Telling Stories from the Field: Children and the Politics of Ethnographic Representation

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Abstract: Bringing a feminist lens to bear on the study of children and childhood has progressed at a slow pace since the mid-1980s. Despite repeated calls for a broader engagement between feminism and childhood studies, the links between the two areas of study remain weak. This article aims to address this gap by examining the processes in which "truths" about children's gendered lives are produced. Drawing from fieldwork in an urban Canadian location, I argue that within the structure of adult beliefs and practices regarding what boys and girls "ought to be," children create spaces in which they are able to "play" with, resist, accommodate, refuse and create alternatives to such beliefs and practices. Based on my research, I explore the ways "violence" is one strategy used by children to create spaces for competing discourses of childhood to emerge. I conclude by reflecting on the implications of using a feminist lens for understanding childhood, maintaining that power plays itself out everyday in children's lives in largely invisible yet compelling ways.

Résumé: L'utilisation d'un éclairage féministe dans l'étude des enfants et de l'enfance a progressé lentement depuis le milieu des années quatre-vingt. Malgré des appels répétés à une plus grande collaboration entre le féminisme et les études de l'enfance, le lien entre ces deux domaines d'étude reste faible. L'article vise à explorer cet écart en examinant le processus par lequel sont produites les "vérités" sur la vie des enfants en tant qu'appartenant à un sexe donné. M'appuyant sur les données de mes recherches dans une localité urbaine canadienne, je soutiens que dans la structure des croyances et des pratiques des adultes en ce qui concerne ce que les garçons et les filles devraient être, les enfants créent des espaces dans lesquels ils peuvent "jouer" avec, résister, accommoder, refuser et créer des alternatives à ces croyances et à ces pratiques. Sur la base de cette analyse, j'explore les manières. dont la "violence" est utilisée par les enfants comme stratégie pour faire surgir des discours rivaux sur l'enfance. Je conclus avec des réflexions sur les implications d'avoir recours à une vision féministe pour comprendre l'enfant, et je maintiens que le pouvoir se joue tous les jours dans la vie des enfants d'une manière invisible mais contraignante.

Introduction

Over the past 20 years, the politics of ethnographic writing and representation have been of central concern for feminist anthropologists. A number of issues have been addressed including the processes of producing "truths" about women's lives, questions of difference and inclusivity, and the impact of research on research participants (Abu-Lughod, 1993; Cole and Phillips, 1995; di Leonardo, 1991; Stacey, 1988; Visweswaran, 1988, 1994). Serious scholarly attention has been directed to the gendered spaces in which women live by examining the social, economic, cultural and political dimensions of women's lives. This essay extends feminist anthropological analyses of (largely) women's lives to consider the problematic relationship between producing knowledge and ethnographic representation in anthropological child research.

In the past, anthropologists have engaged in limited ways with the subjects of children and childhood. For the most part, they have focused on children in the contexts of family life and motherhood. This is due in part to the tenacity of models of socialization and development. According to these models, children are conceptualized as moving toward full adult personhood. That is, they are valued for the future of their lives in the adult world rather than for their presence in the existing world. These models have been extraordinarily resistant to criticism and have persisted in dominating the creation of knowledge about children and childhood (cf. James and Prout, 1990: 22-23).

An emergent childhood studies, however, has been pointing to ways to conceptualize children as creative and competent social actors in a variety of social and cultural contexts (Amit-Talai, 1995; Corsaro, 1985; Qvortrup, 1987; Scheper-Hughes and Sargent, 1998; Stephens, 1995). As well, some childhood scholars have sought to identify and analyze the diversity of social scientific models presently available for thinking about childhood in their attempts to theorize this vast field (Alanen, 2000; Honig, 1999; James and Prout, 1990; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998; Jenks, 1998). For example, in outlining a paradigm for the new social study of childhood, Allison James and Alan Prout (1990: 231) argue for "... a theoretical perspective which can grasp childhood as a continually experienced and created social phenomenon which has significance for its present, as well as the past and future." Taken together, this work has redefined children and childhood as legitimate subjects in their own right, worthy of scholarly attention. In powerfully reconceptualizing childhood, this scholarship attests to the theoretically challenging stage that the field of childhood studies has reached.

Bringing a feminist lens to bear on the study of children and childhood, however, has progressed at a slower pace. Beginning in 1987, Barrie Thorne, and later Leena Alanen (1994) and Ann Oakley (1994), called for a revisioning of the study of children using a feminist lens in attending to agency and diversity. Similarly, anthropologists Sharon Stephens (1995), and Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Carolyn Sargent (1998) edited important collections that advanced the idea of a broader engagement between feminism and childhood studies. However, ethnographic scholarship directed at taking account of gender and the different experiences of childhood for girls and boys has not been a priority since Thorne's (1993) pioneering work.[1] Oakley (1994) offers a partial explanation for this inattention arguing that the focus of the new sociology of childhood has been directed to the broader category "children" rather than on the differentiated categories of girls and boys. She has suggested that this emphasis is a necessary first step in making children visible (1994: 22), thereby echoing an earlier feminist practice to focus on the category "woman." James, Jenks and Prout (1998), however, argue that playing down issues of diversity and the ways power works through gender, race, class and age results in theoretical analyses of children's lives that are incomplete. Clearly the links between feminism, anthropology and the study of childhood remain weak and much remains to be done. As Jennifer Ruark (2000: 22) notes "... childhood is [now] where women's studies was a few decades ago." This essay emerges from this theoretical and methodological context. It aims to contribute to a greater integration of feminist insights with childhood studies by addressing the processes by which "truths" about children's gendered lives are produced.

Following Honig (1999), I am interested in childhood in a relational sense whereby adults and children are implicated in its construction through sets of discursive practices. That is, children live their lives through a complex interaction involving a number of competing discourses of childhood. In shifting contexts, the boundaries around the categories child and childhood—as well as "girl," "boy," "femininity," and "masculinity"—are constantly negotiated, made and remade by both children and adults. Following Michel Foucault's work (1979; 1994) in addressing the ways in which subjects are produced within and through discursive practices, power is central to this matrix. Using material drawn from fieldwork (1992-93) with children in an urban Canadian location my goal is to illuminate, on the one hand, how children's childhoods are structured by adult beliefs and practices (including adult ethnographers' beliefs and practices) regarding what "boys" and "girls" or "children" and "childhood" are or ought to be. On the other hand, my interest is to investigate the ways children create spaces in which they are able to "play" with, resist, accommodate, refuse and create alternatives to such adult beliefs and practices. Based on my research, I use the example of "violence" as one strategy through which children were able to create spaces for competing discourses of childhood to emerge. I conclude with reflections on the implications of using a feminist lens for ethnographic writing and representation of childhood.

Constructions of Childhood

The numerous perceptions of childhood that have emerged in differing historical and socio-cultural contexts illustrate the variability of this concept. Harry Hendrick (1990), in his survey of the shifting constructions of British childhood since the end of the eighteenth century, argues that diverse understandings of childhood have often overlapped and co-existed, in turn, creating the conditions through which new perspectives emerge (55). These constructions emanate from cultural, religious, scientific and political influences. Likewise today there is ample evidence of competing models of childhood that co-exist, i.e., in the educational and legal systems, and the mass media. In this matrix, I would argue that an idealized and historicized model of childhood marked by characteristics including innocence, vulnerability, and passivity, exists alongside many other models of childhood that inform the ways children make meaning for their own social lives. The models also provide adults with a measure against which to interpret children's lives.

Insofar as idealized childhood is one of the dominant messages in society, it situates children in subordinate positions and ideally, outside of adult space. Moreover, idealized conceptualizations of childhood rely on a centralized notion of power. Power in this sense is best described as something that can be possessed by some members of society and exercised over others, i.e., adults holding power over children. In contrast, a fluid view of power sees it as being dispersed among members of society allowing children as well as adults to exercise power. Foucault (1994) expands on this fluid understanding of power by linking it with discourse. He states that "there can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association. We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth" (1994: 210).

Power and discourse are key conceptual points in this essay given my role as an ethnographer of childhood involved in producing "truths" about children's lives while trying to understand the competencies and capacities of children as productive beings. Based on my research, I would argue that the model of power that is centralized and homogenous misses the mark when it comes to the ways in which power works in children's lives. While children are often dominated in many aspects of their lives by the power maintained over them by adults, they also exercise power by resisting and manipulating it.

The notion that children can be at once both powerless and powerful is an important conceptual contribution if we are to better understand the complex relationship between producing knowledge and representing children. Upholding a model of childhood defined in reified and bounded ways, and anchored by the notion of centralized power, limits our understanding of children's lives. Yet this model maintains a powerful hold over popular consciousness and academic thought, reifying the division between adult and child so that when this division is challenged by children, they are perceived as being out of control and in need of adult guidance. Conversely, children can be viewed as potential victims of adults' worlds who need to be properly directed and shielded from these dangers by adults. These diverse perspectives highlight the fact that childhood is a volatile concept situated in a dynamic social landscape requiring constant negotiation by children. Bronwyn Davies addresses this issue in her work exploring children's abilities to invent, invert and break structures in order to speak/write into existence other ways of being. Davies (1993) examines children's own experiences of being powerless or powerful and of the power of adult discourses to position them in powerless ways. She states that

> a central tension in childhood as it is experienced in the modern world comes from the simultaneous struggles to be seamlessly meshed in the social fabric and to know and to signal oneself as a being with specificity.... Each child must locate and take up as their own, narratives of themselves that knit together the details of their existence. At the same time they must learn to be coherent members of others' narratives. (16-17)

The need to operate at many levels at once involves a great deal of social competence on the part of children. That is, children need to understand how to be ***knowable*** in the terms set out by the available categories and discourses in which they are located. Taken one step further, not only must children understand the ways to be intelligible as "children," they must also be knowable as competent social actors according to other ways that they are socially situated. That is, each child is simultaneously positioned within other unequally produced constructions of gender, race, ethnicity, class, age and ability, to name a few.

The latter point once again draws upon feminist insights. Feminist work makes it clear, as Ginsburg and Tsing (1990) argue, that gender gains currency in many discourses which have the effect of shaping relations among social actors and maintaining patterns of dominance in institutions and social processes (cf. 3). As girls and boys begin to understand gender as a binary opposition as well as a situated and interactional accomplishment at a very early age, they are involved in the ongoing processes of identification and positioning themselves accordingly. Moreover, gender as binary opposition has become a site of great investment on the part of society's institutions and adults. It should not be surprising, therefore, that children are invested in the process of gender as well, both accommodating and resisting normative meanings in shifting contexts.

Furthermore, feminist scholarship has emphasized the articulation of gender with other forms of inequality, e.g., race and age. While recognition of such complex articulations is a feature of analyses of women's lives, it remains lacking in much child research. Thus in working to better understand the complex relationship between producing knowledge and representing children, it is crucial to reflect on both the power relations inherent in adult-child relations generally, as well as the adult-child relations involved in child research in particular.

"Doing" Childhood

In 1992 I embarked on a study of how children produce meanings of "gender," "child" and "childhood" through musical practices. This research involved fieldwork with a core group of 25 children between the ages of six and 12 in the context of an after-school program at a downtown Toronto community centre. As a volunteer, my official role at the community centre was to assist staff in the after-school program. However, staff and children were also aware that I was also conducting a participant-observation study.

The group of children who attended the program came from a broad range of socio-economic backgrounds (ranging from single-parent families, families relying solely on social assistance to middle and upper class two-parent families) and cultural backgrounds (including French, Indian, Jamaican, Ghanian, Ecuadorian).

Over a period of eight months, I was able to observe and analyze the ways in which children actively worked to "perform" childhood in accordance, and sometimes conflicting with, adult meanings and constructions of this concept. For example, using "traditional"[2] musical practices as an access point with which to engage children, I began many of my informal "interviews" in the same way by asking groups of girls and boys if they knew of any skipping or clapping songs. During one exchange, I noted a conversation with a group of girls who had performed a clapping song for me ("Down Down Baby"). When they were finished, one of the girls in the group asked: "Is that the kind of song you want?" The question, and the ensuing conversation, were important for they signalled that the girls understood that I was interested in a particular English language oral tradition repertoire of songs over other repertoires. To ensure that their understanding of "children's song" matched what they thought mine to be, the girls asked if their choice of song was "correct." The questioning of the category demonstrated the girls' interest in being perceived as culturally intelligible as "children." Furthermore, not only were the girls attempting to comply with an adult centred construction of "childhood," they were also engaging with a gendered girlhood. Their question regarding the suitability of their choice of song accomplished both categories not only in their interaction with me but with each other as a group.

In this example, by selecting a "children's song" from a tradition that is an exclusively oral one and commonly associated with young children and girls' groups in particular, the girls "get it right" on a number of levels. To paraphrase Davies' point (1993: 16), each child must get its gender right to be seen as normal and acceptable at a societal level as well as for others who will be interpreting themselves in relation to it. Davies' argument may partly explain the absence in my research of boys publicly singing songs from this same oral tradition. While many of the boys over the years have admitted to knowing this oral song tradition, sometimes very well, they rarely agreed to perform a song for me in front of their peers. The one or two who did, were usually the most popular children who wielded a great deal of power in their friendship groups or conversely, were marginalized children whose behaviours had been assigned labels with connotations of homosexuality, i.e., gay, "girly-boy."

In addition to "getting it right," the girls' song example also points out children's awareness of the potentially punitive consequences for those who exceed or do not remain intelligibly within the boundaries of normative categories of childhood and gender. The example demonstrates that in differing contexts, children learn what it means to "be a girl," to "be a boy" and to "be children" in particular ways. These meanings are censored and monitored by a number of societal groups including children themselves. In other words, children learn what lies within and outside of normative conceptions and how to negotiate the limits of the categories in making sense of their own social lives and relationships with others.[3]

If the performance noted above by girls can be understood as an example of how these girls conform with adult expectations regarding childhood and girlhood in particular, it is also possible to see in these same performances more active resistance or challenge to aspects of adult normative definitions. For example, many of the "children's songs" that have been collected by folklorists (Fowke 1969, 1977; Iona and Peter Opie, 1969) as well as in my own research, contain challenges to adult constructions of childhood innocence, asexuality, and vulnerability. Many of the songs' themes deal with subjects that are often explicitly located "outside" of childhood, notably sexuality and violence.

The apparent paradox that this represents is directly addressed in Valerie Walkerdine's work (1993) on young girls and popular culture. She describes how despite an ostensible separation of childhood and sexuality as normative categories, the erotic nonetheless enters girlhood through popular culture. As she states: "Little girls sing songs about sex, talk about being bad girls, sexual girls, forbidden girls" (20). Her work points to how children not only adapt to but may also (even simultaneously) evade, refuse, or actively resist elements of the representations of the category "child" (or "girl" or "boy") as encountered in the social world.

Thus the content of girls' songs point to some of the complexities of their engagement with powerful constructions of childhood and girlhood. Such complexities, however, became even more apparent in other exchanges during my field research. Specifically, using violent behaviour, some children attempted to disrupt and reconstitute boundaries around childhood and between childhood and adulthood in their encounters with me as a female ethnographer and with each other. It is this phenomenon to which I now turn in order to bring the complexity of children's lives into view.

Some scholars have argued that violence and violent behaviour complicate childhood by exceeding its limits. Violence disrupts child/adult boundaries because it pushes children over the boundaries of what it is to be a child (Jenks, 1996; Wyness, 1996). Chris Jenks, for example, argues that violence destabilizes childhood when children engage in behaviours associated with adults and adult worlds. Without clearly demarcated lines indicating where childhood ends and adulthood begins, Jenks argues that a kind of anxiety is created for adults who feel they must reestablish these boundaries. Thus the stability of the category "adult" works in tandem with the stability of the category "child." Adult spaces are kept intact by maintaining a certain degree of control over childhood.

While Jenks' argument is compelling, the notion that adults are able to contain childhood in a bounded way is problematic in that it retains three elements of an outmoded and idealized understanding of the ways children live their lives. First, children are incomplete social actors on their way to achieving full status in society (development/socialization models). Second, children live apart from, rather than amid, the world of adults; and third, it is implied that children live their lives in contexts devoid of power and violence. The reality for many children is that violence *is* a part of their lives. As many studies have shown, violence is a factor of childhood for many children whether as victims of abuse (Kitzinger, 1990), in situations of work (Boyden, Ling and Myers, 1998), as witnesses to violence in the home (Dobash and Dobash, 1998) as perpetrators or victims of violence at school (Callaway, 1999) as perpetrators or victims of violence in the family (Cummings, 1999), as consumers of violent messages in the media (Singer, 1998), and as perpetrators of crime (Sprott, 2000). Based on my research, violent behaviour is also integral to an understanding of the ways children assert agency and powerfully position themselves in relationships with adults and within peer groups. I explore these points in the next section of this essay using two fieldwork accounts.

Two Stories from the Field

The narratives presented here have been selected for what they can reveal about the ways in which girls and boys produce the categories that are meaningful in their lives. The stories are complex in that the children both reflect and challenge dominant conventions of childhood in differing contexts. The second story, of a boy whom I call Brad, is the one I most often tell of my fieldwork experiences with children. In light of the discussion above, I have reflected on why this is so and what "story" I am actually conveying—about childhood, boyhood, violence—in highlighting this particular account over others.

But first I tell a story of Katie and her friends as an example of the ways in which girls are engaged in simultaneously upholding and challenging "childhood" and "girlhood."

Hate Lists and Friendship Groups

Katie, an eight-year-old girl whose family was originally from Ghana, and her "best friend," Nadine, a nine-year-old girl of Jamaican heritage, had asked me to follow them to what they called the 'library area" of the community centre. This was a small closet-sized space at the back of the centre with a few books and a mat on the floor where children could sit and read.

> *As we sat together on the mat, Katie, Nadine and I discussed our favourite songs. The girls named popular songs that they had heard on the radio. Suddenly, the conversation shifted from music to focusing on other events in their lives. As we spoke, a boy named Julio wandered in. The girls immediately yelled at him to get out: "boys aren't allowed." When he left, they commented that he was fat. Then they proceeded to compare the body sizes of several children. "Fat Amanda" occupied the conversation for the next few minutes. "Fat Amanda," Nadine chanted "Oh she's smelly too. She stunk up the whole laundry room. When my mother went down there, she had to plug her nose."*

Many times throughout my fieldwork, Katie and Nadine spoke about Amanda's appearance and used this in a powerful way to keep her out of their play group. As many of the girls had a strong interest and placed high value upon female beauty, pretty clothes and other material markers of stereotypical femininity, Amanda was clearly unruly. Her position in the girls' group was marginal at best. When the girls spoke about Amanda, they used phrases that described her as having "messy hair" or "dirty clothing" that "didn't match." They also commented that Amanda did not have as many "things," such as toys, games and material goods at her house as some of the other children. In addition to her undesirable physical appearance, Amanda's friendship with Mark, one of the boys at the community centre, was critically scrutinized and mocked. The two children, Mark and Amanda, spent much of their time at the centre together, either playing games (table hockey, for example) or sitting apart from other children and talking with one another. Based on her physical appearance and her relationship with Mark, Amanda exceeded the boundaries of both "childhood" and "girlhood" as defined by the girls themselves. As someone subjected to constant teasing, Amanda paid a substantial price for her inability to "do" childhood and girlhood "correctly." She was ostracized from the girls' group of friends for not "getting it right" and clearly suffered from poor self-esteem.

Amanda was excluded from the girls' friendship group by what amounted to a form of verbal harassment. This is one of the ways that I noted that girls' groups kept the boundaries around girlhood and childhood clearly circumscribed in particular contexts. Another tactic is exemplified in the following excerpt. Here, Katie strategically deploys the idea of "hate" as a boundary maker while simultaneously transgressing boundaries around conventional expectations of girlhood.

> *Katie and I sat together in the community centre library and began talking about her mother.*
> *Katie (K): My grandfather is stupid*
> *Virginia (V): Why do you say he's stupid?*
> *K: He doesn't know what he's saying.*
> *(Katie went on to describe his "balding head with hair that stuck up.")*
> *K: I hate my grandmother and my stupid cousin too.*
> *(Katie reached into her pocket and pulled out a list of people that she said she "hated." She began to read off the names she had noted.)*
> *V: Do you always carry a list of names of people you hate?*
> *K: Of course.*
> *V: Do your friends carry lists too?*
> *K: Yeah, lots of my friends do.*

Katie discussed the ways she and her friends made up the hate lists and notes and used them to include and exclude people from their group. For example, she stated that her group of friends considered each person individually and decided on their status in the friendship group, for the most part, on the basis of appearance. Hate list-making was one of the ways that Katie established and maintained relationships, a strategy quite different from those that I had seen employed by some of the boys at the community centre. Unlike boys' strategies that included joke telling, "dissin'" and rapping, the girls, as this example reveals, used less obvious and written forms of communication.

The lists are important to recognize as an instance of the ways girlhood is produced in the practices of everyday life. These practices are both material and discursive, producing girlhoods that challenge the fiction of idealized childhood in certain contexts but reproduce it in other ways (clothes, beauty). In this example, the girls affirmed and subverted notions of femininity at once by appearing to be engaging in cooperative relationships while embracing the idea of hate and utilizing these list-making and note-passing activities to mark and exclude particular children. Clearly, girls live their lives at the intersection of a number of competing claims about this time of life. Some of these claims are that girls are the objects of adult control and that they are presumably passive and obedient. As is evident in this example, for some girls the lists provided a way to disrupt these claims and the power relationships implicit in them. The lists become a vehicle to assert and redefine the boundaries around girlhood and childhood in differing contexts.

For Katie in particular, not only did list making facilitate her ability to wield power in her peer group, it became a vehicle to resist adult power as well. That is, Katie used the lists to remain within the bounds of an "obedient child," which she felt was expected of her by adults in her life, while challenging this obedience by transgressing childhood boundaries through her use of "hate" in concealing and secretly sharing the lists with other girls. What is important to highlight is that the movement between transgressing and complying with the boundaries of normative childhood and girlhood is accomplished at the expense of other children. On the surface, therefore, the girls' practices seem innocuous yet for children ostracized from the friendship groups through the hate lists, they are experienced as a real form of violent behaviour.

Like the story of Katie and friends, violence is a key feature of the next account from my fieldwork. This story depicts an exchange that took place between myself and Brad. Brad was 12 years old at the time. The following encounter occurred as I was making soup for the children. (One of my daily tasks was to prepare a snack for children returning from a full day of school using food provided by the local food bank).

"I'm Just Playin' with You."

> *The closer he moved toward me, the more intent his gaze became. He nudged up next to me and pretended to spit his gum out in my face, I thought he was joking and raised a brow and smiled. But he wasn't. He spit it out, much to my surprise and shock. In that moment, I tried to*

> *think of what to do and say and what came out was: "Your behaviour is totally unacceptable, Brad." He looked at me. Laughing, he replied: "white woman."*
>
> *Later in the day, Cameron, the program director, spoke to Brad about the incident and [told him] that he should apologize for his behaviour. Brad reluctantly approached me as Cameron continued to coax an apology. I took the opportunity to tell Brad how I felt about the incident: "How would you feel if I did that to you?" I asked, hoping he would reflect on his actions. His response, again, shocked me. Brad replied: "You do that to me, I'll kill you." He continued in a louder voice: "You do that to me and I'll kill your boyfriend, your husband, whatever, I'll kill your whole family."*
>
> *I contemplated a number of ways to react to Brad in that moment. I realized that Brad was testing me and that it would be best to stand my ground. Instead of backing away from him, I moved closer to where he was standing. I tried to control the anger in my voice. "I don't like it when you say those things to me, Brad." I said sternly. "It makes me feel really bad." Brad must have seen the look on my face. I had not found his outburst funny in the least. He looked at me and smirked. "I'm just playin' with you." He paused and then said, "You just don't understand my 'nigger ways.'"*

The story of this encounter is important in understanding the ways in which Brad reproduced and challenged normative constructions of childhood through violence on a number of levels. First, my reaction to this exchange generally, and to its violent nature in particular, was one of shock and dismay. I had noted in my field journal following this encounter that, "I could hardly imagine such a violent reaction from a 12-year-old child." Clearly my reaction can be understood as a reminder of the ways in which as an adult female ethnographer I was deeply attached to powerful constructions of children as innocent of violence, and in this case racism as well. My interpretation of Brad's words did not appear to follow the prescriptions for "childhood" and it was this disjuncture that was shocking to me as an ethnographer. It is also this "shock" that I wanted to convey in my ethnographic writing as disruptive of dominant constructions of childhood in an idealized sense.

In addition to complex understandings of the concept of childhood, gender materialized in this account in particular ways. Brad used violent behaviour to contest "childhood" while simultaneously creating a space for a performance of hyper-masculinity. The fact that the performance unfolded in front of an audience of his peers was significant insofar as it made him publicly "accountable" for "getting gender right."

Clearly, Brad's performance of masculinity had much to do with remaining intelligibly within the boundaries of boyhood/manhood in front of his audiences of peers and adults. The degree to which he sought clarity in this performance underlines his understanding of the positive and punitive consequences of this intelligibility.

Moreover, generational relations of power in this context marked Brad's performance. He explicitly acknowledged the unequal adult-child power relations in his relationship with me by redefining his actions as "just playin'" with me. In other words, he was behaving in a manner appropriately "childlike." He clearly understood my investment in the authority accorded to adult staff at the centre. On one hand, Brad wielded power by transgressing the lines around childhood through threatened violence that pushed him over the bounds of what is conventionally understood to be "a child." On the other hand, Brad upheld and reinscribed the lines between adult and child by acknowledging his unequal position of power vis-à-vis adults at the centre.

Importantly, Brad was one of the older boys in the after school program. He repeatedly tried to sneak into the youth program that was held at the building across the courtyard. Brad often publicly proclaimed that he was not part of the "children's group." He argued that he was "too old" for the "kids' stuff" in the after-school program. His insistence that he was "almost a teenager" and thus more powerful than the younger children demonstrated his recognition of the power of age groupings, and his active resistance to being positioned as a relatively powerless child.

On many levels, therefore, Brad fiercely challenged the tactics that myself and members of the staff at the centre used to order childhood in this setting. He gave meaning to the category "child" in ways that defied containment. In my role as both ethnographer and volunteer, I was constantly challenged with negotiating the boundaries of what it meant to "be a child" and to "be a boy" with Brad. Unable to anticipate the possible ways Brad would relate to me, I admit that I remained uncomfortable with this particular challenge throughout the course of the fieldwork.

In addition to his resistance to adult normative conceptions of childhood, Brad also effectively subverted my position by inscribing my "difference" and greater power in essentialized categorical rather than personalized terms. By referring to me as a "white woman," Brad emphasized not only the generational but also gendered and racialized divides between us. By inscribing me as "woman" he confronted me on the basis of age and gender simultaneously. In addition to using the term "woman," Brad referred to me as "white" woman. At the same time, he identified himself using the inferiorizing label of "nigger." In doing so, he drew attention to my "whiteness" thereby both challenging and reproducing inferiorizing racist discourses. As with the contesting and reproducing of adult-child and male-female hierarchies, here the racial hierarchies white and "nigger" were invoked, asserted, challenged and reproduced by Brad in complex ways rarely acknowledged in child research (see also Rizvi, 1993; Troyna and Hachter, 1992).

Creating "Truths" about Children's Lives

As noted above, a particular discomfort accompanied me throughout the fieldwork process. Part of the discomfort I experienced in carrying out this research stemmed from what I had initially perceived as my task as an ethnographer of childhood; that is, to find "authentic" anthropological subjects. As I now reflect on questions of representation, however, I realize that I could not, and did not, render an "authentic" telling of childhood. Rather, my interest had been in investigating how childhood is lived in various ways, not with the intent of capturing some kind of "reality" but to find a way to open spaces for the stories and experiences that are disruptive and supportive of a coherent view of their worlds to emerge. As Britzman (1995: 232) argues, "in poststructuralist versions, subjects may well be the tellers of experience; but every telling is constrained, partial, and determined by the discourses and histories that prefigure, even as they might promise, representation." Thus one of the predicaments that I faced in writing ethnography had been in producing a persuasive narrative that convinced the reader of the credibility of my research efforts, on the one hand, while remaining true to the contradictions of this work, on the other.

One of my goals, therefore, has been to demonstrate how children create for themselves spaces within the highly contested terrain of childhood. These processes are interwoven in spaces that are deeply gendered. That is, the boundaries of childhood, girlhood and boyhood are continually made and remade by girls and boys as they attempt to remain inside of conventional notions, at times, and challenge these articulations, at others. The examples that I have presented in this paper demonstrate the fluidity of the research relationship as it is generationed, gendered and, in some cases, racialized. This final point creates challenges for working with children in the field and for writing and representing children's lives.

One of the "truths" about childhood that emerges from the two accounts that I have retold is that power, in its many manifestations, is an intrinsic part of childhood. Based on my research, the locations which children inhabit are replete with power. This power is accessed, manipulated and exercised by children according to shifting contexts and by their positioning according to lines of difference such as gender, race, ethnicity, class and age.

Furthermore, power is exerted by children through violent behaviours that are physical, verbal and relational. While children may not exhibit these behaviours explicitly in the presence of some adults, they are, nonetheless, ways that children manage their lives. While it should not be so surprising to find girls and boys using violence as a resource because it is abundantly at their disposal, at some level, it remains disconcerting. This is due in part to the persistent notion that children are not fully agential beings living amid the world of adults. Indeed, as I have argued, although there are a number of competing discourses of childhood that coexist in Western society, it seems that idealized childhood retains a particular conceptual strength moreso than other conceptions of this time of life. Yet in seeking to understand the spaces in which children live, ethnographers of childhood must begin to regard violence as part of the experiences of many childhoods. As in the fieldwork stories that I have presented in this essay, relational violence via the hate lists, and threats of physical violence, are only two of many forms that violence takes in children's lives.

By my own admission, the story that I most often tell is the story of Brad. It is one which exemplifies the competing and contrasting discourses through which children make meaning in their lives. For example, Brad verbally violates the conventional boundaries of childhood, invokes discourses of race, gender and age, and manipulates power in relationships with others around him while acknowledging power that situates him in particular ways. In highlighting this story in my own work, spectacularizing it as somehow lying outside of the bounds of conventional childhood, I have brought a particular kind of attention to bear on this representation that is similar to the kind of attention that is often directed at cases of sensational violence involving children (i.e., boys) who commit physical violence against others. In reflecting on the consequences of spectacularizing violent behaviour in children's lives in this way, a number of questions arise. At one level, I query the repercussions of highlighting Brad's story over others from my fieldwork. The boyhood/masculinity/violence triangulation seems to supersede the activities of girls, especially those activities which outwardly comply to stereotypes of femininity and reinforce a predictable view of gendered violence (boys = physical aggression; girls = relational aggression). Arguably, this dichotomous understanding of violence perpetrated by females and males is superficial in that it leaves aside the complexity of the nature of gendered childhoods for both girls and boys (i.e., boys and relational aggression; girls and physical aggression). Furthermore, the repercussions of making the experiences of girls, and women, invisible is well known. In the case of Katie and friends, attention to the specificities of their lives in different contexts using a gendered lens reveals a complex range of power relationships.

Finally, it can be asked why the links between girls and violence continue to be ignored if we can so readily locate violence as one of the discourses through which both girls and boys break down, uphold and refashion notions of childhood, child, femininity and masculinity. Might this be due in part to its potential to explode the boundaries around childhood and, as Jenks would argue, boundaries around adulthood? What role do feminist scholars play in engaging or dismissing violence in girls' lives? It seems to me that recognizing that girls as well as boys can be violent invigorates the kind of imagination required for understanding children as fully human beings living in contexts wherein power and violence are abundantly present. This final point brings me back to the question that served as the impetus for this essay: As collaborators with children in producing "truths" about children's lives, which stories are most often told, which ones are not told at all and which stories are the most telling?

Conclusion

Questions regarding the problematic relationship between creating knowledge and ethnographic representation can be fruitfully addressed through an engagement between feminism and a progressive anthropology. This engagement can facilitate the kind of conceptual clarity that is necessary for understanding children as agential subjects living in powerful contexts informed by a number of competing discourses. While anthropologists interested in the cultural politics of everyday life highlight the ways children are actively involved in the production of the categories "child" and "childhood," a feminist lens seeks to understand these gendered practices through relationships of power. In bringing together these interests, the intricacies of children's lived experiences, including both the sensational and the less obvious ways that people negotiate their lives, become compelling.

In this process, feminist ethnographers of childhood will be faced with a number of methodological and theoretical challenges not least of which is to be constantly reflexive so that the voices that challenge prevailing truth stories are included. If the task at hand is to find ways to further our understanding of the lives of both girls and boys, as in understanding the lives of women in all their diversity, and in empowering girls and boys, bringing them from the margins into the centre of discussions of power, it is the stories that we do not tell that turn out to be the most "telling" ones. These are the stories about power played out everyday in a largely invisible yet compelling way in children's lives.

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Notes

1 For important exceptions see Mankekar, 1997; Niewenhuys, 1994; and Thorne and Thai, 1999.

2 I am calling children's skipping and clapping songs "traditional" in the sense that they are part of an English language children's oral song tradition that is transmitted largely by children themselves. It appears to be self-sustaining, being passed from one generation to another, from child to child. The tradition abides by its own set of rules; songs must comply with the demands of the children themselves. (For more, see Caputo, 1989).

3 This may be one of the reasons for the preponderance of 10-year-old boys in my research who draw heavily on violent symbols such as guns, killing, bombing and other destructive acts in constituting masculinity in a circumscribed way. Whatever the case, children actively encounter, resist, adapt to and refuse elements of the representations of the category "child" from the adults and children they meet, in the culture industry's portrayal of competing representations of childhood, in mass mediated images which intentionally blur the lines between children and adults, and in institutional arrangements, to name a few.

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