Girls in a Goldfish Bowl
Cultural studies provides an analytical toolbox for both making sense of educational practice and extending the insights of educational professionals into their labors. In this context Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education provides a collection of books in the domain that specify this assertion. Crafted for an audience of teachers, teacher educators, scholars and students of cultural studies and others interested in cultural studies and pedagogy, the series documents both the possibilities of and the controversies surrounding the intersection of cultural studies and education. The editors and the authors of this series do not assume that the interaction of cultural studies and education devalues other types of knowledge and analytical forms. Rather the intersection of these knowledge disciplines offers a rejuvenating, optimistic, and positive perspective on education and educational institutions. Some might describe its contribution as democratic, emancipatory, and transformative. The editors and authors maintain that cultural studies helps free educators from sterile, monolithic analyses that have for too long undermined efforts to think of educational practices by providing other words, new languages, and fresh metaphors. Operating in an interdisciplinary cosmos, Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education is dedicated to exploring the ways cultural studies enhances the study and practice of education. With this in mind the series focuses in a non-exclusive way on popular culture as well as other dimensions of cultural studies including social theory, social justice and positionality, cultural dimensions of technological innovation, new media and media literacy, new forms of oppression emerging in an electronic hyperreality, and postcolonial global concerns. With these concerns in mind cultural studies scholars often argue that the realm of popular culture is the most powerful educational force in contemporary culture. Indeed, in the twenty-first century this pedagogical dynamic is sweeping through the entire world. Educators, they believe, must understand these emerging realities in order to gain an important voice in the pedagogical conversation.

Without an understanding of cultural pedagogy's (education that takes place outside of formal schooling) role in the shaping of individual identity--youth identity in particular--the role educators play in the lives of their students will continue to fade. Why do so many of our students feel that life is incomprehensible and devoid of meaning? What does it mean, teachers wonder, when young people are unable to describe their moods, their affective affiliation to the society around them. Meanings provided young people by mainstream institutions often do little to help them deal with their affective complexity, their difficulty negotiating the rift
between meaning and affect. School knowledge and educational expectations seem as anachronistic as a ditto machine, not that learning ways of rational thought and making sense of the world are unimportant.

But school knowledge and educational expectations often have little to offer students about making sense of the way they feel, the way their affective lives are shaped. In no way do we argue that analysis of the production of youth in an electronic mediated world demands some "touchy-feely" educational superficiality. What is needed in this context is a rigorous analysis of the interrelationship between pedagogy, popular culture, meaning making, and youth subjectivity. In an era marked by youth depression, violence, and suicide such insights become extremely important, even life saving. Pessimism about the future is the common sense of many contemporary youth with its concomitant feeling that no one can make a difference.

If affective production can be shaped to reflect these perspectives, then it can be reshaped to lay the groundwork for optimism, passionate commitment, and transformative educational and political activity. In these ways cultural studies adds a dimension to the work of education unfilled by any other sub-discipline. This is what Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education seeks to produce—literature on these issues that makes a difference. It seeks to publish studies that help those who work with young people, those individuals involved in the disciplines that study children and youth, and young people themselves improve their lives in these bizarre times.
Girls in a Goldfish Bowl
*Moral Regulation, Ritual and the Use of Power amongst Inner City Girls*

Rosalyn George
*Goldsmiths, University of London, UK*
For Siobhan

*With Love*
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Thanks to all of you.
PREFACE

In the classic cultural-sociological text edited by Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, *Resistance through Rituals* (1980), contributors celebrated the achievement of cultural agency (literally) as the public performances of (a predominantly) masculine and sometimes masculinist social formation. Mods and rockers alike co-represented a new academic genre of sub-cultural cool as well as providing flamboyant dramatic assemblages. These creative displays were theorised as evincing the ‘magic resolutions’ of marginalised young (mainly white and working class) me. These subjects were newly aware of the appeals of the consumer market, which were often in contradiction to the conformist demands of education. Preferring their status in the fashion and popular cultural public arena rather than as subordinates in the labour market, young men were seen as creating their own exciting cultural worlds.

It was, in the main, a homo-social world even if this was not commented upon as such.

Indeed it was this decisive break from the ‘femininity’ of schooling and their families that strikes readers now about this work - ideologically confirming the traditional association between the ‘private and personal’ as a less exciting, more directly oppressive and smaller ‘female’ world.

However, as many feminists/ethnographers and cultural theorists have subsequently asserted (McRobbie, 1980; Skeggs, 1992), to pose the problematic this way already skews our point of interest so that the division between the public/private remains under-theorised, a point Stuart Hall acknowledges in later work (Hall, 1980).

The predominantly Gramscian focus of the ‘Birmingham School’ thus meant that, whilst the world of paid labour was not its principal concern, it nevertheless was still preoccupied by the public realm - a move that Jane Miller (1990) argued meant retaining a male-centric model of both culture and class.

If The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Birmingham thought class was a cultural accomplishment, it was a move which to some extent anticipated the burgeoning of interest in the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Yet, as it is now widely recognised, for both strands of cultural critiques – gender and ‘race’ complicate class.

Understanding that class might function as a psycho-social, affective and intensely moral vector of gendered experience, has accompanied a different type of theoretical and empirical attention (Skeggs, 1997, 2004; Reay, 2005).
Thus the feminist-inspired interest in that which resistance through ritual relegated to the ‘backstage’, insists that the vitality and social and cultural complexity of the personal and ‘private’ (for example, girls’ friendships) constitute crucial cultural work about ‘difference’. Whilst style may still feature, what counts more are how these practices inscribe intense feelings of desire, alienation and need.

Recently feminist ethnographies and commentaries on friendship amongst girls have gained momentum. Such literature has ‘corrected’ the tendency to privilege the ‘performative’ and visible practical productions of male identity work (Fordham, 1995; Proweller, 1998).

The newer literature on girls’ friendship has also to some extent powered the move to seek out a distinct piece of parallel intellectual territory called ‘Girls’ Studies’. Such an epistemic claim follows the logic of academic work more generally, (Bernstein, 1996). However this burgeoning of work is by now international (for example, Aapola et al, 2005) and increasingly registers the confidence of a branch of feminist intellectual endeavour that knows these ‘ordinary’ relations are, in effect, anything but banal, since for their subject they carry just the same level of normative significance as other forms of more socially acknowledged relations.

Rosalyn George’s monograph makes a welcome addition. She has built upon the growth of literature that draws from cultural studies, a powerful analytic language, one that is able to get into the interstices of schooling, to reveal how friendship emerges as a site of power and moral regulation. She also shows what sort of femininities get done there and amplifies a trend to make identity into a ‘verb’ (Kehily et al (2002) & Discourse Special Issue on Relationship Cultures (2002); Reay, 2001).

Using an eclectic reading of previous work, George, situates her own empirical investigation and creates a vivid account of young inner city girls’ inveterate concerns with establishing a sense of belonging which centre on how they negotiate a self in the matrices of their school-based friendship networks. The girls’ social relations are meticulously charted. We see their struggles as part of the fraught process of girls’ transfer from their primary to a more widely dispersed selection of secondary schools. These relations are revealed as sources of pleasure, pain, loyalty and difficult to overcome antagonism and as circuits of desiring to belong, fearing and being anxious about exclusion. They are inextricably linked to ‘wars’ of position – to how girls strive for or achieve or are allocated ‘positionality’ (Alcoff, 1997) in the highly charged nexus of relations. There are leaders, close allies, followers and those on the periphery, rather than simple, self-evident divisions between ‘popular’ or ‘unpopular’ girls. Interestingly, being a ‘good listener’ is awarded an especially important place and status in many groups.
Yet, if these relationships are preoccupying, they are simultaneously dismissed as having nothing to do with the institutional life of primary and secondary school, mainly because teachers and other professionals (as well as mothers) conspire to deny, naturalise or dismiss them. Moreover, the public discourse of ‘nice’ femininity presents obstacles to the girls’ own capacity to reorder and contest, what are ‘private’ friendship arrangements, such as the everyday dynamics of making (or breaking) social arrangements. However, being ‘left out’ or ignored by girls who were once one’s friends is, as the author shows, a particularly devastating form of emotional manipulation.

Since dissention is seen in tension with ‘nice’ white middle class femininity, the excluded or ‘teased’ girl is not in much of a position to complain. This, rather than any natural passivity, is what tends to obscure girls’ ability to publicise the emotional harassment, which circulates as part of the static of power strategies which some girl leaders can stage-manage to their own ends. Being a ‘bully’ is theorised not as a separate identity but one that is often deployed by the girl who has mobilised enough capital (ability, attractiveness, confidence) to claim the position of being the ‘leader’ of the group.

However, as I have noted, if it is obvious that the underworld of girls’ schooling is a fraught business, highly social as well as highly structured with its ‘rules and rituals’. The author shows these discourses and practices of friendship are (almost) completely disconnected from adult knowledge.

So whilst they evince a whole set of important consequences for the girls, their educational success, their social ease (or lack thereof), their school choices and their ability to be reflexive of their social circumstances, the ‘grown-up’ world consistently misrecognises and misreads them.

Patiently building a closely recorded (and well-listened to!) ethnographic picture of the girls over many years, Rosalyn George tracks her sample into and across the transition from primary school to their respective and contrasting secondary schools. She is able to build up trust and reflexivity, weaving into her portrait a sense of her own investments in the project which unites her commitment to equity and to seeing schooling and education as sites of power and contestation, not confined to issues of the curriculum or in the rhetorics and indeed the realities of teachers’ own moral valuing of social diversity.

One of the most plangent aspects of the study is the extent to which attention is paid to institutional policies valuing London’s much-vaunted diversity in terms of speaking of the need for equity, but there is no professional discourse or ability to engage with girls about their own inequitable struggles as they seek claims for respect and recognition in that part of their lives which founds (or confounds) their sense of social worth.
This study will remind women readers of their own girlhoods perhaps and maybe alert us to thinking of how boys ‘do friendship’ in similar or different modes.

We urgently need to make ‘cultural studies’ speak to ‘educational studies’ and the book shows just what can be gained in understanding once we situate the subject in the pulse of her own lived experience. There is a massive explanatory loss that occurs when we decontextualise social policy from the ethnographic and ‘felt’ texture of living schooling. George shows just what an absorbingly cultural, as well as achievement-oriented, activity this is for many girls and the complexities and contradictions such achievements install.

We have to ask what is it that compels many educational professionals to ‘see’ education (especially secondary and beyond) as devoid of the affects, concerns and rites of passage that enthral their pupils. This type of detailed work reveals what it might be that we see if we redirect our attention. Since in showing how the interpersonal world is negotiated via working with (and perhaps questioning) moral norms, Rosalyn George’s monograph is a powerful response to Andrew Sayer’s (2005) important argument that we need to make more sense of how people invest in and prioritise moral norms.

It seems to me that studies such as Rosalyn George’s reveal the force of his argument because she demonstrates how the seemingly inconsequential aspects of friendship have a moral valence/violence that traverses the ‘standards agenda’, ‘the respect agenda’ and the ‘diversity agenda’.

It might not to be too strong to claim that unless we listen more to what Rosalyn George’s global city girls say about their friendship, we will have a very distanced view of them. We may well miss how central to their sense of a possible self is ‘growing up’ in, and as, the symbolic and moral regulation of the feminine forms of friendship.

One might even push further and question the conventional conceptualisation of the subject as the singular self, rather than what the book implies and others argue, that subjectivity is wrested more in a context of all those ‘others’ who we both imagine and form as an audience for putting into question the illusion of our unique authored identity.
INTRODUCTION

There is a growing body of literature exploring the nature of girls’ friendship in schools (Hey, 1997; Quicke and Winter, 1991; Nilan, 1991). The majority of this literature, however, has focussed on girls in their ‘teen years’, i.e. those of fourteen years old and beyond. Traditionally, girls’ friendship groups have been characterised by teachers, parents and educational researchers as ‘malicious, bitchy, catty and resentful’ (Davies, 1979, p. 65), with boys’ friendships being seen as far more straightforward (Nilan, 1991). This book challenges these familiar characterisations through highlighting the cultural practices that underpin urban girls’ friendship groupings and their social networks. It will explore the emotional and social dynamics of a group of inner city preadolescent girls and their friendship groups as they transfer from primary school to secondary schools. Within this transitional phase of schooling, much of the existing work on girls’ friendship has focused on girls’ collaborative work in groups, adult-child relationships and girls’ willingness to conform to school structures and organisations. This book explores such ideas but goes further in that it exposes some of the complex processes by which urban girls’ friendships are constructed and sustained.

This book presents an in depth exploration of pre-adolescent girls’ friendships as they relocate from their inner city state primary school to their secondary schools. The schools are all urban schools and represent the state and public sector of education. The girls in the book encompass the diversity of ethnicities found in large urban communities and how the girls manage and negotiate their friendships across ethnic divisions is central to the book.

Critical moments in the girls’ schooling are analysed to explore how cultural shifts impact upon existing power relations. Through discussion, interviews and journal entries of the girls and their teachers in one primary school and six secondary schools, the book provides an insight into the organisation of friendship groups, the rules which govern group membership, and the role groups play in defining the quality and nature of the girls’ relationships and their social networks at school. By focusing on the constitution of the groups, questions of ‘leadership’ and ‘popularity’, ‘race’ and ethnicity and ‘bullying’ are interrogated and their resonance for the ‘exclusionary’ and ‘inclusionary’ practices which characterise the friendship groups, are considered. The disparity between the priorities of the girls at the point of transfer and the priorities of the school as a learning institution is also documented. The book highlights the emotional investment girls make in their friendships, and makes more visible this aspect of their lives in their day to day interactions in the classroom and in schools.

The rationale for this book came from a realisation that patterns of inclusion and exclusion were a regular feature of young girls lives and that this widespread social experience was on the whole socially invisible and that where it was observed its
importance was denied or diminished. Furthermore this book highlights what
might be called the bleak side of young girls’ social relationships, and attention to
this has provoked some unease amongst readers of my work. Some of the
responses I have met when talking about this work have been: ‘not all girls are
mean’, ‘girls are wonderful’. One mother I spoke to was distressed at the prospect
of her child either being a ‘horrible, nasty leader’ or ‘a victim’ who will be
‘bullied’ and ‘miserable’. It has been suggested that I should provide a more
nuanced portrayal and that it is unfair to only highlight this negative aspect of girls’
lives. Such comments have caused me some anxiety for it would be a grave
mistake for any reader of this book to interpret my study as a condemnation of girls
and women. On the contrary, I wish to make it clear that my deep affection for
girls has been the driving force behind this project. Western culture has long
affirmed the niceness of girls and therefore this study, which provides another
perspective and a different lens through which to make sense of girls’ lives, can
possibly be unsettling. However, I would wish that the insights this study brings
will have some impact upon those adults working with young girls, be they school
teachers, youth workers or adults from others agencies, in raising awareness of the
emotional investment girls make in their friendships, and to make more visible this
aspect of their lives in their day to day interactions in, for example, the classroom,
the school or the youth club.

Throughout this book, the names of the girls, their mothers and the schools they
attended have been changed to maintain their anonymity.

ORGANISATION OF THE BOOK

The book is divided into two parts. The first part is concerned with the theoretical
underpinning of the empirical work and the methodology and methods used to
generate the data. For those readers who may like to read the data first, I suggest
they go straight to Chapter 4 before returning to the theoretical and methodological
chapters at a later stage. I outline the chapters in more detail below.

Part A

Chapter 1 Understanding Friendships: A Critical Review.

This Chapter serves to set the context for the rest of the book. It will provide a
rationale for the book through a critical examination of how friendship has been
constructed in various historical, social psychological, sociological and cultural
accounts of friendship. Further, through exploring the literature on friendships, the
book highlights how the majority of studies of friendship have been extrapolated
from empirical work done on boys at school. The book reveals the lack of
attention within social research that has been paid to issues of pre-adolescent girls
leading to a view that friendships where they are viewed as a homogeneous.
Misconceptions about ‘friendship’ are explored. This chapter will also document