index_interactive_map_and_rankings, 20 March 2010. The other two counties are Kenya (ranked 14th) and Ethiopia (ranked 16th).

³ The armed militia men used by all Somali warlords were mostly young men who were simply recruited in the name of clans to carry arms for the warlords and fight against other clans who were portrayed as their clans’ ‘enemy’.

⁴ The militia groups constituted young men – some even under aged boys who were recruited by each warlords to fight against other clans who were portrayed as their enemies and to achieve some political goals – to make their clan the future inheritors of post-military political arena in Somalia. Through ‘clan victory’ or establishing the hegemony of their clans, these young men were promised a better life. These young men were mostly uneducated, vulnerable, unemployed, poor and from rural areas who were then armed to teeth to work for their given warlords who hailed their own clan and sub-clans. These young men were used to do the dirty work for their masters - warlords. However, they lost limbs and even their previous lives.

and their ruthless armed militias miserably failed to restore a new government after they dismantled the military regime. Instead, they ended up destroying and looting public institutions such as schools, banks, universities and hospitals that were previously built by the military regime and previous governments that governed Somalia before the social upheavals began in the 1990s. Public institutions and archives were not protected and were deliberately obliterated because they were seen as infrastructures belonging to the previous regime but yet such institutions like hospitals and schools belonged to the people of Somalia and destroying them affected an entire generation to access education and healthcare services as those facilities were reduced to rubble. Leaving millions of Somali people without access to education, healthcare and employment for decades. In addition, the warlords and their ruthless armed militias rampaged through all cities and towns to kill men, women and children. Armed militias committed gender-based violence against defenseless women and girls (Africa Rights 1993).

Defenseless Somali women and girls without state protection became easy target by the warlords and their armed militias. Interviews with women activists in Mogadishu highlighted that “life in stateless, chaotic and violent Somalia became a restrictive, painful and deadly life for women and girls. As armed men belonging to different warlords were targeting other men, women and girls / boys were caught in the cross-fire. Women and girls were affected by the violence perpetrated by armed men when they were directly targeted whenever they went outside to fetch water, firewood outside of their homes”.⁵ Private properties were not spared and were looted which perpetuated the material deprivation and desperation of families and their dependents. Women and men who either owned their own businesses and worked in this sector lost their livelihoods. Thus, this not only affected the ability of mothers and fathers to provide for their families but also impacted directly the welfare of their children including girls. Furthermore, the destruction and over-taking homes from the rightful owners contributed to the pauperization of many households and eventually facilitated their displacement from their homes, which reduced them homeless and

destitute families in the midst of chaos and violence. One young woman interviewed in Nairobi explains how this has affected her and her family “before the conflict, my family lived in a four bedroom house. But when the conflict broke out, we could not stay in our home and left it and ended up living in a tent provided by a local relief organization. We became homeless in our own country and when we had our own home built by my father”.⁶ Furthermore, The violence and the insecurity which the warlords and their militias perpetuated displaced a large population from their homes to dangerous territories such as refugee camps in neighboring countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Yemen, internally displaced camps inside Somalia causing many deaths, deadly injuries and sufferings. Children – girls and boys were forced to grow up in refugee camps located closer to the borders of Somalia where they and their parents encountered new security challenges. Some of those children, who are now adult refugees living in urban areas such as Easleagh, a poor district in Nairobi, Kenya continue to be affected by the ongoing instability in Somalia that once was home to them and their parents.

The militarized violence in Somalia persisted for over two decades despite the numerous attempts made by the international community since 1990s to resolve the violence, reconstitute a state and build peace in war-ravaged Somalia (Brons 2001, Mazrui 1995, Menkhaus 2003, Lyons 2004, Luling 1997, Lyons and Samatar 1995, 1992, Rotberg 2004). As the conflict dragged for decades, children were born in these volatile decades and become grown-ups in a prolonged militarized environment. The tragic of this conflict in Somalia is that an entire generation was born in a stateless nation and inherited life without birth certificates, access to proper educations, healthcare and safety. This has not only prolonged the sufferings of the Somali people including girls but has intensified their vulnerabilities. Reasons why all the attempts – local and international intended to end the conflict Somalia failed are due to internal and external competing interests and local actors. Some local actors became spoilers and did not play their roles to strengthen and promote previous peace processes. As result, they became barriers to peace and

⁵ Interview with Asha by the author in Mogadishu, September 2011.

⁶ Interview with Nimo by the author in Nairobi, October 2011.

perpetuated the militarized and protracted violence in Somalia. Because of that, the people of Somalia, particularly children including girls have been living in a harsh life with deprivations and have been coping with no access to basic social services and security.

This article examines the particular ways in which girls in war-torn Somalia were affected by the disintegration of Somali state following the protracted violence. While there are studies on the effects of militarized violence on girls in some African countries such as Congo, Uganda, Liberia, Mozambique and Sierra Leone captured ways in which young girls are victimized by warring groups (Amnesty International 2004, Arnston and Boothby 2002, McKay and Mazurana 2004a, 2004b, 2001, McKay 1999, Nordstrom 2004, Human Rights Watch 2002), there are not many literatures that capture the specific ways in which Somali girls are affected by state collapse and the protracted militarized violence. When international and local aid agencies discuss about the effects of the protracted conflict in Somalia on Somali people that Somali girls are often lumped together with women and male children as one group. Somali women and girls are not homogeneous group. In order to fully understand the specific ways in which Somali girls are negatively affected by the collapse of the Somali state and the protracted militarized violence, it is paramount to carry out disaggregated research on Somali girls, through this, we may be able to capture the differential experiences of Somali girls as well as the impacts of the protracted militarized violence on them. It is the goal of this Chapter to produce a piece of literature that specifically examines the particular effects of Somalia's protracted conflict on girls and their girlhood experiences. The next section discusses the methods used to gather information from five young women who are urban refugees in the capital city of Kenya – Nairobi and five female activists in Mogadishu, Somalia.

Methodology: Capturing the Voices of Girls affected by Violence

Qualitative research methods were used within a feminist framework to gather information and data from Easleigh (Nairobi, Kenya) and Mogadishu, specifically in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Reinhartz (1992: 19) underlines, interviewing is one effective way to access women / girls' knowledge and opinions:

Interviewing offers researchers access to people's ideas, thoughts and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher. This asset is particularly important for the study of women because in this way learning from women is an antidote to centuries of ignoring women's ideas altogether or having men speak for women (1992: 19).

Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2007: 118) posit that in-depth interviews allow the researcher to both seek and understand the "lived experiences of the individual". The open-ended interview techniques I used allowed women to participate actively and speak for themselves. This Chapter particularly explores how the collapsed Somali state and the militarized violence affected young girls residing in urban areas of what used to be Somalia. In this Chapter, Somali girls are provided the opportunity to express themselves as subjects with their own voices. It is based on the findings of interviews conducted with ten adult Somali women in Easleigh⁷ District in Nairobi, Kenya from August to September 2011. The ten participants were randomly selected and agreed to partake in the interviews. At the time of the interview, the young women noted that there are 25 to 27 years olds. Nine of them were born in Mogadishu, Somalia and fled from Somalia together with their families in the mid 1990s to Kenya. When the state collapsed and the civil war emerged, that four of the five young women were at the age of 5 and 7 years old. One of the ten was born in a refugee camp in Kenya. In the interviews, the ten young women were asked specific questions: how old they were when the Somali state collapsed and the civil war broke out? What happened to them and their families? and how were they affected by the social upheaval? The open-ended questions enabled them to provide their views of the impacts of state collapse and the civil in a more detailed way. All the interviews with the 10 participants lasted 40 to 50 minutes and were conducted in their homes in Easleigh, Nairobi, Kenya.

In addition, five female leaders of women's organizations operating in the capital city of Somalia, Mogadishu were sought out and interviewed to shed light on the particular ways in which women and

⁷ Easleigh is a district in Nairobi where many Somalis including refugees from Somalia live. It is also called little Mogadishu. Many Somalis have established businesses and it is known to have uncollected garbage, open sewages and terrible roads but it is a vibrant business zone where Somalis and non-Somalis do their shopping.

children were affected by the prolonged militarized violence. These leaders and their organizations have been delivering social services to their respective recipients in their areas of operations. These leaders were selected to provide their opinions and views on how Somali girls were affected by statelessness and the militarized violence that have been raging in Somalia for over two decades now. For security reason, the actual names of the participants including the young women in Easleigh, the leaders of these organizations as well as the names of the organizations who are based in Mogadishu will not be revealed in this Chapter. Fictitious names are used to hide their actual identities. Discussions with women activists in Mogadishu point out that women and girls in Somalia are disproportionately affected by the on-going violence in Somalia. One of the women activists asserts that:

Women and girls are directly and indirectly affected by this deadly conflict. Initially, they [women and girls] were directly targeted by warlords and their armed Mooryaans – armed militias due to their status, gender and clans. Now, they are affected by the extremists groups, women are restricted from participating in economic activities, where girls are forcibly married to unknown men who are part of this group. On the top of that, the violence which are perpetrated by men whether they belonged and still belong to opposition groups based on different ideologies affect women and girls directly and indirectly. Somali women and girls are the faces of the most violated groups and most vulnerable groups of this senseless militarized violence.⁸

Forced marriage is one of the human rights violations committed against young Somali girls. I argue that the conflict and statelessness in Somalia have produced specific gendered outcomes for Somali women and girls. It is thus essential to not only acknowledge but also recognize the specific effects of the social upheavals on Somali girls and women in particular.

The ten young women interviewed in Easleigh, Nairobi, Kenya are part of a large statistics of Somali refugees who have been residing in Kenya since mid 1990s. This is an example that the protracted conflict in Somalia continues to affect an entire generation and robbed them a promising future and reduced them stateless bodies without access to healthcare,

education and citizenship in the host country - Kenya. The ten young women interviewed together with hundreds of thousands other Somali refugees in Kenya continue to wait for a better change, a security in their country, Somalia. As they 'wait' for things to change for better in Somalia, they struggle to survive in an environment where there they cannot access basic social services. The ten young women interviewed are undocumented refugees living in the capital city and have no access to education and basic healthcare due to their refugee status.⁹ They made the choice not to register and reside in the refugee camps that are located between the border between Kenya and Somalia. They described the Dadaab refugee camps as insecure and geographically isolated camps and decided to reside in Nairobi where they have no access to assistance from aid agencies. They noted that life in Easleigh is not full of roses but at least they can access the support [financial and social] from other Somalis including relatives who are living in Nairobi and overseas. For example, all of them work in stores owned by other Somalis in Easleigh where they get less than \$ 50 a month. Three of them live with their parents where the remaining seven reside with relatives. All of these women want a better future. They do not want to be in limbo. They want to have access to education, healthcare, freedom of movement and other opportunities that will improve their future for better. The first section of this article presents what life used to be for young girls prior to the state collapse and the militarized violence in Somalia. In doing so, the reader can have a sense of the environment in which young Somali girls were girls or growing up. It also provides a clear picture what protection and opportunities were there for girls in a peaceful and stable Somalia.

Mohanty (1988) and Iman (1997) argue that women from the global south cannot be presented as a unified category and as passive subjects. Such critiques are crucial, and it is therefore paramount to avoid the production of descriptive literature that: "discursively colonize(s) the material and historical

⁸ Interview with Ubah by the author in Mogadishu, October 2011

⁹ The refugees living in refugee camps such as Dadaab that are located closer to Somalia's border have some limited access to healthcare and education. Insecurity is a major problem in these camps and even continues to affect the overall security of refugees including women. Urban refugees such as the five young women interviewed chose to reside in outside of the camps and thus, they cannot access any social services either offered by the international aid agencies. They are on their own and must cope living in the capital city – Nairobi without any safety nets.

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heterogeneities of the lives of women in the global south, thereby producing / representing a composite, singular ‘Third World’ women” (Mohanty 1992: 74). I have worked hard in this Chapter to avoid essentializing and homogenizing Somali girls’ experiences. I argue that Somali girls are not homogeneous group. For instance, girls who are born to a middle class family residing in urban areas are different from their counterparts who are born to pastoralist, poor and rural families who have no access to basic social services and education. Middle class girls growing up in urban centres where infrastructures and institutions are there, had more access to schooling, basic healthcares and free time to play than girls in the rural areas who have no access to education and have no free time to play because they contribute to the productive work of their families’. Rural girls in pre-conflict Somalia had less access to education and health care services. This is due to the concentration of all state institutions and services in the urban areas – particularly in the capital city – Mogadishu. In pastoral community, girls herd the small animals, collect firewood and water, wash the dishes, clean their family compounds and babysit their younger siblings. Due to these socio-economic, access to social services, class and geographic residency differences [urban vs. rural], Somali girls experienced girlhoods differently prior to the conflict. Because of class, socio-economic geographic location, education of the parents differences, thus, I argue that Somali girls as heterogeneous group have been affected by the collapse of state and its institutions. The following section illustrates life before the militarized conflict for Somali girls.

Girls and Girlhood in Pre-Conflict era in Somalia

In pre-conflict Somalia, according to women activists interviewed that Somali girls were ‘girls’ and experienced all stages of girlhood in un-interrupted way. The existence of the rule of law, security, and a functioning state, and the availability of publicly funded primary and secondary education, public health all enabled Somali girls to experience a safer girlhood without insecurity, trauma, displacement, burdens and responsibilities placed on their shoulders. Discussion with women activists in Mogadishu noted that Somali girls at that time [in pre-conflict pe-

riod] had state protection and grew up in a ‘healthy’¹⁰ way where they experienced their childhood life to the fullest way. In pre-conflict Somalia, girls were growing up in a stable and forward-looking and stable society. Due to existence of the rule of law and security, girls were visible in primary and secondary schools, at the beaches particularly on Holidays including Fridays and in the streets playing with their peers. Prior to the deadly conflict, according to the young women interviewed in Easleigh, Nairobi, that many girls and their families did not experience injuries, traumas and displacement. Due to the ongoing violence, children including girls continue to be the casualties of the structural violence. They grew up with their parents and siblings without fear and structural violence. This is not to say that there were no abuses, neglect and violence against children in Somalia before the conflict. The militarized violence in Somalia brought a large scale of violence against children including girl child. I argue that for girls to go through healthy girlhood stages that it is pertinent that they grow up in a normal and safe environment where they can access education, healthcare, and protection from violence. In war-torn Somalia, a safe environment has been non-existing and because of this, millions of Somalis girls’ girlhood experiences were hindered. Participants noted that prior to the lawlessness and militarized violence, Somali girls were free from fears, vulnerabilities, threats and insecurity.

To illustrate how life was for Somali girls in pre-conflict Somalia, women activists and young women interviewed argued that girls had access to state protection, free primary and secondary education and basic healthcare services. For instance, Fahma asserts that:

Before the war broke out, I had my parents and siblings alive and healthy. I had my childhood friends in our neighborhood, other friends whom I went to Madrasa¹¹ and attended a publicly funded primary school where I shared lots of laughter and joy with my classmates and friends. As a girl in Somalia at that time, I had time to play with school and neighbors friends’, access to basic health care. Before the war broke out, the future

¹⁰ Healthy in the sense that there were normalcy, security and available social services provided by the government which provided some sort of security to all Somalis including children.

¹¹ Madrasa is a Koranic school where young children both boys and girls are sent to learn and memorize the entire Koran.

seemed somewhat promising for my family and I, but the war changed our lives dreadfully.¹²

The above quote illustrates the kind of environment in which girls including boys were growing up in pre-conflict Somalia where there was stability. Life before the conflict was life where children like Fahma could live life in a peaceful way where they have their parents, siblings, friends, a normal life with safety, a time to play, laugh and most of have access to schools. Furthermore, Farhia describes life in a stable Somalia and what was life for her and family:

I was the fourth child of my family of eight. We lived in four bedrooms house filled with family members and relatives. We were so happy. My father worked for the government. We were not rich but could afford for the most basic stuff. We all attended schools – of course there were free schools. Those years were the happiest years of my life. We were all healthy, happy and lived under the same roof. I was growing up in an environment where I was growing up with my family members, extended relatives and my friends. Life was simply great and the future seemed bright and promising.¹³

In a stable environment where schools were functioning and other social services were available, a girl like Farhia, her girlhood was not interrupted and was able to experience it. For Farhia, the war destroyed parents' access to employment, and dispersed family members to different directions. Haweya who was born eight months before the civil war broke out in the early 1990s points out:

When I asked my older sisters what was life like for them as girls, they stated that there were no pains, traumas and burdens, that my older sisters and her age-mates grew up in a normal environment, free from structural violence. Because of this, they were able to go through all stages of girlhood in their given society. My generation was not so lucky as my sisters'. We were not provided the security and opportunities to experience healthy and promising girlhoods. I simply grew up in refugee camp and later shifted to Nairobi where we remain vulnerable and insecure. My generation is a generation subjected to many insecurities, traumas and deprivations.¹⁴

An entire generation is lost as the militarized violence raged in every corner of Somalia claiming many lives and displacing Halima's generation and forcing them to grow up in a refugee life and unknown territory. It is worth noting that not all Somali girls before the war had access to opportunities and security as Halima's sisters. There was also material deprivation that may have affected specific girls from experiencing normal girlhoods in a stable Somalia. Somalia according to the United Nations Human Development Report (1998), an annual report that measures the progress of countries ranked Somalia before it collapsed among one of the poorest countries in Sub-Saharan Africa which may directly and indirectly affected young Somali girls to access to education, healthcare and other opportunities. What is different in the militarized violence period though is that the structural violence, the absence of state, state institutions, the absence of social services, the rule of law perpetuated socio-economic and security of a large population and in some cases, destroyed the lives of Somali girls and denied them to experience to grow up in a stable environment, experience a joyful and promising girlhood.

The five young women interviewed were asked about what was it like for young girls to grow up in a violent, lawless and stateless environment? How did the collapse of the Somali state and civil war interrupted their girlhoods and over all affected their lives? The following section examines ways in which Somali girls were negatively affected by these two tragic events: state collapse and civil war.

Lives Turned Upside Down: Growing up in a Militarized Environment

When the Somali state collapsed administratively and functionally and when lawlessness and everyday violence became the norm in Somalia, the lives of Somali people including girls were turned upside down. Hamza, an activist who lives in Mogadishu pinpoints that:

The moment the armed opposition groups including their leaders decided to take up arms and fight against the military government set the way to the destruction of our lives as people and overall the nation. Many lives were senselessly destroyed. The 'lucky' ones who survived were put in a hell life without life saving services. The destruction and looting of public institutions and

¹² Interview with Fahma by the author in Nairobi, Kenya, September 2011.

¹³ Interview with Farhia by the author in Nairobi, Kenya, September 2011.

¹⁴ Interview with Haweya by the author in Nairobi, Kenya, September 2011.

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sectors by armed groups signified the end of a normal life and the beginning of nightmare in Somalia. The killings, maiming and rapes of innocent women and girls became occurring crimes in Somalia.¹⁵

The militarized violence affected in every aspect of people's lives, from family wellbeing, ability to earn livelihoods, access to education, healthcare and free from gender-based violence. A nightmare that continues to affect the lives of young girls and their girlhood passages today.

One of the young women interviewed asserts that “when salaries of our parents who were employees of the public and private sectors ceased, our parents could no longer afford to feed us let alone cover our health and education costs. We children in those households became the most vulnerable groups in those families”.¹⁶ In any settings, children are so dependent upon the care of their parents and when the war destroyed the ability of Somali parents to provide for their families, it directly affects the wellbeing of the children including girls, particularly girls' access to nutritional meals, schools and healthcare services.

The protracted militarized violence in Somalia initiated by warlords destroyed the lives of young girls and their girlhoods. Discussions with young women in Nairobi and activists in Mogadishu argue that the actors that initiated, funded and participated physically in the civil war destroyed Somali girls' right to live in a normal and safe environment. Ramla, a young refugee woman who fled Somalia with her family when she was only 8 years old in the mid 1990s to Nairobi, Kenya underlines “this senseless war was a war initiated by adult men who I would say were selfish and were driven by their own and their clans interests to simply ruin the lives of all Somalis and our nation to rubbles. For me, including my generation will not forgive them for what they put us through. They ruined our lives and future. Entire generations were really destroyed by this senseless violence”.¹⁷ It is worth noting though that not all men participated in this conflict. In fact, some men and boys are also victims of this militarized violence. Like women and girls, they were affected by it but differently from women and girls though. When the

rule of law collapsed and when violence and chaos became the order of the day, the lives of women and girls were not only turned upside down but also they were targeted by armed groups due to their gender and clan affiliations. Ramla questions the motives of the armed opposition groups and states “why did the armed opposition groups turned against innocent women, men, girls, men and boys who needed their protection the most? Why did they destroy institutions such as schools and hospitals? For me, the war waged by armed opposition groups was simply intended to cause massive effects on Somali people including women and young children”.¹⁸ Ramla asserts that women and girls were targeted because they symbolized the attackers' ‘enemy’ belonging to the opposing clans¹⁹ that the armed groups were fighting against. The failure of armed groups of protecting civilians have led to major human rights violations including the rights of children and women in Somalia. Another young woman who was displaced by the on-going violence in Somalia also points out that “the actors and groups that initiated this never ending violence and who blocked every efforts to bring an end to it, I would say are warlords, armed groups including religious groups and they are responsible for the many lives that are being destroyed, the hopes and dreams that are being shattered and future of many generations that are being ruined. They [all armed groups] should be held accountable to all their wrong-doings.”²⁰ The breakdown of the rule of law led to those with the weapons to violate the rights of the unarmed population including girls. To illustrate the particular ways in which women and girls were disproportionately affected by, for example, in conflict ridden Somalia, girls' access to schools dwindled, they lost state protection, lost loved ones including parents, siblings, friends, experienced never-ending gender-based violence, trauma, and were forced out of their familiar neighborhoods, cities, towns and were forcibly displaced to dangerous internally displaced and refugee camps inside and outside So-

¹⁵ Interview with Ramla by the author, October 2011, Nairobi, Kenya.

¹⁶ The membership or the positions in which women and girls occupy in the clan system is lesser when compared to men and boys. Men and boys are given a very high position in the membership of their clans – simply they are men who have the ‘legitimacy’ to extend their clan identities to their children. Where in women and girls, they are considered to be members without privileges and values and cannot pass their clan identities to their offsprings.

²⁰ Interview with Fahma by the author in October 2011, in Nairobi, Kenya.

¹⁵ Interview with Hamza by the author in Mogadishu, October 2011.

¹⁶ Interview with Sadia by the author in Nairobi, September 2011.

¹⁷ Interview with Ramla by the author, October 2011, in Nairobi, Kenya.

malia. Many young girls died of hunger, died from the wounds subjected to them by armed groups and where many lost their innocent childhood and girlhoods due to lawlessness and violence produced that wreaked havoc on their country. Trauma is another burden where young girls have been experiencing as they lost their sense of safety and normalcy in their lives. The lucky ones whom survived from the violence, become overwhelmingly burdened with numerous roles and responsibilities at a very young age without any adequate support. For example, some girls and boys have become the primary earners and caregivers for their siblings when they lost their parents and primary guardians leaving them no time to experience safe childhood and girlhood. There is no available statistics on the percentage of young ones who have taken over the previous roles of their parents and further research needs to be done to capture the exact percentages of girls who became the heads of their households. Others with one of their surviving parents have become the house managers of their families as either of their mothers and fathers ventured out to earn meager livings to secure the food basket of the families. They become the baby-sitters, the cooks and the cleaners for their families. Due to these abrupt changes brought by the social disintegration and the on-going militarized violence, Somali girls for the last two decades, were completely denied the right to grow up in a normal, stable and enabling environment where they could experience their rightful girlhood and access opportunities that would enabled them to have a secure and promising future.

The absence of social services such as education in war-torn Somalia meant no opportunities for young girls to obtain primary and secondary schools. The conflict together with the disintegration of institutions such as schools including when their parents lost employment at the public and private sectors, diminished Somali girls to have a bright future and thus restricted them to the domestic arena. In addition, the insecurity that emerged as the Somali state and its institutions particularly the collapse of security institutions continues to perpetuate Somali girls' vulnerabilities and marginalization which will inevitably intensify their invisibility and disempowerment in the post-conflict period and beyond. The next section of the Chapter delves into the ways in which

the conflict and the absence of education system, resources and security denied parents to send their children to publically funded schools.

The Disintegration of Education Institutions and Loss of Girls' Education in Somalia

The education system in Somalia completely disintegrated in the 1990s, resulting in an illiteracy rate that remains extremely high and an absence of formally organized education services for the past 21 years (UNDP 2001). Somalia ranks the lowest in the world in terms of school enrollment (UNICEF 2003) due to state collapse and the protracted militarized conflict. Shamsa who was then only 12 years old notes that "I had the opportunity to attend primary school in Somalia, this was before the violence broke out. We (children) used to wear uniforms and attended these schools free of charge. In those short years that I attended schools in Somalia were wonderful years. I had classmates and friends whom were all attended same schools. As a young girl, I had the opportunity to learn many subjects".²¹ Prior to the conflict, schools were run and managed by the previous military government and any child regardless of his and her family's socio-economic background had access to free primary, secondary and tertiary education. Educating girls was mandatory in pre-conflict Somalia and this enabled many parents to send their daughters to schools free of charge and benefit from state-sponsored education. This is not to say that there were no barriers that affected girls to access education in pre-conflict Somalia. When armed groups including militias turned their guns and mortars against schools and universities marked the death of free education in Somalia right after the Somali state disintegrated. In the capital city, schools – primary and secondary buildings once provided free education and hope for many children from poor families mostly got looted and became contested zones of violence and led to their total shut downs. For instance, in Mogadishu, armed militia groups fought against each other to gain control over school buildings and higher education institutions to either loot and establish their military bases and assert their control over such landmarks. As a result of the

²¹ Interview with Shamsa by the author in Nairobi, Kenya, September 2011.

militarized violence waged by armed groups, teachers who taught in primary and secondary schools and taught children many years fled for their lives in order to escape from the rampant violence in Mogadishu. As teachers' salaries and other benefits halted due to collapsed state and when the conflict spread to many parts of Somalia, school aged children including girls were reduced to generations without access to free education. Dekha, a young girl whose education got interrupted by the social upheavals states that "right after the conflict between government troops and the opposition groups broke out, it was no longer safe for children to attend schools. Everything shut down and walking outside of your home became extremely dangerous, let alone going to schools for the entire day. Both teachers and students did not feel safe to go to schools to teach and learn".²² Security and free education are prerequisite to accessible and affordable education for young girls. The disintegration of the state and the violence stymied Somali girls from accessing security to attend schools. According to Asha "everyone including children who were attending schools thought that the violence between opposition groups and the government troops would not go on for a long and that one of them would become the victor and then we would go back to our normal life including going back to school".²³ The interruption of children's education was thought to be a temporary but became a prolonged reality which denied millions of Somali children the security to attend schools and continue their primary, secondary and tertiary education for over two decades. The protracted conflict not only denied Somali girls a safe environment to attend schools and access free education that was once provided by the state. The absence of schools and education have ushered a life without certainties and promises for many girls in war-ravaged Somalia. The interruption of many valuable years of schooling due to the political disintegration and social upheaval, Somali girls will be the most disadvantaged groups in the post-conflict stage. Hamza, an activist in Mogadishu, a mother of three teenage girls describes how the conflict destroyed one of the most important institutions that are essential to training future generation:

The perpetrators of the militarized violence destroyed institutions such as schools and universities. The armed men did not protect those schools and universities because they were seen to be symbols of the military regime and decided that they had to be destroyed. It was very unintelligent thing to do! Those schools whether they were primary and secondary including universities belonged to the people of Somalia and not the regime. These schools were the spaces where our children were supposed to be educated, trained and prepared for the real world. Instead, they were destroyed, looted and used as military bases and housings for the armed militias. The destruction of schools affected children's access to publically funded schools. There were no schools where parents could send their children to get primary and secondary education.²⁴

The destruction of schools during the conflict in Somalia meant the destruction of decades of investment in such institution restricting Somali children including girls to access to free and affordable primary and secondary education for the last two decades. This raises question such as: how does the loss of education particularly access to primary and secondary education impact on girls growing up in a violent and restricted environment? As publicly funded schools disintegrated, the educational needs of thousands of young children including girls became un-met needs for over a decade now, leaving once young girls who are now adults – without primary, secondary and tertiary education, putting them in adversely disadvantaged position in their society. Access to education to girls is pivotal to their development and growth. I argue that education is a key to girls' empowerment. However, access to free and affordable education remains an obstacle for millions of girls in war-torn Somalia. It is through schools when girls' characters are shaped and grow up with confidence and hope. Schools also provided a haven where girls can escape from domestic chores and find time learn and play with their cohorts. The social upheaval and the lawlessness denied Somali girls to attend schools safely and continue their primary and secondary education for the last two decades. Access to free education freed girls from domestic chores and enabled them to be children without adult responsibilities. As schools were either destroyed or became bases for the warlords and their armed militia, Somali parents could

²² Interview with Dekha by the author in Nairobi, Kenya, September 2011.

²³ Interview with Asha by the author in Nairobi, Kenya, September 2011.

²⁴ Interview with Hamza by the author in Mogadishu, September 2011.

no longer send their children including girls to go outside and attend schools. As the incomes of each family living in a war-torn environment dwindled that parents could no longer afford paying the tuition of all of their children to attend a newly established private schools in the end of 1990s in many areas of the country. In many cases, parents choose their sons to be educated than their daughters. By not emphasizing on girl-child education, Somali girls will be severely disadvantaged. In addition to the protracted insecurity, parents became hesitant to send their daughters to schools and universities fearing that their daughters may be subjected to specific gender-based violence including rape. Such hesitation may even persist in peace time and this may jeopardize girl-child's education in post-conflict period. Because of these barriers mentioned above, Somali children particularly girls continue to be without access to free and affordable education. Educating Somali girls will contribute to the recovery of their communities from the ashes of war and provide them a nation-rebuilding role to play in the post-conflict processes.

The following section discusses the abrupt changes in gender roles and relations in war-torn Somalia and how this impacted on Somali girls. As the livelihoods of parents become interrupted due to the social upheaval and the disintegration of school system, many parents were forced particularly mothers who became the primary income-earners for their families to rely on the assistance of their young daughters, thus limiting young girls to grow up as young girls without shouldering heavy responsibilities.

Mommy's Right Hand Helpers: Becoming the Beasts of Burden

Women in conflict zones end up shouldering numerous roles and responsibilities, including those that were carried out primarily by their male counterparts in the pre-war period (El Bushra 2000, Karam 2001, Onyejekwe 2005, Tickner 2001, Vickers 1993, Zeigler and Gunderson 2006). Adams and Bradbury argue that in militarized conflicts:

Gender relations may change as social systems are disrupted, with women shouldering added burdens, but gaining increased status and independence at the same time (1995: 35)

The collapse of gender relations creates space for women and girls to make a valuable contribution to their families and community's survival and recovery. The political and economic disintegration following the militarized violence in Somalia have led to the death of primary income-earners and loss of livelihoods. Women, men and their families became penniless and vulnerable due to these losses. This brought drastic changes in gender roles in war-torn Somalia (McGown 2003). Somali women have responded to state collapse and the militarized violence through the adoption of new roles and responsibilities to address the needs of their families and communities. Like other young girls in militarized violence, out of necessity, Somali girls learned to enable their mothers to adopt survival mechanisms to safeguard their families' survivals. In female-headed households due to the loss of fathers and husbands, divorce, young girls have been enabling their mothers to continue to be the main primary income providers for their families. Even in families where the husbands / fathers escaped from the violence and who lost their livelihoods, Somali women were able to become the primary breadwinners for their families through the support of their young girls. These new roles and responsibilities shouldered by Somali women enabled them not only to feed their families but also to emerge as new entrepreneurial actors in their communities. In every city, town and village in Somalia, women constitute the majority of petty traders and small businesses. Such responsibilities do hold physical and psychological ramifications for Somali women living in a restricted environment in terms of security and resources.

Gender roles and responsibilities are fluid and may change dramatically in times of social upheaval (Gardner 2004, Large 1997, Richter-Devroe 2008). For instance, due to the social, political and economic disintegrations in Somalia that, the rigidly defined gender roles and responsibilities have loosened. Thus, it forced Somali women to take on new roles and responsibilities without spousal and state supports'. By taking new roles and responsibilities, women gained new status and became the primary breadwinners for their families at the expense of their daughters. Somali women as mothers were able to fulfill such new roles with the assistance given by their young daughters whose education got interrupted. In

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other words, it was young Somali daughters / girls who had no schools to attend due to the disintegration of schools and the insecurity that enabled their mothers to earn a living outside of their homes. These young girls without no schools to attend and who became confined to their homes took over previous roles performed by their mothers at their households. Fatuma, a mother of four daughters and two sons living in Mogadishu asserts that:

I was very fortunate to have older daughters who freed me from doing household chores. Because of their help, I was able to go outside of my home and earn a meager living for my family. I simply could not afford to stay at home and do nothing. I am a single mother and I must go out to bring resources for my family. I am also concerned about the future of my daughters. I want them to have an adequate education but I cannot afford to send them to schools because it requires money to do that.²⁵

Habiba, another mother in Mogadishu who has two daughters and three boys states “the security situation in Mogadishu did not allow me to send my daughters outside of the home. It was not safe to send girls to schools. Because there were no free schools. So I kept them in the home so that they could be safe. My children helped me with the house work and their help was very pivotal to our survival as a family”²⁶ It was the little girls and boys that end up helping their parents and siblings to cope with the insecurities and challenges that come out during conflict. I argue that Somali women and girls not only did they experience constraints but also gained opportunities to self-organize and respond to state collapse and militarized conflict.

The lack of resources, schools and insecurity were the three obstacles that denied parents to enable their girls to continue their education in war-torn Somalia. As a result, young girls growing up in war-torn Somalia with no opportunities to attend schools and safety available outside of their homes became the cook, the cleaners, the babysitters, the guardian of other family members and their house managers. Young girls in Somalia whether they are rural and urban inhabitants understood their responsibilities at

very young age and provided unremunerated work for their mothers and siblings. Shamsa, a young refugee woman living in Easleagh, Nairobi, Kenya illustrates that “I am the first born of my family whom constituted my mother and six siblings, my mother openly informed that she is depending on my help and that I have responsibilities to cook, clean and take care of my younger siblings. I did what my mother asked me to do. It was a lot of responsibilities for sure for a young girl like me to carry on her back”²⁷ Dekha underlines the difficulties she encountered as a girl who was growing up during the social upheaval particularly the burden that was placed on her shoulders by her mother because she was the older girl of her family. According to her:

For me, being a girl in war-torn Somalia was extremely difficult experience. I did not have access to education and mostly we stayed at the house. I was burdened with number of domestic chores. I used to wake up at five in the morning to lit the fire, make the *canjeero*²⁸ for breakfast, do the laundry, bathe my younger siblings including making beds and sweeping the rooms, then prepare lunch and dinner and wash the dishes. I performed house chores very late at night. It was exhausting and if I failed to fulfill these roles properly my mother would really discipline me. My parents could not afford to put me into school and besides it was not safe for me to go out because there was so much violence in the community”²⁹

Despite their subordinate positions and the imposition of heavy roles by their own mothers, young girls including Dekha and Shamsa enabled and assisted their mothers to become resourceful and resilient actors for their families and community. During the protracted militarized violence, young Somali girls became their mothers’ right hand helpers. Hamdi, who was a young girl when the Somali civil started in the 1990s notes “my mother constantly used to remind me that I am her ‘*gacanteeda midig*’ – her right hand helper to take over all the housework she did so that she can sell vegetables at the market”³⁰. Being assigned as a right hand helper comes with responsibilities and shouldering such responsibilities become burdensome for young girls and may deny

²⁵ Interview with Fatuma by the author in Mogadishu, September 8, 2011.

²⁶ Interview with Habiba, a mother in Mogadishu, Somalia, September 9, 2011.

²⁷ Interview with Shamsa by the author in Nairobi, October 26, 2011.

²⁸ A Somali pancakes like that are eaten for breakfast in Somalia.

²⁹ Interview with Dekha by the author in Nairobi on October 26, 2011.

³⁰ Interview with Hamdi by the author in Nairobi on October 27, 2011.

them to attend schools. Discussion with a Somali education pioneer – Hawa Aden³¹ in Galkacyo who has been delivering free education for young girls including orphan ones in Puntland for over two decades noted that when she approached parents and guardians of orphaned girls in many rural areas in Puntland, Somalia to educate these orphaned girls at her schools in Puntland that the response of some parents to this educationist was “these girls that you want to educate perform very important household chores for our family, they cook, clean and take care of the younger ones, so who will do these chores if you take these girls to schools?”³². I argue that the protracted militarized violence together with the collapse of state institutions including schools and poverty not only diminished parents’ ability to send their girls to schools but also increased the perception that girls are only good to do domestic chores in times of conflict. Such perception can indeed jeopardize Somali girls’ access to education that in the long run can impact on their literacy, socio-economic freedom, independence and empowerment. The next section discusses how the militarized violence claimed the lives of young girls parents, leaving them without the love and care of their parents. The loss of the primary care-givers and guardians - parents particularly in times of militarized violence, alters the lives of young girls and exposes them to insecurities and vulnerabilities.

Losing Parents: Losing Love and Protection

In a stateless and lawless environment, armed groups in Somalia unleashed atrocities against defenseless civilians including women, men, girls and boys. There was no functioning state that could protect civilians from the atrocities committed against them by armed groups. Thus, innocent civilians including children lost loved ones, lost their livelihoods, access to basic services and were forcibly displaced from their homes and forced to reside in internally displaced and refugee camps inside and outside of Somalia for the last two decades. Somali girls like women in general continue to be affected by the ongoing militarized

violence. Discussion with adult women who were young girls when the civil war broke out in Somalia in early 1990s highlighted that the violence robbed their loved ones – parents, relatives, friends and neighbors and turned their lives upside down. One of the young girls interviewed in Nairobi asserts that “when you parents whom you need them the most at that tender age are taken away from you, then life become unbearable and difficult to pursue in an environment when adults made the country we were growing up unsafe and dangerous. You can imagine the level of vulnerabilities that young girls feel when their most protectors and caregivers get killed and are all left alone with their younger siblings without any adequate support and protection”.³³ In addition, discussion with women activists in Mogadishu noted that most of the children have witnessed the killings of their parents whether were caused by straying bullets and shelling fired by warring groups. By witnessing the death of their parents and siblings, these young girls experienced a life-long trauma and do not get any psychosocial assistance to cope with such traumas. This has left orphaned girls and boys without parental love, protection, guidance and care in a volatile environment, thus, destroying the hopes and dreams of these young ones to be raised by their loving parents. The death of parents led to a new life under the care of close relatives for the orphaned ones. For instance, the few lucky ones of these orphaned children including girls ended up being taken by their close relatives such as aunts, uncles and grandparents. These relatives of the orphans with their own responsibilities to look after their own children provided shelter, food and protection to their orphaned nephews and nieces. However, for Samira, “nothing can replace my parents’ love and care. There was no single day that passes by which I did not miss my parents”.³⁴ Others who are not so lucky became their own parents and guardians surviving in a harsh and violent environment. For the case of the latter group, there are no relatives that were willing to take them in and provide support to them. Thus, such orphans simply had to rely on themselves in a materially deprived and insecure environment. Life in war-torn Somalia particularly

³¹ Hawa Adan is the founder and the Executive Director of the Galkacyo Education Centre for Development and Peace (GECDP).

³² Interview with Hawa by the author in Galkacyo, Puntland on January 2006.

³³ Interview with Asha by the author in Nairobi, Kenya, September 2011.

³⁴ Interview with Samira by the author in Nairobi, September 2011.

being orphaned, with no parents who could raise them, care for them, and protect them that life for the orphaned girls become one filled with full of hardships, insecurities and struggles. The loss of parents placed the younger girls in vulnerable and insecurity positions. For example, they were forced to become the primary caregiver and providers for their younger siblings without resources and support. As a result, survival becomes a priority where young girls become burdened to eke out meager incomes for their siblings and other family members.

The following section of the paper examines the ways in which state collapse and the on-going militarized violence produced gender-based violence for young girls. The loss of state protection, breakdown of the rule of law, the disintegration of security, access to basic social services and the loss of livelihoods opportunities intensified the vulnerabilities and susceptibility of women and girls to all kinds of violence. The militarized violence in Somalia was not simply a violence waged by armed groups against one another over power struggles and resources. It is also a violence that is waged against women and girls due to their gender and position in the patriarchal society that is ravaged by protracted violence. One of the features of the militarized violence in Somalia is the gender-based violence committed against defenseless women and young girls.

More Vulnerabilities and Violence against Girls in a Militarized Environment

Armed conflicts are gendered and affect women in different ways than men (Karam 2001, McKay 2000, Mertus 2000, Tickner 2001, Zeigler and Gundersen 2006). Feminist scholars have highlighted the gender-based violence that women and girls experience during periods of armed conflict (Anderlini 2000, Cockburn 2004, de la Rey 2000, Korac 2006, McKay 2000, McKay 1998, Moser and Clark 2001, Mertus 2000, Jacobs, Jacobson and Marchbank 2000, Nordstrom 2000, Lindsey 2005, Onyejekwe 2005, Rehn and Sirleaf 2002, Yuval-Davis 2004). The protracted militarized violence in Somalia, I argue is a masculine-militarized violence that affected both men and women differently. For instance, the militarized violence provided the license to some men who were armed to teeth to murder other men, but also to target women and girls by violating their

bodies and dignity – committing gender based violence. Such violence has also emasculated men to fulfill their roles towards their families. In addition, the impacts of the protracted violence in Somalia can be described through the old African adage “when two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers” and such adage very much applies to war-torn Somalia. However, the elephants that perpetrated the violence in Somalia are armed warlords and their militias and the grass that the two elephants fought on is the people including girls. The conflict perpetrated by armed men with their deadly weapons made women, children and un-armed population as their grass or ground where they waged their deadly fighting. The defenseless Somali population including women and girls have been the grass where warring groups and their armed militias have been waging their violence on - - thus, impacting them in a very profound way.

Feminist scholars who studied about gender-based violence carried out in conflict zones note how rape is often used as a weapon of war to destroy the dignity and integrity of particular women and girls belonging to specific ethnicity (Brownmiller 1994, Enloe 2000, Korac 2006, Lorentzen and Turpin 1998, Musse 2004, Puechguirbal 2003, Seifert 1994, Stiglmeier 1994, Olujic 1998, Ticker 2001, Turshen 2001, UN 2000, Zeigler and Gundersen 2006). Lindsey notes that in times of conflict, women are deliberately targeted because “...they are perceived as symbolic bearers of the future of their cultural and ethnic identity and are responsible for future generations of their community” (Lindsey 2005: 23). McKay points out that women and girls are also subjected to abduction, domestic slavery, separation from families and forced prostitution with rebel leaders (2000: 564). While men and boys are also victims of violence (Moser and Clark 2001), women carry both the physical and psychological trauma of these particular forms of violence, including rape (Large 1997). In Somalia’s context, all warring groups used rape as an instrument to weaken and destroy their ‘enemy’s’ women and girls. Somali women and girls’ bodies become an open field where warring groups could violate their bodily integrity and possess them as spouses by force. The lack of state protection and the absence of the rule of law, Somali women and girls became victims of rape and forced marriages perpetrated by armed groups. Certain armed men hailing from specific clans and region of

Somalia are accused for abducting and forcibly marrying young women from minority groups including light skinned Barawaan and reer Xamar women and girls. Majority of women and girls whose bodies were violated by armed men often belonged to minority groups who could not defend themselves from dominant and armed militia groups. It is also worth noting that women hailing from dominant clans encountered gendered based violence. However, minority women and girls were more vulnerable than women hailing from dominant clans, and because of this, they were more likely to be subjected to rape and other gender-based violence than women belonging to dominant clans. In war-torn Somalia's context, minority women and girls are often described due to their vulnerabilities to human rights violation including rape as '*loomo ooyayaasha*' – literally meaning those if they are killed, maimed and when their rights are violated by dominant clans that there will be no one who will come to their aid, defend them and shed tears for them and because of this, they have neither protection from the wrong-doings of armed groups nor access to justice and reparation. Dominant clans and sub-clans whenever their women and girls are violated by another dominant clan, vengeance becomes an inevitable when similar crime is committed against women and girls belonging to minority clans that there will be more likely that there will be no reprisals, thus, enabling the perpetrators to walk free and re-violate the same vulnerable women and girls over and over. Discussion with women and men in Mogadishu and Nairobi, Kenya indicated that some armed militia groups took possession of young beautiful women and girls hailing minority groups³⁵ and took to their clan territories and forced them into marriages. These young women never consented to such forced marriages and did not have any protection mechanisms or institution that could protect them from such looting. Without their consent and wishes, young women ended up being forced to become wives to armed men who looted their family assets and killed their loved ones during the war.

The safety for Somali children to play has been absent for the last two decades. Due to the prolonged

violence, the right to play in a safe environment has been non-existent and a right that has been denied to Somali children including girls. The following section demonstrates how the social upheaval eroded a safe space for children to play.

The loss of the Right to Play: Girls living in Militarized Violence

It used to be common in pre war Somalia particularly in the capital city of Mogadishu to see girls playing outside of their homes in the afternoons including Fridays. The sight and the sound of children including boys and girls playing outside of their compounds signified the existence of security and stability within those given communities. It also indicated that girls in pre-war Somalia enjoyed some free time to play as children. In pre-war Somalia, the children of this war-consumed nation had the right to play without being affected by the violence perpetuated by armed adult men and boys. There were specific games which young girls played including: *Gariir* – one stone is thrown up in the air where other stones restored in a small hole is brought outside of the hole, the player picks one stone and puts the rest of the stone back into the hole. The other game often played by girls include – *Gabley Shimbir* – some sort of dancing where girls sing and dance – waving and stretching out their arms. Another popular game often played by girls is – the *Xarig* – jumping with ropes. *Dhudhuumashoow* – hide and seek. All of these games provided Somali girls to be girls in their own environment. Playing times in a safe environment enabled the players – in this case the girls, a time to have fun, play with friends, neighbors and most of all be themselves – as young girls. The protracted militarized violence obliterated the safety for children including girls to play outside of their homes. Streets that were once filled children including boys and girls playing different games became deserted and empty as the shootings fired by many armed groups shower the streets and the sky. Haweya who experienced the loss of a safe environment to play when she was a very young girl outside the home during the civil war asserts:

When armed men and young men took over the city with their guns, then, the right to play and safe spaces diminished for us. You can imagine how terrible that has been for young children – boys and girls due to

³⁵ Minority groups such as Barawanis and Benadiri who are light skinned compare to the majority of Somalis. These groups have no armed militia groups and did not participate in the civil war. They constitute the most vulnerable and violated groups in war-torn Somalia.

the insecurity were no longer to play as free children without fear, without bullets falling on their heads. The sounds of shootings and straying bullets that on daily basis killed innocent adults and children forced thousands of children to hide in their families' compounds. Fear and trauma became the companion of children, and I was one of those scared to death children in war-torn Somalia.³⁶

In the words of another young woman whose right to play as a young girl was affected by the militarized violence states:

The civil war and the absence of state meant for Somali children a life without joy, happiness, and full of insecurities. We lost everything including the safety to play. I remember, as children in Somalia we made our toys and were very creative and played a lot before the conflict and social upheaval started. Due to the insecurity, we were more concerned about securing our basic survival, play and venturing out outside of our homes became risky business we could not afford to try. It is a miracle that we survived from such tribulation. Both Somali adults and children are traumatized and need to receive counseling and other psychosocial support.³⁷

The Somali conflict took away the leisure and safety for Somali children including girls to play outside of their homes and at their neighborhoods' streets.

Conclusion

This Chapter makes a contribution to the existing literature on the impact of war on girls in conflict zones. It elaborates the ways in which the prolonged and deadly militarized violence that came out of Somalia's political disintegration in the early 1990s impacted young Somali girls as a particular group of the larger society. The protracted militarized violence in Somalia continues to destroy the lives and future of young girls. It also eroded their safety, access to social services including education and made them susceptible to specific gender-based violence. Somali girls have lost their parents who were the primary income-earners. Surviving parents have experienced a loss of livelihoods and this has placed heavy responsibilities on the shoulders of young girls to assist their struggling parents to make ends up in times of violence.

The two tragedies [state collapse and militarized violence] also produced specific gender-based violence, deprivation and vulnerabilities for young girls in Somalia. Somali girls lost access to education, health-care services and the opportunity to grow up in peace and normalcy. The protracted militarized violence also forced thousands of Somali children out of their homes and overall country. The young women interviewed constitute thousands of Somalis who were forced to leave their country and search for security in neighboring countries such as Kenya. Even those who escaped from violent Somalia, continue to be in limbo without access to education, healthcare and other opportunities. The current insecurity, political and socio-economic situations in South and central regions of Somalia continue to affect the well-beings of Somali children including girls.

Despite the effects of the protracted state collapse and militarized violence on girls, Somali girls have coped with gender-based violence without the support of state. Somali women and girls are not only victims of the militarized conflict, but also actors, survivors who endured insecurity and social deprivation for over two decades now.

Protection of Somali girls is important to their long-term personal growth and their overall empowerment. Promoting the rights of the girls including to right to grow up in a secure environment, access to education, healthcare, state protection, and the right to play is urgently needed in war-torn Somalia to reverse over two decade ridden with violence, deprivation and insecurity. It is essential that to place the needs of Somali girls at the centre when planning national recovery programs to ensure that their specific needs are addressed in the post-conflict stage.

³⁶ Interview with Haweya by the author in Nairobi, Kenya, September 2011.

³⁷ Interview with Nimo by the author in Nairobi, Kenya, September 2011.

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Theme III: Girlhood Interrupted Chapter 21

Visible Girl Invisible Lesbian/Mizrahi: Gender, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Israel

Yael Mishali

Israel

Mizrahi and *Ashkenazi* are categories of ethnicity that serve to classify the Jewish-Israeli population into two distinct groups. The term *Mizrahi* refers to Jews who immigrated to Israel mainly from Arab and Muslim countries, while the term *Ashkenazi* refers to Jews who immigrated to Israel from western European countries, as well as English speaking countries in the Americas. Like *Black and White*, *Mizrahi* and *Ashkenazi* are cultural categories that hold class and economic value, as well as both negative and positive symbolic meaning. These categories serve the Israeli-Ashkenazi hegemony in determining the social standing of Ashkenazis and Mizrahis, and in defining the hierarchy and power relations between them. This article examines the potential meanings of *Mizrahi* ethnic origin in shaping the sexuality of lesbians in Israel. I consider the accessibility of *Mizrahi* women to sexual and gender possibilities, by accounting for the effect of the marginal status of *Mizrahi* people in Israeli society in constructing familial models while examining whether there is a place reserved for *Mizrahi* women in the masculine white queer identity. To this end I focus on texts of *Mizrahi* women and women of color while incorporating my personal narrative in order to avoid ethnic or sexual essentialism.

“Ata Chayav Lamut Alay” – “You Must Love Me” was the first *Mizrahi* song I listened to on my own, initially the Hebrew version and later in Moroccan. Prior to that I had never chosen to listen to *Mizrahi* music of my own free will. Like many of my friends, whose ethnic origins were irrelevant, I believed that *Mizrahi* music was weepy or something to joke about. The first time I let myself listen to a *Mizrahi* song repeatedly was while working on a drag show. On stage I was as Moroccan as I could be, in dress, movement and voice, before I was ready to be so in

real life. I believe that even if we view drag as reversal, it may bear an autobiographical quality allowing us to express desired sexual or ethnic corporeality that may or may not correlate with our born gender or ethnic origins. Through a song that presents a *Mizrahi* woman to whom it is clear that there is no man who can resist her, I wanted to make a double passing – from someone who looks like a straight *Ashkenazi* woman to the *Mizrahi* *Femme* that I am, who by perfectly imitating the language of women who preceded her, entices imagined butches. Only after the performance, when there was no longer a reason to memorize the song and I still heard it played over and over again in my head, could I admit that it aroused in me what I thought I had willingly hidden.

Like Chicana lesbian Cherrie Moraga, I identify primarily as “my mother’s daughter” (Moraga 2000). Similar to the way that Moraga talks about the danger and excitement involved in placing the words “lesbian” and “Chicana” in the same sentence, for me to say that I am a *Mizrahi* lesbian is also considered a paradoxical achievement. Moraga recognizes that writing brought her back to her family, but education and consciousness separated her from them, compelled her to leave home and made her a stranger in her own community. Like her, I understand that what marks me as different within my family is not just lesbianism, but also writing about it. Like her, I write with my family over my shoulder, and even if I cannot share my writing with them, I know that my writing allowed me to love them from a place that had previously been only unexpressed pain. Even if my parents never hear my lectures or read my work, and even though I had to distance myself from them and that which is similar to them in order to be here today, there is something in this that they could understand.

Queer models - even if developed within a white, western discourse - may allow for a return to what was previously cast aside due to racist exclusion. Within the framework of queer thinking, which praises all that deviates from the norm, Mizrahism, like femininity or masculinity, may serve as a theatrical performance of those who deviate through voice or color. Gloria Anzaldúa, who is situated on the racial, geographic and sexual crossroads, proposes considering the borderlands as a queer space that prevents the restriction of ideas within rigid boundaries and allows tolerance toward ambiguity, contradictions and constant transformation (Anzaldúa 1987). I suggest that by successfully adopting the look or voice of a woman, who is inherently white, Mizrahi women who pass as Ashkenazi undermine the necessity for an ethnic hierarchy. When Mizrahi women pass as Ashkenazi, whether by adopting physical characteristics or a particular manner of speech, it may be analogous to the way in which butch lesbians pass as men or femme lesbians pass as women. In each case, the normative role is performed by someone who is inherently incompatible for the job.

When I say that I am Moroccan, people immediately ask me, “Really? 100 percent?” And when I confirm, they marvel, occasionally even saying, “Wow, I couldn’t tell by looking at you,” because an Ashkenazi appearance is always considered an achievement. It is customary to think of skin color as a biological given, but some of us spend our entire lives in the shade, hiding from what could expose us as impersonators. When my mother and I went out in the sun together, she would get brown and I would burn, as if my body couldn’t endure that color and everything it stands for. Not knowing how to absorb the burning brown, and in an act of survival, I would shed my skin. I would also tame my curly hair and give it a proper, clean look. People would say to me, “With your hair up, you look classy.” I knew this actually meant that there was something wild, dirty and uncontrollable about our hair.

According to Ella Shohat, only a personal document that defines me, for example, as a Moroccan Israeli, can place a complex identity on the map of identities, an identity that doesn’t have to “whiten the Mizrahi stain” and choose between Jewishness and Arabness (Shohat 2001, p. 245).¹ Mizrahis were

forced to adopt a new, homogenous identity that necessitated the destruction of the self and required many of us to erase our bodies. The Mizrahi body became an enemy, in color, appearance, dress, accent and hand gestures. Through the Ashkenazi gaze that we all internalized, “Mizrahism” symbolized something inferior and repulsive, and at the same time identified most of us as “Others”, as objects of a fantasy about sensuality, innocence and submissiveness. The fear of being categorized as Mizrahi led many of us women to lighten and straighten our hair as a means of self erasing and survival in a society that worships beauty and sexuality defined by a white, European order. The epithet “Shchordinit” – Namely - Blond Wannabe”, served to remind us that our black roots would always reappear.

My mother always wanted us to get our hair straightened. Ever since I can remember she saved newspaper clippings and reported the latest updates from the hair stylist on hair products or hair straighteners. Ever since I was a little girl, my mother, who was fascinated by the beauty of women with straight hair, would tell me that our hair was a calamity, and blow dry her hair straight. When I came out of the closet at the age of 16, I cut my hair short, intertwining ethnic and sexual stereotypes – lesbians have short hair and Moroccans have hair like steel wool. The first time I wore my hair down was four years ago, as a femme lesbian.

According to Moraga we design our dark femininity through our mother’s body and her history (Moraga 2000).² If I wanted to formulate a physical-feminine ancestry and describe my connection to gender through my mother’s relationship with her body and the bodies of women in her family, might I risk perpetuating the stereotype? Am I not creating a renewed essentialism of the Mizrahi woman who is forever an exotic, limitless body? On the other hand, does the fact that I am trying to formulate coherent thoughts on the body and sexuality only prove how Ashkenazi I have become, how far removed I am from my mother’s “true” culture?

When I was a child, my brother and I studied at a religious school in *the projects* in Petah Tikva. My brother, who is slightly less white than I, wasn’t able to pass as Ashkenazi, perhaps because everyone

¹ See also: Shohat, 1992, 1999, 2003, 2006.

² See also: Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981.

called him “Mishali,” but mainly because he didn’t learn early enough that he couldn’t speak in public in the same manner that we spoke at home. Without a clear explanation, my brother, who was a fairly good student and enjoyed learning, was transferred to a vocational class. When my parents asked why, they were told that he was a troublemaker. I remember him being a good boy, who gave me a ride to school every day on his bicycle, but he sounded like a troublemaker, and when he tried to object to the move he was told that his behavior only proves that he belonged in a special class. When my brother was about to get married, he and his wife decided to *Hebraicize*³ their last name. My brother swore that his children would not relive his experiences. His daughter, who inherited her mother’s brown skin, goes to preschool with a “modern” Ashkenazi name.

The writings of Moraga and Anzaldúa propose a language of borderlands, a “bastard language” that insists on blending two languages, expressing a commitment to communicate with both sides of the self - the white and the black, the lesbian and the straight (Moraga 2000; Anzaldúa 1987). In the words of Dror Mishani, Mizrahis’ Hebrew is “a language that fears erring”, a language that hears its mistakes before they are made (Mishani 2004, p.87). When I speak a proper language I sound arrogant and when I speak a lower language I prove my inferiority. Like Ariella Azoulay, I too felt the burden of “reading all of the books” especially those I don’t understand (Azoulay 2004, p.164). The academic language wasn’t hard for me to acquire due to the habit I developed of mastering that which I don’t understand, recognizing that what is important would always be stated in a language detached from what was familiar to me. When I struggle to use the correct language, I revert back to being the girl trying on her mother’s high heels, never walking straight, exposing my excessive desire for the white and pure language that my fingers or mouth might contaminate.

For me, Hebrew was always an orphaned language. In elementary school, occasionally I’d blurt out, “My name is Ya-el,” but I quickly learned to say Yael. My mother said all names with an emphasis on the first syllable, and everything according to French pronunciation, but after I used the word “fautille” in-

stead of couch and “intersol” instead of storage - one too many times, I learned that not only don’t the Moroccan accent and pronunciation sound smart, they are even considered linguistic errors, and I started listening to my mother through a permanent filter – silently correcting her, lest her mistakes be ingrained in me. Outside the house I heard many words that I didn’t completely understand, but I knew exactly how to say them. Eventually I succeeded in passing - an Ashkenazi name was written on all letters addressed to me – Mishali was given a new spelling, without the guttural “ayin.”

A light-skinned Moroccan’s admission of her ethnic origin involves waiving the transparency privilege granted by her fair skin and actively pointing out her deviation. Mizrahi women’s reclaiming of their past, in their insistence upon reconstructing what had to be erased in order to acclimate to the Israeli-Ashkenazi identity, undermines their successful transition and is similar to the manner in which Sandy Stone calls on her transsexual sisters to oppose passing as biological women, which entails waiving their gender-sexual history (Stone 1991). As Pnina Motzafi-Haller clarifies, we are not interested in creating a female-Mizrahi history reliant on essentialist, gender and ethnic categories, but rather in pointing out that Mizrahi women have a shared history in Israel (Motzafi-Haller 2005).⁴ The stories of Mizrahi women can reveal a process of *Mizrahi-zation* and *Ethni-zation* that made female immigrants from a wide range of countries and social backgrounds into “Mizrahi women” – as part of the process of geographic, material, social and cultural exclusion. She notes that even when the history of women began to be written in Israel, the writing continued the canonical male framework, styled by poles of traditionalism vis-à-vis modernism, disregarding the systematic class and ethnic oppression. As long as public activity continues to constitute an exclusive measure for feminist activity, the actions of Mizrahi women, who were limited to the domestic sphere, are erased from history.

Ashkenazi-ation, when Mizrahis appear to be Ashkenazis, can be a kind of passing, undermining the correlation between physical appearance and ethnic origin, and even reveals that survival prac-

³ To change the original “foreign” name (first or last name) to a Hebrew name, either using its literal meaning in Hebrew or another Hebrew word.

⁴ See also: Motzafi-Haller, 2001, 2004.

tices in hegemonic institutions, like academia, are always white-Ashkenazi. One should question the substance of the term Ashkenazi-ation. Who is obligated to confess that she is in fact Ashkenized? Isn't this directed at all intellectual, successful, logical, rational, reasonable Mizrahi women? Isn't the rise of the term Ashkenazi-ation an actualization of a racist view intended to put the Mizrahi woman back in the kitchen, bed or street corner? Is "smart Moroccan" such a vulgar oxymoron that it can only be explained through artificial reclamation of ethnic or gender identity? Can I be an authentic Mizrahi woman only by adopting the Mizrahi stereotypes? Will I ever be able to be a Mizrahi woman when I am neither married nor pregnant, but a feminist lesbian? Would I be here today if I spoke my mother's Hebrew? And can I be a Mizrahi woman when I am not brown, warm, brimming with street smarts and joie de vivre? Isn't Ashkenazi-ation a derogatory epithet that serves as a tool to promote shame and guilt among Mizrahi women, similar to how "aggressive," "frigid" or "masculine" are applied to feminists and lesbians who have stepped out of their place?

According to Anzaldúa, shame is our born identity (Anzaldúa 1987). We are ashamed of the fact that we need your "white" approval. Shame was one of the first words I learned in Moroccan: "Ch-shuma, Ya-el, you can't leave the house like that," or "Don't let them hear you." What does being Moroccan mean? Is being Moroccan being Mizrahi? In our home, being Moroccan meant being "Mziana" – a beautiful, delicate woman but also "Mkucha" – a strong woman who knows how to get what she wants, even sly and difficult, someone who rules the house, but also knows how to cook and clean. Doesn't being Moroccan mean perpetuating the extreme female stereotype, one who shouts and is hotheaded – a woman who is always menstruating? A Moroccan woman is one who was raised to be "Laarosa," a wife and mother, but, contrary to some Mizrahi women, being a Moroccan woman often means being light-skinned – meaning being Mizrahi at home and Ashkenazi outside the home.

The marginal status of Mizrahi Jews in Israeli society oftentimes leads to the creation of very conservative gender roles and family models that serve as a defense mechanism, immune to irregularities, which may induce further exclusion. While Shohat

raises the construction of a contradiction between feminism and Mizrahism Audre Lorde shows that feminism is perceived as treason and lesbians are considered ones who deny their color, leaving many trapped between white racism and black homophobia (Shohat 1998; Lorde 1984). Nevertheless, coming out of the closet in a Mizrahi or black family is oftentimes viewed as coming out against the family, its good name and family values in general.

Looking feminine summoned me to the threshold of the dreams of my mother and her sisters, as well as other female family members who, since I was a child, have said to me "I shall dance at your wedding." Since I was 18, the age at which my mother got married, she has been measuring the growing gaps between us. "At your age I was already married. At your age I already had three children and was pregnant with the fourth." She also fails to understand why I have been at university for so many years. My family understands obtaining a teaching certificate and being home in the afternoon when the kids get back from school.

Mizrahi lesbians suffer not only from heterosexual oppression by the family and Mizrahi community, but also from ethnic oppression by the queer community. What place is reserved for Mizrahi women in the western, white, male, queer identity? Can queer identity be Mizrahi? For me, being Mizrahi is maintaining connection to my family. It is hard for me to believe that a queer approach to identity can explain my choice to my parents – can I tell them that I'm sacrificing everything they consider sacred for an identity that isn't an identity? If I would tell my mother that my identity isn't permanent or homogenous, wouldn't my statement be viewed as an answer to her prayers, that there is still hope that I'll soon want a husband and children?

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who recognizes that coming out of the closet is a privilege linked to ethnic origin and geographic and economic conditions, criticizes the act of coming out of the closet as a practice that reproduces the Homo/Hetero dichotomy as contradictory and polar categories (Sedgwick 1993). We must ask: Who has the privilege of staying in the closet? If my mother wed at the age of 18, and her mother got married at the age of twelve, and every time I've fallen or gotten hurt since the age of three I've been told, "It will all blow over by your wedding

day,” the option of staying in the closet will only be given to me when I’m married with five children. The Mizrahi woman, who many times consents to conventions of traditional female appearance, is obligated to justify her deviation from them, but can that really be considered coming out of the closet? Coming out of the closet is a foreign, western term among Mizrahi families, and for many of us the decision to live as lesbians entails leading a double life. Even those who decide to deal with their family knowing won’t usually make theoretical declarations, but choose to let the facts speak for themselves.

While Sedgwick states that a majority of the homophobic oppression is enforced through contradictory claims, like the decree to hide and reveal sexuality (Sedgwick 1993), within the Mizrahi family sexuality is both a taboo that shouldn’t be mentioned, while on the other hand the expectation of starting a family at a relatively young age makes it a subject of conversation. Aside from the basic difficulty that derives from the fact that parents often aren’t fluent in the hegemonic language – Hebrew – even the alternative discourses that define and conceptualize identity, like feminist or queer discourses, constitute another foreign language inaccessible to those outside of academia and far from the elitist-cultural discourse. It is likely that the construction of homosexuality as a secret was especially successful among ethnic minorities. A discourse expressed through terms of knowledge and individualism remains closed to whoever marries in order to leave the house and have children. There are no secrets here – everything is out in the open and there’s nothing to know. When I told my mother that I couldn’t be with men because I wasn’t attracted to them and because I didn’t like it, she said that I was spoiled and that I need to stop being so selfish.

Since I was a little girl, you told me over and over about the day you came home, you were in seventh or eighth grade, and Grandpa came into the room and opened your backpack, took out your textbooks and threw them in the garbage. He said you had no money and that you must get a job. From that day on, you never went back to school, despite the fact that you were a good student and loved to learn. You started working at a bra factory. Whenever you would tell me this, I would change the end of the story. I would go back and take the books out of the trash,

wipe them off and air them out on the windowsill. Later we would put them in your backpack or open them and do homework together.

Merav Arielli says, “I want to talk about my mother. To soothe her scars and allow myself to separate from her fate” (Arielli 2004, p. 189, my translation). Her words echo Moraga’s belief that every daughter starts to write out of loyalty to her mother, but she must free herself from this loyalty when it starts to punish her. If Lorde claims that women respond to racism and that their response is anger, this anger was passed down to us by our mothers for what happened to them, and was sometimes even directed towards us (Lorde 1984). Being a Mizrahi feminist means loving my mother and forgiving her for her rage, by understanding that the only power she had was over us, her children. I know that my mother saw only two options: to oppress or be oppressed. Therefore I can only suffer the knowledge and power that were prevented from her because of her gender and ethnic origin. To be a Mizrahi feminist means to recognize my privileged place compared to my mother and not to judge her for things that she never had. Being a Mizrahi feminist means preserving my mother’s feminism, angry that it isn’t considered feminist because it only took place within the confines of home. Being a Mizrahi woman is a queer process because it forces me to report the context in which my identity was formed and the conditions that allow or erase it.

When my mother returned home from work, two older brothers would be waiting for her, and by the door was a small basin in which she was supposed to wash their feet. Every time you entered the house, you were supposed to be a sister who is a mother, like in Bialik’s poem, because your mother didn’t have the time or energy to take care of everyone and you, the older girls, had to take care of the children and men of the house. Your sisters took on this role and when it was their turn, they would carry out the task silently or while softly humming or by swallowing what had once been dignity. But when it was your turn, you said no. At the time and place, it didn’t sound that way. Sometimes it sounded like a basin overturning and water

⁵ Haim Nachman Bialik (1873- 1934), was a Jewish poet who wrote in Hebrew and is considered one of the first, and certainly the most influential, of Modern Hebrew poets. Bialik is widely recognized as Israel’s National Poet.

spilling and furious shouting in Moroccan. Sometimes it sounded like your hurried footsteps and then a door slamming. Sometimes it sounded like threats and blows. Sometimes it sounded warm, like crying.

Israeli feminism, like its American counterpart, assumed that racial or ethnic tensions are irrelevant to the feminist struggle, and even jeopardize female unity and solidarity. Henriette Dahan-Kalev states that the feminist movement in Israel presented a critical and superior position towards the world from which Mizrahi women came, a stance that condemned the patriarchal, traditional lives that many of them lived (Dahan-Kalev 2005).⁶ As a result, Mizrahi women found themselves trapped between traditionalism and Mizrahism and the feminist call for sexual permissiveness, celebrating sexuality and gaining control over their bodies. If they chose to maintain their traditional lifestyle, they were considered primitive, and if they abandoned that lifestyle, they were considered promiscuous – cheap women lacking morals. The Ashkenazi feminists' position created a double binary – between the modern, western world, allegedly open to the advancement of women, and the traditional, Mizrahi world, which imprisons its women.

Shohat criticizes the feminist expectation that women from all sectors will only talk about the male oppression in their community, without regarding the oppression that they face due to their ethnic origins or sexual orientation, and without addressing the tension and pressure between women as a result of these differences (Shohat 1998). She stresses that one must consider the context and location of the woman, which require a complex consideration of questions of race, gender and nationality. Thus, for example, for Mizrahi women to join the work force is an act of survival that does not allow financial independence, and therefore undermines the liberal, feminist assumptions that work is an indication of feminist liberation. Employment opportunities for Mizrahi women often preserve their lower class and dependence on their husbands. The patriarchal gender divide is given additional ethnic validity when Mizrahi women fulfill their gender obligations, from which Ashkenazi women can allow themselves to escape, both inside and outside their homes.

After she got married, my mother started to work as a nanny, to bring home some money. I remember her coming back from job interviews bitter, saying once again they claimed they needed a nanny, but they actually wanted a cleaning lady. She would say, "I'm not a cleaning lady or a maid, and if that doesn't suit them they can find someone else. Where will they find someone like me, with my experience and references?" She knew how to put a quarter teaspoon of cinnamon powder in their mouths to ward off a cough, and to put a hot oil-soaked cotton ball in an infected ear, and to rub *Arak* liquor on their bellies to stop cramps, and to gargle salt water to kill the germs, and to turn food they didn't like into something tasty, or to make them take their feet off the new table. There you always had to smile and speak quietly and patiently and answer to the name "Aliza⁷," and even if they were younger than me, I knew they were telling you what to do. At home you were different. You wouldn't get off the couch if you didn't have to. You would send your words throughout the house, sailing on a ship of shouts or in one concentrated scream.

As Sedgwick stresses, there isn't one particular paradigm that oppresses and another that liberates, therefore we need conceptual and strategic flexibility (Sedgwick 1993). While in terms of queer theory, the traditional wedding constitutes a symbol of the celebration of compulsive heterosexuality and sexism, as Shohat elucidates, in the Mizrahi space, family weddings constitute a personal-communal site that allows the celebration of the erased culture in a way that subverts existing cultural boundaries and allows one, for a moment, to forget what had to be forbidden and denied (Shohat 2001).

When I was a girl, you said to me: "When I was your age, I would go out a lot too." She would go out dancing with friends at the *Karmoniyeh*⁸ almost every night, stealing the new clothes Marseille bought for herself, going to a friend's house to get dressed. You told me that before Dad, there was a guy who came to pick you up on his motorcycle and everyone would run to the windows to see who it was. He would wait for you outside with his shiny hair and heavy jacket and you would run out, with your long legs, and you'd paint the town red, you in a white skirt

⁷ Her original name is Alice. "Aliza" is considered a Israeli version of that name, and it's literal meaning is cheerful.

⁸ A dance club in Casablanca.

⁶ See also: Dahan-Kalev, 2001, 2003.

and him with his black eyes. But it wasn't serious with Gilbert, you said. He was your brothers' friend, and when they wanted you to marry him, you said that you'd choose your man. You met Dad in Israel. After a month in the country, when you lived in the *Amidar*⁹ neighborhood in *Ra'anana*¹⁰, someone stole your laundry off the drying rack, after all of your gold was stolen on the boat to Israel. So when you and Dad started dating, he bought you everything at *Kol-Bo Shalom*¹¹ Mall, and took you out dancing every Saturday at *Café Noga*¹². You convinced him to get a driver's license and soon he had a car and he would pick you up.

Moraga asks, "What kind of lover have you made me mother?" (Moraga 2000, p. 1) and I know that for me, the decision to be a femme lesbian is linked to the desire to include in my identity what my mother understood and experienced as femininity and sexuality. The feminist critique of patriarchal and sexist sexual patterns appeared not only in Israel, in regards to the Mizrahi-traditionalist lifestyle, but also in regards to lesbian sub-cultures such as Butch-Femme or S/M. One can see that under the conservative criticism of practices that involve power relations, lay implied homophobia and racism, because it seems that Mizrahi women or lesbians must obey strict moral principles in order to be considered feminists. According to Dahan-Kalev, feminism must find a way to change women's status and location within their existing traditional framework without destroying the subtle settings in which their identities were formed, through which they experience meaning in their lives, and from which they gain strength and hope (Dahan-Kalev 2005). I wonder how far I'll be able to stray from the confines my mother designated for me and from the survival practices she taught me. I believe there is a link between the manner in which my mother sketched femininity and masculinity as the only framework enabling erotic relations, and my feminine, femme, seductive, submissive sexuality and my longing for butch masculinity to lean on.

My mother would say: "Don't bring a Moroccan home. Moroccans are primitive and don't know how to treat women, and your father is no example. You

should find an Ashkenazi who is set. He'll listen to you more." Is my choice of white butches an empty internalization of my mother's dreams?

Through the straight perspective, a lesbian couple can be perceived only in terms of similarity and symbiosis and therefore we can't give an account of the differences between a Mizrahi and Ashkenazi woman, or a butch and femme. While the mother of African-American feminist, Patricia Williams, said to her: "You have two choices, to become a professional woman or to die in the gutter" (Williams 1999, p. 194), my mother said to me, "Hurry up, Ya-el, there's no time." Maybe that's why at the age of 27, during the second year of my doctoral studies, every day I feel like I am wasting time. Your mother taught you tranquility and in your eyes I can see her looks encouraging you for what you've achieved, proud of whom you've become. My mother taught me to accomplish as much as possible. Your mother taught you to accept things as they are. My mother taught me how to change them so they would suit me, because that's what we have. To whom can we present the different languages of pain, when some of us locked our jaws while our mothers mourned – screaming and ripping clothes through ongoing lamentation – while others learned to swallow their pain like a pill, waiting for the relief to come.

With whom can I share our inability to avoid resolving all aspects of an argument, while others learned the art of avoiding unpleasanties? Our inability to talk about the differences between women brings us to a dead-end road, void of ethnicity and sexuality; with whom and in what language can I share the problems of those of us who bring our differences to bed. Where can we detail the problems that stem not from the differences between us, but from the fact that we should deny them – to the feminists who don't understand why roles are necessary, to my friends who really believe that ethnic origin is no longer relevant, or to my mother, who tries to prove to me that lesbianism isn't for me?

Anzaldúa claims that formulating a stance against white patriarchal conventions isn't enough, because a response is always limited by what it is responding to, so she suggests that we can survive only by existing on both sides simultaneously (Anzaldúa 1987). Relations of submission and domination may confirm the patriarchal sexist model, but in the

⁹ An area in the city which is subsidized by the Israeli government.

¹⁰ A city in the center of Israel.

¹¹ The biggest and most Prestigious mall in the 60'.

¹² A famous coffee house in the 60'.

lesbian or Mizrahi context, may also enable the only sexual relationships in which one can free herself from pain and dismantle it through erotic pleasure or by giving herself meaning. The erotic relationship between butch and femme, or between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi women may allow a different encounter between differences and may create an opportunity for dialogue in which the differences are not denied, but rather serve as a basis for a pleasurable connection. I have no doubt that there is a link between my identification as a femme and my past and my family, just as there is a link between the butch-femme culture and the class from which it developed – the working class, which was populated largely by ethnic and racial minorities.

A daydream: A woman is cooking on a steamy afternoon. Her armpits are moist and her cheeks are rosy. A Mizrahi song is playing in the background; the floor is wet from expectation, like her body, and the amount of light is precise, like a spice. Her face is my mother's face, and I can almost hear one of my brothers crying in his crib in the next room, but you come from behind, hug me, strong like the man my mother always wanted behind me; and in front of me the food reaches a boiling point and I'm bubbling and you cannot let me cool off, and I am fixing you a plate of desire, but we eat from the pot, Standing up, Steam streams alongside our bodies. You take me and bring me back; reminding me that it's me, and all of this under the floral apron.

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Theme III: Girlhood Interrupted Chapter 22

The Invisible Black girl and ‘miss’ representation of ‘her story’

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The life experiences of Black¹ girls within various school communities continues to be the focus of concern among Black parents as their needs are often ignored which impacts upon their sense of identity and citizen participation.² This chapter draws on the narrative of the Black girls from birth to 13 years, focussing particularly on the development of girls’ identity and social processes in traditional African-Caribbean family roles; handling mythological structures, media representation of females and the restricted nature of the world towards girlhood. The methodology for conducting this study consists of visual images and narrative first-person observations from discussions with Black girls and Black parents³ living in the Urban Midlands locality. The findings revealed how Black girls are in the struggle not only for their personal rights as individuals to be acknowledged and respected in British society, but also for their legal rights as children. In particular, Black girls felt marginalised. As a consequence, there is a call for initiatives to provide specialist girls’ services to address exclusion and emotional resilience issues.

Introduction

Black girls have been engaged in a struggle to secure their human rights and are consistently the subject of exclusions, their needs often ignored which impacts upon their personal growth and learning opportunities. Historically, the Black female positioning has shown a multitude of barriers, they suffer in an environment cultivated from racism, sexism and exploitation and greater social disadvantages when compared to other social groups. They are frequently the target of the music industry and marketable trends (hooks 1981; Lewis 1988; McCooty 2001; Grey-Elsharif 2010). In spite of their willingness to embrace the notion of children’s rights, their living

conditions inevitably are influenced by barriers to the future they deserve. Hazardous signs of physical barriers and mental inferiority are all but a few significant differences in the value system and growth of young Black girls which allow them to be vulnerable in today’s society (Lewis 1988; Pennie & Best 1990; Wright et al 2000; Grey-Elsharif 2010).

Within the poorest societies, Black girls are by nature, subject to greater risk of malnutrition and their rights are often systematically violated. A strong recognition for girls’ needs is a pressing concern from individuals working within international development organisations for children and the African-Caribbean community which are, unfortunately, less visible within the agenda for every child that matters (UNESCO 1994; Grey-Elsharif 2010). There have been a number of studies on inequality of girls, however limited studies capture the Black girl’s voices and imagination on these issues. All these factors contribute to a Black girl’s invisibility (Skeggs 1995; Blair 1997; Wright et al 2000; Grey-Elsharif 2010; Amnesty International 2011).

As Black female practitioners involved with young people within their homes, communities, on local, national and international levels, we provide some insight into girls’ lives. The narratives shared in this chapter, portray how the conditions surrounding the Black girl’s lives alter in response to their changing circumstances, especially for those in external instructional practices. The Black girls we talk to are often vocal, vibrant and full of laughter. As well, they are sometimes embarrassed, unprepared about the growing up changes occurring to their bodies, expectations in response to these changes and often feeling unprotected and alone. To help us examine the Black girls’ experiences of invisibility, we have drawn together four themes as follows: a) girl’s identity

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and developmental stages; b) social structures and processes in traditional female roles; c) emotions, feelings, fears and challenges from popular media representation and attitude and d) pastoral care. All the above themes are inter-related.

Girls’ Identity formation: What comes to mind?

We recognise from our own dynamic perspectives of girlhood that the reader’s knowledge about Black girls in Britain, their lives growing up, images and media representation may vary. In that case, the first discussion in the chapter is a descriptive one, but may allow for further questions to be raised about the Black girl’s objective existence of reality. A good starting point is to consider what first comes to mind, when we ask you to visually define a) a British girl, and b) a British Black girl? Here are some visual pictures of young girls we have come across in our discussions with a diverse group of people:



Figure 1. Model images of different young girls

Did you have any of the above images in your mind? As it has been seen the girls are all unique individuals. However, there is a percentage of the population who assume, without questioning, that except for skin colour a British Black girl’s identity is the same as a British White girl, who just happens to be coloured Black. The Black British girl would benefit by close replica and development measurement standards of her White counterpart especially from middle-class background as her needs often represent all that is superior. The outcome of such reasoning is the Black girl will achieve the same social wealth and equality when grown in the same way. However, this has proven not to be the case as the attempt to treat all girls the same has failed to reduce the gaps between the rich and poor in respects to the family resources

available. A close examination of the experiences of different communities indicates that the Black community are often at the mercy of negative connotations and responses in Britain and other Western societies. The responses are seen when we critically examine economical power positions, social interaction and socialization (Wilson 1978; hooks 1981; Dobson 1993; UNESCO 1994; Majors 2001; Cork 2005; Gus John 2006; Grey-Elsharif 2010). In the following sections we describe those issues which were found to be essential for exploring social structures, resulting gender differences and expectations for Black girls.

Gender differences and expectations

Simply by the very nature of being born a Black girl can create mixed feelings for many new parents who repeatedly hear the following statements during the celebration of her birth:

“Congratulations, on your daughter, you have to start saving your money for her wedding....”

“A girl, at least you will be cared for when you get older...”

Hearing the above statements, it would be interesting to explore whether they are, in reality, accepted or denied, and to which extent they influence the Black girl’s social, psychological, cultural, intellectual, emotional and spiritual being. Despite many equality issues raised in the 21st century around the impact of gender and race distinctions, there is still at core, a shared set of expectations, that girls are geared towards care giving roles, often preparing for their wedding day and becoming a mother as part of her life cycle. Could this assumed expectation be ‘a princess waiting for her prince charming storyline’ perhaps?

We are aware of how Black girls might be groomed into young mothers and caring for the elderly from an early age, their role of caregivers cannot be ignored as the Black community has a percentage of working females in various social care sectors that brings many benefits to the British welfare system. Many young girls are encouraged to enter many academic areas of social care, the medical sector being one, demonstrating they can become nurses, doctors or carer assistants perceived as caring professions. This decision may reflect their parents’ choice or their own experience of seeing others’ need of support, and

imagining one day this may be part of girls' development and her career path (hooks 1981; Wells 1998; McCooty 2001).

This developmental path brings us to examine girls' identity formation which can be described as the process that takes place on all mental functioning and understood in the context of the cultural identity being formed. This may indicate the appreciation that the Black girl's identity is exposed to various influences and development stages which can be studied and importantly evaluated, with equal emphasis given to relevant variables. It is important to look closely at factors such as race and gender dimensions, social directives, cultural values and family life styles in the assessment of the female self-image and the society in which she lives (Wilson 1978; Erikson 1982; Baber & Gay 1987; Dobson 1993; Gillborn et al 1996; Collins 2000; Grey-Elsharif, 2010).

From experience, parents want their daughters to engage in meaningful events in society with the probability that she will develop an identity that is fulfilling, productive and socially acceptable. Unfortunately, something has failed, resulting in many Black girls today feel wholly invisible. To assist in the understanding of the Black girls' experience and appreciate some of the difficulties encountered, we examine her many developing selves.

Developmental stages and social learning

Although there are no absolute boundaries between the Black girls' developmental stages, we have identified specifically three transitional stages to discuss their experiences: Early childhood, also known as pre-school, which usually covers between a new born and the age of four/five years; mid-childhood, also known as primary, which usually begin between the ages of five to ten, and early adolescence, also known as pre-adolescence, which may begin between the age of ten and end about aged 13 years.

There are overlapping features within each of the developmental stages and these features can be the turning point which runs across different cultures and changing generations, which cannot offer a fixed definition of all Black girls development. Additionally, we are aware that a specific expression given as appropriate development for one girl in a particular environment may be ineffective under another set

of circumstances when applied by the same girl (i.e. home or school interactions). What we want to introduce is some issues of relevance to her identity, provide insight into her world and the notion of 'purchasing power' and symbolic interaction, which has significant impact on child development. An example would be a Black African-Caribbean parent furnishing her Black daughter with 'normalised' gifts, a Cindy or Barbie doll portraying White European features, long blonde straight hair, blue eyes and a pink dolls house. Are there hidden symbolised messages in these purchases or just encouraging innocent girls' play? Does the same assumed expectation apply when a doll portraying Black African features, curly black hair and brown eyes is purchased by a White European parent for her White European daughter or son as a toy for play? There have been well-known studies about the impact of the ethnicity of dolls identity and play preference. Clark & Clark (1947) found Black children, although aware of racial differences from pre-school age, expressed some inability to identify with Black dolls and chose White dolls.⁴ (Clark & Clark 1947; Wilson 1978; Grey 1996).

Early childhood (also known as pre-school) which usually covers between new born and 5 years?

Purchasing power can have a great impact on identity formation and this is born out in the young Black girl aged between newborn and five years old. A girl of this age has no power over what her parents purchase for her or the type of stimulation received during this critical stage of developmental psychology. Her personality is developed from birth along with understanding her parents' code of honour. The formation of the Black girls' identity passes through her parents and extended family, often a mother's input and the female family lineage plays a key role as part of the matriarchal system, despite the dialogue about it being 'a man's world'. The family input forms the bases of any formative identity in relation to developing a belief system, moral standard, health education, traditions and cultural care. The cultural capital,⁵ therefore, becomes another important issue. In addition to the economic factors impacting on her identity, cultural habits and dispositions inherited from the family are paramount to her education and learning development. The Black girl will not

be growing up in a vacuum but influenced by her parents' cultural habits, life style, religious thinking along with societies influence such as the official institutions, pre-school, dominant group norms, media and subliminal messaging. The messages generally portrayed, usually by the female family lineage, what is acceptable behaviour within the confines of the young Black girls' surroundings (Wilson 1978; Lewis 1988; Wells 1998).

Mid-childhood (primary), which might take place between five and ten

At age five to ten, the Black girl begins to develop her own characteristics, becoming more confident as she embarks on attending school officially and socializing with other children as oppose to being with her parents constantly. At this developmental stage, the Black girl will be formulating her opinions about many of her limited life events, focusing on self-interests, personalising aspect of her character and friendship structures to add to her self-concept. Generally speaking, it takes a lot of strength, usually from her mother and other significant females to stimulate daily learning interests and battling with development of a positive self-image in a rather daunting and intimidating environment.

There is a growth in the Black girl's acknowledgement of cultural care as her caregivers encourage her to be more independent with personal care, basic chores and responsibility. We may also see an overt indoctrination of religious or cultural belief dependant on parental behaviour. If her parents are religious, she would have already participated in a religious belief system from birth, Sunday school attendance, praying, readings focusing on the bible scripture, for instance. We will see the Black girl moving from being wholly dependent to partially independent, gaining a modicum of trust from parents and others in authority, enough for her to explore her social position, peer classification, environmental hierarchical structures and its influences.

From a learning perspective, the Black girl at this development stage begins to recognise diplomacy, start to make sense of the world and act in the way she is expected to behave, sometimes through stereotypical assumptions and restrictions in self-expression. Acknowledging consciousness and belief systems that sometimes go against the grain

of others, it is at this stage Black girls are becoming vulnerable to the reflections of society and getting caught up in a cycle of unrest. Her behaviour may appear more challenging, while she assumes it is her way to maintain self-respect. Her language expression can be misconstrued as 'rudeness' or 'over assertive' to the point of 'aggression', and the steady momentum towards the prospect of stereotypical behaviour become more apparent. She is likely to become negatively labelled especially within some school environments, where her abilities are now challenged and confidence begins to waiver preventing her from reaching her full learning potential. The Black girl may thus shrink away, become quieter, withdrawn and invisible or may become loud, the centre of attention, sometimes negatively following social directives and assumed expectations. This period is also a transitional phase for testing themselves on compatibility, individuality, environmental hierarchical structures such as school playground rules, team working and social acceptance (Lewis 1988; Dobson 1993; Grey-Elsharif 2010).

The Black girl tends to explore the female lineage and group bonding, often a mother's input is paramount, seek to be associated with her image, clothing, walk, hair and develop the same rhythm in her voice. She also reflects more on her aunt's advice, grandmother's narrative and teacher's interaction to make her more conscious of 'gender-specific behaviour' and how other females in her life behave. She moves from the individual phase of her development and starts the initiation into women hood, verging on a mini female 'rites of passage'.⁶

The rites of passage has a significant role in marking transitions and a cycle of life change often passed down from elders in a society, ensuring that citizens knew their identity, positioning, and what was expected of them growing up. A number of African-Caribbean families perceive the rites of passage series as important symbols, consciously and unconsciously affecting the mind, milestones or personal transitions which solidify a new identity. They are aimed at helping young girls (and boys) to function appropriately in society as responsible participants (Baldwin 1976:1980; Lewis 1988; Karenga 1997; Majors 2000; McCooty 2001; Grey-Elsharif, 2010).

Pre-teen (between the ages of ten and end about aged 13 years)

The pre-teen Black girl at this stage in her development becomes more focussed on her physical changes which are quite understandable given what is now taking place to her body. Cultural care is quite significant and she becomes increasingly body conscious. In addition to the Black girls' changing physical features, growth spurt, hair, developing curves and reproductive system, there are other changes relevant to her preparation for womanhood. There are intellectual gestures taking place as she is beginning to think more abstractly, attempting to make connections between the decisions made and consequences, and becoming self-preoccupied and vulnerable. Her changing attitude towards what is interesting to her quickly move from one period to another, and wonders what is 'right' and 'wrong' and 'what would happen if ...' often testing boundaries and peers classification structures.

All those years of watching significant females in her life now start to be reinforced. Greater self-awareness on how she has been taught to acknowledge personal care, style of dress, hair care, cosmetics and other beauty products will have significance on her development and acceptance or rejection within various social circles. Her moral barometer is further challenged by a new found 'perceived freedom' and friendships, which will challenge more boundaries as she begins to engage with people outside of her family and school. As the Black girl moves away from the family circle and redefining relationship patterns, she may seem less accepting of family relationships, more eagerly challenging her parent's standards, family protocol and becoming self-centred. However, she is still in need of some reassurance and family guidance given her maturity.

The pre-adolescence stage is often a period of which restrictions are tested, and the traditional cultural guidelines and internal family mechanisms no longer seem to have as greater bearing on the decisions made. Some adults say girls today appear more eager to challenge parent's boundaries and authority figures when compared to young girls this age in the past (Dobson 1993; McCooty 2001; Grey-Elsharif 2010).

Reflecting on our own narratives, many girls are moving rapidly toward adolescence, and subse-

quently womanhood, despite being pre-teens. Universally, current trends are making it more acceptable today for young Black girls (and White girls) to demonstrate their physical changes and femaleness more overtly, acknowledging their forming sexuality.⁷ Their social environment complete with blaring 'multi-faceted subliminal messages of aggressive sex appeal', domination, material wealth, social forces, and often uncontrolled violence demand that young girls become women now, if they are to accept the rate at which society generally tells them to behave. This startling experience and universal trend of womanhood altered girls' rites of passage in the 21st century and educating young people through cultural family knowledge.

Changing patterns of girl's development and girlhood

A question frequently asked by practitioners is 'what has changed in society resulting in greater barriers between young people and adults in authority'. Our response is that social rules appeared much tighter and rigorous in the past with clearer boundaries for boys and girls. Additionally, a greater working pattern of behaviour was observed between the parent, child, youth worker and school community. Modern day living and convenience contribute towards the changing attitude between parents nurturing their children and social competencies. The boundaries set by Black parents in the past and societal expectations of children allowed parents to take the stronger lead in the family household which often demonstrate greater respect for family boundaries.

Having a secure base,⁸ young girls (and boys) develop social competence and get involved in family activities and household chores. Reflecting on our own childhood experiences, this action was a common occurrence among many young people each Saturday morning. There was less likelihood of young people challenging their parents' authority and decision-making to allocate basic chores. Furthermore, the weekly chores did not seem like a punishment but a sense of belonging including shared responsibility and alliance, because a majority of peers were doing similar tasks. The boundaries appeared clearer between family members and society. Today we often wonder what would have occurred if we had said 'No' to our parents and refused to participate in

The Invisible Black girl and 'miss' representation of 'her story'

the family chores and support the development of a secure home base.

Today everything has changed with modern day convenience giving girls more freedom from household duties, more choice in how they spend their time with greater social activities (music, sport, speech and drama) which has promoted their self-confidence. For example, microwave cooking, on line shopping, is more about speed and reduction in many pre-determined female roles. With the support from previous female generations, girls have become more liberated, a stronger voice with greater communicative avenues and evidence to base a constructive argument. Working mothers and fathers are also teaching their son's to be self reliant. With the changing economic structures and wide unemployment a father could remain at home daily caring for their children with the mother of the household going to work and socializing alone with female peers, is not an uncommon feature today.

Many practitioners working with young girls (and boys) believe that there is something profoundly missing from support services for young people today - a call for greater social structures and family tasks for young people to develop positive values and self-worth. There is also a call to revisit some traditional parenting skills on boundary setting and provide further guidance to parents in need of family support. Furthermore, a stronger 'united front' among parents and practitioners may lead to less opportunity for young Black girls to fall into the net and feel invisible (Arnstein 1969; Grey 1993; Majors 2001).

Gaining a sense of visibility

When it comes to describing the Black girls' invisibility it seems quite a challenge; what kind of invisibility experienced is often related to how a girl feels about herself in difference to others, which leads to her being accepted or rejected by others as a consequence.

This study confirms a need to expose some of the material power which may implicate the Black girl in the conquest of securing her visibility and the symbolic dimensions of colonization against Black communities' exposure to 'on-going' negative images. As the images involve features in the intersecting contexts of history, it raises a fundamental question about how we have contributed to the Black girls' developmental process in the past. For instance,

adults' accountability on Black girls' rights and the monitoring of social influences which impact on her identity formation, the media, respect for family traditions, boundary setting and official child care support systems.

Accordingly some of the Black girls we have spoken to felt their invisibility was a reflection of the environment they found themselves in, whether it was a secure base that allowed expression of positive values and was intellectually stimulating for example. Some Black girls stated they did not feel protected where a safety net existed because they are often marginalised from the official support systems that protect Black children and their families. Although Black pupils are only a small percentage of the British school population, they made up a large proportion of pupils excluded and labelled with special needs with limited support available to alter their circumstances. As the identity as a Black female was often felt ignored within many mainstream services and popular products, (girls/youth groups, accessible hair and skin care for example), many of their personal needs were 'ill-met' (Coard 1971; Tomlinson 1981; Irvin 1990; Wright et al 2000; Majors 2001; Grey-Elsharif 2010).

When reporting a feeling of visible and respect, some Black girls reported a position of self-awareness and discovery of shared cultural tradition, language, value and a sense of belonging. The experience is not inclusively that all young Black girls are feeling 'invisible' or 'visible', because each individual is unique.

We have identified the following case scenarios to provide examples of how invisibility may present itself for two Black girls, Joy and Angel (All names are changed to preserve anonymity).

Joy

Joy, aged 12, is a Black African-Caribbean girl whose parents are second generation African-Caribbean of Jamaican parentage. Her parents encouraged her from early childhood development the value of education. Joy progressed steadily in school and enjoyed attending many community learning activities. She was prepared to go to school, focus on her studies in order to become a doctor of medicine, and she created her own fashion with the support of her mother and grandmother. Joy uses her free time taking violin lessons, playing chess and contributing to community

participation including helping young children to read. She managed her way through state school with a great deal of success. The cultural capital instilled by her family contributed to developing a positive approach to learning and achieving. However, she felt isolated from her peers at school, and perceived differently from girls of her age in her community. Joy often felt she did not really fit in with most of her peers and her progression into girlhood, therefore, saw her becoming the ‘invisible girl’. She felt, to become visible, she would have to follow the latest fashion trends irrespective of these not being to her liking, spend time communicating with peers about the latest phone, social media networking with less focus on her studies.

Generally speaking, Joy’s peers took exception to the fact that she went against the grain and adopted the persona of the gifted Black girl wanting to aspire. Joy became a target against individuals resentful of her self-development, going to the library, studying and being unwilling to accept the latest youth trends. She felt that some of her peers see her as strange because she spoke with a strong English accent irrespective of being British born. Joy has not located herself in the negative myths of Black femaleness or following the latest fashion, hairstyle and music, these issues threw up a form of invisibility for Joy within the realms of girlhood and familiar youth culture.

Angel

Angel, aged ten, is a Black girl of mixed parentage who lives with her parents born in Britain, her mother is African-Caribbean with family originating from Barbados and her father is White European Irish origin. Angel is tall and slim, often mistaken as much older than her age. She has short straight burgundy coloured dyed hair, light-skinned in appearance. Her relationship with her parents and teachers is often strained. At school she is popular and funny to be around, often at the centre of attention, talkative, perceived louder than her peers and sometimes dominating. Her grades are just below average for her age, she is diagnosed as having special needs generally because of her behaviour and lack of concentration. Angel was not keen on attending school apart from when she attended subjects she really enjoyed - English, performing arts and design technology.

Angel is very good at fashion imagery and wants to be a designer. Her parents allowed her to make her own decision about completing homework and are happy for school to take the lead with her educational progress. They do not share much information about their family origin and there were no cultural artefacts or pictures in the home that represent her family origin. Angel feels detached from her Caribbean heritage and is not comfortable within her own familiar socio-cultural circle. She has little knowledge of her father’s background or grandparents in Barbados, often rejecting her dual cultural heritage in place of feeling she is solely of White European origin.

Angel experiences identity conflict ‘in between’ two cultures which made her feel invisible. At school, although she is perceived as very popular, she feels she has few real friends, apart from those she messes about with which causes the teacher to exclude her from class, or when she brings in the latest fashion trends and has something to talk about with girls her age. Detachment from her African-Caribbean background often leaves her feeling unsure of relationship patterns with individuals from the Black community, including many female family members. Angel takes the lead from the mainstream fashion trends, famous icons and images in the media, yet felt invisible.

Female representation and girlhood

When examining the images portrayed in the television media industry it could be argued that there has not been much improvement over the years concerning how the female gender is perceived to the public eye. Sexuality is often acted out in television soaps, women are often seen as props for the contentment of others, and stereotypes are now the norms in society. Pre-conceived ideas are triggered by the media and programme storylines are designed to capture the girl’s attention, imagination, and performing arts has a way of being played out in real life.

On the contrary, young Black girls today often choose the music industry as representation as it portrays what they want to succeed too, not knowing or understanding the music industry may build them but also devalue them. Given the power of the music industry on young girls, it is important to encourage the positive aspects to music and arts by encouraging creative workshops that encourage others to think more critically what would help all young girls (and

boys) who are embellished in the daily features of fashion and music culture. Additionally there are extremely limited positive storylines in the media about Black girls in Britain successfully achieving, and Black actors moving slower to embracing Black British talent. Limited processes enhance the Black girls' visibility and teach them how to feel positive about their identity and be comfortable in their skin (Grey-Elsharif 2010). This lack of visibility and positive role models often leaves Black girls feeling left out in the public eye, rarely seeing other Black girls or Black women doing what they do, or looking how they want to look as a Black female, the alternative often follows the norm of the dominant girls' group culture (hooks 1981; Lipsky 1992; Grey 1993; McCooty 2001).

A new image is required that challenges the norm but also gives acceptance to how young Black females would like to be portrayed in light of positive role models and female representation. The media, including television, radio, and the music industry will need to take a proportionate blame as to how the female images portrayed have a great impact on the lives of many confused youth today. To consider what impact this image portrayed has in the past, today and what young girls face in the future, in support of developing inclusion.

Reaching social inclusion and a safety net

In terms of a support mechanism, many Black girls are growing up in an environment that often fails to support them when things go wrong, with their community often perceived more harshly with negative reinforcements and a lack of official school pastoral support systems when compared to other non-Black communities in Britain. Evidently, many Black girls (and boys) have felt excluded, marginalised and invisible (Wright 1987; Blair 1997; Majors 2001; Collins 2000; Grey-Elsharif 2010).

Some people have argued that Black girls do not need a safety net if things go wrong because there is already one in place but this belief has left her needs being 'ill-met', often assimilated into a 'one size fit all colour blind approach'. When Black girls feel invisible it is important they have somewhere to take those feelings and accept the support offered from someone who cares and help her to manage and understand what those feelings mean.

In relation to the two case scenarios discussed earlier, Joy obtained support and was able to improve her visibility and social development by learning how others saw her was different to how she felt about herself. Accepting her tone and accent is part of her uniqueness and is nothing to be embarrassed about because language was a key aspect of her identity. Joy further engaged in a Black girls' support group which help her to meet other like minded achievers sharing similar characteristics, building confident and communication skills helped to reduce feelings of isolation and rejection. She also developed coping skills which contributed to managing the feelings of success and building a stronger relationship with her peer group and female role models in her community.

Angel, obtained support developing a positive self-concept, exploration of female self-images and dual racial identity promoted cultural enrichment. She learnt about her dual identity with an increased awareness of contributions made by the Black and Irish communities in the United Kingdom and interacted more positively with diverse communities. Angel also engaged in an emotional resilience nurture programme with her parents and pastoral support in school, which helped to improve communication skills with her parents, teachers and peers. Thus recognising how specific clothing and media representation can generate a level of consciousness in which girls become familiar with domination and devaluing the identity of some being Black and female. Angel's behaviour and academic grade subsequently improved. She also developed a stronger relationship with her paternal grandparents who furnished her with cultural arts, crafts and understanding of her Caribbean heritage.

The girls' group we spoke to about their personal needs requested further specialist project work focusing on female identity and the rites of passage, pastoral school support, social relationships and positive self-image. The Black girls also acknowledged the genuine love of one's own Black ethnic group is the basis for the love of oneself, global awareness, the love of others and the basis for a loving balanced personality worldwide. Similarly to the establishment of the Scouts, they requested an International Black girls' group and national forum for female (Black and White girls) agenda items. They requested development in adults understanding of youth culture, how

young people really feel at home and in school, the social pressure and inequalities experienced, societal changes in Britain and its relationship with their parents and the Black Diaspora. They expressed a strong feeling to be ‘themselves’ and contribute to the development of positive visual and oral media representation of Black and female individuals. We asked one Black girl Ebony aged 10, why the need for a Black girls group and she replied:

‘To teach Black girls to build confidence and feel positive about being Black’

From this perspective, there is a need to support the process of initiation of girl into girlhood and female adolescence. We acknowledge that there is no single ‘one size fits all’ model for working with all Black girls but a series of interrelated rites of passage activities designed to support girls’ development and citizen participation (hooks 1981; Lewis 1988; Karenga 1997; Wright 1987; Collins 2000; McCooty 2001; Grey-Elsharif 2010).

Summary

This chapter has given examples of approaches to making a positive contribution in the struggle to combat Black girls’ invisibility and exclusion. There are benefits for a community to developing Black girls’ development as society needs female leaders, carers and supporters, with each girl holding their position in life and a positive contribution to the environment. Positive role models can be duplicated by all women working together with young girls and encouraging their effort to be viewed positively in the society they live. Encouraging girls through positive role modelling, positive female carers and motherhood, understanding that this can be achieved, and enhancing feelings of self-value and belonging all contribute to a healthy environment. Developing educational projects as Oprah Winfrey and the educational school for young girls in South Africa⁹ and the first lady, Michelle Obama visiting the United Kingdom has contributed to forging academic links for young school girls in Britain.¹⁰

Raising Black consciousness will support our experience in feeling real, valued and visible. There is a greater need to acknowledge Black and female inventors, the Black war hero who made contributions

to state services, and the value of cultural traditions relating to families and proverbs using programmes that nurture self image and African-centred history (Karenga 1997; Henry & Williams 1999; Collins 2000; Grey-Elsharif 2010).

In terms of seeking new directions and Black girls’ participation, all communities need to take further responsibility for all young girls even acknowledging the old African proverb that ‘it takes a village to raise a child’; with greater unity, developing the role of youth and community workers, places of worship, home and school welfare systems concluding that we all work together to support the Black girls’ development and visibility.



Figure 2. Black dolls, soft toys and female cultural arts

Notes

- ¹ For the purpose of this study, the term Black will be used inclusively as a descriptor to describe individuals of African-Caribbean origin, including of those mixed (African-Caribbean and White European) parentage. In the paper we will not be placing the term Black in inverted commas although it is recognised that, like the term White, it is a socially constructed, classificatory concept that dominates the process of racialization in Britain and are often contentious. We will however be capitalising the term Black and White.
- ² Citizen participation - Sherry Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation, goes back to the seminal article that was published in 1969. This typology distinguished eight levels of citizenship participation, with each level or rung corresponding to the extent to which citizens have real power to determine the end product or affect the outcome of the process. Sherry Arnstein's 'Ladder of citizen participation' has been adopted by other scholars such as Wilcox (1994) who has reduced Arnstein's eight levels to five: 1) Information, 2) Consultation, 3) Deciding together, Acting together and 5) Supporting independent community interests. Wilcox (1994) suggests that these different levels of participation are appropriate at different times to meet the expectations of different interests (for further information see Grey-Elsharif's (2010) study, which uses Sherry Arnstein's influential eight level typology of citizen participation to provide a baseline framework against which the debates on models of parent-school partnership practice, perceptions of disability and SEN issues can be plotted.
- ³ Definition: the term parent is used to describe a parent or legal guardian.
- ⁴ Clark & Clark in their well known study found that children learn the prevailing social ideas about racial identity at a very young age – 75% of Black children aged approximately three were conscious of the difference between 'white' and 'coloured' (for further information see Clark's (1947) study, as discussed in Amos Wilson's book on *The Development of the Black Child (1978)*. The Black child – The pre-school years pp.70-85.
- ⁵ According to Pierre Bourdieu, cultural capital helps to address why economic obstacles are not sufficient to explain disparities in the educational attainments of children from different social classes. In addition to economic factors, cultural habits and dispositions inherited from the family are paramount to school success and a child's well-being.
- ⁶ The 'rites of passage' has a significant role in marking transitions and a cycle of life change often passed down from elders in a society, ensuring that citizens knew their identity and what was expected of them growing up. Practitioners and parents who wish to undertake a formal training course in the rites of passage programme should log on to the website <http://www.spicesacademicconsultancy.com>.
- ⁷ The term 'sexuality' is used in reference to the girls' developing sense of femaleness, not the act of sexual intercourse and all that involves.
- ⁸ The term 'secure base' as discussed by the authors, implies a secure home in which an individual feels nurtured, develop a feeling of security and sense of belonging (for further information see SPICES' nurture group training programmes and official website <http://www.spicesacademicconsultancy.com>).
- ⁹ Oprah Winfrey a successful and influential Black woman developed Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for girls to provide high school education to girls in need from South African (for further information see Oprah Winfrey's official website www.oprah.com/-united states).
- ¹⁰ Michelle Obama, a significant successful Black woman, and the first lady, met up with girls from a London school at Oxford University to offer career advice and to help raise their aspiration and esteem (for further information see www.guardian.co.uk/michelle-obama-elizabeth-garrett-anderson 25 May 2011).

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Theme IV: Gender and Contemporary Media Chapter 23

The Story of the Transparent Girl

Told by: Marcus Persson

*Illustrated by: Mikael Eriksson Björling
Sweden*

Once upon a time in a place commonly known as the Western world lived a young girl called Lilith. She grew up in an ordinary home, with ordinary parents, in a completely ordinary middle-sized city. Lilith had a brother called Adam who was of the same age. They both had a good number of friends, and their parents loved them both dearly.

In the eyes of their parents, Lilith and Adam were no different from each other. Both children were encouraged and pushed to be autonomous and self-governed individuals. Lilith and Adam's parents were like most parents at the time, wanting the very best for their children and hoping that they would grow up and thrive, the parents worked hard to be able to afford all those things that would ensure Lilith and Adam a good start in life.

However, the permeating idea of how girls and boys best succeed in life were at the time firmly grounded in society by a functionalistic belief that women and men should excel at different skills, and thereby complement each other, in order to create a stable and healthy family. It was believed that if

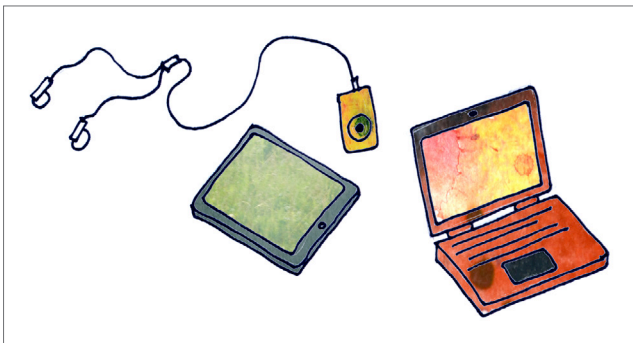
women and men were too similar in family function and orientation, competition between them would disrupt family life, weakening the family's vital role in society (Parson 1954; Parson and Bales 1956). In order to meet this societal demand, Lilith and Adam's parents did like all other parents; they took on different roles in life: the father as the main breadwinner – responsible for providing economic stability to the family – and the mother as the main caretaker – responsible for providing social and emotional stability to the family. Because of this functionalistic belief, and because of their parents' love, Lilith and Adam were raised in different ways in order to be prepared to meet the societal demands and for playing their life roles according to a gendered script (Brown and Gilligan 1992; Chodorow 1978; Leaper 1994; Lever 1978;). Lilith was raised to be more cooperative and sensitive to the needs of others than Adam who, instead, was encouraged to take on the world on his own.

In fact, the functionalistic belief was so established in the Western world that the division of gender roles was practiced by the societal institutions that were responsible for educating the children and teaching them how to be competent, good members of society. In the educational institutions, called school, it was common that girls' and boys' play were differentiated. For example, toys were often labeled as suitable for one gender or the other (Serbin, Connor and Iler 1979), and girls and boys were often assigned different activities (Best 1983; Ministry of Education 2004; Ministry of Education and Culture 2006; Thorne 1993).

In the Western world, people had always been fascinated by technology – both for practical as well as for recreational purposes. One technological device became particular popular among the generation and friends of Lilith and Adam (Castells et

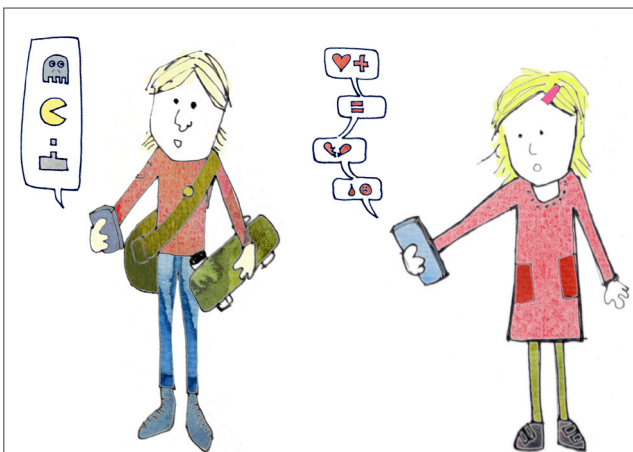


The Story of the Transparent Girl



al 2007; Ito et al 2005; Lenhart 2012; Thulin and Vilmerson 2007). It was quite simply a handheld device that allowed people to do various tasks wherever they happened to be. A few of the more popular tasks performed on the device were: talking to other people over far distances, sending letters, images and photos instantly over the air, playing games (by yourself or with others), listening to music, seeing what other people were doing at the moment without talking to them, writing, drawing, and shopping (comScore 2011). This communication-and-play-thing further helped the young do the stuff young people have always been doing: hanging out with friends, playing together, trying to figure out their likes and dislikes, and ultimately striving to be recognized as unique individuals (Ito et al 2010). Much of what Lilith and Adam learned about the world they lived in, created and experienced was mediated through these and similar devices, to such an extent that Lilith and Adam came to treat the device almost as a body part (García-Montes et al. 2006; Oksman and Rautianen 2001).

The communication-and-play-thing was a flexible technological device and as such it could be used in a great many different and personalized ways. Lilith

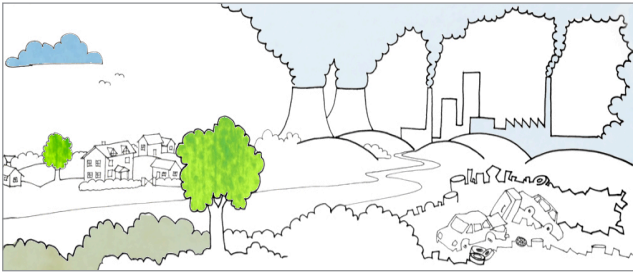


and Adam both made good use of the device and used it in many interrelated ways. However, there existed some major differences in the way Lilith and Adam used the communication-and-play-thing – they seemed to use it for different purposes. More specifically, Adam mostly used the device for playing games and Lilith mostly used the device for communication (Livingstone and Bovill 2001; Swedish Media Council 2010).

If one were to ask Adam why he used the technology so much for playing games, he would simply answer that he liked playing games and that it was what all his boy friends were doing and talking about, and if Lilith were asked, she would say that she loved hanging out with her girl friends and keeping herself up-to-date with what they did and where they were (Bussey and Perry 1982; Martin and Fabes 2001). By using the communication-and-play-thing in different ways and for different purposes, it became a tool for practicing different skills. In this regard both Lilith and Adam used the device, and other technology, in line with their childhood gender lessons: By playing various games Adam trained competitive skills, learning to take risks and to develop complex strategies to beat the games; Lilith used the device to train social and collaborative skills through the use of social forums where she discussed everyday life and different matters, learning to take the role of others (Upitis 2001). Even though Lilith and Adam used the communication-and-play-thing in their own preferred ways, the device became a tool that was used to cultivate the established gender norms in society: Adam to stress self-assertion over affiliation, and Lilith to emphasize coordination of affiliation with assertion (Leaper and Friedman 2007; Morley and Silverstone 1990; Rakow and Navarro 1993).

The Western world was believed to be a good society in which most people lived in peace and good health. But it was also a society facing different challenges: Tornados, poverty, terrorism, chemical and nuclear power waste, and much more. The rigorous media reporting of such societal problems led over time to abstract feelings of insecurity and a growing awareness among the people of ever present risks (Bauman 2008; Beck 1992, 2008; Giddens 1999). Collective and individual feelings of insecurity were further fed by sporadic and disturbing local reports of

accidents, mobbing, rape, child abuse and unwanted teen pregnancy.

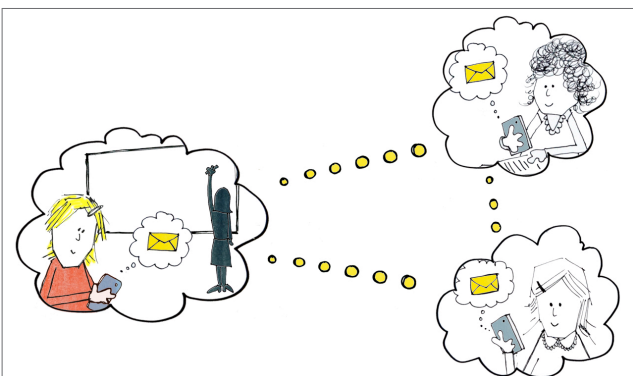


In order to safeguard their children and cope with (feelings of) societal risks, parents started to regulate their children's use of the communication-and-play-thing, and even monitor their whereabouts with the help of the device (Eriksson 2011; Nilsén Fahlquist 2011). Since the device was very good at recording what Lilith and Adam had been doing, where they had been and who they had been in contact with, it was not uncommon that their parents inspected the children's communication-and-play-thing from time to time. As a matter of fact, it was Lilith's use of the device that was controlled and regulated the most by their parents, while Adam's use did not attract the same parental attention (Lenhart et al 2010). Lilith had learned to use the device according to the culturally accepted rules for how girls should behave in order to be happy, accepted and successful in life. And just because she was using the device in a highly social manner her actions became visible and easier to track by the parents. It was as though Lilith had become transparent – sociable and controllable. Moreover, Lilith's extensive communicative use of the device was considered more risky than Adam's playing because Lilith was in direct contact with many more (potentially bad) people than Adam, and it was she who stood to lose the most if, for example, get-

ting pregnant. Lilith's parents only wanted to keep her out of harm. So it was that the communication-and-play-thing became a social-and-control-thing for Lilith and a play-and-freedom-thing for Adam.

This could have ended a rather sad story were it not for the creativity and ingenuity of Lilith and her peers. Because they were more accustomed to the latest technology compared to most parents and teachers, they soon developed workarounds - ways of subverting institutional barriers, at home and at school, and thereby sneaking under the parents and teachers' regulating radar (Horst, Herr-Stephenson and Robinson 2010). In school, where social media sites were blocked, Lilith learned how to work around the internet block and access her favorite meeting places. Even though many schools forbade the children to bring the communication-and-play-thing to school, children brought it anyway and used it secretly (Lenhart et al 2010; Persson 2012). In-between classes and during class – hidden under the work desk – Lilith continued texting her friends. To protect her communication from prying eyes, Lilith also started to use multiple accounts with different pseudonyms for the various social media sites she used for her communication – different accounts for different purposes, for different eyes. She also began writing in coded language with her peers in order to be able to discuss matters that were not meant for the eyes of her parents or teachers. Over time Lilith developed a good number of strategies to tackle the dark side of being transparent – she learned how to become invisible.

The end



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Theme IV: Gender and Contemporary Media Chapter 24

She who can, teaches

Margaret Lloyd
Australia

The following are real statements from real women taken from two surveys (2001, 2008). While they were all pre-service teachers training to teach specialist secondary IT or computer science subjects, some were straight from school while others were mature-age or career-change students. Some were questioning whether they should follow careers in the IT industry or should they continue into IT teaching. This is a poetic transcription of their voices.

I grew up with computers.

From an early age I loved playing.

My father bought me a Commodore 64 when I was 13; a truant, bullied, fat and craving a friend.

I'm from a family with two girls; we got our first computer when I was in Year 2.

Having two older brothers and a dad who loves gadgets, I have never been intimidated by tools or technical instructions.

I was Miss Fix-It in the office... my boss took me under his wing and later on his sheets. But I knew I had more to offer.

I was the unofficial tech support in high school; it was not uncommon to see me carrying laptops and a projector with extension cords over my shoulder.

I'M STUDYING TO BE AN IT TEACHER...

Good for you! Why?

They roll their eyes

Then ask "primary" or "kindy"; Art and Craft or History...

Oh, secondary and IT

Oh, surely not.

Don't do it

You're wasting your time.

But I am/you are a girl

Rubbish

A cop-out!

Useless drivel!

Gender is a negligible factor.

It's a societal perception that only boys can be real computer nerds.

I'm confused by the question.

DO YOU STILL WANT TO BE AN IT TEACHER?

No

Teaching is a lesser job than working in IT.

Now I have know that my real passion is creating and working behind the scenes with directors, and animation crews, working on the technicalities of computers and doing something meaningful and exciting.

Teachers aren't valued.

Why would a person who is good at IT want to teach?

To me, it is a waste of skills.

Yes

I get more enjoyment from teaching others how to do awesome stuff with computers than just doing it myself (although that is fun too).

I find more satisfaction in listening to a student finally grasping an important point in class than scrambling up a corporate ladder to find success.

A 9 to 5 IT job, where you see a few people in the office, occasionally have a social meeting with them doesn't seem to be as important, or rewarding.

IT teaching just makes sense.

Maybe

This is something I'm still debating.

Sometimes I think I'm playing it really safe by teaching, as it is easier, and less scary than the unpredictable world (and the unknown world) of what IT companies want from me, or expect of my skills.

The network technicians found out I had a degree in IT and asked me why I was wasting my time with an Education degree when I could be making good money in IT. Now, I'm not so sure.

THE LAST WORD

The World Wide Web is new but such old news! People discussing the web like it was just invented, teachers complaining of having to use the Internet in classrooms or email to communicate when other professions have just moved with the times.

I wonder whether access is really an issue anymore, rather is society reluctant to let go of past generations' gender bias and move on.

Are our own limitations holding us back from a future of opportunity?

I've always hated that saying which says "those who can do, those who can't teach" because if you can't do something there's no way you can teach it. I like to rephrase it to say "Those who can do, those who understand teach."

Maybe teaching is a special thing that not everyone can do.

Theme IV: Gender and Contemporary Media Chapter 25

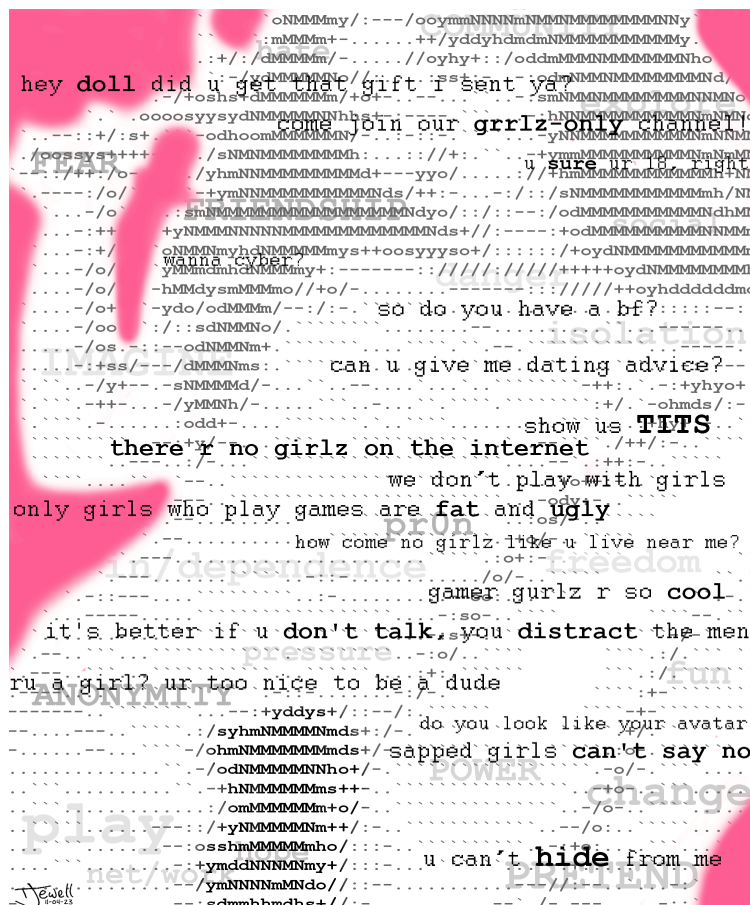
webGURL dis/connects

Tess Jewell
Canada

On the Internet, most communication is mediated through text and image. At their most basic level, even images are composed of text. This mediated nature of the Internet allows users to choose how they define online identities, how they interact with others, and what they wish to learn about the world. However, the combination of anonymity and audience can also lead to rude or discriminatory behaviour [this is known colloquially as “The Greater Internet Fuckwad Theory” (<http://www.penny-arcade.com/comic/2004/3/19/>)]. For girls in particular, accessing the Internet can be a complex experience with varying impacts on identity formation. At the same time that girls are exposed to a vast wealth of dis/information as well as various online cultures, they are

also introduced to the massive availability of online pornography and new arenas for sexual pressure. Messages about what it means to be a girl, and a girl online, often conflict.

This piece presents a pornographic image as ASCII art to capture how self-image and identity are constructed textually online, making the user as in/visible as she desires. Embodying both text and subtext, the image is interspersed with quotations from the artist’s own experience of being a girl on the Internet, particularly in online multiplayer games. The viewer is forced to read between the lines to discover the dangers and potentials of the online experience for girls and to make her own determination of whether girls are truly visible on the Internet.



Theme IV: Gender and Contemporary Media Chapter 26

I Could Visit Her Blog Just Because She's so Stupid

A Study of how Gendered Norms and Discourses Surrounding Girls' Blogging Habits are Created and how the Girls' Negotiate Around Them

Sofia Zettermark
Sweden

*Do like 3175 others today: Create your own blog!*¹

Web blogs and web blogging is a subject of constant debate. Do the blogs change our way of thinking about media and work as a democratic force, or are they simply a waste of time? Why do millions of Swedes want to read about the everyday life of a few spoiled teenage girls? Is the era of the printed word over? In the past few years, all these questions and many others have appeared in different forms in the Swedish mainstream media. About 500 000 Swedes run a web blog today,² and half of them are girls between 12 and 24 years old. Three quarters of all Swedish girls in their twenties have tried blogging and around 90% of all teenage girls read blogs (Findhahl, 2010:46-47). It is obvious that blogging is a big part of the world that young Swedish girls inhabit, but how is this activity mirrored and debated in contemporary mainstream media? This study aims to create a picture of the media climate surrounding girls' web blogging by examining a number of Swedish news articles concerning blogs, as well as look deeper into how the discourses surrounding this phenomenon are created and prescribed with meaning.³ A brief overview of the hierarchies in the Swedish blogo-

sphere will complement this aim. I am also interested in how girls understand their blogging practices and relate to contemporary media discourses. Questions about how the bloggers negotiate their understanding of this practice, as well as what gendered norms become visible in their reasoning, will be answered with the help of five girls in a focused group interview that I conducted. In addition to that, I will explore whether feminist standpoints or strategies of resistance can be detected among the girls. As a result of the two different research methods the dynamic power relation between bloggers and mass media will become visible.

Despite the large break-through in blog-keeping in recent years among adolescent girls and academic initiatives in the research field concerning adolescent girls, such as Flickforsk at Mittuniversitetet (Formark, 2010), girls' blogging habits are still an unexplored subject in Sweden. International research, with names like Herring and Paolillo (2006), and van Doorn, van Zoonen & Wyatt (2007) has showed how the current climate in society where middle-aged male voices are held in highest regard also stands for the successes this group have shown in the blogosphere. Karlsson (2007), McNeill (2003) and Sorapure (2003) among others have discussed the link between blogs and the connotation of female writing being a belittled culture of diary-keeping. According to several studies (Cronin, 2000; Duncan & Leander, 2000; Shade, 2002; Willet, 2008) the construction of young female identities in an increasingly commercialized online space is often mediated through consumption. Fashion blogging can be much more than a proof of a consumerism society – it is also

¹ The quote is gathered from the first page of one of Sweden's most popular blog portals, *Blogg.se* (2011), where thousands create their own blog and many more write blog posts and comments. The portal is dominated by young girls and often promotes fashion and lifestyle blogs.

² A blog is a website which is frequently updated and show posts in reverse chronological order (Herring mfl. 2004:1), and often contains a profile where name, gender, interest and photos can be found (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008:27).

³ I use Foucaults definition of the concept, in which the language becomes meaningful in different ways during different periods of time or social contexts, since the specific knowledge and connotations we connect with words shift. See Foucault, (2002)[1969]. In this essay discourses is used to investigate and describe the system of linguistic structures and meanings created around girls' blogging.

a space where young people can experiment with, and express, their identity, as Chittenden (2010) showed in her study.

Who matters in the blogosphere?

I will start with a short description of the blogosphere's own value system, as a background to the qualitative analysis of the discourses in the blogosphere, followed by a brief introduction of the news paper articles. Knuff is a blog catalogue that automatically indexes and ranks a number of Swedish blogs through a system of "knuffpoäng" ("push points") (Knuff.se, 2011). This system is characterized by awarding the most points to blogs that are considered prestigious, that is, that have many incoming links. Knuff has an outspoken goal: To gather all the "high quality" blogs in Sweden. Out of the 25 highest-ranking blogs, all but two comment on political issues, and adult men author 19 of them. Thus the blog authors themselves create a hierarchy where males interested in politics are found at the top. The blog catalogue Bloggportalen.se works in a very different way (Bloggportalen.se, 2011). Anyone can register and the ranking only considers the number of readers your blog has. At Bloggportalen.se, the girls who run fashion blogs and personal journal blogs are the highest ranking. This confirms that the label "quality" is strongly associated with adult male practices, and that it can be used to exclude those who do not fit into the normative rules.

Out of 98 reviewed newspaper articles, 20 concerned young women. Considering that girls between 12 and 24 author half of all Swedish blogs, this reveals a misallocation in who is given space in the established media. The fact that more women and girls are blogging today can be traced back to the increase in Internet usage that have occurred since 2004 among these groups (Findahl, 2009:45), but the girls' dominance is more likely to be a consequence of the blog culture that has arisen during the last few years among girls. This culture is defined both by media and the girls I have spoken to, but in somewhat different ways.

A pattern easily recognised among the articles are that almost all the articles that concern issues of democracy have a main focus on adults, primarily male adults, while the fashion category, with one exception, only focuses on women. In the first category, it

is common to present the blogosphere as important, with an essential subversive force; something that only occurs in one of the articles concerning young women. It is lucidly established, based on the survey of newspaper articles, that Swedish media sources repeat a normative discourse in which men are associated with power and the public sphere, and women with looks and the private. Mainstream media rewards those who already have a privileged position in society in their coverage, a finding that is consistent with what Herring, Scheidt, Louis and Wright (2004) saw in their mapping of the blogospheres' hierarchy of statuses.

Important issues of democracy or 'super banal goo'?

The media analysis reveals a discourse that is invalidating and often derogatory. The following quote is typical of this language:

You might not like it. You might think it's silly or irrelevant. Yet you have to face it: Blondinbellas' blog⁴ about fashion and everyday life in the young upper class of Stockholm attract about a million readers every month. (Ekström, 2009)

It is apparent that the author speaks to a reader who is assumed to not blog themselves, and undermines the every day life of young girls by suggesting that the reader may feel that this is "silly or irrelevant". In some cases, the entire blogosphere is referred to as meaningless on the basis that girls dominate it, as is shown this quote:

It has been said that the blogs set the agenda for the public debate. In fact, they are uninteresting and unimportant. [...] To summarize: the Swedish blogosphere consists of a small group of young girls. These girls write about fashion and other things that are uninteresting to the vast majority of Swedish people. (Schulman, 2009)

"Public debate" is defined by a male framework of interpretations, where fashion and girls' interests are described as lacking all significance and is put in opposition to the important issues that men discuss. As a result of the dichotomy that is constructed, girls'

⁴ Isabella Löwengrip is a famous Swedish blogger of 20 years who writes about career, fashion and self esteem (<http://blondinbella.se>).

writing is excluded from the public debate. Girls' experiences of parties, school and appearance are, for example, not interpreted as a "striking contemporary portrait", but rather, as one article in a Swedish tabloid puts it, "tjosan hejsan" (roughly translated as "random superficial babble") (Färnbo, 2009).

Words like "superficial" and "pointless" are common in the newspaper articles. Reporters who focus on the blog star's appearance in interviews, sometimes amplify the discourse of shallowness (Amster, 2010b; Monikander, 2009). The stigma that blogs suffer, creates a paradoxical discourse where shallowness is despised by both media and the girls themselves, while at the same time being constructed as the only reasonable position you can take in relation to your blog. This contradictory statement will be explained with the help of Petra:

...I feel like it's become kind of "fjortisstämplat" [marked as an action of a young bimbo]⁵ to have a blog. So sometimes when you say you have a blog so well I don't want to, but I almost feel ashamed. (ironically) "Yeah but I blog, like in a serious way." Then people become like (scornful) "Aha, really, that's what you do." So I really try, because I don't feel ashamed over my blog, I really don't, but it's like... the way people look at you when you're like "yeah, I have a blog", it's a little, a little... they look down on you.

Petra's quote shows that it is not considered to be something positive to run a blog as a young girl, despite the fact that blogging is necessary to be able to decipher to keep up with the conversation of your peers. This is shown on several occasions in the focus group. One of the girls chooses the words "pantat svammel" ("thoughtless babble") when she is asked to describe her blog in an exercise, and during the introduction round all the girls stressed what singles their blog out – they give it the *raison d'être* that it does not have in itself. The blogging girl leads an ever ongoing fight against these preconceptions. She needs to distance herself from taking her blogging seriously, since her efforts are framed by a discourse that deems girls' blogging unnecessary, but at the same time she needs to stay up-to-date with the phenomena which

bear significance in her world. Many girls mention stress in relation to or "addiction" to their blogs. One interpretation is that the significance of blogging in the world of young girls requires them to be a part of that community. Willet (2008) has investigated how individuality and freedom to express oneself can become mandatory online, and therefore results in an illusion of free choices. There are evident parallels to this in my study when the girls in the focus group justify the existence of their blog through its unique qualities. It is necessary to distinguish yourself from the crowd, but only in specific, rather moderate ways. Individuality therefore becomes a required social condition rather than a path towards resistance and true freedom.

The girls in the focus group did nevertheless show resistance against the devaluing discourse, which becomes evident in Agnes questioning of the hierarchy of the blogosphere:

...some blogs are more valued than others, we have this constant contempt towards like today's outfit and "ooh, it's so damn silly and..." (Petra: Yeah, definitely) and maybe it's like, I mean some truly are very shallow but, yeah, who says that's worse than something else really?

This indicates that the girls' understanding of the prevailing discourse is not entirely passive. Other resistance strategies include negotiating around the accusatory vanity discourse that media portrays by talking about the relaxed and informal writing as a conscious decision. Their reasoning show traits of belittling and disdain that fits well with the picture mainstream media paints, but also contrasting images and understandings of the dominant discourse that demonstrates individual agency. This illustrates how governing structures and individual agency work through each other and are impossible to separate (Willet, 2008), when the discourse surrounding young girls is created.

It will become increasingly clear that young female bloggers become bound to the private sphere by a public discourse in this chapter, but the blog as a unique medium must be considered when these gendered structures are explored. Blogs are usually public, and although only a few become widely read, all have the potential of being read by anyone. Blogs may be written in the comfort of one's home, but as

⁵ "Fjortis" is a derogatory Swedish slang word, which from the beginning was used when referring to teenage girls of the age of fourteen, who was judged to behave and/or present immaturity. The meaning of the word has shifted during recent years and it is now used to point out any negative, stereotypic girly act.

soon as a post is published it becomes a part of the public sphere owing to its online accessibility (Reid-Walsh & Mitchell, 2004:180). One reason for the massive hostility and invalidation that girls' blogging seems to attract, is that blogging in itself pushes limits and is provocative.

Fragmented fashion and the limits of a consumerism society

There are many factors inside the young female culture that urge girls to pursue fashionable attributes, and although it is surrounded by many limitations, such as economy and the opinions of parents, both Bentley (1999) and Dricoll (2002) have identified fashion as an important part of girls' cultural expressions. Blogs are the perfect medium for this type of expressions according to Chittenden (2010), since a blog has the potential of reaching more people than you can do in the material reality. Additionally, there are no physical boundaries for experimenting with your looks and identity. Fashion blogs are major sources of inspiration for the girls in the focus group, and overall they truly enjoy reading these blogs. They seem to be able to identify, at least partly, with the major fashion bloggers, and feel proud when a blogger they followed for a long time and see as "their own", becomes widely recognised.

Several journalists in the reviewed articles paint a picture in which the fashion industry and the blogosphere are irrevocably intertwined, and where young fashion bloggers have an ever-increasing influence upon trends and collections. One author writes: "Blogs have become a major power factor in the world of fashion in recent years" (Danielsson & Färsjö, 2010) and some articles mention "today's outfit", having your own style and fashion in relation to success among young female bloggers. Focusing on body image and appearance is thereby created as a desirable position for girls who blog, since it seems to be a potential road to success. I argue that fashion blogging is one way to invest in what Skeggs (1999) defines as feminine cultural capital. Time and money are spent on staging a fashionable and respectable femininity through the different outfits that are presented on the blog. Moreover, the discourses that are found in the material indicate a new dimension of Skeggs' feminine cultural capital. Femininity can, according to her, be negotiated and bear importance in same-sex groups,

but it is foremost the male gaze or norm that gives femininity its worth (Skeggs, 1999:164). The investments in femininity that the fashion bloggers do will, on the contrary, primarily get a response in and power through a female audience, although its power outside the fashion industry and blogosphere will be limited through the systems earlier mentioned.

Not only do mainstream media highlight fashion blogging and consumerism among young girls, but it also creates a polarity between politics on one hand and fashion and everyday life on the other hand. The first category represents all that is considered important, while the latter is made out to be completely uninteresting for all sensible citizens:

They compare blouses and hangovers; have a bad conscience for missing out on the gym training with the personal trainer, are in agony that they despite a strict diet ate that Ben&Jerry ice cream just now [...] In the midst of this super banal goo a post about Moderaterna [a Swedish right wing party] shows up. It is most certainly a lightning bolt from a clear blue sky. (Schulman, 2010)

The author of the article seems to think it completely impossible for a young woman who writes about fashion and such to have political opinions, even the week before the elections. It is well known that the private sphere is defined as female by society, while the public sphere belongs to men (DuPree Begos, 1987). By undermining girls who make statements about the public sphere and encourage them to reach success through the "superficial" dimensions of blogging, mainstream media locks girls in a position where their only possibility to be "experts" and be listened to, is to talk about fashion and similar subjects which the prevailing values in societies already deemed unnecessary. Fashion and appearance is thereby rendered desirable for blogging girls, and portrayed as the only things they can truly master, whilst simultaneously being used as a strategy to belittle and invalidate.

Influence of fashion and consumerism in the blogosphere is correspondingly clear in the focus group. This is what Sarah said when all the girls introduced their blogs:

Yeah, I write mostly about things that happen. Yeah well, I don't usually buy that much clothing, I like put

99 per cent of my money on *food*, so it would be an awful lot of food if I wrote about everything I bought...

Sarah's quote points out that there is an expectation of blogging girls to write about their purchases and to value consumerism over other aspects of life. This is in line with Shade's work where she argues that girls are not encouraged to take part in critical analysis or production when the Internet becomes commercialized, but rather to consume (2002:9). In a Swedish context, the consumerism becomes clear when the first page of *blogg.se* is examined. There are five tabs at the top of the page, each consisting of a category: "the blog shop" (marked with a colour field), "fashion and beauty", "interior design", "family" and "food". All categories belong to classic female spheres and consumerism is highly premiered.

My informants were highly aware of the fact that fashion is considered banal and redundant, and therefore negotiated around the reading of fashion blogs in several ways. They could for example mark their awareness of the situation, or define specific situations when relaxation in the form of "superficial" blog became acceptable. The girls understood "superficial" blogs partly in the same way as media, but they had a more constructive approach where fashion tips became an encouragement to express ones identity. Willet (2008:52) argues that this construction of identities is limited by a consumerist culture, which presents a restricted range of choices. The identity-play the blogging girls engage in is thus carried out on the conditions of consumerism, and is limited within a capitalist structure. To be crass, the construction of identity is narrowed down to a choice of "today's outfit". My study indicates this being true, but also shows signs of resistance.

The blogosphere vs. old style-media

Herring et al. (2004), and McNeill (2003), have found that mainly women have personal journal blogs, which is coherent with the fact that women write more paper diaries as well. This is in line with the Swedish context, where many of the newspaper articles about female blogging focused on personal journal blogs and all of the girls in the focus group keeping some sort of diary blog. The girls also assumed that keeping a blog always implies writing a diary blog.

Isn't a blog really a kind of diary? Like, whatever you write about, like music and such, you will bring part of yourself into it and then it becomes like a diary.

Petra demonstrates a discursive shift in the usage of the word "blog" where the personal exchange becomes fundamental. This suggests that the system of understanding regarding blogs are partially separated between mainstream media, which largely covers strictly political or special interest blogs, and the blogging girls, who interpret all blogging as expressive. DuPree Degos (1987) writes that diaries are constructed as innately female since communication and holding the family together have traditionally been deemed as female endeavours. Women are socialized into understanding writing as expressive, while men view it as an instrumental tool. Despite, or perhaps due to, the fact that expressive writing rests upon a long tradition of female writing, neither the girls themselves nor media sees it as something positive,

The display of the private that personal journal blogs create becomes authoritatively criticized by an adult generation with an interpretative prerogative. A dichotomy between the objective, honest "old-style media" and the subjective, uncontrollable and excessive new media is created. Johanna Sjödin, a young female blogger who writes about sexual politics,⁶ mirrors this phenomenon in an article in which she claims that new occurrences always outrage the adult community (Sjödin, 2009). Herring investigated the tension field between generations, where adults are given the right to define adolescent and young people in 2008. She found that media makes young people into "the other" by using exotifying language and derogatory expressions. Some of the journalists in my study expresses this view by showing a lack of comprehension and sympathy of young people's media habits, or invalidate them on the basis that their experiences differ from their own.

Hello, teenage parents! [...] Do you know that your sweet 15-yearold daughters blog? Do you know what a blog is? Do you know Google? Do you have a computer? [...] This collective silence and consent to that your 14-year old daughters are wasted, and display to the whole world on their blogs for everyone to see, is abuse from the grown up world. (Skugge, 2009)

⁶ Johanna Sjödin's blog is found at <http://johannasjodin.se>

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The quote is an example of how teenagers are made out to be “the other”, and it also shows how displaying your private life is made out to be something truly horrifying, equally bad as minors drinking:

Young people, growing up with Internet, do not separate their online and offline identity; instead these parts interact constantly and are expressed through each other (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008:5-7). The online interaction thus becomes crucial for adolescent identity formation. To share private information online, through blogs and other forums, is often about proving yourself trustworthy enough to get access to other peoples information and thereby building social capital (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008:25). To belong socially in a community is very important to teenagers in their late adolescence (Kroger, 2007), and because of the connection of online and offline identity, the blogosphere can mediate this.

When the young bloggers lack means to define themselves because of a dominating media discourse, with no insight to the social exchange that blogs can offer or the contextual meaning of being raised with Internet as a part of your life, they are left without agency and with a difficulty to claim their right to exist. However, the generational divide is not blind to gender structures. A very specific situation is created in the young blogosphere just because it is predominantly inhabited by girls. Brake (1980) has found that adults monitor girls' free time more closely than boys'. This could lead to a heightened sensitivity and stronger reaction when girls enter a place adults cannot control – the Internet.

Blogging is an important part in life for all the girls who attended the focus group, something that is shown both in how “addicted” to their blogs they sometimes claim to be, and in how they respond to other peoples' reactions to their blogging habits. However, they frequently adopt a distanced and ironic position when talking about it. This is demonstrated by a dialog between Agnes and Sarah:

The blog is both a means of expression when you just need to clear your head, but also something that makes time pass, sort of “I might as well write a blog post”.

Yeah but it's like, if you have something you need to get out of your system, you might as well *spit it out* on the blog.

This indicates that the girls have internalised a lot of the negative discourse concerning blog and therefore need to remain critical toward their own practices. Although this is true to some degree, it is not a one-dimensional issue where the girls passively accept the acclaimed truths of mainstream media. Their distance partly consists of a rather down-to-earth realisation that blogging might be a nice thing to do in your free time, but it can never fill your whole life.

A modern soap opera with sad streaks

“It's really hard to stop reading a blog, you like want to know more and more.”

Sarah bear witness of the blog as a “never-ending story”, commonly used for soap operas when describing a story which continues with each episode – or blog post (Fagerström & Nilsson, 2008:92). The mechanisms of the discourses surrounding popular blogs have many points of contact with those concerning women's consumption of soap operas and romantic novels.

Blog reading is coded feminine in the same way watching soap operas and reading romance novels are, by connecting to a discourse of female relationship orientation that exists in our culture and creates a need for even more intimacy, something strongly associated with femininity (Modleski, 1987). The interest in human relationships and internal events is mirrored in the girls' large consumption of “intimate” diary blogs. Blogs are coded as “bad culture” when women consume them, rather than women choosing to consume “bad culture” in the first place, an effect known from Modleski's study of female romance reading (1987). The common conception of blogs as “bad culture” is enhanced when mainstream media connects blogging with other contemporary phenomena that are frowned upon.

And it is obvious that you will have a different take on life if you grew up among reality shows, cheap gossip magazines and blogs than if you had to make do with Public Service TV. It is often of great importance for the youth of today to be seen and heard. (Lernfelt, 2009)

The superficial and sometimes exceedingly gullible or indifferent attitudes are certainly a dimension of the blogosphere, but it does not represent the whole

of the younger generations' "take on life", something that is clearly shown when the focus group discusses blogging. The cultural stigma that intimacy suffers from, where less intimate blogs are considered having a higher cultural value inside the blogosphere, forces the girls to question their consumption of intimate blogs, and often devaluing themselves in the process.

Skeggs and Wood have shown how the emotional labour and relationship orientated socialisation of women is something that "Reality-TV", such as reality shows and make-over programs, uses to create an "intimacy" that captures female viewers (2008:21-23). I see a clear parallel with personal journal blogs, where the author continually writes about private things, but always has the possibility of editing the "reality" that is presented to the readers, and thereby creating an illusion of intimacy.

Skeggs and Wood point out a discursive shift between empathy and condemnation in the conversations of the women they interviewed. They use the same word: "sad", to express both honest sadness on someone else's behalf, and to lay judgement on someone by saying they are ridiculous and pathetic. This corresponds to what happens in the focus group when we talk about the blogger Kissie⁷. Agnes expresses both judgement and sympathy using the same word:

"I think it's so **sad** too, 'cause I've never visited her blog, and yet I know that she has enlarged her lips and that she has... because it's sort of in the tabloids and on every gossip site you visit. But, but I feel it's so **sad** too. How old was she when she did her boobs, what, 18? (Someone: Yeah). She just turned 18, I mean, is there no one there to stop her? Is there no one who can try to..."

An additional gendered dimension that becomes apparent in the media discussion is the issues surrounding objectivity. The articles that want to illustrate the insignificance of the blogosphere in comparison to printed media all express a clear ideal of objectivity (Danielsson & Färsjö 2010; Sandström, 2010; Schulman, 2009 & Granlund: 2009). The discourse produced around girls' blogging builds on that women have long been considered subjective

and emotionally orientated in our culture (Hirdman, 2001; Driscoll 2002). The means of expression that the girls choose are therefore partly judged as being of less worth because it is interpreted through an understanding where subjectivity is already a precondition.

Good girls and platinum blonde attack blogs

In an article about Sweden's largest female game blogger, 23-year old Angelica Norgren,⁸ she says: "I want to show that there are girls, who genuinely love games, who knows what they talk about, and who are not here to get attention" (Wallin, 2010).

The dichotomy between "good girls" and "bad girls" reoccurs several times in the reviewed articles, and is also repeated by the focus group. The most limitless blogs triggered the strongest emotional responses, while those who stayed within the borders of heteronormativity caused the least disturbance. The "good girls" are portrayed like "good" because they avoided drawing unearned attention to themselves or breaking too many normative rules.

Another popular blogger who is depicted as a "good girl" is Anschia "Foki" Wallström.⁹ One article mentions that Foki's blog is "not exactly an opinionated Kissie-blog prone to argumentation ad hominem" (Amster, 2009). The picture of Foki as the classic "good girl" is mediated through a comparison between Foki's choices to write about "her little life" and steady heterosexual relationship, and popular bloggers who challenge many limits of femininity, such as Kissie. One difference that is possible to spot is that Angelica Norgren is portrayed as competent, if only compared to other girls, while Foki's blog only is seen as cute and harmless, despite an enormous amount of readers. This is an indicator of that male spheres, such as videogames, remain easier to associate with competence. The girls in the focus group from have a different take on Foki's blogging. They interpret her exceptionally cute mode of dressing as a proof of individuality and courage, rather than assigning it to be a result of heteronormativity. The girls also praise Ana Gina, a comedian blogger who challenges Swedish race stereotyping, for her

⁷ Alexandra "Kissie" Nilsson is a 19-yearold girl who writes about her everyday life, fashion and opinions (<http://kissies.se>). She is famous for being provocative and mean, and gets an enormous amount of critique for her appearance and lifestyle.

⁸ Angelica Norgrens' game-blog is found at: <http://xboxflickan.se>

⁹ "Foki's" blog about fashion, cute things and Japan is found at: <http://fokis.se>

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courage, and one of the girls uses her as a base for identification.¹⁰

Alexandra “Kissie” Nilsson is one of Sweden’s most eagerly discussed bloggers. In one article she was asked to respond to the criticism of her breast augmentation, right after the question about how it feels to have the most widely read blog in Sweden (Amster, 2010a). Sexuality and power is thereby connected and creates a stereotype image of the woman as a temptress. The tone is harsh in the focus group when Kissie is discussed. Fanny says:

Well I could visit her blog just because she’s so stupid. (Some girls scoff in agreement) I mean, do your boobs and then just “Oops, they might be too big” [...] Yeah well I don’t read Kissie or Paow or so, I think they are... I think they try to become celebrities in a *bad way*. They try to provoke to reach the top, and I don’t like that.

The negative attitude that the girls show toward Kissie when she is unconcernedly showing off her body, echoes an established discourse in which female sexuality, when immoderate, becomes imposed with guilt. The massive critique that meets Kissie in mainstream media is partly explained through her play with female attributes that are associated with “bad girls”, exhibiting a vigorously sexual and boisterous nature, while simultaneously having power resulting from being the most widely read blog in Sweden.

There is not only the dichotomy between “good girls” and “bad girls” that limit girls to stereotypes, but the words used to describe girls’ blogging is often highly emotive and gendered. Words with a negative female connotation, like “the blog hysteria”, “commercial whore” (Amster, 2010a), “vulgo-blogger” (Färnbo, 2009) and “young, pretty bimbos with too little clothing” (Skugge, 2009) are used to describe the blogosphere, leading to the reinforcement of derogatory female encoding that blogs receive. Neutral words such as “little girls” (Hellsten, 2009) are also used as insults in the blogosphere, since femininity has been considered a hindrance in becoming an adult (Driscoll, 2002:50-52).

Positive images and resistance have a part in the

¹⁰ Ana Gina Dirawi is a 19-year-old girl who run a humour blog. Her explicit goal is to create an understanding between “blattar” (Swedish slang word for racialized groups, mostly of Arabic origin) and “svennar” (slang word for Swedish people or a kind of exaggerated “swedishness”) and she plays a lot with stereotypes (<http://anagina.blogg.se>).

emerging media discourse. The blogging girls are referred to as driven and outspoken, and the blog is considered being able to open doors into career paths (Freiberg, 2010 & Svanell, 2010). A few articles use words that signal power, such as “boss” and “media-mogul” (Amster, 2009; Nilsson, 2010). The girls in the focus group reason around power as well, although they mainly dissociate themselves from it, as is shown when Petra talks about a popular Swedish blogger:

...when we spoke about Kenza and so... I think it’s a bit scary with *the power* she has, I mean she could get hundreds of thousands of people to believe like anything.¹¹

The ambivalence toward the potential power of blogs shown by the focus group designates a difficulty in bridging assumptions surrounding young women’s lack of power in society. Mainstream media spreads conflicting messages, where being girly seems to be both the greatest hindrance and the key to success in the blogosphere. The popular blogger Isabella Löwengrip says that the “girly touch” made her successful (Ekström, 2009), but also gives this piece of advice to girls who want to excel at blogging: “Don’t play the girly role” (Freiberg, 2010). The last quote illustrates that girlhood still is strongly associated with passivity and not a desirable trait for reaching success.

Conclusion

This study has shown how girls are encouraged by a contemporary societal discourse to consume and focus on their appearance, and in doing so creating their own social context, something for which the blog as a medium is well adjusted. On the other hand the girls are invalidated and reprimanded when following the rules of this discourse, as a result of girls’ interests being preconditioned as uninteresting. Mainstream media combines an adult interpretative prerogative which “others” young people, with a focus on the femininely connoted intimacy and subjectivity, which creates a highly derogatory discourse for those who are placed in both constructed categories: young girls.

¹¹ Kenza Zuoiten is 19 and write about her life as a model, shopping and travels (<http://kensas.se>). Competes at the time of writing with Alexandra “Kissie” Nilsson for having the largest blog in Sweden.

In addition the blog as a medium have norm-breaking aspects, such as automatically making the private public, built in. The stigma attached to the blogosphere, which in turn works within a wider framework of stigmatized female culture, forces the girls to constant negotiation, where recognition and pride often is followed by estrangement or dismissal. The distancing is used as a strategy for not appearing “sad”, but the girls also question who has the right to set an agenda where they find themselves at the bottom of the blogospheres’ status hierarchy.

Openings in the media discourse and reinterpretations of meanings in the blogosphere shows that despite this, a motion exists in the discourse that leaves girls powerless, with a potential of new understandings of what it means to be a blogging girl. This resistance does not generate an actual change in the societal discourse, but it shows that the structures which derogate girls’ experiences are not immobile. Blogging has, although it exists within a framework of a commercial market, become a major social movement among Swedish girls, where important cultural codes and communities are created. The body of evidence in this study shows how the ever-growing readership and influence over “old-style media” that blogs retain, while at the same time being defined by the same, points toward a dynamic power relationship where no party is unaffected by the other.

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Theme IV: Gender and Contemporary Media Chapter 27

Resisting the Subordinate Woman - a Young Girl Constructing Gendered Identity Online

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Based on experiences and results from the research project (the.GTO.project · <http://mt.sh.se/gto>), this article discusses how tween (app. 10 to 14 years old) girls construct gendered identity in online environments, where the publication of digital images is of core importance. The case being the Swedish social network site (SNS) Bilddagboken (BDB). At BDB up to 500.000 images are posted each day, totalling more than 250 million images. In the article I will discuss, based on a single illustrative example from a 12-year-old Swedish girl, how a tween girl constructs an online gendered identity and what kind of communicative competences this production of gendered identity demands. The article begins with reflecting upon the gendered image of the gazed woman of Cindy Sherman, followed by a discussion on the (gendered) photograph and how new qualities are added when being used in a digital context. Ethical issues arising from publishing empirical data collected at a SNS are discussed at some length.

Introduction

Young persons spend time and invest engagement in social networking sites (SNS). The currently most popular is the global Facebook, but there is also a wide range of more local SNS in both geography and/or in interest. Most of the users, and especially so young persons, interact with their friends from the off-line world, or persons they already are acquainted with. This then can be seen as a reflection of the fact that these networks primarily are *social* networks, supporting interpersonal relations, and being for many of the users an essential part of everyday life. Being online means, in this perspective, being with friends (and not primarily using technological gadgets).

Looking closer at young people interacting in SNS, there seems to be a gender bias as there are more girls

than boys using SNS, and also that girls spend more time than boys on SNS (Findahl, 2010). Or, in short, while boys tend to play computer games, girls are more frequent users of social media. Among tween (app. 8 to 14 years old) girls, being online means being connected. Not just literally as in having a Internet connected computer or mobile phone, but also - and more importantly - being connected to friends. In this social activity, the presentation of oneself is a core, and constantly ongoing, project. The meeting of the demands of both the SNS and the friends to present yourself and to update the profile, is a focal point in the communicative activity in many SNS. The first question the user meets when creating a user account on a SNS is "who are you?". This communicative activity understood as an identity project, is done in many different modalities like written words, typography, colours, fonts, images, movies, sound, links, etc. Still further modalities are i.e. sampling, meshing, intertextual references and postproduction of photographs/images.

Based on results from the.GTO.project¹, the theme for this article is the gendered online identity of a tween girl and what kind of communicative competences this production of gendered identity demands. But instead of presenting results from the.GTO.project at length (this can be seen in i.e. Siibak & Hernwall, 2011), I will focus on a unique photograph from a single user, a 12 years old Swedish girl. This is a photograph that in many respects can be said to illustrate several of the qualities found in the previous semiotic analysis of a much larger sample of images from the.GTO.project, without being representative in any statistical meaning. The article will start

¹ the.GTO.project (Construction of gender and normality among young people online in Estonia and Sweden) is a research project founded by The Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies (Östersjöstiftelsen), 2009-2012. See <http://mt.sh.se/gto>.

with reflections on gendered images and the online photograph. Then, before describing and analysing the actual photograph, there will be a lengthy discussion about ethics in publishing this kind of empirical data (and what actually stops me from doing that); a discussion that is on the importance of an ethical compass when studying minors, regardless if they being present on an "public" web community. The final part of the article discusses the image and the self-presentation in a wider context.

The gendered image

What intrigues me the most about the photographical project of Cindy Sherman is her depiction of the objectified woman. In her early works (i.e. *Untitled Film Stills* from 1977/1978), she takes the role of the beautiful (and vulnerable) woman, posing in a range of different situations - photographs that just as well could be stills from French noir movies from the 1960s. This woman seldom looks in the camera, but is rather looked-at, as Mulvey expressed it (1975, 1989). This is the woman objectified by the controlling male gaze, the "woman as image" (Mulvey, 1975). As if she is not able to look back at the onlooker, in her subordinated position. When Sherman in the next step deconstructs this image of the gazed-at woman, the objectified woman literarily becomes the victim of physical actions. In the *Untitled* series from the 1980s and 1990s we get testimony of the abandoned woman, of the assaulted woman, as well as of the modified woman. In this series of portraits, there are photographs of lonely and crying women, of beaten up and raped women, and of women with prosthesis (as well as women made of a collage of prostheses). All being, as I read them, critical comments on the construction of the woman as being valued according to the prevailing heterosexual normative structures. In this reading, I see Cindy Sherman resisting - by depicting - the hierarchical positioning of the woman in a subordinate position and how she is judged according to how well she accepts her place in this gendered power hierarchy.² I use the concept

gender in the meaning the social construction of norms and values related to the stereotypical binary categories of men and women and the masculine and feminine attributes/power dimensions associated with those categories.

Obviously, the photograph can tell a story, even though the photographic depiction is of necessity a frozen moment in time. Whereas the written text is linear and causal in its modality, the photograph is nonlinear and lacking of expressed causality. That the photograph can tell a story even though it lacks the linearity of the written text comes from the fact that the photograph has another kind of grammar than the written text. The narrative dimension of the photograph is in this interpretation co-constructed by the author and the reader, as the photograph invites the reader to add what is missing; i.e. time. Just as we cannot imagine ourselves as being in a fraction of time, in a frozen 1/250 second of continuous time, the still image not just needs the before, but also invites to take part of what to come. What is the object looking at? Why that surprised face? Will the dog catch up with the cat? Every photograph has the potential to ask questions of what to come, as we all know time is unstoppable. It is as the causality of things becomes highlighted in the photograph.

The photograph in the online presentation

The photograph used in an online presentation is part of a multimodal textuality with a broad spectrum of semiotic recourses (Kress, 2009) that carries the communicative and intentional dimensions of the expression in other ways than the written text do. The multimodal textuality affords new ways of creating text, which many contemporary young people are well familiar with. For most children, the photograph as a communicative act is used long before they use written words. This means, that children develop an experience in using photographs to express feelings and experiences, as they use available communicative "portraiting" tools (such as digital cameras, mobile phones, web-cams, and so on).

Before discussing what different (and interacting) modalities there can be found in a photograph, based on the empirical data, let us first reflect upon how to understand the author of the online photograph. The author of multimodal texts is according to Kress

² This kind of play with and resistance against gender stereotypes is obviously commonplace within the so-called popular culture. The perhaps most striking example being the artist Madonna. Depending on the analytical perspective (or perhaps gaze?) a lengthy list could include personalities of the popular culture such as Lady Gaga, Gwen Stefani, and Spice Girls (and consequently (?) the metrosexual David Beckham). But also Marilyn Monroe, and oddly pin-up girls such as Bettie Page, seem to be (re-)interpreted in this vein (cheered by Dita Von Teese). And from the Swedish pop cultural arena, contemporary Regina Lund. And so on.

(2009) a rethor. The rethor, as the rhetorically skilled communicator, needs knowledge on not just the limits and possibilities of different modalities, but also knowledge about different modal combinations. This means that the rather stable system of rules of the written text (i.e. grammar) is in Kress' social-semiotic theory exchanged with constant changeable semiotic resources. These semiotic resources can be understood as a gallery of expressions in different modalities to be inspired by. This means that when young people act online they are rethors making use of semiotic resources for multimodal communication. A further important aspect of the rethor is, according to Kress, that the use of semiotic resources always is motivated, and hence intentional. The rethor has something to say, and make use of semiotic resources to say that. In this act of communication, the rethor probably needs to imagine the onlooker to be able to tell *ones own* story in a photograph (or any other modality). Or, the rethor needs someone to communicate with.

When young girls publish photographs on a SNS, these then are motivated communicative acts of a rethor in a socially subordinate position making use of appropriated multimodal competences as semiotic resources. In an analysis of multimodal content, it (i.e. a photograph) can serve as an instrument to come closer to the experiences and life-world of the rethor (c.f. Graviz & Hernwall, 2011) as this content is motivated by intentions of the rethor. Obviously, as the photograph is not limited to words, the photograph can illustrate a position or experience, which can be hard to describe in words. Here the translation of experiences and feelings are transduced rather than transformed (c.f. Kress, 2009), as it involves a motivated and reflected change of modes (rather than a maintaining of modes across cultures). Even though the photograph is a complex modality, where i.e. postproduction adds to the communicative layers and the complexity in the making of an argument (the illustration), the access to this complex modality can on the other hand contribute to the clarity of the rethors argument. And when used as a editable surface, the photograph do become something else, perhaps best defined as "image".

The photograph used in an online presentation is an instance in a continuous dialogue between the sender (the avatar, the rethor, etc.) and the receiver

(the community and its users). This in at least three meanings: (a) as the content or design of the single photograph can be changed or updated according to comments of the community and the intentions of the rethor; (b) as the photograph can be deleted and possibly replaced by another photograph, and; (c) as the single photograph is part of a flow of photographs and other modalities, in sum constructing what can be understood as a nurtured and attentive multimodal figuration ("gestaltung"). The photograph published online is in this respect not a linear text (as a written text could be), but rather a intertextual, fluid and readerly text presented in a public space. Even though many SNS are more or less private in the respect that the user needs a unique username and password, the quality of the SNS is still that of public media. When the number of viewers of a physical photograph is limited by the size of the photograph (and the number of copies made), the online photograph has no such limitations. Rather, the online photograph - however private the motif might be - is part of a public media space. And this is another crucial dimension of the photograph in the online presentation: the qualities of the image, motif, figuration, and so on, are negotiated in a public space, giving important feedback to the rethor as for how to interpret her/himself. This means, in the words of Bordo (2003), that the private is presented in a public space, and that this public media space gives important feedback as to how to construct the personal self.

Setting and method

When doing an analysis on images, there are three significant ways of doing it (Eriksson, 2009). The first can be described as analysing what style an image is representing. A style can be related to time, culture and/or a specific person (i.e. the artist). The second way of doing an image analysis focuses on its formal aspect, its composition (materials, colours, etc.) but also the internal relation between different elements in the image. Grounded on these two methods, the third mode of image analysis can be described as iconographic, and is based on the idea that the image is a carrier of content and/or message. Iconographic analysis starts with a description of the image (its style), goes on to an analysis of its content (formal aspects), and ends with an interpretation of its meaning. In this third way of doing an image analysis, the

object is placed in a broader context and its meaning is supposed to be growing out of an interplay between the object, the context and the viewer. All being instances of even further complexities and interrelationships.

The context for the specific image, or photograph, to be analysed is that it has been published by a 12-year-old Swedish girl at the Swedish SNS Bilddagboken in December 2010. The core idea behind Bilddagboken (or "Image Diary" in English) is that the users publish images from their everyday life.³ Images can be uploaded with a computer, with a smartphone, or by way of MMS. The only requirement on the images, besides legal aspects, is that there has to be a written text in one way or another commenting/accompanying the image.⁴

The actual image discussed below, is part of a larger sample of images collected in the.GTO.project. When doing the sampling for the.GTO.project, we continuously tried different qualitative strategies. As the amount of images is vast, and that there is constantly new images published, the sampling and analysis is primarily based on semiotic methods (Fiske, 1989; Kress, 2009; Eriksson, 2009; Hernwall, 2009). That means, that the number of images in a sample has in the.GTO.project always been secondary to the qualities of the images collected, to the tentative analysis developed out of the digital ethnography conducted, and to the discussion within the research project about possible thematic interpretation and conclusions. The analysis of the images has been a continuous process when logging in to one of the SNS used as empirical settings in the studies.⁵ The actual image mirrors in interesting ways some of the

qualities found in many images presented by young girls on preferably Bilddagboken; the positioning of the object, the kind of textual comments, and the use of postproduction to add artistic qualities to the photograph. Also important to notice is that even though it is possible for the users of Bilddagboken to hide their information behind passwords (i.e. only registered user, and in some instances only invited/accepted user, get access to specific user profiles), not all do. Those profiles are thus accessible for everyone, and it is also from those open profiles that we have gathered empirical data for the.GTO.project.⁶

Reflections on ethics on publishing images from SNS

One of the aspects affecting the validity of the argument put forward here, is related to the possibility of actually *showing*, and giving voice to the rethor of this particular image. This means, being able to cite (and making visible) the online presentation. Nevertheless, making visible stands in contrast with the need of being cautious of the person having published the image. Even though this is an image publicly available (no passwords needed), it is still a child of minor age that is the publisher/rethor and hence we need to be attentive to the possible consequences and take serious the ethical considerations.

A core issue in research ethics in general, and with research including subjects of minor age in special, is the obtaining of informed consent. By and large, if this is not guaranteed, the collected material could not be used (or should not be collected in the first place) in any way if it reveals the identity of the subject, or in any way may lead to consequences for the subject. If the subject is not informed on the consequences of her participation in the research, it is not ethically acceptable to use that material. Even if the subject is presenting herself under a nickname, as in this particular case, there is still the same need of informed consent. But obtaining this informed consent is basically impossible without me as a researcher approaching her physical identity, and then the position of the rethor will undoubtedly

³ Bilddagboken was a SNS hosted by Wyatt Media Group, also the owners of i.e. Lunarstorm, another Swedish SNS. Both these communities hosted a large number of preferably Swedish speaking users. In August 2010 Lunarstorm was closed down and replaced by LS8, most likely as an effect of (a) the growing popularity of Facebook and (b) Wyatt Media Group focusing on Bilddagboken. In December 2010 there were more than 250 million images on Bilddagboken, and up to 500.000 new images on a "good" day. The number of users was about 1.3 million, and about 220.000 of them were between 10 and 14 years old. There was of course a number of passive users, as well as there were persons having two or more user accounts. Still, as a preferably Swedish speaking SNS, the 1.3 million users would be about 14 % of the Swedish population (9.3 million). In May 2011 Bilddagboken changed named to DayViews, and all Bilddagboken members and all the content of Bilddagboken were ported to DayViews.

⁴ This requirement is there, according to the owners (personal conversation spring 2011), to stop the user from unreflectively publishing large amount of images.

⁵ In the.GTO.project we have in the analysis of photographs/images mainly focused on two SNS. Bilddagboken (and later DayViews) in Sweden, and Rate in Estonia. See Siibak & Hernwall (2011) for a presentation of the two SNS and their different qualities.

⁶ We have contact with the administrators of Bilddagboken (DayViews) and are accepted to do the research we actually do. They have also given us approval to have user accounts on the SNS, to get access to user profiles that are secluded from user that do not log on to the SNS. As an ethical consideration, we have chosen not to use that possibility, the main reason being respecting the users sense of privacy.

become another. The *chosen* position of the rethor (the name and description of the avatar) needs to be respected and not revealed. Still, this does not lead to that it is impossible to do research on i.e. images on a public SNS, even if the rethors are not informed or given their informed consent. An analysis of the images as such is still possible, if (a) it does not reveal the identity of the rethor or in any other way might affect her and (b) the analysis is on qualities of the images (and not of the subject). Following this line of argument, it is possible to do an analysis of the multimodal *works* of the rethors and i.e. the (gendered) figurations interpreted, if not revealing the identity of that rethor.

Another dimension of ethics could be discussed in terms of paying respect for the author/rethor and by that give the subject credit for her work. Obviously, in this article my ambition is to describe and give a deepened understanding of the qualities that could be found in these kind of images in general, and in this particular image in special. Following that line of argument, the image - as being publicly published - should be reprinted here, giving full reference to the subject (and of course having had informed consent from her as well as her parents/legal guardian). There are obvious advantages in this perspective, not the least as it gives me as the author of this text valuable tools in putting forward my argument. It also gives advantages for the reader, as it will be easier to both follow the argument and to be critical towards it. Still, in this more utilitarian oriented argument (greatest good for the greatest number, public good over private good, and the end justifies the means) (c.f. Ess & AoIR, 2002), there is an obvious risk that unforeseen consequences will afflict the subject. The argument that the published material is public is not enough.

A more important argument is, I argue, the possible consequences for the subject (of minor age) emancipating from publishing the image. This deontological-based argument (primarily deciding with reference to actions and not ends, the moral obligation, and rejects acts that is possibly harmful for individuals or minorities) (c.f. Ess & AoIR, 2002), holds the importance of finding adequate ways of theorising and analysing that do not (risk to) have any negative impact on the subjects. Based on this ethical compass as grounded in the (new) sociology of childhood (James & Prout, 1997; Christensen &

James, 2000) and children's right to respect, I will not publish the image(s).

Still, there is the need of *showing* or using citations. Describing, in words (as is done below in the passage "The image"), is obviously not an equivalent to reprinting an image. But instead of showing the image as it was published by the rethor, I will use a combination of written description with an illustrating fragment (or citation) from the image. Doing this make it possible to, I argue, on the one hand respect the obligation to keep the rethor anonymised and on the other hand illustrate the character of the image. This latter aspect have to be chosen consciously so that it (a) does not reveal the rethor (the originator of the image) nor the object of the image, (b) has a general character so that it serves as a reasonable illustration of existing qualities of the image as a whole, and (c) serves as an explanation or clarification of arguments in the analysis.

The image

A description of an image, and the challenges in doing it, can serve as an illustration of the complexity of that image. It can furthermore be seen as a confirmation of the inherent problem of transduction (Kress, 2009), or translating one mode (image) to another (written text). Obviously, different modes have different qualities. One such difference in quality, is the problem to anonymise an image as discussed above in the ethics section. With these challenges in mind, let me describe the image/photograph.

In mid-December 2010 JeffsGiirl (anonymised and translated) published 10 photos on her personal page of Bilddagboken (BDB) on this particular day. JeffsGiirl is 12 years old and publishes images on BDB regularly (on average every second day). The analysed image is published twice this day with different texts; one with a positive remark directed to her loving sister, in a sans-serif typeface, partly in capitol letters and coloured pink. The other - and it is this image that is discussed here - is a more gloomy remark, in a regular (default) sans-serif typeface.

The image is a combination of a postproduced ("photoshoped") photograph of her from torso and up, taken from a position slightly below her face, and written text. She is wearing a dark top. The photographed subject is bending her head forward slightly to her right, looking down. If her eyes are

open or not is not possible to see, but the eyelashes are marked/highlighted, and they are in the centre of attention/image. At the lower fourth of the image are four letters forming the word "Yees"⁷ in a sans-serif bold typeface (the image will be called the Yees-image hereafter). The letters are white with a black contour. The image as such is in the colour range brown-yellow, softened, and with the contours of the face, the long blond hair and the eyelashes marked. Below the image is written, in the default sans-serif typeface, "why like me when one can hate me?"⁸. In the lower left of the image, are some interior details visible but it is not possible to see what they are, except suggesting the photograph is taken indoors.

I use a cut-out of the eyelashes as an illustration ("citation") of both the style and qualities of the image as such, and of the position of the eyes.

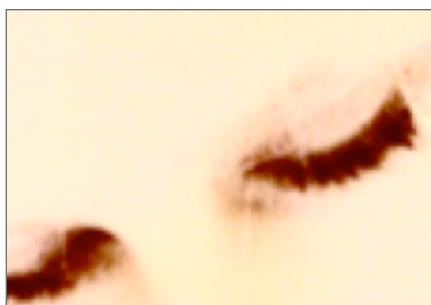


Image 1. Cut-out from "Yees", a JeffsGiirl posting on Bilddagboken December 2010.

After this description of the image and its content, I will no go on with the third step of the analysis and reflect upon its possible meanings. I will do this by placing it in a broader context of young girls presenting themselves in online communities with special emphasis on gender aspects.

A gendered constructed identity

The rethor is constructing a gendered identity of JeffsGiirl by way of how she is presenting herself in different modalities on her Bilddagboken account. That identity is a fluid and nomadic (Braidotti, 1994) relational identity constantly being updated, as every new entry to the account of JeffsGiirl is adding new dimensions to how to understand JeffsGiirl. The Yees-image is part of this constant negotiation of who JeffsGiirl is and who JeffsGiirl wants to be un-

derstood to be. But how does the rethor construct the gendered identity of JeffsGiirl in the Yees-image? And what is that gendered identity? In one respect - and I'll start with that - it is a rather stereotypical construction of a subordinate girl/woman, in accordance with prevalent societal structures and norms. At another level, the Yees-image illustrates something opposite and quite intriguing, of which I come back to shortly.

The stereotypical invisible girl/woman, as depicted by i.e. Cindy Sherman (and discussed above), of a vulnerable, fragile, and anonymous object, is perhaps the initial reading also of the Yees-image. The 'to-be-looked-at' object (c.f. Mulvey, 1978), rather than autonomous subject taking place as an independent individual. This is a depiction of a girl with long blond hair, not looking at the onlooker but bending her head forward as to escape - or at least not having to expose herself to - eye contact. But still being seen, being the object of the gazing onlooker, and also accepting that subordinate position. And that positioning of herself as the object of the gaze of the judging surrounding, is in this respect a traditional positioning of the female object. The marked eyelashes, together with the long blond hair, the hairstyle (side-parted hair in a girlie way) and the (dark) top, do emphasise this gendered position. Accompanied with this "writing" of the subject of the Yees-image, are the additional modes used for emphasising that subordinate position. These are on the one hand the written text, and on the other hand the postproduction of the photograph. The written text is twofold, with "Yees" written on the lower fourth of the image, and also "why like me when one can hate me?" below the image. The latter is a phrase could give associations to broken love and/or friendship, to existential questions of tweens on the brink to the teenage years. This emphasising of personal feelings, and especially the hardships of love and friendship, are predominantly considered female traits. The former phrase "Yees" seems to underscore the position of the object in the photograph, and it also underscores the importance of the written question of love/friendship, saying that it should be taken seriously. That the rethor is actually meaning what is stated in the different modes present in the Yees-image. At the same time this phrase is something of a paradox. On the one hand "Yees" seem to suggest a confirmation of her position, which then

⁷ "Jaah" in original.

⁸ "varför gilla mig när man kan hata mig?" in original.

is made uncertain in the "why like me when one can hate me?" phrase. An uncertain and fragile position, in other words. The last dimension of the image to be commented upon in this stereotypical reading, is the postproduction of the photograph making the object more anonymous by way of softening the contours (adding blur to the photograph), altering the colour balance and reducing it to the colour range brown-yellow (sepia). Postproduction, or "photoshopping", is an activity often carried out in solitude giving associations to classic female handicraft activities such as knitting or embroidery. The metaphor of handicraft could perhaps also be used to illustrate how the female subject is post-producing a representation of herself, which is for others to see and comment upon.

Now going from that rather stereotypical reading of the Yees-image and the sender as a more or less passive object, to an analysis of the rethor as harbouring deep knowledge on how to construct an image of a subordinate girl in accordance with societal norms and values, means looking at the image with a different set of glasses. Obviously, there is something wrong with the above characterisation of JeffsGirl, of the Yees-image, and especially of the rethor of those two, as it so clearly misses the interpretative and creative qualities that are there in the production of the Yees-image (and of JeffsGirl). One of its more interesting qualities is how it illustrates a transition of a girl on the bring to womanhood, emphasising conflicting feelings and a young girls struggle with norms and roles.

To start with, the use of the phrase "Yees" in the image could be seen as a confirmation of herself, stating her presence and her right to her feelings - Yees, here I am! The rethor of the Yees-image clearly does master different modalities and the associated semiotic resources to construct an image of the vulnerability of contemporary women/girls, a position which could be described as a subject becoming an - and resisting being an - object. This, I argue, is illustrated by had she only felt subordinated she would not have made this clear confirmation of herself and of the construction of herself. This does not stop her from reflecting upon the complexity of love *and* hate, of the meeting between the girl *and* the young woman, as well as stating her presence and her right to her feelings, ideals and the image of herself. Being courageous confirming herself, JeffsGiirl does make

her voice heard as she is proudly presenting this construction of herself as visible in the Yees-image.

By asking the question "why like me when one can hate me?" she is showing herself fragile and uncertain. This comment is to be understood as a comment to her peer friends, inviting the real friends to confirm her. In her using this image, (post)produced, published and chosen with concern as an image reflecting an ideal self worth striving for, she does position herself making private ambitions visible. Even if she this way recreates the male gaze, being the woman to-be-looked-at, making the construction of herself and the stated fragility open for criticism, this also marks a consciousness with societal norms about how to act and look as a (young) woman. The Yees-image this way becomes incorporated with the male gaze, giving the viewer not only an advantage but is also expected to comment upon this image and state an opinion. And it is exactly from an awareness of this subordinated position that JeffsGiirl initiates the dialogue with her peers, urging them to confirm her. The question "why like me when one can hate me?" is a marker of not just subordination, but also of an *awareness* of this subordinated position strengthening the bonds between the friends. At this level of peer-to-peer communication, the only feedback that actually counts is the supportive comments confirming her right to be as she wants, as well as stating *their* love to her.

By these readings of the Yees-image, the rethor of the Yees-image is creating a mirror of contemporary societal values and norms, which do position the woman/girl in a subordinate power position. And also how even young girls are aware of and comment upon these power positions. To be able to do that requires a special kind of digital competence of the rethor including use of a camera, gesture and positioning of the object, use of editing software, participation in SNS, and uploading of images to SNS/internet. All of these include, in one way or another, elaborated communicative skills. Skills of necessity needed in the maintaining of the community of friends on a SNS (in this case Bilddagboken), which means being open for critique, giving feedback to friends, adopting necessary genres and ways of acting, etc.

Furthermore, in the Yees-image, the rethor is making visible not just the subordinate position of the woman/girl, but also the qualities needed in the

re-constructing of that subordinate position. The image then becomes something else than a mere reproduction of stereotypical gendered norms, but rather a creative communicative testimony of a perceived mental as well as physical societal position. In this interpretation, girl rethors (such as the rethor behind JeffsGirl) appropriate the same kind of possibilities to present a reflexive comment on their experiences, just as Cindy Sherman has done in her professional artistic photograph carrier, by way of their resistance towards being passive objects. Instead JeffsGirl, and the Yees-image, become accounts of the need to questions the way we perceive multimodal figuring of young girls on social media, as these are examples of developed not just modal skills but also of critical readings of contemporary (popular) culture.⁹ And as such, the images on a SNS like Bilddagboken tell important stories about the situation of contemporary young people, giving testimony to how they appropriate the gendered norms prevalent in our society.

Concluding reflection

When constructing online gendered identity, tween girls do this in relation to the norms and values prevalent in contemporary society. Consequently, in the images posted on BDB there are traces of tween girls' understandings of these normative gender roles, poses, and gestures, which are adopted, appropriated but also negotiated and transformed. This producing of online (gendered) identity is an important instance of not just gender work, but also of developing a contemporary broad textual, communicative and relational competence harbouring modes such as interpretation, production, publishing, intertextuality, post-production, design, semiotic mixing (combination of semiotic modes such as image, text, colour, and so on) etc. leading to a rich communicative competence of relevance for the 21st century. A competence where the photograph holds a special place in the world of self-presentation(s) in social networking sites.

What is it that makes a photograph fascinating? One reason, out of the many possible, is that is a keeper of memories. But it is not just that. The photograph is, and here it is unique as a communicative

technology and modality, a frozen moment that disregards time. (The painting could be that, but that is then made by a human subject in another respect. And hence something else.) This leads to that the photograph becomes an image of an eternal moment, which is furthermore movable in both time and space. The photograph does, in respect, master time. By this, we as viewers can gaze at the most private, in a passing moment, and being partners in something we have not been part of. Through the photograph we become invited to someone, or something, in the past sense, encouraged to keep the memory alive. And with that, creating a story around that frozen moment of time.

By this act of interpretation, of making sense of what has obviously been, there is a dividing difference between *to see* and *interpret*, and *how* this interpretation is done. The first is a human process, of making meaning of impressions and experiences occurring in the flow of every-day life. If not, we could not act in the world. The latter, how an interpretation is done, is on the other hand bound to culture and something learned. Or in other words, this cultural reading is a question of frames of reference, of structures, power, and so on. But this division is nothing more than a theoretical (or conceptual) one. In the every-day life-world of human subjects, each and every interpretation is influenced by cultural experiences. It is just the degree of consciousness, and stringency, that differs. In this article, my ambition has been to do an interpretation of a particular cultural artefact, the Yees-image of the rethor JeffsGirl. This interpretation is based on on the one hand experiences from the.GTO.project and studies of how young girls construct gender in online environments (such as Bilddagboken), and on the other a theoretical as well ideological interest in the communicative skills of young girls and their creative use of semiotic resources when creating personas in social networking sites (SNS).

In this perspective, SNS is an active media environment, challenging the young female user/s to actively reflect upon not just their own identity and who they want to be. But also of relating this identity to societal norms and values. Ziehe, in his discussion on how the socialising context is to be understood as a merger of everyday life and popular culture, states that with the "sharpened observation of one's own

⁹ Again, obvious associations are Lady Gaga, Madonna and other such artists of popular culture that by exaggerating gendered traits oppose such norms and values.

self [...] a diffuse kind of ‘identity pain’ that makes one more dependent on the recognition of others” is prevalent. In this “identity pain” the SNS, and its peer-culture, become resources to be used in the identity construction process, as illustrated by Jeff-sGiirl and her peers. By using different modalities in the intentional and fluid process of identity re/constructing, these young girls make the invisible girl visible.

Obviously, it is hard to find new ways to present what is accustomed and well known, as every act of production using semiotic resources is an interaction between memory, perception and the perception of these memories (c.f. Eriksson, 2009:57). So, when young girls like the 12 years old rethor of the Yees-image do multimodal work, they are doing it from exactly their experiences, as rich and powerful as they are. And the result, which in the contemporary media environment is a constant flow of multimodal figurations, is a testimony of elaborated not just multimodal and digital competences. But also of power structures and gendered identity work as they take shape before our eyes.

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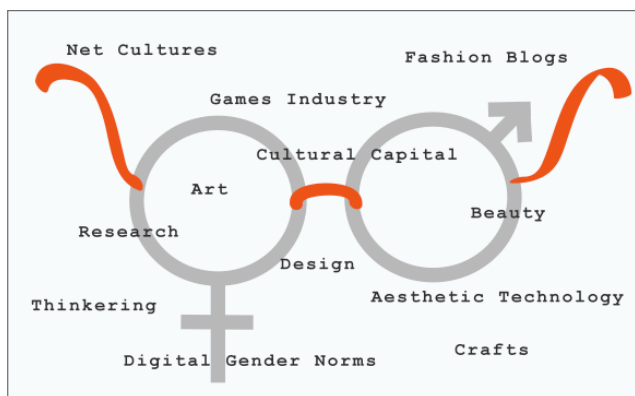
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Theme IV: Gender and Contemporary Media Chapter 28

Can You See Me Now?

The Digital Strategies of Creative Girls

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Can you see me now? – *The digital strategies of creative girls* aims to make visible girls as creative developers of the Internet and new technology, which has been investigated through interviews with students, artists, project managers and entrepreneurs. Why do so many girls choose to blog? What is it that influences girls' choices of new technology? How is digital creativity affected by gender norms? The prevailing social gender norms appear to be reflected on the Internet as *digital gender norms*, where girls and boys seem to prefer different communication tools. While working with the question of *digital gender*, I have developed the hypothesis of *aesthetic technology* namely that girls often have an artistic approach towards technology. Girls mainly learn technology for a reason, planning to do something once they have learned the technique, and their goals often have aesthetic preferences. The issue of girls learning technology, *becoming technical*, is clearly more complicated than one might first think in relation to gender norms. Even though young girls are often just as interested in technology as young boys are, it is difficult for them to keep or adapt their technical interest to normative femininity, as they enter their teens. Another problem is that expressions of technical competence or innovation, which do not

correspond to the predominant male norm, might be hard for us to see. Creative girls who undergo education within the digital field can easily end up in a situation where they must first work with equality and become entrepreneurs in order to have a chance to practice their profession.

Digital Gender

Fashion blogs or forums for game development on the internet – which shall I choose? The question may appear to be superfluous – of course I will choose the sites that contain information and discussions about the topic I am most interested in, whether it is fashion or games development. But what happens if I, as a female, am interested in game development and there are basically only males on the game development sites? Will I be accepted by the boys? Do we have something in common through our interest in game development? Do we share a common view of what constitutes a good game or what would be an even better game? Are we going to understand each other?

The questions that arise are not a unique feature of the Internet; the same pattern or problem is also found in homosocial contexts *in real life* (IRL). The problem is seen distinctly on the Internet because the net is supposed to be, using the term of American social and literary critic Katherine N. Hayles, a “disembodied” social meeting place and to some extent thought of as an arena where it ought to be easier for us to put our gender, age and cultural identity aside in order to treat each other more equally. (Hayles, 1999). During the early days of Internet's development, such utopian hopes were expressed by e.g. feminist researchers like Sherry Turkle (1995) and Donna Haraway (1991). However, contemporary Swedish studies have shown that our behaviour on the Internet is not very different from our behaviour

IRL (Sveningsson Elm 2007; A. Hirdman, 2006; 2007).

The way we behave when communicating on the net, even when we are not physically visible or audible, can reveal more about our identity than we ourselves can imagine (Suler, 2005; Dunkels, 2009). Social codes that we are not even aware of can expose us. The symbolic or cultural capital, *habitus*, which, according to the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1979), we always carry with us, affects our options for choosing which roles we are able to take on in a convincing way both on the Internet and in a physical setting. The question of which places on the Internet we can conquer and make our own is therefore more complicated than simply being a matter of our interests; different social norms, like for instance gender norms, are of significance for our freedom of choice.

According to Haraway as a researcher, you might find it difficult to see anything other than the patterns or pictures you expect to find, so in order to make the invisible visible one must perhaps also make the actual seeing visible (Haraway, 1991). This is why norm critical theories and postmodern feminist analysis (Lykke, 2010) have become important for the analysis and problematizing of this work. According to postmodern feminist theory, based on American philosopher Judith Butlers theories of “performativity”, one of the fundamental thoughts behind the term “gender” is that identity is negotiable and is formed and created through everyday actions that are continually repeated, as we “do gender”. (Butler, 1990; Ambjörnsson, 2004). When someone breaches gender norms, we often find it provocative. In particular, men who deviate from male gender stereotype patterns are often subjected to comments about a presumed non-heterosexual orientation (Connell, 2002). This may be seen an example of how our culture’s heteronormativity affects our freedom of choice when it comes to interests or professions through the identity-forming process (Ambjörnsson, 2010).

When we *do gender* we use *the principle of keeping apart* in order to set up a *gender order*. One fundamental idea within contemporary gender theory is that we create differences between the sexes by categorizing male and female characteristics in a state of opposition to each other (Harding 1986, Y. Hirdman, 1990; 2007). For example, according to *gender order logic*, being *technical* is a male trait as

long as it is not a female trait. If more women would become technical, there is a risk that the *dichotomist* order that is based on male and female characteristics being each other’s opposites, will begin to break up. The consequence being that *technical* could no longer be regarded as a male trait. By the same logic, a prerequisite of masculinity is that a *man* is *not a woman*. Distancing oneself from anything that can be associated with femininity is a way of *doing* male gender (Lykke, 2010).

Why are girls and boys attracted by these seemingly different forms of socializing and communication on the Internet? According to facts that emerged through the statistical investigations of what young people do on the Internet, conducted regularly by the Swedish Media Council (2010), girls who use the Internet are more focused on *communication*, although this is a conclusion that could be challenged. Being active in blogs and in social forums is one way of communicating, but playing online could also be seen as a form of communication (Linderoth & Olsson, 2010). Socializing through online gaming is generally done in real time; communication is direct; it is created and then disappears again instantly. However, the words or pictures that make up the communication in a blog live on and this requires more consideration by the person who is communicating. It would appear that it is more common for girls than boys to consider in advance how the things one says and does will be perceived by others (A. Hirdman 2006; Sveningsson Elm, 2009). Perhaps it is a reflection of gender norms that, generally speaking, more females than males write blogs while more boys than girls prefer to play or develop games on the Internet, which has been shown through the statistical investigations of what young people do on the Internet, conducted regularly by the Swedish Media Council (Findahl & Zimic, 2008).

In order to find out more about digital gender norms and how young women view themselves as the producers of pictures on the net, in the spring of 2010, I began to interview girls studying the aesthetic upper secondary school programmes about their use of photography in blogs. This resulted in a paper called *Blog pictures* (Morén, 2010). To gain a deeper and wider perspective of the significance of gender as regards creative girls’ entry into the field of digital technology, I continued the research the

same year, by interviewing two university students, and five women at work. The informants were all engaged in the field of digital technology, two of them were studying fine art, one was a game designer and researcher; one worked as a photographer and pedagogue; one of the interviewees was a sound artist; and two of them worked as project managers within digital culture and media.

Blog norms

According to the upper secondary girls I interviewed, fashion bloggers are young girls who can earn money on their blogs because many people follow them. The girls I interviewed expressed respect for certain fashion bloggers, for instance, those who blogged about design rather than just about fashion, and who expressed themselves in a personal way. Other fashion bloggers were described with some contempt because they were superficial, self-centred and provocative. There seems to be links to the *normative feminine ideals*, identified by the English anthropologist Beverly Skeggs (1997) in her studies of how young girls behave in order to become *respectable*. Examples of these female ideals are moderation, control, empathy and caution. Some of the bloggers seem to live up to these ideals while other bloggers appear to provoke them in a challenging way which can bring on different kinds of attention from their readers. Generally speaking, it seems that fashion bloggers receive more positive comments and are more respected the closer they stay to the normative feminine ideals, but if they deviate from that norm, they may sometimes attract a larger number of readers.

Commenting is an important part of the blog culture. The upper secondary school girls I interviewed said that they regularly comment on other people's pictures and blogs, not just those belonging to their closest friends. One of the girls described to me how *the commenting* itself can be used as a creative tool for building up networks where one's own blog is strategically woven into part of a larger social network.

Upper secondary pupil: "I often comment on blogs so that people will look at my blog (...) the whole point is for me to become well known (laughs). On blogs I want to, well, the whole point is for me to get comments, not for me to make comments, and so I look at someone's blog and make a comment. In order for them to see that I have been there and read it, I'll

write: "Good blog, point, good contribution" and then if I see a phrase "Kent is great", then I'll write "Oh, yes, Kent is really great" as a comment. I don't need to comment on 'Bilddagboken' because there you can see that I have looked at the picture."

The strategy of commenting works by a person attracting new readers to his or her own blog; it's a way of building up and extending one's own network.

According to the Swedish gender researcher, Fanny Ambjörnsson (2004), the homosocial reflecting of one's self, the need to be compared, assessed and appreciated by other girls, is a typical feature of young women's forming of identity. In Swedish *fashion blogs*, identity is often manifested through fashion, culinary culture or an interest in design (Saxbo, 2010). Girls mostly read other girls' blogs and the upper secondary school pupils I interviewed mentioned this phenomenon more or less in the passing, as if they had not really reflected much about why this was so; it was simply the case that girls in general are more interested in other girls' pictures and narratives. Even though the Internet is a completely new social field that might be characterized by irrationality, fragmentation and the breaking up of traditional hierarchies (Lindgren, 2009), it would nevertheless seem that most of the youngsters who present themselves on the net endeavour to appear to be as normal as possible in relation to prevailing gender norms (Sveningsson Elm, 2009).

The feminine gender norm appears to encompass certain human characteristics but exclude others that do not seem to fit, for instance, outgoing self-confidence or physical aggression. The traits that do not fit in with femininity must be either concealed or be expressed in a different way. Girls have, according to American author Rachel Simmons, special *code words*, which are used to set up behaviour norms among themselves in a homosocial female network. When girls say that other girls "*think that they are somebody*", this is an example of that type of coded message (Simmons, 2002). According to Simmons, girls can contribute to the maintaining of the predominant gender order by actively repressing each other's self-assertion, with the help of various behaviour norms. This often results in girls being forced to conceal the very behaviour they should need to become successful in a competitive society. Female fashion bloggers risk being subjected to double pun-

ishment: partly sexist oppression from males in the form of negative comments, partly contemptuous *coded messages* from other girls. This is perhaps because bloggers, as female entrepreneurs they appear to be self-assured, outgoing and self-assertive and these are traits that do not fit into the feminine norm.

Identity Online

But why do girls and boys choose different forms of socialising on the net? Why do these homosocial environments arise and what makes it difficult to enter the other party's social room? One banal explanation why so few girls take part in multi-player online games could be that the games do not have many characters with whom the girls can or want to identify themselves, something a project manager whom I interviewed pointed out to me.

Project manager: "But when it comes to how one creates, attitudes to gender roles, and how beauty ideals are maintained or that type of thing, I believe we must look more carefully at the games that are consumed today, what most of them are like, because they help to maintain ideals that people in other contexts are trying to break down. If one is always going to portray female game characters as "busty dames", then we are not going to get very far in our discussions about the equal worth of men and women generally and how we are going to overcome objectification and other such matters. This is going to be difficult if one of the most popular forms of entertainment is still in the 1800s when it comes to outlook on people."

Even if girls can ignore the fact that there is no character with whom they can identify themselves in the gaming world, there still remain some other problems for the girls who choose to take part in multi-player games, above all different forms of discrimination and sexualisation on the grounds of assumed gender (Linderoth & Olsson, 2010). Gender related discrimination appears to be quite a common occurrence when females are in a male dominated setting (Faulkner, 2001; Hedlin, 2009), no matter whether it's on the net or IRL. Changing one's gender identity is a strategy sometimes used by girls playing multi-player games online in order to avoid discrimination. Endeavouring to be *one of the guys* is a relatively common strategy used by women in male-dominated environments IRL (Wajcman, 1999; Salminen Karlsson, 2003).

Although research in recent times has shown that the net is a rather normative place (Sveningsson Elm 2009; A. Hirdman 2010) there may be much to be discovered and learnt about precisely norms and gender by experimenting with different identities online. Several of my informants have devoted themselves to the artistic examination of the making of gender and the creating of identity on the net. One of the upper secondary school girls I interviewed told how she had spent several years studying gender-crossing digital identities in different social forums on the Internet. She described how she was treated completely differently depending on whether her *fake user* was as a girl or a boy. My informant also described how her experiences as different fictive characters had given her new insights into human relationships and inspiration to create characters in her manuscript writing.

Upper secondary school pupil: "I suppose that is why you develop so much on the Internet too, because you learn how people react, and how people develop, and how people behave as well. So then you perhaps start to think about that more and in that way you yourself change in the way you write and show pictures and so on."

Even if a digital change of identity only works in certain ways, it is still a strategy that can give new insights into how identity is created and how normative prejudices work. One of the art students I interviewed told me about an artistic project that she had worked on for some years where she created a *persona* on the Internet that was partly fictive. During that period of her life, her artistic work was made visible solely on the net. With the help of pictures and narratives, she explored the field in order to create identity and myths about the persona.

Art college student: "The whole point of this project is that it is just me, but "just me" must also encompass the person that "I could be or could become".

However, some experience of life is needed in order to successfully change gender or identity digitally. It is difficult for young people playing multi-player games online to fool older friends on the net that they are the same age as them. They rapidly expose themselves because of their lack of social competence. However it does seem possible for a female player in her late

teens or older to play under a false male identity without being exposed. The reason why girls choose to do a digital gender swap is because otherwise, as a minority group in online gaming environments, they are likely to be discriminated against (Linderoth & Olsson, 2009). One disadvantage of concealing their female identity might be the risk that playing and socializing will then be on entirely male normative terms.

Aesthetic Technology

For many young girls blogging is not just about writing some kind of public diary, but a way of communicating identity, style or, using the term of British sociologist Beverly Skeggs (2000), “female cultural capital” through all the possibilities that new media has. Photography and digital image processing is a current growing hobby among young Swedish girls, which proves in the fact that it is, according to my experience, fairly easy to attract female students to such courses in contemporary Swedish online education. Perhaps this might even be related to the use of the photography in blogging. However, fewer female students apply for courses in multimedia or programming. According to several of my informants, girls prefer a planned route of learning with a set objective in sight. Girls seem to need a goal in order to feel that learning technology is meaningful.

Photographer: “I like to think that I myself am quite representative of my sex (gender). I think that boys/men are better at experimenting their way forward and testing things out while girls/women tend to want to know what to do before they start.”

When it comes to digital technology, it would appear that the goal is often artistic and the technique is a way of achieving aesthetic expression. In the contemporary Swedish blogging scene, girls communicate mainly with text and photographs in interaction, using pictures which they have produced themselves. Common subjects of girls’ blogging are e.g. fashion, food, design or styling, all themes connected to the concept of good taste and commonly expressed with beautiful images in advertisements and magazines.

Seen from a norm critical perspective, one might assume that there is no gender normative gain in learning technology *only for its own sake*, - as girls

are not expected to be *technical* within the stereotype feminine norm. For boys however, it may be worthwhile learning the technology without asking why or wondering what use they will have of the technology. In the male *hegemonic* (dominating) gender norm, technological knowhow is an important trait (Connell, 1995). Boys are expected to understand all kinds of technological equipment simply because it is part of being masculine. That is why many boys, on their own initiative, read through camera manuals or books about programming (Nissen, 1993). It is also common for people to expect that men will spontaneously be able to explore technically advanced equipment without supervision and understand it, as if technical know-how is a *natural* male trait (Mellström, 1999).

Girls seem to make gender by communicating and confirming cultural similarity thereby creating the networks that are an important part of the process of forming a feminine identity (Ambjörnsson, 2004). Feminine identity is formed on the net in relation to other users, through texts and images, where expression of style and taste are continually commented on, reflected and approved by, in the first instance, other girls. During the first half of the 19th century, femininity was linked to *beauty* and different forms of aesthetic expression by an emphasis on appearance and a demand for gracefulness (Skeggs, 1997). The homosocial network seems to be confirmed by young girls showing each other that they master the expressions of what the German 19th century philosopher Immanuel Kant referred to as “beauty”. According to Kant, *beauty* is beautiful in more or less the same way as an object that is suited to its purpose; it possesses a *necessary* delight. However that which is *beautiful* lacks purpose since it is not intended to be of any *use*. According to Kant, beauty is founded on an *aesthetic* judgement that is *not logical* (Kant, 1792).

When girls write, take photographs and digitally process their pictures in order to put them on the net, they often present an image of their life that has been adapted and put right (Sveningsson Elm, 2009). In that perspective, it might be worth the effort and time that it takes to learn advanced digital image processing, as it brings tremendous opportunities to beautify the image of your everyday reality. Aesthetic preferences or an interest in *beauty* seems to be an important part of the feminine *doing gender*. If one

uses the dichotomist model for how gender is constructed, where gender is made through differences and opposites, then a lack of interest in beauty, not caring about something's appearance, or holding the opinion that functionality is the most important aspect, could be linked to masculinity. But perhaps beauty and function are dependent on each other? Ideas like this were expressed back in the 19th century, for example by designer and utopian William Morris, who was engaged in the English *Art and Crafts* movement. Could it perhaps even be the case that some people find it difficult to use a digital tool that is *not beautiful*, that has been created without considering aesthetic preferences, or where too much attention has been paid to function instead of form? Some of my informants described how they had chosen not to use functional digital technology precisely because it was ugly or boring.

Art college student I: "But I really wasn't that interested either; I think it was mostly a question of – aesthetic resistance, everything in the computer was so ugly, it was a laptop, I think it had a lot to do with the fact that I thought everything was so incredibly ugly!" (laughs)

Art college student I: "It was so incredibly ugly and I couldn't hide it away and there were not very many choice options either".

Art college student II: "No, exactly."

Art college student I: "What it should look like and so on."

Art college student II. "Exactly."

Art college student I: "Yuk!" (laughs)

Art college student II: "Yeah, yuk! (laughs)."

Trying to understand the issue of 'form' or 'beauty' in software design, from a gender perspective, I have come up with a hypothesis, which I call *Aesthetic Technology*. The term is inspired by the work of the American psychologist Sherry Turkle. In the 1980s, when Turkle studied children who were doing computer programming, she discovered differences in how boys and girls thought and related to the computer. It emerged that the girls had a different approach to the machines: they attached greater value to any personal features of the program which meant they made use of bugs or allowed errors to remain since they made the program and the computer more

alive. According to Turkle (1984), the girls used an *aesthetic style of programming*; they thought more like artists and created programs where the code was just as sophisticated as the boys' code but with completely different solutions. As an intellectual experiment, if we try not to either belittle or idealise the traits or interests that are associated with normative femininity, perhaps we can instead find new approaches to how girls do in fact handle technology, how they assess, develop and try to improve existing technology, for example by using it in novel ways, or in ways that the technology was not initially intended for. One example of this kind of progression would be how female photographers like e.g. Sophie Calle (2003), Barbara Kruger (1983) or Cindy Sherman (1990) renewed the field of contemporary artistic photography, starting in the 1980s, shifting focus of the media from technical to conceptual or aesthetical questions (Rosenblum, 1994).

How do girls learn new technology?

In a learning situation, it is sometimes apparent that boys and girls use different strategies when it comes to learning new technology. With some prejudice, it can be said that girls learn new technology by asking for help while boys look for the answers themselves on the net. Girls are more focused on learning technology through a dialogue than boys are (Staberg, 2002). Males tend to spend more time "thinkering" (as in playfully investigating new interfaces on their own), than females do, when the task is to solve problems using a digital software (Burnett et al. 2011). Several of the women I interviewed, who themselves have experience from running courses describe that they have experienced a phenomenon of gender differences in learning strategies.

Project manager: "What I said earlier, that girls are more quick to ask for help, they want a dialogue-discussion, but if I do this, what happens then? While at the same course there may be a boy who searches for and finds four tutorials and goes through them so as not to have to ask the teacher, so he can find his own way so to speak."

For some reason, it seems to be more difficult for girls to take the initiative to search themselves for answers on the net. However, several of the girls I talked to described how liberating it was to suddenly

realize that all the information they need is in fact available on the net without having to ask someone for help. Perhaps it is a matter of habit, insight or being informed; perhaps it is a matter of changing gender-linked stereotype patterns of learning.

Art college student: "But it was a vital moment for me, that he actually explained some things to me so I could understand, that there is so much information out there on the Internet and, well, just to have a go and keep at it."

Sol: "Did he teach you to search for tutorials or the like or in a forum?"

Art college student: "Yes, that sort of thing. For instance he said something, although I often forget this, but he said that if you Google a question, someone has usually already asked the same question and someone else has answered it, yeah, that's right, that's how it can be. Another example, it's not a matter of being good at it and knowing everything all at once, which is how I think I perceived it all, and then sort of realizing that everything is out there, waiting to be learnt."

Some of the girls who were interviewed also described how they were introduced to *searching for answers themselves on the net* by male partners or close friends. But some of them also told me they received support from other women. One of the art students described how she was allowed to borrow a studio with technical equipment such as cameras, computers and printers from an older female artist colleague. The student described how much it meant to her that someone showed confidence in her when she was going to use the technology. She described how she had asked her older colleague for help in order to learn the program but she was given an encouraging answer which amounted to "*you'll manage that yourself*".

Art college student: "I got really scared but it was so cool that she said that because it was as if she really believed that I would be able to do it and it really took a lot for me to dare to try it out, that I wasn't useless."

However, getting stuck and having technical problems seems to be a rather common occurrence when females try to teach themselves advanced digital technology and do not have adequate support, and the gender-related expectations that *girls are not able to learn technology* might take over. The female

game designer whom I interviewed told me that it is very common for girls to drop out of the game design study programmes before graduating and that very few girls apply for and get a job within the field after completing their studies. She also told me about her experiences from her time as a game design student. The study programme included a course in programming. It soon emerged that she did not get going with the programming as fast as the boys did, (many of them had previous experience of programming), even so, she was not given any extra pedagogic support. When she told the course leaders that she was considering dropping out of the programming course, she was not offered any remedial education. Rather they supported her dropping out, by explaining that even if she did not do that course, she would still pass the study programme as a whole. She told me that she decided to drop out of the programming course because it felt meaningless to sit through lessons where the level of teaching was way above the level she was at.

There are recent studies done by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate that show that expectations from teachers influence to a high degree how pupils perform (Skolinspektionen, 2010). In this case, we must consider what expectations we have as regards women's technical knowhow and how that affects girls doing game design study programmes. Another informant described her experiences from a study programme in stage technology. Every time she had a technical problem and asked for help, she had to point out that she wanted to be taught how to solve the problem; otherwise the teachers just quickly solved the technical problem for her without telling her how it was done. With that sort of pedagogy, asking for help does not result in any learning process, and if boys are used to being treated like that by their technology teacher, it is not surprising that they prefer to search for answers to problems themselves.

Digital Gender order

One of the problems with digital technology equality is that women perhaps view technology in a different way from men and women's views and ideas about technology are often ignored. But it is not only men who maintain the gender order; much of the resistance to change lies with the women's own view of themselves (Bourdieu, 1998). Reducing or belittling

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one's own competence is a common expression of female subordination and this happens at a subconscious level. When I asked my female informants to describe their technical knowhow, the answers I received indicated that they themselves do not rate their knowledge very highly. This is something that is apparent in both students' and professionals' descriptions of their own technical knowhow.

Sound artist: "I have tried now and again to make time to learn, well, a little more CSS style sheets (...) I also use Max MSP quite a lot."

Sol: "Yes but that's programming, isn't it?"

Sound artist: "Yes, but, yes, it is, but I mean it's a visual, yes, it is, yes, yes but it is programming."

Sol: - "Visual programming. Was that difficult to learn?"

Sound artist: "Yes, I only know a little, but you do learn, there are many, many examples, you look at examples and so on."

Women in our society handle and use technology daily but, generally speaking, women do not describe their own competence as being particularly technical (Hedlin, 2009), perhaps precisely because technology has such a strong link to masculinity (Mellström, 1999). Masculine and feminine traits are rated differently and a *hierarchical gender order* often means female competence and female-dominated fields are belittled (Y. Hirdman, 1990; 2007). There have been some pedagogical attempts to teach female students technology by letting them spend some time in special women classes. But although girls studying technology learn more and perform better in a homosocial learning environment, they nevertheless choose not to continue because the study programme has lower status and there is a risk that employers will view it as being inferior (Salminen Karlsson, 2003; Olofsdotter Bergström, 2009). One of the girls I interviewed expressed similar anxiety that the hierarchical gender order could lead to courses intended only for girls being marked as inferior to courses that are aimed at both girls and boys.

Project manager: "Perhaps it is more a case of us talking about the difficulties and thereby creating them by talking about them than it is the problems actually existing; if we were to say that, that it is done, that it feels like, that in my work it has been important to,

to support people without excluding them, I guess I can say, well, do you understand what I mean? Sometimes when we use special measures aimed at girls, the only thing we achieve is to create a group (...) it's not always that good..."

Sol: "Can you give an example of such a special measure?"

Project manager: "Well, if we do, like, if we do Photoshop for Girls, well, just as an example, I'm not saying anyone has done this but sometimes it can be worded in such a strange way, these courses. Photoshop for Girls – come and learn and see how it's done and we run the course at a really basic level, then you have created, well then you've sort of made it clear that the pupils are not going to learn much, we going to do things really slowly, and there will not be much opportunity to advance, well, then, in some way you've marked the whole group or sort of stigmatized the entire group, even though the aim was to help them, do you see what I mean?"

Generally speaking, girls are not prepared to attend *technology schools for girls* even though they would actually learn more (Salminen Karlsson, 2003; Hedlin, 2009). The problem is probably a structural dilemma where female-dominated areas are awarded lower status in accordance with the principle of hierarchical gender order. Male gender coding also constitutes a hierarchical symbolic order. This means that a masculine coded field is rated higher than a feminine coded field and there is a risk that a field will be weakened and lose status when women begin to encroach on it (Hedlin, 2009). Men who work within a masculine coded field easily end up in a situation where they join forces to defend their field from intruders, and this defence is often at a subconscious level without them even having to think or talk about it; it is almost instinctive (Cockburn, 1983).

Computers are nice, clean machines that do not make a noise and you do not have to be strong in order to hack codes. Even so, most of the computer gaming industry is populated by men; in 2009, 90 % of the employees in the Swedish industry were males (Lindell, 2010). Because the gaming industry is a field that is advancing very strongly financially, there are different groups of people who are keen to see more girls consuming and producing games. Some of the girls I interviewed played, developed or did research on digital games. One topic that came up during our discussions was the strong masculine gender code

that prevails in the field, both in the design and concept of the games and in the digital gaming industry's corporate culture. The gaming industry can be viewed as part of the larger field of technology, which has traditionally been regarded as a masculine field, just like the field of natural sciences (Berner, 1997; 2003). One way of studying male-dominated fields is to see them as *power fields*, an approach adopted by the French sociologist Michael Foucault (1977). Power fields are constructed and preserved by a certain group of people marking out a field in various ways as being their territory, in relation to *the others* who do not fit in. There are many different factors that make it hard for girls to penetrate a male-dominated area. Even though young girls are often just as interested in technology as young boys are (Staberg, 2002), it is more difficult for them to retain and fit their interest in technology into the normative femininity that they are expected to adapt to as they go through puberty and enter the adult world.

Through my interviews I have met several women who have been very interested in working within the field of creative digital technology. When their childhood and adolescence were mentioned, it was apparent that their parents had been supporting and encouraging their interest in technology. These women had a lot of self-confidence and had completed technical study programmes. After finishing their education, they had applied for jobs in the field but then they had been treated with polite scepticism and, after many interviews and some project work, they had not been able to establish themselves in the field with the help of any existing companies. In order to be able to do any kind of work at all connected to their studies, these women have instead been forced to set up their own organisation, often with the help of other women in a similar situation. Several of the girls I have talked to have ended up in the role of project manager. Instead of working in the field of creative, new technology which is what they had studied to do, they had to start off by trying to create the necessary prerequisites for women to be able to enter the labour market. It would appear that having personal experience of gender discrimination can at best be a starting point for women to initiate equality projects and act as entrepreneurs.

Can you see me now?

The gender norms that prevail in society appear to be reflected in the net cultures of young people, as digital gender norms. The communication of girls and boys on the Internet is manifested in different forms of socializing, linked to homosocial gender norms, even though the net is a meeting place that is supposed to be disembodied. Boys dominate on-line gaming environments, and girls seem to prefer the blogosphere. Blogging could be viewed as a new type of female entrepreneurship with users who continually develop new creative strategies for network communication. While working with the question of *digital gender*, I have developed the hypothesis of *aesthetic technology*, namely that girls often have an artistic approach towards technology. Girls often choose to learn technology for a purpose, planning to do something in that special technique, and their goal often have aesthetic preferences. One example is the common use of digital photography within the blog culture, where girls learn advanced image processing, in order to beautify the image of their every day life. For a girl to become technical may be problematic, according to the crossing of gender norms. Even though young girls are often just as interested in technology as young boys are, it is more difficult for them to retain and fit their interest in technology into the normative femininity that they are expected to adapt to, as they go through puberty and enter the adult world. The female creators whom I have interviewed all had long experience of working in technical fields such as digital technology, web development and the gaming industry, even so they do not describe themselves as being particularly technical. When it comes to technical knowhow, there are normative expectations regarding how technical competence should be expressed. Knowledge or innovation manifested in a way that is not in line with the dominant norm, often appears to be invisible. Since it is hard for females to establish themselves in the existing male-dominated ICT corporate culture, girls who study within the field of creative digital technology are often forced to begin their career by working with questions of equality, instead of practicing their profession. Some of them they become entrepreneurs who, often together with other female creators, run innovative projects, which in the long run might expand their professional field, making it

more diverse. With this work, I hope to contribute to the new growing field of research within the digital cultures, where questions concerning gender and equality in digital technology will be problematized and made visible.

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Theme IV: Gender and Contemporary Media Chapter 29

“A Blog of Their Own”

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Czech Republic, Estonia and Italy

This chapter analyses both the theoretical and empirical research regarding the role of blogs, personal web pages, as venues which provide teenage girls with the tools to construct representations of self and express their identity. As Virginia Woolf stressed in her 1928 lectures, female authors were non-existent or invisible due to their lack of money and privacy, a “room of one’s own.” In some recent studies, blogs have been understood as an analogy for bedrooms, offering more than real bedrooms can. Thus, using up to date knowledge of the presence and behaviour of girls in cyberspace, we suggest that blogs are perceived by girls as a secure space where they can talk to other girls while sharing a sense of invisibility and therefore freedom from social and parental constraints. Focusing on identity, on answering the question of “who am I?” blogs offer an ideal space for viewing the continuity of self. They allow reflections and self-presentations to be kept long term and to become visible, not only to others, but most importantly to the individual.

(...) give her a room of her own and five hundred a year, let her speak her mind and leave out half that she now puts in, and she will write a better book one of these days.
She will be a poet, I said (...)
Virginia Woolf

Introduction

In this chapter we would like to shed more light on the girlhood of today especially in regards to blogging and bloggers in Euro and North American societies. By reviewing the related literature we try to address some important questions, such as: What do girls blog about? Why do they blog? Is it to free themselves from social or parental constraints? Can blogs be a powerful tool to make girls visible, speak their minds, and become the poets and novelists of their own lives?

The questions we pose were inspired by a reflection on whether girls today may find in blogs a space of “their own” as Virginia Woolf meant. We suggest that there are invisible girls hidden in the online world who are being overlooked by the relevant experts and considered uninteresting, yet they are the creators and re-creators of a new sense of femininity.

It has been a long time since Virginia Woolf gave her series of lectures at Newnham and Girton, two women’s colleges at Cambridge University in October 1928. At that time females were in many ways invisible, hidden behind their men in the steam from the kitchen or the laundry. Learning to cook, knit and raise children and being fully committed to these activities with little free time. In her lectures Virginia Woolf pointed out two main issues regarding women and writing in her time. Firstly, the presentation of women in the literature of the time portrayed women in the role of lover, mother, and housekeeper, it was mostly written by men. The second, and more relevant to this chapter, were the barriers preventing women from becoming authors and expressing themselves as individuals. This was likely exasperated by the lack of control women possessed over the direction of their own lives. To become someone who touches others with words one must, at least in part, be a conscious writer of one’s own life. However, you probably first need a strong desire to *be* before you can write yourself into being.

At the time Virginia Woolf presented her powerful and accurate opinions on “women and fiction” any women attempting to express their real thoughts and feelings would have found it very difficult, having no room of her own, privacy, time, or money. This is what Virginia Woolf meant when she said “give her a room of her own and five hundred a year” and she will be a poet, she will be able to write something more than just a light novel about love and relationships.

In today’s developed countries most girls have their own room, privacy, and free time. The evolution of femininity has been turbulent (Mazzarella, 2005) as has the development of research on this topic. During the twentieth century, most academic clinical research on youth and development was undertaken using male subjects (Mazzarella, 2005). Carol Gilligan and Angela McRobbie were pioneers in turning attention to the feminine experience of development and listening more to girl’s experiences and lives. However, as most classical studies on human identity and development were carried out by males, studying males, blind spots in regards to female development likely still remain.

It has been two decades since the “new space” of the World Wide Web entered our everyday reality; we propose that it has also brought a new sense of shared and reflected femininity, especially to young girls.

The introduction of new technologies has commonly been connected to the masculine world. From its beginnings until the late 90’s the Internet was no exception, as van Zoonen (2002) summarised, it is because the main actors and an overwhelmingly majority of the developers were men. The creation of the Internet itself came from a so-called military-industrial complex. Computer mediated communication has been shown to take on many masculine modes (Kendall, 2002). Boys have generally been expected to be more experienced with computers and have better attitudes towards its usage (Gackebach & von Stackelberg, 2007). At the start of new millennium the number of female users began to grow significantly as did the patterns of Internet usage. The technical and expert aspects of Internet use diminished and the Internet became a social and communication tool. It thus took on strong feminine attributes. Although no major differences exist in the numbers of boys and girls using the Internet frequently in Europe (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig & Ólafsson, 2011) a perception of gendered Internet use still occurs, for example boys are often depicted as more interested in gaming. Researches have often focused on studying shooting games or role-playing games where male dominance is significant. Subsequently, the favourite topics were aggression or gaming addiction. Although girls also often play computer and online games (Livingstone et al., 2011, ESA, 2011) their favourite genres are puzzle, board,

and card games and these have been rather neglected by researchers.

It is not only their gender that makes online girls particularly invisible to the common adult observer but also their age. As an example, Technorati.com, an influential server and blog search engine which is focused on depicting the blogosphere world-wide, includes only those blogs maintained by people over 18 years of age with most bloggers being between 25 and 44. This gives the impression that youth blogging is not serious or worth attention. As has been shown, youth are prevalent bloggers, and among youth it is females who predominantly blog (Subrahmanyam, Garcia, Harsono & Lipana, 2009; Mazur & Kozarian, 2010; Blinka, Subrahmanyam, Smahel & Seganti, 2012 in press) while according to technorati.com it is males among adult bloggers. In this way girl bloggers may really be invisible.

Before we try to investigate the transition of girlhood and the features of spaces specifically for girls, it should be mentioned that this chapter focuses on the Euro-American context. In the past, even within this area, there have been significant cultural differences especially in terms of gender roles. In regards to space, today’s world is very different from that of the past and of Virginia Woolf’s time. The term “space” is somewhat hard to grasp, as it has lost its traditional physical and cultural borders. Although cultural contexts still have strong influences on socialisation and the lives of individuals, media, digital media, and the Internet in particular influence society on a global level. As stated by Bjarnason, Gudmundsson and Ólafsson (2011), the Internet tends to vaporise cultural trends. Young people in both Europe and North America share similar immersion in the use of this technology. The Internet has become an integrated part of youths’ lives, with the majority of them going online regularly and the borders blurring between offline and online lives (Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011). Similarly, most of the young people in Europe go online privately in their own room or they have a mobile Internet device of their own (Livingstone et al., 2011). Finally, globalised Internet applications are attractive for most young people regardless of their geographical location. As an example, Facebook, which was originally American, has become a dominant social networking site among European young people (Livingstone, Ólafsson & Staksrud, 2011).

New technologies, in this case represented by the Web 2.0, allow youth a lot of customisable personal space. This can be seen as true space of their own. One of the most known and popular tools for creating such a space is the blog. These are especially popular among adolescent girls (Subrahmanyam, 2007). This can partially be perceived as a continuation of keeping a diary. Though, blogs are not just virtual diaries and the virtual environment has its own qualities different from those of the offline world (Bjarnason, Gudmundsson & Ólafsson, 2011).

Before we provide deeper insight into the very specific world of wired female youth, we need to take a brief look at what blogs are and what blogging means for contemporary youth generally.

Blogging through adolescence

Blogs, an abbreviation of web-logs, can be defined as frequently updated personal web pages which allow their owners to publish their thoughts, links, videos, photos etc. The links are organised in reverse chronological order, with the newest entries displayed at the top of the page (Schmidt, 2007). Despite the fact that blogs can be compared to traditional personal journals resembling a standard diary, blogs are a more diverse genre. Blogs may include personal reflections in the form of text, thoughts, essays, audio-visual materials, and hyperlinks all of personal or external origin. Although an effort was made to categorise blogs, placing them into groups such as personal diaries, K-logs (knowledge blogs), and filters; f. e. Herring et al., 2004, in reality it is difficult to recognise any clear-cut distinctions. While at the same time, all online tools including blogs are quickly developing in both structure and content. Creating a precise technical definition has been further complicated as Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn and Twitter have entered the virtual arena (Bjarnason et al., 2011) bringing with them a phenomenon called “micro-blogging”, brief continuous status updates.

Blogs are a very easy tool to start using as they require no special IT skills (Schmitt, Dyanim & Matthias, 2008) and are free to use. However, blog portals are owned and controlled by corporations and driven by economical interests. In spite of this, adolescent blogging may be approached as a new adolescent public sphere or form of crowd communication standing apart from economic interests

and mainstream consumption and stemming from the real adolescent society (Bjarnason et al., 2011). This adolescent public sphere is, in a sense, universal across the European and American contexts.

In a direct comparison of the English language U.S. blogosphere and the Czech language Czech blogosphere some structural similarities and culturally influenced differences were found (Blinka et al., 2012 – in press). In both countries young people were similarly likely to be interested in maintaining their own blog and reading other’s blogs. About one fifth of young people maintain their own blog at least weekly and about one third regularly read other’s blogs (Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011). In both blogospheres (Blinka et al., 2012- in press) girls make up 90% of the bloggers, with those around age 15 dominating youth blogging. In both blogospheres, quizzes and asking for feedback occurred with similarly frequency, as did blog content focused on, teen problem behaviour, the public scene (typically celebrities) and metablogging (blog entries about issues connected to blogging itself). But significant differences were also found. The U.S. youth blogosphere more frequently consists of narration, reflections of family, peer relationships, romances, or school and afterschool activities. In contrast, the Czech youth blogosphere typically had more frequent use of visuals, photos, videos, pictures. The authors use culture to explain the differences. Youths in the USA are more used to writing essays and reflections in schools than Czech youth and this may be the reason why Czech girls use visuals more often to express themselves. About two thirds of Czech, and one third of American, youth disclosed personal and contact information on their blogs. This indicates that the bloggers have rather interwoven online and offline personas, and it also demonstrates the stronger privacy concerns in the USA. Thus, in both blogospheres the answer to “who is blogging” is the same, mostly young girls around the age of 15. Nevertheless, “how blogging is approached” may differ depending on the specifics of each country such as its educational system.

However, as pointed out by Recabarren, Nussbaum and Leiva (2008) it may be problematic to identify people from one country as part of one culture. Especially as regards the Internet, it is important to study the behaviour, motives, and needs etc. of subcultures, as large proportions of young people

travel and stay abroad and the language barrier may be receding.

Blogs as identity negotiation tools

As stated above, adolescents appear to be the group most engaged in blogging. Blogs can be perceived by youth bloggers as a reflection of their interests and values (Stern, 2007). Keeping a blog often provides relief from emotional tension, which is, according to Nardi (2004) one of the main reasons for engaging in this activity. Many authors suggest that keeping a blog can be a contributing factor in developing a sense of *self*: Most blogs represent the personal experiences of their authors, and the ability to write about these may facilitate a better understanding of oneself and it may also alleviate problems or conflicts (Miura & Yamashita, 2007). This is very important when speaking about developmental tasks in adolescence, i.e. exploration and reaching one’s identity (Kroeger, 2000). According to Erikson (1968) the feeling of self-consistency and its continuity over time is necessary for identity creation, especially in adolescence. Even if we act differently in different contexts, the sense of *self* mostly does not change over time and thus we may know that we are still ourselves. For adolescents, whose identities are emerging (or moratorium, Kroeger, 2000) a narrative blog kept over a period of time can help them to see such stable characteristics within themselves (Schmitt et al., 2008). Youth can check their older posts to search for what they were thinking or feeling at a particular time. By archiving a personal narrative, youth are given a chance to answer some essential questions of this period of life, e.g. *Who am I?* Of course this is not intentional but rather an intuitive process.

While searching for *who we are* we are also very likely to search for some kind of *meaning*. During the stormy time of adolescence, it is easy to get lost in one’s own soul and grasp for some assurance, *this is me, I know who I am, there is meaning underlying my life*. Past experiences are often just fragmented pieces of the *old me*, until we give them meaning. The blog is a unique tool for reconstructing past experiences, and for grasping such meaning. McAdams (2006) describes adolescence as the developmental stage of reconstructing the past to make a coherent story. The blog provides a place where this can easily be done. Past events, which were perceived as a

fragmented pile of incidents can be given their own meaning, and causal relationships emerge. These past events are key factors in explaining how a person understands aspects of their own personality, or the person they would like to be (McAdams, 2006). With regard to what we do now and the kind of person we think we are, we are constantly choosing events and experiences from our past lives that we credit with causing our existing position in life, and shaping who we currently are. This “picking” of specific experiences is related to the basic human need to perceive one’s own identity and the path to its creation as coherent, something that possess a very causal meaning (McAdams, 2006).

For girls, identity can be created and re-created very simply. Anyone who has ever visited a teenage girl’s blog has probably seen the little surveys, such as: “Which colour are you?” “Which character from the Twilight saga do you dream of?” (Subrahmanyam, et al., 2009; Blinka et al., 2012 – in press). These little things, no matter how trivial they may seem, also help to answer the identity question (Bortree, 2005).

The final contributing factor, and perhaps the most important in identity development through blogging, is reader feedback. Peer relationships are of great importance in youth identity development. Adolescents need to slowly separate themselves from the strong parental ties to more individual and peer group ties. Online peer groups are often presented as helping strongly with youth emancipation. Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (2008) note that the online world strongly enhances peer group relations at the expense of family relations. This may cause some parental anxiety, however, it provides youth with many benefits which would have been unimaginable a few years ago. Probably the most important benefits relate to identity development through narratives, feedback, and interaction. Keeping the Cooley’s *looking glass self theory* in mind we can clearly see why, for most bloggers, audience is very important (Viégas, 2005). Moreover, as in Scheidt (2006), adolescents often have feelings of being permanently watched by an (imaginary) audience. This in effect pushes them to act or to present idealised parts of themselves, e.g. to post personal fables for the assumed readers. The audience has a great impact on the blogger; to some extent, their audience will determine what they blog about, and will offer feedback when needed. Howev-

er, this feedback can easily be regulated if unwanted comments occur. It provides a more emotionally secure space for interaction about important and self-related topics. It is common practice for bloggers to write their posts in such a way that only certain people can understand them; these people are the *selected audience*, and are often known from real life. To make content “invisible” to others bloggers often use specific language, omit parts of a story, or write in code (Gumbrecht, 2004). This is very common when youth blog about intimate and personal things that they only wish to reveal to those who they think can understand and give valuable feedback. According to Van Dijck (2004), self-verification is very important for bloggers. Blogging is perhaps primarily about synchronising one’s experience with others, about testing one’s evaluations against the outside world. Blogging, besides being an act of self-disclosure, is also a ritual of exchange. Bloggers expect to be signalled and perhaps to be responded to (van Dijck, 2004). In line with Pasquier’s (2008) argument, blogs are seen to play an important role in facilitating youth in the symbolic and practical establishment of social identity in a period of life which is complex, insecure, and uncertain. Pasquier (2008) argues that in a contemporary context where the expression of self is continually scrutinised by reference groups exchanges and discussions on the Internet may be a sort of emotional safety valve. They provide a place where interactions which may have been constrained during the day can develop more fluidly, often with the same interlocutors. Pasquier says: ‘Electronic sociability sheds light on the dead ends or difficulties of teenagers social lives’ (2008: 457). Thus, blogs in general offer many possibilities for answering the developmental tasks of adolescence; but what about youth female bloggers? How exactly are they different, and what do they reveal?

Girl bloggers

When surfing through adolescent blogs the first question that comes to mind is, is blogging a typically “girlish” discipline? The second question should then be why are adolescent girls so keen on blogging? The simple answer would be that diaries are more traditionally kept by females (Burt, 1994; Subrahmanyam et al., 2009). Keeping a blog thus can be seen to resemble keeping a diary to the extent that boys would

rather do something more “masculine” like playing online games. This may be true, however, there may also be other reasons, such as the shattered gender role system: Who is a woman and who is a man? How should they look and express their individualities? This places a large burden on (western) girls. We are not assuming that men do not undergo a similar transition; instead, what we suggest is that the feminine role has changed vastly over the past few decades, perhaps more so than the masculine. Thus, femininity requires greater investigation and identity switching. The internet is a place where this can be relatively easily addressed. The fact that blogs are mostly kept by younger adolescent girls (Subrahmanyam et al., 2009) who probably have the greatest need to experiment with different identities as there is no “template” to follow, supports this idea of the difficulties inherent in today’s multifaceted femininity.

It should be mentioned here that the media have a tendency to present the internet as a dangerous place for youth, especially for girls (Mazzarella, 2005). The media’s position and presentation of this issue could be viewed as creating a vicious cycle. This view of the dangers is not only related to the risks of data misuse, meeting strangers, and sexual harassment etc. but also because there is a risk of being involved in dangerous communities, of exposure to today’s overly sexualised image of girls, getting inappropriate information, and being objectified and exploited (Toffoletti, 2008). Contrarily, it is the media who spread this over sexualised image of the modern girl, who is slim, fit and perfect.

Recently, the debate over girls being at risk flared up with the growth in popularity of “Gossip girl”, an American teen drama television series based on a series of novels of the same name written by Cecily von Ziegesar. The series is especially popular among adolescent girls. The main character/narrator is an omnipresent (but unseen) blogger called “Gossip girl”. The series is centred on privileged youth, living in Manhattan’s Upper East Side. The story is full of controversial topics revolving around, beauty and fashion (both presented only in the form of total perfection), sex, luxury shopping, drugs, and wrecked family relationships. What most critics probably consider to be the most disturbing thing is the portrayal of “girl beauty” and sexualisation. The character gos-

sip girl is disturbing; a blogger whose identity is never revealed but who reveals every spicy detail about the lives of the main characters. It is made clear that the blogger is one of the main characters, the same age, and in the same social context. As Tofolletti (2008: 75) says:

Part of the moral panic generated by novels like Gossip Girl is a product of concern over what happens when girls are immersed in an integral reality, positioned as both observer and observed, consumer and consumed, and the potential shifts in traditional adult-child power relations that may ensue when girls 'know too much'.

There is an invisible girl in the show, who knows everything, and who attempts, and succeeds, to manipulate the lives of others. She uses her blog as a powerful tool to change and reveal things in the lives of others, without their parents' knowledge. This invisible girl is an embodiment of the consumption-centred society, and in spite of being disturbing in many ways, we can consider her existence as leisure time micro-world. However, the show emphasises how popular girls' blogs are nowadays, and the extent to which they can influence everyday lives, even if the topics are rather “superficial”. However, blogs are not isolated monads, especially those of adolescent girls. An interconnected blogging emerges as girls are connected through the same topics, areas, interests or previous friendships. Online communities are then created giving girls another shared world of possibilities. Blogs and blog communities possess a social potential able to transcend any specific topic and are separated from the marketing of “youth culture” (Bjarnason et al., 2011). This social aspect appears to be the cornerstone of the new sense of femininity and visibility that is so amazingly different from that in the times of Virginia Woolf.

Blogs: Girl's bedrooms or open spaces?

Do we know how girls perceive their own blog, as they write their thoughts, post pictures, create, or just copy and paste, manifesting their identity? Do they consider it a space or a place, or just something “not very real”, like a non-existent diary made of zeros and ones? Is the virtual world really able to provide both public and private awareness?

Sitting in my virtual bedroom

Hodkinson and Lincoln (2008) came up with the concept of online blogs/journals as individual bedrooms. They suggest that like the real teen bedroom online journals have the symbolic and practical properties of individually owned and controlled spaces. Youth can mark their territory and explore and exhibit their identities. During childhood and later during adolescence it is essential to occupy, mark, and claim a place of one's own. This could be a bedroom, but as we pointed out at the beginning of this chapter a young person's bedroom does not really belong to them. It is linked to the family, owned by a family, as is represented by the typical sentence “Clean up that mess in your room”. In contrast, a blog is really a place of one's own and if you do not want to clean up you do not have to. According to these authors blogs can be perceived as personal rather than shared territory (Hodkinson & Lincoln, 2008) this may seem confusing as blogs are mostly made public and almost anyone can read them. Bloggers are well aware that people (e.g. family members) could look over their shoulders or read their files later (March & Fleuriot, 2006).

This perception of blogs as personal spaces may relate to the fact that if you own a blog you can erase anything anytime, you can change everything in a few seconds. This is not possible in any offline aspect related to identity. Perceiving a blog as a room of one's own is a typical feature of blogging; bloggers speak of blogs as if they were their homes and invite others to “come over” (boyd, 2006).

According to Bagder, blogs themselves balance on the edge of private and public and are in fact dichotomous. We are used to surfing the web alone in private and when we read someone's very personal entry it strengthens our feeling of having face-to-face interaction (Badger, 2004).

Girl blog communities: Am I too fat? Am I worthy? Anyone like me here?

Online blog communities are quite specific. They do not develop around a “centre” like other online communities, there does not have to be a shared chat room, web page or server. They are really a kind of a “ring” of blogs (also known as “blogroll”), which are interconnected to create a community. But what are girls looking for in such communities? Generally

speaking, apart from a particular topic or interest, online blog communities can provide girls (and youth in general) with a sense of belonging, social identity, confirmation, and empower the development of social identity (Wellman, Boase & Chen, 2002). According to Ridings and Gefen (2004) the main reasons for engaging in online communities are: searching for information; social support, help, advice, the fact that members are caring, leisure, and searching for friendship, it is easier to find people with similar natures and interests. While these sound like a lot of good opportunities, when we talk about girls and communities we also meet some ambivalent or negative aspects. Some online communities are potentially risky, helping to facilitate risks which are hidden within particular girls' lives. These include for example self-harming communities and pro-ana (pro-anorexia) communities. Both share some common features and have gained a fair amount of researcher attention in the past few years due to their growing popularity and the potential risks involved. They are mirroring not only the body-related issues girls deal with, but also they can serve as a reflection of today's society. A society which is often body-cult driven, yet blind to those invisible things, such as emotions, frustrations and the basic needs of the human soul, girls who self-harm or are looking for someone to share their fears and stories with, trying to escape from solitude and to find advice (Whitlock, Lader & Conterio, 2007).

What we can say with certainty is that these girls are invisible. To a common surfer visiting a webpage they are hidden behind their nicknames and their special language. To their parents they are likely partially invisible through very carefully hiding their behaviour and in so doing hiding a very important part of themselves. Maybe they were invisible as healthy beings and now are crying out for attention. Attention seeking is often mentioned as one of reasons for both self-harm and excessive dieting (Costin, 1997). Amongst online communities, the self-harming community and the pro-ana community are perhaps the most alarming due to their huge popularity and their health and life threatening character.

In contrast to these communities, closely linked to the body and embodiment in adolescence, other similarly focused communities can be found. These may appear shallow, but embrace a huge variety of

identity creation, such as fashion blog communities. Over the past few years these communities have become increasingly popular with specialised websites emerging along with individual blogs, such as Lookbook.nu and many others. Within these blogs and websites both strong visuals of identity switching through dress changing and the gathering of social capital can be observed. However, these are not apparent to the casual observer (Chittenden, 2010). As fashion may seem very superficial and part of an industry that pushes girls towards eating disorders, hating themselves, and self-harming, these communities often possess a strong manifestation of individual taste, artistic skill, and playful slaps to the face of the mainstream fashion industry. The social aspect is more visible within these communities. As Chittenden (2010) notes, "collecting" other bloggers and hosting links to their blogs is a means of making social capital visible and making oneself visible. Furthermore, "Visibility in the teen fashion blogosphere is about visibility in relation to one another and to one's followers through the exchange of gaze and comments provoked by that gaze. Where teens are reserved or have poor social capital in their offline relationships, the mediation of the blog creates a distanced space where they can build confidence by exploring their identity with like-minded others." (Chittenden, 2010:518). Fashion blogs seem to be a great tool to *use* fashion and the media, not *to be used* by them. Of course, the opportunity and the manner of the use of this tool depends on the individual.

The main reason why girl blog communities are worth exploring and discussing is that the majority of research on them is focused on their negative aspects and potentially risky communities (such as self-harming and eating disorders). Although there are exceptions to this, the greatest attention is still given to adult bloggers, and if focused on females, then adult female bloggers (as is shown on the case of Technorati.com) who do not even note why adolescent girl bloggers should be less important or interesting. Thus, there are a huge number of invisible girls. While this invisibility is in some regards deliberate and liberating, not seeing these girls could mean ignorance of one of today's important social phenomena.

Who sees me?

As shown by the reviewed literature, new technologies, represented by the Internet, have allowed young girls far greater customisable personal space. These spaces can be self-created, with the owner controlling who, if anyone is invited to share them. Sonia Livingstone (2002) speaks about the decline of street culture, claiming that youth no longer spend the majority of their free time outside their homes now being media rich. Young girls having mastered digital technologies now also have media rich bedrooms. This has developed into a bedroom culture, where it is preferable for parents to keep their children “in the protected environment” of the home. Girls of today are thus equipped with a very powerful tool, a room or a place of their own which can be private and then easily made public. They have the opportunity to stay invisible if they wish and to become very visible when needed. One minute they can sit in their virtual bedroom in safety and enjoy a quiet moment, the next they can create a huge online open space within a community of their own choice. If it seems too social they can block comments with the same efficiency as locking a door. They can keep their blog as just a journal. There are many more girl blog communities online than those mentioned above. Girls seem to use and profit from online communities much more than boys. These communities can serve as a very powerful tool to speak out about feelings and thoughts in a disinhibited way, in ways which would not be acceptable in the offline social world. Becoming a girl and understanding what that means is a big task, especially in these times of shattered gender roles as it is difficult to define the “real me”.

Invisibility regarding blogs is very relative. As was shown, blogs can enhance identity development and serve as an efficient tool to reflect oneself in times of uncertainty. Blogs can help to answer the questions *Who am I? Where am I heading?* If a girl is alone on her blog, a self-reflective tool, the answer to the question *Who sees me?* would be... “Me”. Previously invisible girls can become visible to *themselves* through their blogs.

Maybe this is one of the reasons for the popularity among girls of online communities. Females use the social aspects of blogging to a far greater extent than males (Dolgin & Minova, 1997) and through this self-

disclosure and sharing they can gain the knowledge to become prolific constructors of the multi-faceted female identity of today. Girls and youth in general do not seem to be used by media but rather to use them, re-creating their own spaces in ways that the people who designed particular tools could never have anticipated. This could also be interpreted alongside the co-construction model of Patricia Greenfield (Greenfield & Yan, 2006). This explains how the youth of today participate and co-construct rather than just watch, consume and use. This creates a complex virtual universe with its own social norms (Greenfield & Yan, 2006) which is invisible to, and not set by, corporations and financial interests. The power of sharing everything regarding youth femininity is what brings a breath of fresh air into something which was valid not only in the times of Virginia Woolf, but also a few decades ago when mastering technology was still attributed to men. Girls were able to find a technological tool to create and dominate their own space and to invisibly socialise beyond parental constraints, and perhaps, at least to some extent, behind economic and corporate interests.

The most important thing is probably not for once invisible girls to grow into poets or belletrists or to change the course of the world, but to be able to find themselves through their blogs, mirroring each other, observing the stories of their lives, and enjoying the precious presence of those who understand and reassure them that their stories are as good and promising as everybody else’s.

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Theme IV: Gender and Contemporary Media Chapter 30

Outsiders in the Videogame World – Where are the Girls?

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Videogames are increasingly part of the lives of youth, and yet girls are not as involved as their male counterparts. In this chapter we draw on the perceptions of eight adolescent girls from western Canada to explore the barriers to their involvement and potential implications about their absence. The barriers identified through this research project include: 1) lack of **access** to gameplay, through availability of consoles/technology as well as access to experienced gamer role models; 2) **attitudes** of young women regarding videogames, and attitudes of male videogame players; 3) **images** of women portrayed in videogames; and 4) **time** available to play.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, videogames have – despite negative responses from mainstream society -- increasingly become a significant activity in the lives of children and youth (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2002; Hamlen, 2010). The excitement and interest generated by videogames create the type of engagement never before seen by generations of youth – currently surpassing television and sports. Yet the immersive worlds created in videogames, so appealing to many, have largely eluded girls and young women (Lucas & Sherry, 2004; Cassell & Jenkins, 1998). Recent reports suggest there is now greater involvement of females, but the games that seem to appeal to girls are more often short, individual online games that are easy to access, easy to learn, and easy to leave when other responsibilities call, rather than immersive game spaces.

We continue to live in a patriarchal hegemonic world where, despite some headway, stereotypical representations of females proliferate -- in politics, media, and school, and feminist ideals are often viewed with suspicion by many men *and* women. It is still difficult for females to challenge the status quo,

to venture into male-dominated worlds, to demand equal opportunity. And, as has been noted, when girls do venture into these spaces, they often find hostility and harassment (Warrington and Younger, 2000). We wonder whether this is why more girls have not been enthusiastic about entering the immersive worlds of videogames where masculinity proliferates and where game designers and players have been predominantly men.

This chapter explores the experiences of eight adolescent girls as videogame players, and considers whether these girls are being disadvantaged any way by not being included in game worlds to the same degree as their male counterparts. The chapter explores what we perceive to be the overall invisibility of girls in the videogame world, a world in which girls are most often represented as scantily-clad ‘eye candy’, stereotyped both through visual representations and the roles they are forced to play as gamers. Although there are many videogame spaces in which they could engage, girls remain largely outside the realms of fantasy, science fiction, and imagination of virtual spaces offered by many immersive videogames. In this chapter we take the position that access and opportunity are not only desirable but necessary for equitable engagement in the 21st century world where digital technologies proliferate at rapid rates. Drawing on interviews, observations, and focus groups, we explore these eight girls’ views related to their access to videogames and how they understand the potential value of engagement with videogames. We conclude with discussion about what it might mean for girls to be continually marginalized in this culture and ways that girls might have more access into a videogame world that values and acknowledges them.

This chapter reports on an investigation into the videogame experiences of eight female participants

living in a mid-sized western Canadian city. Each of their experiences was unique and they described very different experiences with videogames. Their participation in this study took place over a six-month period where they were observed playing a variety of games, engaged in focus groups, and participated in individual interviews. From these encounters with the girls we elicited four main themes: access, attitudes, images of women, and identity.

Introducing the participants

The eight participants were completing high school or enrolled in post-secondary education. They all came from middle class families, but their socioeconomic status ranged considerably, as did their access to postsecondary education. Their video game experiences, as described below, ranged from competitive tournament play to almost no engagement whatsoever. The participants were engaged in individual interviews, focus groups, and observed videogame play with us over the course of a six month period. Holly, Amber, and Madeline worked with us in a collaborative project with male peers, while Abby, Heather, Nora, Janice, and Alena were part of an all-female group.

- Amber is drawn to games, but is still on the fringes of the hard-core gaming world, although she talks the language of gamers, and clearly knows games; she often is the observer, choosing to watch her male friends play rather than play herself, and says she is not very good; she does not see herself at the same level as the guys and has less confidence.
- Holly is focused on school and career, she not really interested in games, except those that will help with her future aspirations; she is perceptive, interested in ideas when introduced to them; she has become more interested through her boyfriend.
- Madeline has entered and plays videogames in competitive tournaments; she is respected by males in face-to-face situations but is still treated poorly (receiving trash sexist talk) in some online spaces; she finds herself always having to prove herself when she is recognized as female.
- Abby is interested in some games, has general knowledge and skill, mainly gained through engagement at home with her father and sisters; she is highly focused on school success and her career.
- Heather has had very little exposure to videogames, her parents are not interested in videogames and only one of her sisters has any interest; she is involved in many extra-curricular activities and is very school-focused.
- Nora is very socially-minded and has developed some interest in games through her peer group and boyfriends; she is interested in engaging in order to enhance her social life; she talks knowledgeably about the games but doesn't have a great deal of experience.
- Janice, a university student, is from a traditional Asian culture and her family discouraged her from 'wasting time'; she has had no access through family, but has gained a little understanding mainly through her boyfriend and other male friends.
- Alena has played a variety of games with her male partner; she places importance on her developing professional career; she sees knowledge of videogames as useful in preparing her to be an effective teacher.

The participants demonstrated varying degrees of awareness of issues related to portrayals of females in videogames, however none of them expressed significant concern about these issues. Our impetus for investigating the girls' perceptions of these issues is a growing realization of the opportunities afforded to those who have confidence and knowledge in exploring new technologies and new virtual spaces. Videogames, while not the only source of this knowledge, provide considerable comfort and facility with a wide range of hardware, platforms, language, and concepts related to these new digital spaces and tools. Those

youth who have not had exposure to this rapidly expanding world of technology could potentially be excluded from future career and life opportunities. While girls are continually demonstrating their ability in formal education settings (PISA, 2010), we wondered at their lack of visibility in, and acceptance into, the world of videogames. In this study we wanted to explore whether they felt limited in life and career opportunities as a result of this lack of visibility. We also consider broader implications of not engaging in videogames, and whether girls might be being disadvantaged in their future life and career choices.

Access: ‘Complicated games are for the boys’

Access to ideas, attitudes, and knowledge can enable or discourage learners from engaging with new ideas and equipment. Videogames, like many new technologies, are not equitably available to all youth. In many homes and schools today, access is limited by economics, gender, age, and location. Videogames are part of current and future ways of successfully interacting in the world: children need opportunities to be exposed to videogames and further opportunities to develop skill and understanding of their highly complex workings. As girls are often socialized by their same-gender parent, they can be influenced by significant women in their families, e.g., mothers, while boys, especially as they grow older, are afforded more opportunity to spend time with men. By the time children are able to make conscious choices for themselves about hobbies and careers, their socialization has profoundly influenced them to make ‘gender-accepted’ choices.

Girls and young women, including our participants, often report that they develop interest and skill in videogames and other digital technologies through spending time with fathers, older brothers, and boyfriends (Sanford, 2006). Without these influences in their lives, their chances of exposure to videogames are not as great. Holly, growing up in a household where there was no interest expressed in videogames, has had little interest or opportunity to play. In Janice’s household, videogames were actively discouraged. She commented:

Growing up, we were never allowed to have any video games because they thought it would distract us too

much from school...We didn’t really care too much. Like, if we were at a garage sale, and there was a cheap Nintendo or something, we would beg to get it. But other than that, we didn’t really think about it. It didn’t appeal to any of us, it wasn’t a big deal.

Amber, in contrast to Janice, had continual access to videogames. She comments,

I’ve grown up playing video games my entire life. Part of that’s because my brother was playing them and then he taught me how to play them so it was that. And with the computers, we just kinda, I’ve just kinda learned to use the computer, like, its kind of funny my brother would be playing on the computer and I’d be playing on the PS1 and he’d be like “can you help me do this” so I’d help him with the computer and then he’d help me play my videogames.

Amber’s keen interest grew and was supported and encouraged in her household, particularly with her brother.

Abby’s experiences growing up were similar to Amber’s, in that videogames were a normal part of her childhood experiences:

I don’t know, uh I guess I always played video games. My dad was into video games, computer games, and like little consoles for the TV, like I had, or I didn’t have, but we had Super Nintendo. We started off playing Mario, my dad would just get what ever was the newest when the price was good. Yeah we always had video games. My dad likes them so he would buy them for himself and us. I always liked playing with him.

Abby’s engagement was enabled through her father’s own interest and encouragement shown as he provided access to multiple forms of videogame consoles throughout her childhood and adolescence.

However, even girls who have access limit themselves to full connection with videogames and are often the spectators of the gameplay; when they do play themselves they talk in self-deprecating terms about their skill at the games. Amber, although a competent gameplayer herself, was observed regularly deferring to the males in her group; she comments on how her skills aren’t as good as the males’ skills. She loves to play, yet continually turns the controllers over to the boys while she limits herself to spectating. She says, “I love watching people play videogames... I learn by watching people and then if I play the game later

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then I might remember something they've done." Heather said, more directly, "All the time I suck and want to quit."

Heather's lack of confidence kept her from trying new videogames; although she was around others who played and had opportunities to play, she did not see herself as able to succeed in this realm.

Madeline, however, is unique in this group of girls; she has had considerable access to many forms of videogames and is a highly accomplished videogame player. She describes her own experience:

I've been playing since I was probably four. I made my own website when I was eight years old... I'd get bored at my house and technology is evolving a lot and I just found it interesting going through websites and I liked looking at like little images of like bears and stuff and make art on Paint and got further into it to Photoshop.... I pick up things like really fast- it's weird... most of it I also like researched, you like Google, they show steps, step-by-step kind of stuff on there too.

She continued describing her involvement,

I got into gaming competitions because my older brother actually got me into playing Halo; I started playing on his XBox a lot more and then he gave me his account and his XBox and I found the gaming through, well, there's clans. Which is like a group of people we get into -- a group of people we usually play with. They're talking about competitiveness and they told me about that and I'm like, 'Oh, ok, I want to try it.' And some of the people I've know for like five years online, it's crazy and they taught me how to play, like competitively.

Through the many opportunities Madeleine had to not only play games but to immerse herself in the gaming world, she gained skill, confidence, and the ability to talk the language that allowed her ongoing access into videogame spaces predominantly occupied by males.

When children and youth don't have regular access to game technologies or opportunities to play, they don't develop familiarity and comfort with 'playing' with the technologies and opportunities that games offer. They are not as willing to take risks, either with the game action or the controls – for fear of damaging the games or the computer and for looking foolish in front of their peers. As some of the participants

commented, they choose games and controllers with which they are comfortable. Heather says, "I always stick with a game if it is easy to pick up at the beginning, like if it has complicated buttons and stuff, I'm like 'uh – too complicated'". Holly chooses games that are familiar and easily accessible,

I have a little game on my cell phone that I play all the time which is like *Brick Breaker*... or I play *Tetris* or *Rock Band* or *Guitar Hero* but other than... oh, and *Diddy Kong Racing* for Nintendo 64...but other than that I'm not into *Mass Effect* or *Call of Duty*... and all of those games.

Holly's notion of 'too complicated' kept her from accessing more challenging games. She, like Heather and Amber, didn't believe that she could master the more sophisticated controllers which would enable access to games demanding greater skill and understanding.

Throughout her life Amber has had lots of sporadic access to different game consoles and has learned through being around and watching different gamers:

I've lived with step-dads and step-parents so we've always had different variety of games and what not... I just kinda learned naturally. Uhm, playing Sega Genesis mostly, and the PS1, computer, PS2, PS3, Wii a little bit. Game Cube, Xbox, pretty much everything.

Her online play, however, was limited because she still didn't have access to online games. Although Amber became interested in what her step-dads were doing and was able to develop skill, it was not intentional or encouraged.

In relation to the happenstance of learning videogames, Abby commented,

I think the only reason we have video games at our house is because my dad likes them. If it was just my Mom, I don't think she would have done that. I don't know, maybe it is just a stereotype that boys like video games, and girls just get dolls and stuff. Where as if they have a boy, they automatically say 'Oh, we'll just get a video game'."

All the girls commented that they have never seen videogames targeting girls; mostly they see games that don't really interest them. They reported that when there are games 'made for girls', they're very

‘girly’ and suggest very traditional female stereotypes, like Barbies, or fashion, where players can dress up their characters, or go shopping. None of these girls expressed interest in playing games with these types of themes.

Attitudes: “I’d rather be a dance super star than a...sniper”

We believe it is important that girls have opportunities to become immersed in video games, where deep and rich learning happens, where players learn to challenge, take risks, attempt new ways to problem solve, use their imaginations, and create powerful identities for themselves. Access to videogames and the ways gamers think are important in shaping not only future opportunities and skills for females, but also in shaping their attitudes (Walkerline, 2007). These girls seem willing to accept that the world of videogames is not meant for girls; as Abby considers, “... we’re brought up like that...I donno... computers is a guy thing maybe.”

The girls seemed to struggle to see any benefit from video games. Nora ponders,

I donno why! I just find that I’m just not interested. I couldn’t possibly pin-point it because we grew up with a few videogames we had the original Nintendo and we had a PS2 and its not like I was never exposed to it...its just that I was never... like, something else that I would rather be doing. I think that...I have a social personality that way and I would rather be talking and doing stuff, interacting with other people rather than an inanimate thing.

The attitudes that shaped their early years seemed to clearly be linked to the amount and type of access to videogames; they seemed to accept that they were not intended to engage with the world of videogames and did not consider this as limiting their future options.

Constraining Attitudes of Female Players

Girls’ ways of thinking about videogames and themselves in relation to games, as well as their interests and skills, were developed during their connections to significant adults in their lives throughout their childhood and adolescence. As reported in an earlier study (Sanford, 2006), these connections can support or limit their curiosity about games, provide opportu-

nities for investigation or discourage exploration. By the time they are teens, many girls have eliminated themselves from the videogame world through their fear of looking foolish, not being accepted, or being out of control. The conversation below with some of the participants exemplifies ways in which girls think of themselves as incompetent and willing to take on a spectator role.

Alena: Yeah but I looked like an idiot because I am like like ‘boo boo’...

Abby: Yeah, you are so out of control. Everything is like ‘woah woah’ – too confusing!.

Heather: Yeah. I think I have a hard time with those games like when more things are involved, especially when people are attacking you. I just kind of lose my head.

Nora: Um...I like it when the controls are easier, I like it when you have it like: one thing does that shooting and one thing does the jumping...when they are all together then they get confusing...but I really don’t know if that can be avoided...

Abby: Ya, it does take awhile though, it wasn’t easy at first...

Heather: Its hard to keep going...I always forget where to put my feet and then behind me...I have to coordinate myself better on that one, takes practice

Heather: Ya, I’d rather be a dance super star than like a...sniper

Heather goes on to comment, “If there were guys around I would just let them play, and I’d watch, because they don’t want to play with a bad, a sucky girl!” Abby adds, “I think that, if they were really that much more skilled than me, that they would have a higher level then I might feel that I was lagging behind or holding them back and I might stop sooner and be like, ok, you guys play, you know what you’re doing.”

Nora’s attitude reflects comments made by Graner Ray (2006) in relation to what girls are seeking from videogames. Graner Ray suggests that “female gamers are concerned with more than just exciting visuals and flashy surfaces”; she believes that female gamers need deeper experiences with characters and want emotional connections with the characters; in order to stay involved they need more than action. Nora’s comment reflects her desire for something more than action:

I found that once you get past a certain point in the game, once you can use the controllers and once you can play every game...that is when I shut off and I'm like 'OK, I'm really bored with this now', or if I've done all the racetracks or something, even if I'm not the winner, than I'm like 'Oh, I don't want to see this one again, I don't want to play this anymore'. I get bored when I've seen it all.

And despite the fact that these participants are successful, motivated and engaged learners in many realms, they are not inspired to enter the videogame world – one where males have dominated as players, designers, and producers. However, the significance of their lack of engagement does not appear evident to them.

Interviewer: So, who is going to do the computing science courses and the engineering and all that kind of stuff, because none of you seem interested in it all, right? [All nod], So, who is going to do it?

Heather: The guys? (laughter all around).

Abby elaborates:

Well, I'm sure that all the jobs will be filled; there will always be someone there to do that job. Its just that society has these predisposed roles for women, forever, for women to have the jobs that have the nurturing roles and for men to have the creating roles, so its like people have just learnt that, for however long, its like their Mom's have always been home helping them with Math homework and their Dad's are at work, 9-5, that is what I grew up with.

These young women have not previously thought about these issues in any significant ways, and Heather's tentativeness in her exploration of the ideas is expressed in the following comment,

I dunno if, like, more important jobs, are like, are through the critical, mathematical side of things... like, if you are an Engineer and you work your way up and you become, I dunno, is that why our world is so controlled by men instead of women? I mean, like, is the way get a more even playing field for women and men to get women in the field of technology and stuff? I dunno...

Although Heather reports having done well in school courses, including mathematics, it appears from this

comment that she has not had occasion to consider these issues of gender and access in any depth previously.

Male attitudes restricting females

Once they have found the world of videogames, girls need to be continually supported in their interest and involvement. However, they can be quickly discouraged by attitudes of males they encounter – verbal displays of characters in the game, rules created by the game designers, disparaging comments on blog sites, or online interactions. Videogames still remain largely a male culture and portray hyper-masculine attitudes and behaviours. The sexist comments used to describe females and the harassing language used in interactions during games can be very off-putting to females of all ages and abilities with videogames, but serve to quickly discourage many females from entering these hostile spaces. For example, in a YouTube video documenting a game design contest, popular themes were related to 'dead ugly princesses', 'dominatrix supervillains', 'bitter man-haters', and 'women wanting to emasculate men' (IGN Youtube, 2012). And although some of the blog posting comments following the YouTube challenged the 'rampant sexism and stupidity' of the game designers, pointing out how seriously offensive and misogynist they are in their attitudes and portrayals of women, these images and characteristics of female characters continue to dominate popular videogames. Many blog sites and discussion forums dedicated to discussion of videogames include similar language, descriptions, and attitudes towards women. It's difficult for females to challenge these comments, however, as they are often presented as humour, and blog contributors wonder in their posts why girls 'can't take a joke'. Madeline and Amber, who have had extensive experience in the online videogame world, describes how they and their female gamer friends have dealt with the overt sexist harassment:

Interviewer: Do you think that there are any girls that pretend that they're guys online? So that they can play [without getting harassed]?

Madeline: Well most of the time what girls would do is they unplug their mic, when they don't play.

Amber: Yeah because when you're online you have a microphone so that you can hear their voices.

Madeline: And then also right away they ask you right away if you're a little boy or a girl.

As these girls reported, male players often make disparaging (even abusive) comments when they know that online players are female, suggesting that girls are not good at playing videogames, and that they should return to the kitchen where they belong.

Interviewer: I remember that you mentioned a while ago for something that there's been a lot of sexism online. You were sharing and saying things like "Oh girls suck at playing videogames and why don't you go bake a pie or something."

Madeline: Yeah. 'Go in the kitchen and make me a sandwich. Like what are you doing playing videogames? You're probably fat.' I get that a lot too. 'You're probably like fat or ugly cause you play Halo. You probably weigh like 200lbs.'

Interviewer: How often do you think that happens? Is it quite often?

Madeline: It's every other game. I often get harassed like that and they send mean messages, dirty messages and stuff and I just block them right away... it's horrible, a whole different kind of social world in the online community.

A column in *The Escapist* (2011) addressed the overt sexism in many immersive videogames, raising the issue of overtly sexist behaviours and images of women in videogames and noting that not only are females depicted in skimpy clothes and abnormal proportions but also are posed as static characters whose job is not to act but to pose for male players. These images of over-sexed female characters that are in the games to be viewed by the (predominantly male) players have become normalized in videogames, so much so that our participants scarcely commented on or appeared to notice this aspect of videogames.

Images of women ... "an extreme version of gender"

Although the portrayal of women as highly sexualized and scantily-clad is a recognized issue (Graner Ray, 2006), the 'sex object' images and explicit poses of female characters were not expressed as a major concern by the participants in this study. Rather, they didn't seem to take much notice of the female characters with sexually explicit clothing, overly accentuated breasts, large lips and heavy eyelids. The

participants reported finding the female characters humorous rather than disturbing. As Nora commented, "it's so, so funny. I mean, men are boosted up a bit too... it's an extreme version of gender." Abby says, "Especially in *Dance Dance Revolution*, all the girls are dressed up pretty fancy and they are all dancing around, and the guys are, like, "Ya!!" However, upon reflection, she notes that "the guys are all in baggy jeans and backward hats, that kind of thing, you know, none of them do ballet."

After this comment, there was silence in the room for a bit. Nora then ventured,

Well, it doesn't help. It doesn't bother me, I guess, but I donno, its hard to say...I mean, I don't think that it really matters, or, I don't think that it effects us because we are, um...numb to that, and it's just portrayed in so many ways...so it may not effect us as deeply as it would ... ya. Ya, its totally expected, its like...what else would they be wearing in a video game, you know?

The silence following some of their comments and the uncertainty of their responses suggests that for some, these are ideas they have not previously pondered. Rather, they have accepted these images and their role in videogames as 'normal', not something to worry about. There are also attempts to justify the depictions of women in videogames, with comments such as, "I donno, because they are so extreme and they are so fake, and we know they are fake", "they don't look like real people" and "they are just computer graphics". Alena offers, "Because, I don't really think that it makes men look at women, and think that women should look like that. From the guys that I have talked to they're like 'no way, we know what real women are supposed to look like'. These comments are qualified, however, with reflective comments; as Heather commented, "but I really think that it has an impact on the way women look at themselves and the way women think that they should present themselves" and recognition by the participants that these types of images are not just offered in videogames, but in a proliferation of popular media images; upon consideration of the issue, Nora added, "everything is being portrayed that way, I think it does have an effect."

However, Madeline, a competitive videogamer, offers another more hopeful perspective:

Well, I find it like, that's what makes me like being a female gamer sometimes, cause there are girls that do break those stereotypes, and when we show up at those competitions its good that we do and show that girls can play video games as well.

Although more attention is gradually being paid to ways that girls and women are portrayed in videogames, and some games offer female character options, most often the women characters are non-person players, or computer-controlled artificial intelligences. The label 'non-person' is very revealing of how females are regarded by game designers and players. Females are seldom the heroes of the story, do not have opportunities to engage productively in the action, or make significant decisions regarding the direction of the game.

Casual affinity with game worlds: “We play and then find other stuff to do”

All of the participants who took part in this study are busy; they go to school full time, take part in extra curricular activities (student government, band, sports), work part-time jobs, help out by doing chores and child care at home, and keep up with their homework. These responsibilities come first before game playing. Amber, although she spends considerable time playing videogames, is not perceived as a gamer at school. She says it is because “...I tend to just do my homework instead and I have a lot of things after school I do so when I can play video games then I play but all my teachers know I play games...as long as I get my homework done they're happy with it.” Despite wanting to participate in a hobby she enjoys, she has developed an understanding that videogames come after more important things such as her school homework.

Once the girls' obligations are completed, the girls' social lives become paramount and this is when most of them incorporate videogame play into their lives. Madeline explains how she and her friends hang out together. “So we have LAN [local area network] parties. So we get our Xboxes together and play like, with a bunch of people all together.” Heather suggests that she is okay with playing games as long as there are other people around. “I will usually only play if my sister is already into her game. I wouldn't normally think of it as something to do. And like, I will only play games that will facilitate more than one person.”

The girls all speak about playing video games with their friends present, rather than virtually, through online games.

The amount of time spent playing games varies among the girls, depending in part on their other obligations and interests. Holly says she and a friend, “played Wii sports for a half hour and then found other stuff to do.” It was not engaging enough for them to play for a longer period of time. They also use Facebook and IM to engage in social behaviour, rather than just playing video games. However, Amber has a different experience with the game *The Sims*.

It's kind of a control thing right? You can control this person and you get the freedom of doing whatever you want. Like, my favourite thing on there is probably building houses. And I just enjoy doing that all day long. I sat there for three hours creating one house for a family.”

Amber's experiences with videogames are different from her brother's, who cannot understand her wanting to spend so much time building a house. And, she mentions, when he wants to play, she usually gives up the controllers to him.

Madeline would like to play video games as freely as Amber but at home she is limited by her mother's rules.

She thinks it's a waste of time. She can't see it from the point of view of like it's a new generation and she keeps thinking it's just like a waste of my life. It's kind of a hobby for me and she doesn't really like that... And she doesn't respect that at all, that I enjoy video gaming. And for my career I want to be a video game designer to fall back on...I went through also a time period where I skipped school just to play video games-... And it was a deal that if I maintain my grades I can play during the week but she doesn't want me to. And it's weird cause like, the administrators at my school trust me more than my mom does. Which sucks.

Her mother does not trust that videogames could be positively influencing her daughter's learning, despite the fact that Madeleine is currently earning high marks and has been accepted to an elite and highly competitive videogame design program at a college nearby during her Spring Break.

Conclusion: “Videogames are what my boyfriend does when I’m doing homework.”

Access to the world of videogames, both physically and emotionally, enables these girls to engender interest and understanding of the potential of these virtual spaces for themselves. Access is often dependent on family dynamics, values, and social connections. When they had access they developed greater awareness that in some instances served to question normative gendered attitudes – exposing stereotypes and barriers that had not been previously recognized. However, the misogynist attitudes prevalent in many videogames are, either explicitly or implicitly, shaped through visual and verbal messages, storylines, and characters’ actions, that can quickly discourage girls from attempting to engage with videogames. To develop video gaming skills girls and young women need to have the interest, determination, encouragement, and support to engage in these traditionally male spaces. To gain access normative gendered behaviours and values need to be challenged so that girls can play videogames on their own terms and not always on the males’ terms.

It is important to recognize and acknowledge the significant barriers restricting girls’ engagement in videogames, particularly immersive games. In this study we have discussed significant barriers as described by our participants that we believe are important to address in order to provide inclusive and equitable opportunities in today’s world. Creating access to videogames playtime and equipment for girls, shifting attitudes of both females and males about videogames, representing female characters in non-sexist ways, and reconsidering societal expectations about ways in which girls should spend their time are all issues that we believe need further consideration.

Growing up female or male can be very different experiences; children lead parallel but separate lives as males or females. While girls are traditionally rewarded for compliance, nurturing, talking through problems, multitasking and providing emotional support in family lives, boys are more likely to be rewarded for taking on challenges, taking risks, taking action, and taking charge in public spaces (Stromquist, 2007; Beal, 1994). Boys’ lives are visible, public, and acclaimed, while girls’ lives are often rendered unacknowledged and invisible – this

is manifested in videogame play as well as other aspects of their lives. Girls experience success by doing well at school, where they can be recognized and acknowledged in their own right, whereas boys experience success and acknowledgement in other spaces – including the videogame world. As Holly has commented, “videogames are what my boyfriend does when I’m doing homework.”

It is no wonder, then, that many girls continue to be concerned about doing well in school, trying hard, and developing relationships, while boys are more often noticed publicly, develop independent tough personas, and are recognized more for talent than hard work (Staton & Larkin, 1993; Sanford & Blair, 2002). The opportunity to be heroic and to win, afforded through every videogame encounter, is frequent and often shared publicly. Such is not the case so often for young women, where the female videogame characters are not represented as important or laudable – epic adventures can seem daunting to them! The more that young women are harassed and bullied, in videogame domains and elsewhere, the less opportunities they have to develop video gaming skills, immerse themselves into exciting quests, and build friendships through videogame play. Instead, they seek out more socially acceptable and comfortable spaces where they can feel at ease and valued.

How can girls become integrally involved in the world of videogames, so that they have the same exposure to worlds of imagination and possibility to which their male counterparts naturally belong, and the same opportunity to develop facility with digital technologies? It is important that girls are seen for their abilities, their strength, and their imaginations – not merely for their appearance and compliance. Machinations of patriarchal hegemony continue to marginalize and limit opportunities for girls and women, influencing societal and personal attitudes, restricting options and reinscribing fierce but often invisible boundaries. Early exposure to a wide range of many types of activities is needed in order to reshape attitudes that provide limitations – both self-imposed and defined by society.

What would it take for girls to be interested in videogames so that their options related to technology, relationships, and identities are broadened? How can involvement with computers and science, that we believe is facilitated through engagement

with videogames, become normalized for girls as well as boys? We would like to propose three directions. Firstly, girls need access to a wide array of activities and ideas at a young age – when boys are actively engaged in building, problem-solving, and creating, girls should be also included. When boys are spending time with their fathers and other adult males, girls should also. Science is for everyone, sports are for everyone – just as nurturing and relationships are for everyone. Secondly, inclusive thinking about videogame creation will encourage new thinking about the types of videogames created and the content of them. Involvement of girls with videogames requires that videogames become more appealing to girls – they need engaging storylines, powerful female heroes that feed their fantasies rather than traditional male fantasies, and scenarios that allow them to see broader possibilities for future life and career choices. Finally, they need mentoring, not bullying and derision when they attempt to join in. It is not only females who need to change attitudes about who belongs in the videogame world. Game designers, producers, and players all need to change the offensive attitudes towards girls and women portrayed in videogames, develop more respectful storylines, characters, and responses to girls' engagement. Females must demand respect and inclusion, but that will not happen if they are rendered invisible in the videogame world and satisfied to remain so. In order that all children and youth, females and males, can live equitably in the world, it matters that they all have equal access, opportunities, and support.

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Theme IV: Gender and Contemporary Media Chapter 31

The Princess with the Quasi-Feminist Agenda: a Glance at Two Disney Films Through the Lens of Feminist Criticism

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As an important and influential presence in the global landscape, Disney films exert a powerful influence on their young and (arguably) uncritical audiences, shaping to a large extent their perception of the world and themselves. It is often stated that girls present a particularly vulnerable group in this respect. Close scrutiny of the images and messages which play such a significant part in the processes of (female) socialization and acculturation present, therefore, a pressing need. In this paper, my aim is to examine gender roles and imagery in two recent Disney films: *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) and *Tangled* (2010). I am particularly interested in what is often referred to as 'feminist' features of Disney heroines: are these, as some critics claim, mere 'gestures to feminism', or is the Studio truly rejecting traditional feminine ideals promoted in its earlier releases (*Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*)?

Introduction: the beef with Disney¹

Given its status as synonym for family entertainment (or, more specifically, entertainment for children) and childhood innocence (Giroux 1995:45) Disney has for a long time been 'off limits' for critics. Any attempt at viewing the films and their messages through a critical lens was perceived as almost sacrilegious; such good clean fun is certainly free of any kind of ideology or hidden agendas... Or so the dominant view went (cf. Bell et al. 1995:3). While the Studio's artistic and technical achievements can by no means be (and never have been) disputed, it is precisely this "spectacular" animation and "artistic

skill" that helped draw attention away from the implicit and explicit messages that were being communicated to young, impressionable, and, for the most part, uncritical audiences (Bendix 1993:290). Recent years have, however, seen quite a surge in Disney criticism². The very arguments formerly used to protect Disney's sacrosanct status have been appropriated by the opposition to emphasize the necessity of placing it under closer scrutiny. Given its "profound influence on civilizing children" (Zipes 2006:193) as well as its status of "central storyteller in our society" (Ward 2002:2), it is clear that images and messages coming out of the Disney dream factory do in fact "demand close reading and careful interpretation" (Wood 1996:42).

The most frequent accusations against Disney to date include racism (cf. Hurley, 2005), as well as upholding and promoting a set of values which can only be described as deeply patriarchal and specifically American (cf. Stone 1975; Zipes, 2002, 2006). Furthermore, the fact that the Disney pantheon includes a large number of helpless and hapless maids has also induced many a feminist critic to have a go at the films (cf. Stone, 1975; Bendix, 1993; Cummins, 1995, etc.). Faced with growing dissatisfaction with their portrayal of female characters as mere "helpless ornaments in need of protection" (Zipes 1995:37), the Studio announced it was taking a new course. The so-called 'Disney Renaissance' started by *The Little Mermaid* (1989) not only helped bring Disney back to the forefront of animation after a somewhat unsuccessful period, but also boasted heroines which were much closer to feminist ideals than the comatose Sleeping

¹ In this paper, I use the term 'Disney' to refer to the Walt Disney Company (more specifically, the Walt Disney Studio), rather than to Walt Disney himself. Furthermore, I find the term 'Disney' designates "a canon of popular film", "a multinational corporation", as well as a specific "ideology" (Bell et al. 1995a:2).

² See esp. Stone (1975), Bendix (1993), Bell et al. eds. (1995), Zipes (1979, 2006), Orenstein (2011).

Beauty, or happy housewife Snow White. The 'new' Disney heroine, the Studio claimed, is brave, rebellious, curious and open-minded. However, a closer examination of these would-be feminist icons soon revealed that their more progressive features were little more than, to borrow a phrase from Douglas, "gestures to feminism" (1994:297), and as such a far cry away from a radical shift in Studio policy. As it turns out, the new chicks on the block are not all that different from their predecessors. They may be more sassy and outspoken, but their happily ever afters still include wedding bells and tiaras.

Aims and Methods

In this paper I propose to examine several of the 'crimes and misdemeanors' feminist criticism most often ascribes to Disney. To do so, I shall focus on two recent studio releases which have so far received little critical attention: *The Princess and the Frog* (2009, an adaptation of "The Frog King" by the Brothers Grimm) and *Tangled* (2010, based on Grimms' "Rapunzel"). My analysis shall be conducted as a close reading of the select films, as well as a comparative reading of the films and the tales they are based on. By focusing on which elements from the tales are preserved, which are modified (and in what why), and which are dropped altogether, I shall try to describe the specific ideology and set of values promoted by Disney. The analysis shall mostly be focused on female characters, their individual traits, relations to other characters, romantic involvements, and the positive/negative lights that the movies cast on them.

Examining the way female characters are portrayed seems especially pressing and relevant since these not only invite identification, but also continue to exert their influence on their primary audiences (mainly girls) through various film-based commodities marketed as part of the globally successful 'Disney Princess' brand (cf. Orenstein, 2011). The brand which, according to Orenstein, presents the "largest franchise on the planet for girls ages two to six" (2011:14) has imposed itself as a significant factor in the processes of (female) socialization and acculturation³, providing girls with opportunities to not just play with doll figures of their favorite heroines, but to actually *become* them by wearing the same clothes as

their heroines⁴, or even undergoing complete make-overs (hair, clothing, make up) at specialized spots such as the "Bibidi Bobbidi Boutique"⁵.

Disney fairy tale tradition

Disney is perhaps best known for its screen adaptations of classic fairy tales. Their popularity and distribution range are such that for contemporary audiences Disney has indeed become a synonym for fairy tale (Mustich, 2011); Hurley even claims that original tales and myths on which the films are based tend to be dismissed in favor of the 'Disney version', which in turn acquires the status of "the real story" (2005:222). Many folklorists and literary critics (primarily, perhaps, Jack Zipes, who openly dismisses Disney fairy-tale films as "the worst aspects of capitalist, corporate productions" (Mustich, 2011)) are highly deprecatory of the so-called process of 'Disneyfication', *ie.* taking existing narratives (be they German fairy tales, or Greek myths) and transforming them "into something peculiarly American" (Zipes 2006:203). To be sure, there is nothing wrong with giving old tales new twists, but what seems to bother many a critic is the specific nature of the Disney twist. By insisting on moral (over)simplification and building narratives on the classic boy-meets-girl pattern, Disney has 'tamed' the original tales and robbed them of their rebellious features and emancipatory potential (ibid:193), turning them, as a result, into saccharine, crowd-pleasing romances (Haase 1999:354) and "entertainment commodities" (Zipes 2002:60). In addition, the changes introduced into original texts often serve as platforms for promoting patriarchal and capitalist norms (Hastings 1993:83).

But why such a fuss about once-upon-a-times and happily ever afters? Fairy tales, claims Tatar, have always played an important part in the process of transmitting (and, to an extent, preserving) social norms and structures (1992:229). Children, who have come to be regarded as their primary audi-

³ See, for instance, Wohlwend (2009), and Orenstein (2011).

⁴ A full list of the various princess-themed clothes, costumes, accessories, toys, etc. is available on-line: <http://www.disneystore.com/disney-princess/mn/1000016/>.

⁵ "Bibidi Bobbidi Boutique is a beauty salon where young Guests are magically transformed into little princesses and knights at 2 locations: [World of Disney Store](http://disneyworld.disney.go.com/tours-and-experiences/bibidi-bobbidi-boutique/) in Downtown Disney Area and [Cinderella Castle](http://disneyworld.disney.go.com/tours-and-experiences/bibidi-bobbidi-boutique/) at Magic Kingdom theme park" (<http://disneyworld.disney.go.com/tours-and-experiences/bibidi-bobbidi-boutique/>).

ences, “tend to structure [their] lives according to fairy tales”, which makes these narratives an important factor in the “phylogenetic and ontogenetic development and in socialization processes” (Zipes 2002:63). Lieberman insists that fairy tales play a particularly prominent part in the acculturation of women; these stories, she claims, have become “the repositories of the dreams, hopes, and fantasies of girls”, influencing the psycho-sexual development and world-view of “millions of women” (1989:187). Various research into the nature and influence of different types of media⁶ indicate that we are all but immune to the messages (whether covert, or overt) they are serving us. Children are usually cited as a group particularly susceptible to what they see and hear on television, or in the movies. According to Beal, the extent to which such messages can shape children’s behavior and overall worldview should not be underestimated: “these sources can help shape children’s gender role behavior, turning boys into macho warriors and girls into beautiful princesses waiting to be rescued” (1994:158). Though it would be wrong to assume that children are mere “media victims and cultural dupes” (Wohlwend 2009:79), it would be equally (if not more) erroneous to presume that all contents targeted primarily at children are just ‘innocent fun’ (Tatar 1992:229). On the contrary, claims Hastings, media aimed at children requires special critical attention as it both reflects the ideology of its producers, and shapes the worldview of its consumers (1993:89).

Disney dames

In film after film, Disney confirms its status of adamant believer in the beauty myth and promoter of “the feminine beauty ideal”, *ie.* “the socially constructed notion that physical attractiveness is one of woman’s most attractive assets, and something all women should strive to achieve and maintain” (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 2003:711). It does not take too much power of deduction to realize that all Disney heroines are gifted with hourglass-shaped figures, “glossy hair, long-lashed eyes, and heart-shaped face[s]” (Wohlwend 2009:65). It is the beautiful girls who are singled out and chosen

for adventure, wealth and romance, which not only suggests that attractiveness is a woman’s most important asset, but also that it is a prerequisite for happiness. So far we have seen a Disney heroine stand up to her father (*Aladdin*), wield a sword (*Mulan*) and work for a living (*The Princess and the Frog*), but we have yet to see one who is not drop-dead gorgeous.

Tiana, the heroine of *The Princess and the Frog* retains her good looks even when she is transformed into a frog. Far from being a slimy toad, the ‘green’ Tiana is a graceful, “shapely, long-eyelashed amphibian” (Orenstein 2011:181). The effort to preserve one’s appearances is one of the central motifs in *Tangled*. Terrified of aging, Mother Gothel will apparently stop at nothing to secure her good-looks and keep wrinkles and age spots at bay. While the Gothel of the Grimms’ story seems to be a much more sympathetic character whose efforts to keep Rapunzel in the tower are often interpreted as an ill-fated attempt of a “consummate overprotective parent” (Tatar 2004:55) to protect her maturing daughter from the outside world, Disney’s Gothel is motivated by purely selfish interests. Rapunzel’s magic hair is her elixir of youth, which is why the girl must stay locked up for ever. “You know why we stay up in this tower, / Yes, to keep you safe and sound”, sings Gothel while stroking the heroine’s golden hair. While such a character provides ample opportunity for comments on youth obsession or (given her uncanny resemblance to Cher) cosmetic surgery, none of these are, unfortunately, seized. This reluctance to deal with delicate issues is another characteristic of Disney. Even though *The Princess and the Frog* was self-congratulatory celebrated as the first film featuring an African-American heroine, the issue of race is tentatively avoided throughout the film (at one point the two brothers from whom Tiana wishes to purchase the old sugar mill suggest that running a business would not be appropriate for someone of her “background”, but this seems more like a comment on her low social status and gender than her race). To make matters even worse, the heroine spends most of the film wading through the swamp in the shape of a frog, which ultimately renders “her race more or less moot” (Orenstein 2011:181).

⁶ See, for instance, Beal (1994), Douglas (1994), Walkerdine (1997), Hurley (2005).

Dreaming of a true love's kiss

As Wood notes, “Disney versions of märchen [sic] consistently emphasize the romantic aspects of the plot” (1996:29). Though it cannot be argued that fairy tales themselves are not romantically inclined, the love story (given the fairy tale’s disregard for “internal emotions”, it is arguable whether one can speak of a proper *love* story (cf. Lüthi 1986:15)) is usually secondary to, or merely an excuse for the adventure plot. With Disney, however, it plays a central role (Cummins 1995:23). It should also be noted that romance does not weigh equally for male and female characters. Rather than stating that romance is the center of the narrative universe, it would perhaps be more accurate to say that it is the center of the *heroine’s* universe. Although love is also important to male characters, their lives rarely revolve around it. Cummins even notes that in films which focus on a male character romance usually functions only as a subplot (*The Lion King*) (ibid:27, n.2), or does not feature at all (*Pinocchio, Oliver & Co.*).

One of the staples of Disney’s romantic tales is of course the happily ever after which is realized through marriage alone. To be sure, there is nothing inherently wrong with marriage, but the fact that it is presented as “a woman’s *only* option” (Rowe 2004:60, emphasis in the original), causes some concern. To quote Ross, “there ought to be more than one girls’ story out there, relentlessly repeated with minor variations” (Ross 2004:60). Even heroines who claim they have “sworn off men” like Megara (*Hercules*), or that romance “ain’t their style” like Tiana, are quick to change their minds the moment the right guy comes along. Belle (*Beauty and the Beast*) may sneer at the thought of becoming Madame Gaston, but she has no objections to being Madame Beast.

Much has been made about the kiss that brings about the frog-to-prince transformation in *The Princess and the Frog* (the film was even advertised as “the story behind the most magical kiss the world has ever seen”). However, the Grimms’ “Frog King” on which the movie is based makes absolutely no reference to kissing. The transformation is anything but romantic as the heroine flings her amphibian suitor into a wall (cf. Zipes, 2003). At the beginning of the film, Tiana is certain of two things: that her only dream is to open her own restaurant, and that she would “never ever kiss a frog”. However, in order for

her to “meet [her] Prince Charming and dance off into [her] happily ever after” as her mother would wish for her, she will have to renounce both of these convictions. She may *want* to run her own show, but what she actually *needs* is love. Despite her strong belief that the only way to get what you want is to “do your best each and every day”, after learning that she will not be able to purchase the old sugar mill, she turns to the (supposedly) magical evening star for help. “Please, please, please...” she whispers as she is standing on a balcony, dressed as a princess (the outfit is reminiscent of Cinderella’s gown), staring hopefully into the night sky. But instead of a bucket load of cash, what should appear but a prince-turn-frog: “A prince? But I didn’t wish for any..”. She is wrong, of course. For what else could any girl wish for?

It’s a man’s world after all

Disney female characters are “consistently defined in terms of their relationships with males” (Beal 1994:159) - their fathers, boyfriends, or their supporting crew. The names of heroines may appear in the titles, but it the guys who ultimately steal the show. *Snow White* is a case in point: the undifferentiated and relatively obscure dwarfs from the Grimms’ story snatch the spotlight from the Betty Boop-like heroine and literary make the headlines⁷ (Zipes 1979:113-4). Zipes even goes so far as to claim that while seemingly revolving around female characters, Disney films in fact celebrate their male counterparts, thus creating and perpetuating an exclusively “male myth” (Zipes 1995:37).

More than Rapunzel’s, *Tangled* is Flynn Rider’s story: he is the narrator and one of the two main characters. But he is also the one controlling Rapunzel’s fate. He (unknowingly) brings her her own crown and, at the end of the movie, places it on her head. Without his help she is unwilling to leave the tower, and once she has come out she relies solely on the kindness of (male) strangers (primarily Ryder, but also the rough-looking, but kind-hearted patrons of the ‘Snuggly Duckling’). Finally, it is Ryder who saves Rapunzel from Gothel’s clutches and reunites her with her parents. A story about female maturation in which the prince is given a minor part thus becomes

⁷ Unlike the Grimms’ fairy tale which bears only the name of the heroine (“Schneewittchen”), the film gives equal credit to both the leading lady and her supporting crew (Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs).

another 'male myth' revolving around a street-wise Errol Flynn look-alike who goes from rogue to royalty. Although Flynn tries to convince us that what we are watching is actually "the story of a girl named Rapunzel", the fact remains that the first thing we see is a picture of him, and the first words we hear are: "This is the story of how *I* died". And even if it is indeed 'the story of a girl', why not give the girl a say in it? The only time Rapunzel takes part in telling her own story is at the very end, when she informs us that she and Flynn "are living happily ever after". Finally, Rapunzel's secondary role in the story is also indicated by the change of title: unlike the Grimms' story, the film does not bear the name of the heroine.

In Grimms' "Rapunzel", the prince does not stand up to the enchantress; upon hearing that his beloved is "lost to [him] forever" (Tatar 2004:62), he simply jumps out the window. Also, the lovers' reunion is almost a lucky coincidence: they do not look for, but rather stumble upon each other (ibid:62, n.13). The film, however, uses both cases as an opportunity to demonstrate Flynn's courage and resourcefulness. He defeats the villainess and rescues the woman of his dreams. Furthermore, the fairy tale prince has to climb Rapunzel's hair to get into the tower. Flynn, however, requires no such help: he is perfectly able to climb to the top by relying on his wit and muscles alone, which further diminishes the role of the heroine. Ultimately, he cuts off her hair, robbing her thus not only of her magical powers, but also of her strength (earlier in the film she uses the hair to tie him up), and, in a way, to recreate her in his own image (her long blond hair is now short and brown, like his). The cutting of the hair is ultimately an act of disempowerment. The one 'with all the hair' and a story named after her has been reduced to a spectator rather than narrator, an object rather than a subject.

Father knows best

Portraying movie heroines side by side as is done in the Disney Princess logo may at first glance seem to inspire a spirit of community, sisterhood and 'girl power', but the opposite is the case. Although the princesses stand side by side, they make a point of discouraging "female bonding", and even, as Orenstein notes, avoid eye contact (in pictures, each princess is looking in a different direction) (2011:23). But this is merely in line with the lack of female soli-

arity and cooperation which is characteristic of all Disney features. Fairy tale heroines often rely on the help and support of their mothers and sisters; the relationships between females in Disney films, on the other hand are, in most cases, marked by jealousy, enmity and competition (Bendix 1993:285). Also, the notorious absence of mother-daughter relations is a particularly sore point with feminist critics (cf. Ward 2002:150, n.7). Although both Tiana and Rapunzel have living mothers, neither of the two women play any part in their daughters' lives. Rapunzel's mother is completely reduced to an image of caring motherhood: we see her giving birth, worrying about her lost daughter, and finally embracing her as she returns home.

Tiana is repeatedly described as "her daddy's daughter"; the mother-daughter relationship does not even come close in terms of plot relevance and impact on character development as that between (dead) father and daughter. Her mother is there simply to fan her belief in fairy tales and wishing stars, and keep the memory of her father alive. Although both Tiana's parents work, it is only her father who figures as a role model for her: he is the "hard-working man" whose dreams and work ethics Tiana inherits. When referring to the restaurant, Tiana never states that buying and running it is her wish - it is something that her father had wanted, and it is her duty "to make sure all daddy's hard work means something". The restaurant may be called 'Tiana's Place', but it is her father, not Tiana herself, who picks the name. It is interesting to note that emphasis on the father is perhaps the one point in which the Disney film is most faithful to the Grimms' story. Namely, the Brothers added "dialogue between father and daughter about the importance of honoring promises" in order to transform the tale "into a miniature behavioral lesson" (Tatar 2004:3).

Evil stepmothers may figure as stock fairy-tale villains, but their malicious schemes are often carried out with their husbands' tacit consent. The father in "Hansel and Gretel" may protest much, but this does not prevent his wife from getting rid of the children. In the story of Beauty and the Beast, it is father who (unknowingly) promises his daughter to the Beast in order to save his own skin. Disney, however, absolves the father of all responsibility - "crazy old Maurice" accidentally stumbles upon the Beast's castle and

even tries to stop his daughter from taking his place in the dungeon (Cummins 1995:26). In Grimms' "Rapunzel", a man decides to steal some of the herbs from the title to satisfy the craving of his pregnant wife. He is, however, caught by an enchantress who owns the herb garden and, frightened for his life, agrees to give up his only child. The 'Disney version', however, absolves the parents of all responsibility. It is Mother Gothel who wrecks the happy family by stealing the baby, while the morally dubious couple from the story is transformed into a regular model of parental love and devotion as they patiently (and silently!) wait for the return of their daughter.

Bad boys and gracious girls

According to Ward, "Disney helps shape children's views of right and wrong, their morality" (Ward 2002:2), as well as the way they think "about who they are and who they should be" (ibid:5).

One of the issues most frequently under debate in connection with this is the way the films portray gender roles⁸. Not to go into the 'woman-is-born-or-made' debate, the fact is that gender identity does to a large extent rely on what Lober calls 'gender imagery', *ie.* "cultural representations of gender", such as images promoted by media and other social institutions (quoted in: Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 2003:711). And the media message on what is and what is not acceptable in the behavior of little boys and girls, claims Douglas, is quite clear: girls learn that "to sing and smile admiringly at boys is highly desirable. Being smart, brave, or assertive isn't" (Douglas 1994:299).

"No story makes more evident the absurdity of trying to find models for good behavior in fairy tales than the Grimms' 'Frog King, or Iron Heinrich'" (Tatar 1992:154). The beautiful princess who spends her time chasing her golden ball is a far cry from the dutiful Cinderella or compliant Snow White; on the contrary, she is almost a model of "bad breeding" (ibid:11). And yet, this "selfish, greedy, ungrateful, and cruel" lass receives the same reward as her "modest, obedient, magnanimous, and compassionate" counterparts (ibid). Not so in the case of the Disney version. The movie heroine is not only not a princess,

her character traits are almost the complete opposite of those of her literary counterpart. Tiana is a "dutiful daughter who obeys her father" (ibid:20) and has no time for 'messaging around' (let alone chasing golden balls). While self-absorption and carelessness are clearly at odds with Disney heroines, they seem to be quite acceptable when it comes to heroes. Naveen, the Maldonian prince who spent his life "sucking on a silver spoon" and "chasing chambermaids" functions as a kind of male version of the Grimms' haughty princess.

Laziness and egoism in a man are not only tolerated, they are also justified. Similar to the Beast, whose crude behavior is presented as a result of bad parenting (cf. Cummins 1995), Naveen can hardly be blamed for his shortcomings: "When you live in a castle everything is done for you. All the time. They dress you, they feed you, they drive you, brush your teeth. I admit, it was a charmed life until the day my parents cut me off and suddenly I realized I don't know how to do anything".

One of the most radical departures from the original tale is certainly the fact that the heroine is also transformed into a frog. Apart from being a witty narrative solution which creates new plot opportunities as well as catering for comedy, such a decision on the Studio's part gains new meaning when viewed in light of the following remark Maria Tatar makes on Grimms' "The Frog King": "Unlike the ogres and giants of fairy tales, [the frog] remains in a subordinate position, forced into the role of supplicant" (2004:8, n.6). The human heroine (whether princess, as in the story, or waitress, as in the film) is therefore in a superior position in relation to the hero. Since such a power balance is clearly incompatible with gender relations as envisaged and promoted by Disney, Tiana must be 'cut down' to the hero's size, *ie.* she must become a frog herself. While the frog in the fairy tale may have the upper hand over the princess in terms of its ability to retrieve the golden ball, she is in the position to offer him material compensation: "I think I can help you, but what will you give me if I fetch your little plaything?" 'Whatever you want, dear frog,' she said. 'My dresses, my pearls and my jewels, even the golden crown I'm wearing'" (ibid:6). In the film, it is Naveen who is (or at least, pretends to be) "fabulously wealthy" and can therefore offer Tiana "some type of reward" for her assistance. His words,

⁸ Beal defines gender roles as "behaviors that are expected of males and females within a particular society, including dress and appearance, work and leisure activities, obligations within the family, skills, and social behavior" (1994:4).

however, turn out to be lies (as do the words of the Grimms' princess), as he has no intention of keeping his promise. Since the Grimm princess is clearly not a model of good (female) behavior (at least according to Disney standards), the roles must be turned so as to preserve the patriarchal norm.

Disney's double standards also apply to sexuality. Although the films carefully avoid any reference to sex or any form of physical contact beside hugs and kisses, it is clear that a certain dose of experience in romantic endeavors is acceptable for heroes, but not for heroines. Tiana is too busy to go out, while Rapunzel has never even laid eyes on a man before Flynn's arrival. Naveen, however, is quite the ladies' man who has dated "thousands of women". Flynn's confusion at Rapunzel's unimpressed reaction to his 'smolder' makes it clear that he has used it many times before, and with far more success.

Gestures to feminism

Although one must acknowledge that the Disney Studio is largely a product of a specific time and set of socio-economic conditions (Zipes 1979:115), that neither explains nor alters the fact that the ideological guiding star that first sparkled at the Studio's mast in the 1930s continues to light its paths today. In other words, Disney may claim to have done away with its murky past of reducing women to happy-go-lucky housewives and compulsive cleaners, but for all its insistence on a new outlook, all changes seem to be merely cosmetic retouchings. Or, as Murphy puts it: "Despite Disney's recent corporate changes, the motto for the animation division should be: 'The more things change the more we stay the same'" (1995:125).

Try as they might to convince audiences of their newly-adopted "enlightened view of gender roles" (Bendix 1993:288), the Disney Studio has not yet provided ample evidence to support this. The 'new' batch of heroines may at first glance appear to be more assertive and independent than their near-comatose predecessors, but their 'feminist' traits are quickly revealed as mere "flourishes" (Douglas 1994:297) which play virtually no part in the plot itself. "Each of the refreshing traits set up at the beginning of the story is diminished or eliminated" (Cummins 1995:27): Belle forgoes her dreams of exploring the 'great wide somewhere' for sitting pretty

in a forest castle, and it is unlikely that, given her newly acquired royal status, Tiana will have to work hard anymore. Also, it is their traditional feminine traits, such as self-sacrifice, nurturing, devotion and (first and foremost) beauty, rather than their intellect, that capture the attention of the dashing heroes (Murphy 1995:134). No matter what their dreams and ambitions may be, the heroines still find fulfillment only in the arms of a man (Ward 2002:119).

Working two shifts and sacrificing her social life to her (father's) dream, Tiana appears to be a model of ambition and determination. However, despite all her thriftiness and diligence she cannot get the restaurant on her own. The Fenner brothers make it quite clear they do not perceive a single young woman as a serious potential customer, but a young man and (male) crocodile obviously constitute an offer they cannot refuse. The battle can only be won with male assistance. Similarly, Tiana succeeds in defeating the voodoo man after she has appropriated Naveen's rhetoric ("It's not slime, it's mucus"). Furthermore, Tiana's work ethics do not exactly invite identification. Rather than being admired and/or celebrated for her determination, she is criticized (even by her mother!) for being uptight and not having fun. Hard-working Tiana is clearly a party pooper, or, to borrow a phrase from Naveen, "a kill joy" and a "stick in the mud". Her friend Lottie may be superfluous, silly and utterly spoiled, but she is much more charming than the grumpy, preachy heroine. The underlying message? All work and no play makes Tiana a dull girl. After Mama Odie's song about the need to 'dig a little deeper' in order to find what one truly needs (as opposed to what one wants), Tiana is asked if she finally understands what she needs. "Yes, I do, Mama Odie. I need to dig a little deeper, and work even harder to get my restaurant", she replies, to disappointed groans from the animal assembly. Luckily, her newly acquired royal status will enable her to give up work all together and 'live the high life' with Naveen (as is suggested by the final scene in which the two are hopping and bopping on the roof of 'Tiana's Place').

The story of Rapunzel as presented by Disney faithfully follows that of Snow White or Cinderella: the virtuous young heroine does her chores (doing laundry, waxing the floor, mopping, knitting, etc.) while singing about her heart's desires, and wondering when will her life begin. The answer is, of course,

when she meets a man. And while the beautiful blond apparently boasts of many talents (such as painting), the ability that plays the most important part in the plot is her “capacity to nurture” (Cummins 1995:25). Not only does her “magic glowing hair” heal physical wounds, but her love and support help Flynn embrace his true identity (that of Eugene Fitzherbert).

Conclusion

Despite its claims of adopting and promoting novel views of gender roles and equality, Disney still seems to adhere to the patterns set by *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. The all-too-familiar “Hollywood and Broadway musicals that repeat the same romantic happy endings” (Zipes 2006:209) are now advertized under the guise of feminism, but the underlying messages remain the same: beauty (with a little help from wishing stars) goes a long way, and happily ever afters equal wedding gowns and tiaras. This would suggest that even more “work needs to be done on the implications of Disney representations of the sex-gender system, and how audiences receive it” (Wood 1996:42). Commercially successful brands such as Disney Princesses or Fairies which are “all about clothes, jewelry, makeup, and snaring a handsome husband” (Orenstein 2011:16), increase opportunities for sending and frequently emphasizing messages on ‘proper’ gender roles and behavior promoted by the films. Although none of the studies conducted so far points to a clear link between so-called ‘princess culture’ and low self-esteem, there is, according to Orenstein, “ample evidence that the more mainstream media girls consume, the more importance they place on being pretty and sexy” (ibid:16). Such findings merely highlight the fact that even (or, perhaps, especially) ‘good clean fun’ requires close critical scrutiny, especially when it appears under the guise of entertainment or, worse, (quasi)feminism.

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Theme IV: Gender and Contemporary Media Chapter 32

Elle, au printemps: the Bildungsroman of an Immigrant Girl

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Madagascar

Many readers of Michèle Rakotoson's *Elle, au printemps* (1996) celebrate this short novel for its realistic description of the somehow stereotypical Malagasy experience of immigration to France. Yet, seen from a different angle, the novel is essentially a rich exploration of a girl's *Bildungsroman*². The particularity of this journey is that it occurs in a cross-cultural context: it begins as the heroine, Sahondra, leaves her homeland, Madagascar, and ends in France, the country where she settles down. An analysis of the writer's use of representational devices enables us to trace the trajectory of this cross-cultural journey towards visibility.

The theme of female journey in novels written by women has been the subject of myriads of books and articles these last three decades. The most significant of them is *The Voyage in: Fictions of Female Development*, which synthesizes the major features of the female *Bildungsroman*. According to the editors of this book, narratives of female journey can take two patterns. The first pattern consists in a chronological apprenticeship which relates "the attempts of a sensitive protagonist to learn the nature of the world, discover its meanings and pattern, and acquire a philosophy of life." (Rosowski 49) According to this first pattern, the trajectory of the female journey is linear in so far as the journey somehow ends in "maturity [...] and the possibilities of transformation offered by individual choices". Conversely, in the second pattern, the direction of the journey is circular: even though the female figure may experience growth, her journey ends where it started. As Mary Rosowski says, it

follows what is becoming a pattern in literature by and about women: movement is inward, toward greater self-knowledge that leads in turn to a revelation of the disparity between that self-knowledge and the nature of the world. The protagonists' growth results typically in [...] a realization that for a woman such an art of living is difficult or impossible: it is an awakening to limitations. (49)

One important point that has to be mentioned is that in spite of the differences between the texts they are dealing with, the writers in this collection present some major common points as far as the features of female journeys are concerned. All put emphasis on "repressive environmental factors, on the process of disillusionment necessary for personality change and maturity, and on the possibilities of transformation [...]" (Feng 9). The trajectory of female journey, which can be circular or linear, is normally determined by whether the female character experiences (or does not experience) growth, and on the form such growth takes.

One important detail concerning the novels studied in *The Voyage in: Fictions of Female Development* is that they portray mostly Western female characters. Therefore, even though the theory it puts forward is enlightening, it elicits in the reader an important question on whether female journeys in novels might have other features, especially when they belong to different contexts. In other words, does the journey of a girl from the Third World follow the same trajectory as that of a Western girl? The aim of this paper is to show how an immigrant girl becomes visible in a post-colonizer culture³, and to determine the trajectory of that journey.

¹ Michèle Rakotoson is one of the most prominent figures in contemporary Malagasy literature written in French. She is well-known for her plays such as *Sambany* (1980) and has won several literary prizes, including the prestigious Prix de Madagascar.

² The Bildungsroman is a literary genre which focuses on the psychological, spiritual or physical development of a character from childhood or adolescence into adulthood, through a troubled quest for identity (Baldick 24)

³ Madagascar was a French colony from 1896 to 1960. After independence, the relationship between the two countries has always been alive. French is the language of education and many Malagasy students go to France for higher education.

Before that, however, an overview of the plot might be necessary.

Elle, au Printemps relates the story of Sahondra, a Malagasy girl who is tired of the harsh living conditions in Antananarivo and decides to continue her studies in France. Her French pen friend, Marie, has greatly encouraged Sahondra to make the decision to move, and has made the promise to help her once the latter is in France. Thus, Sahondra gathers all the money she needs, gets her papers ready and boards on the plane for Paris. Sahondra lands in France on a cold morning and the anxiety she felt on the plane is heightened by the fact that Marie has not come to meet her at the airport. Sahondra is thus left alone in a place where she is a complete stranger. Her stay in France thus turns out into a terrible struggle to find a home, to get registered at the university, to find her friend Marie, in a few words, to survive in a new and hostile environment. The novel ends with a sense of closure: even though Sahondra has not found her friend Marie, she has got a new one and a home and feels ready to stay in France no matter what happens.

The beginning of Sahondra's journey, that is to say her arrival in the new country, is characterized by her experience of alienation which is expressed by a feeling of inexistence or of being nobody. Such a situation is literally and symbolically represented in the novel. As soon as she arrives at Paris airport, Sahondra is overwhelmed by a feeling of being transparent, as if she was invisible. When it is her turn to present her papers to the customs officer at the immigration desk, Sahondra is hurt when "*le douanier [... lui indiquait] la sortie d'un coup de tête, sans même la regarder.*" (30) [the customs officer showed her the way out with a movement of his head, without even looking at her] The fact that the customs officer does not deign to look at her for a second can be interpreted as a refusal to consider her as an interlocutor, and therefore as a human being.

This feeling of invisibility is reinforced when she is in the streets of Paris, looking for an information desk, and nobody is willing to talk to her or even to look at her:

personne ne la regardait. Elle eut une impression atroce, celle de ne pas exister, d'être là dans le décor, sans même être un élément du décor, personne ne se tournait vers elle ... [ils] regardèrent ailleurs ... mais

jamais dans les yeux. (34) [nobody looked at her. She had the atrocious impression of not existing, of being present; without even being an element of the setting, nobody turned to her ... [they] looked away ... but never in the eyes.]

Here the sense of being nobody is heightened as Sahondra feels ignored. She is aware of the state of being present but she cannot make her presence felt, on the contrary she is considered as absent. The pervading silence and emptiness of the environment strengthens the feeling of absence that Sahondra experiences. Once she is on the plane, "*le silence régnait*" (21) [silence was dominant]. Later on, in Paris, what strikes Sahondra about the residential areas is that they are empty: "*c'était un vide profond ... Rien ne respirait une vie quelconque*" (42) [It was profound emptiness ... Nothing gave a sign of life whatsoever.] In a few words, the silent setting puts emphasis on the idea of nothingness which is felt by the heroine.

On a more symbolic level, the alienation experienced by the immigrant girl is represented through the house metaphor in *Elle, au printemps*. In fact, throughout literary history, the house has been a source of meaning and inspiration. Women writers in particular

have used this metaphor in order to define and articulate the (female) self in relation to the larger community. [In] Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, [...] the house that the heroine seeks to possess reveals the "ugliness" of the culture which she wants to enter in light of its association with the ideas of power and appropriation. (Herrera)

Faithful to this tradition, Michèle Rakotoson subtly associates the house where Sahondra lives and her place in the French community. One of Sahondra's major struggles when in Paris indeed consists in finding a house. She finds a temporary place to stay with some remote family members. The management of space in this house as well as its general description are significant details. From outside, the first striking aspect Sahondra notices of the house is that:

Rien ne filtrait des volets mi-clos, rien ne se voyait de ce qui se passait derrière les rideaux, car non seulement les vitres étaient fermées, mais elles étaient rendues encore plus opaques par ces rideaux bien épais. (42) [Nothing can be seen through the half open

shutters or the curtains, because not only were the window-panes closed but they were also made more opaque by the really thick curtains.]

The first impression one has of the place where Sahondra is going to stay is that of inaccessibility. Every element, namely shutters, window-panes and curtains have only one function: to block the gaze which is the only possible means of contact with the exterior. Such a configuration is a clear indication that access to the house is difficult.

As a matter-of-fact, convincing the host to let her in is not an easy task for Sahondra but eventually, seeing her tears, her French nephew accepts welcome her. It is then that the reader has an insight into the interior of the house:

l'appartement était prévu pour quatre personnes ... ils se retrouvèrent à douze ... enfin treize, avec Sahondra, treize donc, dans soixante-dix mètres carrés (51) [the flat was meant for four people ... they were twelve ... or thirteen, with Sahondra, so thirteen, within seventy square kilometers]

In such a small space, Sahondra obviously does not have a room of her own, to borrow Virginia Woolf's term. She has to sleep on the floor in the living room with many other people, and has to leave the place during the day. In a few words, Sahondra's abode reflects her place in the host society at the beginning of her journey: almost inexistent, constrained, and marginal. Thus, Sahondra's journey begins negatively as it is marked by invisibility.

However, as *Elle, au printemps* is a novel about migration, it essentially implies movement. According to theorists, the migratory journey means first and foremost "people moving from one situation to another" (Lemke 132). Sahondra's journey does not end with her alien status. Towards the middle of the novel, she faces a new situation.

In her critical essay on Diaspora aesthetics, Sieglinde Lemke argues that the migratory journey implies "moments of transition" (132). For her, those moments are finely represented through the motif of "crossings" in art. The most recurrent symbols related to this motif are "crossroads, bus stations, and train stations" (Lemke 132)

A system of symbols related to crossing is deployed to represent the act of moving from one stage to

another in *Elle, au printemps*. The novel is indeed fraught with references to mazes, crossroads and train stations. One of the most important events in Sahondra's journey is when she tries to find her way in the Parisian train station, Gare du Nord. (82). She refers to it as to a maze when she asks herself: "*Comment se débrouillait-on bien dans ce labyrinthe?*" [How can one manage within this labyrinth?] The labyrinth in question is the whole network of train and metro stations that she has to understand so as to find the right train that will take her to Valenciennes, her final destination. It is significant that she uses the labyrinth image as it is the representation par excellence of the act of choosing the right path and of struggling in order to reach the desired destination. Doesn't that image briefly but aptly capture the migrant girl's journey?

Sahondra's moment of transition is also symbolically delineated through the recurrent motif of the crossroad. What she notices as she reaches the Valenciennes train station is that it is: "*un chemin de fer accessible à tout le monde, brassage de foule et d'argent, sortie de l'isolement, départ et ailleurs*" (95) [railroad accessible to everybody, intermingling of people and money, the end of isolation, departure and the elsewhere] Sahondra literally and symbolically finds herself in a crossroad: the place where she is is the junction where people move from one situation to another. For an immigrant like her, it is where "isolation" or alienation ends, where people and culture are going to mix. The reference to departure and the elsewhere is also noteworthy: it alludes to a future which is not yet clear but certain.

The function of the intermediary phase is indeed to prepare Sahondra to face this next phase, the future, the "elsewhere". As she is crossing the countryside to go to Valenciennes, she realizes that

Il fallait maintenant que Sahondra affronte l'ailleurs, un ailleurs sur lequel elle avait déjà essayé de mettre des images, un ailleurs qui l'effrayait un peu, où elle aurait à vivre. (90) [Sahondra now had to face the elsewhere, one to which she had associated certain images, one which frightened her, where she was going to live.]

This passage is an accurate expression of part of the immigrant experience in so far as it shows that before getting to the endpoint of the journey, one

needs to go through a moment of transition which corresponds to preparation. For Sahondra, the preparation is here mental. The final phase of the journey means entering the “elsewhere” or becoming part of French society.

The final question that this paper aims to answer is what is the endpoint of the immigrant girl’s *Bildungsroman* and what kind of growth does she undergo? In *Elle, au printemps*, the final stage of Sahondra’s outer journey is reaching the place where she is supposed to meet her French friend. As said earlier, Sahondra got the idea of moving to France thanks to her pen pal. She thought that her stay there was going to be possible because she was going to be with that friend. Now that she is in the city where Marie lives, Valenciennes; geographically, Sahondra has reached her final destination.

This major event in her outer journey corresponds to an inner one: visibility or adjustment to and integration within French society. As seen earlier, Sahondra’s alienation is expressed through her sense of being nobody. The writer also uses the house metaphor to portray such exclusion. Similarly, at the end of the novel, her portrayal of the heroine’s integration within the host society is based on the same devices, namely the use of speech and the gaze, as well as the house metaphor.

At the beginning of her stay in Paris, right at the airport, Sahondra feels transparent because nobody looks at her. Now, for the first time in Valenciennes, she is heartened by the fact that she is looked at and seen by a French man: “*cet homme qui était là à la regarder*” (120) [this man who was there to watch her]. More importantly, she manages to break the silence that she has been in since the beginning of her journey. For the first time during her stay in France, Sahondra dares to speak freely in front of French people, about a subject she has never talked about, her country of origin: “*Elle se mit à parler, elle qui s’était tue toutes ces semaines, elle se mit à parler de son pays ... pour être entendue.*” (85) [She started to speak, she who was silent all those weeks, she started to talk about her country ... so as to be heard.] And indeed, people pay attention to what she says: “*elle avait parlé haut et fort, à dessein. Elle était écoutée maintenant ... Ils l’écoutaient quasiment tous.*” (86) [intentionally she spoke up: she was now heard ... They were almost all listening to her.]

The act of speaking and being heard here has two levels of significance for Sahondra. First of all, it means she is in contact with the outside world. It goes without saying that language is communication, and even though it does not take the form of exchange here as nobody is answering; at least it is a sign that she is in touch with society, that she exists and is therefore a member of that society. Secondly, the act of speaking the language of the former colonizer, for a post-colonized is significant. According to Gillian Gorle, using the language of the colonizer is a form of power (192). Referring to Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*, she asserts that being able to use English, the imperial language, means for the characters being “within reach of greater freedom and choice.” (192) For Sahondra, the use of French is power in so far as it represents appropriation of the imperial language, and therefore means access to the sphere of French people.

The ultimate expression of Sahondra’s integration within French society is her new dwelling. In fact, the relationship between the heroine’s house and her place in society has already been mentioned. Earlier in the novel, Sahondra’s house is the reflection of her marginality. Conversely, her abode is now the symbol of her integration. When in Valenciennes, she is given shelter by a friend who lives in an apartment. Even though his place is not spacious, a tangible sense of welcoming and accommodation emanates from its space management and furniture disposition:

Pour pouvoir faire le lit de Sahondra, ils avaient dû empiler dans un coin livres et journaux. Le living ressemblait maintenant à un immense campement. Une fois ouvert, le canapé occupait toute la chambre, laissant juste un passage à son hôte s’il avait à se lever la nuit. (115) [In order to make Sahondra’s bed, they had to pile the books and newspaper in a corner. The living room now resembled a huge camping site. Once open, the sofa bed took up all the space in the room, leaving just a way for the host in case he woke up at night]

In order to make room for Sahondra, the host makes a symbolic compromise. First of all he accepts to move his belongings, to let his guest use his furniture and to lose some of his space and comfort so that Sahondra can have some. More importantly, not only does Sahondra feel comfortable, but she also has more of the usable space than her host does.

The idea of integration is further reinforced as Sahondra “*se sentit presque chez elle ... à Madagascar au pays de la lenteur, des gestes lents et doux, paisibles.*” (120) [felt almost home, in Madagascar, a place of nonchalance, gentle, slow and peaceful gestures.] The feeling of being home is the clearest sign of comfort, adjustment and integration. It marks the annihilation of all forms of exclusion and barriers. Unsurprisingly, this passage appears at the end of the novel and thus marks the end of the heroine’s journey.

Before concluding, a clearer formulation of the answers to the questions raised earlier might be important at this point. Firstly, Sahondra’s journey reveals that the process of becoming visible for an immigrant girl is made possible because of two main factors: on the one hand the girl’s willingness to have access to and understanding of the host society and on the other hand, the host society’s openness. Secondly, in order to become visible, the immigrant girl goes through three stages: alienation, transition and integration. It can thus be asserted that the trajectory of the immigrant girl is linear. In this sense, *Elle, au Printemps* presents a new and subversive representation of female journey because it appropriates a typically masculine and Western trajectory.

This reading of *Elle, au printemps* has shed light on a different conception of the female *Bildungsroman*, that of the immigrant girl. Sahondra’s journey is characterized by three stages, alienation, transition and integration. The first part of the novel shows such alienation through the gaze and the house metaphor. The next phase, transition, which is much more elusive and abstract, is symbolically represented in the novel. The last point of the journey corresponds to her integration and her visibility which are shown through her sense of comfort and changing relationship to space. The meaning of the title, *Elle, au printemps*⁴ is now clearer: Elle, refers to Sahondra, the heroine who gets her place in a typically Western space embodied by *printemps*.

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⁴ Printemps, or spring is a season that, culturally, does not really exist in Madagascar where there are only two distinct seasons: summer and winter. Therefore, printemps is typically a Western notion.