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# *Girling in liminal spaces:*

## Schooling and the constitution of young femininity

"If you call a guy a slut it kind of sounds funny and people laugh it off and stuff but if you call a girl one..."

(Susanna)

"You call them a 'man whore' ...Like, I've been at a party and people have come up to me and been like 'oh, don't go near that guy 'cos he's a slut, he just like, goes out and parties and kisses everyone'."

(Ruby)

This extract from a conversation among students attending an elite girls' school in Melbourne is a playful exploration of ways of understanding masculinity and femininity. It is a direct engagement with what has been called 'the sexual double standard' (Milhausen, 1999) and the extent to which the label 'slut' might carry the same rancour when applied to men as it does when applied to women. The conversation utilises cultural politics, or, as Barker and Galasinski put it, "the struggle over 'naming' and the power to redescribe ourselves" (2001, p. 56). Ruby draws on her experience of being at a party in this exploration and articulation of gendered identity.

In this paper I consider the spaces and places upon which a group of young women attending an elite girls' school in Melbourne draws whilst talking about gender and sexuality. 'Lyla Girls' Grammar School'<sup>1</sup> (LGGS) is situated in the South-Eastern

<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms are used throughout this article to protect the anonymity of the school and its students.

suburbs of Melbourne. This paper draws on a study of the intersection of various ideas about 'girl power' at LGGS and the extent to which cultural politics is mobilised in this environment in order to stimulate discussion around gender and sexuality. Part of my research methodology involved team-teaching a Year 10 English class for eight weeks toward the end of 2004. During this time I undertook small group interviews with students outside the classroom in order to extend some of the activities we had undertaken. I will draw on three interviews in this paper. The first two involved a group of five students and lasted approximately 30 minutes each. The third involved one student and lasted about ten minutes.

I engage Bettis and Adams' (2005) use of the term 'liminal spaces' to suggest that the young women draw on recollections from disparate spaces and places in constructing accounts of gender and sexuality. Drawing on Judith Butler I contend that these recollections constitute important 'girling' events, in which their young female identities were shaped in relation to other gendered identities. The weaving of these recollections into the conversations continues the 'girling' process, and thus, the articulation of young female identities within schooling.

I will begin by explaining Bettis and Adams' concept of liminal spaces, and their role in the shaping of youthful femininities. I will then show how the students drew on liminal spaces in discussion, recollecting significant 'girling' events in their lives – events where their identities were shaped and positioned in relation to other gendered identities. I will argue that the complexity of the girling process complicates the notion that educators can simply mobilise a culturally political interrogation of gender and sexuality in school spaces. I will conclude the article by briefly considering the implications of this for broader constructions of educators as 'purveyors' of values and knowledges.

## Liminal spaces and 'girling' events

The places or spaces drawn upon during the student conversations are as follows: The streets between school and home, public transport between school and home (trains and trams), public transport stops, building sites near home, parties, school excursions, television shows (CSI), the races, the LGGS toilets, previous schools attended, going out at night, Amsterdam, Nepal, Hong Kong, China, India, Port Douglas, St Kilda, Caulfield, Broadmeadows, and a regional city in North-East Victoria. These disparate locations indicate the significance of space and place in the shaping of identity. The places or spaces drawn upon by the students vary across recognisable and fixed geographical 'places', such as Amsterdam, transient places or spaces such as public transport, and more abstract 'spaces' such as 'going out at night'

or 'parties'.

I have found Bettis and Adams' (2005) discussion of 'liminal spaces' generative in thinking about the sites drawn upon in my conversations with the LGGS students. "It is the in-between spaces and places found within and outside the formal domain of schools", they write, "that we believe to be central to how girls make sense of themselves" (p. 5).

They use the concept of liminality in three ways, and it is the third that I primarily wish to draw on here. Firstly, they suggest that adolescence can be conceptualised as a liminal space, "a period of time distinct from childhood and adulthood" (p. 7). Secondly, they consider contemporary definitions of normative femininity to be "in a liminal state with the old markers of normative girlhood such as prettiness alongside the new markers of assertiveness and independence" (p. 10). Thirdly, they suggest that the materiality of schools include liminal spaces in which adolescents are given opportunities to recreate themselves. "Thus hallways, bathrooms, lunchrooms", they write, "...can become kid spaces in which they can exert their power at least temporarily" (p. 11).

Bettis and Adams consider these liminal spaces as central to girls' discussions and negotiations of identity. They argue that:

*Girls and young women desire to be engaged in identity work, work that allows them the opportunity to articulate who they are and who they want to become. This type of work is done in schools, but on the margins of the classrooms, in the lunchrooms, and crammed into the four minutes between classes. It needs to be pulled out of the playgrounds, the backseats of buses, chats on the Internet, and the hallways of schools and made central to the curriculum so that girls may more thoughtfully and critically consider how they are becoming female (p. 279).*

The spaces drawn upon by the LGGS students cannot all be conceptualised as 'liminal' in the sense that Bettis and Adams use the term. It is clear that the spaces brought into the classroom by these girls extend beyond the 'liminal' spaces within and around the school grounds into the wider local and global geography.

It is in these spaces that important 'girling' events occur, in which young women's gendered identities are shaped and articulated. By 'girling' I mean the performative constitution of femininity. I draw on Judith Butler's work on performativity (1993, 1997, 1999a, 1999b) to inform this concept. In short, the notion of 'girling' implies that femininity is something that we 'do', rather than something we simply 'possess'. As a verb it implies action and a sense that girling is an ongoing, unfinished process. It is important

to note here that this does not simply mean we can 'do' femininity in whatever way we like, or that we always 'do' femininity willfully and consciously. Butler reminds us that "[t]he performative is not merely an act used by a pre-given subject, but is one of the powerful and insidious ways in which subjects are called into social being, inaugurated into sociality by a variety of diffuse and powerful interpellations" (1999b, p. 125). I am conceptualising the liminal and disparate spaces as a series of 'diffuse and powerful interpellations', which the girls weave into the conversations.

Sandy's family came from a regional city in North-Eastern Victoria where they owned a farm. She was a blonde, tanned and very sporty student who had achieved recognition for her involvement in school skiing. She makes a reference to playing tennis at home during one of the conversations:

**Sandy:** I used to play tennis and this group of boys used to sit up on the grandstand and yell stuff out and it was like I was going to quit tennis because they made me feel really uncomfortable...

**Claire:** Oh really? Was this in Melbourne?

**Sandy:** No, back at home.

Ruby was a tall, dark-haired student who, along with Clara (Anglo-Australian), had tanned skin that sometimes appeared to be artificial, and wore dark eyeliner. She and Clara both mentioned going to parties in the conversation and Ruby drew on her experiences of traveling between home and school:

**Ruby:** I had these builders down my street and every time I'd walk past they'd yell out 'sexy' and stuff and I have no idea how but one of them yelled out 'Ruby' and it was the weirdest thing ever and I actually did not walk past that street until they finished building because I was so scared, they did it twice and it was like... the scariest thing ever.

In these instances Sandy's experience playing tennis and Ruby's experience of walking along her street position them in relation to the boys and the builders who are yelling out and intimidating them. Both are 'interpellated' within these spaces as young women, subject to surveillance and intimidation when in contact with that space and the males who occupy it. As Butler would have it, our subjective agency in fact only exists because we

are brought into intelligibility by a number of social, cultural and institutional practices that 'do' gender 'to us' in a sense, mobilising our bodies and utterances through discursive frames that exist beyond us. "I can only say 'I'", she writes, "to the extent that I have first been addressed, and that address has mobilised my place in speech" (1993, p. 225). Sandy and Ruby bring these girling events into the present space of the classroom, illuminating the way in which **classroom articulations of self draw on diffuse girling events from previous times and places.**

## Articulating 'appropriate' femininities

Gill's family lived in Hong Kong and she herself spent time there frequently. She wasn't a particularly motivated student academically (compared with what was expected at LGGS) and was frequently reprimanded by the class teacher during the time I was at the school for not submitting work. She was an attention seeker and was often reprimanded during class time for talking and distracting her peers with objects such as her notebook computer, or school diary. Her long chestnut brown hair always hung loosely around her shoulders and she didn't appear to engage in as many 'preening' activities as some of the other girls. Yet she often policed the appearance of other young women, drawing on her experiences in Hong Kong to do so:

**Gill:** Some school uniforms are, like there's schools in Hong Kong. Their shirts are really tight like literally they'd be like this and then their skirts are like these really short little beige things, I don't even know if you could call it a skirt because, yeah it's disgusting like...

**Claire:** Why is it disgusting?

**Gill:** Because, girls walk around, and it's just like 'are you wearing anything?' and like the whole point of school is learning and like respect and everything and then they go and wear practically





nothing to school.

Here Gill unashamedly polices the boundaries of what constitutes 'acceptable' femininity within a school context. She is not the only student to draw on an outside space toward this purpose. Elise was interviewed alone for a few minutes during class one day. She was a blonde Anglo-Australian and had moved to LGGS that year from a regional co-educational independent school. She constructed herself as slightly 'alternative', making a point of telling me on my first day in the classroom that she was into 'Big Day Out' kind of music and had been raised in 'a political family'. She too polices the boundaries of 'acceptable' femininity in a school environment, drawing on her experiences in different school settings, and in particular, the ritual she has observed of applying makeup in the LGGS school toilets, which she describes as "all a bit stupid":

**Claire:** You mentioned that you went to a co-ed school before here?

**Elise:** Yeah, I came to Lyla this year.

**Claire:** Oh, only this year. Where did you go before that?

**Elise:** Oh, I came from [regional co-ed private school].

**Claire:** And you mentioned that when you were there girls didn't wear makeup as much.

**Elise:** Not at all [emphatically].

**Claire:** And you thought that was quite interesting.

**Elise:** I thought that was exceptionally interesting, because I came here and I thought why are people looking like *Barbie* when they've got no-one to impress?

The use of liminal spaces by Gill and Elise constructs particular ways of being female in negative terms. Kath Albury (2002) notes a failure within feminism, and in general, to accept representations of feminine 'display':

*The feminist attitude that queer theorist Emily Apter (1998) calls gynophobia condemns 'feminine' display as stupid, bad or slutish. Within the gynophobic framework, female sexual display is considered both a foolish weakness and a perverse collaboration with the enemy... Just as some men see femininity as a weakness, many women see feminine looks or behaviour as evidence of vanity, passivity, manipulateness or stupidity (p. xi).*

Elise's gynophobic response also underscores an assumption of

heterosexuality, as her comments do not include the possibility that these girls may be looking like *Barbie* to impress each other. The fact that there are no males at LGGS, for Elise, is reason to construct this behaviour as unnecessary. Thus the LGGS toilets become a significant space in which girling events occur – events in which young female subjectivities are articulated through citing and mobilising a discourse of gynophobia. Upon entering this space Elise's identity is shaped in relation to the young women from whom she seeks to distance herself.

## Articulations of class

Sandy and Ruby are interpellated in relation to males in their girling events. Gill and Elise, however, are interpellated in relation to other young women. Gill reports of being under the surveillance of two young women at the tram stop outside her school. She is quick to return this policing back on them, articulating her class privilege in relation to the places that arise in her interactions with these young women:

**Gill:** ...the other day when I was on the tram with [her boyfriend] like these two girls were waiting at the tram stop and they were looking at me ...and then she told us not to go to Broadmeadows and we're like "yeah, we go there all the time!" [sarcastically].

**Ruby:** Broadmeadows? [incredulously].

**Claire:** Did they appear to be well dressed?

**Gill:** No they were really trashy like they were wearing tight pants and then like way too tight tops and you could see like it was sort of like coming out... But the reason that I thought maybe they were doing that was because like maybe they don't have a lot of money and... or education or something...

Here the liminal space of the tram stop mobilises a girling event in which further articulations of place in relation to identity occur. Gill draws on the outer Melbourne suburb of Broadmeadows in her account of herself in relation to the young women at the tram stop. Constructing them in a negative light she seeks to undermine their 'trashy' appearance and behaviour. The suburb of Broadmeadows shapes Gill's articulation of her own eliteness, in relation to the other young women.

**The liminal spaces host girling events in which the LGGS young women's identities are articulated.** The entrance of these spaces into the classroom sometimes appeared to shore up the very notions of femininity that I hoped to destabilise. Gill's



description of school-girls in Hong Kong as 'gross' and 'disgusting', because they wore short skirts and tight shirts to school, for example, works to consolidate the idea that 'acceptable' ways of being female are constrained by propriety, or, as she calls it, 'respect'. Similarly, Elise's description of the application of makeup in the toilets during class breaks as "all a bit stupid", and questioning the need for such bodily adornment when there is "no one to impress" in a girls' school does not indicate an openness to multiple ways of being a young female, especially whilst at school.

## Culturally political girling?

The liminal spaces disrupted my 'agenda' as an educator, which was the destabilisation and contestation of confining ideas about gender and sexuality. As a researcher, however, I am excited by the insight they have provided in relation to the girling process and its relationship to girling in school contexts. The girls' conversations seem to speak to Butler's idea that the girling process is fragmented, diffuse and unpredictable. It cannot be thought of in terms of a straightforward framework whereby discourse "acts in a singular and deterministic way to produce a subject as its effect" (Butler, 1993, p. 8). In other words, one's identity as a 'girl' is not determined in a singular moment of interpellation. The liminal spaces can be understood as diffuse girling 'events' that shaped the students' immediate accounts of gender and sexuality. The conversations constitute a conglomerate in which multiple girling events from disparate times and places overlap and intersect each other. By drawing on these liminal spaces in conversation the LGGS students utilised them toward further articulations of self with respect to gender and sexuality, thus continuing the 'girling' process.

The role of place in the way these young women make sense of themselves and others complicates the possibilities of what educators might do in the classroom in terms of utilising cultural politics toward the destabilisation of confining ideas about gender and sexuality. Just as girling is a performative process, so too is cultural politics, in that, it cannot simply 'happen' at an educator's will. **The 'girling' process sheds light on the complications involved in any simplistic construction of educators as purveyors of values and knowledges.** The unpredictable configuration of liminal girling spaces within school contexts reminds me of the futility of reducing teaching to what Giroux (2000) describes as the role of a "technician engaged in formalistic rituals" (p. 140); whether these rituals be for the purposes of achieving state sanctioned benchmarks, or for the purposes of utilising cultural politics toward dismantling heteronormativity.

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