



*I'M GONNA MAKE YOU LOOK WEIRD:
PRETEEN GIRLS' SUBVERSIVE GENDER PLAY*

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Abstract

Despite widespread argument that contemporary girls are limited by the boundaries of normative femininity and negatively influenced by patriarchal and overly sexualized images of females in Western cultures, a growing number of ethnographic accounts of girl culture suggest that girls often subvert, resist, and transgress normative/iconic femininity and undo gender limitations and taboos. These observations, which are supported by Judith Butler's theory of gender as performance and her concept of gender parody in particular, frame my exploration of preadolescent girls' subversive gender play as manifested through caricature drawing² and consuming alternative products that enable the crossing of gender boundaries. These girls' cultural productions and participation offer localized and nuanced understandings of how dominant gender ideas are challenged and disrupted, and how such disruption blurs the boundaries between the personal and the political.

1. I adopt Judith Butler's (1990) notion of the subversive bodily acts as related to femininity. These acts are mundane performances and gestures that disobey established sociocultural norms of feminine appearance and behavior. Butler considers gender parody as most conspicuous of such subversive acts due to its carnivalesque effect.

2. Here I refer to caricature drawing as an intentional exaggeration and distortion of essential visual traits of a person's graphic portrayal.

As an 11-year-old at a residential summer camp, I was invited to participate in a drama contest to reenact the ending of a classic Cinderella story. When all the boys declined to play the prince (perhaps to avoid embarrassment), I, one of the few girls with short hair, willingly took on this role, donning the princely costume and pretending, for the first time in my life, to be a male. To my great satisfaction, my peers saw this novel cross-dressing act as cool, while the cute long-haired Cinderella appeared merely typical. On stage, I therefore became a comedic character, going down on one knee to propose to the fictional Cinderella, stifling my laughter, hiding my face in my sleeve, almost ruining the entire scene, and yet receiving applause from the audience. Quite unexpectedly, I turned a classic tale into a parodic performance simply by adopting a male role. Such moments of transgressing femininity—from cross-dressing to tomboyish talk to production of grotesque gender images—do exist in a seemingly uniform girls' culture inhabited by skinny dolls, cute ponies, pink clothes, and ladylike gestures. As Barrie Thorne (1993) asserted after 12 months of observing children's gender manifestations in elementary schools, “[g]ender boundaries have a shifting presence, but when evoked, they are accompanied by stylized forms of action, a sense of performance, [and] mixed and ambiguous meanings” with heterosexual meanings “lurk[ing] within other definitions” (p. 66).

Nonetheless, it has been widely argued that girls are severely limited and even oppressed by the rigid boundaries of normative femininity, as well as by the patriarchal and overly sexualized portrayals of females in Western cultures (Durham, 2009; Griffin, 2004; Lamb & Brown, 2007; Levine & Kilbourne, 2009). Indeed, the female body is monitored, fetishized, aestheticized, and objectified via the media and other cultural products and discourses. Thus, Aapola, Gonick, and Harris (2005) claimed that from an early age, today's girls are routinely encouraged “to relate to their bodies as objects that exist for the use and aesthetic pleasure of others, and to work on the improvement of their appearance” (pp. 136–137). Similarly, Christine Griffin (2004) argued that the bodies of preteen and teenage girls are often constructed as objects of male gaze in need of improvement through the fashion, makeup, and hair styling techniques presented in girls' magazines and other popular cultural texts

created for girls' consumption.

On the other hand, a growing number of ethnographic accounts of girls' culture—particularly those grounded in third-wave feminist theories³—have challenged and questioned this widespread assumption that girls' passively internalize cultural norms and values (Bae, 2009; Cahill et al., 2004; Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2009; Ivashkevich, 2009; Leblanc, 1999; Raby, 2006; Rand, 1995; Reid-Walsh & Mitchell, 2000). Rather, as Forman-Brunell and Roberts (2001) emphasized, girls' culture needs to be recognized as “the rebellious culture that girls make themselves through innovation and imagination” and by transforming existing cultural texts and artifacts created for girls' consumption (p. 325).

The rebelliousness and subversiveness of girls' culture is particularly visible when studying femininity in the making, “the micro level of everyday gender dynamics” (Currie et al., 2009, p. 186), which reveals the diversity and ambiguity of girls' consumption of products, images, and messages. For example, some studies on girls' Barbie doll play have suggested that rather than being simply an iconic object that conveys rigid standards of beauty, Barbie often serves as a “producerly” popular text (Fiske, 1997, p. 103) open to resignification by the players. Reid-Walsh and Mitchell (2000) illustrated this dynamic using an autobiographical account by a political scientist of her own and her friend's childhood Barbie play as a deliberate escape from conventional domestic scenarios. For these girls, growing up in suburban upper class neighborhood of stay-at-home mothers, Barbie opened up a “universe of other possibilities” (p. 182). Indeed, Rand (1995), drawing on her series of interviews with women about their childhood Barbie play, provided even more provocative accounts of mutilating, cross-dressing, and queering the doll.

3. Building upon earlier feminist ideas that mainly focused on women's political and socioeconomic rights and gender equality, post-1990s feminist scholarship which is often referred to as “third-wave,” attempts to challenge the essentialist definitions of femininity and the feminine/masculine binary. Third-wave scholars recognize the ambiguity of gender and power, embrace diverse feminist ideas and responses by marginalized populations (e.g., women and girls of color, people of non-traditional sexual orientation, and economically disadvantaged), and focus on the micro-politics and subjectivities of gender performance.

The complexity of such resistance to normative femininity by minority girls has been uncovered by Michelle Bae's (2009) longitudinal research with a Korean adolescent girl residing in the U.S. Most particularly, this girl's self-initiated digital image remaking of the popular Korean female singer BoA revealed an ambiguous defiance of both “U.S. cultural homogenization and traditional Korean femininity” (p. 181). Likewise, Rebecca Raby's (2006) discursive analysis of a multiracial group of teenage girls' school experiences revealed that these girls' resistance to gender norms is often “hidden and c/overt” and located in the “private spaces of interaction” (p. 153). That is, rather than openly rejecting dominant gender images and stereotypes, the girls tended to “mis-identify” with them by working simultaneously “with and against” these dominant ideas (p. 152). For instance, they took “dominant signs, roles or discourses and then use[d] them in new ways that disrupt the dominant message” (p. 152). As one girl in Raby's study described, she intentionally wore provocative yet not popular/branded clothing and accessories (such as abundant home-made jewelry and ripped shirt) to school to challenge both school expectations and peer definition of “cool.”

Judith Butler's (1990, 2004) theory of gender as performance provides a strong theoretical foundation for feminist ethnographers' findings. Specifically, Butler proposed that gender is not fixed but rather a temporal and contextual construction whose stability and fixity actually stems from a pervasive sociocultural belief that gender correlates with biological sex. According to Butler, an individual is not born but rather becomes a woman. This gender-becoming is manifested through a socially and culturally learned “stylized repetition of acts” such as “bodily gestures, movements, [and] enactments,” which then constitute the “illusion of an abiding gender self” (2004, p. 154). Such daily routine gestures as putting on a dress or makeup, adorning hair, and gazing in the mirror thus constitute the gender performance of being a female, and their continuous repetition (re)enforces the social boundaries of the gendered body, which are monitored via norms and exclusions. As Butler (1990) put it, “what constitutes the limits of the body is never merely material” but rather a socially reinforced “surface,” which is “systematically signified by taboos and anticipated transgressions” (p. 167).

Butler (1990) identified parodic performances—including “drag,

cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities” among others—as particularly revealing of gender as a social and cultural “fabrication” (p. 174). That is, they reveal that the gendered body is nothing more than the style, the fashioned appearance, the (re)presentation. This fabrication in turn exposes the “fluidity of identities”—their openness to “resignification and recontextualization” (p. 176)—as manifested in the “arbitrary relation between [gender] acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity” (p. 155). Furthermore, gender parody stands out among other subversive bodily acts due to its producing a carnivalesque, comical effect.

In this paper, I draw on these concepts to explore the subversive gender performances of preteen girls as manifested in their production of caricature images and their consumption of alternative products that offer possibilities for crossing established gender boundaries. I am particularly interested in the “mundane manner” in which these gender acts are executed (Butler, 2004, p. 159). Yet to date, even though the ethnographic impulse of looking into everyday gender performances by girls is somewhat evident, it remains at the margins of feminist research conducted by academic scholars. Moreover, even though parodic performances by adult women—for example, drag, cross-dressing, and butch/femme stylistic expressions—are well represented in the feminist literature (Halberstam, 1998; Munoz, 1999), more subtle subversive gender acts by adolescent and particularly younger girls remain largely unaddressed. I therefore hope with this research to call attention to these more subtle and often elusive ways in which preadolescent girls undo normative gender constructions.

Unruly Portrayals: Girls’ Transgressive Image Making

My ethnographic 9-month study of two preteen girls’ culture, friendship, and collaborative image making in the contexts of home, school recess, and summer day camp supports and contributes to other feminist ethnographers’ accounts of gender as a fluid and context-specific performance. I have known both girls and their families for several years prior to conducting this study, via a local art camp where I worked as

a counselor. The girls have been good friends who attended the same school and summer program and enjoyed drawing together when the opportunity surfaced. I audio recorded and transcribed all conversations that occurred during our encounters⁴ and took extensive field notes of my observations. 10-year-old Maria⁵ (Caucasian, lower middle class) and Jessie (mixed African American and Caucasian, middle class), routinely used collaborative drawing as a tool for dealing with the cultural pressures of becoming a female, particularly the norms of feminine appearance and behavior. Their friendship was also often complicated by Maria’s concern with her friend’s quest for popularity, preference for brand-name clothing, and preoccupation with maintaining a slim body, all of which rested largely on their socioeconomic differences. Whereas Maria came from a struggling single mother household and often shopped at second-hand stores, Jessie’s family enjoyed greater financial security which enabled her access to expensive products. Importantly, this difference in the girls’ socioeconomic status influenced the way each of them approached gender representations in their drawings. While Maria often demonstrated imaginative flexibility and humor in her female portrayals, Jessie was more concerned with her female characters appearing attractive and neat (yet she was willing to adopt a more playful approach in her drawings following Maria’s lead) (see Figure 1).



Figure 1.

4. I first met with the girls at school recess for an hour a week during the course of five months, and then observed them at summer camp for ten hours a week during the course of two months. I also visited their homes to conduct five in-depth interviews with each girl participant for another two-month period.

5. Pseudonyms are used throughout the paper.

In several of our research encounters, Maria and Jessie crossed and disrupted the boundaries of normative femininity by

adopting the gender parody approach. For example, during our meetings at school recess, when the girls usually ate their lunches and drew in their sketchbooks, they produced a series of caricature drawings depicting each other as vegetables, fruits, and other food-inspired characters, which they initially dubbed the Veggie Girls. This process of image production allowed them to remake the boundaries of the female body and play continuously in between the seemingly rigid dichotomies of pretty/ugly, skinny/fat, and feminine/unfeminine. Their alterations of the representations—for example, the easy shift in caricature from “pretty” to “ugly” and vice versa—plainly revealed the dichotomies as fabrications and rendered open the playful space in between the two (see Figure 2.) In this context, the rules of parodic performance led Maria and Jessie to adopt a fluid, open-ended approach to femininity.



Figure 2.

The first drawing in the Veggie Girls series was sparked by Maria's humorous comments about Jessie's eating too many carrots for lunch:

Maria (singing):
My name is
Jessie, and I'm a little carrot...
[continues in poetic form]:

I have a great sense of style...

I'm a carrot...

And I'm very mild...

I'll draw Jessie the Carrot! As she turns orange... And you can draw me as a broccoli [begins drawing in her sketchbook].

Jessie (agreeing): OK, I'm turning you into broccoli!

Maria: Fine, I'm turning you into a weird... [excitedly] Oh, I'm going to make it weird looking... Yeah, OK, yeah, that's it. I'm gonna make you look weird.

At first, Jessie felt uneasy and even a little offended by her friend's intention to draw her as a “weird-looking” carrot with short legs and arms and a sloppily drawn face with huge lips. Working quietly on her own picture of Maria the Broccoli, she initially attempted to give the character a “proper” female look, one that included well-groomed hair and a sweet face (see Figures 1 and 2). Yet, sensing Maria's invitation to play with the image in a parodic manner, she probed for her friend's reaction by smudging pencil over Broccoli's face and then depicting her body as a simple stem:

Jessie: Hey, Maria, I hope you don't mind all these smudges on your face. Sorry... My fault.

Maria (referring to her drawing): I made her look real scary [adds sunglasses to cover the eyes].

Jessie: Your face is kinda pretty, Maria.

Maria: Yours too. I kind of messed up on the blush, though.

Jessie (offended): But I made you look really pretty, Maria!

Maria: OK, fine. I'm gonna make a gypsy face.

Jessie: A what face?

Maria: A gypsy face, so you cannot see the hair.

Jessie: Your hair is going to look real ugly, but your face is going to be pretty, OK?

Maria (adding the dress): OK, this is kinda gonna look weird...

But it's really a carrot look. It's really what carrots are looking like these days... [making the dress longer to cover Carrot's short legs]. I'm trying to make it pretty, Jessie.

According to the rules of this parodic performance, each girl had to accept and feel comfortable with her own depiction as an imperfect, weird, and even ugly character, and Jessie's insistence on keeping a "pretty" (even if fleeting) dimension in their caricatures was meant to make it easier for her friend to accept a generally unflattering look. This compromise was, therefore, an important point of negotiation for both girls, one in which they agreed on how to go about their subversive explorations and one that led to another caricature drawing only five minutes later.

This time, Maria announced her intention to make Jessie's portrayal "look pretty" and began depicting her friend as a slender-bodied asparagus wearing a long dress and sunglasses. Jessie, on the other hand, began enthusiastically drawing Maria as a full-figured squash. After starting with a cute-looking face similar to that of Maria the Broccoli, Jessie took evident pleasure in deforming Maria's body to resemble a squash-like shape:

Jessie (about her drawing): Your face looks so pretty, Maria...

You have squashy

hair... You have big

thighs, Maria.

Maria: You have the skinniest thighs in the world...

Jessie: It's a fat squash!

Maria: You are like the skinniest asparagus in the world!

In these portrayals, the intended "pretty" look slipped into the unruly realm of vegetable-like female characters with grotesque body shapes, and both girls were visibly enjoying the process of playing with each other's representations in an unrestricted, subversive manner with-

out being hurt by a friend's unflattering rendition.

At our subsequent meetings at school recess, Maria and Jessie continued their parodic explorations by depicting each other as cheese balls, hotdogs, and pineapples (see Figure 3) but unfortunately Maria's portrayals of Jessie were lost at school. In each of these instances, the girls expressed their intention to draw their characters as "pretty" or "beautiful" but then gradually added features that made them "scary," "weird," or even "ugly"—a subversive act from which they derived increasing pleasure with each additional drawing. They also made their drawing activity into a surprise game by hiding the pictures in progress and then revealing the finished images to each other at the very end with the expectation of a strong, mixed reaction from the partner but an anticipation of laughter.

For instance, while drawing each other as pineapples, they had the following conversation:

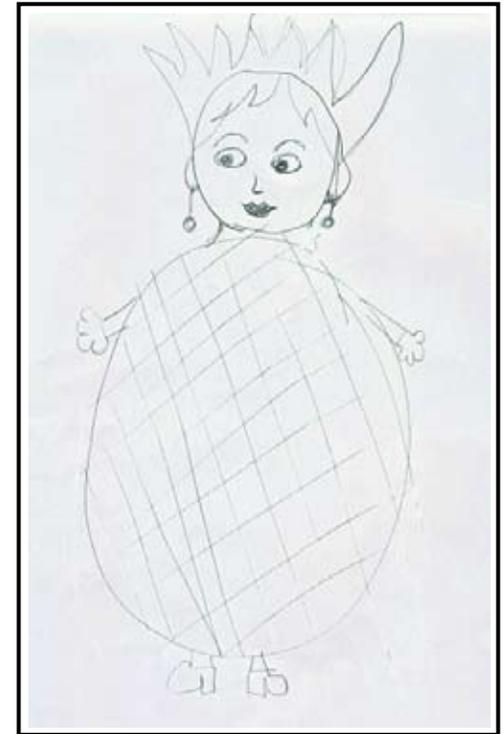


Figure 3.

Maria: Make my hair dorky, OK?

Jessie: So-o-o-ry, Maria. You are rabble... You are rabble, Maria.

Maria (jokingly): That's not a good thing. A rabble pineapple?

Jessie: Yeah, your hair looks like rabble.

Maria: OK, do I look weird?

Jessie: Ne-eh...

Maria: Ugly?

Jessie: Ee-eh...

Maria: Like you?

Jessie: Ne-eh...

Maria: OK, I'm just gonna make you look ugly.

Jessie: You told me to draw you crazy hair!

Maria: OK...

[Maria and Jessie reveal their drawings to each other.]

Maria (with visible pleasure): Oh my goodness, I look scary!

Throughout Maria and Jessie's collaborative drawing and conversation, female appearance became a blurry concept as notions of "pretty" and "ugly/weird" were freed of any rigid boundaries and able to slip in any direction quite unexpectedly. It was therefore both amusing and liberating for the girls to suddenly reveal gender as simply a look, a fashioned appearance that can be rebelliously and subversively altered.

Over the course of my investigation with Maria and Jessie, I noted another interesting use of gender parody, this time based on existing popular imagery rather than original invented characters. One day at summer day camp, Jessie performed an imaginative cross-dressing act

with a black and white picture of Barbie and Ken that the camp counselors had distributed together with other images for coloring. Specifically, she took a box of colored pencils and attempted to transform Barbie into a man and Ken into a woman (see Figure 4). She then complained to several other girls at her table that it is almost impossible to make Barbie look "like



Figure 4.

a boy" and that she looks "too perfect." "Nobody is that perfect in real life," she grumbled. Although this small episode attracted little attention from the other girls in the noisy, hectic environment of the summer camp, it struck me as an openly rebellious and transgressive act that also exposed the temporality and performativity of gender. That is, for Jessie, Barbie was not good enough precisely because she failed to look masculine: she was "too perfect," or overly feminine, to be transformed into a boy. Once again, gender was exposed as an intentionally fabricated construct that can and should be able to be changed, played with, and transgressed when needed.

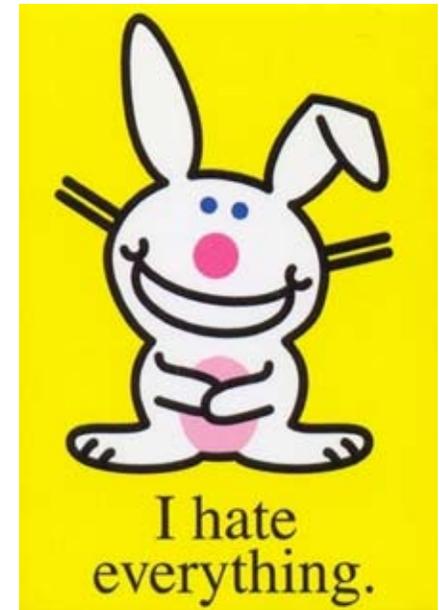


Figure 5.

Jamming a Good Girl with the Happy Bunny

A subversive approach to gender norms is also observable in the girls' choices of the commercial products they consume. These possible choices include a number of alternative product lines such as Hot Topic's Kids Rock clothing, Horvath and Kim's Ugly Dolls toys, and Tim Benton's Happy Bunny merchandise, which all provide both girls and boys with a symbolic means to transgress normative gender boundaries. For example, the Happy Bunny logos are printed on posters, mugs, T-shirts, key chains, and other merchandise with global retail sales exceeding \$200,000 a year. I discovered some of these products when working with my research participant Maria and via my colleague's 11-year-old daughter Ally (see Figure 5). The Happy Bunny logos portray a cute, innocent-looking bunny with an unusually sarcastic, cocky, self-centered, and sometimes blatantly offensive attitude, which undermines the traditional

idea of a good girl as humble, sweet, and nurturing (Aapola et al., 2005; Currie & Kelly, 2006).

According to Currie and Kelly, traditional (White, middle class) femininity requires “good girls” to practice “caretaking and nurturing roles” and suppress “expressions of direct aggression” (p. 157). However, these social expectations are apparently at odds with most Western girls’ lifestyles and the social pressure to be assertive, physically active, and ambitious (Aapola et al., 2005). The Happy Bunny products seem to capture this contemporary girlhood paradox and invite subversive gender play by building upon the discrepancy between bodily appearance and actual performance and revealing appearance as a stylized, fabricated façade that (mis)represents a character’s identity.

Whereas Maria owned three large Happy Bunny posters that read “Hi, loser,” “I’m not listening,” and “It’s all about me, deal with it” (see Figure 6), Ally’s room was filled with dozens of posters, large and small. The girls also each owned a T-shirt, with Maria’s stating “Hi, loser” and Ally’s declaring “Crazy does not even begin to cover it.” In our conversations, Maria admitted especially liking the character’s “sassy attitude” and “sarcasm,” qualities deemed inappropriate for White, middle class femininity. She also claimed that wearing a Happy Bunny T-shirt does not offend her friends because everyone knows that she is “usually nice.” Hence, the logos provide Maria with a safe way to express her rebellious, sassy side without being judged for doing so. Ally described her obsession similarly: “Happy Bunny is sarcastic and funny in a mean sort of way ... I also think Happy Bunny is



Figure 6.

happybunnyroxmysox created a colorful fan webpage on which she wrote

HAPPY BUNNY IS MY FAVORITE CHARACTER EVER!!

...i might be one of the weirdest people you will ever meet. i like oldies. i like slimey tortia. i am a future girl. i can stick my feet be hind my head. you'd be surprised how loud i can scream for such a little mouth. im smart. i love disco music. i hate purfume and shopping for clothes and shoes. NOT A GIRLY GIRL i repeat NOT A GIRLY GIRL!! the only girly thing i like to do is paint my nails...

Apparently, Happy Bunny fans use the character as symbolic capital for constructing an alternative identity to that of the docile, compliant girl. For Ally and happybunnyroxmysox, embracing Happy Bunny also implies resisting the fashion-driven iconic femininity. Thus, although the Happy Bunny fans’ resistance to normative ideas of female appearance and behavior may be hidden in their private bedroom spaces and within online communities, such resistance should be recognized for its potential to challenge, if not erase, the social and cultural dichotomies between “good” and “bad” girl images.

Afterthoughts

These transgressive, rebellious gender performances by preteen girls provide evidence for the contextual fluidity of gender as a social and cultural enactment. Specifically, in the private, covert spaces of their bedrooms and friendships, these girls take visible pleasure in undoing gender limitations and taboos and exploring alternative self-representations. By accepting their own portrayal as “ugly” or “weird” and embracing the cultural symbols of noncompliant femininity, they challenge and transform cultural beliefs about girls and girlhood. Yet to date the feminist literature has paid little attention to such subtle and private forms of resistance because, as Raby (2006) noted, “resistance through style, strategy, and disidentification often seems individualized, private, and fleeting”

(p. 154) and is thus assumed to have minimal potential for broader social action and change. Yet poststructuralist third-wave feminist scholars have called for more localized and nuanced understandings of how dominant gender ideas are challenged and disrupted and how such disruption blurs the boundaries between the personal and the political. Such understandings allow us to see the body as what Butler (1990) called “the surface politics” (p. 173), through which gender is controlled and regulated, but which also evokes a disruptive and unruly response. As Butler (2004) asserted, “Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds” (p. 164).

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